

## Mini-Reviews

*From Poppa*. Anne Carter. Illus. Kasia Charko. Lobster, 1999. 32 pp. \$19.95. ISBN 1-804222-02-4.

Like the migratory birds, Marie's grandfather is heading south for the winter. This will be his first winter away from Marie and she tries to convince him to stay. That afternoon, he enlists her help in painting a special decoy that he had carved for her. After completing their work and writing the words "from Poppa" on its wing, they take the decoy to the lake. A flock of real ducks flies close overhead and when the decoy disappears, Marie and her grandfather believe that the decoy has joined the flock.

Anne Carter portrays the special relationship of a child and her grandfather, validating the child's sense of loss when he has to go away. His gift of a beautiful decoy is a gift from the heart and symbolizes the depth of their connection. When the decoy appears to magically fly away, it is believable. Her skilful handling of this transformation gives power to the imagination of a child reading this story.

The language of the story is evocative, with the rhythm of the sentences paced to the action. The use of alliteration gives many sentences a musical sound — for example, "whistle of wing tips," "fragrant, feathery boughs."

The illustrator captures the beauty and poignancy of the story. The colours of her palette are soft and delicate, matching the emotional tone of the author's words. The detailed pictures use varied points of view and page layouts. Some pages have small vignettes giving the book energy and engaging an impatient child. However, on a few pages, the girl in the story looks stiff and awkward, and her nose changes size. As well, on the back cover, the illustrator shows the grandfather holding a paintbrush that appears to emerge from his nostril, which my six-year-old son was only too eager to point out. The magic of the story was lost in laughter when he discovered this, and it is an unfortunate illustration error.

Overall, however, the book is a touching story that will capture the imagination of the child and tug at the heart strings of the adult reader.

*Bear on the Train*. Julie Lawson. Illus. Brian Deines. Kids Can, 1999. 32 pp. \$15.95. ISBN 1-55074-560-3.

In *Bear on the Train* a little boy named Jeffrey sees a black bear board a hopper car of a westbound train. The bear eats his fill of grain and then begins his hibernation on the train. Jeffrey tries to rouse the bear with a shout but to no avail. The bear

spends the winter crisscrossing the country on the train and each time the train passes through Jeffrey's little town, he keeps watch on the bear. Finally, in the spring, the bear awakens.

Each time Jeffrey sees the bear he shouts the same chant:

'Hey, Bear! Get off the train!

You'll freeze when it snows and get wet when it rains!

You'll be scared in the tunnels; you'll be all alone!

Your friends will be worried; they'll want you back home!

So, Bear! Get off the train!'

The rhythm of this chant mimics the rhythm of the train. The repetition, slow pace and simple nature of the story make this book suitable for very young children or as a supplementary aid in explaining winter hibernation. My four-and-a-half-year old, who is an adoring fan of both trains and bears, did not find it engaging enough to want to read it again.

The skill of the illustrator of this book is highly evident. Each picture is beautifully rendered in oil on canvas with magnificent coloration. Even though the paintings are somewhat impressionistic in style, the bear, the boy, the train and even the background are captured in abundant detail. Deciding what to illustrate from this story would have been a complex task since the story has so much repetition. In less skilled hands, the illustrations might not have worked as well as they do; here, they are energetic and successfully move the story through time.

Overall, this is a beautiful picture book that is recommended for younger children.

*Claire's Gift*. Maxine Trottier. Illus. Rajka Kupesic. North Winds P, 1999. 32 pp. \$18.99. ISBN 0-590-51461-X.

In *Claire's Gift* Tante Marie lives alone in a house that looks over the gulf in Cheticamp. Her great-niece, Claire, comes to stay with her for the summer. When Claire becomes homesick and silent, Tante Marie does not know what to do to help her overcome her sadness. All Tante Marie can think to do is to go back to her rug hooking. Soon Claire becomes interested in rug hooking and starts to make her own rug. At the end of the summer, Claire goes home. One day some months later, Claire makes the touching gesture of sending a beautiful little rug to Tante Marie.

In this lovely story, the reader learns about the healing gift of friendship and the soothing power of a hobby like rug hooking. Expertly woven into the story are interesting details of life in a small Arcadian community, which give the book depth and complexity. The sprinkling of French words throughout the story also adds to the authenticity.

The primitive folk-art style of the illustrations is well suited to this story and have been skilfully executed. Charming details can be found on each page, and the tender mood of the story is captured in the faces of the characters. This book

could have used a few small vignettes to break up the white space under the words on some of the pages.

I was pleasantly surprised to find that my little boys (who don't hesitate to call it like it is) enjoyed this story. It would appear from the title and the focus on rug hooking that this would be a story geared to little girls, but the compelling story, the engaging pictures, and the vivid language kept them interested and wanting to hear it again. As a result, I can confidently recommend this charming book for both boys and girls.

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*Ingrid Masak Mida left the newspaper publishing industry to stay home with her two boys. In order to keep her Bachelor and Masters degrees from getting rusty, she is an avid reader and is working on having her own stories published.*

*Matthew and the Midnight Hospital.* Allen Morgan. Illus. Michael Martchenko. Stoddart Kids, 1999. 32 pp. \$7.99 paper. ISBN 0-7737-6011-8.

Matthew, by now well known to readers through Morgan's series, embarks on another frenzied and frenetic adventure. One might suspect that the political situation in Ontario (cutbacks in health care) inspired this story. At the emergency room, when Matthew is advised to take a number and wait ... the nurses seem no more knowledgeable about what to expect next than does Matthew himself. The message about surviving a hospital visit without trauma is neither soft nor gently reassuring, as in some books, but wrapped in a package of wordy prose and zany, raucous humour. Bright art effectively moves the narrative forwards and will capture the attention of the very young, should their attention wander from the slightly long prose. The book's large format will also work well to engage attention.

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