

Children's Books as Works of Art

PAULINE NEALE

Crocodile, Crocodile, Peter Nickl. Illustrated by Binette Schroeder. Translated by Ebbitt Cutler. Tundra, 1976. 26 pp. \$7.95 hardcover.

“Children's Books as Works of Art” is a new series from Tundra, who have undertaken to be the Canadian publishers of outstanding children's books previously published abroad.

The venture is highly ambitious. That a book, a whole book, can be a work of art is certainly possible. It means combining fine illustrations with an eloquent and compelling tale. It means that every aspect of the book's designing and making has to be integrated with imagination and skill so that the whole book is harmonious and balanced. However, the concept must not be an excuse for publishing magnificent picture books that glorify the illustrations at the expense of the stories.

The first of Tundra's new series comes from Switzerland: Peter Nickl's *Crocodile, Crocodile*, illustrated by Binette Schroeder. Schroeder is among the most gifted artist-illustrators currently working anywhere; her pictures have won awards for the book, among them Switzerland's "Most beautiful book of the year" (1975) and inclusion in Germany's "Fifty Books of the Year 1975". Alas, the story of Omar the crocodile does not match up to the pictures. This children's book is not truly a Work of Art.

The story could well have been sub-titled "an ecological revenge comedy". Omar the crocodile travels from the banks of the Nile to Paris, centre of the crocodile-skin trade, and eats a fashionable lady to revenge his long-lost friends. (France is apparently one of the few countries still importing crocodile skin for fashion accessories. Crocodiles everywhere are endangered species and need all the help they can get to survive, no matter how nasty we may think they are.)

Omar is not depicted as a real Nilotic nasty, but as an appealing, anthropomorphic creature who is motivated by a child-like curiosity. As the story opens, he overhears two very elegant ladies refer to the "crocodile store".

His eyes grew wide: 'A store for me?
This is something I've got to see!'

(The original German text by Peter Nickl also rhymes; Quebec writer and publisher Ebbitt Cutler has written the gently humorous English translation.) Away goes Omar all by himself, down the Nile, out to sea, by yacht to Marseilles and by train to Paris; a different picture illustrates every stage of the journey.

In Paris, people faint or panic at the sight of him, but Omar is unaware of his species' reputation for ferocity, so he remains a friendly innocent abroad until he reaches the "crocodile store". He is appalled by what he finds: fashionable purses, shoes, etcetera, all made of crocodile skin, not a store for crocodiles at all, of course. He recognizes old friends, and sobbing real tears—not crocodile ones—he devours a customer. Again the plot turns on a verbal ambiguity; as Omar gulps the lady down he cries:

Since you're so fond of crocodile skin
How would you like to get right in?
Forever more wherever you go,
You'll wear crocodile from head to toe!

It's fun, it's jokey, but it's lightweight. The character of Omar does not develop in any way; there is this one act of witty violence and then Omar becomes a quaint wee beastie again. He goes on to another kind of revenge, robbing the "crocodile store" of perfumes and parasols and other fal-lals which he takes back to the banks of the Nile as souvenirs to distribute to his remaining friends and acquaintances. The crocodile who might have been an animal-hero turns into a comic creature who pilfers fashionable trivia. When he swallows the fashionable lady our sympathies are aroused for his justifiable revenge on behalf of all murdered crocodiles; but the tastelessness of his pilfering not only destroys our sympathies, but also reproaches us for our folly in admiring such an empty hero. Omar has realized nothing about himself; he returns home unchanged but for the thinnest veneer of ersatz sophistication. The story has no integrity and its two clever puns are not enough to make a plot.

But the pictures are something else. Every one of Schroeder's illustrations is a work of art on its own; as a narrative sequence, the group is magnificent. Her style is reminiscent of the soft clear surrealism of Henri Rousseau, himself an artist who was sensitive to the natural world, but Schroeder has a sharper wit. Motifs from Ancient Egyptian art, two-dimensional and in profile, co-exist with an almost natural landscape. Shapes and colours recur; scaly palm tree trunks show affinities with the crocodile's tail, and in every picture there is a very small amount of an incredible pink colour providing vivid contrast with the desert or the sea or the French landscape.

Details of the pictures comment on the story: the dove of peace perching hopefully on the text as Omar sets out to sea is replaced by a panicky flight of pigeons when he promenades along the Champs-Élysées; a distant and organized flock of sheep with their respectably employed sheep-dog look tame and dull by comparison with the free wheeling crocodile on holiday. This book truly merits the description "in full colour". No scrap of white paper has survived. Even the end papers are very pleasantly reptilian and muddy. The whole effect of superb pictures, high-quality printing and brilliant colour is exhilarating.

This is not, incidentally, a story for pre-schoolers, in spite of the format of very large pages with only a few lines of text on each. The very young are upset and confused by Omar's swallowing of the fashionable lady, who is not deserving of punishment in any way that young children can comprehend. The story is for those who relish the wit and are amused by the whimsy.

What a waste that such visually beautiful work should be allied with such a thin tale! It would seem that publication in English is the only way that anglophones can obtain access to the book, and for this we are grateful to Tundra, but there is no justification for the description "work of art". Nor is there a place for children's coffee table books.

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