

How Much Garbage Delight?

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Garbage Delight, Dennis Lee. Illus. by Frank Newfeld. Macmillan of Canada, 1977. 64 pp. \$6.95 hardcover.

Dennis Lee is probably the superstar of Canadian children's literature, and any of his publications must now attract the critical attention appropriate to any pacesetter. Since the appearance of *Alligator Pie* in 1974 his work has been a singular success, both commercially and artistically. He has been hailed in the *Globe and Mail* by Margaret Laurence, profiled by Margaret Atwood, and publicly-approved-of by the supposed curmudgeon to end curmudgeons, Alan McFee of CBC Radio. *Alligator Pie* is already regarded as a classic, as a work that both crystallizes a whole group of artistic/social tendencies and creates a new form. As someone who has remained respectfully skeptical of Lee's popular appeal over the last few years, I must report that *Garbage Delight* seems a refinement of what he has accomplished previously.

One of the most attractive features about Lee's writing for children is that the characters in the poems are so active. This vitality must make the poetry a special delight for children to act out and may be one of the reasons for the great appeal these books have for children. "Bloody Bill," from *Garbage Delight*, is a good example of this dramatic quality. It's quite a long poem, narrating the trouncing a shy young fellow hands out to a bullying pirate, and on the old Spadina Hill of all places. There is a steady and effective use of repetition, with "blood" and "bloody" putting in sixteen appearances, and good internal rhymes bouncing off these keywords, most notably "mud" and "crud." Lee's inventive diction also colours the proceedings as the eponymous pirate's boots are said to have "sloshed . . . till blood ran down the hill" (p. 57).

Adults may smile at the echoes of Kipling and Service in this improbable tale of youthful superheroics, but it is the devices just mentioned that make it so accessible to younger fans. Important also is Lee's gauging of child psychology: "Bloody Bill" is actually a challenging story told in self-defence so that the shy narrator may bluff his/her (and Lee keeps gender details artfully ambiguous) way out of a bout of fisticuffs with a neighbourhood bully. So, the poem is a dramatic monologue as well. Its depiction of a child's mind at work calculating just the extent to which the listener can be expected to tolerate the outrageous details of the encounter with Bloody Bill provides a fine illustration of Lee's method at work. There is real danger in his world, and a visual reinforcement occurs in the omnipresent sharks in Frank Newfeld's drawings. The overall feeling is positive and optimistic, however. The kids here may be in trouble some of the time, but are generally able to rhyme their way out of it.

In this way, a monster may roar "its mighty monster song":

"I EAT KIDS YUM YUM!"

I STUFF THEM DOWN MY TUM.
I ONLY LEAVE THE TEETH AND CLOTHES.
(I SPECIALLY LIKE THE TOES.)” (p. 37)

And the child may prove to be equally vigorously bloodthirsty:

“I EAT MONSTERS BURP!
THEY MAKE ME SQUEAL AND SLURP.
IT’S TIME TO CHOMP AND TAKE A CHEW--
AND WHAT I’LL CHEW IS YOU!” (p. 37)

The child who is able to out-devour the dinosaur in this poem is much preferable to the hypersensitive tad down the block whose teddy bear, Hannah, is being re-sewn. This maudlin little fellow is watching “The Operation” with all the deep emotion of Woodbine Meadowlark weeping over *Winnie-the-Pooh*:

And old Hannah’s pretty brave, she’s
Trying not to cry or scream,
And I’m sorry that I done it
And I’m having red ice-cream. (p. 43).

What is disquieting in such saccharine moments is not so much the obnoxious brat in the poem (is any real child this unctuous?), but the thought that Lee has included this sort of thing as “balance” for the more vulgar poems. One hopes that this isn’t so -- artistically, the “balance” must favour the energetic works, in any case -- and that there will be more of the pelting “with melted cheese/and fourteen devilled eggs” (p. 58) from “Bloody Bill,” and less of the earnest admissions that Hannah is “special to my mind, and now/ I’m going to comb her fur.” (p. 43)

From the imagery already noted, it may be perceived that the common denominator to the collection is Lee’s constant use of food as metaphor. The children in these poems are hungrier than characters in Dickens, and there is food to be gobbled everywhere:

I’m handy with candy.
I star with a bar.
And I’m known for my butterscotch burp;
I can stare in the eyes
Of a Toffee Surprise
And polish it off with a slurp. (p. 38)

This selection from “Garbage Delight” is central to the rest of the collection in the way that “alligator pie, alligator pie” was central to the earlier book. The oral fantasies conjured up in the feast of ‘Garbage Delight’ recur in poems as different as “Periwinkle Pizza”:

If you want to see a breakfast
Getting gobbled up and gone
Give me periwinkle pizza
In the parlour in Saint John. (p. 47)

and "McGonigle's Tail" ("...I took out some gum,/ And I chewed on it some") (p. 21), or the mustard and ketchup in "The Tickle Tiger" or the note that Big-foot "isn't clever, he can barely chew his gum." (p. 30)

Eating food is sometimes equivalent to a metaphorical acceptance of factuality. This is not the case in *Garbage Delight*, however. From the examples just cited, a synopsis of the qualities that Lee attributes to food and eating may be presented. Food is an immediate gratification in these poems. The children and other characters may or may not be hungry; they eat for the love of it. Their world is generally soft and malleable and dream-like (see "The Coming of Teddy Bears" or "The Snuggle Bunny" or "The Bedtime Concert"), and this sleepy lullaby-gone existence is, of course, the reverse of the sharks, giant mouths and teeth of the more "realistic" poems. Food and eating are a way of consuming some of this world of candied delights, as if the obsessive eating not only feeds their fantasy world but also makes the children a part of it. The meals in these poems do not so much alter the characters' sizes of shapes as make them part of a wonderland where magical things are possibilities, along with everyday life.

The food may also be the subject of muted rebellion. *Garbage Delight* is obviously not actually garbage; it is composed of foods that adults consider unhealthy, and therefore are irresistible for kids. So, there is an aggressive side to the vision, a side that Newfeld's sharks amply illuminate. The danger is in being eaten, in losing control of the safe side of the fantasy. After all, in a world where *raison d'être* is dining, who would want to be the "red ice-cream" or the gum, or even the model train" that gets devoured at the conclusion of "I Eat kids Yum Yum!"? Dennis Lee has introduced this ominous undercurrent to the seemingly innocuous surface of his verse with subtle irony. One wonders if there are perhaps some unpublished alligator rhymes from the point of view of the alligator?

The suggestion was made at the start of this article that *Garbage Delight* is a refinement of *Alligator Pie*, and there is much to enjoy in the recent collection. The danger is that refinements will eventually make what was so fresh simply a formula, and already there is a sense of less challenging locale, of a change from defiant Canadian place names to comfortable middle-class Toronto. Still, this adjustment from the nation to the neighbourhood is no reason to carp. Dennis Lee has come by his enormous audience of children and adults honestly, and it will be fascinating to watch the development in his work with and for his audience.

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