

A Space of One's Own

The Boy Who Wouldn't Speak. Steve Berry. Illus. Deirdre Betteridge. Willowdale, ON: Annick Press, 1992. Unpag. \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-231-9. *The Watcher*. Brenda Silsbe. Illus. Alice Priestley. Willowdale, ON: Annick Press, 1994. Unpag. \$4.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-384-6. *Jeremy Jeckles Hates Freckles*. Geraldine Ryan-Lush. Illus. Kathy R. Kaulbach. St John's: Breakwater, 1992. 32 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 1-55081-009-X. *One Two Many*. Mark Thurman. Toronto: Viking, 1993. 32 pp. \$8.99. ISBN 0-14-055826-8. *Fearless Jake*. Margaret Haffner. Illus. Mark Thurman. Scholastic/North Winds Press, 1995. 32 pp. \$14.99 cloth. ISBN 0-590-24308-X. *Christopher, Please Clean Up Your Room!* Itah Sadu. Illus. Roy Condy. Scholastic Canada, 1993. 32 pp. \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-74034-2. *The Boy, The Dollar And The Wonderful Hat*. Marilyn Helmer. Illus. San Murata. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1992. Unpag. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 0-19-540875-6. *Secret Dawn*. Edith Newlin Chase. Illus. Yolaine Lefebvre. Richmond Hill: Scholastic Canada, 1996. 32 pp. \$15.99 cloth. ISBN 0-590-24443-4.

Among some of the distinguishing thematic features in this diverse sampling of picture books for young children are two distinct but sometimes intersecting areas of focus. While many of these tales celebrate the power and seductiveness of the imagination, others show, in subtly revealing ways, young protagonists confronting various kinds of social idiosyncrasies, behavioural disorders, and personal problems which tend to categorize these children as different from the norm. Through the course of many stories in this latter grouping, the protagonists' differences indeed come to be valued by others in their community.

There is an oft-told tale in speech pathology circles that takes up the theme of difference as perceived disorder: it is about a child who will not speak. The child's parents, growing increasingly worried about their child's "condition," take him to specialists who determine that there is no medical reason for his silence: his lack of speech remains a mystery. Then, finally, at three years of age, the boy sits down for breakfast and casually asks in perfectly formed English, "Why aren't there any strawberries in my cereal?" His amazed parents just stare at him and ask, incredulously, "Why haven't you said anything before?" The boy matter-of-factly responds, "Because everything up until now has been perfect."

Steve Berry's *The Boy Who Wouldn't Speak* is a charming, and much more sophisticated, variation on this theme. Owen, at five, has still not said a word, much to the concern of his parents. Then a family of giants moves into the neighbourhood and Owen is the first to befriend them. They do not find his silence odd, just as he does not question their size — in short, what develops in these two intersecting accounts of social particularity is a fast friendship between Owen and the giants. When it becomes apparent that the giants are, because of their physical difference, receiving a hostile reception from the neighbours, it is time for Owen to step in using all the skills he can muster. Owen's intervention is all the more effective and powerful precisely because of his perceived impediment, because he has not thus far had occasion to speak. Now, when he *does* speak, people listen, and social tensions in the community are thwarted due to Owen's passionate call for members of the community to respect the giants as equals. This book deals in an imaginative way with xenophobia and should be applauded for its sensitivity to the nuances of a child's perception of complex social issues.

Like Owen, who is set apart because of his silence, the protagonist in Brenda Silsbe's *The Watcher* similarly averts a crisis through his difference, and, consequently, is viewed in a newly respected light. Unlike his peers, George is not interested in sports or other school activities, preferring instead to sit quietly, watching and taking in all that unfolds around him. George's passivity, however, gives way to action when he's confronted with an emergency, but it is his particular predilection for watching that in fact makes possible his intervention. Here again, young readers are presented with a protagonist whose difference initially leads others to shun him but who himself is perfectly content with this difference. In Alice Priestley's illustrations, we see this contentment reflected in George throughout the tale, regardless of the opinions of his peers. *The Watcher* is an inspiring tale of self-respect and contentment which will foster in young readers an appreciation of the worth of difference.

