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## Editorial: Dynamic encounters

In the last number of *CCL*, the first of two issues devoted to studies of Canadian illustrators and picture books, the articles focused on how theory from a spectrum of disciplines could suggest useful approaches to specific texts. While continuing to provide close readings of Canadian picture books and other illustrated texts, most of the articles in this number widen the discussion, by placing the texts they deal with in the context of the skills and needs of young audiences.

Dave Jenkinson's survey of Canadian picture books which have been subjected to censorship attempts shows just how often adults make the incorrect assumption that they can know exactly how children will understand the books they read. In articles that test that assumption, Ted McGee analyzes how alphabet books encourage beginning readers to make important connections between words and pictures, and our French contributor, Flore Gervais, describes how some actual kindergarten and grade six readers make sense of—i.e. translate and transform into pictures—the books they experience.

Tim Blackmore's discussion of the comics artist Dave Sim raises questions about comprehension and young readers in a different way. Sim's audience, once mostly adolescents, is now mostly adults. Blackmore's article suggests much about the shifting boundaries between children's literature and literature for adults, and the many levels and kinds of response made possible by both simple and complex texts.

All these articles—indeed, all the articles in both issues—confirm what Doug Thorpe suggested in his discussion of his young daughter's reading in the last issue: a picture book is "both something to be known and something to be explored .... not a static object to be controlled, but the site of a dynamic encounter."

Perry Nodelman, University of Winnipeg

## Éditorial

Le présent numéro, entièrement consacré à l'illustration dans les livres pour enfants, forme, avec le précédent, un tout cohérent: en effet, le numéro 70, où diverses approches empruntées à des disciplines variées permettaient de mieux déchiffrer et apprécier des oeuvres spécifiques, s'attachait surtout à la dimension théorique de l'analyse du rapport entre le texte et l'image; le numéro 71, par contre, s'intéresse plus particulièrement à ce rapport dans la perspective de la réception des ouvrages concernés, c'est-à-dire dans le contexte concret des besoins et des lectures de leurs consommateurs. A cet égard, les contributions de Perry Nodelman, Dave Jenkinson, Ted McGee, Flore Gervais et Tim Blackmore confirmeront le propos de Doug Thorpe sur la manière de lire et de comprendre les albums illustrés qu'il avait observée chez sa petite fille: le texte et son iconographie constituent un ensemble "qui doit être reconnu et exploré (...); non un objet statique à maîtriser, mais le lieu d'un échange complexe et dynamique".

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Cover illustration from *The longest home run*, © 1993 illustrations Sheldon Cohen, text: Roch Carrier, published by Tundra Books.

L'illustration de la couverture est tirée du livre *The longest home run*, texte de Roch Carrier, illustrations de Sheldon Cohen, Toronto, Tundra Books, © 1993.

### The illustrators of Munsch

#### Perry Nodelman

Résumé: Dans son analyse des ouvrages de Robert Munsch, Perry Nodelman insiste tout particulièrement sur les différences entre le contenu verbal et le contenu iconique. C'est bien dans ces différences que se perçoivent les moyens grâce auxquels les illustrateurs enrichissent et approfondissent la portée des textes de l'auteur.

If reviews are any evidence, most adult readers of picture books are unaware of the possibility that the pictures in them might be having an effect on their responses to the texts. While reviewers usually have a lot to say about the language and meanings of the verbal texts of picture books, they tend to limit their discussion of the illustrations to vaguely impressionistic phrases about how "charming" or "appropriate" they are.

The picture books with texts by Robert Munsch are a particularly revealing example. Not only do reviewers rarely comment on the illustrations in these books, but just about everybody almost always refers to them only as books "by Munsch," a label which discounts the contributions of his illustrator-collaborators.

Munsch's reputation as an oral storyteller reinforces this attitude. Mary Rubio speaks, quite rightly, I believe, of "the rhythms of oral storytelling which pace Munsch's tales." But as I suggest in my book *Words about pictures*, it's generally true that the stories in picture books require both words and pictures—that the texts are designed to be accompanied by illustrations, and are incomplete without them. Munsch's stories break this rule: they can convey meaning and provide pleasure as purely oral performances, without any pictorial amplification at all. Why then, do the books which offer printed versions of them even contain illustrations?

The most obvious answer is the one implied by reviewers' neglect of the illustrations: the illustrations aren't important. They are there, we might guess, simply to satisfy conventional expectations: expectations which lead most adults to believe that books for young children are picture books and nothing but picture books.<sup>2</sup> In order to sell to this market, then, the Munsch texts must have accompanying pictures; and while the pictures themselves are colourful, they are essentially superfluous.

But according to the semiotic theory I outline in Words about pictures, it

would be impossible for them to be superfluous: once there, pictures must affect our responses to and understanding of the texts they accompany. Whether we are conscious of it or not, illustrations *always* convey information, not just about what things look like, but how we should understand and what we should feel about the things depicted. The exact same words found in any of these books "by Munsch," printed without the pictures, would not add up to the same story: they would have a different focus, imply a different point of view, convey a different mood.

Nevertheless, the fact that pictures always influence our understanding of the texts they illustrate doesn't mean that their effect is always positive. Inept illustrations can also make verbal texts reveal less or different information than they might have with more communicative illustrations. Indeed, I believe that to be the case, to varying degrees, for just about all of the Munsch texts illustrated by someone other than his most frequent collaborator Michael Martchenko. Without downplaying the value and significance of Munsch's genius for storytelling, I want to argue here that at least part of the success and popularity of the picture books "by Munsch" can and should be attributed to Martchenko.

For all the ways in which Millicent and the wind, Giant, A promise is a promise, Love you forever, Good families don't, Get me another one! and Purple, green and yellow are different from each other, these books not illustrated by Martchenko all have one thing in common. They all seem significantly different from the ones that are illustrated by Martchenko.

It's possible that the difference is not just a matter of differing styles of illustration; there might be an actual difference in content. Munsch himself says that *Millicent* is "a quiet-them-down nap-time story, so it's much more laid back than the kind I do now in front of an audience, where the idea is to whoop them up. There's a difference in tone and a difference in purpose" (Kondo 29). Munsch adds that his publishers waited five years before they found an illustrator they considered suitable for this different sort of story. Perhaps the editors of all the other non-Martchenko books have chosen different illustrators, or the illustrators different styles, in order to complement inherently different kinds of texts.

In order to determine that, I must establish what typically Munschean texts—meaning, specifically, those illustrated by Martchenko—might be. This is fairly easy to do; Munsch's artistry depends notoriously on his inventive use of repetition and variation: what Raymond E. Jones calls "the folkloristic repetition of phrases or episodes that injects life into his ... books" (*CCL* 53, 56). Not surprisingly, then, his work as a whole consists of variations of the same few elements—so much so that Jones also suggests, with some justice, that "too often Munsch has seemed as if he stamped out stories in the same way that bakers use a cookie cutter to stamp out gingerbread men" (57).

While Munsch's stories are fantasies, most of them are firmly grounded in reality. They are almost always about fantastically exaggerated bouts of anarchy

breaking out in an otherwise normal world—most often, the normal world of contemporary children. And most of them are variations on one of three central patterns:

- 1) Intrusion. There is a momentary and often unexplained suspension of normal reality. What would be a perfectly ordinary aspect of the world as we usually know it suddenly appears somewhere it does not belong, in a way that upsets the otherwise normal life of one normal child. Versions of this story occur in *Jonathan cleaned up*, *Murmel murmel murmel*, and *The boy in the drawer*. In all these stories, the child protagonist must take charge of the situation and figure out a way to suppress the anarchic intruder.
- 2) Anarchic parents. In David's father and 50 below zero, the odd intrusion into normalcy is the behaviour of a weird parent, specifically a father. These two stories are contrapuntal variations on each other: in Fifty below zero the child must, as usual, solve the problem created by the father's oddity, while in David's father, much more unusually for Munsch, the father's oddity solves the child's problems.
- 3) Anarchic children. The usual intrusion of anarchic abnormality is caused by the child protagonists themselves, usually through their indulgence in undisciplined excess. In *Thomas's snowsuit*, *Pigs*, *Something good*, *Show and tell*, *I have to go!*, *Mortimer*, *Moira's birthday*, *Angela's airplane*, and *The fire station*, the only actual fantasy is in the exaggerated nature of the children's behaviour and its consequences. The child protagonists of most of these books must themselves find ways to solve the problem and restore the world to order, usually after adults fail to do so.

Despite their apparent differences, the non-Martchenko books all have some connection to one or more of these basic patterns. The dark, Mud puddle, Millicent and the wind and Good families don't are intrusion stories, in which darkness, mud, and two different forms of wind become unhinged from their usual functions. Love you forever, Giant, and A promise is a promise also involve intruders in places they don't belong: a mother sneaking into her adult child's bedroom while he sleeps, a giant intruding in heaven, and a Qallipilluq, a figure from traditional Inuit myth, intruding in a contemporary home.

To my mind, furthermore, Love you forever also represents category two, the weird parent; but I know that not everyone would agree with me, and I'll say more about that later. Another weird parent, a father who uses his daughter as fishbait, also appears in Get me another one! This story also involves the undisciplined, anarchic behaviour of a child, as do A promise is a promise and Purple, green and yellow.

Nevertheless, all of these stories are still significantly different from the ones illustrated by Martchenko—all more or less experimental variations from the basic successful pattern. The variations might well justify differences in visual style.

Most obviously, the source of the anarchy in both Giant and A promise is a

promise is a figure which is not merely out of place, but inherently fantastic. Unlike darkness or wind, Qallupilluit and giants like McKeon do not actually exist—at least not according to usual conceptions of reality. Convincing illustrations of creatures so fantastic would have to be persuasively concrete and three-dimensional: as indeed Vladyana Krykorka's for A promise and especially Gilles Tibo's for Giant are. Being merely real, meanwhile, the intrusive boys and babies and pigs and pizzas and such of more typical Munsch stories need look merely exactly as tangible as everything else in the pictures in order to confirm the oddity of their uncharacteristic behaviour—as is indeed the case in Martchenko's illustrations of them.

Furthermore, both the giant and the Qallupilluit are figures from traditional bodies of folklore: the giant from the European tradition, the Qallupilluit from Inuit tradition. Their presence makes these stories into literary folk tales: stories invented by Munsch in the first case and by Munsch and Michael Kusugak in the second, but modelled on stories already existing in the folk tradition about encounters between fantastic beings like these and ordinary people. Indeed, a reader who didn't know these stories were new inventions might well imagine them to be merely new versions of traditional tales—not Munsch-engendered stories at all.<sup>4</sup>

The boy whom Shelley finds in her sock drawer in *The boy in the drawer*, and the baby Robin discovers in her sandbox in *Murmel murmel murmel* merely appear, irrationally, all of sudden, with no foreshadowing and no previously established context; but, as in traditional folk tales, the anarchic events of *A promise* and *Giant* emerge from logical reasons clearly enunciated in the stories themselves. Mckeon's violence is a response to St. Patrick's attempts to rid Ireland of snakes, and the Qallupilluit are unleashed when Allashua breaks the promise she made her mother.

As a result of this logic, these stories have a more obvious relationship to fables—stories told as parables with messages for readers about their own future behaviour—than does most of Munsch's work. As a fable, *Giant* enunciates a theme common in much children's literature, the importance of accepting differences: "Saints are for hanging up church bells and giants are for tearing them down. That's just the way it is." Even more conventionally, *A promise is a promise* follows the most common children's story pattern of all—the central defining fable of children's literature: a child disobeys parental authority, gets into trouble because of it, and needs an adult to extricate her from the difficulty.

While more typical Munsch stories share the first two elements of this pattern, it's astonishing how rarely his children do actually need assistance from adults. Julie and David in *David's father* and Ben in *Show and tell* are rare examples of children extricated from trouble by parents. Even in these two books, furthermore, the texts give little indication that child readers are to learn any sort of respect for adults or distrust of their own initiatives. While Ben's decision to bring his baby sister to show-and-tell leads to an anarchic situation at school that

only his mother can solve, that situation is exactly as pleasurable as the anarchy other Munsch children extricate themselves from. By and large, if a typical Munsch story has any moral at all, it is that independence is worth all the trouble it causes, and that in any case there is a lot of fun to be had in not doing what your parents tell you. Appropriate illustrations would have to focus on the fun of anarchy—as Martchenko's, in fact do.

But the more conventional nature of Giant and A promise is a promise means that they might well require a visual style unlike Martchenko's. In fact, the work of Tibo and Krykorka is more like the important tradition of fairy tale illustration begun by figures like Arthur Rackham and Kay Nielsen and still carried on by many illustrators of folk tales and their literary offspring. As I suggested earlier, the pictures by Tibo and Krykorka are more representational than Martchenko's—more interested in showing things as they appear than in making us see the comedy in them. The pictures are richly detailed in terms of costume and setting. Their vibrant colours and complex textures assert that their purpose is not just to convey narrative information, but also to provide viewers with a purely sensuous aesthetic pleasure. They seem more weighty than Martchenko's cartoon images, more artistic—more "important."

The same is true of Suzanne Duranceau's images for Millicent and the wind. They are richly detailed in their depiction of clothing and setting, light and shadow: in the berry patch Millicent stands in (figure 1), we can see, not just every leaf, but the veins of every leaf. Duranceau's depictions of landscapes are not just highly representational but exceedingly atmospheric, romantic images of the sort that conventionally signify



Figure 1.

a deep emotional response to and respect for the natural world.

Again, this seems appropriate. While *Millicent and the wind* is a version of the typical Munsch intrusion story, the text itself is significantly different from the other versions of that story, in ways that ground it in reality and focus on its emotional content. When the baby suddenly and irrationally appears in the

sandbox in *Murmel murmel*, we must either be seriously unsettled by this lack of logic, or else just laugh at it. Martchenko's cheerfully comic images comfort us by telling us we can afford just to laugh. But the wind enters Millicent's world only after the events of the story establish how much she needs it: when she is alone without friends, or when she is being laughed at by others. This makes its appearance seem reasonable: meaningful, and therefore, not unsettling at all. It is even possible to see it as actually real, to believe that Millicent is merely imagining words being spoken in the natural sounds of an actual wind. Realistic images whose only odd feature is a disconcertingly artificial-looking wind (about which I'll say more later) support this reading.

Furthermore, the wind's arrival is emotionally pleasing, even comforting: it represents a satisfying fulfilment of Millicent's need for companionship. Quite differently, the anarchic intrusions in *Boy in the drawer* and *Murmel murmel murmel* are not the answer to a problem, but the problem itself: how do you cope with an intrusion so illogical, so ungrounded in previous physical causes, so totally unrelated to one's previous emotional state of mind that one cannot possibly figure out any logical way of dealing with it? If illustrations as emotionally evocative as Duranceau's accompanied these stories, they'd seem



Figure 2

dark and unsettling indeed, opening deep chasms of chaos and unreason; Martchenko's lively comedy suppresses that sort of response.

In other words. Millicent is like Giant and A promise is a promise in being more conventional than more typical Munsch stories—less unsettlingly anarchic, more clearly oriented towards communicating comforting and reasonable messages to readers. It's appropriate that the illustrations by Krykorka, Tibo, and Duranceau are both less anarchic and more serious than

Martchenko's—and more like the pictures conventionally used for serious, important children's literature.

Yet despite these differences, these texts, if considered on their own without the accompanying pictures, are really not all that much unlike the texts illustrated by Martchenko. If *Giant* is a literary fairy tale, so is *The paperbag princess*. Both stories involve aggressively violent fantasy creatures who begin by causing devastation but are finally defeated by the non-violent actions of a young girl. If one seems merely comic and other far more serious, it is in great part because the illustrations help to convey these ideas to us.

Tibo's images for *Giant* are hauntingly beautiful, a pleasure to look at even without reference to the narrative information they convey. They make admirable use of the luminosity, complex textures and persuasively three-dimensional modelling made possible by air-brushing. The figures have depth and solidity, so much so that, as in figure 2, they often seem surprisingly still.

The effect is like that of stop-action photography: one moment of an action captured, so that figures in motion look like statues.

Martchenko's images for Paperbag princess are more serviceable. It's hard

to imagine them hanging on the walls of a gallery; they are interesting exactly and almost exclusively because of the energy of the actions they depict.

They convey energy not by stopping it but by using every conventional trick in the cartoonist's book to convey it: conventions like the use of action lines to imply symbolically that a figure is moving, and clever uses of pictorial dynamics. In fig-



ure 3, for instance, the small lines representing blades of grass form a line that converges with the lines representing the path of the dragon's flight, to form an arrow that focuses our attention on the no-longer visible dragon: by not showing the dragon but using these tricks of the cartoonist's trade, Martchenko cleverly implies just how quickly the beast has moved.

In Millicent and the wind, Duranceau uses similar lines to represent the wind. But this is the only use of a cartooning convention in pictures which otherwise try to be representational. In figure 1 and throughout the book, the convincing reality of the rest of the image makes the lines seem exceedingly artificial, clearly symbolic in a way the rest of the image is not; and the lines draw our attention to the two-dimensional surface of the picture plane in a way that interferes with the reality of the three-dimensional world it otherwise implies. It's not surprising, then, that Millicent herself seems so fixed in this picture; the motionless quality of the stopped-time photography convention is reinforced by the contradictory attempt to convey movement in the action lines of the wind.

The lines convey not only movement, but the mere fact that the wind is there at all. Since wind can actually be detected by the eye only when it makes other objects move, its depiction as a set of action lines represents an attempt to solve a difficult problem. Interestingly, a number of the other books not illustrated by Martchenko also attempt to depict what cannot actually or easily be seen; and, in my opinion, at least, they fail to do it successfully. Indeed, it's this failure that most clearly distinguishes the illustrations of *The dark*, *The mud puddle*, *Love you forever*, *Good families don't*, *Get me another one!* and *Purple*, *green and yellow* from Martchenko's.

Yet, unlike the work of Tibo or Krykorka or Duranceau, the most obvious quality of these illustrations is their similarity to Martchenko's work in other Munsch books. Sami Suomalainen's pictures for The dark and The mud puddle, done before Martchenko's, are even more frenetic than his, and just as comic: they have a somewhat amateurish quality, a klutzy charm quite different from the assured confidence that emerges from Martchenko's work even or especially at its most anarchic. And while the other four illustrators have styles different from Martchenko and from each other, all acknowledge Martchenko's clever solutions to the problem of illustrating Munsch by aping his techniques. <sup>6</sup> All four choose a lively cartoon style as the best way to convey Munsch's comic exuberance. All four frequently use conventions and techniques of pictorial dynamics to focus on movement and depict it. All four sometimes use Martchenko's trick of focusing closely in on active figures depicted inside constrained spaces that make the action seem even more intense. All four also depict anarchy in scenes in which numerous objects are strewn randomly around the picture plane.

These similarities are justified by the fact that these six stories are classic Munsch tales of anarchic intrusion, far more like the Martchenko-illustrated tales than the stories I discussed earlier. Yet despite the similarities in the stories and in their illustrational styles, none of these three illustrators match what Martchenko achieves. I have to wonder if the problem isn't at least partially in the stories themselves—if they don't in fact all contain elements that could never be depicted successfully.

Good families don't involves an illustration problem similar to Millicent:

how do you depict a wind? Having chosen a naturalistic three-dimensional style, Duranceau was at least wise enough to know she could not get away with something like Alan Daniel's solution; her action lines may not work, but they work much better than would a literal depiction of the visible personified being which is implied by the text, a wind that talks and, since it is capable of "running among the trees," apparently has feet. Daniel's more cartoon-like style—and the comic tone of the text itself—would seem to allow him to get away with depicting the fart of the text as a visible monster with human eyebrows and teeth and fingernails. But in fact, his doing so allows viewers to lose sight of the fact that it is indeed only and exactly a fart: gas expelled from an anus.

In fact, these pictures divest the story of its dangerousness. While the text itself tells us that the fart is purple, green and yellow, it never suggests that it isn't an actual fart, a natural occurrence gone scarily and delightfully awry: but in the context of these pictures, "fart" is now just a somewhat strange name for a monster, yet one more of the apparently endless series of comically grotesque picture book creatures that descend from Sendak's Wild things. Not only does that make this book all too much like a legion of other picture book stories, it seriously dissipates the text's satire on the dehumanizing gentility of "good families" and what they don't like to admit to doing. It may not be accidental that Munsch's text compounds the problem by finally allowing Carmen's mother to turn the fart into a satisfyingly harmless stuffed toy. It seems that good children can have farts, as the story's ending insists, only as long as the farts are no longer actual smelly human gas.

Something similarly weakening seems to happen in *The dark* and *The mud puddle*, the two books illustrated by Suomalainen, although I suspect with less complicity on Munsch's part. Certainly, the scary weirdness of "a small dark" emerging from its home inside a cookie jar and growing huge on the shadows it devours is weakened when the dark is not all that dark at all, but merely a pleasant turquoise, and when it looks more like a jolly porpoise than a devouring void. Suomalainen's mud puddle is equally unthreatening in a way that undermines the darker implications of the text.

It seems likely that Suomalainen's and Daniel's failure here is less in their solution to a problem than in their assumption there might be a solution at all. How *could* one accurately depict the scarily amorphous dark or the vulgar and gaseous fart evoked by Munsch's texts? I tend to believe that these texts are essentially unillustratable—or at least, that the style which might accurately illustrate them would be too abstract or too symbolic to fit comfortably within the conventions of children's picture books.

If *Purple*, green and yellow is equally unillustratable, it is for the exactly opposite reason: not that it takes the familiar and makes it disappointingly strange, but that it takes the strange and makes it disappointingly familiar. Bridgid, rendered invisible after following a doctor's advice about how to rid her skin of the indelible marker she'd coloured herself with, solves her problem by

colouring herself again, but this time with a special marker "the same colour she was." In response, her mother says, "You're just a picture. Everyone will know there is something wrong." Hélène Desputeaux's picture of Bridgid undermines that statement by being, in fact, just a picture—a picture exactly like all the earlier pictures of Bridgid throughout the book.

But then, how could it be different? For no matter what style an illustrator uses, the pictures in a book will always be pictures. It's a literal truth that not only are the marks on the page depicting the colours on Bridgid's fingernails actually marks—marks representing marks—but so, too, are the fingernails—marks representing fingernails. To draw a picture of a character which makes it clear that the character now is meant to look like a picture rather than just actually being one is a dizzying proposition. Desputeaux merely compounds the problem by choosing a style so thoroughly and perkily non-representational as to be nothing but picture-like throughout.

