

“ . . . Treat ”

MURRAY J. EVANS

Hag Head, Susan Musgrave & Carol Evans. Clark, Irwin, 1980. 28 pp. \$9.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-7720-1251-2.

Susan Musgrave is best known for her numerous books of poetry, including her latest, *A Man to Marry, A Man to Bury* (1979). Unlike her earlier book of children's poems, *Gullband* (1974), which sensitively explores the world of three animal characters, *Hag Head* tells of a group of ordinary children out in costume on Hallowe'en. They are pursued by Hag Head, a witch from the marshes on the edge of town, and her followers, "Cold Things and Crawling Horrors" out of the "murky depths." Hag Head has her eye on one of the children whom she wishes to transform into a ghostly servant. Disguising herself as the children's mother, the witch succeeds in trapping Gretel, but while her servant Scum delays in using Hag Head's wand on Gretel, another of the children, Nick, tackles Scum from behind. The wand fizzles out in a puddle, Hag Head powerlessly retreats, and Gretel and Nick run home to safety.

Ms. Musgrave's admirable craft is evident in several aspects of the story. The suspense of the book builds slowly as Hag Head and her sprites first shadow the children at a distance, then creep near at one trick-or-treat stop, stealing candies and playing pranks. When Hag Head, disguised as "Mother," leads them off, Drizzle the cat becomes suspicious of Hag Head's fishy-smelling feet and some of the children start glimpsing her followers in hiding. Finally Hag Head throws off her disguise; in a burst of bewitched firecrackers, Gretel is caught and the other children run in fright. Not only is suspense finely paced in the story, but Musgrave's ghouls transcend the merely frightening: they are *humorously* horrible. True, Hag Head means to change Gretel into a witch, but her vampires and demons spend most of their time playing pranks: tugging at the children with a fishing-line, snipping the bottom off a treats bag, eating stolen candies. They are disgusting, but comically so. When Hag Head first summons them in the marsh, she has to turn many of them "into toads in order to silence them. Her greedy companion, Flemm, oozed out from under her feet, and, with a small sucking sound, devoured the toads through his nostrils." The ending, though foreboding, is not too frightening. Enjoying their treats at home after their escape,

Gretel was still shaking. "But what about next Halloween?" she asked.

Peter took a large bite out of a popcornball. "Next year we'll take Mother with us," he said.

A disguised "Mother" had almost done Gretel in. Mother doesn't even believe in ghosts, let alone have power over them. Hag Head will be out again next Hallowe'en.

Carol Evans, illustrator of the story, fully deserves the co-authorship that the layout of the title-page gives her, for her illustrations enhance and vividly image elements of the text of the story (see Figure 1). The spindly fingers, pointy noses, and mischievous eyes of her ghouls emphasize their comic quality, as they peek out of the shadows with scissors and fishing-rod. This illustration is typical, too, of her spatial juxtaposition of the human and bewitched worlds. At the top of the stairs, Nonnie Hannah, in domesticity and light, gives jellybeans to the kids, while below the spooks make mischief and bide their time in the darkness. Ms. Evans also incorporates striking detail, colour, and depth in her illustrations. In one, we see the feet only of the trick-or-treaters, now joined by the witch-"mother" 's weblike feet; golden autumn leaves fall into, and

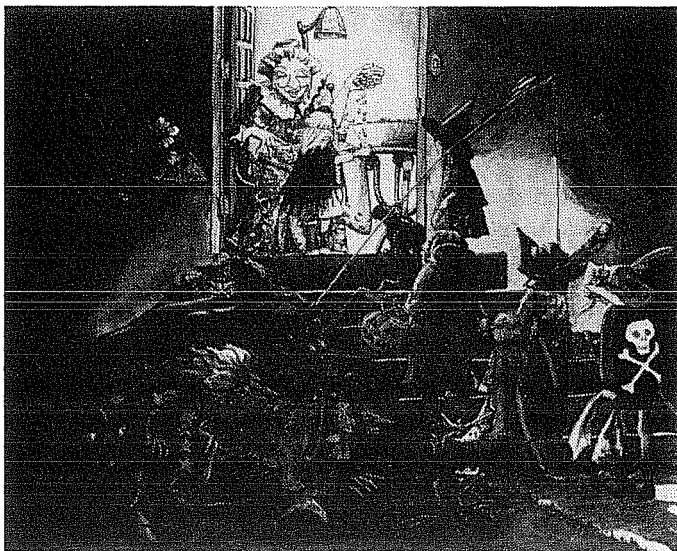


Figure 1.

make rings in a puddle blued by the reflected night sky; in the centre of the puddle is the image of a yellow full moon, ringed in white. The graphic details of the picture draw us into its centre which is, in fact, a reflection of the moon “above” the illustration.

