

# THE PICTURE-BOOK DILEMMA

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*Jolly Jean-Pierre/Voyage Extraordinaire de Jean-Pierre*, Lyn Cook and Micheline St-Cyr. Burns and MacEachern, 1973. 35pp. \$6.95 Cloth.

*If I Were All These*, Lyn Cook. Burns and MacEachern, 1973. 35 pp. Cloth, \$6.95.

*Sleeping Beauty*, Carel Moiseivitch. Oberon, 1973. 46 pp. Cloth, \$6.95.

It is unfortunate that many beautiful and sensitive picture books are doomed because they do not find the right audience. No one takes the time to look at them closely enough. They are instantly recognized as picture books because of their short length and striking pictures, and immediately are classified as books for primary school children. This means that public and school librarians put books like Alexander's *The Fountain* and Zemach's *The Judge* in an area of the library where children who would appreciate them will never find them without guidance. What self-respecting 5th or 6th grader would be "caught dead" in "the little kids' area"? I have even heard teachers forbid older children the use of this section of the library. And what parent is willing to pay today's prices for a book that will take their child fifteen minutes to read? After all, we live in the generation of the throw-away rather than the keep-and-save.

The only way that many picture books such as these can be appreciated is through the guidance of a sensitive adult: someone who will read them to children and share discussions and debates about their themes and their worth. How unjust that these beautiful, thought-provoking books should be lost just because they are beyond the understanding and interest of most primary grade children!

One of the most frustrating books that I have run into lately is Lyn Cook's bilingual *Jolly Jean-Pierre* or--as it is known in the parallel French text--*Voyage extraordinaire de Jean-Pierre*. What catches one's attention first are the colourful and lively illustrations--but there is no illustrator named! The next thing one notices is the unusual French adaptation of the rather pallid, over-simplified, monotonously rhyming English text. If you look hard, you discover that the credit for the French Version should go to Micheline St-Cyr. The French is so lyrical that one wants to hear it read aloud whether the language is understood or not. The French version is also tantalizingly more comprehensive than the English. If you are only English-speaking, your curiosity is whetted to translate the French just to see what has been left out.

For example, just compare:

When clouds rode with their sails all set  
Across the autumn sky:  
And when the cloak of night was flung,  
Their tales were strange, both told and sung.

to

et sous les nuages....soudain...  
tout était gris.  
Mais il y avait le rouge  
et l'or des montagnes du Nord!  
La Nuit, autour d'un feu de joie...  
Jean-Pierre et ses amis aimaient bien chanter et se  
raconter des histoires...  
des histoires étranges et belles,  
des histoires merveilleuses et fantastiques.

and you'll see what I mean. It's hard to believe that the English came first.

The most glaring fault of the English text in my opinion is the use of broken and ungrammatical English which makes Jean-Pierre appear illiterate:

I cry, "Oh ho, you big fish there!  
Just wait, I bring you in!"  
And so I pull and tug so strong,  
But that old fish won't come along.

Thank heavens the French was unable to follow suit and could build suspense instead:

Bien reveillé...agrippé à la ligne...je pensai:  
'Oh! Oh! Voilà un gros poisson! Tu n'attendras  
pas longtemps...je t'aurai."  
Et je tirais, tirais...  
Mais le poisson ne venait pas.

It is an interesting example of a bilingual book which demonstrates the beauty of French over English.

I much preferred Lyn Cook's *If I were All These*. Charming line pictures stimulate imaginative speculation and creative word play in this unusual picture book but unfortunately both text and illustrations are really too subtle for young children. They delight in the crazy upside-down, turn-about pictures which make you wonder which way you're going, but despair over the curious hand-drawn letters which, though attractive, are too confusing for young readers to read on their own. Much of the humour and vocabulary is beyond them as well.

Too bad the book didn't start with,  
If I were a Cat  
I'd buy a big hat  
with a purr-ty cord.

instead of,

If I were a mouse  
I'd build a wee house  
in a par-cheesy board.

The humour of "par-cheesy" was lost on the first grade class I read it to until they caught on to the author's trick of playing with rhymes and

words. Perhaps you don't really appreciate the book until you try making up some of your own, which is what one sixth grade teacher did with her class. It made an excellent language-art lesson! Take your cue from the cat in the last illustration and play the game too! You may find your class can out-do the author.

According to the publishers, Carel Moiseivitch's *Sleeping Beauty* is superior to all other versions of the story because the plates were commissioned by the National Film Board. They are certainly most unusual plates, but only a most unusual child would respond favourably to them. They are very bold, stark, and almost surrealistic. There is nothing romantic or beautiful about them. One child to whom they were shown exclaimed that the princess was the ugliest princess she had ever seen! Another was disturbed by the awkwardness of many of the heads and arms. The apparent attempt of the artist to duplicate medieval tapestry was lost on them.

Michael Macklem has done a rather interesting text, retelling the story from the point of view of the butcher, the baker, the dairy-maid, and the dustman. In this version, it seems that only the servants necessary for the Princess' comfort are put to sleep, and again this deviation from the traditional story rather upset the younger children. What a heartless fairy to think that the princess would care more about her personal comfort than the love of her parents, who aren't put to sleep! But that is the trouble with this book. The characters have no hearts. You can't really care about them. For example, the only thing one learns about the prince is that he almost doesn't kiss the princess because he doesn't want to share her with others after she wakes up!

But are there not the seeds of humour here? In a dramatization, the suspense of whether he will or won't kiss her could develop into a very funny scene, particularly if the prince makes up his mind for a moment that he won't. There is also the disrupted life of the servants to consider. If only a few of them are put to sleep, and if after waking they don't realize what has happened, what chaos could result! This air of detachment lends itself well to satiric comment; I think older children would have great fun extending this potential humour into dramatizations of their own. Looking at life from other points of view is excellent training for world peace as well as for the ability to laugh at human nature. It should be encouraged.

Too bad Michael Macklem had to subordinate his text to the pictures. Left on his own, I think a richer story would have developed. Even as it is, however, the text could stimulate some interesting creative writing and spontaneous dramatizations.

All three of these books could easily become lost in a primary section of the library and never read, and yet they have much potential if used with some imagination. So look more carefully at that picture book when you come across it. Perhaps it would be better to put it in the junior section, or use it to develop creative writing, dramatic, or evaluative skills.

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