The problem in *Love you forever* is quite different: a question not of unillustratable content, but of perhaps unillustratable difficulties of tone. As I've suggested, this story shares enough of the absurdity of other weird-parent stories like 50 below zero; a mother with a fetish for holding grown men on her lap and rocking them is exactly as strange as a frozen sleepwalking father. Indeed, this story would be nothing but humorous if it ended differently. But when the mother grows old and the son treats her as she once treated him, the comedy turns emotional—I would say, sentimental—and that creates a problem. How do you depict the earlier events so that they don't seem so absurd that the touching ending is a jarring surprise? How can you possibly show a mother sneaking into her teenage son's bedroom to cuddle him as he sleeps without eliciting laughter—or even worse, evoking horrific images of a monstrously exaggerated devouring mother out of the worst nightmares of Freud.

My answer is, you can't; it's impossible. This is not to say that Sheila McGraw doesn't do a surprisingly good job of balancing comedy and sentiment. In the first half of the book, she tends to alternate them. Calm, organized images, mostly in muted pastel shades, of the mother holding the sleeping child, alternate with more boisterous images, in more brilliant colours, of the child wreaking anarchic havoc. Furthermore, these images of the child awake use all the Martchenko techniques I listed earlier; and the other images use not just a more muted palette, but also, a variety of unusual points of view—from below and from high above—that place the reposeful figures firmly and comfortingly in the context of their setting, and allow enough distance from them to create a sense of stability.

In the latter half of the book, the boisterous images disappear. Pastels predominate, the distance from the figures increases, and so do the proportion of views from on high, so that the delicate emotions deflect the absurdity and swallow up the comedy.

Nevertheless, when an image shows a woman on her knees heading towards

an adolescent male's bed, or with a fully grown man cradled in her arms, the fact that it is in delicate purples does not make it all that much less absurd. I know that many people—especially, in my experience, adult female parents—claim to find this book not funny at all, but deeply satisfying, emotionally profound. I can only say that it must take a determined act of will to ignore the absurd elements in this story and in these pictures—to not allow oneself to think about what act a mother sneaking into her teenage son's bedroom at night might find him doing, or to not acknowledge noticing that McGraw has carefully placed the boy's arms and, presumably, hands, *outside* the covers.

The last of the Munsch texts illustrated by somebody other than Martchenko, Get me another one! also implies difficulties of tone. It not only describes what might be viewed as a fairly horrific act of child abuse, but it insists we notice the abusive nature of the act by calling it wrong and punishing it. Shawn Steffler's flatly un-modelled and rather luridly colourful pictures simply ignore these darker implications, and work hard to pretend that the story they accompany is nothing but jolly fun. It's hard to imagine illustrations that would accurately capture this perverse tale's strange mixture of the exaggeratedly comic and the all-too-real; Steffler's pictures don't even try.

As I thought about the difficulties these texts create for illustrators, I began to wonder if the stories illustrated by Martchenko ever raised similar difficulties. By and large, they don't. As I've shown, the non-Martchenko books all represent deviations from Munsch's usual sort of storytelling, variations that make the stories less assured. less clear in tone and purpose, and much less easy to illustrate.



Figure 4

But despite that, the stories in books illustrated by Martchenko do contain problems—problems I hadn't noticed simply because Martchenko's illustrations solved them. In *Thomas' snowsuit*, for instance, it's hard to imagine what Thomas and his teacher might look like *during* "an enormous fight" which

results in them wearing each other's clothes. Martchenko doesn't even try to show us; he cleverly chooses to depict only the results, and allows us to imagine the impossible causes that might have had such intriguing effects.

But that's solving the problem of the unillustratable by not illustrating it; how about actual depictions of things that can't be seen? Well, probably because of their origin in oral performance, Munsch's stories are often about noise, about shouting and singing and babies howling (and for that matter, farting). Martchenko's pictures must often depict what visual images simply can't show: what things sound like. In figure 4, from *Mortimer*, Martchenko uses the cartoonist's technique of symbolic representation to solve this problem. Mortimer's exuberant song is visible as brightly coloured musical notes floating above his head in magnificent profusion.



Figure 5

This works here. I believe, because, unlike Duranceau's symbolic wind, it fits the cartoon style of the images as a whole. In fact, the noise is represented, not just by the musical notes, but also, by other cartoon devices: some typical Martchenko flying objects—slippers, carpets, toys) and by the impossibly contorted shape of Mortimer's bed. which seems to be being twisted by the immense vibrations.

In figure 5, from *Moira's Birthday*, there is no visual representation of a baker's yell; but the yell is clearly evoked by its effects on others. We see eggs flying in the air, cherries popping out of a can, icing squishing, batter jumping; the noise has been loud enough both to startle humans and cause intense vibrations in objects.

In other words, noises are implied by the movements they cause in objects; but in fact, this is, like all picture book illustrations, a still picture: nothing actually moves. So in order to imply noise, Martchenko must also imply movement. He does so here by depicting objects in positions in which our contextual knowledge tells us they could not possibly be at rest: eggs floating in

the air space above a bowl must be moving, probably downwards, and tilted boxes are clearly in the process of falling over.

Figure 6, from Show and tell, is an especially clever visual representation of the actually unillustratable. Here, movement and noise are represented by at least five different types of visual symbolism from the cartoonist's repertoire.



- 1) As in the image of the baker just discussed, objects (the baby's soother, the teacher's hemline and hair) are depicted in positions that would logically require them to be moving.
- 2) What Schwarcz calls "continuous narrative"—the use of a series of images of the same object, sometimes, as here, superimposed on each other—suggests the rapid movement as the teacher rocks the baby.
- 3) The use of a convention borrowed from photography: a blur represents action too fast for a camera to capture.
- 4) As the images of the baby move from left to right (the conventional direction in which time passes in illustrations), the circle representing its mouth grows larger, and the colour intensifies from grey to black. These visual intensifications represent intensified noise.
- 5) The little dots above the baby's head are symbolic visual representations of its noise, and the lines emanating like rays from the baby imply the movement of the noise outwards.

In the midst of all this is the fixed face of the teacher, and the gloriously demented self-confidence of her impossible smile, so that the picture effectively represents the contrast in the text between the teacher's conviction that "I know how to take care of babies" and the narrator's quiet statement that "she didn't rock quite right."

Indeed, this picture sums up the essence of Martchenko's contribution to

these picture books. Munsch's words here are, as his published texts almost always are, straightforward, matter of fact in tone, and so reticent as to report information only in the most general terms. By themselves, then, the words "she didn't rock quite right" leave us free not only to imagine what the teacher might have been doing wrong, but to choose from a vast range of possible responses to her act, from fear to sympathy. But the picture is breathtakingly clear about what the teacher does wrong—very exact, and also, very funny: it tells us we should laugh at this teacher and feel superior to her arrogance, rather than, perhaps, feeling sorry for her.

In other words, Martchenko conveys by visual means the focus and mood and tone which might perhaps be implied by a good oral storyteller but which are not actually found in the words of the text. And as I've suggested above, he does it by making use of a vast repertoire of picture book conventions. We must, of course, know these conventions before we can understand and appreciate their use in pictures; but the pictures can convey rich and subtle meanings to those who have learned to read them.

The consistent success of Martchenko's illustrations in revealing the moods and meanings of Munsch stories depends on a quality they share with those stories: their similarity to each other. Like Munsch's verbal tales (and most specifically like the specific Munsch tales he has actually illustrated), Martchenko's pictures are themselves variations on a formula—a formula that can successfully be repeated so often simply because, (1) it works, and (2) it is flexible enough to allow for almost infinite variations.



Figure 7 Figure 8

In what follows, I outline the principles of Martchenko's formula as they are revealed in two characteristic images, figure 7 from *Thomas' snowsuit* and figure 8 from *Moira's birthday*.

- 1) Use a cartoon style—a style whose most obvious message is always that we are supposed to understand the events we see as being funny—and a pallet of bright, fairly saturated colours that will reinforce a light, happy mood. This incidentally, may be one reason why the text of Giant, accompanied by Tibo's darker, heavier images, is subject to attacks for its depictions of violence<sup>9</sup>, whereas Martchenko's more violent images in book after book are not. Martchenko's style tells us to laugh at what we see, to not worry about its effects or implications—as Munsch intends; whereas Tibo's pictures invite us to take things more seriously—something which Munsch may or may not intend in Giant.
- 2) Keep the figures simple. Imply people and objects with the smallest number of lines possible: keep their eyes lines or dots, except when they pop hugely in frequent moments of shock or surprise. Avoid crosshatching and other means of creating complexities of texture; indeed, rarely use lines at all for anything but the exterior outlines of figures. Colour them in with solid blocks of one shade, with just enough darker shading to imply a minimal amount of three-dimensionality.

This focus on simply drawn caricatures with just a hint of substance exactly mirrors the world of Munsch's texts. His characters each have only one or two traits—no more than is needed to account for their behaviour in the most minimal of ways. This causes us to focus less on their motivations than on the behaviour itself. Not surprisingly, the behaviour we focus on in these circumstances tends to be frenetic physical activity; Munsch's world has much in common with slapstick comedy. Martchenko confirms this for us by the energy of his work.

- 3) Depict physical activity with as much energy as possible. Exaggerate gestures to imply either action in progress or the results of a just completed action. The more exaggerated, the better. The more things that seem to be in motion, the better. In figure 8, for instance, every object depicted is in motion, even the picture hanging on the wall. Even in the deliberately still moment of figure 7, puffs of smoke move around the figures stubbornly fixed in a war of wills; and the exaggerated tension in the principal's pointing finger and Thomas's arms akimbo imply energy repressed but ready to burst out.
- 4) To reinforce the focus on physical activity, depict characters from enough distance so they are seen full figure, or at least from the knees up, but close enough to us as viewers so that their gestures fill the picture. This also confirms that our interest should be centred on the physical movements of limbs and torsos, rather than on emotions or motivations, as is usually implied by close-ups of faces, or on the characters' relationship to settings, as might be implied if they were depicted making the same gestures but surrounded by detailed settings in more distant shots.

- 5) Keep the point of view more or less fixed throughout. Don't move in or out, or up or down, in a way that might imply changes of emphasis in terms of our relationships to characters from one picture to the next. Not only does all this confirm the focus on physical actions, their causes and effects, as our main interest; it keeps that focus steady in a way that helps us to read the stories with the attitude they require. Thus, for instance, we never have to think about the pain so often caused by the actions depicted (as in figure 8), because we almost never see a character's face closely enough to bring the convention of thinking about their feelings into play.
- 6) Alternate between two ways of depicting action. First, show actions being planned or their results being contemplated in pictures which show figures without backgrounds (as in figure 7). Such pictures allow total concentration on the simple emotions implied—usually anger or exhaustion.
- 7) Second, show action itself in pictures with backgrounds—and with the backgrounds depicted as being very close to the picture plane. In figure 8, notice how the picture above and behind the female figure at top left seems to be directly behind her head; apparently, there is a wall very close behind her and the rest of the action.

This accomplishes a number of things. The close background, depicted with just about the same degree of saturation as the foreground, gives each of the objects depicted, whether central figure or background object, equal weight, and so prevents us from settling on any one particular object to focus on. <sup>10</sup> Pictorial dynamics would dictate then that our eye then move from object to object in an unsettled way—a perfect way of conveying the anarchy being depicted. Furthermore, our closeness to the figures in front and their closeness to the walls behind imply that all this anarchic action occurs in a very tight space; and the constriction makes the action itself seem even more frenetic.

This lack of depth also has another effect. It forces all actions to move from right to left or left to right, instead of inwards towards the depth implied by techniques of perspective drawing or outward toward the viewer. Martchenko's characters always seem to be moving towards the sides of the pictures. In doing so, they reinforce the focus on left-to-right movement which is one of the main conventions by which illustrations imply movement and the passage of time. <sup>11</sup> Furthermore, time conventionally moves in pictures from left to right; as in figure 8, Martchenko often moves characters from right to left, a trick illustrators often use to imply constraint and create tension.

All of this reinforces both the intensity of the action and the focus on the cause-and-effect movement of narrative. Martchenko's pictures make it clear that these are stories about how events lead to other events, that they are not centrally concerned with the morality or the meanings of those events.

8) Organize the anarchy. For instance, frequently fill the picture plane with many objects of similar size and shape, in order to create a visual effect similar to the effect of rhythm in music. In figure 8, for instance, note the complex variety of rhythms established. There are at least ten crescent-shaped mouths formed of a black circle with a border of white teeth on top and bottom; indeed, many of the faces in this pictures are similar enough in size and in the shapes of their features to read like variations on each other. In addition, the held-out arms of mother, on the left, are echoed in the raised legs of father on the right; there are similarly-sized green areas representing the mother's dress, two of the children's shirts, and one of the gifts; the red and green, and red and yellow, of the gifts, lower left, is echoed by the red and green of the roses, upper left, and the red, green and yellow of the father's socks, upper right; and the pop-eyed child with orange hair on the extreme left is a variation of the pop-eyed mothers with orange hair, just above her. Even in the more simple picture, figure 7, the round heads and tummies, wisps of hair, slanted eyebrows, narrowed eyes and bent elbows of the figures of Thomas and the principal are rhythmic echoes of each other.

These rhythmic variations do what musical rhythms do: organize time. In doing so here, they add a sense of balance to the frenzy depicted—a balance missing in the merely frenetic work of, for instance, Suomalainen and Daniel.

9) Carefully choose moments to depict, both to establish focus and create rhythm in a series of pictures for the same text. Because pictures don't actually move, illustrators can choose one moment only of stopped action out of all the events the text accompanying it describes; and the ones they choose focus our attention on the events in a highly specific way. In figure 8, for instance, Martchenko characteristically chooses the moment in which the children run over Moira's parents rather than the less active movement when they open the door, which the text also reports.

Figure 7 represents a different use of chosen moments. As with every other picture in *Thomas' snowsuit*, it represents the moments between actions: we always see Thomas about to resist the snowsuit or the results of his resistance to it. As I suggested earlier, this solves a problem of depicting impossible and therefore unillustratable events. And as we move from picture to picture, all representing calm moments between the frenzied actions described by the text, Martchenko establishes a rhythm that cleverly counterpoints the text and affects our response to its meanings.

Furthermore, this rhythm is amplified by repeated patterns within the pictures, most of which show Thomas standing beside one adult, the two figures with bodies faced toward us even if their faces look towards each other or elsewhere. But there is a varying factor: the figure of Thomas appears to the left of an adult figure whenever he is in difficulty, but in his moments of triumph, he stands to the right of the adult. These arrangements may or may not have

specific significance in themselves;<sup>12</sup> but they certainly affect response in terms of creating expectations and then breaking them in ways that become meaningful and noteworthy simply as variations.

In Moira's birthday, similarly, figure 8 follows four previous pictures (five if we include the image of Moira by herself on the title page) and precedes five following ones, all of which contain at least one figure with arms flung into the air. Indeed, only two pictures in Moira's birthday don't show arms raised. Not surprisingly, this book seems far more frenetic than does Thomas's snowsuit, which more subtly implies activity rather than exulting in it; it might not be surprising, then, to discover that in Thomas' snowsuit, almost every picture shows figures with arms pointing downwards.

10) Always use these same techniques. Never vary from them. The qualities I've listed above recur in all of Martchenko's illustrations for Munsch, and help to create a consistent world—one where we know what to expect and how to respond to it. The world is further unified by its occasional self-referentiality. In The boy in the drawer, Shelley reads The paperbag princess, and a pig in Pigs eats a copy of I have to go! Most spectacularly, the teacher in Show and tell (figure 9) is confronted not just by Ben's "strange things," but also by Mortimer in his pyjamas, David with his father, Thomas in his snowsuit, Millicent and her pigs, the princess Elizabeth in her paper bag and with her dragon, Jonathan's jam-eating friend from city hall, and David's grandmother.

David's grandmother appears here as she does in *David's father*—merely a giant hairy leg emerging from a polka dot skirt. The text accompanying the original

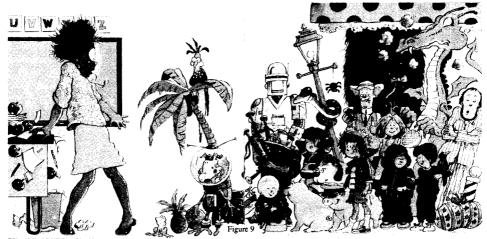


illustration doesn't mention the size or the hair or the skirt, merely saying, "Wait till you see my grandmother." This illustration has the same relationship to its text as does the picture in *Show and tell* of the teacher rocking the bawling infant, and represents one final contribution Martchenko makes to Munsch's texts:

11) Offer visual information that makes a text's general statement into a very specific scene, and so turns the text into a dead-pan joke of understatement. This happens specifically in final pictures, which show us, for instance, Jason sleeping in the kitchen along with his father at the end of 50 below zero, or Megan, who "never let out any more animals. At least not any more pigs" about to pick the lock on an elephant cage at the end of Pigs. These pictures offer a visual equivalent to one final characteristic element of the Munsch formula: the little hint at the end of a story of even more intense chaos to come.

Intense chaos: that is the chief characteristic of both Munsch's texts and Martchenko's pictures. But it is balanced in both cases by careful artistry, a controlling sense of organization which safely allows the pleasure of chaos while being anything but chaotic. Some of Munsch's other illustrators (Suomalainen, Daniel) convey only the chaos; others (Tibo, Duranceau) downplay it so much as to seem overweighty and somewhat joyless. Perhaps they do so in attempts to illustrate uncharacteristic Munsch texts that are equally without balance—about that I am not absolutely sure. But two things I am sure about. In his stories illustrated by Martchenko, Munsch is at his most assured best; and in his illustrations for those stories, Martchenko makes an equally assured, equally masterful, and equally important contribution to the final effect.

#### NOTES

- 1 In "Rhymes and pictures for toddlers," Carol Anne Wien focuses on the illustrations in three of the four books she reviews, but doesn't even mention the pictures in the fourth, Munsch and Martchenko's Mortimer; nor does Sheldon Richmond mention McGraw's illustrations for Love you forever in his review of it ("Children and the thought of death"), or Mary Rubio mention Martchenko's illustrations for Pigs in her review of it; and Joan Weller speaks merely of Martchenko's "colourful, lively illustrations" (95) in her review of 50 below zero. In "Munsch: Chaotic Comedy," Ray Jones' comments on illustrations are limited to the assertion that Tibo's work for Giant is "whimsical" (104) and the suggestion that a difference in skin tones in Martchenko's pictures for Something good implies that the children are adopted; in "Munsch Ado," Jones labels Krykorka's work for A promise is a promise as "less cartoon-like than Martchenko's" and suggests that Martchenko's drawings for Moira's birthday "vigorously complement the prose," but doesn't say how. In a rare perceptive comment on illustration, Marjorie Gann says, correctly, I think, that Daniel's pictures for Good families don't, "though witty and faithful to the text, are almost too overblown and abandoned; there is no let-up to the chaos. The genius of Michael Martchenko, Munsch's usual illustrator, is the tension between vertical and diagonal, stillness and movement, poker faces (usually on the children) and caricatured emotions" (65). Later in this article, I present my own analysis of how this tension operates.
- 2 The usual justification for this is that children have "visual imaginations," or perhaps, require the visual information they easily understand in order to figure out the meanings of words. As I suggest in Words about pictures (1-39), neither of these is necessarily true; the convention is, finally, merely a convention, but one so firmly entrenched that publishers defy it at their peril.
- 3 Anyone who doubts that need consider only how the same events, and sometimes even the exact same words, come to imply different moods and meanings when accompanied by differing pictures in the variety of different picture book versions of widely known fairy tales like "Snow White" or "Little Red Riding Hood."

- 4 It could, of course, be argued that the more typical Munsch tales are also grounded in the folktale tradition. But while that's true, his stories of anarchic intrusion evoke quite a different kind of folk tale: less widely known stories like the Grimms' "The golden goose," in which everyone who touches the goose gets stuck to it, for no apparent reason.
- 5 I refer to artists like Trina Schart Hyman, Errol Le Cain, Lazlo Gal, and Robin Muller. Incidentally, I don't mean to imply that no one has ever done energetic cartoon illustrations of folk tales; but cartoon renditions by artists like those by Jack Kent or Quentin Blake are relatively uncommon.
- 6 A cynic might assume that the editors at Firefly and Doubleday who worked on Love you forever and Good families don't made every attempt to ape the successful Annick formula by providing these Munsch tales with Martchenko-like illustrations.
- 7 It's possible the irony here may be intentional. The mother's statement implies a metafictional impulse on Munsch's part, a joke which draws our attention to the fact that the characters we see in all the pictures are in fact only pictures—that their existence is merely fictional, a sort of clever lie we have pretended to believe. This would make Desputeaux's pictures thoroughly appropriate, and suggest that both author and illustrator are addressing a highly sophisticated audience which might both understand and appreciate this internal deconstruction of a fictional world. It would be nice to believe they had this much faith in the subtlety and sophistication of child readers and viewers; somehow, though, I doubt it.
- 8 Indeed, Sheldon Richmond, comparing Love you forever to other picture books describing death, suggests that "feelings of return and rebirth are displayed in the grown-up son repeating the mother's ritual with his own new baby girl .... These are feelings the other stories talk about rather than reveal in their realistic approach" (81).
- 9 For a discussion of concerns about the violence of *Giant*, see the interesting article by Dave Jenkinson in this issue.
- 10 For a discussion of visual weight, see Words about pictures 125-157.
- 11 For a discussion of visual conventions used to depict the passage of time, see *Words about pictures* 158-192.
- 12 If they do, it might relate to what Mercedes Gaffron calls a "glance curve;" see *Words about pictures* 135. Our relationship to Thomas would change in relation to his differing positions on the glance curve in different pictures.

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Figure 1. Millicent and the wind. Robert Munsch. Illus. Suzanne Duranceau. Annick Press, 1984.
Figure 2. Giant or Waiting for the Thursday boat. Robert Munsch. Illus. Gilles Tibo. Annick Press, 1989.

Figure 3. The paper bag princess. Robert Munsch. Illus. Michael Martchenko. Annick Press, 1980. Figure 4. Mortimer. Robert Munsch. Illus. Michael Martchenko. Annick Press, 1985.

Figures 5 and 8. Moira's birthday. Robert Munsch. Illus. Michael Martchenko. Annick Press, 1987. Figures 6 and 9. Show and tell. Robert Munsch. Illus. Michael Martchenko. Annick Press, 1991. Figure 7. Thomas' snowsuit. Robert Munsch. Illus. Michael Martchenko. Annick Press, 1985.

