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A Medley of Motifs: Boots, Mittens, Robins and a Dream of the Beach

Emma's Magic Winter. Jean Little. Illus. Jennifer Plecas. HarperCollins, 1998. 64 pp. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-06-025389-4. *The Money Boot*. Ginny Russell. Illus. John Mardon. Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1998. 56 pp. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 1-55041-370-8. *Andrew's Magnificent Mountain of Mittens*. Deanne Lee Bingham. Illus. Kim LaFave. Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1998. 46 pp. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 1-55041-389-9. *Jingle Bells*. Maryann Kovalski. Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1998. 39 pp. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 1-55041-383-X. *Fishes in the Sea*. Maggie Spicer and Richard Thompson. Illus. Barbara Hartman. Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1998. 30 pp. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 1-555041-387-2. *Robin with a Red Hat*. Sukhder Kaur Dosanjh. Vantage Press, 1998. 20 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 0-533-12227-9.

With a pile of three children's books sharing Christmas or winter settings and three more having an end-of-winter and dream-of-summer theme (both sets for younger readers), I am challenged to look for other elements to cross-reference their connection. Surprisingly, multiple similarities do suggest themselves. As in a universal cerebral internet, not unlike the Collective Unconscious, I sometimes wonder whether ideas circulating in the air may have a way of infiltrating our brains independent of direct communication through speech or written language. What else may explain how writers not in correspondence with each other come up with the same ideas or think along related lines?

In Jean Little's *Emma's Magic Winter* and Ginny Russell's *The Money Boot*, a friendship between two girls in the first and between two boys in the second shapes the story and action. In *Emma's Magic Winter*, Emma overcomes her shyness by bringing a pie over to meet a new neighbour, Sally, and in *The Money Boot*, Jim's friendship with Gary is bonded through their adventures together during the Christmas vacation. At the end of the story, the boys decide to team up in their school assignment about what they did dur-

ing their holidays.

In both books, a boot motif helps the stories along. When Emma uses the pie as an excuse to introduce herself to her new neighbour, she notices a pair of red boots just like her own beside the front door. Immediately she is heartened and concludes that the two girls may have something in common. In the following chapter, Emma starts what turns out to be a great little game with the talismanic boots. Waiting outside for Sally to join her, Emma initiates this game of magic:

'Magic Boots, make me vanish,' Emma said.

'What did you say?' said Sally.

'I told my boots to make me vanish.'

'When will they do it?' Sally asked.

'They did it already,' said Emma.

'If you still see me,
your boots are magic too.'

'I still see you,' said Sally.

'Now make *me* vanish, Emma.' (23-24)

For me, this delightful scene captures the true spirit of little girls at play. Throughout the story, Emma's new friendship enriches her life, directly and indirectly. After breaking the ice to make this new friend, Emma battles her excessive shyness about reading aloud at school by the less challenging task of reading to Sally's toddler brother, Josh. But then, still fretting about the prospect of standing before the class, Emma on Sally's suggestion decides to wear the magic boots while reading in class! Of course, it works! I did wonder about whether this plan might have caused other problems in messy weather but I guess that would make for another story. At any rate, *Emma's Magic Winter* is compassionate and funny, true in its understanding of children's fears and in the patterns of play they invent to deal with those fears. The illustrations are lively, making use of bright primary colours and simple shapes with bold crayon-like contours.

Rather more functional than magic, the boot in *The Money Boot* becomes the means by which Jim and Gary, playing amateur detectives, solve the case of the stolen coins. As in *Emma's Magic Winter*, the boys' friendship is warmly drawn. Gary's confession that he had read his Christmas gift to his friend, appropriately a detective story entitled *The Case of the Missing Microchip*, before wrapping it, adds a human touch offsetting a sense that the characters in this book tend to seem a bit flat. Of course, character in *The Money Boot* is not a focus but more a function of plot in this small-league detective story.

Neither stereotypes nor realistically-delineated characters, the robber cleaning lady and Mr. Paralova did trouble me slightly, however. I found

myself wondering about the motive for the cleaning woman's crime and feeling vaguely distasteful about Mr. Paralova's cardboard benevolence. Certainly, the cleaning lady is presented unsympathetically while she irritably, and for her own good reasons, shuns the boys' assistance during her get-away. Employed as a cleaning lady, however, she cannot be quite as destitute as a bag lady. Still, why does she filch her employer's old boots for her husband? Either she is a kleptomaniac or a woman in considerable need. Perhaps Mr. Paralova would have done better to spread his munificence with his cleaning lady. However, my children were not bothered by this detail.

Although young readers may not be encouraged to consider the underprivileged, this moral lapse is countered by a puritan view of money guaranteed to please parents. Jim must buy his own batteries since money does not normally grow on trees — except during rare literalizations of such proverbs as occurs in this story. The scene in which the cleaning woman drops coins and they fall through the branches of a cedar bush stands out in the book as one of the cleverest.

