

ers; more than most, his books demand thoughtful and informed reading. But the rewards are rich for those willing to pursue them.

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#### A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW

**For the birds.** Margaret Atwood. Douglas and McIntyre, 1990. 54 pp. \$12.95 paper. ISBN 0-88894-825-5.



In the year 1786, writing as one of the group of writer-educators now referred to as the Sunday Schools Moralists, Mrs Sarah Trimmer produced her best known work for children under the title of *Fabulous histories, designed for the instruction of children, respecting their treatment of animals*. In this quintessentially evangelical book, which came to be widely known as *The history of the Robins*, Mrs Trimmer proselytizes for religion, obedience and the Christian family through comparisons between a human family and a family of Robins. The two human children who appear as primary beneficiaries in this edifying fable are indoctrinated in the

late eighteenth century concern for matters spiritual. While Mrs. Trimmer's purposes are clear enough, so too, alas, is the palpable urgency of that purpose. How many young readers would, because of its blatancy, resist, Trimmer's pleading, is, of course, a question of some importance.

For late eighteenth century, read late twentieth; for spiritual indoctrination, read environmental concerns, and, for Mrs. Trimmer, read Ms Atwood. Margaret Atwood's *For the birds*, interestingly enough, reverts to a metaphor similar to that used by Mrs. Trimmer some two hundred years earlier as she reveals her particular theme primarily through the perspective of birds. But while Margaret Atwood's dedication to her theme is no less urgent than is Sarah Trimmer's to hers, Atwood's formidable arsenal of writing skills renders her proselytizing engaging, convincing, and ultimately, enjoyable.

Samantha, the book's heroine, friendless and plagued by the cheerlessness of a new home in a big city, carelessly throws a stone at a beautiful red cardi-

nal, knocks it unconscious, and is set upon by a strange neighbour, one Phoebe Merganser. As Phoebe chastises Samantha, and transfixes her with an ancient mariner stare, Samantha finds herself transformed into a Scarlet Tanager even as Phoebe is being changed into a large, black crow. With the metamorphoses in place, Samantha and Phoebe set off on a migration from Canada to a tropical rainforest in South America. Samantha's disbelief equals that of any skeptical young reader's at this startling development, but as she gradually learns to speak bird and eat worms (these and similar incidents are wonderfully tempered with logic and humour by Atwood), her incredulity fades. So too does the reader's, and by the second of the eight chapters of the book, it is not suspension of disbelief which gnaws at the reader, but the unconscionable carelessness, cruelty, and myopic destructiveness of human beings with respect to their environment. Samantha suffers through experiences integrally linked to the critical environmental issues highlighted by Atwood.



The environmental crises covered in the book, including air and water pollution, chemical spraying, the annihilation of wildlife, and the destruction of the Amazonian rainforests, are made relevant to the young reader because they are made very relevant to Samantha. As she is stalked by her very own pussycat, suffers the pains of poisoned air, barely escapes sadistic hunters and finally passes out in a denuded jungle forest, Samantha's reactions are not only those of a Scarlet Tanager, but those of a very ordinary young girl who has been quite literally taken up in a cause hitherto unknown to her. Atwood brings home those

concerns to children in a way which empowers them to address the environmental degradation they will certainly experience.

Two other points warrant notice in *For the birds*. John Bianchi, in some thirty deft colour illustrations, captures two of the dominant aspects of Atwood's text: the peculiar poignancy and humour of Samantha's forced migration, and the underlying seriousness of the environmental hazards she encounters. Secondly, the book includes a sidebar text, with data on environmental issues and practical activities for children such as how to make a backyard more appealing to birds. The sidebar is aesthetically obtrusive: without it the book indeed would be a purer artistic creation. The compromise in favour of the informational material perhaps is best viewed in terms of what

Earthcare Books, a series dedicated to pollution and environmental issues, is attempting to bring to the children of Canada.

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## L'UNION FAIT LA FORCE

**Plaisirs d'animaux.** Roger Paré. Illus. auteur. Montréal, La courte échelle. 1990. Non paginé, broché. ISBN 2-89021-140-1; **Plaisirs d'hiver.** Roger Paré. Illus. auteur. Montréal, La courte échelle, 1990. Non paginé, broché. ISBN 2-89021-141-X.



Inutile de décrire longuement la série "Plaisirs de...", déjà bien connue, dont tous les volumes destinés à un très jeune public offrent, pour chaque double page, une comptine à gauche et une illustration pleine page à droite.

La comptine est un genre difficile qui demande de l'humour, de la vivacité, de l'insolite, du rythme, des jeux phonétiques, pour ne citer que les principales caractéristiques du genre. Dans les deux derniers volumes de "Plaisirs", toutes ces qualités, à l'exception des jeux phonétiques, évidemment, se retrouvent dans les images, mais trop peu dans les textes. Les efforts pour insuffler au texte rythme et vivacité sont parfois anéantis par un certain prosaïsme du texte, qui explique, à juste titre pourtant, l'image de la page de droite. Car sans les comptines explicatives, comment faire comprendre au jeune lecteur que Souris-Lili dans la gueule de l'hippopotame ne court aucun danger, que la bataille de boules de neige n'est qu'un jeu sans intention belliqueuse et que le rhinocéros n'a pas pour dessein d'écraser les tortues? Les comptines apparais-