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## ABCs of ABCs: Two Canadian exemplars

#### Ted McGee

Résumé: Dans son analyse des abécédaires, Ted McGee prend à partie l'opinion reçue selon laquelle la relation entre l'image et le réel est simple, claire et univoque. Bien que ces ouvrages encouragent les enfants à établir des liens nécessaires et importants entre 'les mots et les choses', il n'en reste pas moins vrai que leur polysémie soulève le problème de la compréhension immédiate du message verbal et iconique, à savoir: les jeunes lecteurs comprennent-ils effectivement ce qu'on veut qu'ils comprennent?

To begin with, "A" is for Aristotle's apocryphal, alliterative ABC. Circulating in manuscript late in the Middle Ages, this prototypical alphabet book warned against extremism of various kinds, telling its readers not to be

Too Amorous, too Adventurous, nor Anger thee not too much; Too Bold, nor too Busy, nor Board not too large.<sup>1</sup>

And so on. The work recommended "a measurable mean" as the best way of life, and, as if the force of Aristotle's authority and the stress of the alliterative verse were not enough, some copies added several prefatory stanzas which urge the reader to "blame not the bairn that this a.b.c. made," but to "learn he of letter" in order to grow wise, command respect, and "his life save." One remarkable aspect of the preamble to the ABC is that it conjoins a child's work on the rudiments of language with lofty claims about the efficacy of "learning of letter."

Very few makers of Canadian alphabet books make such grand claims explicitly,<sup>2</sup> though their books do offer important samples of Canadian culture of different regions at various times. In what follows, however, I would like to attend not to the lofty purposes or salvific potentiality of alphabet books, but rather to their usefulness in the rudimentary business of learning letters. The role that alphabet books can play in developing literacy—reading and writing—is exemplified by two of the simplest instances of the form: Elizabeth Cleaver's *ABC* (1984) and *Alphabet book*, prepared in Canada's centennial year by the children on the Kettle Point Indian Reserve in southwestern Ontario.

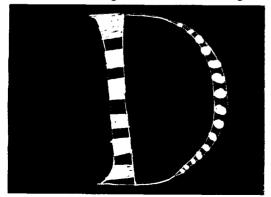
Before examining these books, we should note that most Canadian children know their ABCs before they ever have recourse to an ABC book. This is not the case for adults learning English as a second language. For them, alphabet

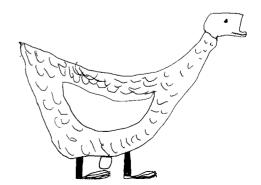
books are a primary device for establishing the connection among letter forms, sounds, words, and their referents. But children of English-speaking parents usually learn their ABCs first as a series of sounds. As they can rattle off a series of numbers before they have much sense of what the numbers refer to or how they might be used, so they can recite with varying degrees of precision the sounds of the alphabet. Doing so may well be a source of some pride and a demonstration of a child's capacity to join in the activities of older children.

At this stage, however, elision (particularly of the 1-m-n-o sequence) often reduces the twenty-six sounds of the alphabet to twenty-two or twenty-three. Careful enunciation is fostered by sound of another sort: song. Alphabet songs provide an especially positive starting point for learning because they associate the child's knowledge of the alphabet with other sources of pleasure, such as self-esteem, as in Sharon, Lois and Bram's version of the old standard "A, you're adorable, B, you're so beautiful, C, you're a cutie full of charms ..." (Hampson 6) or friendship, as in *The polka dot door*'s "Now I know my ABCs;/ Next time won't you sing with me?". Nor are these songs without cultural significance: Canadian performers like Sharon, Lois and Bram affirm their Canadianness by choosing to pronounce "z" as "zed", in spite of the requirements of the rhyme scheme.<sup>3</sup>

More important for our purposes here, alphabet songs establish that the alphabet is a series of discrete sounds, but they also create the mistaken impression that for each letter there is but a single sound. Alphabet *books* confirm the former (particularly by their format) and correct the latter (principally through their illustrations).

Both Alphabet book by the children of the Kettle Point Reserve and Elizabeth Cleaver's ABC give a single two-page spread to each letter of the alphabet. This format individuates the sounds and symbols of the alphabet by requiring that a reader turn a page in order to proceed from letter to letter. The left-hand page of the two-page spread contains, sometimes along with other material, a representation of a letter of the alphabet; the page to the right contains an illustration of (at least) one thing, the word for which begins with the letter opposite (as in figure 1).





For nine of the letters in Alphabet book, including the first six, this is the sum total of the material set forth. Cleaver's illustrations—considered apart from the "text" on the left-hand page of each two-page spread (as in figure 2 below)—establish the same basic connection, by imposing a large, colourful roman capital on cut-out figures of various things. This format, the juxtaposition of a letter form and a picture, encourages a child to make a connection basic for literacy: the connection between the letter, its sound in a word, and the object to which that word refers.

Cleaver has designed the illustrations of *ABC* to facilitate this connection. The elements of each picture tend to cohere as a scene, but actually fail to do so. In each collage, Cleaver places strips of paper of different colours horizontally across the page to suggest a landscape with depth of field. The figures are then set against this background in such a way that they tend to be seen in naturalistic relationships to one another and to the background. Figure 2 provides a good example: two shades of blue paper create the lake in the foreground; a strip of brown and one of orange suggest the autumn woods in the middle distance; and the light blue background, mottled with white, represents the sky on a fair day.

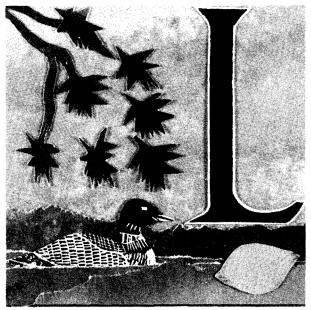


Figure 2

Setting the loon *into* the waters of the lake and somewhat behind an overhanging branch of red leaves produces the illusion of a recognizable, harmonious scene.

But one might well ask, having looked at figure 2, "what about the lemon?" Clearly it does not fit in, placed as it is on top of the water and over the trees. That it does not is crucial. Like the foregrounding of the leaves and the con-

trast between the colour of the loon and the background, the incompatibility of the lemon helps a child reader to focus on that thing and say the word in which the relevant letter appears. Cleaver resists the very tendency toward naturalism that she creates.

She does so not only in the representation of things but also in the representation of the letters themselves. In some illustrations (those for A, B, C, H, M,

V, and Y) even the letter form—climbed on by caterpillars, perched on by birds, scurried over by mice, looked around by a yak—might be construed as a concrete thing in a landscape. However, as with the capital "L" in figure 2, so with every other letter of the alphabet: Cleaver scrupulously preserves a thin white border around the roman capitals, as if to suggest that the letters and the language are a set of symbols essentially different from the things they denote or distinguish.

In the last paragraph I deliberately oversimplified Cleaver's ABC, by consistently noting that the words associated with each letter referred to "things." Although nouns do predominate in most alphabet books (as they do in both the books under consideration here), Cleaver's ABC suggests more complex sets of connections necessary for literacy, for reading in particular. Besides the "things" in Cleaver's illustrations, there are three qualities (all quite basic: blue, red, and white), one action ("j" for "jump"), and one spatial relationship ("u" is for "under," and under the umbrella both the "U" and a unicorn appear).

Cleaver's *ABC* also complicates the basic connection between a letter, a sound, and their use in a word by including in the illustrations an array of things, things identified by words that use the same letters but produce different sounds: "c" is both for carrot and for "celery." In figure 3, "e" is long, short, silent, and silenced, in "ear," "egg," "envelope," and "eye" respectively.

Most important for developing the ability to read, ABC registers the letters and the words as seen. The letters appear on the left-hand page, in type, both upper and lower case—a feature of the book just hinting at conventions that should become meaningful later on. And the words, known as sounds, sounds prompted by the pictures, are all spelled out and listed in alphabetical order. As a result, Cleav-



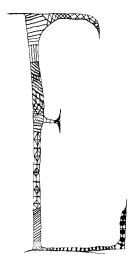
Figure 3

er's ABC, through its conjunction of illustrations and text, establishes the network of connections basic to reading: connections of a letter, in various

forms, to its sound(s) as these sounds are heard, seen in the symbolic system of language, and used to distinguish things, actions, qualities, and relationships in the world around us.

Besides encouraging connections necessary for reading, the format of ABC creates a striking contrast between the text on the left-hand page and the pictures on the right. Stark columns of words set off colourful, playful, sometimes allusive illustrations. The power of the book to engage pre-literate readers comes largely from the illustrations. Alphabet book, on the other hand, dramatizes a process of engagement with the letter forms themselves.

The illustrations of this ABC book are not without interest, of course, for they represent "a spontaneous view of the many influences converging on the young Indian today" (Alphabet book 2). Many of the pictures confirm the impression that Canada's native peoples live in close contact with nature: "f" is for "fish," "g" is for "gulls," "j" is for "jack-in-the-pulpit." The first and last images, however, register the impact of modern technology; "a" is for "airplane" and "z" for the television hero of the day, Zorro. And at the centre of the book is a nostalgic reminder of the historical moment of this book, a picture of Sir John A. MacDonald which symbolizes the unity of Canada's various peoples in centennial year. What is of more interest in a discussion of literacy, however, is



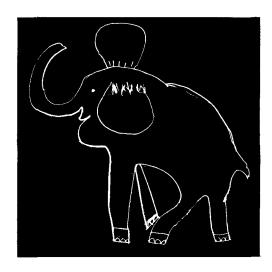


Figure 4

that Alphabet book presents a writing of the alphabet by children.

Many primary school teachers in the Waterloo region plunder local libraries to make alphabet books available to their students. The same teachers report, however, that these books are most useful as models by which children make their own ABC books, just as the children of the Kettle Point Reserve have done

in Alphabet book. Through their illustrations, the Kettle Point children have made the alphabet their own by using it to structure important aspects of their experience. They have also used it as a taxonomical device, organizing the names of all the collaborating authors in alphabetical order. Most important, the children have written the letters (sometimes in upper case, sometimes in lower), drawn the roman capitals, and decorated some of them. The decoration sometimes confirms one's sense of the letter forms by replicating key features of them; for example, black and white triangles (v-shapes) appear on the arms of the "V," and the "D" is filled out with rectangles on its straight side and balls on its round part (as in figure 1). With x's, horizontal lines, vertical lines, squiggles on one diagonal, straight lines on the other diagonal, diamonds, loops, and circles, the "E" is most ornate (figure 4). The contrast here between the elaborate letter form and the simple drawing is no less striking than that between the text page and the illustration page of Cleaver's ABC. The implication of the contrast in figure 4 is quite different, however: it reveals that the child's energy and interest have been engaged by the letter itself. Throughout Alphabet book, the letters command attention not only as parts of a useful symbolic system but also as intriguing, if not beautiful, graphic shapes. In Alphabet book, the letters themselves, more than the illustrations, are objets d'art. The importance of the graphic design of the alphabet is clear from the very start of the book, the cover of which spells out the title in type of various fonts and various sizes, all, it seems, imprinted by means of primitive wooden blocks.

Throughout this essay, I have tried to suggest ways in which the art of ABC books engages the interest of children and suggests a complex network of connections fundamental to reading and writing. Even very simple alphabet books, such as the two on which I have focused attention, try to involve children in a process of hearing and speaking and seeing and reproducing and appropriating and applying the language.

For the children of the Kettle Point Reserve that process was fun, as the representation of themselves in the background of the illustration for "T" and as the centrepoint of that for "U" clearly reveal: in *Alphabet book*, "U" is for "us." Similarly, Elizabeth Cleaver's "child-like love for cutting paper" and the delight she derived from playing with paper dolls inform her collage technique in *ABC* as in other works. The art of both these books, the letter forms of *Alphabet book* and the pictures of *ABC*, tries to stir up and to sustain the interest of children by providing pleasure too. To the extent that they do, they become useful tools for those teaching literacy by means of whole language programmes, which encourage explorations of the language and foster them by means of positive reinforcement even of the most rudimentary work with language.

That reinforcement can be doubly effective, as one experiment in a local school revealed, if children learning their ABCs teach others learning theirs. This experiment allows me to end as I began, with a manuscript, but a contemporary one written by a seven-year-old girl to her "reading buddy" in

junior kindergarten. Working with the language herself, and "not blaming the bairn that his a.b.c. made" but imitating with relish the encouraging responses of her own teacher, the girl wrote of her buddy's efforts to write "n": "he stase with it. he likes to do laters. he dusint git sad iF he dus sumthing rong. Rory is a exalinte kidd."

#### NOTES

- 1 Furnivall 11. I have modernized Furnivall's diplomatic transcription of Lambeth Palace MS. 853, p. 30.
- 2 Lyn Cook is one who does; in the final poem of A Canadian ABC, she urges readers to give voice to a necessary creative urge and "see what magic/ you can make/ with scenes from history/ and far-flung places/ and all the diverse faces/ of our country."
- 3 In the printed version of the lyrics to "A, you're adorable," found in a twelve-page booklet inserted with the album Smorgasbord, Sharon, Lois and Bram add a postscript to explain their failure to rhyme the last letter of the alphabet with "me": "We've taken the liberty of using the Canadian pronunciation of 'Zed.' Artistic license."
- 4 In her illustrations for Phyllis Gotlieb's A bestiary of the garden for children who should know better, Cleaver integrates the letter form more fully into the natural scene by eliminating the white border. Five of the letters from A bestiary have been reproduced in The new wind has wings.
- 5 For a more systematic development of the possibilities that Cleaver just suggests, see Ted Harrison's *A Northern alphabet*.

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#### Illustrations:

Figure 1 and 4: Alphabet book © copyright 1969 Anne and Alex Wyse (U of Toronto Press, 1969) reprinted with permission of Alex and Anne Wyse.

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# Livre d'images et expressions graphiques et verbales à la maternelle

Nancy Lambert, Flore Gervais, et Jocelyne Cyr

**Summary:** Drawings as well as verbal expression were studied to learn about the influence of certain kinds of motivation strategies on kindergarten children. Storybooks, films, slides, group discussion were among the means used by the teacher.

#### DESCRIPTION DE LA RECHERCHE

L'état actuel des recherches nous fournit peu de données quant à l'efficacité relative des différents déclencheurs habituellement utilisés pour promouvoir l'expression des enfants. Comme il convient d'éliminer autant que possible l'arbitraire de l'intervention pédagogique, il nous a semblé intéressant de comparer l'impact du livre d'images à celui d'autres déclencheurs quant à l'expression graphique et verbale des enfants: aptitudes qui, à elles seules, témoignent de façon souvent très éloquente du développement global.

Pour ce faire, nous avons élaboré, mis en place et évalué un programme d'activités graphiques et verbales auprès d'enfants de maternelle dont le livre d'images constituait, parmi d'autres, l'élément déclencheur.

C'est ainsi que dans un premier temps, à partir de différentes activités comme la lecture d'albums, l'échange sur certains événements de la vie quotidienne, le visionnement d'un diaporama, etc., ou à partir d'une consigne de dessin libre, l'enseignante de maternelle invitait les enfants soit à illustrer ce qui les avait frappés ou ce qu'ils se rappelaient de la mise en situation, soit, quand aucune amorce n'avait été prévue, à dessiner tout simplement ce qu'ils voulaient.

Dans un second temps, qui suivait immédiatement la période de dessin,<sup>2</sup> chaque enfant était jumelé avec un "grand" de 6e année qui était invité à transcrire mot à mot ce que, le "petit" disait à partir de ce qu'il avait dessiné.

L'expérience a porté sur une période de 32 jours consécutifs; le programme quotidien durait environ 45 minutes: 8 à 15 minutes étaient consacrées à la lecture du livre ou à la mise en place des autres déclencheurs, 15 minutes à la production du dessin puis 15 minutes aux paroles de l'enfant que le "grand" transcrivait simultanément.

Trente-cinq enfants de maternelle et trente-cinq élèves transcripteurs de 6e année ont participé à cette expérience.

#### CUEILLETTE DES DONNÉES, VARIABLES ET RÉSULTATS

Le journal de bord de l'enseignante, les dessins des enfants et les transcriptions des "grands" ont servi à la cueillette des données. Les principales variables prises en compte ont été les types de déclencheurs utilisés, l'expression graphique et verbale des «petits» et leur sexe. Voici de plus amples informations sur la cueillette des données ainsi que quelques résultats de la recherche.

#### 1. Les types de déclencheurs

Les déclencheurs, utilisés de façon spontanée, ont été regroupés *a posteriori* en trois classes, selon qu'ils consistaient en activités dirigées ou en opérations plus complexes, ou selon qu'ils ne comportaient aucune activité ou opération préalable, comme dans le cas du dessin libre.

#### 1) Activités dirigées

Dans les activités dirigées, nous avons tenu à distinguer celles qui faisaient appel au livre de lecture de celles qui impliquaient d'autres types de déclencheurs; ainsi nos calculs ont été effectués sur 9 activités qui impliquaient la lecture d'albums et sur 10 activités qui faisaient appel à d'autres types d'expériences comme un échange, un visionnement de film, un diaporama, etc.

#### 2) Opérations plus complexes

Pour ce qui est des opérations plus complexes, nous avons regroupé sous cette appellation 6 activités qui consistaient en une expression d'opinion sur un mets, un objet, une fin de semaine, etc., et 2 qui faisaient appel à d'autres opérations comme l'anticipation d'une activité pour le lendemain et l'expression de la signification d'une fête.

#### 3) Aucune amorce

Enfin, nous avons voulu évaluer l'impact de l'absence d'une amorce sur le dessin et sur la verbalisation qui s'ensuivait. C'est ainsi que nous avons constitué une troisième catégorie qui réunissait les résultats obtenus à la suite de 5 consignes de dessin libre.

#### 2. Expression graphique

L'étude des dessins a été effectuée séparément de l'étude des commentaires verbaux. Ce n'est qu'à la fin du processus que nous avons comparé nos résultats.

L'analyse de l'ensemble des dessins a été effectuée en sept étapes:

- 1. lecture flottante<sup>3</sup> pour laisser émerger les impressions générales des dessins quant au degré d'engagement des enfants par rapport à leur production graphique;
- 2. élaboration et mise à l'essai d'une grille de lecture des dessins à partir des

critères jugés pertinents à la discipline des arts plastiques: le schéma, l'organisation de l'espace, la technique;

- 3. choix d'un barème de notation pour attribuer un score à chaque dessin;
- 4. étude critériée des dessins à l'aide de la grille;
- 5. choix intuitif d'un dessin qui, à l'intérieur de la série de chaque enfant, semblait témoigner de son plus grand engagement par rapport à un déclencheur donné:
- 6. validation de ces "choix intuitifs" avec les scores attribués à l'aide de la grille;
- 7. identification des déclencheurs qui ont semblé les plus efficaces sur le plan de l'expression graphique.

Toute cette démarche visait à déterminer si la lecture d'un album avait un impact plus grand qu'un autre déclencheur sur l'engagement de l'enfant dans son dessin, engagement dont faisait foi la qualité du dessin exprimée en scores. La validation des scores a été effectuée à l'étape 6. Cette comparaison des deux procédures de sélection du dessin, l'une intuitive et l'autre relevant d'une analyse critériée, a conduit sensiblement aux mêmes résultats. Voici les figures qui illustrent l'analyse critériée des dessins et le tableau 1 qui présente les résultats de cette analyse.

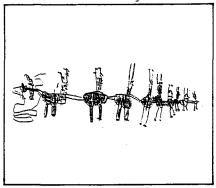


Fig. 1 schéma complexe

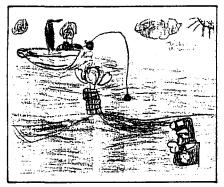


Fig. 3 espace complexe

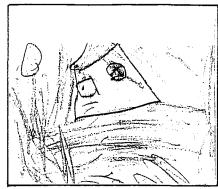


Fig. 2 schéma simpl

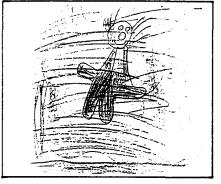
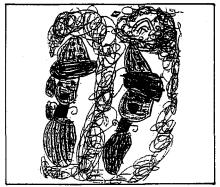
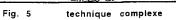


Fig. 4 espace simple





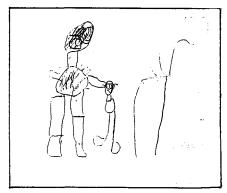


Fig. 6 technique simple

Tableau 1: Les déclencheurs selon leur efficacité sur le plan graphique				
Déclencheurs			Pour chaque enfant: propos le plus réussi	Nbre d'enfants sur nbre de jours
Activités dirigées	Lecture (9 jours)	Contes traditionnels Contes modernes Récits informatifs	1 1 3	5/9 = 0,6
	Échanges, visionnements de films et de diapositives, etc. centrés sur l'expérience vécue (10 jours)	Mon toutou L'hiver L'été et l'hiver Une joie Mes vacances Ce que j'ai fait en fin de semaine	2 1 9 2 1 4	19/10 = 1,9
Opérations plus abstraites	Expression d'opinions (6 jours)	Ce que j'aime et ce que je n'aime pas en général Autres	0	4/6 = 0,9
	Autres types d'expression (2 jours)	Ce que je ferai à la St-Valentin Ce que signifie la St-Valentin	2	5/2 = 2,5
Aucune amorce	Dessin libre (5 jours)	Non figuratif Trois enfants qui jouent	1 1	2/5 = 0,4

Le thème "la Saint-Valentin" est très apprécié même s'il relève d'opérations que nous avons considérées plus abstraites.

Les activités dirigées qui ne comportaient pas de lecture, c'est-à-dire celles qui ont eu comme déclencheur des échanges, des visionnements, etc., ont semblé stimuler davantage l'expression graphique des enfants.

Quant au dessin libre, qu'on aurait pu croire très incitatif sur ce plan, il a semblé peu stimulant.

### 3. L'expression verbale

Étant donné que la majorité des enfants étaient portés à énumérer les éléments du dessin plutôt qu'à les insérer dans des phrases simples ou complexes, nous avons basé notre analyse sur la quantité de mots contenus dans leurs commentaires.

Pour cela, nous avons donc postulé que plus le commentaire verbal sur un dessin était long, plus le déclencheur correspondant avait été efficace.

### Quelques résultats

C'est ainsi que, pour mieux cerner l'impact de la lecture d'un album sur la verbalisation chez les enfants, nous avons, entre autres, identifié le déclencheur qui avait permis à chaque enfant pris isolément de produire son commentaire ou propos le plus long.

