

Editorial: On illustrating Canadian children's books

Writing in *Signal*, the British artist Edward Ardizzone proposed that the "born illustrator" should have inventiveness, imagination, the ability to use pen and ink correctly, an appreciation of colour and design, a sensitivity to text, and a capacity to convey humour and vitality. As the articles in this special issue indicate, pictures provide an alternative perspective on children's books, one that is visual rather than verbal. The conscientious illustrator will faithfully transpose the text in a literal fashion, recreating not only characters and actions but period and ethnic details. That such transposition may result in the stereotypical treatment of race and sex, Diana Shklanka reveals when she examines Chinese and Japanese characters in Canadian picture books. The inspired illustrator, in Maurice Sendak's phrase, "burrows" himself into the text and into the writer's mind. When the verbal content is fantasy, as Françoise Lepage explains in "Pour une rhétorique de la représentation fantastique," the artist must develop strategies for overcoming the disparity between real, concrete and natural imagery, on the one hand, and dream figures, demonic machines and monsters, on the other.

A contemporary trend which Eileen Conway and Jetske Sybesma explore in their articles is the illustrator's subversion of the text by creating an alternative reading. Conway notes that in *The Booky trilogy* the "non-imaginary" photographic illustrations, while appearing to support the biographical "truth" about the heroine's development from impoverished child to sophisticated woman, in fact, introduce a contrary set of values and situations. Sybesma finds that in some recent picture books the text's innocent child-world of home, park or seashore is visually subverted when the artist interjects sexual innuendoes and images of mutilation. This is a clear departure from the long-held ideal that children's books embody "wholesome truth in beautiful forms."

As well as discussing the inter-relationship of text and illustration, articles in this issue focus on art appreciation and the influences of other media. The development of aesthetic awareness in adults (the buyers) and children (the consumers) is essential if we are to "read" pictures as confidently as we read words. To a large extent, artistic judgments are superficial, depending on an immediate response to seductive colours, bold outlines, nostalgia and technical gimmicks rather than an appreciation of line, metaphor, and spatial con-

trol. While the subtle watercolors of Shizuye Takashima's *A child in prison camp* won the author-artist "Best Illustrated Book" awards nationally and internationally, the researchers of *Children's Choices of Canadian Books* (1983) found that "almost none of the children enjoyed the award-winning illustrations at all."

How can visual literacy be developed? Bernard Schwartz and JoAnn Sommerfeld suggest conveying formal information about media, line, shape, space, colour and texture by means of readily available works of art – the well-illustrated children's book. Jetske Sybesma examines the claim that Canadian picture books *can* legitimately be regarded as works of art. Sadly, she finds that lofty aesthetic aims may be undercut by commercial considerations which discourage the publication and purchase of high quality work. Worse still, publishers may actually prefer the naïve, old fashioned and auto-didactic to the experimental or sophisticated.

Contributors to this issue recognize that such traditional modes as drawing, wood engraving and easel painting are no longer the only visual influences on illustration. *The Booky trilogy*, through the medium of photography, accesses iconography derived from the advertiser's commercial art. When Hilary Thompson surveyed the illustrations in *Owl Magazine* from its appearance in 1976 to the present, she encountered a wide range of art work utilizing black and white, sepia, pastels and full colour. In earlier issues there was a consistent co-relation between subject and style. Dr. Zed's experiments, for example, elicited a playful cartoon style; the featured animal of the month was presented in realistic photographs and evocative paintings. In current issues, however, the effort to "teach" visual literacy has been undermined by a narrower range of styles and subjects. The graphic artist, the advertiser's adjunct, now imposes a uniform sophistication and slickness that offers trendiness and a quick read rather than contemplation.

A thorough examination of contemporary influences is "Images d'enfants de l'image: l'illustration à l'ère audiovisuelle" by Denis Bachand and Marie-Andrée Turcotte. Many illustrators of books for Francophone children want to employ up-to-date aesthetic principles. Because they themselves have grown up in the audio-visual age, they derive their techniques from film and television. Close-ups, flashbacks, a focus on a single face or part of a face, a spatial plane that can be absorbed at a glance – such devices make their art exciting and accessible.

Reviewers of Canadian picture books often lack a critical framework for examining the visual component of children's literature. The specialized articles in this issue may assist future reviewers in approaching this important sub-genre of popular culture.

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