

## POSSIBLE WORLDS FOR ACTUAL MINDS

**The Windy Day.** Halina Below. Illus. Jacqueline White. Lester, 1994. Unpag., \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 1-89555-74-4. **In the Great Meadow.** Skid Crease. Illus. Jan Thornhill. Annick Press, 1994. Unpag., \$5.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-998-4. **Pikolo's Night Voyage.** Pierre Filion. Illus. Giles Tibo. Annick, 1994. Unpag., \$5.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-364-1. **The Bubble Machine.** Jean-Pierre Guillet. Illus. Giles Tibo. Trans. Frances Morgan. Quintin: Ecological Tales, 1994. 32 pp., \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 2-89435-033-3. **Jess Was the Brave One.** Jean Little. Illus. Janet Wilson. Puffin, 1994. Unpag., \$6.99 paper. ISBN 0-14-054309-0. **You Can Go Home Again.** Jirina Marton. Illus. author. Annick, 1994. Unpag., \$5.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-990-9. **I Promise I'll Find You.** Heather Patricia Ward. Illus. Sheila McGraw. Firefly, 1994. Unpag., \$11.95 cloth. ISBN 1-895565-40-5.

This recent crop of picture books offers a virtual gloss on Jerome Bruner's brilliant description of the relationship between readers and books as being between "actual minds" and "possible worlds" (*Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1986). Not only are possible worlds from all over the globe available in these picture books, but emotional and intellectual possible worlds are represented here too.

*In the Great Meadow* offers the tempting possibility that the natural order — in this case the biological order that decrees that frogs eat snakes — might be broken. Illustrator Jan Thornhill's abiding love of drawing the natural world shows in her scratchboard illustrations. Without distorting either frog or snake she manages to make a frog look snake-like (slithering on his belly) and a snake frog-like (coiling up into a spring and trying to hop). Their respective mothers disapprove of this unnatural imitation between predator and prey.

The text offers a final question: "What would have happened if they had just let us be friends?" In posing the question about reconciling the wars between frogs and snakes, the text veers just far enough away from the everyday world of bitter wars (between Serbs and Croats for example), that the moral doesn't weigh down the story.

While Thornhill begins in the natural world in order to construct a fantasy, Tibo, an artist deeply committed to ecological concerns, begins in fantasy in order to trace back to the natural. Tibo's airbrushed illustrations alter the light so that solid objects appear weightless — lifted off the page. In *Pikolo's Night Voyage* those apparently weightless objects are made of solid wood: a clever gravitational trick, the grain of each individual kind of wood plainly marked in the pictures — appropriate for a story about the search for a "Treasure Tree." In *The Bubble Machine*, Tibo's luminescent bubbles block the sky: a physical manifestation of the damage caused by the airborne pollutants (the message is spelled out at the end). But the story itself is too heavily moral, and weighs against the pictures.

Another book that offers possibilities for trying on other lives — in this case

other people's hats — is *The Windy Day* by Halina Below with paintings by Jacqueline White. The impressionist texture of the art is hinted in the name of a poodle who appears on the first page: Claude Monet. The “windy day” offers a clever conceit: the hair and leaves and hats of many cultures and countries blow across the landscape (Pat Hutchins uses a similar conceit in her windy day book). Jacqueline White stabilizes the blowing with a subtle use of rooted verticals: thick tree trunks in one page of a double-spread played on one page against the vertical of a child leaning on crutches on the facing page — a very gentle example of an “inclusive” illustration.

Jean Little's picture book is a direct example of the way a possible fictional world enables one little girl to transform herself in her actual world. *Jess Was the Brave One* is not about Jess really, but about her older sister Claire. Janet Wilson conveys the shift in the normal power structure by making the younger Jess appear bigger through the first part of the book as her brave exploits are recounted: Jess is shown sitting on top of an examining table at a doctor's office for example, smiling smugly, while Claire cowers below. But in the pictures Claire grows into her true height, when she rescues Jess's pink teddy from some bullies. She does so by using stories, her grandfather's stories of Wellington and Wilberforce, to scare them. By using words rather than fists Claire engages in a feminist tactic, though it's not stated as such.

Sometimes it is possible to recover a lost world: to find that the past is not irretrievably lost. *You Can Go Home Again* by Jirina Marton is an autobiographical story of her return to Prague. Annie loves the stories of her mother's childhood in Prague, stories of an uncle who was a concert pianist, and the beautiful, strange objects of his house, including a set of ebony elephants. The story revolves around the rediscovery of these elephants in a Prague restaurant, and a story that traces the formerly broken threads of the family history. In Canada, all our stories are immigrant stories. The retracing and retelling of those stories is part of how we know who we are.

It is not, however, always possible to recover what is lost. *I Promise I'll Find You* by Patricia Ward, illustrated by Sheila McGraw, is a double-edged story. It is reminiscent of *The Runaway Bunny*, but for those of us living in the '90s, the reality of runaway, lost or abducted children is painfully present. The book jacket explains that “[a] portion of the author's proceeds” go to “child-locating agencies.” The searcher in the book roams earth, sea and air, and offers this final hope: “So remember this my darling / For it is very true / If you're apart from me, / I'll search till I find you.”

“Narrative,” as Bruner says, “deals with the vicissitudes of human intentions” (16). These books all do.

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