A few other details bothered me, such as Jim's sprained ankle in chapter one not preventing him from hunting for batteries for his flashlight all around downtown Toronto, and then chasing down the robber cleaning lady. Perhaps the very short chapters undermined my sense of time having passed. However, as my own experience with children confirms, kids do recover very quickly. Other details worked well, reinforcing a friendship theme or preparing the reader for the action, such as the background hockey game between the Toronto Maple Leafs and the Rangers, and Jim's Christmas gifts of a magnifying glass, a flashlight, the detective novel and the puzzle which the friends complete together. In short, *The Money Boot* is adequate in its assembly of parts; however, I could not escape the feeling that the story does feel rather rough around the edges. Like the simple text, the black and white sketches, one per chapter, are sufficient to hold the budding reader's attention but not exactly mesmerizing.

Also taking place during the Christmas vacation, Maryann Kovalski's *Jingle Bells* makes a light-hearted read. Here the absent-minded and eccentric but not unenergetic grandmother's personality galvanizes the story and action. The story opens with a confusion of arrivals and departures as the grandmother arrives to take her granddaughters, Jenny and Joanna, to the airport. A litany of worries, in the manner of a Munch picture-book, follows:

'I hope we did not forget anything,' said Jenny.

'I hope we did not forget anything,' said Joanna.

'Oh I do hope we did not forget anything,' said Grandma. (13)

In *Jingle Bells*, illustrations round out the text, and here the cameo of Grandma with her bubble of thought demonstrates the illustrator's creativity. Built on the well-known Christmas carol, the story is simple — a sleigh ride in which Grandma ends up driving rather recklessly — but the pictures are full of gusto and enliven the story considerably.

Grandma's scatterbrain finds a parallel in Andrew's forgetfulness in *Andrew's Magnificent Mountain of Mittens*. Anguished parents and children anguished by their parents' displeasure on this account will find much to laugh at in this book. Andrew's grandmother comes up with the solution of attaching strings to Andrew's mittens, but the strings are torn on the jungle gym. Truly repentant, Andrew decides to illustrate each pair of his lost mittens and then posts them all around the school. On a farcical note, one even turns up on the principal's back! At the climax, a "magnificent mountain of mittens" duly accumulates in the principal's office, following in the tradition of bedlam that accrues, for instance, with Jillian Jiggs's pigs. That the principal, himself, has even lost a pair is well taken considering his grumpiness on summoning Andrew to his office, and the last straw of Andrew's lost hat at the end adds a humorous touch of resignation to this common complaint of childhood (and adulthood).

Using patterns of repetition like those in *Jingle Bells*, *Andrew's Magnificent Mountain of Mittens* makes a hilarious read. However, I was disturbed by the illustrator-bungled colours (my children noticed too), incorrectly depicting the green mittens with strings as yellow and orange, and later presenting a blue pair for a lost purple set. Thankfully, LaFave did, however, take care to insert the hat in the illustration of the mountain of mittens on page 26, which is only later discovered missing on the last page of the story.

Sukhdev Kaus Dosanjh's *Robin with a Red Hat* is a whimsical little book first readers would be able to read; but the material seems more suited for the younger child. When spring is in the air and the "mountains seemed to reach the clouds and the clouds wandered around in the blue sky" (3), Robin, sporting the imaginary jauntiness of a red hat, feels inspired to fly over the city and zoom down to a little girl's house. Robin explores the phenomenal world, first viewing itself in a mirror and then, while drinking from a jug, dropping its hat. Helpfully, a little girl retrieves the hat for the bird by filling the jug with more water. Here a scientific learning experience would seem to have been transposed or at least empathetic. The book is written in simple language carrying poetic undertones but I found that the story lost both my own and my young reader's interest. The black-and-white illustrations seemed to inhibit his appreciation as well as the story's poetic potential being all but subliminally lost.

Again, *Fishes in the Sea* may entertain a younger child, but the book is simply enough written for a young reader to read. Essentially a counting book with rhymes written around aspects of a summer day, *Fishes in the Sea* distinguishes itself from other counting books by counting not only up to ten

but also counting back down to one. I found the rhymes zippy, with just the right jingle-jangle to please young listeners, and the illustrations, richly colored in blues and reds and golds, pleasing to all.

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A Story of Friendship and Imagination

The Cherry Pit Princess. Lynn Manuel. Illus. Debbie Edlin. Coteau Books, 1997. 101 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 1-55050-118-6.

Being best friends is one of the great joys of childhood. With your best friend, you share everything and you can always be yourself. Trouble is, sometimes the person who wants to be best friends with you is not the person you want to be best friends with. Manuel adds to this conundrum the more pragmatic puzzle of how to save a cherry orchard from the realtor.

These two problems are woven together in the story of Dagny and Megan, who grow to realize that a person can have many kinds of best friends. Dagny's most outstanding trait is her imagination and her ability to invent stories. Throughout the book, her impromptu stories about princesses serve as catalysts for further action, as the girls try to come up with ideas to save Aunt Allie's cherry orchard. Megan, more down-to-earth and perceptive, desperately wants to be Dagny's best friend. She and Dagny often enjoy the cut and thrust of childhood debate, which demonstrates Manuel's keen observational skills:

'... When cherries turn black they taste like the night.'

Megan shook her head. 'The night doesn't have a taste.'

'Yes, it does,' said Dagny. 'It has a black cherry taste.'

'Does not.'

'Does too.'

'You just made that up,' said Megan.

Despite their brief arguments, as the girls come up with ideas such as fortune cherries and tree rentals, readers come to appreciate how people with different but complementary personalities can become close friends.