

Watts tells an engaging story whose liveliness and humour is enhanced by the illustrations. The princess, surrounded by flies, looks so filthy you can smell her, and such details as the fountain cherub holding his nose as she passes provide nice comic relief from the weight of her struggle.

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### Pride and Peanuts and a Plethora of Ps

*Princess Prunella and the Purple Peanut.* Margaret Atwood. Illus. Maryann Kovalski. Key Porter, 1995. 30 pp. \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55013-732-8.

*Princess Prunella and the Purple Peanut*, Margaret Atwood's fourth children's book, is as distinctive from its predecessors as they are from one another in terms of type, style and tone, and corroborates that Canada's premier novelist is as eclectic in this genre as in her adult literature. Atwood has moved from a Seuss-like charm in her versified tale for pre-schoolers, *Up in a Tree* (1978), through the probing of more complex themes such as the role of all creatures in the universe in *Anna's Pet* (1980) and current environmental concerns in *For the Birds* (1990), to a whimsical, twisted fairytale in *Princess Prunella*.

Prunella is the pretty but spoiled protagonist who in addition to stumbling about the royal palace because she is constantly peering into a pocket mirror and to torturing her three plump pussycats and her puppydog, Pug, inevitably renders herself eligible for another of those intriguing spells from fairyland when she refuses to give a Wise Woman some food. The spell is especially irksome to the petulant heroine, for it features a purple peanut sprouting and growing larger each day, on the end of her nose. Moreover, the spell cannot be broken until Prunella performs the requisite three Good Deeds, and if her pedigree and previous performances are any indication, Prunella's purple proboscis appears permanent. In fact, Prunella does manage to break the spell by performing a series of deeds all prompted by her concern for others, culminating in her saving a prince from diving into a polluted pond populated by "ponderous pointy-toothed pike." The tale ends with Prunella sans peanut frolicking with her prince who allows that he might be prepared to propose to her when she is older.

In a note by Atwood on the work she identifies two origins for the tale. The first was the "Letter Language" game the writer's daughter and her childhood friends played at age nine or ten in which they spoke only in words beginning with a chosen letter. The second was the "Princess Prunella, the saga," an invented story Atwood used to tell her daughter while she washed her hair which involved a vain and stupid girl who got into all sorts of trouble and who invariably had "foreign objects sprouting from her nose" ("A Word on Princess



Prunella"). As Atwood acknowledges, Prunella also recalls Edward Lear's "alliterative tendencies" and his "pronounced nasal interests." In a more general sense, the stock elements of traditional fairy tales provide the framework for the tale.

Princess Prunella spins off of the motifs and characters of traditional fairy tales, and in particular, that unhappy legion of unworthy daughters or princesses who are cursed by fairies (such as the disagreeable daughter in Charles Perrault's "The Fairies" who endures a far more lethal curse than that affecting Prunella), and the ubiquitous wise old woman-fairies who apply the test of the day. Atwood, however, subverts the tradition, and sprinkles humour, satire and linguistic excesses in the form of a veritable alliterative assault on the reader. Hence it is that Prunella's parents belie the typical constellation of evil mother-ineffective father and are merely "pinhead parents." The disguised wise fairy carries a curiously varied library, including volumes from Plato, *The Economist* as well as a copy of the *Enquirer* sporting the headline "98 yr old woman weds 22 yr old man." Unlike the menagerie of faithful pets that support downtrodden heroines, Prunella's three pussycats mock her in her darkest hour, collectively declaring that her bedevilling blossom "serves /her/ right for being a selfish pig." Finally, Prunella's Prince charming is essentially a penniless parody of a peerless partner.

The alliterative prodigality which characterizes the tale underscores its playful tone. That the letter "P" is the offending consonant reflects Atwood's recollection that in her daughter's letter game, "popularity was measured partly by silliness — P, it appears, is a letter children of a certain age find intrinsically funny" ("A Word on Princess Prunella"). The verboten associations with bodily functions might well be a factor in that appeal. At another level, the linguistic ingenuity which punctuates the work are at times irresistible. Prunella's cats are "parasitical pipsqueaks — perverse, piddling, pointy-

pawed, pie-faced pudding-brains," and her prospective husband appears as a "pear-shaped, pinhead — sporting a plaid pyjama top and a pair of preposterous plum-coloured polka dotted pants." Perhaps the plethora of P's might perturb parental panderers of pre-slumber patter, but as Atwood's and countless other parents' experience attests, children revel in such extravagances.

Maryann Kovalski's splendid colour illustrations offer more than a mere balance to Atwood's text. They are a masterful amplification of the tale, both reflecting the literal progression of plot and capturing the subtler dimensions of Atwood's parody. Prunella's metamorphosis from a prideful twit to a more humble, gentler soul is superbly reinforced through the illustrations. Each page of text has a complementary illustration, and the harmonious interplay between the two is a critical, delightful feature, even extending to the illustrations supporting the "P" preoccupation (the opening scene depicts the royal courtyard, and in the background a servant performs her duties as a royal "Pooper-scooper"; in the final illustration, Prunella entertains her portly prince, while Pug piddles on a garden flower pot).

*Princess Prunella* is a cleverly crafted fractured fairy tale. It offers up a moral on the perils of pride, but it is not moralistic. The text is poetically succinct, even while it is lavishly alliterative. The illustrations are impeccably detailed, and never abandon the tone of the text. In a nutshell, Atwood's playful romp on pride and redemption should be in every child's library.

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### A Lighthearted Look at Family Life

***Mortimer Mooner Makes Lunch.*** Frank B. Edwards. Illus. John Bianchi. Bungalo Books, 1995. Distributed by Firefly Books. 24 pp. \$14.95 cloth, \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-921285-37-X, 0-921285-36-1. ***Best and Dearest Chick of All.*** Bob Barton. Illus. Coral Nault. Northern Lights Books for Children, Red Deer College P, 1994. 24 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 0-88995-117-9. ***Little Kiwi at the Beach.*** May Rousseau. Illus. author. Trans. Anne Fotheringham. Editions Chouette, 1991 (The Concertina Collection). 24 pp. \$9.95 cloth. ISBN 2-921198-29-0.

These three picture books take a lighthearted look at family life through the eyes of pigs, chickens and bears. In *Mortimer Mooner Makes Lunch*, readers get a glimpse into another day in the life of the Mooner family of pigs. "You have TEN minutes to catch your bus," cries Mortimer as his father jumps in the shower and Mortimer dashes into the kitchen to pack his dad's lunch. And what a wondrous lunch it is! As the countdown progresses, the usual parent/child roles are reversed. Mortimer is the one making lunch and yelling "Are you dressed yet?" to his parent who is frantically racing the clock to catch his bus on time. The text and the illustrations shift between Father Mooner and Mortimer. As Father Mooner "pulled on his socks and hopped to his closet," Mortimer "added some pickles" to the peanut