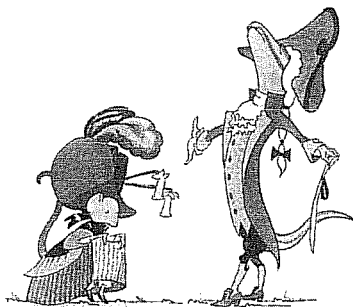


## A LITTLE ASSASSIN STRIKES

**The Beautifull Cassandra.** Jane Austen. Illus. and Afterword Juliet McMaster. Victoria, British Columbia: Sono Nis Press, 1993. Unpag., \$9.95 paper. ISBN 1-55039-041-4.

Stories written by children tend to be more iconoclastic than those created by adults for children. While some adults may suffer from a sense of social nervousness about what they can safely say in a book intended for juveniles, children writing for themselves have fewer inhibitions. Consider Daisy Ashford's *The Young Visitors* [sic], where adult physical passion is viewed through the quizzical eye of a nine-year-old, with hilarious effect. Readers of Jane Austen's adult work, especially those who think of her as consistently restrained, decorous, and conservative, will

be startled to find what fantasies she harboured at the age of twelve. Her earliest skill, it seems, was for irreverent satire. As Frances Beer in her Introduction to Austen's *Juvenilia* remarks: "At twelve the little assassin is eagerly at work, showing no mercy to her victims."



"She curtsyed ...

In *The Beautifull Cassandra* [sic], written by Austen at the age of twelve and dedicated to her beloved elder sister, the writer is already taking aim at literary pretensions and social absurdities. In a caricature of popular romance, the high-born heroine (the daughter of a milliner with aristocratic connections by way of the servants' hall) falls passionately in love, not with a man but with a bonnet. The romance continues apparently in the conventional way, as the heroine elopes with the loved one; but in this case the object of passion is firmly clapped upon Cassandra's head. Theft, violence, mockery, and lack of concern for social propriety are the major plot elements of this brief tale. After hours of unchaperoned mayhem on the London streets, more reminiscent of a juvenile Tom Jones than of a young Fanny Price, Cassandra returns to the loving and non-judgmental arms of her mother, remarking blandly, "This is a day well spent."

Juliet McMaster has done a favour to modern children by showing that at least one eighteenth-century girl was not prim and proper. But she has not simply



& walked on."

rescued the comic text from scholarly hands and returned it to its rightful owners. She has given it enlarged life with her own original and creative illustrations. Unexpectedly, she presents the characters as small animals in the anthropomorphic tradition, and equally surprisingly, it works. Mice, frogs, and cats, dressed suitably in eighteenth-century style, caricature London behaviour. The Viscount of Squiggle, a young man-about-town, appears as a lizard, lofty in his conceit until Cassandra snubs him. A hackney coach is drawn by a turtle, unwilling to put on a turn of speed. Though conceived in the Potter tradition, these illustrations are brightly coloured, and they focus not on the charm and sentiment but on the comic and satiric aspects of the tiny plot. As Austen's dedication tells us, this is a "novel" in twelve chapters, each about two sentences long. Hence, each page is mostly illustration, decoded by a line or two of Austen's text.

It is to be devoutly hoped that Juliet McMaster will continue with the enterprise of returning Austen's *Juvenilia* to the hands of children. As a happily independent female, the "beautiful" Cassandra flouts convention in the nonchalant style of Robert Munsch's paper-bag princess, but she is comparatively tame when set against some other heroines created by the young assassin. What would McMaster's illustrative skill make of Lady Williams in *Jack and Alice*, who disposes indirectly of her rivals in love by means of poison and the gallows? Not suitable for children? Jane Austen wouldn't agree.

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## LA PUISSANCE ÉVOCATRICE DES ILLUSTRATIONS

**Le Baiser maléfique.** Adaptation de Robert Soulières. Illustration de Stéphane Jorisch. Montréal, Les 400 Coups, 1995. 29 p. Relié. ISBN 2-921620-06-5.

Au début des années 80, les Éditions Ovale, alors réputées pour la qualité exceptionnelle de l'illustration, avaient lancé la collection "Légendes du Québec", dans laquelle on pouvait retrouver des adaptations de récits du Québec d'autrefois, tels *Le Cheval du Nord*, *Le Noël de Savarin*, *Le Chien d'or*, ou *Le Baiser maléfique*. C'est ce dernier conte que nous offrent aujourd'hui, en reprise, les Éditions 400 Coups. La collection initiale n'avait pas connu le succès escompté, frappée sans doute par les *blues* post-référendaires de 1980 et par le désintérêt assez soudain pour le folklore régional jusque là très prisé. Il faut dire que plusieurs de ces albums présentaient un corpus d'illustrations très conventionnelles, les illustrateurs à qui on avait alors confié la tâche d'interpréter le folklore oral n'ayant su lui insuffler une vision moderne et déstabilisatrice.

*Le Baiser maléfique*, dans le texte de Robert Soulières, c'est l'histoire de Rose Latulipe qui aimait trop danser. En cette veille du Mercredi des Cendres, son père