Tableau 2: Les déclencheurs selon leur efficacité sur le plan verbal				
Déclencheurs			Pour chaque enfant: propos le plus élaboré	Nbre d'enfants sur nbre de jours
Activités dirigées	Lecture (9 jours)	Contes traditionnels Contes modernes Récits informatifs	14 3 2	19/9 = 2,1
	Autres expériences (10 jours)	Mon toutou L'hiver L'été Une joie	6 3 2 1	12/10 = 1,2
Opérations plus abstraites	Expression d'opinions (6 jours)	Ce que j'aime et ce que je n'aime pas en général Ce que j'aime et ce que je n'aime pas à l'école	1	2/6 = 0,3
	Autres types d'expression (2 jours)	Ce que je ferai à la St-Valentin Ce que signifie la St-Valentin	0	1/2 = 0,5
Aucune amorce	Dessin libre (5 jours)	"Il neige" Autres thèmes	1 0	1/5 = 0,2

La lecture semble, sur le plan verbal, constituer le déclencheur le plus efficace. Dix-neuf enfants, c'est-à-dire plus de 54% des sujets se sont le plus exprimés après qu'on leur a lu une histoire.

Mais ce qui ressort surtout, c'est que 14 de ces enfants se sont le plus exprimés après la lecture de l'un ou l'autre des contes traditionnels suivants: Trois petits cochons, Le Petit Chaperon rouge et Boucle d'or.

De plus, d'autres analyses qui dépassent le cadre de cet article confirment que la lecture d'un conte traditionnel est de loin le déclencheur le plus susceptible d'inciter les ensants à parler de leur dessin.

En effet, alors que, dans les cas des contes modernes et dans celui des récits informatifs, les commentaires comportent en moyenne, respectivement, 33,7 et 32,7 mots, cette moyenne atteint 53,9 quand le déclencheur est un conte traditionnel. On peut se demander pourquoi ce type de conte a un tel effet sur la verbalisation chez les enfants. Ces derniers pourraient-ils plus facilement se les réapproprier oralement parce que ces récits leur sont plus connus que d'autres? parce que leur formulation ou "mise en mots" leur est déjà familière, ou encore parce que la linéarité<sup>5</sup> du discours propre à ce genre littéraire rend les enfants plus habiles à se rappeler la séquence des événements? Ces questions restent ouvertes.

Par ailleurs, 3 enfants ont semblé plus impressionnés par la lecture de contes modernes (dont l'un mettait en scène un serpent, le deuxième une petite fille aux pieds de crocodile, et, enfin, le troisième une poupée); 2 enfants ont le plus parlé de leur dessin après la lecture d'un récit informatif sur les animaux du zoo. Force nous serait-il de reconnaître que le thème des animaux reste encore riche d'émotions pour les petits?

Pour ce qui est des autres activités dirigées, 6 enfants ont paru plus inspirés par la description de leur toutou préféré. Le thème des saisons (hiver, été) a touché 5 enfants particulièrement heureux de raconter leurs jeux dans la neige et dans le sable; enfin, le souvenir d'une grande joie rappelé à la suite du diaporama "Les Belmines", a stimulé un enfant à exprimer sa joie devant un cadeau de fête longtemps attendu.

En outre, nous remarquons que 31 des 35 enfants de la population-cible se sont le plus exprimés à partir des activités dirigées qui ont fait surtout appel à la lecture, mais aussi à des expériences vécues.

De leur côté, les opérations plus abstraites qui consistaient pour la plupart en l'expression d'opinions n'ont incité que trois enfants à s'exprimer le plus. Par ailleurs, lorsque nous analysons le contenu de leur commentaire, nous voyons que ces enfants ont réussi à exprimer une expérience passée d'ordre sensoriel (comme "je n'aime pas le carré de sable quand il est mouillé"), mais ils sont demeurés plutôt laconiques quant à leur goût pour un mets, un objet ou quant à ce qu'ils ont aimé ou ce qu'ils n'ont pas aimé de leur fin de semaine.

Il faut reconnaître que l'expression d'opinions requiert une faculté

d'abstraction plus grande que la narration ou la description. En effet, l'enfant qui doit exprimer ce qu'il aime et ce qu'il n'aime pas en fonction d'un contexte général ou particulier, doit pouvoir identifier ce qui lui est objet de goût et de dégoût, le contextualiser, puis le nommer. Il s'agit d'une opération plus complexe que, par exemple, narrer la séquence d'événements d'un récit ou décrire un objet ou une action.

### ANALYSE DE CORRÉLATIONS

Seize filles et dix-neuf garçons ont participé au projet. Nous verrons dans quelle mesure le sexe pouvait jouer un rôle dans l'expression graphique et verbale des enfants de maternelle, et dans quelle mesure certains déclencheurs semblaient plus efficaces que d'autres pour stimuler l'expression du garçon ou de la fille.

### Aptitudes verbales/déclencheurs/sexe

Les résultats fournis par le Test de Student pour échantillons indépendants tendent à montrer que les garçons seraient autant portés à s'exprimer sur les contes traditionnels et modernes que les filles. Dans tous les autres cas, ce sont les filles qui ont obtenu les meilleurs scores moyens.

### Aptitudes graphiques/déclencheurs/sexe

Pour ce qui est des aptitudes graphiques, aucune différence significative n'a été notée en fonction du sexe à partir des scores obtenus sur les dessins effectués pendant les 32 journées.

### Aptitudes graphiques/aptitudes verbales/déclencheurs

Si la lecture d'albums et particulièrement celle du conte constitue le déclencheur le plus stimulant sur le plan des aptitudes verbales, il semble en être tout autrement sur le plan graphique. En effet, le développement des aptitudes graphiques semble s'effectuer davantage à partir de la fête de la Saint-Valentin et des activités dirigées qui comportent des déclencheurs d'ordre expérientiel, mais non littéraire.

### CONCLUSION

Voici quelques constats auxquels nous a conduites cette recherche.

La lecture d'albums et en particulier celle de contes traditionnels constitue le déclencheur qui stimule le plus l'expression verbale des enfants, mais elle ne suffit pas, à elle seule, pour stimuler l'expression graphique.

Pour ce faire, ne faudrait-il pas que l'enfant s'approprie sa lecture d'albums

non seulement sur le plan narratif, mais aussi sur le plan expérientiel, à travers des activités: jeux de rôles, sketches avec déguisements et décors, fabrication de maquettes, expérimentation en sciences naturelles, sorties, observations dirigées, etc.

Les résultats de cette recherche nous amènent aussi à constater qu'il faut utiliser avec circonspection les déclencheurs qui font appel à des opérations plus abstraites comme l'expression de ses goûts et dégoûts pour un mets, une situation ou une chose, ou l'expression d'une anticipation ("Qu'allez-vous faire demain, à la Saint-Valentin?") ou encore l'expression du sens que peut recouvrir une fête pour un enfant ("Qu'est-ce que c'est pour vous la Saint-Valentin?"). Ces opérations peuvent paraître sans complication évidente, comme semble le suggérer sur le plan graphique l'évocation de la Saint-Valentin. Mais, sur le plan verbal, il ne faut pas oublier qu'elles impliquent une distanciation et une saisie discrète des éléments constitutifs du problème posé. L'enfant de cinq ans qui est placé dans cette situation de résolution de problème, sans y avoir été préparé, peut se sentir dépassé par une telle tâche et y perdre tout intérêt parce qu'elle fait appel à des aptitudes cognitives et personnelles qu'il n'a pas encore suffisamment développées.

Voilà les principaux résultats que le cadre de cet article nous permet d'exposer. Nous en avons obtenu d'autres intéressants qui dépassent nos attentes. Pour n'en nommer qu'un, il s'agit du changement d'attitude des "grands" envers les plus jeunes : ils ne les voient plus comme des concurrents ou des "enquiquineurs", mais à la fois comme des pupilles qu'ils guident avec attention et comme le miroir de ce qu'eux-mêmes étaient au même âge. Bref, ils découvrent le sérieux et le plaisir d'une responsabilité et développent leur aptitude à observer et à analyser.

### NOTES

- 1 S'il y a peu de données par rapport à l'efficacité relative aux différents déclencheurs, on constate que, par ailleurs, la distinction et les relations entre plusieurs formes d'expression du jeune enfant suscitent un intérêt constant chez les chercheurs en éducation. Voir:
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- 2 Cette recherche s'est beaucoup inspirée du travail à long terme de Bob Steele (1991) de l'Université de Colombie-Britannique pour qui le dessin du jeune enfant est un véritable langage. Ses idées de faire dessiner les enfants pendant une courte période de temps avec un crayon noir et de ne pas exiger le coloriage ont particulièrement marqué la cueillette des données en ce qui concerne le dessin.

- 3 Pour la méthode de l'Analyse de contenu, voir Bardin, Laurence. L'Analyse de contenu, Paris, P.U.F., 1977.
- 4 Pour plus d'informations, voir: Retallack-Lambert, Nancy. "A Description and Interpretation of Four Children's Art Serials from the Lived Experience of the Pedagogical Dialogue". Montréal, Concordia University, 1988.
- 5 Pour comparer le caractère linéaire du langage et le caractère pluridimensionnel du dessin, voir: Danset-Léger, J., L'Enfant et les images de la littérature enfantine, Psychologie et sciences humaines, Bruxelles, Pierre Mardoya éditeur, 1980: 117.
- 6 Si on veut pousser plus loin sa réflexion sur la qualité du conte comme outil pédagogique, voir: Gervais, Flore, "Des Contes pour les 9-12 ans", Le Conte comme outil pédagogique, Québec, Musée de la civilisation, 1991: 44-55.

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### Good libraries don't: The censorship of Canadian picture books

### Dave Jenkinson

**Résumé:** Le relevé des albums illustrés qui ont été critiqués ou attaqués par des groupes de pression révèle que la censure repose sur un malentendu fondamental: la plupart des adultes présupposent, à tort, qu'ils connaissent la manière dont les enfants vont interpréter les ouvrages qu'on leur donne à lire.

In schools, censorship occurs whenever groups or individuals, within or without the school, attempt to prevent students from reading, hearing or seeing something or someone because of the censors' belief that such exposure will be harmful to the students. In Canada, for example, the liberal left, concerned about various "isms," has challenged books like Mark Twain's *The adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, William Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little house on the prairies* and W.P. Kinsella's *The moccasin telegraph and other stories* on the grounds that these titles are racist in content. Meanwhile, members of the conservative right, troubled by matters such as explicit sex, the presence of witchcraft or what they consider to be offensive language, have caused books like Sarah Ellis' *The baby project*, Beatrice Culleton's *In search of April Raintree* and Alice Munro's *Lives of girls and women* to be removed from schools.

Nor is censorship limited to these kinds of challenges. The climate of censorship within Canadian public education has led to a number of authors, including Margaret Buffie, Welwyn Wilton Katz, Kevin Major and Sandra Richmond, being "dis-invited" from speaking at schools. And as I reported in "Censorship and Canadian schools," the censorship chill is also felt by the nation's publishers, both trade and textbook, who attempt to avoid the censors by pre-censoring their books.

But surely, you say, censorship does not extend to the contents of picture books, those slim 32-page volumes with the brief text and the "pretty pictures"? Alas, it does, and Canadian authored and illustrated picture books experience both the same forms of censorship and the same range of complaints that censors of the right and left address to materials for older audiences.

Often, the very popular authors for juveniles are also the most frequently censored. Robert Munsch is a favourite with Canada's picture book crowd, but his legion of early-years followers is not sufficient to protect him from the various forms of the censors' wrath. In an interview in 1988, Munsch reported

that at least one school has blackened out "I have to go pee!"—the repeated line in his book I have to go!—and replaced it with the more genteel, "I have to go to the bathroom." Rick Wilks of Annick Press recalls some "parents [who] complained that Munsch's The paper bag princess was anti-family because the princess refuses to marry the ratty Prince Ronald" (Goyette A9). Still other adults have questioned the princess Elizabeth's calling Prince Ronald a bum at the conclusion of this book. In his 1988 interview, Munsch recounted that earlier oral versions of this story had Elizabeth socking Ronald on the nose; but Annick Press, suspecting that there would be objections to such a physical response, asked him for a softer version.

Some Munsch stories contain what he calls "minor taboo violations," words such as "pee" or "bum," which he says children will readily accept. "Kids love talking about peeing and farting, but they do not like stories where the mother says, 'Go to hell!' to the father. That's a major taboo violation, and kids do not want an adult doing that. But to have an adult saying 'bum' or 'pee', that's great. 'Underwear' is good too!" (Munsch 1988).

Numerous parents can, undoubtedly, relate to the conflict about clothing found in Munsch's *Thomas' snowsuit*. Thomas, characterizing his "nice new brown snowsuit" as "the ugliest thing I have ever seen in my life," refuses to wear the garment voluntarily. After Thomas' mother expends considerable physical effort, she manages to get him into the snowsuit for school. At recess, Thomas' teacher, having inherited the problem, is forced to involve the principal in

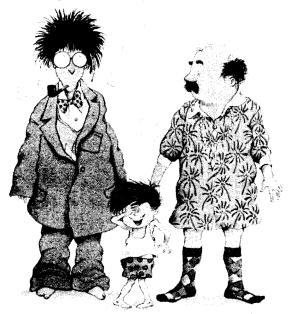


Figure 1

helping to get Thomas to put on the hated garment. "When he [the principal] was done, the principal was wearing the teacher's dress, the teacher was wearing the principal's suit and Thomas was still in his underwear "

While children generally find *Thomas'* snowsuit delightfully funny, not every adult

shares their assessment of Munsch's plot or Michael Martchenko's illustrations of the cross-dressing teacher and principal. During the 1988-89 school year, "a teacher at an elementary school in Lloydminster (on the Alberta/Saskatchewan border) told the school principal that the book (despite its humour and spirited hero) undermined the authority of all school principals. The principal agreed and removed the book from the school library without even telling the school librarian" (Rae K15). Though another district school followed suit, the area's eight remaining elementary schools kept the book.

Lloydminster was not the sole source of such a complaint. In an interview in 1990, Munsch recounted how

he got a letter from a school in New York City saying, 'We try to teach good citizenship and respect for authority, and this book is anti-authoritarian.' I can see how, in certain social situations if people were thinking a certain way, they would think that. I regard that situation as unfortunate. In general, that's a very popular book with teachers and principals.

Almost immediately after its publication, Munsch's Giant; or waiting for the Thursday boat was challenged in Ontario's Middlesex and Welland Counties for depicting violence towards God. McKeon, Ireland's largest giant, is angry at St. Patrick for chasing all the snakes, elves, and, with the exception of himself, all the giants out of Ireland.

St. Patrick's explanation that he was "just doing what God wanted" causes McKeon to transfer his anger and to say:

Then send out your God.
I'll kick Him in the knee.
I'll knock Him on the head.
He'll never recover!

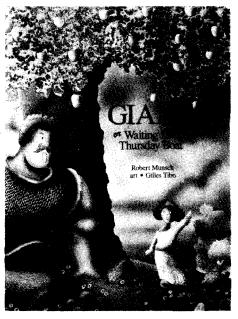


Figure 2

Told that God does not fight with

giants, McKeon attempts to provoke Him by throwing Ireland's church bells into the ocean. Learning that God is arriving on the Thursday boat, the giant plans to meet Him on the beach, where "I'll pound him till he looks like applesauce." The first boat to arrive is quite tiny and contains only "a very small girl with a lot of fish." Certain that this person is not God, McKeon awaits other boats. In succession, boats arrive containing a very rich man, an important man, and a prominent military man, but McKeon discovers that none of these people

is God. When the little girl tells McKeon that St. Patrick is now driving snakes, etc., out of heaven, the giant goes there and commences to throw bells over heaven's sides. St. Patrick, wishing to complain to God about McKeon's behaviour, searches for Him in the biggest houses in heaven. Finally, giant and saint find God, the little girl, in heaven's smallest dwelling.

Initially banned by Ontario's Middlesex County Board, Giant was returned to libraries with the restriction that, "because of the book's religious implications, it won't be in the primary curriculum and teachers won't be permitted to read it to children" ("Children's book" 19). In describing the early response to Giant in 1990, Munsch said, "My letters are going 50% hating it and 50% liking it. People are saying they don't like the amount of violence in it which isn't what I thought people would say. I thought people would get upset on religious grounds. Maybe people are upset on religious grounds, but what they're saying is that it's too violent a book for little kids."

In a study of challenges to materials in Canadian public libraries, Alvin Schrader (1992) found that the nation's most frequently challenged title was a children's picture book, and a Canadian one at that: Lizzy's lion, written by Dennis Lee and illustrated by Marie-Louise Gay. Recipient of the 1984 Canada Council's Children's Literature Prize for Illustration, the book was challenged eleven times during the study's 1985-87 time span, with violence being the recurring complaint.

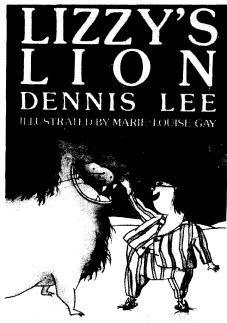


Figure 3

In fourteen four-line stanzas, Lee's Lizzy's lion describes what happens when a burglar breaks into a little girl's bedroom one night and attempts to steal her piggy-bank. Anticipating that the child's room might be guarded by a lion, the burglar brought candy to scatter about to distract the animal. Lizzy's lion, which "wasn't friendly" and "wasn't tame" and which can only be controlled by using "his Secret Lion Name," proceeds to give "the rotten robber an experimental chew."

In an interview, Marie-Louise Gay described the personal challenge she faced in illustrating Dennis Lee's 56 lines.

Violence doesn't bother me in children's books, but I realized that, for four double

page spreads, there was a lion eating a robber. That's a big part of the book. 'What am I going to do?' I started the whole book again and said, 'How could I put this into one or two pages?' There was no way. You can't have a page with five stanzas and then a page with no text....I couldn't draw four pages of blood and guts. And I don't think that's the point. The point is that the lion eats the robber and the child is the strong person in the book. She knows the word, the lion's secret name. So, how to do it?

What I did was to dress the robber up in very distinctive clothes and the lion would rip them off. You could tell the lion was doing something, but we didn't have to see the blood. In the last fight image, the lion is holding the robber by the leg and the robber's head is cut off by the page. Now, who knows? Maybe the head had been bitten off, but it's left to the imagination. Two pages later, you have Lizzy looking at the room, and there are shredded clothes scattered all over the place and the robber's glove is hanging out of the lion's mouth. It is clear that the lion has devoured the robber, but the violence has never been graphically detailed.

Although one of the eleven challenges did cause *Lizzy's Lion* to be temporarily removed from circulation in a public library, the book was retained in the remaining ten challenges, "but in two cases, it was relocated to a juvenile section" (Schrader).

Violence was also the concern when, in 1990, a mother complained about the book, *The old woman and* the pig, which her six-year-old son brought home from a Winnipeg school.

In the McCrackens' retelling of a traditional cumulative tale, an old woman cannot cause a pig she recently purchased at market to climb over a stile. When it appears that the porker's pig-headedness will prevent the woman from returning



An old tale retold by Robert and Marlene McCracken

Figure 4

home that night, she attempts to enlist help from passersby. Commencing with the old woman's unsuccessful request of a dog that it bite the pig, the story chronicles the domino-like chain of requests wherein the needed action of each subsequently introduced character will occur only if the character next "higher" in the chain takes action. Ultimately, the old woman's act of giving the cat a bowl of milk causes the necessary series of connected actions to unfold so that finally "piggy in a fright jumped over the stile."

Within the story's cause-and-effect chain of events, a butcher is called upon to threaten the well-being of an ox; however, in turn, the butcher also requires some extrinsic motivation. The mother said that she refused to let her son read the book "when she saw an illustration showing the butcher with a rope around his neck and his tongue hanging out. 'I know it's a fable. I wouldn't have minded it except for that illustration'" (St. Germain 5).

Although this mother's right to restrict the content of her son's reading would have been acceptable to the school system, it appeared that, in describing the book as "inappropriate for use in her son's school" and saying that "they have to screen the books better," she wanted to extend the scope of her prohibition. As further argument for the book's removal, the mother noted that "a student in another class [had] attempted suicide by hanging." The school's principal, however, replied that "she hadn't heard about a suicide attempt among the school's students." While *The old woman and the pig* was to have been reviewed by the school division's education committee, the principal, in early 1993, could not recall having received the committee's decision. But she stated that the school, itself, had voluntarily removed the book from general circulation and

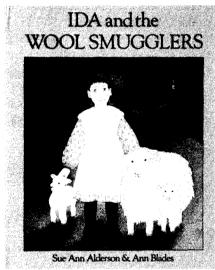


Figure 5

placed it on the "teachers' shelf"—from which, one assumes, it can still be borrowed by teachers and read to classes without the illustrations having to be shared.

Sue Ann Alderson's *Ida and the* wool smugglers, illustrated by Ann Blades, found its way onto the list of books cited in America's "Banned Books Week'92" ("Kids' Corner" 25).

Using a setting of "long ago, when tall trees grew where cities now stand [and] farmers settled the islands that lie off the west coast of Canada," Alderson tells the story of a middle child, Ida, who is too small to help her father or big brother

John with their farm chores, and who is also too little to assist her mother in caring for her infant sister. One day, however, Ida's mother asks her to deliver a basket of bread to their nearest neighbours, the Springmans, who have just had a baby. John immediately insists that "Ida's too little to go the Springmans' by herself," adding, "It's too dangerous for Ida to go." The danger which John anticipates comes from smugglers who row from the mainland to the islands to steal sheep, shear them, and then smuggle the wool back to the mainland to sell. As no one else can be spared for the delivery task, Ida must perform it. Her mother warns Ida to stay out of the woods and to follow the meadow path. Further, if Ida hears any whistling in the woods, the smugglers' method of signalling, she is to run home or the Springmans', whichever is closer. On her errand, Ida not only encounters her favourite ewe, Tandy, with her twin lambs,

but she also hears the whistling. Fearing that following her mother's instructions would lead to Tandy's lambs becoming smugglers' meals, Ida elects to drive the sheep trio to safety at the Springmans'. At book's end, a successful Ida can start to think of herself as "big enough now."

Certainly Ida did disobey her mother's explicit instructions, and it is not unheard of for someone to complain when a juvenile character in fiction does not do what an adult in authority requests. That *Ida and the wool smugglers* might encourage children to rebel against adult authority was not the complaint in this instance, though. Instead, the *Newsletter on intellectual freedom* reported the parental objection to be that "the mother in the picture book was neglectful because she sent her daughter to the neighbors when she knew the smugglers were in the vicinity" (178). A Howard County, Maryland, review committee, in recommending that *Ida and the wool smugglers* stay on library shelves, said it was an "historical representation of nineteenth century rural Canada and it was normal for the child to take a long walk under the circumstances."

