

and its world would dare to wield. He honours his own Prairie childhood in so doing.

Overall the design is subtle and thus is effective — professional and yet self-effacing. There is no text designer with pretensions here. Congratulations to all for this gentle homage, such a dignified testimonial of love. This one's a real keeper.

*Robin Baird Lewis is an eclectic artist whose 30-year career has enjoyed highlights such as **Red is Best** (1982) and portrait work (e.g. *Sir Edmund Hilary*). Amidst a spate of mural painting, Robin also teaches. Recent titles include **To the Pool with Mama** (Annick) and **More than Words** (Hanan), a text about coping with autism.*

Owning Your Days and Naming Them: Books about Special Days

A Visit from St. Nicholas. Clement C. Moore. Illus. Kim Fernandes. Doubleday Canada, 1998 (1823). 32 pp. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-385-25784-8. *Muslim Child: A Collection of Short Stories and Poems.* Rukhsana Khan. Illus. Patty Gallinger. Sidebars by Irfan Alli. Napoleon, 1999. 72 pp. \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 0-929141-61-X. *The Christmas Orange.* Don Gillmor. Illus. Marie-Louise Gay. Stoddart Kids, 1998. Unpag. \$18.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-3100-8. *The Last Straw.* Frederick H. Thury. Illus. Vlasta van Kampen. Key Porter Kids, 1998. Unpag. \$18.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55263-022-6. *Woodland Nutcracker.* Avril Tyrrell. Illus. Frances Tyrrell. Key Porter Kids, 1999. Unpag. \$18.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55263-124-9.



*Illustration by Marie-Louise Gay from
The Christmas Orange*

"You've got to *own* your days and *name* them — each and every one of them — or else the years go right by and none of them belong to you." Such is the epiphany of the life-loving, wonder-filled hero of Herb Gardner's *A Thousand Clowns*, who, as he raises his twelve-year-old nephew, learns to observe and celebrate the everyday and quotidian, the ordinary and domestic — like the birthday of the proprietor of the best kosher deli in his neighbourhood. For each day is packed with spiritual meanings to be uncovered and observed and we never know when a new understanding will come to us in the midst of its celebration.

And, if every day is entitled to reverence, because it is a sign or symbol of a deeper reality, how much more so are special days — like Christmas, or Ramadan, or any other festival — the nominal focus of the handful of books reviewed here.

And, since art is order, as Saul Bellow reminds us — "order, made out of the chaos of life" — might not we expect a child's book about a special day to speak to us in some significant way? To say something that resonates like the ringing sounds of a bell that decay slowly after the initial clang? To tell a story that points beyond itself?

A Visit from St. Nicholas is the venerable Clement C. Moore poem of that name with new illustrations by Kim Fernandes. The book showcases the artist's virtuosity with Fimo modelling compounds, which she handcrafts into three-dimensional scenes and then bakes in the oven before having them photographed. This art form can bring new vision to material for the very young — as in some of Barbara Reid's work with plasticene — but, here, it is stilted and awkward, failing to bring the tale to life. While some details are evocative — the red cardinal on a branch and the sleeping mouse in the straw that make up the endpapers — the twelve tableaux that interpret Moore's poem are too stiff and static, and too repetitive. Kim Fernandes's dexterity with modelling compounds is let down by her composition and visual imagination; this rendering makes for impressive cake decoration but as a children's book it is prosaic and confining. The fault may be the publisher's as much as the artist's — not only for making a poor match of illustration with text but, also, for pusillanimity in recycling such a trite piece of nostalgia for a Canadian children's book.

Woodland Nutcracker, retold by Avril Tyrrell, illustrated by her daughter, Frances, is another reinterpretation of traditional Christmas material: the *Nutcracker* story, reworked as a piece of Canadiana, with Clara and Peter as woodland bear cubs. Nutcracker rewards "Clara, the Peacemaker" for "bringing about a Christmas Truce" in the battle between the field mice and the tin soldiers; and the second half of the book recounts a multicultural soiree of performing bears at the palace of the great bear in the sky, Ursa Major, to which Nutcracker takes Clara as her reward. Featured are all kinds of bears, from Yuk Tuk the Arctic Circle polar bear gymnast, to the macaronic Cirque des Etoiles from Mexico, who dance flamenco; and from Tung Tung and Chi Chi, the Chinese juggling giant pandas, to Mother Grizzly and her Rocky Mountain Peewees, who skate a mock hockey practice.

What might have been light, airy Christmas dessert is in the event lumpen and saccharine: the prose is overwritten, both for its subject and for the age of its intended audience; and the miniaturist's art — more properly decoration than illustration — though luminously detailed and lambent as a mediaeval Book of

Hours, is too formal and remote for this children's book.

The Last Straw, by Frederick Thury, an adaptation of one of his librettos performed by the Toronto Children's Chorus and recorded by the CBC, takes us, at last, into more original (and Canadian) material. This is the story of Hoshmakaka, a proud old camel who has been chosen to bring to the newborn King in Bethlehem the gifts of the three wise men — as, also, the gifts of a procession of others along the way (which betrays one of the points of the original Bible story that has not already been confounded by the artist's depiction of the three wise men as identical triplets). As Hoshmakaka takes upon his back the final gift of a piece of straw for the baby's bed, he collapses to his knees before the newborn King, realizing at last the meaning of his task. As only now (in another betrayal of the original story) do the three wise men: "The wise men noticed Hoshmakaka. Quickly they, too, knelt."

