

Adapting One Medium To Another

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The Violin, Robert Thomas Allen. Illustration by George Pastic. McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1976. 79 pp. \$8.95 cloth.

The recent tendency to regard the field of children's literature as a fertile area for development has resulted all too often in books which are visually exciting or marvelously clever with words, but which fall short as books to be read and enjoyed by children. A similar situation often occurs when material which has attracted children to television and film is adapted to fit the print medium. The plethora of mediocre books based on well-known children's television shows attests to the truth of this statement. In fact, it is almost inevitable that a successful children's book will eventually be transformed into a movie and the reverse situation will likely occur. If one could be sure that these alternate presentations of material were equally effective one might forgive the underlying monetary concern behind the exercise. I believe that the reviewer has a responsibility to point out the relative value of multiple presentations of various works as well as to criticize these works on their own individual terms.

The Violin is a delicately rendered vignette which describes an important event in the life of a young boy, Chris, and his best friend, Danny. Chris is revealed as a sensitive, introspective boy who longs to own a violin, convinced that he will be able to make beautiful music with it by sheer virtue of his overwhelming desire to do so. With the money Chris has accumulated, the two boys succeed in purchasing a violin. Unfortunately for Chris, the ability to play is not magically bestowed upon him and he abandons the violin in an outdoor trash basket. It is retrieved by an old man who plays it beautifully and offers to teach Chris the art. A close friendship develops between the man and the two boys as Chris' lessons continue and winter becomes spring. The old man reminisces about his former experiences and Chris begins to form impressions about his background. The denouement arrives in autumn when Chris and Danny are together one day—Danny's fishing line tangles and as Chris attempts to help him he is accidentally pushed and falls on the violin. Overcome by this disaster, Chris vows that he will never play again and Danny races away to ask the man for advice. The man offers Chris his own violin and when Chris rejects the gift, leaves it on the ground and walks away. Minutes later, Danny returns with a letter which the man had nailed to his door and both boys immediately set out in search of him. They finally spot him rowing away across the lake and Chris breaks his vow to play a song of farewell to his good friend.

In reviewing material which has been adapted from film to print and vice versa one tends to make comparisons between its successful realization

in both formats. Perhaps this is unfair and admittedly each version must be judged as a separate entity. However, there is merit in pointing out some of the more obvious difficulties inherent in successfully presenting *The Violin* in book form.

First, the music which is the central theme of the film and which imbues it with a whole extra dimension is absent save for the written score on the book's endpapers. The film lets the music speak for itself. The book is forced to convey its importance through description, necessarily a less effective technique. The film's glowing colour shots are changed in the book to black and white photographs, thus removing yet another dimension. Finally, the telling of the story itself is altered—from the technique of narration in the film to a third person retelling in the book. Ideas and emotions which are indicated in the film by actions or changes in facial expression must be explained and form a greater barrier between the reader and the story. In a comparison, therefore, the book medium seems to present a less multi-faceted approach to the story than the original film is able to do.

When the book is examined as a totally separate entity, one is immediately struck by its appearance. Text and illustration are beautifully integrated into a well-balanced whole. Such striking details as the designs on the half-title page and endpapers enhance the book's appeal. In choosing to use black and white rather than coloured photographs, the illustrator was forced to explore various techniques in order to stimulate the reader's interest. A dream-like partly-focused picture on one page may be followed by a smaller more sharply-focused close-up. The photographs effectively convey many ideas—a small sharp illustration of the man with the violin evokes the precision necessary to play such an instrument while a soft close-up of Chris' face depicts his wistful longing for a violin of his own. One shot of Chris and Danny staring longingly at a violin in a store window is far too exaggerated in its portrayal of emotion, producing a distinctly "soap-opera" effect. The final illustration, almost a painting rather than a photograph, is absolutely stunning. In its simplicity it is reminiscent of a delicate Japanese watercolor. Purely as a visual work of art *The Violin* is a gem.

The tale with its emphasis on the themes of friendship and selflessness is more a parable than a representation of the real world. Judged from any other standpoint, one could find many details which appear questionable. In the real world, Chris would undoubtedly be much more aware of the value of money. He would also be unlikely to count as his best friend a boy who is obviously so much younger than he is. And few modern children are naive enough to expect that they will be able to play the violin without some instruction. These points seem irrelevant as one reads the story, though, because the book operates on a simpler level.

Much more important is the depiction of the concept of friendship—the warmly affectionate relationship between the two boys and the respectful camaraderie between the boys and the man. The idea of giving a

truly priceless gift and accepting that gift with grace is adequately portrayed. The eager inexperience of youth is deftly contrasted with the ponderous experience of age. As the seasons change from winter to spring to fall so the relationship between children and man changes and deepens. As Chris grows and becomes more aware of life the man retreats from life into experiences in his past. As autumn heralds the end of the growing season, the man takes his final leave of the children and this world. The image of old age and impending death is gently expressed, and many younger readers will take the man's departure at face value.

The book's major defect lies in the often stilted writing which occasionally reminds one of a primary school reader with repetitive sentence structure. Imagery is far too often expressed as simile (too many "as if's" and "likes") rather than more subtly as metaphor. Some of the asides are condescending (e.g., "But sometimes grown-ups aren't sure what to do.") and should have been omitted. Despite these problems, the story does progress simply and surely to its conclusion. I think it might prove to be a rather special experience for many young readers who would like to renew their friendship with Chris and Danny on a very personal basis.

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Memories of a Prison Childhood

DANA CHEN

Child in Prison Camp, Shizuye Takashima. Illustrated by Shizuye Takashima. Tundra Press, 1976. Unpagged. \$3.95 paper.

As a young girl, Shizuye Takashima endured the hardships of life in a British Columbia internment camp during the Second World War. *A Child in Prison Camp* is based on Takashima's personal experience, although some details have been altered to simplify the account and to preserve the anonymity of other internees. A distinguished Canadian artist, Takashima shares her memories not only through words, but also through eight magnificent full-page watercolours which illustrate the text.

Both illustration and writing reflect a gentle, soft quality, with no suggestion of rancour, surprising when one considers the unjustifiable