Sometimes the censoring of a picture book occurs before the book is published, and the general public is then not aware of the censorship that has taken place. Laszlo Gal's illustrations of Margaret Crawford Maloney's retelling of Hans Christian Andersen's *The little mermaid* resulted in Gal's receiving his second Canada Council Children's Literature Prize for illustration, but the paintings children meet in the book are not as they were originally

submitted to the publisher and have, instead, been altered in response to the publisher's censorial instructions. For example, the original cover had featured a mermaid au naturel. Explains Gal, "It was much more daring before, and I had to cover the breasts with hair. I felt stupid to put a little shell there like a Walt Disney movie." American publishers showed interest in The little mermaid, but they did not publish it. "A year later, I found out that they couldn't take it because of the 'nudity,' because they cannot sell these books in the Bible Belt."

While touring Manitoba during Children's Book Week in 1990, illustrator/author Werner Zimmermann related another incident of pre-publication censorship, one which affected his illustrations The Little Mermaid

ILLUSTRATED BY LASZLO GAL



MARGARET CRAWFORD MALONEY

Figure 6

for the picture book, *Henny Penny*, *aka* Chicken Licken. Zimmermann's Canadian publisher, pleased with his illustrations, had offered the book to an American publisher who expressed a willingness to take some tens of thousands of copies of the book on the condition that the illustration for the double page spread occupying pages 6 and 7 be changed. It seems that Gal's experiences with bare human breasts being unacceptable in certain areas of the United States also extended to the "breasts" of any mammal. In Zimmermann's original painting, which he shared with the Winnipeg audience, two fowl characters, Henny Penny and Cocky Locky, are seen in the background walking across a field. In the foreground, and acting as a frame to the pair, are the legs and underside of a cow from which dangled an anatomically correct udder. "Either the udder with its teats goes, or the book goes," said the American publisher in effect. Faced with the loss of significant royalties, Zimmermann finally capitulated and replaced the cow with four horses, their rear ends prominently facing readers, perhaps as an illustrator's editorial comment on editors.

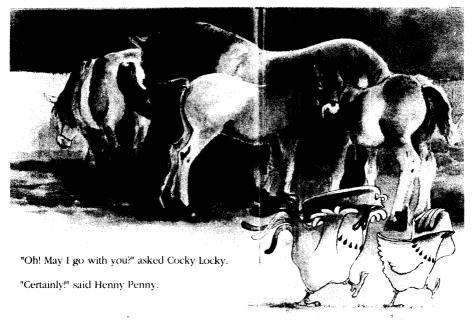


Figure 7

Calling Diane Léger Haskell's *Maxine's tree* "emotional and an insult to loggers" (Dafoe C4), members of the Sechelt, B.C., area's IWA-Canada [International Woodworkers of America] local demanded that the trustees of School District 46 remove the book from school libraries. The complaint about this picture book arose when a six-year-old girl told her fourth generation logger father that what he did for a living was wrong (Collins 134). Asked to provide

the source for this judgement, the little girl referred her father to a book, *Maxine's tree*, which had been read in school.

In Léger Haskell's sentimental tale, Maxine, five, goes camping on weekends with her father in Carmanah Valley on Vancouver Island's west coast. There, Maxine's father, with other volunteers, builds trails through the woods so that people can visit the ancient rain forest. While others work, Maxine plays in her tree, a giant sitka spruce. When Maxine sees the clear-cut sections in the next valley, she fears for her tree. Making a sign with her name on it, Maxine sticks it on the tree in the belief that "Nobody will" want to hurt someone's favourite tree."



Figure 8

Though the story is presented as fiction, Léger explains that the book's Maxine is actually her own daughter and that "Maxine's tree is basically a true story" (Paul 8). The real Maxine and her cousin Eddy, having spent a weekend in 1988 in the Carmanah with Maxine's parents, began to cry as, leaving the forest, they saw kilometre after kilometre of clear-cut.

They thought Carmanah was going to be the same thing .... I wrote the story to soothe them—soothe their fears .... Maxine's tree is not anti-logging, but I do have a viewpoint on a particular type of logging in a particular area .... I was very careful not to put the word 'logger' in or to have any negative connotations. I was expecting a bit of a stir from some local pro-clear cut groups, but nothing happened. So I was surprised that it happened two years later. (Paul 8-9)

The complainant father said he "didn't want the book used in the classroom. In fact, I think library books should, as a rule stay out of the classroom" (Collins 134). As noted earlier, the union sought to widen the prohibition, but the trustees decided to retain *Maxine's tree* in the school district's libraries.

Voice or cultural appropriation was the reason for the removal of the 1985 recipient of the Canadian Library Association's Amelia Frances Howard-Gibbon Medal for illustration, Ian Wallace's *Chin Chiang and the dragon's dance*. The book relates the story of a young Chinese boy, Chin Chiang, who, for years, had dreamed of dancing the dragon's dance with his grandfather in the New Year's parade. Now, on the day he is to do so, "instead of being excited, Chin Chiang was so scared he wanted to melt into his shoes. He knew he could

### CHIN CHIANG AND THE DRAGON'S DANCE

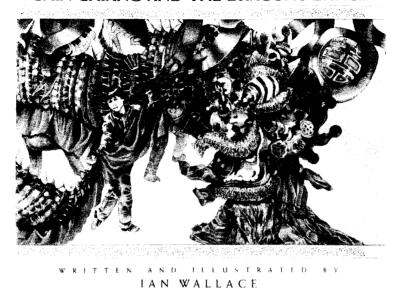


Figure 9

never dance well enough to make Grandfather proud of him." With the help of a new friend, Chin Chiang overcomes his concerns about clumsiness and dances so well that his grandfather describes him as "the very best dragon's tail I have ever seen."

MacCallum (C15) recounts how a number of Toronto school libraries quietly removed *Chin Chiang and the dragon's dance* in 1991 because it supposedly "seriously misrepresented Chinese culture." According to a former social studies consultant, "the crucial problem with *Chin Chiang* originated with its author coming from outside the Chinese community, and doing no research with people in the culture, so the voice was not Chinese." Had the persons levying these charges taken a moment to call fellow Torontonian Wallace, he could have described to them his two months research time at Toronto's reference library and the period he spent at Vancouver's Chinese Cultural Center (Jenkinson 1985 49).

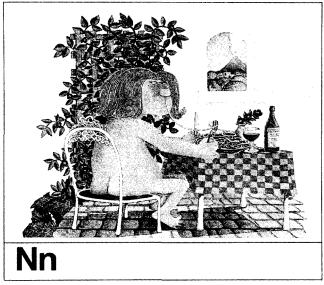
Wallace's editor, Patsy Aldana of Toronto's Groundwood Books, acknowledges that "I'm much more aware of the possibility of post-publication censorship problems these days .... I now have to feel a book is defensible, that it can sustain attack from whoever, before I'll go ahead" (Hurst D5). As for *Chiang and the dragon's dance*, Aldana describes it as "an honorable book by an honest writer," while adding, "Would I publish [it] today? Absolutely not. But then the author wouldn't submit it today."

Perhaps Aldana has misjudged what Wallace would do. In a recent interview,

### he says:

I see the whole thing as a kind of reverse discrimination where we're going to be pigeonholing writers and illustrators into these little slots where someone like Paul Yee can't do anything but a Chinese book and native writers can't do anything but speak from a native position. I think it's absurd! I don't know where the trend is going to go or where it's going to end, but I think the minute you start restricting the creative imagination, you have placed limitations on it that shouldn't be there.

Nonetheless, the damage to Chin Chiang and the dragon's dance has been done. As Rae points out, "It may be difficult to remove the 'controversial' taint from a delightful book" (K15). Even the alphabet has been subjected to censorship—or at least the words and illustrations used to represent one of the letters in Roger Paré's The Annick ABC may have been censored. In June, 1992, Canadian Press carried the story that a Red Deer, Alberta, mother had "complained the reference "N" is for nudist eating noodles in Naples' is inappropriate reading for kindergarten students" ("In Alberta" A8). The mother was upset that she "had to explain nudism to her five-year-old daughter." Though the illustrations had



A nudist eats noodles in Naples.

Figure 10

resulted in Paré's winning the 1985 Canada Council's Prize for Illustration, after the mother "complained to the school librarian, the 99-cent book ... was pulled from the shelf and thrown out."

Some eight months later, however, the principal of George Wilbert Smith

Elementary School claimed that "the story was much ado about nothing" (Goyette A9). According to the principal, a kindergarten teacher, on overhearing one mother express concern about a school library book, *The Annick ABC*, to another parent:

suggested that the mother talk it over with the librarian. They had a good chat and the mother's questions were resolved. Checking the book again, after the conversation, the librarian 'made an individual judgement' and threw out the book. He later told the principal he removed it only because of its poor physical condition, and 'felt terrible' about the accusation of book banning.

Evidently, the charges of censorship arose because "the parent who had been talking to the worried mother in the hallway concluded that this was an act of censorship. She contacted the media and the story was widely reported." The principal reported that "everybody feels burned .... We feel the press made an issue where there was no need to make an issue." As for the well-worn *Annick ABC*, the principal said, "It probably won't be replaced because it has created such 'bad feelings."

Was *The Annick ABC* really censored, or was it, as the librarian and principal claim, just discarded because of its deteriorating physical condition? Because the book has yet to be replaced, the question remains unanswered, but another comment made by the principal raises a further question about the level of understanding within George Wilbert Smith Elementary School regarding the concept of censorship. Goyette reports the principal as saying: "Schools indulge in censorship whenever they make budget decisions about library materials, or select certain books to support the curriculum." If this statement accurately represents what the principal said, it would indicate that the principal does not understand the fundamental difference between censorship and selection. Selection is a positive process in which selectors look for reasons why a material

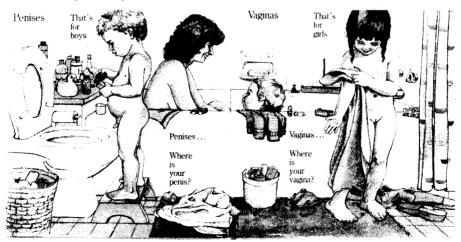


Figure 11

should be added to a library's collection or included in the curriculum, but censors, armed with a mental hit-list of "no-no's," look for reasons to exclude items. The selection process undoubtedly offers in-house censors many unseen opportunities to practise silent censorship.

For example, if a library has purchased all of Kathy Stinson's picture books, such as *Big or little?* or *Red is best*, but not *The bare naked book*, which labels body parts from head to toe, is that censorship?

Stinson, herself, asks that question:

Does my acceptance of schools not having *The bare naked book* in their collections give principals or teacher-librarians permission, whenever it's convenient, to hide behind the 'book selection' argument, when in fact, for some of them, not choosing to have this (or any other) book might have more to do with fear of controversy than with any professional concerns? If this is what is happening, is it not a form of censorship after all—censorship by anticipation? (Stinson, "Letters" 136)

At the time Robert Munsch's *Giant* was under attack, he was awaiting the publication of a story which had been part of his oral repertoire since the days of *The dark* and *Mud puddle*. As the *Giant* brouhaha swirled around him in 1990, Munsch looked ahead, possibly with some trepidation, to the public's response to that next book. "It's called *Good families don't*. That's the notorious fart. God knows what the reaction to that is going to be!"

Given the "fuss" generated by a word like "pee," Munsch's concern seemed justified. The plot of *Good families don't* focuses on a little girl, Carmen, who,

one night, goes up to her bedroom and finds that "there, lying on her bed was a great big purple, green and yellow fart." When she informs her mother and father, their response is, "Don't be ridiculous ...! Good families like ours do not have farts." In the same fashion that the young children in The dark and Mud puddle use their

# ROBERT MUNSCH · ALAN DANIEL

Good Families Don't

Figure 12

internal resources to overcame the books' villains, Carmen rescues her parents and the police from the fart's noxious effects. The silence which has surrounded Munsch's *Good families don't* likely represents another example of the widespread but quiet censorship which can and does occur during the selection process.

Kathy Stinson has also experienced another form of censorship which, again, is of a type largely invisible to the general public. Annick's Rick Wilks reports that "an Ottawa school cancelled [Stinson's] visit because her *Bare naked book* contained a single picture of a child's very tiny, but definitely bare naked penis" (Goyette A9). Actually, Wilks is not completely correct, for the book's closing illustration of "bare naked bodies" also shows most of a toddler's penis. Nevertheless, given the concern over the "penises" page, it is interesting to note how the right half of that double-page spread bathroom scene carried the parallel text: "Vaginas That's for girls Vaginas ... Where is your vagina?" and showed a frontal view of the little boy's bare naked sister drying herself off after a bath, but it was seemingly ignored. Additionally, Stinson-the-author was censored for illustrations created by Heather Collins.

As the various examples have shown, censorship in its many forms and for its many reasons is part of students' lives from the very first moment they walk into their kindergarten classrooms and encounter the collections of picture books found there. While schools must respect the censorial rights of individual parents, schools must equally strive to ensure that such parents do not succeed in extending their prohibitions to everyone's children. As Carmen's mother might have said, "Good libraries like ours do not have censorship. What would the neighbors say?"

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**Figure 4.** The old woman and the pig. (1989) Robert and Marlene McCracken. Illus. Diane Colquhoun. Used with permission of Penguis Publishers.

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## Cerebus: From aardvark to Vanaheim, reaching for creative heaven in Dave Sim's hellish world

Tim Blackmore

Résumé: Tim Blackmore analyse la dimension intertextuelle des bandes dessinées de Dave Slim: à la fois évidentes et complexes, les allusions au cinéma, à la peinture, aux genres littéraires et paralittéraires permettent de mieux préciser la frontière souvent incertaine entre la littérature réservée à la jeunesse et la littérature destinée aux adultes.

Working from Kitchener, Ontario, Dave Sim writes, draws, and markets *Cerebus*, a highly successful black and white comic about an ambitious aardvark. When he began it in 1977, the comics world had dire warnings for him and for his then wife Deni Loubert (*Cerebus*'s publisher): "We were told that we couldn't make it if we didn't go to New York" (Wawanash 31: 22). The overt threat implies that creative activity can only be successful in approved geographical, financial and artistic surroundings. But Sim refused to accept that idea; as Gary Groth, editor of *The comics journal*, noted recently, "if Dave Sim at times seemingly operates out of an ivory tower, it should be remembered that he built it himself" (Groth, "Repentant" 80).

### **Discorporate Cerebus**

Sim's isolation is a key factor in the development of *Cerebus*. Remote from even the meagre support offered by the comics community, away from the corporate lap of above-ground American comics (Marvel and DC), away from underground comix (*Zap, Weirdo*), and even from ground-level comics publishers (Fantagraphics, Dark Horse, Tundra), Sim is one working in opposition to many. In 1984 he wrote, "You have to understand that doing a comic book for seven years with no one else assisting in the direction of it becomes a very intense kind of self-therapy" (*Swords* 6: 30). Sim's cloister has performed the double function of setting him apart and keeping him safe.

The positioning of the individual against those around him is *Cerebus*'s leitmotif. When Groth observed that Sim "struck [Groth] as being an outsider even in the *WAP!* [*WAP!*: an acronym for words and pictures, was a forum for comics' creators] milieu," Sim replied, "I'm an outsider everywhere" (Groth, "Repentant" 107). Cerebus is also a stubborn loner, and he is warned by another of Sim's characters, Weisshaupt, a quiet authoritarian, that "you've chosen a

difficult and perilous course without allies. Without structure .... There is a real danger that you will be consumed by your own power" (*Church and state* 501). What follows is an attempt to navigate between intentional and affective fallacies to understand the way the text and its author respond to each other; how Sim can produce his world which produces *Cerebus*, and yet *Cerebus* produces Sim's world.

Sim's response to the threats of corporate America is uniform: "This is mine. Cerebus is mine. I'm the guy you negotiate with for Cerebus. There's no Jenette Kahn [Marvel Comics], or Dick Giordano [DC], or Diana Schutz [Comico]" (Groth, "Repentant" 87). Sim's black and white funny animal comic does not even seem to fit the genre as defined by Walt Kelly's Pogo.

Free to decide what he wanted to do when not doing commercial art, Sim began a parody of the popular 1977 comic *Conan the Barbarian*. *Cerebus* (the Barbarian) was a happy misspelling of Cerberus. Sim settled on a 6000-page work of 300 issues that would be complete in 2004. The work would see Cerebus from his early days as a sword-carrying mercenary, through his time as prime minister and pope, his journey to the moon in search of heaven (Vanaheim), to his death. Sim promised that there would be no break in continuity, no late delivery, rarities in a field notorious for both. As of this writing, Sim has moved well past the half-way mark. Six of his self-published graphic novels (from his own press Aardvark-Vanaheim, Inc.) are in print, collecting *Cerebus* from issues 1 through 150.

Sim's steady success with *Cerebus* has hardened his dislike of corporate publishing, particularly its recent enforcement of "work-for-hire" schemes, where salaried creators who develop characters and ideas for the corporation forfeit all rights to their creative work. In a 1982 interview, Kim Thompson discusses these matters with Sim:

Thompson: So you're one of the highest-paid comics artists in the industry?

Sim: Oh yes .... In the medium. I'm not in the industry. The industry is here in the city [New York]. The City—The Industry.

Thompson: I think of all the publishers forming "The Industry."

Sim: Yeah. I hate the term for it, though. It really brings across the idea of an assembly line of poorly paid workers who are supporting a hierarchy of businessmen.

Deni Sim: But it is.

Sim: Well it is, yes, on the whole. (Thompson 82: 75)

Sim hopes that the creator will not become a cog in The Industry. Meditating on the baser aspects of power in *High Society*, the graphic novel in which Cerebus becomes prime minister, Sim examines the situation where "the prime minister—your thumb—is united with the bureaucracy—your fingers—great works can be accomplished. The lifting of spirits. The grasping of ideas: we hold the future between us .... If, however, the prime minister and his bureaucracy are *not* united ... like SO!" pain will result (395) (figure 1.)



Figure 1 ©1993 Dave Sim

Sim's experience has shown him the lengths the world of corporate comics would go to in order to have the "fingers" of production "Swear complete and everlasting loyalty to my thumb!"

The reader, like the disinterested worker, looks on at Cerebus's doings, the line of the table splitting the panels so that Cerebus appears to be talking in the lower panels, acting in the upper ones. But as Cerebus goes to work on the bureaucrat's right hand, the focus of the page shifts to the top, to the bureaucrat's agony as he realizes the price of "Anarchy! Revolution!" The design of the page leads us with inexorable and increasing speed to the framed inset panel of the bureaucrat on his knees. Sim comments, "if you sign a contract with an entity larger than yourself—as an example, me signing with DC—they have a team of 50 lawyers that will tell you what the contract says. They can tie me up in court for 15 years until I agree with their version" (Groth, "Repentant" 90). The greater force produces the interpretation it wants. The "50 lawyers" have the power to abolish the creator as a privileged interpreter.

Sim's determination to interpret his world has resulted in an expansion of what comics as a genre is and can be. He sees the superhero genre as "an immense line that snakes around in very bizarre directions ... and aside from that snake there's nothing but empty territory" (Thompson 83: 60). The predator attempts to govern the medium. Sim, who has constantly avoided being swallowed by the snake, relies on creative power which "is tapped in the story; whatever the story is. There's only one story out there, and all of them are just permutations of that story. You're a caretaker of it" (Groth, "Repentant" 123). The artist's duty is to protect and disseminate the story. When Oscar Wilde appears in the fifth graphic

novel, *Jaka's story*, he is confronted by the forces of religious totalitarianism which demand "a permit;" but this is "not a permit to publish" but "a permit to write" (350). Wilde is sentenced to hard labour for possessing "no artistic license."

Sim's aloofness is part of his power. Playing wickets with The Regency Elf, a charming character who only Cerebus really sees, Cerebus notes, "Insanity is a virtually impregnable gambit" when one falls into power relations, "but you have to lay the groundwork early in the game" (*High Society* 87) (figure 2).



Figure 2 @ Dave Sim

Here the power relationship is best signified by the central strip panel where the two croquet balls have touched. One of the balls will not remain in the game: winning consists of not missing any chances and remaining untouched.

The games of creation and power are dangerous: Cerebus is warned by a character based on Jules Feiffer that Cerebus will "live only a few more vears. You die alone. Unmourned. and unloved. Suffering ... suffering you'll have no trouble doing" (Church and state 1212). Ironically, around Sim's book there has grown up a fiercely

loyal group of fans, a group which forms an interpretive community.

In 1977 *Cerebus*'s audience was largely composed of young teenage boys who enjoyed the *Conan* parody. As the creation grew up, so did the readership: Sim now thinks about the book as "tailored to 30-year-olds" (Canadian Press).

It is possible that those 30-year-olds are the same readers who first read the book. Sim has an uneasy relationship with his fans. He attacks them for being too insular and narrow in their concerns, but remains sympathetic to them on "their unhappy road well-travelled" (Jaka's story 8). He charges that "Comics fans are basically followers, ardent followers, but you have to lead them someplace" (Thompson 83: 60). Like any group of followers, they have their eyes on the leader. Now that he is more than half way to his goal, Sim has relaxed enough to recall that during the completion of his first 50-issue graphic novel, he felt the fans were watching someone "committing slow suicide" (Bissette 11). Sim's distant affection for the fan community is paradigmatic of his relations with the comics world.

Sim has constructed a world of others. The corporate world and its worker drones, the underground and ground level world of comics: Sim is none of these. Neither is he a fan, or a believer in being a follower.

At the heart of Sim's isolation there is an obsession with modes of production and commodification. He is upset by the perception that comics as a genre is either a sign system to be disposed of (the main stream), or possessed and hoarded (the fan world). In every interview—and every interviewer can't fail to note parenthetically how incredible the 300-issue story is—Sim points to the size of the project. He asks "[Why not] be the first one to do it? Why not be the first one to do 300 issues of a comic book that all makes sense in one large context?" (Thompson 83: 60). Sim puts quantitative distances between himself and others: he is distant from them in philosophy and time. He will be the first to do the long story with context, the "300-issue story, which is a 6000-page story, which is now nearing the 1000-page mark" (Thompson 83: 74).