As John Bunyan wrote of his *Pilgrim's Progress*, you tell your story "to give courage to the pilgrims who follow after so that, one by one, in their turn, for them also the trumpet should sound." Where the trumpet fails to sound for me in this miscegenation of the Nativity story is in not making much sense as a Christmas story. Why a Christmas legend that, in the words of the blurb, "perfectly illustrates the well-known proverb, 'It is the last straw that breaks the camel's back'"? To what purpose? And what is the point in giving us a hero who is not much different following his epiphany than he was before — proud, boastfully strong, and unwilling to allow others to share in the work of the world?

The Christmas Orange, by Don Gillmor, illustrated by Marie-Louise Gay, is the only completely new (and Canadian) work in this assortment of Christmas picture books. In a "startlingly realistic take on modern society," as the blurb puts it, this is the story of spoiled and precocious six-year-old Anton who sues Santa for breach of promise after getting only a tiny orange from him. Complementing Don Gillmor's brightly-written, breezy text are Marie-Louise Gay's line and watercolour cartoons whose dynamic perspectives give this picture book its energy. *The Christmas Orange* does, somewhat, have the "sparkle and snap of a holiday cracker" — if you like the kind of smart-ass child-hero of American TV sitcoms, hokey characters like Wiley the lawyer and Judge Oldengray, and adult jokes about non-union reindeer, on-street parking for Santa's sleigh, and a jaded, tired S. Claus who's the victim of too many late nights, blizzards and budget cuts — though he can still keep track of "who dyes their hair blonde."

In the end, the storyline of this potential prequel for a holiday TV special, falls flat. Santa's trial folds when he quits his post as the gift-giving patron of the season. The insufferable Anton realizes he has to do something — and manages to save the day by fishing out of his pocket for Santa the very gift he once discarded: his tiny perfect orange. Apparently mollified, Santa tells the taxi driver to take him to the North Pole: "I'm going back to work."

Muslim Child: A Collection of Short Stories and Poems, by Rukhsana Khan, illustrated by Patty Gallinger, is an old-fashioned compendium of stories, verse and activities — on what it is to be a Muslim and what it means to belong to the Islamic faith and way of life. It is, in essence, an information book of the kind that will fill a niche not only as a trade book but, more importantly, as a research text in the elementary classroom. *Muslim Child* differs from those comparable resources published by Macdonald, Oxford, Usborne, Watts, and others in that the information is

not communicated in expository text but embedded in stories (amplified by sidebars). This notion has potential; but the problem with Rukhsana Khan's narratives is that they are long-winded and tedious, and of little worth as stories. They also tend to speak down to the reader (as do the black-and-white drawings reminiscent of basal readers of the fifties), which makes the book serviceable for primary children at best — whereas, in fact, primary children will not have the stamina for so much text and the book will mainly end up in use by junior-age children.

The content of *Muslim Child* is variable. Most is significant and accurate if, necessarily, a little hit-and-miss in coverage: there is material on the life of the Prophet Muhammad, on his sayings, on festivals and observances; and there are recipes and activities. There is little on the tenets of the faith, and nothing on the history of the faith and way of life as, also, on items that children would typically find engrossing — birth, marriage and family, death, burial practices, heroes of the past, etc. Overall, *Muslim Child* would have been better served by the inclusion of material more representative of the many expressions of Islam and material written in more than one voice.

"Stories move in circles ... they don't go in straight lines," Deena Metzger quotes a travelling theatrical troupe in her *Writing for Your Life*. "So it helps if you listen in circles. There are stories inside stories and stories between stories, and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your way home. And part of the finding is the getting lost. And when you're lost, you start to look and listen." Finding and losing my way among this dismal offering of children's books, I offer a few observations that a long absence from reviewing prompts. Canadian publishing for children has come a long way in the last decade. The children's books reviewed here, created by some of our premier publishers, are competently put together and as tastefully designed as any in the world (though it would help cultivate our increasingly sophisticated readership if these books were to give more information about the bookmaking process than just where the book is printed and bound — e.g., information about the book's design; details of the art, printing and photography processes and materials; typeface, etc.). The illustrations of these children's books, too, are for the most part superb — they may not be appropriate for a particular text, or they may fail a particular purpose, but of their quality there can be no doubt. Not so, in most cases, the writing and editing. Where these books fall short is in "reading sign," as Native Americans have called it; in "reading the book of the world," as mediaeval Catholic monks phrased it; in the finding and communicating meaning in the signs written in the texts of life's experiences. These books, in other words, have little of worth to say to children; and the suggested implications, nuances and reverberations of what they do say — e.g., an over-reliance on nostalgia (Moore's *A Visit from St. Nicholas*, the *Woodland Nutcracker*); the misappropriation of others' sacred stories (i.e., the Nativity); and stories that are resolved by a *deus ex machina* rather than by their heroes (Hoshmakaka and Anton) who remain resolutely untransformed to the end — these leave me more than a little disappointed and bewildered.

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