Dealing in a different, perhaps less successful way, with the theme of difference is Geraldine Ryan-Lush's *Jeremy Jeckles Hates Freckles*. Jeremy is a young boy with a big problem: he has too many freckles. This physical trait sets him apart from others and makes him the object of much ridicule. While Owen and George, the protagonists in the other two tales, are not really inconvenienced by their solitude and, indeed, seem quite content to be different from their peers, Jeremy hates being different, especially since everyone identifies him by his difference: "You with the freckles come to the board," his teacher would say. In desperation, Jeremy tries a whole range of miracle cures in an attempt to erase his difference, but none of these has the desired effect. But finally, one day, Jeremy's freckles become attractive — financially attractive — and Jeremy's fortune is mapped. Or is it? While the saga of Jeremy Jeckles who hates his freckles ends happily with an amusing twist, the story's social message does not seem to be as inspiring for young readers as the considerations of difference in the other picture books under review here.

Mark Thurman's *One Two Many* is another story about a young boy's difference, but unlike the other stories we've discussed, this richly symbolic tale comes to a focus not so much in its consideration of the protagonist's individuality but rather in its description of the journey he must embark on to solve his dilemma. Jan, convinced that nobody understands him, wishes, in his self-pity, for someone just like him, and all of a sudden, his wish comes true. The success of Jan's wish makes for a good adventure, at least until the two identical boys begin to want exactly the same things. The journey the two Jans take to become one again is peopled with mythological creatures in a magical landscape. Indeed, Thurman's evocative illustrations add to and help create the magic of the narrative. Yet, while Thurman eschews social realism in favour of a more symbolic mode of emplotment, his treatment of a young child's need to be both different and understood makes this picture book a nice fit with others under consideration in this review.

Thurman's illustrations also nicely capture the imaginative spirit of Margaret Haffner's book, *Fearless Jake*. On his way to school, Jake vividly constructs a series of adventures in his imagination. At one point, for example, he is an explorer crossing a dangerous river, and, at another, he is a woodsman just escaping a deadly rattler. After a series of such adventures, Jake slips into the classroom, ready for "another exciting day" (22) of school. Young readers are likely to be confident that Jake's day will, indeed, be exciting given his penchant for creative

thinking and imaginative models of discovery.

In Itah Sadu's delightful *Christopher, Please Clean Up Your Room*, it is Christopher's *night* that is exciting. Christopher is a model child in every respect, save for one behavioural disorder: he simply will not clean his room. Finally, when two desperate goldfish in a very neglected tank in Christopher's room enlist the help of a remarkably sympathetic cockroach, an elaborate nocturnal cockroach military strategy is hatched in order to force Christopher to tidy his ways. Sadu's clever mixture of fantasy and realism is nicely complemented by the way in which Roy Condy's lively illustrations juxtapose small details of social realism with a wildly imaginative dream-like logic. This wonderful picture book is inspiring for its celebration of the idea of working together and using one's ingenuity to overcome domineering forces.

In Marilyn Helmer's *The Boy, The Dollar And The Wonderful Hat*, it is Benno, the young protagonist himself, who must use his ingenuity to solve his dilemma. Benno and his father go to the fair, and Benno's father gives him a single dollar, telling him that this dollar is all he has to spend for the day. Benno is hungry, the rides all look inviting, the vendors' stalls are so interesting, but Benno's dollar can only go so far. Then he has an idea. He spends his dollar on a hat and with this hat he manages to have everything he wants at the fair. After a full day, when Benno meets up with his father again, he shows him the hat and boasts that it "only" cost him a dollar. Benno's father is surprised, and questions his choice. But Benno instructs his father, while recounting to him the day's adventures, on the power of his hat and the wisdom of his choice. When it begins to rain, Benno's father lifts Benno on his shoulders to give him a ride home. There, "safe and dry" under the hat, Benno falls asleep and this is how we last see him. Benno, the ingenious and shrewd financial planner, is indeed a vulnerable and exhausted little boy. Helmer's moving celebration of a young child's ingenuity and resourcefulness is narrated with economy and precision, and aptly rendered in the detail and colour of San Murata's evocative illustrations. *The Boy, The Dollar And The Wonderful Hat* is genuinely a wonderful book.