Just as I began this paper, Sim had prepared a recitation of the length of the book's run, the amount now completed, the dates it will be finished. The numbers provide stability and legitimacy in a world which has neither. And Sim has his eye on the potential "smart asshole" who is "going to come along ... and he'll do the longest story" (Thompson 83: 74). Until then, Sim will maintain or increase his distance from his comic neighbours. Even Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira* can be discounted, because teams of artists work on the book, whereas Sim has only one assistant (a man simply named Gerhard).

The control Sim exerts over *Cerebus* extends beyond its book publication. Marketing the so-called "phone-books" (huge collections of the comic, similar to Japanese *manga*) by mail and phone order, bypassing the usual venue of the comic shops, Sim withstood howls of outrage from store owners, declaring:

"I've taken eleven years to produce four books; I'm not going to put those out as if it's just another collection of 'dead Robin' stories" (a reference to DC's publicity stunt of having Batman's sidekick Robin killed off by a reader phonein poll) (Groth, "Repentant" 83). Sim's books take up considerable shelf space, they are undeniable physical artifacts. But again he has focused not so much on their content as on the "eleven years" of labour (ultimately 26) and the "four

books" (now six) he has produced. His claustration has had these results: Sim can say, My books are solid, I meet my promised schedules, and I'm the first to do so on this scale in comics.

### **Kinematic Kerebus**

Because control is so important to Sim, it is no surprise that power is *Cerebus*'s focus. Sim's concern with methods of production has made him sensitive to formalist issues: the devices he uses to provoke the reader and the relationship between form and function in the text. As early as issue 11 (1978), Sim began to shift the emphasis of the art away from single pictures to "the layout of the story. From cosmetic technique to narrative flow" (*Swords* 2: 79). Narrative flow led to what look like animation pose-to-pose drawings. Sim's fondness for scrims, overlays and backgrounds turned *Cerebus* into a sort of two-dimensional



Figure 3 @1993 Dave Sim

theatre. The marriage of film and theatre is much discussed by a major influence on Sim, Will Eisner, creator of The spirit. Following Eisner's lead, Sim began to see "each drawing as a connecting fragment. It was like a dormant time-sense had leaped into my head from nowhere" (Swords 2: 79). The "dormant time sense" gives Sim an unerring feel for pace: the film counter in his head ticks off the units required to proceed through a scene, guiding the reader to Sim's destination.

Having seen a miracle, Cerebus backs away from the event, scrambling up bags of gold (Church and state 435) (figure 3).

Sim's composition of the page forces us into a reader-response situation: first we scan for action, and then, with that in mind, reread, assessing the images and text in context. One final pass lets us seize the whole. Sim begins by throwing the viewer into the centre, not the top, panel. Because the centre panel, darkest and most saturated, occludes the others, our eye jumps to it. The figure's gestures and the strong diagonal of the white robe against the grey ground, direct us up to the right corner of the page. Cerebus's ears also indicate his movement: first they lie back as he reacts to what he sees below him, then they tilt forward as he recoils from the view. His mindless scramble up from the events on the floor is stopped by Cerebus's slamming his head on the ceiling (even the panels lose their tops and are compressed, as is Cerebus, whose ears, eyes and nose are flattened by the impact), and we drop to the smallest panel in the centre of the page. The eye follows the tumbling Cerebus as he falls out of the foreground onto

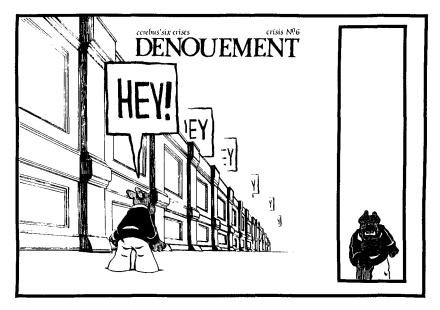


Figure 4 ©1993 Dave Sim

the floor. The gap between panels provides a pause in the text, and a shaky Cerebus staggers to his feet, the panel distortion reflecting Cerebus's disorientation. The open right side of the panel leads the eye over to the next page.

Figure 3 is a splash page that sets the tone for the rest of a remarkably animated issue. Sim gradually slows down the frenetic pace and returns Cerebus to his usual taciturn demeanour. Sim notes with pleasure that he has finally "come up with a series of figures to animate a motion .... I've taken the camera to such an extreme worm's eye view" that the bounds of the comic page have been bent outward, if not broken entirely (Swords 3: 100). In other sequences the reader

is forced to physically turn the book through a full circle, in order to follow Cerebus clinging to a huge spinning tower. Sim knows he is dictating the reader's viewing speed and comprehension, confounding those who have dieted on a standard six-panel grid format. He notes about writing in dialect that when "the previous phrase is repeated your eye makes a funny motion while you read it .... fool-the-reader is what it is" (Thompson 83: 66). The "funny motion" the eye makes is the reader responding to and revising the text. Sim's willingness to frustrate and "fool" the reader has lead him deeper into design territory opened by Will Eisner, Harvey Kurtzman and Milton Caniff.

Sim wants his texts to be open to readers unfamiliar with the sign systems comics usually employ, but he refuses to bore his veteran readers. In some issues he uses type in order that "people who are not educated to the medium ... will understand implicitly what's being done" (Wawanash 31: 22). The echo in figure 4 (*High society* 493) is an example of an implicit sign. But while the fading type (shot using a screen to provide us with a progressively lighter half-tone) and the perspective of the hotel hall read immediately as an echo, much else happens here. The openness of the page is in direct contrast to the tight box enclosing a determined Cerebus striding towards us on the right. The great expanse of white reinforces the sense that Cerebus, on the point of losing all his power, has been deserted. Our eye follows the "Hey!" down the hall, leading us into the centre of the page. The camera engages in a shot reverse and we are now in front of the aardvark, looking up from the direction the echo (and our eye) has travelled.

Experimentation led Sim to conclude that "the whole world opens up because so few interesting approaches have been done. Thick panel borders. Enormous panel borders. I want to do a thing in a while where I have a frame around each page" (Thompson 83: 78). And frame the pages he did, with ornate scroll work and decadent Beardsleyan filigree. Nodelman comments about frames that they may intensify "the sense that we are looking through the border into the world beyond it, so that the flatness of the page on which the words are printed does in fact make sense as being a flat surface positioned in front of the scene depicted" (57). What Nodelman describes and Sim often alludes to is the theatre technique of hanging a near-transparent scrim in front of or inside the perspective box, giving the illusion of depth of field, while solving the problem of displaying large blocks of commentary in the playing area (an idea similar to animation's multiplane camera).

About scrims, overlays, montage and animation, Sim argues that "there's absolutely nothing wrong with conscious trickery. If you can do a panel that is one inch going into a panel that is five inches by an inch ... that's real conscious trickery, where people look at it and go, 'That's clever just by virtue of the fact that it shouldn't work but it does anyway'" (Thompson 83: 76). Sim's willingness to push grid systems to their maximum, to distort or multiply the frame, began relatively early in *Cerebus*. These are not games he plays out of boredom: "That sense of design is what I'm striving for," he notes, "It doesn't intrude, it

just guides you through" (Thompson 83: 75). Sim is more a film and theatre director than flat-shape designer. In some issues the reader acts as a sort of steady-cam, moving at an even pace through the halls of power, with doors opening magically and events occurring before the camera eye.

In addition to the shot reverse (or shot counter-shot) pattern, Sim uses extreme close-ups, pans, zooms and intercutting. At times characters appear to talk to a fixed camera, as if being interviewed. Sim also slices up the page into

long vertical strips: showing an action scene between Cerebus and a giant named being Thrunk, Sim divides the page into as many as seven full length vertical panels, some of which are no more than a centimetre wide, as he cuts back and forth between the combatants. It requires the tightest drawing and editing to make such a complex page (or series of pages) read. Sim educates the reader to graphic literacy in part by his use of filmic techniques, concluding that the cartoonist falls into "more or less the same sort of role as the film director, in that you're not doing



a major part of the story

Figure 5 ©1993 Dave Sim

that day .... but the idea's to make whatever limited frame you're working on at the time carry forward ... and trim down the amount of artwork in the frame so that it doesn't restrict the movement of the eye" (Wawanash 31: 22).

Sim expects his readers will respond and write their own texts, but he would prefer that they follow the gross path he paves, even if they do not stop at the precise scenic points he indicates. Part of Sim's control comes out of his mixture

of animated, kinetic pages and quiet, static ones. Sim subdues page after page with stable six- or eight-panel grids, where motionless characters engage only in verbal or mental action. Sim notes that "my viewpoint is so static, a conscious effort being made to keep the layouts interesting but at the same time bland, in order not to get in the way of the story. I don't like people turning on to a page and going 'Ooooohhh' unless it's a good transition page" (Thompson 83: 75). Nodelman suggests that "We take it for granted that, unlike wallpaper or the sky, a picture is particularly worth looking at" (49). In Sim's case, the wallpaper sometimes is the picture, the reduced play of the signifiers is the sign system. The viewer faced with repeated images becomes sensitive to the tiniest changes in the pattern, changes that provide "specific visual information" that "an artist has chosen to offer us" (Nodelman 49). Figure 5 (Church and state 165) shows us a swatch of Sim's moving wallpaper.

Another eight-panel page precedes this one (Church and state 164-165), as the impatient aardvark waits to sign the next paper. In figure 5, only the third panel breaks the rhythm of the regular movement of the hand followed by the signature, hand and signature. The pattern is resolved when Cerebus provides the visual and philosophical punch line that it is "much faster this way, don't you think": Sim seals off the issue with a cloverleaf at the lower right hand corner of the page. Cerebus seems to be reading the story as we are, and he grows impatient with the repetition, as we do. The implied meta-comic discussion between Cerebus, his creator and the creator's audience is crucial for Sim: "the fact that I have verbal humor in [the book] ... written humor, plays on words, overlapping dialogue, means if the artwork is fighting against that, it isn't going to come across quite as well" (Thompson 83: 75). Often the most animated scenes are silent, while the more static pages carry more philosophy.

Whether he is writing about political (High society), religious (Church and state), or personal power (Jaka's story), or the loss of power over the self (Melmoth), Sim is most drawn to the serial as a genre. Tolstoy's novels, soap opera, and situation comedy are all forms Sim has thought about. In his early writings about Cerebus, Sim half sarcastically remembers watching Hogans' heroes and Bewitched for inspiration. "Good situation comedies are invaluable," he told one interviewer, "because they involve you, they entertain you, they make you laugh out loud in 25 minutes, and make you want to come back next week" (Thompson 83: 78). The world evoked by the situation comedy, whether it is a mock German POW camp or a bar in Boston, is a useful typology for Sim.

A serial more closely related to the comic book is the daily comic strip. Sim began his cartooning career with a comic strip, looking to comic book and strip veteran Gil Kane for guidance. Kane advised the younger artist that "political cartoons, humor strips in newspapers are written in an infinitely more adult way [than comics] .... they're written for adults by adults with humor. They're really clever, and they represent adult values and that's why adults read them .... They're

dealing with adult frames of reference. And comic books don't have those frames of reference" (Swords 2: 10). Kane's implicit exhortation is that Sim create something new, be unafraid to break open a given form. The result is that Sim and his characters are on fresh comics ground. "There is a quality," he notes, "to doing an extended story like that, in terms of getting to know the characters, the story sort of writing itself and amazing things coming out .... It's an attraction/repulsion thing" (Bissette 19).

The extended story has begun to write itself in other ways. Sim's unflagging production of the comic has changed his view of the forces operating in the market. The more he is aware of commodification, the more his art changes; the more the art changes, the more the market reacts to the book. Refusing all outside controls, Sim has produced and commodified his own work. Such a curious contradiction is not lost on Sim, who has simultaneously educated himself and his aardvark, producing a rising level of discourse both inside and outside the comic.

### **Educating the Aardvark**

Sim moved the comic from its basic parodic stance of its first two-dozen issues to discussions of political power. New characters based on Groucho and Chico Marx, Rodney Dangerfield, Mick Jagger and most recently, Oscar Wilde, raised the book's level of discourse. It is Sim's desire to "take in my new-found interest in the real world's larger issues and themes," concluding, "There's no reason I can't do it in a comic book. It's just words and pictures together. The only question is how good are the words and how good are the pictures" (Mietkiewicz). Sim's demands were not limited to his own abilities. He attacks the comics community's insularity:

I try to make [the comic] look difficult for that very reason. I try to make parts of it difficult to conceive or to follow, strictly because I figure you should be able to reach when you're reading comics. You should be able to try for something that's a little beyond you. A lot of people say, well, do any 14-year olds *read* this? And I'll say well, sure. They read it; they don't understand it. But I didn't understand *Popeye* cartoons when I was a kid. (Wawanash 32: 10)

Sim's refusal to condescend to his readers, his wish to slow them down and quell their responses (at least on the initial reading), to place himself as the most powerful interpreter in his own community (that bounded by *Cerebus*), has made him a pariah in some comics circles. Yet many fans rose to the new heights the book demanded.

Cerebus's subtlety is unfamiliar to comics. For readers geared to action, quiet pages are puzzling ones. In figure 6 (Jaka's story 222), Oscar Wilde contemplates his prose, smoking quietly as he rewrites a line of his book describing the dancer's "slim, gilt soul."

The reader's eye tends to skip through the six panels looking for action, or

at least change, and finds none, at least not on the gross level. Forced to return, we are attracted to the motion of the smoke trail left by the cigarette. But that is misdirection from Sim: the real event takes place as in the fourth panel, as the right hand picks up the knife and scrapes off the comma, changing the phrase to "slim gilt soul." Now the slight lift in Melmoth's eyebrow is understood, and



Figure 6 ©1993 Dave Sim

belatedly we see the tiny "scrape scrape scrape" in that panel. The action of such an animated and vet apparently static page is the artisan's discipline in writing: tremendous the weight given to each word and comma. This page demands patience both of Sim as an artist, and of his readers as respondents.

Sim recalls that in 1978 he had been "striving to understand the myriad levels of meaning in all great and intended-to-be-great works of art. When I failed that ... I began to see that what was intended was not nearly as important as what I perceived—I now looked at works for

their impact on me, no longer for whatever 'right interpretation' might theoretically exist' (Swords 5: 92). The reader, once submissive, becomes the actor, interpreter and creator of valid texts. Security in the reader's responses makes the changes in Cerebus and Cerebus explicable. Sim writes to all his readers as equally valid interpreters; however (and ironically) Sim, the authority in his community, will prevent an avalanche of artistic relativism. He must also deal with the problem of being buried by other, more powerful interpretative voices. After spending two years researching and working with Wilde as a character,

Sim recognized that, "Even as I write about Wilde; in this introduction; in the earlier 'summing up'; I am not using my natural voice." He had fallen, like other Wilde fans, into the habit of mimicking "his graceful turns of phrase" (*Melmoth* 7). The rising discourse simultaneously threatens to drown the creator and raise the tone of the creation to pretentious heights.

Cerebus is a battleground between high and low culture. Thompson points out the "distinct change in tone between the first few issues of Cerebus and the later ones," where Cerebus, initially "extremely unlikeable and blunt, and quite shallow," evolves into "this new, intricate, subtle character" (Thompson 83: 59). Sim is aware of his developing style and the points at which he breaks the choke hold of his artistic influences.

But Sim's signifying has become complex and layered, provoking the criticism that *Cerebus*, now hovering between issues 160 and 170, is inaccessible to the new reader. Sim disagrees; but the new reader must face the prospect of working into a sign system of visual and thematic codes that runs across a hundred issues. It is a daunting task for the reader when the artist pursues a complex cross-section of genres doing "a few pages [that] are straight *roman* à *clef*, and then ... an allegory, and then ... a parody ... and jump[s] back and forth" between them all (Wawanash 32: 10).

The danger of such a post-modern free-for-all is that the audience that signed on for the story will weary of the games. Sim maintains that his roots are in low cultures which have been marginalized, and identifies himself more with his character Jaka, a pub dancer, than with Oscar Wilde. Sim sees the dancer and the comics artist as both "toiling in fields of endeavour damned by faint praise, overlooked and almost universally dismissed by the doctrinaire in favor of the thirdrate and the merely lucrative" (Jaka's story 8).

Sim's reach for great themes has taken him into stories of death and transfiguration. *Melmoth*'s dedication is to both fellow artist P. Craig Russell, who has adapted Wilde's work for comics, and "my cousin Ron, AIDS victim." It is difficult to read the following story about Wilde's protracted death as being anything but a discussion of AIDS. When he has leaned too far, Sim falls into a deadly seriousness, where prisoners are shown writing about Liberty on dungeon walls (*High society* 512). Such images are a far cry from the early heady days of Cerebus punching people with his nose, or unsentimentally stabbing them when they are down.

The progression from low to high culture, from colloquial to high discourse, mirrors a change in the texts from a cheery to a brutal tone. In order to discuss such difficult issues as rape, murder, ecological damage, and Machiavellian politics, Sim has abandoned his earlier more natural voice. In the first introductions to his own work, Sim describes the internal process of "the Writer" being handed the job of saving the comic by "the Artist," with the result that "the Writer panicked when he realized he was going to have to come up with some more haha. The Writer wasn't really enthusiastic about getting stuck with a job that

entailed making up twenty-two pages of ha-ha every other month" (Swords 1: 26). Here is the colloquial and easy Sim, looking affectionately at his younger self. Some ten years after the above piece, Sim wrote is his introduction to Jaka's story that "Wilde proved to be an infuriating and exhilarating plot element and companion .... First, last, and always (to me) he is an Artist and the tragedy which befell Wilde, I can't view in any other context than 'Society vs. the Artist'" (8).

The elaborate nature of the second piece, the intricate hypotactic writing complete with concern for the Artist is something Sim of 1981 would have rejected. Sim's language is ironically like the bureaucracies he hates: tangled, complicated, opaque. Early in *High Society* (17) Sim makes loving reference to the tootsie fruitsie ice cream scene in *A day at the races*, where Chico bilks Groucho of all his money. Three novels later, Sim literally replays the trial of Jesus before Pilate, with Cerebus washing his hands of the murder of a religious foe (*Church and state* 983).

But Sim has monitored his own progress as carefully as any critic. He points out that some characters are given the job of lightening the book's tone, providing what the Dave Sim of 1981 would have called "ha-ha." The Regency Elf (figure 2)—a "lovely, light ... bright and glimmering individual that just rambles and bubbles and talks about whatever comes into her head ... sort of Tinkerbell writ large"—is one such "counterpoint" to Astoria, a "cynical manipulator, very cold-blooded, very calculating, all business" (Thompson 83: 69). The Elf is indeed charming and funny, a hit with *Cerebus*'s readership.

One of Sim's greatest power-mongers tells Cerebus "You represent a triumph of the mundane over the sublime .... Like some great masterwork of the theatre ... some timeless drama which suddenly transforms itself into a Punch & Judy show" (*Church and state* 507). Sim is excellent at running a Punch and Judy show. He enjoys the slapstick inherent in some of his creations.

One of the most fruitful characters is British cartoonist Giles's menacing Granny, who Sim happily appropriates to play Cerebus's mother-in-law. Their fight at the dinner table is sophisticated slapstick (figure 7) (*Church and state* 133).

The blanks between each frame freeze the action. The camera gives us a panorama and then provides reaction shots. The action speeds toward mayhem as Granny begins a slow burn mid-age: Cerebus needs no time to respond to the knife which buries itself in his chair. The ensuing fight happens off camera except for the sounds of gleeful combat (*Church and state* 134). Sim maintains that he knows how and why his characters operate; even if he is not privy to their immediate acts, he knows what they will do in the long run. He distinguishes between Astoria, one of the most wily Machiavels in the text, and Cerebus. Sim classes Astoria as a "real-real person ... Cerebus as fantasy-fantasy, Elrod [a spoof of Michael Moorcock's Elric] as fantasy-real, Lord Julius as real-fantasy, Filgate as real-fantasy [both are based on actual people], the Moon Roach [a parody of the Moon Knight, another comics character] as fantasy-real" (*Swords* 5: 47). The characters' label seems to determine their actions: only Cerebus and

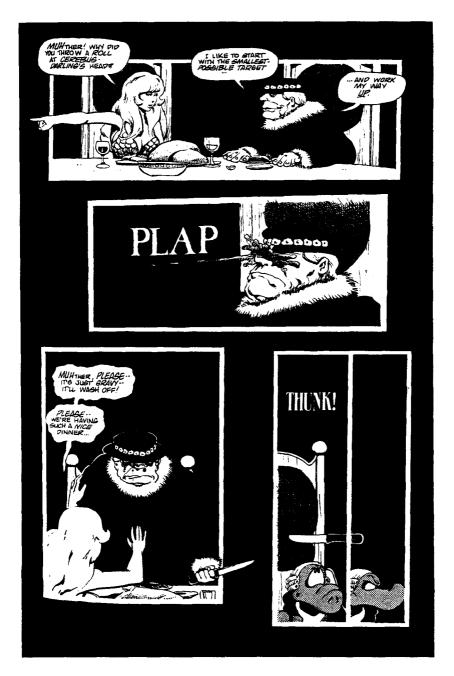


Figure 7 ©1993 Dave Sim

Astoria get into real trouble, while the "fantasy-real" characters usually provide the visual humor. Sim discovered early that "characters who are based on other characters in *Cerebus* tend to be the easiest to write" (*Swords* 1: 72).

Sim creates out of an intertextual stream. He blends people he knows, other creators' characters, people from public life, synthesizing them all into his own work. Those beings he has pulled out of an intertextual space provide him with the smoothest writing: he ponders three of his different types of characters and notes, "Someday I'm going to do a story with Cerebus, Elrod and Lord Julius



Figure 8 @1993 Dave Sim

locked in a closet. It'll write itself" (Swords 1: 72). Cerebus has been called a pastiche, but is really intertextual stage where players from other works, fictional or not, wander into Sim's theatre and he adapts them without losing their basic identities. Lord Julius is always Groucho, but somehow he seems to have agreed to come and work for Sim. Sim creates text where there were only other texts (The Marx Brothers, Moorcock's Elric [whom Sim merges with Chuck Jones's Foghorn Leghorn, already a carom off Fred Allen's Senator Claghorn], the pan-

theon of caped superheroes, Oscar Wilde, Margaret Thatcher, Jules Feiffer, Giles's Granny) hovering. Ultimately the text returns to Cerebus, who has his own ways of entertaining (figure 8) (*Church & state* 296).

