

Mighty Wheels Series Grinds Gears

Hard-Working Wheels. Debora Pearson. Illus. Chum McLeod. Annick, 2000. Unpag. \$15.95 cloth, \$6.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-615-2, 1-55037-614-4. *Load 'Em Up Trucks*. Debora Pearson. Illus. Chum McLeod. Annick, 2000. Unpag. \$17.95 cloth, \$6.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-593-8, 1-55037-592-X. *Rough Tough Wheels*. Debora Pearson. Illus. Chum McLeod. Annick, 2000. Unpag. \$17.95 cloth, \$6.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-637-3, 1-55037-636-5. Ages 1-3.

The *Mighty Wheels* series, of which these are the first three books, capitalizes on the indefatigable interest that some toddlers and preschoolers have in trucks. It covers, in the brief volumes reviewed here, a considerable array of the massive machines that have such power to mesmerize. As the preface in each book reminds adults, the fascination trucks arouse can be harnessed to "share basic ideas and concepts with young children."

Watercolour illustrations by Chum McLeod dominate each page of these books and achieve an impressive degree of detail for this medium. There are points, however, when lack of precision seems a problem, as in the page of *Rough Tough Wheels* devoted to an excavator. The demolished portion of the house seems simply to have faded away into white space behind the arm of the machine, rather than having actually been torn apart. Likewise, although *Hard-Working Wheels* says its street cleaner "leaves behind a clean, wet trail of water," there is no sign in the illustration of whence such water might emanate, and the cleaner itself has only one brush. And although the illustrations use quite bright colours at times, the overall effect of the watercolours seems overly pastel-like and insipid, in contrast to the dynamic vehicles they represent.

It is perhaps an unavoidable consequence of the size of the U.S. market, but it does seem a shame that a book published with Canada Council support should use the American idiom "trash trucks" rather than "garbage trucks." It is a pleasure, in the Canadian context, to see the stalwart ice rink machine the Zamboni and a snowplow featured in the *Hard-Working Wheels* book.

True to the spirit of the preface, the text provided by Debora Pearson presents these trucks from a wide range of perspectives, from describing what tasks various vehicles perform to invoking the care that must be taken not to drop the goodies from an ice-cream truck. At points, though, it feels like the linguistic gears in these books are grinding. There is no consistent rhythm to the language, so that although *Load 'Em Up Trucks* begins with the jaunty couplet "Sometimes load 'em up trucks are full. Sometimes load 'em up trucks are empty," this pattern is not sustained, and the text of some pages is simply prosaic: "Gurgle, glug, sploosh! Fuel flows from the tanker truck, down the hose and into big tanks beneath the gas pumps." At times onomatopoeia, assonance, and alliteration seem to be governing factors in the choice of language, but these choices are not sustained, and the text of some pages feels both uneuphonious and uninspired. The lack of a consistent linguistic emphasis or rhythm often makes the transition from page to page awkward, as clunky as some of the trucks depicted.

The principle of progression through the books also seems to shift without warning: for a few pages we can move from one linked scene to another, so that a monster truck on the first page of *Rough Tough Wheels* is disabled and being pulled away by a tow truck on the next, or in *Load 'Em Up Trucks* we are invited to wonder

where a pickup truck might be headed as a segue into the following page, but this principle of linking the scenes is abandoned in both cases on the subsequent page. Altogether, it feels as if the books were developed without a coherent plan for continuity or linguistic approach.

I must stress this as an adult's viewpoint, though, produced by repeated readings that perhaps only the very best of young children's texts can withstand. These books have recently grabbed the attention of my two-year-old, who having found them uninteresting a few months back now insists on them over and over. Precisely because the books cater to such an obsessive market, however, they might have been written with more care. The adult reader not only utters the language of these books, but inevitably hears it echoed back by a child whose very sense of language is taking shape.

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Bringing History to Life

A Pioneer Thanksgiving: A Story of Harvest Celebrations in 1841. Barbara Greenwood. Illus. Heather Collins. Kids Can, 1999. 48 pp. \$14.95 cloth, \$6.95 paper. ISBN 1-55074-744-4, 1-55074-574-3. Ages 7-12. *House Calls: The True Story of A Pioneer Doctor.* Ainslie Manson. Illus. Mary Jane Gerber. Groundwood, 2001. 56 pp. \$15.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-446-X. Ages 8-12. *Pioneer Girl.* Maryanne Caswell. Illus. Lindsay Grater. Tundra, 2001. 88 pp. \$18.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-550-5. Ages 10 and up.

How can literature best be used to teach history? Three recent picture books attempt to teach readers eight and older about settler life. *A Pioneer Thanksgiving* and *House Calls: The True Story of a Pioneer Doctor* interweave fictional stories with factual information about Ontario's history. Both are illustrated with pencil sketches designed to capture the rustic atmosphere created by the texts — the illustrations in *House Calls*, in particular, have an attractive warmth and beauty.

A Pioneer Thanksgiving presents a series of loosely-connected anecdotes about a family's 1841 Thanksgiving celebrations, interspersed with factual vignettes and fall craft projects. The story line is marred by this discontinuity, and by the predictability of the rather melodramatic stories. Their happy endings, like the restoration of the health of an ailing grandmother in time for dinner, merely draw attention to their fictionality.

A Pioneer Thanksgiving is most engaging when it reveals itself as a didactic text describing a variety of harvest rituals, including the roots of the Canadian Thanksgiving festival. There are indications that, given an organized approach, the text would work well as a historical/factual resource. A story told by the neighbour seems believable, and the straightforward descriptions of pioneer life are interesting. Unfortunately, the intermittence of the anecdotal passages translates itself into an occasional carelessness in the content — nowhere is it explained that the family's neighbours are German, even when they use German words and their traditional blessing is quoted in the original (and here unidentified) language!