

Thankfully there are no blurbs to be discounted in Margaret Edwards' *Wise Eye the crafty cat* and Stella Russell's *The discontented hippopotamus*. The former is an overlong fable showing the cunning of Wise Eye; it is particularly difficult to keep this book open because the shaded line drawings by Rose Zgodzinski create little sense of movement or beauty and also because the central figure supposedly enralls his followers with utterances such as "'Don't you know that every cat has nine lives?'" "'There is always more than one way to do things when you put your mind to it.'" This leaden predictability afflicts the whole story. The problems with *The discontented hippopotamus* are the most serious of all: poorly laid out pages, static black and white drawings and a chattily related story that purports to be an explanation of why "Mother Nature" gave the animal "such a hard-to-pronounce name." Nothing happens: nothing compels the reader's or viewer's attention; like its title character, the book remains "an old stick-in-the-mud."

What conclusions can be drawn from this current crop of books for preschoolers? Still inclined to agree with Dr. Johnson, I think it's time to issue a challenge to publishers and consumers to refuse to print or buy mediocre and mismanaged stories, to insist on beauty, intelligence and wit in the narratives they do chose, and thus to introduce youngsters, in the best possible way, to the delight of words.

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#### LITERARY, AND ENFORCER, LIONS HAVE A PLACE IN THE BEDROOM

*Lizzy's lion*, Dennis Lee. Illus. Marie-Louise Gay. Stoddart, 1984. 28 pp. \$8.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-0078-1.

Perhaps there was a bit of a *literary* lion lurking in the thicket of publishing decisions for the rhyming story of *Lizzy's Lion* — and justifying the quite luxurious thicket it comes with.

It is Dennis Lee's "first storybook in verse" and the publisher has spared little expense in its presentation. There's space — one four-line verse for every two-page spread — full-colour illustration by Marie-Louise Gay on each spread, high-quality bond pages, and a full-colour glossy hard cover.

Children and parents convinced of Dennis Lee's poetic quality will find that this book is an appropriate match physically. There is a price, of course — the \$8.95, which, for the sheer poetry of it, is for one not-too-long poem of 14 verses,

each verse with four not-too-long lines. There is, in short, not much reading here. The illustrations, however, are generous in supplying background information; they are large with spaced-out perspective and detailed with familiar items — toy cars and building blocks on the bedroom floor, kiddies' crayon art on the walls, piggy bank on the dresser, and kites and balls and sundries all over.

And then of course there's the story: Lizzy keeps a lion in her bedroom closet and one night a robber sneaks in the window (this is in the third verse already) and the lion, ignoring the decoy-candy eats the robber (yep, all of him, the whole darn man) and Lizzy wakes up in time at the end to calm her beast and help him (last verse) hide the left-overs — "the toes & tum & head" — in the garbage can outside.

I cringed a little, being a man, at the man-eating violence, but I followed the plot okay, and more or less eagerly — though I'm not sure why it's just "Lizzy" for the little girl at the beginning and then "old Lizzy" in the last few verses:

But old Lizzy wasn't angry,  
And old Lizzy wasn't rough.  
She simply said the Secret Name:  
"Lion! — that's enough."

That's another thing that haunts me — when did Secret Names get to be so simple? A good idea though; we might eventually have whole generations who come to maturity eschewing nicknames and cutesy baby-talk and call things by their right names — like 'things'.

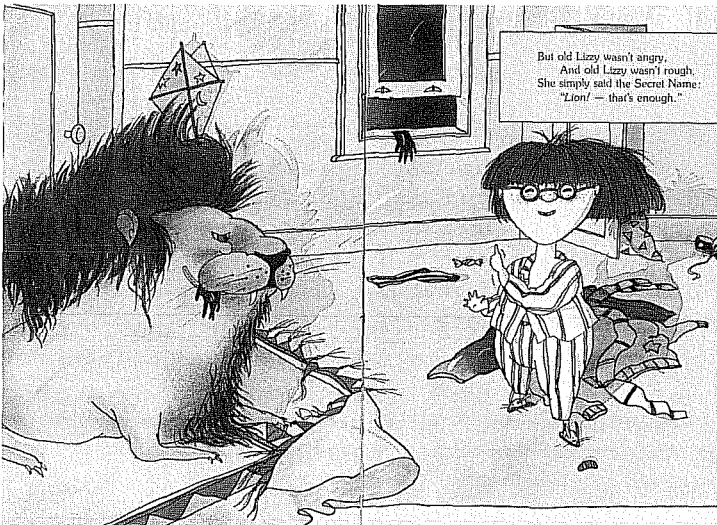


Fig. 1

For other reactions, I went to the neighbouring younger set. Suzanne Cox, 13, of Waterloo, Ontario, likes the story because it "shows that the lion is willing to take risks for his owner, Lizzy" — [reviewer's kibitz: some risk; it eats him happily for four two-page drawings in full, no-blood colour] and "they help and protect each other like a family." Suzanne admires Lee's work but thinks "younger children will enjoy this book."

Good, I tried Alyson Woloshyn, 8, of Kitchener, and she best "liked the part when Lizzy called Lion, Lion" and enjoyed this most of all Lee's books. Her brother, Cam, 6, best liked "the part when Lizzy's Lion start to bite the 'robber' — it was great, it was excellent."

The opinions of Julie Moore, 7, of Kitchener, confirmed that these tykes of tenderer years "liked the feeling of security and protectedness" — that's her father talking — "when the lion eats the robber." She was "most amused by the robber's continued protests while being consumed, read and re-read and insisted on sharing' — the juicier parts, no doubt.

The unofficial results suggest, besides danger pay for kindergarten teachers, that younger children who keep messy rooms (Lizzy's is so pictured) and fear intruders respond quite enthusiastically to the idea of having at beck and call their own (non-parental) private enforcer. At least, I hope that's what they think. I'd hate to get those kids angry.

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## GETTING INTO FOCUS

***Secret at Westwind***, Joan S. Weir. Scholastic-TAB Publications, 1981. 206 pp. \$1.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-71091-5; ***Police story***, Michael Barnes. Scholastic-TAB Publications, 1981. 143 pp. \$1.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-71032-X; ***Mystery at Black Rock Island***, Robert Sutherland. Scholastic-TAB Publications, 1983. 193 pp. \$2.25 paper. ISBN 0-590-71151-2; ***Who cares about Karen?***, Alison Lohans Pirot. Scholastic-TAB Publications, 1983. 151 pp. \$2.25 paper. ISBN 0-590-71148-2; ***With love from Booky***, Bernice Thurman Hunter. Scholastic-TAB Publications, 1983. 160 pp. \$2.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-71220-9.

The first of the five Scholastic-TAB titles under review here demonstrates the problems created by a shifting authorial focus, while the four other books illustrate the varying benefits of a solid centre. Joan S. Weir's *Secret at Westwind* has too many aspirations; it wants to be a mystery, but also a problem novel; it wants to introduce its 10 to 13 year old readers to Canadian art history,