

## Mini-Reviews

*When I Went to the Library: Writers Celebrate Books and Reading.* Ed. Debora Pearson. Greenwood, 2001. 128 pp. \$18.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-423-0. Ages 8-12.

This anthology of stories brings together nine Canadian authors in one attractive hardcover volume. Edited by Debora Pearson, with a spirited introduction by Michele Landsberg, the stories were commissioned to honour children's libraries and librarians. It is very much a mixed bag, as is to be expected when a diverse group of talented writers takes on the subject of libraries, books, and reading. Some stories are predictable, such as Carlotta wanting to find out about leukemia in Budge Wilson's "Carlotta's Search," or Henry Higham learning to appreciate libraries in Jean Little's "Mrs. Grinny Pig, Tigger Wiggle, and Henry." Others take the theme to imaginative new heights: Paul Yee's evocative story of a young immigrant bride in "Fly Away" and the unusual twist on libraries and librarians in Ken Setterington's "Rose's Wish." The rollicking lead story by Ken Roberts, "Dear Mr. Winston," is worth the price of the volume; it's a story that begs to be read aloud to any young audience. Sarah Ellis, Celia Barker Lottridge, Marc Talbert, and Tim Wynne-Jones also contribute their talents to suggest that children's libraries and librarians are worth celebrating. Their stories are worth reading.

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*Trunks All Aboard: An Elephant ABC.* Barbara Nichol. Illus. Sir William Cornelius Van Horne. Tundra, 2001. Unpag. \$18.99 paper. ISBN 0-88776-536-X.

This delightful book begs to be read aloud. Award-winning author Barbara Nichol was inspired by letters and drawings sent home from a European trip by Sir William Cornelius Van Horne to his grandson in Montreal in 1909. Many of the drawings were of "Grandpa" as an elephant, and Nichol has "put the pictures to work" to create her *Elephant ABC*. Each illustration contains not only one of Sir William's elephants but also a copy of the date and origin of the correspondence. The rhyming couplets below each illustration take the reader on a rhythmic journey, "Trunks All Aboard" through the alphabet.

The journey taken, however, is not just a simple linear one through the letters of the alphabet. Using Sir William's elephants, Nichol brings the world of the early twentieth century into the world of young readers in the early twenty-first century. Sir William's world was an elegant one of steamship travel, steamship trunks, top hats, and cigars. The very name Cornelius Van Horne takes the reader even further back, this time into Canadian history of the late nineteenth century. It was Sir William

who supervised the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1881.

*Trunks All Aboard: An Elephant ABC* is a book to be enjoyed by both adult and child. Readers learn about grandfathers, alphabets, and times past and they can have a lot of fun with the elephants in doing so. A good example is the letter "V" and Virgil the elephant who "When he's asked for travel tips he makes it known: / "To simplify my packing, I take everything I own.'" What is delightful to imagine is the picture of a grandparent reading to a grandchild from this book, thus continuing the connection established between Sir William and his grandson almost one hundred years ago.

*Grandpa's Snowman*. Gary Barwin. Illus. Kitty Macaulay. Annick, 2000. Unpag. \$17.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-635-7.

How do we explain the process of ageing to a child? *Grandpa's Snowman* is a good place to start: with a minimum of words, this playful and fun book tells us the story of "Grandpa" from the time he was a young boy until he becomes an old man. Gary Barwin uses the voice of the grandson to tell the tale. When the boy talks of the old man's youth, one can almost hear the voice of the grandfather telling his story to the boy. Kitty Macaulay's cheerful illustrations ensure this. The images of the grandfather's story are bright and clear in the boy's mind, as vivid as grandfather's constant companion, his brightly-coloured pet parrot, Oscar, who ages right alongside him.

