

Not Quite a Bedtime Story

Bedtime Baa-a-a-lk. Rukhsana Khan. Illus. Kristi Frost. Stoddart Kids, 1998. 32 pp. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-30680.

Bedtime Baa-a-a-lk is a delightful take on the familiar bedtime injunction to count sheep jumping over the fence. The story starts with a little girl going up the stairs to bed.

However, it is not quite a bedtime story. It invites the listener's participation with paper and crayon, as the little girl deals with a surly old ram who says there is little reason why they should be jumping onto the dark side over the fence. So the girl conjures a "meadow with clover and buttercups thrown in." And then she is persuaded to colour the dark sky blue, and then she is talked into making the side they are on a little more attractive. Carried away, she draws a merry-go-round and a ferris wheel, and before she knows it, she has a very mutinous flock of sheep indeed. They see no reason at all why they should jump over the fence just so that she can fall asleep counting them. The girl has an answer why. She says she can blot them out of existence and make other sheep who will be more obedient. The ram thinks she is OUT OF HER ... but before he can complete his sentence, pouff, he is gone, the sheep are gone. All gone. A new flock of sheep dutifully jumps over the fence as her eyes close.

Like many modern stories for children, it has its own little sermons — brush your teeth before going to bed and use your imagination. It also has a neat little dig at authoritarian parents (or is it a feminist dig?) when the ram scolds a young ewe for speaking when she is not spoken to, even though he agrees with her.

The illustrations are colourful, especially the scene with ferris wheel and cotton candy man(sheep). On a couple of occasions, however, the page is rather too busy with oversize close-ups that distract rather than add to the use of imagination that could help children "colour in" their own visuals.

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A Sibling Bonding Diptych

The Bye-Bye Pie. Sharon Jennings. Illus. Ruth Ohl. Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1999. Unpag. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55041-405-4. *Ballerinas Don't Wear Glasses*. Ainslie Manson. Illus. Dean Griffiths. Orca, 2000. Unpag. \$18.95, \$8.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 1-55143-158-0, 155143-176-9.

The Bye-Bye Pie enchantingly captures very believable, naive antics of two pre-school age boys while *Ballerinas Don't Wear Glasses* exposes the painful realities of older children coerced into responsibility for younger ones, along with bullying and taunting by classmates and childhood self-esteem challenges. Both stories feature realistic yet gentle portrayals of reciprocal sibling bonding. In *The Bye-Bye Pie*,



Illustration by Ruth Ohi from *The Bye-Bye Pie*

Alfie's imagination rescues his older brother when they scoop two chocolate fudge pecan pies off the kitchen floor to save Grandma's "going-away" dessert, while Alfie himself is rescued when his ruined hand-crafted gift is reframed by his older brother in perfect synchronicity with the occasion. Similarly, in *Ballerinas Don't Wear Glasses*, Ben traverses the divide between having to look after a little sister he regards as a nuisance to rising to her defense and transforming her into the swan of the ballet. Allison, in turn, develops new admiration and appreciation for her older brother's creativity and resourcefulness. *Ballerinas Don't Wear Glasses* was shortlisted for the twelfth Mr. Christie's Book Award in the best books for middle readers (age eight to eleven) category.

Ruth Ohi's engaging illustrations in *The Bye-Bye Pie*, from the chocolate fudge pecan pie handprints on the end-pages to her cameos of a day in the life of a toddler to the child art on the final page, entice the reader into the story. The cover illustration of the triumphant tandem with pies aloft has classic potential that shatters later on discovery that the child artist did not print the secret recipe and Grandma looks very much like a teenage baby-sitter. Dean Griffiths produces the opposite effect to sweetness and light in *Ballerinas Don't Wear Glasses* through the children's ugly and grotesque adult-like poses. The illustrated cover bears no relation to the plot, with the bedraggled brother looking very much the father in this initial entry to the work. A text that bravely unveils excruciating issues confronting many children risks being minimized by such incongruity.

Both stories also raise questions about appropriate content for children's books in this post post-modern age. While objections are often too easily dismissed as "it's only a story," all of us know how narratives fixated in the mind entrench core beliefs that years later may, if one is fortunate, be reprogrammed. Since messages conveyed to the child by an adult-created book have immense power to destroy or empower, informed adults help children to think critically about what they read or what is read to them. My concern is for those whose psyches have not



Illustration by Dean Griffiths from
Ballerinas Don't Wear Glasses

yet fully matured who read adult sociocultural messages unsupervised. For example, charming though it seems, scraping food off the floor in *The Bye-Bye Pie* and serving it to guests who eat it, apparently unquestioningly, is an act that could have lethal consequences if copied in today's world. Similarly, a feminist field day is possible with *Ballerinas Don't Wear Glasses*, where the girl is cast in the role of the one less capable and dependent on the older, wiser male. While it may seem a "funny and warmhearted tale" to adults, with its resonances of *The Ugly Duckling* and *Cinderella*, *Ballerinas Don't Wear Glasses* is no fairy tale to children.

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Gangling Grace

All I Need and other Poems for Kids. Deb Loughead. Illus. Mary Camozzi. Moonstruck, 2nd edition, 1999. 32 pp. \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-9682680-0-5.

Deb Loughead's book is being promoted by Frontier College in Toronto as part of their program to encourage reading among children; some of the proceeds will go to the program. The poems show a strong grasp of children's experience, everything from dust bunnies under the bed to a game of Tug-o'-War. They are written without condescension and with a good sense of humour. Typical of her wit is "Like a Weed," which takes the adult remark "you're growing like a weed" and examines