Cerebus as Pope teaches the villagers a lesson about humility and grace. It is Sim's mastery of technique, his delicate drawing of the squalling child and the

humorous sudden silence of the third panel, where the baby seems to know what is about to happen, that make this slapstick impeccable. Like so many of the pages in *Cerebus*, this one is strongly author controlled. Once we are directed off the left-hand side of the page (what a disaster this page would be if Cerebus were throwing toward the book's gutter), we as Western readers, naturally drop back into the left section of the bottom panel and pan right across the crowd. Nodelman comments that "cartooning simplifies to convey the *right* information; it is static representation of the body in motion. It offers illustrators the chance to depict both the individuality of people and the movement of things" a chance which Sim rarely misses (97). Some critics have denigrated Sim's leaning towards burlesque over satire (Groth, "Two" 4), but it is the cheerful quality of the burlesque which saves the text from being crushed under its own weight of high seriousness. The underlying text is bleak, but the humour reduces and thins the mixture, making the whole palatable.

#### Cerebus: Control: Closure

The book has always been dark, but the proportion of farce to seriousness has changed. Sim decided as early as issue five that "Cerebus existed as an unwitting, but key figure in a number of wide-ranging conspiracies and as a nexus point for a number of disparate belief systems. I mean he was also the self-centred, hot tempered, loathsome little drunkard he appeared to be on the surface, but he was also something different" (Swords 6: 3). When Cerebus moves into the Regency Hotel in High society, he takes off his barbarian gear, his sword and medallions, and dresses in a tie and tails.

Cerebus's move uptown was the first of many shocks to the fan community which had cheered on the grouchy little killer aardvark. When Cerebus is thrown out of High Society, Sim recalls "I had a letter ... somebody else saying, 'Finally you're back to slapstick'" (Thompson 83: 61). But the barbarian is gone. Still mournful, angry and power-hungry, Cerebus is caught up in a higher-stakes game than before. Where Cerebus had been unthinkingly assured as a barbarian, he is now pushed in and out of power by forces beyond his control. Where less is certain, more danger looms.

We might expect a bildungsroman to follow when a character has been forced to leave home and go wandering. But what Cerebus sees rarely affects him. Sim adds, "Cerebus seems to luck onto situations that help him to never have to face himself" (Thompson 83: 70). For a long time Sim argued that Cerebus never learned or changed. After further thought, Sim agreed more recently, "So he does change. As you say, it's not really like he learns his lessons very well, like he's really grown. But he certainly has changed" (Sacks 39).

The line between change and growth seems very thin. Sim notes rather nervously that "Cerebus really doesn't learn from [disaster]. I mean I try to learn from it" (Thompson 83: 66). Sim has found that he must, more than ever, do

things his own way. The book is a sort of moving still: while it has kinetic passages, there are long periods where nothing appears to happen and the events themselves seem static (the now-completed Melmoth storyline concerns the protracted death of one character). Sim is engaged in a 300-issue process of revealing his thoughts, which are always already inscribed in the text. Like Lewis Carroll's Red Queen, he must expend all his energy just to maintain his place in time and art. Sim has shifted Cerebus's character partly by raising the level of discourse from the colloquial of the late '70s to the high of the early '90s, but while Cerebus's language and methods have changed, his nature and worldview remain bleak.

Parody, buffoonery and satire are finally burned off by the bleakness in *Cerebus*. What remains is a skeletal world where the individual must learn to govern the self (temper, fate, future), without outside assistance. Due to his adventures in publishing and public life, Sim has fallen into a belief in an Ayn Randian democracy: too much personal power is eroded by others, especially corporate forces (which may be units as small as the family). He argues we must "limit bureaucracies as well" until there is "virtually no bureaucracy, each creator [will have] one or two-person business operations" (Groth, "Repentant" 113).

Sim's approach to life has earned him the epithet of being "the Babbit of comics" (Groth "Two" 5). Yet Sinclair Lewis's Babbit is not an unsympathetic character. Like Babbit, Sim sees and cannot grasp the democracy around him. Sim recognizes in the "comics environment, books, shops, dealers, artists, fans ... one of the purest and most enduring repositories of FDR's New Deal and JFK's New Frontier" (MacDonald 148). In each local unit (comics shops) there exists a cross section of people: unwitting dupes, political naifs, power seekers—few villains. Astoria, one of *Cerebus*'s main players, is "not there to make you laugh, she's not a villain, she's not a good guy, she's an ordinary person in search of power" (Thompson 83: 67). Pragmatism marks the survivor: while the practical characters are occasionally emotional, the rule is to rule, to govern the self. Groth addresses this matter in an interview with Sim.

Groth: Do you think everything is defined by self-interest?

Sim: I think [that it is] for the most part. I think what isn't self-interest is usually rationalized self-interest.

Groth: Are you an Ayn Rand-ite?

Sim: Yeah, if you want to put it that way. Ok. (Groth, "Repentant" 116)

Sim's conclusion is no surprise. He notes that what intrigued him about Cerebus's "insidious seduction into the game of power" was that it brought him to "the saddest of all possible points; where there was something to lose" (Swords 3: 4). It is unclear whether Sim means, as Thoreau suggests, that once the individual wants material things, that person suffers all the terrors and jealousies of possession; or that Cerebus has given hostages to fortune and is no

longer free. Either way the streak of individualism is powerful.

Sim's democracy is based on philosophical and moral relativism. All people must learn to interpret for themselves. The powerful individual is someone who can contest an interpretation by an entity larger than the self. The entity's most ubiquitous incarnation is the corporation. Comic veteran Dick Giordano gained Sim's respect when Giordano effectively said to various comics companies, "I'm going to pick up my marbles, go back to Stamford ... and draw the occasional book." Sim concludes: "that then becomes an invulnerable personality. That becomes a person you can't intimidate, you can't shake them down, you can't assert your authority" (Thompson 82: 83). The last part of *Jaka's story* is a depiction of the Orwellian state (under the apparently benign rule of Margaret Thatcher), as it sends victim after victim to Room 101, this time for the love of Big Mother.

Sim is concerned by the state's wish to act as the arbiter between the philosophically and artistically desirable and undesirable. For Sim, the state's

delusions of its own morality sanction the most grievous wrongs against the individual. Jaka's life and world are ended when one of orthodox churches breaks down the door. splintering the lives of those connected to Cerebus (figure 9) (Jaka's story 336).

The shattered type indicates the violence of the breakin; Jaka is partly eclipsed by the noise of the approaching disaster, while Pud Withers is nearly obliterated, proleptic of his death a few panels later. Sim, an ardent supporter of publishing rights, has mounted and funded

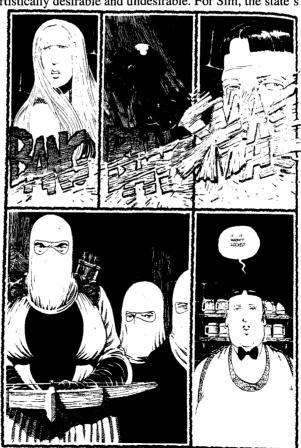


Figure 9 @1993 Dave Sim

the Comic Books Legal Defense Fund, dedicated to helping those who run afoul of censors. Sim notes bitterly that "If you take a mother and a police officer in tandem, they can virtually take away anybody's civil rights ... We are one police officer and one parent away from a bust at any given point" (Sacks 38-39).

As pope, Cerebus hands down the unpleasant realities about the world to an attentive crowd:

Most Holy would like to say a few words. Many of you have been told since you were small that Tarim [one of the gods] loves you .... This is not true ... Tarim loves rich people! That is why he gives them so much money ... Tarim loves strong people ... That is why he gives them enough strength to beat everyone up ... Tarim hates poor people which is why they don't have any money. (Church and state 289)

Cerebus's delivery is funny, but his words connect with Sim's beliefs that we must learn to stop asking "who the good guy is and who the bad guy is. There

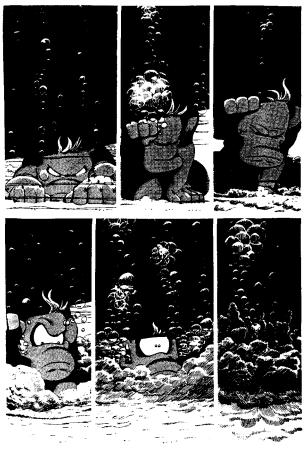


Figure 10 ©1993 Dave Sim

are no good guys. There are no bad guys" (Sacks 33). The laughter in Cerebus is of an ironic kind, diagnostic of the bleak and friendless state of human affairs. Going beyond simple polarities of good and bad, Sim approaches a kind of solipsism where "there is no reality. There is no truth. There is no barometer. There is no yardstick. Everything does exist in a purely relativistic situation .... I have a great deal of trouble with anybody who says they believe anything. To what depth and how far into your conscious mind do you be-

lieve?" (Groth, "Repentant" 125). It is another way of asking how long the individual can withstand Room 101.

The same darkness underlies Groucho Marx's comedy, that acerbic, ultimately unfriendly humour. Sim thinks of Groucho's character in *Duck soup*: "Whatever it is, I'm against it!' Firefly sings to the assembled people .... Sung to the bureaucracy, you could keep a thousand lawyers employed full-time trying to find a way around the purity of the nonsense" (*Swords* 4: 40). Sim operates the same kind of game with his readers. He keeps them hoping for closure, but it is not to be. Thompson asks Sim about this in an interview.

Thompson: Will we know for sure by [issue] 300 ... or even then maybe not?

Sim: Even then, probably not. I think that ambivalence is probably one of the best qualities that you can have in any kind of art. If somebody looks at it and they're certain of what they're seeing, you should be able over the course of time [to] show them that they were putting too much of themselves into their interpretation. (Thompson 83: 74)

It is ironic that Sim, who wants to refuse narrative closure, also wants to guide his readers' responses to his texts. Sim notes, "It was with a great deal of satisfaction that I took Cerebus and the readers on a roller coaster ride of hope for his future and then drew the tracks straight into a brick wall" (Swords 3: 4). Disappointments are no surprise to Cerebus because "inside, he knows, 'We're not making any real progress here, are we?"" (Bissette 39).

The burden of such an existence is depicted in one of Cerebus's dreams, a vision of drowning, of being borne under by a load of huge chains (figure 10) (Church and state 881).

This remarkable sequence is paradigmatic of the book: there is a rise as the character struggles against an oppressive weight, but despite enormous strength of effort, there is an inevitability about the fall and agony of drowning. Existence is a battle and death is terribly painful, as Sim's further meditations in *Melmoth* reveal. Death is the ultimate invasion of the self, of the one, by outside forces. In 1989, Groth questioned Sim about the darkness enveloping the *Cerebus* story line:

**Groth:** Are you optimistic about things? **Sim:** I'm optimistic about *Cerebus*. (Groth "Repentant" 97) It is the one thing Sim believes he can control.

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# Review articles & reviews / Critiques et comptes rendus

#### NOT A PROBLEM: WILLIAM BELL'S NO SIGNATURE

**No signature**. William Bell. Doubleday Canada, 1992. 171 pp., paper. \$14.00. ISBN 0-385-25379-6.

When is a problem novel not a problem novel? That is an important question, because more and more authors of young adult literature are addressing some of the very complex problems and issues facing young people in our society. But then, many writers for children and young adults have always dealt with the problems facing young people. Francis Hodgson Burnett deals with the physical and emotional results of neglect in the classic *The secret garden*. And what is L.M. Montgomery's *Emily of New Moon* if not a book about the problems of an orphan adjusting to life in a home where she is not wanted and where emotional abuse is the order of the day? So what classifies a book as primarily a "problem" novel, rather than just a novel? Surely the answer lies in the focus of the book. If the characters are the focus, as they are with Burnett and Montgomery, and some of the authors writing today, then no matter how many problems are presented, the book lies outside that limited and limiting designation.

William Bell's latest novel is, therefore, *not* a "problem" novel. It deals with adult illiteracy, gays, racism, classism, abandonment of a child by his father and divorce, but it still manages to focus on the protagonist, the very real teenage narrator, Wick (Steven) Chandler.

Bell immediately engages the reader with his character by using first person narration. Furthermore, Bell sets the reader up for a series of very clever "replays" as Wick calls them, or flashbacks, that fill us in on what has happened in Wick's life up to the time of the narration. About half-way through the novel, when Wick has dealt with his past so that it no longer haunts him, the replays stop. This innovative technique effectively gives the reader insights into Wick's past without being distracting or irritating, despite the fact that there is a replay in almost every chapter for approximately half of the novel.

Wick himself is an utterly believable young adult. He is unsure, confused, angry, hurt and loving in all the right proportions. His anger with his father for abandoning him swiftly turns to rage at his mother when he learns that it was she who, by using a bitter blackmail, forced his father to go. His sense of betrayal

and his fear when he discovers that his best friend is gay slowly turns to shame as he realizes his own betrayal of that friend. He grows more flexible as he comes to terms with his father's illiteracy, a flexibility which changes his attitudes towards a number of things. Everything about Wick, from his tone, his actions, his attitudes, his diction to his feelings, is utterly convincing and realistic.

Through Wick, then, Bell presents the themes of the book: understanding, tolerance. This novel gives a penetrating glimpse of the vagaries and viciousness of human beings in their dealings with one another, but also of the compassion and understanding possible. It is a sharp book: challenging, demanding and intense, deeply moving without being sentimental in the least. *No signature* is, quite simply, a superb novel, with something to offer to any young person, yet also something important to say to adults.

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#### TO DREAM OF MAKING

The worker in sandalwood. Marjorie Pickthall. Illus. Frances Tyrrell. Lester Publishing Ltd., 1991. \$18.95 cloth. ISBN 1-895555-10-8 32pp; The potter. Jacolyn Caton. Illus. Stephen McCallum. Coteau Books, 1992. 36 pp., \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55050-037-6.

Opening *The worker in sandalwood* with its cabinet-like cover and end papers is entering a world poised between fiction and (arti)fact, dream and reality, coincidence, miracle and skepticism; the world of the sandalwood cabinet, as the first full-page illustration in this book so beautifully demonstrates, is both central to the story and shrouded by mysterious shadow. Hyacinthe, apprentice to a cruel and drunken wood-carver, Monsieur Oreillard, claims a young Christ visited him on Christmas Eve to comfort him and miraculously to finish carving the cabinet; whether he has merely dreamt this is never clear.

"The sun, not yet risen, set its first beams upon the delicate mist of frost afloat beneath the trees, and so all the world was aflame with splendid gold"—this line articulates with a rare subtlety the paradoxical meeting of divine and human, of static finity and infinite flux so pervasive in both text and illustration, and is perhaps the best indication of how well this new version serves Pickthall's old. Her story, first published in 1914 and collected in Angel shoes and other stories (1923) reads "sent his beams." That missing "n" (intentional or not) sparks my imagination; the elbow rubbing of "risen, set" pleads for a finer attention to (solid) frost embodied as moist and vaporous mist "afloat beneath"—this is language speaking of the oxymoronic nature of the ordinary, of the blurring of laws and states that compose everyday life in a world which just might brush up

against the divine. Frances Tyrrell's illustrations gentle this blurring into visual motif. The curl of a wood-shaving, a ripple of carpet, tips on a snowflake, the bend of an elbow: some detail of each picture slips slightly outside of its small white "frame," defies, in some simple way, the line between colourful picture and the white terrain of text.

This slippage is not Tyrrell's only visual motif. Circles of light irradiate the central part of this book, and much can be learned of a character based simply on his relation to that light—the cruel Monsieur Oreillard blocks it, Hyacinthe is embraced by its curve and glow, and the kind stranger crosses from curve to centre, radiating light as halo. These circles are echoed by swirls and curved lines—the wafting aroma of sandalwood (already smelling of the birds and lilies eventually, miraculously?, carved in it), gusts of frosted wind, cleared spaces on windows, wood shavings, the puff of a cold winter breath. These lines, these movements, draw almost every illustration into the circle of light, of infinity, of possibility, dwelling in the humble and commonplace.

This book is a delight. The illustrations have a subtle and graceful presence; they gleam. And the textual adaptation (which mainly smooths the grain of Pickthall's occasionally fulsome prose) breathes new life into a story that has been too long collecting dust on the shelf.

The potter, by Jacolyn Caton and Stephen McCallum, is also cast upon the incursion of the infinite, or at least the "mythic," into the ordinary world, but in a much different manner. Like *The worker in sandalwood*, this story has an unnamed and removed narrator, though she does not qualify her tale with hesitant alternatives as does the teller of Pickthall's. This narrator (who calls herself "the potter's daughter") tells of a potter who lived alone "at the edge of a sinking island" spinning vibrant pots and bowls. Caton's beautifully paced prose describing these pots is itself a work of art—both prose and pots are animate. And properly so, for this is a pot's story, a tale of origins for shards and fragments found in out-of-the-way corners, for pots left behind in dusty pawn shops. It is also the story of a misunderstood artist betrayed by neighbouring villagers who stand to benefit most by his craft. This latter story is an old one, and, while Caton's interpretation gives it a new spin, the rather pyrotechnical climax is not unexpected.

What is fresh, and quite lovely if a reader is not bothered by the implications for cultural difference (and I suspect in this instance one need not be), is Caton's creation of a collective myth for and from remnants of past civilizations. McCallum plays with this in his fine illustrations, decorating the cavern in which the potter lives with cave paintings closely related to the drawings on the potter's urns and bowls. These paintings are more than an attempt at mood or setting; McCallum's drawing suggests a connection between early artists and the potter, a connection later borne out by the narrator's insistence that finding traces of these pots or lumps of the potter's clay stirs one to dream of making. And it is this dream of making which drives the potter, his "daughter" and the makers of

this story. *The potter* enlivens a creative heritage in which both Caton and McCallum participate.

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#### CHANGING THE VIEW

**The dinosaur duster**. Donn Kushner. Illus. Marc Mongeau. Lester Publishing, 1992, unpag., ISBN 1-895555-38-8.

It is especially true of children's fiction that it should give pleasure during repeated readings. *The dinosaur duster* passes this test through combining an ingenious plot and amusing details, such as the titles of imaginary Carpathian folk songs like "A soldier boy loves sour cabbage," with interesting information about Paris, Florence, and London. A teacher or parent could readily use this book as a springboard into geography or history, or for language skills such as writing some of the 24 verses of "When will uncle Dimitri finally go to bed?" Even without such guidance, the young reader will naturally absorb broadening ideas about how the large cities of Europe are both different from, and the same as, the large cities of North America.

The story, about talking dinosaur skeletons, gives a whole new meaning to the idea of knowing something in your bones. The stegosaurus and triceratops mounted in a North American museum not only can speak and learn, but were able to hear and learn folk songs while buried for millennia in the Carpathian mountains. They complain to their caretaker, Mr. Mopski, about being confined to only one view of the world. The stegosaurus is bored with his view of a city park; the triceratops is annoyed by the bustle of a city street. When Mr. Mopski resolves their problem by switching their heads, experts declare them to be new discoveries, a tricerosaurus and a stegatops. Such obtuseness, of course, gives delight to the knowing reader. (Kushner's assumption that all seven-year-olds know the difference between a stegosaurus and a triceratops is, I believe, wellfounded.) Mr. Mopski, the tricerosaurus, and the stegatops are sent on a world tour during which they learn about other people and other ways and, ultimately, that there's no place like home. Once the dinosaurs are returned home as scientifically unimportant (after Mr. Mopski re-switches their heads), the dinosaur duster has his friends mounted on wheels, so they are happily able to learn about the world they live in.

The text's richness in entertainment and information is enhanced by Marc Mongeau's cartoon-like illustrations. His lively scenes are full of intriguing details including some great bone jokes, some of which involve their association

with dogs. Unlike the text, his pictures include actively participating females. He depicts a cheerful and peaceful multi-racial and multi-cultural world that most children would be glad to inhabit.

Sandy Odegard is a freelance writer living in Guelph, Ontario.



## AU-DELÀ DU SILENCE

Coups durs pour une sorcière. Linda Brousseau. Illus. Claire Maigné. St-Laurent, Pierre Tisseyre, 1991. [Collection Coccinelle] Non paginé, 7,95\$ broché. ISBN 2-89051-449-8.

La violence. Un thème traité avec réalisme et sensibilité dans *Coups* durs pour une sorcière. Sous les traits physiques d'une sorcière

méfiante et arrogante, Nathalie, l'héroïne du livre, réussit à se confier aux jeunes lecteurs pour raconter sa triste histoire.

Placée dans un centre d'accueil, Nathalie se transforme en sorcière et défie son entourage qui tente de se rapprocher d'elle pour connaître ses véritables sentiments.

L'auteure, Linda Brousseau, mise sur l'importance de présenter l'héroïne par l'expression d'un personnage, celui d'une sorcière pour dénoncer la violence dont a été victime Nathalie. Pour comprendre l'histoire, les lecteurs devront saisir les messages de la sorcière et les dissocier de ceux de Nathalie. Car tout le texte repose sur le parallèle des deux personnages qui personnifient la même et unique personne. C'est par un jeu habile que l'auteure manipule les mots pour créer ce dédoublement: "C'est moi, Maléfie, la terrible sorcière aux lunettes pointues! J'habite au centre d'accueil des Hauts-Bois."

Peu à peu, en poursuivant la lecture, nous découvrons Nathalie. Nathalie, c'est l'enfant qui souffre. L'enfant qui se tait par crainte de représailles. Qui a terriblement peur. Ses parents ont abusé d'elle par la violence. Dans *Coups dur pour une sorcière*, Nathalie se dévoile: "Une douleur s'est installée dans mon ventre. Mes mains sont devenues moites et mes trois verrues ont rougi comme des signaux d'urgence ... J'ai pleuré un peu sur mon oreiller."

L'auteure mérite une mention spéciale pour avoir su exprimer ce dévoilement de sentiments si difficiles à décrire quand la violence frappe chez un enfant.

Le jeune lecteur ne tardera pas à réaliser que la sorcière possède un langage

dur et direct: "Ote-toi de mon chemin! lui dis-je en hurlant. Sinon, je te transforme en gorgonzola! Vite! Ca mijote dans la marmite!" Il serait très intéressant d'exploiter le langage de la sorcière avec les lecteurs. Ce qui se cache derrière tout ce charabia! Partir à la recherche de la signification des expressions comme: "tête d'araignée", "venin de mon crapaud", "gorgonzola" ... Chercher le sens des mots qui ne font pas partie de leur vocabulaire courant: "venin", "mixture", "romarin" ... Identifier les sentiments de haine, de peur, de rejet ...

Le lecteur sera envoûté par la gamme des sentiments que Linda Brousseau exploite avec justesse.