As a young boy, Grandpa snuck out of violin practice and used his violin as the focal point of "a musical snowman" built outside. As an old man, he can no longer "come out and play" with the grandson he adores, but must be content with the view of such play through the window of his bedroom. The grandson is very aware of the process of ageing and even states, "Grandpa and I are getting older." There is little sense at all of the dark side of getting older, perhaps only in the darkness illustrated by Kitty Macaulay when Grandpa's house is viewed from the outside and even then the moon is drawn as smiling from above. The "house" of Grandpa's body may be ageing on the outside, but there is hope and cheer within and this is reflected in the conclusion of the tale.

*Ssmarty Pants: A Norah Book*. Colleen Sydor. Illus. Suzane Langlois. Lobster, 1999. Unpag. \$15.95 paper. ISBN 1-894222-06-7.

Great-aunts are not often among the central characters in a work of fiction, nor are they often seen as much fun. On the opening page of *Ssmarty Pants*, Colleen Sydor places Great-Aunt Norah at the centre of her tale and links her straightaway with the great-niece who bears her name. When Norah visits her great-aunt, the rapport between the two is immediately evident. Both are delighted with the idea of a week of fun together. Suzane Langlois accompanies the text with illustrations that welcome the reader to the warmth and quirkiness of Great-Aunt Norah's home. Horse-shoes adorn the walls and the figure of a laughing elephant is placed on the windowsill, trunk raised high to further signal the good luck that is to be found in the house of this great-aunt. There is no "doom and gloom" in this tale and no stereotypical great-aunt either.

Great-Aunt Norah is superstitious, avoiding cracks in the sidewalk, advocating getting into bed on the right side, and shaking clothes three times at night before folding them. Great-niece Norah spurns these ideas on the first night of her visit. The consequences the next day at school provide more fun for the reader and, after some initial mortification, for Norah too. School-age readers will relate to Norah's worst nightmare coming true at "Show and Share" and will delight in the way she handles the problem. *Smarty Pants* is a "smart" book, there are two keen minds in this story, and, once again, learning and knowledge cross the generation barriers. The sense of energy and fun is pervasive, two things not typically associated with the idea of anyone's "Great-Aunt Norah."

*Oma's Quilt*. Paulette Bourgeois. Illus. Stéphane Jorisch. Kids Can, 2001. 32 pp. \$15.95 paper. ISBN 1-55074-777-0.

When the time comes for an old person to move into a retirement home, the move and the decision to do so are not easy. What makes *Oma's Quilt* so special is that it deals with these issues in a refreshing way. Oma is moving into Forest View Retirement Home, but her feelings around this move are not the only ones to be explored. Author and quilter Paulette Bourgeois tells the story through the perspective of Oma's granddaughter Emily. The story is told in the present tense and in it Emily describes the reactions of grandmother, daughter, and granddaughter to this big change in their lives.

All three generations are linked in the text. A subtle example of this is the way all three women are described, at different times, as touching each other with "pats on the back of [the] hand." Stéphane Jorisch's illustrations exemplify this link. Oma, Emily, and Emily's mother are all drawn with similar facial features and their love, respect, and caring for each other is also made evident in the illustrations. Jorisch also uses his illustrations to reflect the hopes and anxieties expressed in the story. The most obvious example of this is the way Oma's clothing changes to reflect her moods. When she is in Forest View Retirement Home with what she calls a "bunch of nincompoops" her clothing is subdued. When she is in her house on Maple Street, her dress is bright and multi-coloured, very much like the quilt she will receive from her daughter and granddaughter.

It is Emily's idea that she and her mother make the quilt from the fabrics and remnants of Oma's past. When Oma tells its story and the story of her life that it reveals, she declares it to be "made of love." Such "love" is well captured in both the story and illustrations of *Oma's Quilt*. This is a wonderful children's book that is not only fun to read (small children will relate to Oma's disgust at having to eat "lima beans two times a week" at Forest View), but also supportive and instructive for any grandmother, daughter, or granddaughter caught in the retirement home dilemma. [Editors' note: *Oma's Quilt* is the recipient of the 2002 Ruth Schwartz Children's Book Award.]

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