

Margaret's Tree presents rich contrasts of flat, smooth areas against richly textured and mottled areas to create pleasing compositions. Illustrations and text are well matched in this charming book.

Dr. Bernard Schwartz is professor emeritus, art/education, University of Alberta. His long-standing interest in the art and literature for children seems to have had a positive impact on his six children. His forthcoming book The Holocaust: Art/Politics/Law/Education, co-edited with Frederick DeCoste, is the result of an international conference held at the University of Alberta.

The Old and the New (and the Old)

Dennis and the Fantastic Forest. Adrian Raeside. Illus. author. Doubleday Canada, 1997. 32 pp. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0-385-25531-4. *Eenie Meenie Manitoba: Playful Poems and Rollicking Rhymes.* Robert Heidbreder. Illus. Scot Ritchie. Kids Can, 1996. 32 pp. \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55074-301-5. *Ogre Fun.* Loris Lecynski. Illus. author. Annick, 1997. 32 pp. \$5.95 paper, \$15.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-446X, 1-55037-447-8.

A couple of false assumptions about children's literature exist among the general public, and those who work with children's books sometimes encounter them. One of these is the belief that all children's books are written in verse. Another is the assumption that medieval fantasy elements like trolls, dragons and giants create automatic child-appeal. These days, although re-tellings of traditional folktales are still popular, most original stories steer clear of verse, and few new books are set in the old goblin-and-wizard territory. However, three recent Canadian picture books demonstrate that the oral tradition continues to influence new material, with varying degrees of success.

Dennis and the Fantastic Forest is the third in the Dennis the Dragon series by Adrian Raeside. His career as an editorial cartoonist is evident in the polished, funny, readable cartoon-style illustrations in this book. When the forest burns down, Dennis becomes over-zealous with his re-planting campaign, until trees crowd out his fellow citizens and cause havoc in the town.

Traditional themes, like "too much of a good thing," and "the wicked must be punished" are present here, along with the familiar fire-breathing dragon. But stories rooted in folklore are structurally solid and, unfortunately, this book does not live up to that tradition. When the townspeople complain, Dennis lists his reasons for liking trees, but says nothing about their overabundance. Then he notices that "a few of the trees [are] still looking lean." Dennis transfers these lean trees to the forest and becomes a park ranger. By the end of the story, it is not clear whether the town has been restored, but in a surprising denouement, Dennis sprays his brothers with an extinguisher to punish them for having set the original fire.

The problems with structure and clarity are compounded by the struggle to tell the story in verse. The metre is uneven, the text occasionally slips from past to present tense, and some of the rhymes (e.g. playgrounds/duckponds and

streams/jeans) are forced. Most unsettling are the places where the action seems to have been driven by the need for a rhyme. The idea that townspeople might “wear [trees] as hats” is delightfully silly, but the humour stretches too far when trees are used to “dress up their cats.” And it seems unlikely that the tree-dwelling “jackaroons” would have existed if it weren’t for the “raccoons” which preceded them.

It is unfortunate that such a problematic text has been paired with these appealing illustrations, especially since the story might have worked just as well with little or no text. In this book, the trappings of traditional storytelling have been borrowed without its corresponding strengths.

In *Eenie Meenie Manitoba*, Robert Heidbreder draws from the oral tradition in a different way, and with more success. Many of the thirty-eight oh-so-Canadian poems in this collection have been fashioned around the rhymes and rhythms of old jump-rope chants, counting-out games, fingerplays and lullabies. Instead of “teddy bear, teddy bear, touch the ground,” we now chant, “Nova Scotia lobster, touch the ground.” Monday’s child is now “a humpback whale,” and “I trucked into Toron-to-to/To see what I could tow tow tow” refurbishes an old clapping rhyme. It works. Heidbreder handles rhyme and metre skilfully, and the watercolour illustrations by Scot Ritchie are fresh and funny. Small icons identify those poems which can be clapped, jumped or acted out, and the accompanying directions are phrased as suggestions (e.g. “Try telling your future with this poem”), keeping the tone light.

Iona and Peter Opie, who scrupulously documented the history of children’s games and songs, might raise their eyebrows at the way Heidbreder has reworked the old standards, and it isn’t likely that these carefully-Canadian rhymes will infiltrate the playground, with its relentlessly oral culture. But as a book of poems to read and act out, this sunny volume offers plenty of fresh material.

In *Ogre Fun*, author-artist Loris Lesynski successfully builds an original story around a rhyming text and a traditional motif — the interaction between humans and ogres. Gronny ignores the warnings about contact with humans, and returns home with a bad case of the yawns. It spreads quickly, but Gronny solves the problem by relying on his wits and courage.

Lesynski’s rhyme and metre never falter, and she uses the verse form to dramatic effect, building tension just before a page turn and resolving it in a phrase which packs extra punch because of its rhyme. When Gronny shocks his family by yawning hugely at the dinner table, we’re told, “They’d never seen a yawn before./He heard his Mogre say — [page turn] — Gronathan, you wretched boy./ you stop it RIGHT AWAY!” The careful placement of text on the page, along with changes in the typeface, underline the fact that this story is meant to be shared aloud. Incorporating elements from the oral tradition into a modern-day format with brisk pacing and wonderfully funny illustrations, Lesynski has achieved a satisfying blend of old and new.

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