Abordant l'imaginaire et la réalité quotidienne, ce livre s'adresse à des lecteurs d'âge scolaire du premier cycle. Il faudra apporter un support pédagogique pour aider les lecteurs à se situer dans le temps. Tantôt Maléfie, tantôt Nathalie, l'héroïne de ce livre joue les rôles en s'appropriant du passé, du présent et du futur. Par exemple, le lecteur se retrouve dans la chambre de Nathalie, en proie à des angoisses à la suite de l'annonce d'une visite au centre d'accueil. Le lecteur se situe dans le temps présent. La lecture du livre se poursuit ainsi: "Un matin, dans la classe ... Mais d'où viennent ces marques sur ton corps?"

Logiquement, l'action est du passé mais l'auteure raconte les événements au présent. Certes, Linda Bousseau aide les lecteurs à se situer temporellement: "un matin", "ce soir" ... Cependant, il importe de bien identifier le facteur temps. Le jeune lecteur possède le temps présent. Le passé et le futur sont des éléments encore fragiles pour lui. Décrire sa réalité journalière constitue un exercice peu facile.

C'est un livre superbe qui apporte un témoignage profond et qui donne espoir aux enfants qui vivent cette violence. Diane Brousseau n'ignore pas que la route est longue pour réussir à ne plus se taire. Par son livre, elle suggère une porte de sortie pour éviter le silence: se transformer en un personnage, sorcière ou autre. Le personnage permettra peut-être au lecteur blessé de dévoiler la violence. Son message est clair: les victimes ne doivent plus se taire.

Le livre se veut un outil précieux pour les intervenants en milieu scolaire. Les illustrations de Claire Maigné priment par leur disposition dans *Coups durs pour une sorcière*. Elles sont imprégnées d'idées et mettent un baume sur le texte dramatique. Prendre possession de ce livre, c'est se joindre au même combat que l'auteure: permettre que l'enfant puisse vivre au-delà du silence.

Lucie Paré est professeur titulaire de première année au niveau primaire.

# QUAND L'IMAGINAIRE PREND LE POUVOIR

La Magicienne Bleue. Daniel Sernine. Illus. Mario Giguère. Montréal, Pierre Tisseyre, 1991, 127 pp., 7.95\$ broché. ISBN 2-89051-423-4.

Daniel Sernine offre dans son nouveau roman (recommandé pour enfants de 8

à 11 ans) l'image d'un monde double: l'un réel et l'autre imaginaire. Dans le premier, vivent deux enfants un peu solitaires: Laurent et Tania qui mènent la vie terne des locataires de grands immeubles de banlieue: peu d'enfants de leur âge avec qui jouer, peu d'espace pour gambader, des cages d'ascenseur, des couloirs sans fin, des escaliers sombres, un coin de pelouse où poussent trois arbres tristes. Mais les deux amis ont su se créer leur propre univers imaginaire où ils se tranforment en deux aventuriers intrépides: Lorio et Tanagra. Distinctement coupé du monde réel, ce domaine fantastique se caractérise typographiquement sur la page du livre par une différence de caractères d'imprimerie: toute la partie rêvée du roman est présentée en lettres italiques. En fait, il s'agit moins d'un rêve que d'un récit à multiples épisodes que les enfants se racontent pour couper leur ennui et oublier un peu la morosité d'un immeuble de banlieue peuplé essentiellement d'adultes ignorant leur besoin d'imaginaire. L'histoire en continu que les deux enfants brodent au fil de leur temps libre leur permet sans aucune contrainte d'exprimer leur soif d'aventures et leur envie de fantasmes. Laurent devient Lorio, Tania se métamorphose en Tanagra et, par le pouvoir de leur imagination, ils se laissent flotter jusqu'à la planète Lumière pour y vivre des moments intenses de danger et d'aventures. Cette planète est une monde à la fois magique et poétique: les arbres sont des "arbreronds" peuplés de lutènes bleues ou encore des arbres-ballons qui, une fois parvenus à maturité, se détachent gracieusement du sol pour s'élancer légèrement dans les airs: les prairies sont émaillées de lessi-fleurs odorantes, de langueroses ou de fleurdoigts. C'est aussi un monde effrayant, sombre et suffocant avec ses tunnels profonds, ses lacs gélatineux, ses rochers monstrueux en forme de géants.



L'imagination fertile des enfants leur permet de transposer les incidents réels de leur vie quotidienne dans l'univers fantastique de la planète Lumière. L'auteur établit habilement des points de liaison entre son récit et celui que se font les enfants. Ainsi, par exemple, un jour qu'ils sont prisonniers de l'obscurité qui règne dans la cage d'escalier de leur immeuble, ils entendent des battements sonores et lointains, boum boum boum...un simple locataire qui frappe sur la paroi de l'ascenseur où il est coincé. Dès qu'ils auront l'occasion de reprendre le fil de leur histoire, leurs héros Lorio et Tanagra entendront des sons étranges venir des profondeurs de leur caverne sur la planète

Lumière, brrroummm, brrroummmm...

Les enfants établissent une sorte de passerelle entre la réalité de leur vie et leur monde imaginaire par l'intermédiaire d'un personnage qui joue un rôle essentiel surtout pour Laurent: la magicienne Bleue. C'est ainsi qu'ils ont surnommé

Mme Béatrice Rose, une locataire de l'immeuble qui se trouve aussi être une amie de longue date de leur mère. Elle affectionne la couleur bleue et porte toujours des chapeaux et des vêtements un peu excentriques qui lui donnent des airs de magicienne, parfois de sorcière. Il faut dire que leur premier contact avec Béatrice n'a pas été des plus chaleureux; en fait, elle les a terrorisés un soir de panne d'électricité, où ils se sont tous trouvés plongés dans la plus totale obscurité à tâtonner dans les couloirs de l'immeuble. Ils avaient pris Béatrice, tout aussi désorientée qu'eux dans le noir, pour un danger extrême qui, en fait, n'existait que dans leur imagination dont ils étaient pour une fois les victimes.

Mais, rapidement, les enfants acceptent les excentricités de la magicienne Bleue, et il ne faudra pas bien longtemps avant qu'elle ne devienne leur amie. Laurent surtout aime aller lui rendre visite dans son appartement et jouer avec Aussi, son magnifique cacatoès blanc et rose pâle. Peu à peu Béatrice entre dans le monde onirique de Laurent et Tania qui l'ont initiée à la planète Lumière. Béatrice éprouve une grande joie d'abord à écouter les histoires que lui racontent les deux enfants, ensuite à participer à leur effort collectif de création narrative. En fait, elle y excelle, comme en témoigne la superbe histoire qu'elle leur raconte un jour où ils se retrouvent tous les trois coincés dans l'ascenseur, alors qu'une fois de plus il y a panne d'électricité.

Au fur et à mesure que le roman progresse, il apparaît clairement que ce monde imaginaire est une forme d'évasion et de rêves tout aussi nécessaire à Béatrice minée par un mal très grave qu'aux enfants à qui elle le cache soigneusement. La triste fin du roman joint une nouvelle fois le réel à la fiction. Béatrice, terrassée par la maladie, est venue dire au revoir à Laurent avant de partir se faire soigner aux États-Unis. Elle lui raconte une dernière histoire où se mêlent étroitement son propre destin et celui de Rozière, l'arbre-ballon, à la fois timide et audacieux, qui caresse l'ambition de traverser le vaste océan. Histoire à deux niveaux dans laquelle l'arbre-ballon est la métaphore de la précarité de la vie de Béatrice. Et quand Laurent lui demande si Rozière parviendra à triompher de l'épreuve en atteignant l'autre rivage, Béatrice doit bien confesser quelle n'en sait rien pour le moment.

Entre les deux niveaux du récit de Daniel Sernine, il y a une singulière distinction de fond aussi bien que de forme. Autant l'histoire de Laurent et Tania est finalement assez ordinaire, autant celle de leur double, les héros de la planète Lumière est chatoyante, poétique, magique, bref, unique. D'un côté, Laurent, enfant de divorcés dans la solitude des grandes banlieues, les vacances avec papa, le reste de l'année avec maman. De l'autre, Lorio et son amie Tanagra qui mènent la vie extraordinaire d'aventuriers perdus au coeur d'un univers fantastique. Alors que tout en apparence sépare les deux récits, il est pourtant clair que seule la grisaille du monde réel pouvait engendrer la brillance de la planète Lumière, celle-ci tirant sa substance de celui-là. Tour de force d'un écrivain habile qui manie avec talent le style aussi aisément que les méandres de l'intrigue.

Les illustrations de Mario Giguère viennent discrètement suggérer, plus que souligner quelques-uns des points forts de l'histoire de la planète Lumière. Il ne

met aucun visage sur les deux enfants, ce qui paraît essentiel dans un type de récit

qui veut donner le pouvoir à l'imaginaire.

Claire L. Malarte-Feldman est professeur de français à l'Université du New Hampshire à Durham. Plusieurs années de recherche sur les Contes de Charles Perrault l'ont tout naturellement poussée à s'intéresser à la littérature de jeunesse d'expression française.

**Brown bag blues**. Linda Rogers and Rick Van Krugel. Illus. Rick Van Krugel. Studio 123, 1991. 47 pp., \$10.00 paper. ISBN 1-895302-06-4.

The battle against Victorian mores seems to have resulted in blatant concentration on sex by the media. Will the Van Krugels' tilting against physical-emotional repression of children result in blatant focus on boogers, belches, bowel movements and between-toes accumulations? If the TV cult cartoon "Ren and Stimpy" is any indication of entertainment fare for school-age children, it is a trend with which our authors here are definitely in touch.

Isn't vulgarity, like spice, better used in pinches to keep life from becoming prissy and bland? Why must great doses of crudeness constitute the healing measure?

Must we accept negative vulgarity, technological twaddle and pseudo-sociology as influences? Much of life can be tedious, indelicate, harsh. Some-how we learn to cope with less than pleasurable experiences. Yet, to concentrate on the shocking and gross, to exclude the fantasy, adventure and antic humour of high spirits is to deny children the development of subtlety, of finesse. Are children not capable of a variety of responses, acknowledging grossness and horror and moving on? In devoting so much time to this trivia, these artists neglect other more enriching experiences.

As to form, why are these and many other authors intent on setting children against learning rules of writing which have evolved in our language? Have we reached a sudden plateau, a place to rest on the way to Olympus, an experimental station to test the strength of these guidelines for expression? There is an attitude that spontaneity is stifled by knowledge of grammar, spelling, rhyming and rhythmic structure. Yes, test the holds but on with the ascent. Neglect of the structure which shapes poetry results in too much slack as in this book-tape production *Brown bag blues*.

Be wary of granting yourself or the young too easy a poetic license. Caution does not preclude patient acceptance of a child's fresh hopeful writing. With models of excellence the young will absorb and produce great things. Exposed to crass cartooning, undisciplined writing, unexceptional music and repeated grossness, they may develop into crass, undisciplined, unexceptional gross people.

It is a great challenge, privilege, and responsibility to write for the young, offering them a variety of ways to deal with reality. Yes, we all as children giggled ourselves into raptures over the little vulgarities that came our way. We also ran under rain-drenched trees, shaking the drops over ourselves and sat on back porches in the mysterious, cool summer dusk watching the swoops and listening to the calls of mosquito hawks.

The wondrous stories of Andersen stay in our minds even now. As the collective consciousness of children grows, children love the under-sea-song of the little mermaid because she longed, as they do, for the magic and beauty of new, unexpected, hopeful worlds.

On the tape are heard two quite good voices with an acceptably talented accompaniment. But the music lacks spark, becomes monotonous and the script of the verses is, for the most part, uninspired, often overdone.

This is low stuff, glibly done. Children deserve better.

**Patricia Vickery** is an educator and writer whose work for children has been anthologized and published in school readers. She won the 1989 Saskatchewan Award for Children's Literature and is presently editing her poetry for publication in 1994.

CE QUE L'ON VOIT SI L'ON "GARDE LES YEUX OUVERTS ASSEZ LONGTEMPS"

**Edgar le Bizarre**. Gilles Gauthier. Illus. Jules Prud'homme. Montréal, la courte échelle, 1991. 96 pp. 7.95\$ broché. ISBN 2-89021-159-2.

La lecture d'*Edgar le Bizarre* de Gilles Gauthier a été pour nous une véritable source de plaisir. Ce roman-jeunesse si bien écrit est d'une originalité et d'une complexité étonnantes. Nombreux sont les réseaux de signification que nous

pourrions relever; parmi eux, notons les rapports entre parents et enfants préadolescents, la façon des uns comme des autres de voir le monde, le quotidien, le bizarre et le fantastique, la réincarnation et l'extra-sensoriel, l'importance des lectures et du passé. Nous ne nous arrêtons brièvement qu'à quelques-unes des caractéristiques de ce texte unique qui mérite d'être lu par tous.

Edgar, douze ans, protagoniste central du récit, entreprend une enquête afin de "percer certains des mystères de la vie." Ces mystères concernent une vision qu'il a eue, un chat qu'il a vu sourire, un ami mystérieux de ses parents... L'entreprise est intéressante surtout dans la mesure où Edgar décide de "garder l'oeil ouvert" et qu'il évolue tant au niveau



intellectuel qu'au niveau psychologique. Ayant émis un certain nombre d'hypothèses, il les corrige et rejette même quelques-unes de ses théories: lui

qui, au début du roman, croit fermement au surnaturel, à l'étrange, à l'extraordinaire, admet vers la fin du roman qu'il se peut que certaines de ses hypothèses ne soient qu'un "mélange de coïncidences et de créations de [son] imagination". De même, alors qu'au début du récit il décrit son père comme "une vraie machine à calculer" et accuse ses parents de trop simplifier la vie, Edgar, vers la fin du récit, apprécie ses parents d'une façon nouvelle, et ses rapports avec eux sont modifiés. Edgar aura découvert la vulnérabilité de ses parents, l'amour qu'ils se portent et celui qu'ils ont pour leurs enfants: "C'était comme des retrouvailles entre maman et moi. C'était comme si une longue période de méfiance prenait fin". Edgar aura compris que sans qu'il ait à puiser dans le fantastique et dans le surnaturel, la vie est quand même fascinante et pleine de mystères. Ainsi, alors que le roman porte en épigraphe ces vers de Poe: "Depuis l'heure de l'enfance, je ne suis pas semblable aux autres; je ne vois pas comme les autres [...]" et qu'en effet, au début du récit Edgar est seul, vers la fin du récit nous assistons à une scène où Edgar, serré dans les bras de sa mère, semble réconcilié avec la vie.

Mais ce sont surtout les procédés narratifs que nous trouvons intéressants, peut-être plus encore que l'évolution du protagoniste. Si le titre du roman ainsi que la citation en exergue doivent probablement être attribués à l'auteur implicite, le reste du roman n'est qu'une longue narration d'Edgar. Edgar Alain Campeau, qui se dit être la réincarnation d'Edgar Alan Poe nous parle et son récit constitue le roman. D'ailleurs, dans l'épilogue nous trouvons même une construction en abyme, où Edgar s'imagine en train d'écrire d'autres récits encore dont il suggère l'intrigue. Edgar-narrateur sait engager l'attention de son lecteur; il rend les événements passés plus saisissants en les rapportant souvent au présent: "Il y a deux semaines, Emilie arrive à la maison avec un chat blanc [...]", lisons-nous. Fréquemment, plutôt que de raconter un événement, Edgar le reproduit en rapportant le dialogue qui a eu lieu. Ainsi, le récit de base est toujours prêt à s'animer, alternant entre le sommaire et la scène, mais ponctué aussi de passages adressés directement au narrataire, passages qui comprennent souvent une argumentation vraisemblabilisante: "Vous avez des doutes? Et vous vous demandez pourquoi le chat n'a pas transmis son nom directement à Lucille plutôt que de passer par Emilie? Là-dessus aussi, je crois avoir une explication". En effet, ce qui engage peut-être le plus notre intérêt, ce sont les fréquentes interventions du narrateur auprès d'un "vous" narrataire. Ces interventions créent une intimité directe et explicite entre le "je" qui parle et ce "vous" auquel il s'adresse. Les exemples abondent: "Ecoutez ça. Ça s'est passé plus tard qu'hier", ou encore "Rappelez-vous.[...] Mais ce n'est pas tout. Attendez de lire la suite". Le narrateur pique la curiosité du narrataire, anticipe ses questions et ses doutes, bref entre en dialogue avec lui. Parmi les divers procédés narratifs, les renvois intertextuels occupent une place de choix dans Edgar le Bizarre. Alors que nous trouvons dans le roman des renvois à la bande dessinée, aux dessins animés, à un ouvrage traitant du mythe de l'éternel retour, à la peinture

figurative et abstraite, la partie la plus importante du champ citationnel inclut des renvois à l'oeuvre d'Edgar Poe et à Alice au pays des merveilles de Lewis Carroll. Ces renvois reflètent la fascination d'Edgar pour le merveilleux et le fantastique, mais sont aussi caractéristiques des textes de l'avant-garde littéraire. L'intertextualité s'établit par des citations directes et signées, des références explicites aussi bien que par des références implicites, ou encore des "clins d'oeil", par exemple sous la forme de l'intertitularité anonyme. Ainsi, le quatrième chapitre, qui traite d'un portait d'Emilie, s'intitule "Le portait ovale", titre que porte aussi une des histoire de Poe. Par ailleurs, l'intrigue entière tourne autour d'une vision qu'a Edgar et qui n'est qu'une reproduction de la vision décrite dans l'histoire de Poe intitulée "Manuscrit trouvé dans une bouteille". Edgar invite et encourage le narrataire à lire le texte de Poe. Ouvrant le texte à d'autres discours, ces renvois établissent dans Edgar le Bizarre une série de résonances, de distinctions et de significations qui enrichissent énormément le roman.

Enfin, si le récit donne par moment l'impression d'être quelque peu dispersé, la narration d'Edgar, certains thèmes sous-jacents, des détails repris ainsi que la structure unifiante (cadre constitué par un prologue et un épilogue, huit chapitres numérotés et intitulés), sont autant de moyens d'intégration qui assurent à la fois la structuration et l'unité de ce petit roman. Concluons en paraphrasant Edgar: "Pourquoi faire l'éloge de cette histoire en particulier? Lisez plutôt et vous ne me poserez plus cette question".

**Irène Oore** est professeure au Département de français de l'Université Dalhousie à Halifax. Elle se spécialise en littérature canadienne-française.

#### MINI-COMPTE RENDU

**Bobino, Bobinette et Cie.** Michel Cailloux. Montréal, Pierre Tisseyre, 1988. 208 pp., 19,95\$ broché. ISBN 2-89051-349-1.

Depuis près de cinq ans, l'on peut trouver en librairie un volume qui, en quelque sorte, constitue un hommage à l'une des émissions pour enfants les plus intelligentes de l'histoire de la télévision canadienne, *Bobino*. Et le livre est à la hauteur de la réputation de cette émission que regrettent plusieurs générations d'enfants parvenus au véritable âge ingrat, l'âge adulte. Les nombreux inconditionnels de *Bobino* seront ravis de posséder cet ouvrage: riche d'informations intéressantes sur l'origine et l'évolution des personnages, bien illustré en noir et blanc (comme à l'époque faste de l'ancienne télévision), il présente une anthologie de scénarios puisés dans les quelque vingt-cinq années de la série. Or, c'est bien par la richesse du texte écrit que les amateurs seront

séduits: le lecteur, ayant quelque peu oublié la présence de Bobinette et du regretté Guy Sanche, goûtera le rare plaisir de (re)découvrir l'auteur des textes et, sans doute, l'un des meilleurs écrivains pour la jeunesse. Là réside le secret de la vitalité et de la magie de l'émission: seul un auteur talentueux pouvait rédiger plus de "cinq mille scénarios" à partir de quelques situations-types (l'arroseuse arrosée, le déguisement percé, etc.) sans jamais donner l'impression de se redire et sans verser dans le "pédagogisme" condescendant. Certains textes, comme "Bobinette joue les professeurs", peuvent non seulement supporter plusieurs lectures mais encore donner l'impression aux adultes désabusés que certaines émissions dites "pour enfants" respectent fondamentalement -et c'est de plus en plus exceptionnel- l'intelligence du téléspectateur. On l'aura deviné, le livre s'adresse plutôt à nous, c'est-à-dire aux enfants qui ont "vieilli" et mûri avec l'émission: quant aux autres, nos enfants, les adultes de l'an 2,000, souhaitons-leur qu'il existe pour eux un auteur du calibre de Michel Cailloux!

Daniel Chouinard est co-rédacteur à CCL.

#### NOTES

An outstanding catalogue

The University of British Columbia Library's holdings of material written for children are remarkably valuable to scholars in the fields of cultural history, education, psychology, and sociology. Important bequests and donations over the past thirty years have enlarged the collections of early children's books published in Canada, written by Canadians, or closely related to Canada to an extent that warrants a carefully compiled listing as part of the Library's continuing effort to make details of its resources more widely known. This catalogue describes some 850 books in bibliographic detail with extensive annotations, plot summaries, and critical commentary. The compiler, a Professor Emerita in the University's School of Library, Archival and Information Studies, is Canada's foremost authority on the country's children's literature. With the help of the extensive reference collections at The University of British Columbia and of library resources in this country and elsewhere, she brings to light significant new information on the authors, illustrators, publishers, and printers of these books, all of which are indexed. Some thirty illustrations from these books are reproduced (the two on the cover in their original colour) showing the principal styles of illustration in a period when children's books of fiction, poetry, etc., were much more likely to be illustrated than is true today.

Canadian children's books, 1799-1939, in the Special Collections and Univer-

sity Archives Division, The University of British Columbia Library: A bibliographical catalogue. Compiled by Sheila A. Egoff. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Library, 1992. Occasional publications; No. 2. 396 pp., \$95.00. ISBN 0-88865-197-X. Distributed by UBC Press.

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#### **ERRATA**

De malencontreuses erreurs se sont glissées dans l'identification des illustrations de l'article de Suzanne Pouliot, Les images de la vieillesse dans les albums de jeunesse, à la page 47 du numéro 70. Dans l'appendice, la figure 6, tirée de Si l'herbe poussait sur les toits de H. Major, a été attribuée à H. Desputeaux alors qu'elle est l'oeuvre de Suzanne Langlois; de même, les figures 8, 9 et 10, tirées de La Vraie Campagne de M. Aubin, ont été attribuées à l'auteur de l'album: c'est en fait Hélène Desputeaux qui a illustré cette publication. Enfin, la figure 4, tirée de L'Héritage, Les Stadaconé, 3, est de Johanne Ouellet. Nous nous excusons donc auprès des artistes et de leurs éditeurs et nous les remercions de leur compréhension.

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