Another fine book celebrating the imaginative potential of its protagonist is Edith Newlin Chase's semi-autobiographical *Secret Dawn*. This is the story of a young girl who creates a room of her own—a secret hideaway, in the trees, for herself and her thoughts. She steals out of her crowded bedroom at the break of day and is soon engulfed in her own magical, mysterious world high up in the embryonic comfort of her willow tree. Every page of *Secret Dawn* is a splash of Yolaine Lefebvre's watercolour pastels—perfect for the secretive, magical element of this story. *Secret Dawn*, the only story in this sampling with a female central character, is refreshing in its femininity. The young girl yearns for and secretly relishes this "room of one's own"—her tree nook where she can imaginatively record her thoughts by writing poetry. Also the only book in our sampling that is both written in verse and about the development of poetic talent, *Secret Dawn* will gently and evocatively invite young readers with the promise of a space of their own.

The creation of such a space is, in part, what each of these picture books is about. While clearly very different in nature and scope, they all, at their best, explore the ways in which difference and imaginative exploration (indeed,

conditions of difference are often shown to nourish and strengthen imaginative processes) animate young children's capacity for self-expression and expand the potential for socially resonant forms of creative endeavour.

*Ajay Heble teaches Canadian and Postcolonial literatures at the University of Guelph, and he and his wife, Sheila O'Reilly, are parents of two young children. Dr. Heble's recent book, *The Tumble of Reason: Alice Munro's Discourse of Absence*, was published by the University of Toronto Press.*

Weathering the Psychological "Prairies"

If You're Not from the Prairie.... David Bouchard. Illus. Henry Ripplinger. Raincoast Books & SummerWild Productions, 1993. 32 pp. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-9696097-4-4. *A Prairie Year.* Jo Bannatyne-Cugnet. Illus. Yvette Moore. Tundra Books, 1994. 32 pp. \$17.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-334-0.

Pull on your balaclavas and squall jackets: we're in for some blustery, prairie weather. Henry Ripplinger takes us on a nostalgic, visual tour which includes spring skies reminiscent of Hurley (11). Sky predominates the prairie as it does the pages of this book. Layout artist Dean Allen has artfully accentuated the dream-like quality and extended the metaphorical theme of both images and story. His placement of the text evokes cumulous word-clouds in stanzas cleverly flanked by hazy-edged, delightfully narrative vignettes (8). The text is rhythmical, the form comfortably repetitive but not particularly poetic. Its insistence, which cumulates in a point, finally, on page 22 that,

If you're not from the prairie,
You don't know me.
You just can't know ME.

becomes somewhat disconcerting if not annoying. Perhaps the writer has taken his point too far. Prairie writers have found the device of inner landscape somewhat irresistible (if not inevitable). In the capable hands of Sinclair Ross and W.O. Mitchell, extended metaphors (even the personification) of weather and landscape work — undeniably. In his famous disclaimer "The Weather in this Book," Mark Twain recognized that "weather is a literary specialty, and no untrained hand can turn out a good article of it." Twain's solution was to append "such weather as is necessary" to human narrative, instructing the reader that "[t]his weather will be found over in the back part of the book, out of the way." The "reader" was to "turn over and help himself from time to time as he goes along." A tempting strategy.

Like Twain's readership, Bouchard and Ripplinger's prairie seems to be populated solely by lone men and boys. I could, of course, be misassigning gender to the somewhat androgynous (long-haired) children which people Ripplinger's paintings. Certainly several of his grassier scenes evoke Wyeth's "Christina's World."

Nevertheless, the text remains petulant, motherless. How does one small "ME" (even heart and soul) *ever* become upper-case enough to withstand the prairie's vastness? Bouchard's somewhat enigmatic answer might be that one *becomes* the prairie, becomes sky, sun, wind, snow, flat, cold. In this case, it would