Both the text and the illustrations raise the question of what sort of world, what relationship of the normal and the praeternatural the book presents. The children’s world is obviously modern. At the opening, Mother wears loose, furry house-slippers and Father’s hair and moustache are blond and stylishly long; near the modern stove and cupboards, *The Joy of Cooking* leans on a bookshelf. Into the world come the spooks. There is no creation of a “secondary world” in Tolkien’s sense, with its self-consistent laws to accommodate spooks and humans convincingly in the same world. Sometimes the two worlds are juxtaposed, as in Figure 1. Often there is a blurring of the distinction. In that same kitchen illustration, all of the humans have rather pointed ears and squinting eyes, not unlike the imps looking in the window. Then too, the children are dressed up to look like ghouls: if Hag Head’s feet look strange beside human feet, Gretel’s feet also look queer in her mother’s large red high-heeled shoes. At one point, a gust of wind rears Gretel into the air on her broomstick. *Spooks* eat candies, too. Text and illustrations, then, suggest that the praeternatural and human worlds do not need the conviction of a consistent “secondary world”: their mutual collision, and resemblances, and the prospect of future encounters at the end of the story just hint that ghosts do exist in such a world as ours, or at least that kids do not need naturalistic consistency in the story to find them convincing. Ms. Musgrave herself comments in an interview: “I had no trouble believing in fairy-tales when I was little – where all sorts of improbable changes in form and appearance take place – and I have no difficulty now. My poems are evidence enough of this.”¹

The story does not, however, focus on this question. While Musgrave’s interest in witchcraft is apparent in poems in *The Impstone* (1976), for example, this matter does not become an “issue” in *Hag Head*. Similarly, the fact that Nick, dressed as a handsome pirate complete with sword, rescues Gretel at the last moment does not invite (nor is the event, I think, meant to sustain) reflections on the nature of the hero, or on *eucatastrophe*. The story is not allegorical in the sense that Muriel Whitaker’s *Pernilla in the Perilous Forest* can be,² nor does it present a message, as Ms. Musgrave mentions the poems in *Gullband* often do unintentionally (Pearce, 18). *Hag Head* is a different kind of book: its suspenseful, well-told story and its vivid illustrations promise to entertain and engage child readers of five to ten years of age. This is what I think the book sets out to do, and it does it well.

NOTES

¹Jon Pearce, "Desire and Death: Susan Musgrave," *Malahat Review*, no. 53 (Jan. 1980), p. 14.

²See Murray J. Evans, "Bright Parable of Pernilla," *Canadian Children's Literature*, 18/19 (1980): 117-120.

Murray J. Evans has written articles on Malory's Morte Darthur and reviews on children's literature. He teaches medieval literature, composition, and children's literature and fantasy at the University of Victoria.

A Rainbow for Emma

JEAN LITTLE

there's a rainbow in my closet, Patti Stren. Illus. by Patti Stren. Harper & Row, 1979. 136 pp. \$11.75 hardback. ISBN 0-06-026082-3.

Patti Stren's first novel *there's a rainbow in my closet* presents us with an engaging heroine, creative and lively, shy and noisy, strong-minded yet vulnerable, never sweet yet wholly endearing. The book resembles its main character in more ways than one.

It too, is occasionally awkward and unsure, now and then exasperating, and yet, in spite of these momentary lapses, entertaining, sensitive and memorable. There is also a refreshing intimacy and honesty in the way Patti Stren writes of childhood. Here is a new voice and a welcome one.

Emma Goldberg is an only child whose father, a clockmaker, understands and appreciates her. Her mother, the publicity manager for a ballet company, loves her but is busy and fails to take Emma's passion for drawing and painting seriously. When Emma learns that her mother is going to leave her to go to Europe for a couple of months and that her grandmother, a stranger to Emma, is coming to look after her, Emma is outraged. Hurt that her mother can actually