

DOMESTIC COMEDY

Quincy Rumpel, Betty Waterton. A Greenwood Book, Douglas & McIntyre 1984. 94 pp. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-036-7.

As the feckless Rumpel family pack for a move to the west coast, eleven-year-old Quincy and her younger brother Morris find a little box covered with satin and lace. The box had been prepared as a coffin for the Rumpels' dead hamster and then saved as too beautiful to bury (the hamster got a cocoa tin instead).

"Please can I have it?" begged Morris.

"I guess so," sighed Quincy. "I hope you know it has great sentimental value."

"I know," said Morris. "I'm going to keep my money in it."

Some of the best moments in *Quincy Rumpel*, Betty Waterton's short, episodic, domestic novel for pre-teens, are in such characterizing exchanges. Most of the rest are in the comic climaxes of doomed enterprises initiated by impulsive, accident-prone Quincy. Young readers familiar with *Little women*, *Anne of Green Gables* and Eleanor Estes Moffat's books will recognize the majority of these as variations on tried-and-true ingredients of the children's domestic-comedy genre but should enjoy them nonetheless, especially when effective dialogue enhances the action. It does when Quincy defies a parental order to stay out of the attic of their somewhat dilapidated west-coast house. Having witnessed her ascent from a linen closet, the other children are bemused by a crash from the master bedroom. They reach the scene of the disaster in time to see a long leg descend from a hole in the ceiling.

"Quincy, is that you?" asked Gwen hoarsely.

"That's her sock," said Leah.

Waterton is also good at defining and conveying small shivers in universal experience that are seldom recorded in children's fiction. For example, perched in a cherry tree, Quincy first enjoys a sensation of voyeuristic detachment as she watches her parents and siblings through the kitchen window, then panics at her own exclusion and sprints for "the bosom of her family."

On the other hand, the novel suffers from a lack of momentum. *Little women* and Montgomery's *Anne* and *Emily* series are books to live in. Their characters have long-as well as short-term goals. There are strong currents upon which the episodes move. Current publishing economics appear to demand much shorter, faster-paced, more spasmodic books like *Quincy Rumpel* in which events have a happenstance air and explicit characterization is broad. Moreover, Waterton's frequently awkward narrative style, a contrast to her assured dialogue, prevents the reader from becoming immersed in the fiction. Un-

doubtedly wholesome and often amusing though it is, *Quincy Rumpel* is not a comfortable read. But its virtues suggest that Waterton is a writer worth watching.

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MOTHER (CANADIAN) GOOSE

Hickory dickory duck, Pat Patterson & Joe Weissmann. Greedy de Pencier Books, 1981. 29 pp. \$8.95 cloth. ISBN 0-919872-72-7; *Jelly belly*, Dennis Lee. Illus. Juan Wijngaard. Macmillan of Canada. 64 pp. \$9.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7715-9776-2; *Mother Goose*, Sharon, Lois & Bram. Illus. Maryann Kovalski. Douglas & McIntyre, 1985. 96 pp. \$12.95 paper. ISBN 0-88894-487-X.

In that indispensable volume, *The Oxford book of nursery rhymes*, Iona and Peter Opie theorize about the effect on babies and children of the very first verses we present to them: the dandling rhymes, the tickle rhymes, the counting chants, the taunts, the nonsense sing-songs. All these Mother Goose rhymes lift the child into an awareness of his own body, and into the delight of rhythm and rhyme sound. These rhymes also have a second function — they preserve cultural continuity. They begin the fitting of the child into the tradition, the history, the value system of his social world.

Canadian babies join an English-speaking world when they bounce to the rhythm of "Ride a cock horse" or giggle at the differentiations of "This little piggy goes to market." But Canadian parents have sometimes felt nonplussed by the inappropriateness, the inaccessibility, of some of the traditional verses. For a high-rise child who has never seen, and will never see, a stile or a castle, or for the supermarket kid who will not be served pease porridge or a Christmas pie, the old rhymes baffle as well as they tickle.

There are three ways out of this dilemma. First, replace the old verses with cognate new ones, in the way of Dennis Lee's *Jelly belly*, with for instance that marvellous here-and-now substitute for the "little piggy" tickle: "Pizza, pickle, pumpernickel/ My little guy deserves a tickle;/ One for his toes, one for his nose/ And one for his tummy where the hot-dog goes!" Or, second, make Canadian versions of the old rhymes, with additions and spoofs of the older verses: this is the path taken in *Hickory dickory duck*. (Old King Cole's fiddlers are augmented when "a tot with a tuba gave two toots/ as he squeezed through a crack in the floor".) Then there is the third way — offer a blend. Sharon, Lois and Bram, who are known across the country for their rollicking concert performances where children in the audience are drawn into the fun of the