New Picture Books

CAROL ANNE WIEN

The Birthday Party, Mark Thurman. NC Press Limited, 1981. Unpaginated. $1.95 paper. ISBN 919601-56-1.

The Lie That Grew and Grew, Mark Thurman. NC Press Limited, 1981. Unpaginated. $1.95 paper. ISBN 919601-31-6.

Winter, Ginette Anfousse. NC Press Limited, 1981. Unpaginated. $1.95 paper. ISBN 919601-70-7.

The Bath, Ginette Anfousse. NC Press Limited, 1981. Unpaginated. $1.95 paper. ISBN 919601-68-5.

The Chocolate Moose, Gwendolyn MacEwen. Illus. by Barry Zaid. NC Press Limited, 1981. Unpaginated. $1.95 paper. ISBN 919601-38-3.

Belinda's Ball, Joan Bodger. Illus. by Mark Thurman. Oxford University Canada, 1981. Unpaginated. $9.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-19-540378-9.

NC Press has an admirable aim to produce high quality full-colour preschool children's picture books at low cost. The five books under review above are all nicely printed, slickly designed and illustrated with sophistication. There is just one problem: the stories are not very good.

Thurman writes moralistic, didactic stories in language that is tedious and boring. The details of the story have no relevance to the plot. The plots center on Douglas the elephant's wishes and on his reactions to social situations. In one story, Douglas tells a lie, embroiders on it, feels guilty and ashamed, and admits the lie. In another, Douglas does not receive the expensive glider he wants for his birthday, but "learns," through being told by his grandfather, that he is very fortunate to have so many good friends. It just is not convincing. Other books for the three to seven age group, such as James Marshall's *George and Martha*[1] series, deal with similar social situations with much more memorable characters, snappy yet

thoughtful dialogue, and lively, inventive storylines. In contrast to the stories themselves, Thurman's illustrations are great fun. His characters fill the page, their facial expressions expansive and easy to interpret. Children quickly connect with them. His drawings also have clean, sharp edges which make it easy for young children to see what is there. I recommend adults and preschoolers look at Thurman's books together and produce their own story to accompany his illustrations.

Ginette Anfousse's central character JoJo and her "honest-to-goodness-baby-aardvark-who-really-eats-ants" are always memorable and display abundant personality with which three and four-year-olds can identify. However, both *Winter* and *The Bath* lack fully developed story structure. In *Winter,* The Bogey-Man-Twice-Seen comes through the dark up to the window. There are the beginnings of suspense as he approaches, but essentially the book provides no more than an introduction: there is no episode, no problem, no solution. *The Bath* shows JoJo scrubbing herself clean, enjoying a variety of outdoor activities which make her spectacularly dirty, and climbing into the tub again. These are Anfousse's weakest "stories" yet. She might be interested in the literature on story grammars[2] which details how quickly children build up expectations about story structure and how these expectations develop. Anfousse's strength is her ability as an illustrator. Her illustrations are wonderfully vivacious and practically leap off the page. They have a flat, decorative quality that works well as design and greatly appeals to adult conceptions of how children's books should look. Young children, however, have more difficulty than we often realize in interpreting action in illustrations. In response to the question "What is happening in the picture?", children often simply don't know. They will identify the characters but be puzzled about actions implied between them. Anfousse could be more conscious of figure-ground distinctions, especially where she introduces colourful patterns; this would result in greater clarity of the presentation of her ideas.

Barry Zaid uses colourful, flat, sophisticated designs for his illustrations of Gwendolyn MacEwen's *The Chocolate Moose.* Both text and pictures are framed by a border pattern composed of stylized Canadian motifs such as fir trees, snow and owls. The story itself is laced with Canadianisms: this moose eats maple syrup on his breakfast toast and maple leaves on a bun for lunch. The most intriguing part of the story concerns Martin's problems because he is made of chocolate. When he plays piano he leaves chocolate marks on the keys and when he drinks milk it turns into a chocolate milkshake and bubbles out his enormous ears. This playfulness with food items appeals to children and extends the pun of the title. However, it needs

to be carried over into the story structure itself. The theme is Martin's identity crisis, and the necessity of accepting his chocolate self before he can function well. This theme has both a personal value and a place in the body of Canadian literature dealing with identity, but it is not dealt with as artfully or effectively as it might be. Martin rejects his chocolateness and leaves home, quite despondent. The resolution arrives when a strawberry owl provides the basic humanistic message that each of us is different and, as Leo Bascaglia puts it, "You are the best you can be. You'll always be a second-best someone else."[3] Why this should be an adequate resolution of his problem when Martin refused the same message from his parents is unclear. Children do not learn by being told. Basic understandings develop through active experience: life must be lived, not experienced second-hand, even by book characters. Nothing happens to Martin to justify his sudden self-acceptance, and when I read the story to children, it did not seem to make sense to them. As well, the consequences of this sudden acceptance are not worked out, so that it seems as if the story stops abruptly, half-finished.

Belinda's Ball by Joan Bodger was the favorite among the children to whom I read these books. Belinda is a toddler chasing a red ball. When it gets lost under the couch she retrieves it by using a tool. This insightful problem-solving means, among other things, that she is able to retain an image of the ball in her head after it has rolled out of sight; she has begun to grasp the concept of object permanence. It is indeed a novel idea to adapt a concept from Piaget's developmental theory into a children's book. Bodger intends this to be useful to the child on two occasions, first as a toddler, and later, as a beginning reader. Accordingly, the basic ball-chasing situation is similar to that experienced by toddlers. Action is implied and there is a sequence to follow. Thurman's illustrations clearly separate figure and ground; their simplicity and realism will be useful to children listening to labels in the process of language acquisition. For the second occasion, that of the beginning reader, Bodger provides a simple repetitive text in extra large print. There is good predictability between text and illustrations. Unfortunately, the book's appeal to five and six-year-olds is limited by its lack of significance for this age group. The most powerful books appeal at an emotional level: this story just does not have it. Another objection is the presentation of phrases such as "The couch with the fringe." (sic) as sentences. This is inexcusable. The book is most valuable for one to two-year-olds, especially if they have had experience chasing balls around the house.

Although I cannot recommend any of these books wholeheartedly,

their visual attractiveness alone will probably ensure a certain measure of success. With the exception of *Belinda's Ball*, they are beautiful productions lacking in substance. As yet, we have in Canada too few top quality storywriters for very young children.

NOTES

[1]James Marshall, *George and Martha* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973).

[2]Nancy Stein, "How Children Understand Stories: A Developmental Analysis," in *Current Topics in Early Childhood Education*, ed. by Lillian Katz (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1979).

[3]Leo Bascaglia, *Love* (New York: Fawcett, 1972).

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