

## Mini-Reviews

*To the Pool with Mama*. Sue Farrell. Illus. Robin Baird Lewis. Annick, 2000. 24 pp. \$15.98 cloth, \$5.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-620-9, 1-55037-621-7. Ages 2-4.

*To the Pool with Mama* by Sue Farrell celebrates one of many beloved little rituals in which small children delight. Illustrated by Robin Baird Lewis, this charming picture book takes us along with "John J." on his trip to the swimming pool. Seen through John's fresh young eyes, the outing presents a succession of opportunities and challenges: there are lockers for hiding in, shower drains enough for any young empiricist equipped with a pail, there is a baby pool to plunge into. And, it is always satisfying to share some of the water with Mama, even if she's *not* in her bathing suit! Like most three-year-olds, John savours the independence in carrying his own towel. When capricious little Elise dumps her own bucket over his unsuspecting head, solace beckons to the young adventurer from Mama's open arms. The warmth of the dryer and the sight of "bare bottoms and bare naked toes" quickly restore John's spirits. Farrell's colourful depiction of the moods and motivations of the pre-schooler is lovingly observed. Writing in the first person and present tense, the author puts us squarely in John J.'s shoes:

"I give Mama a hug. I snuggle on her shoulder and she lifts me up. Mama's hair smells like apples. She feels soft and cuddly and warm ... Mama sings my little song. I close my eyes and fall asleep." (30-31)

I particularly like how Farrell captures a child's affectionate sense of ownership of *his* adult. John J. figures front and centre in Lewis's delicate watercolour illustrations. The artist's beautifully-rendered line drawings evoke the undiluted wonder Farrell captures in John's trip *To the Pool with Mama*.

*Facing the Day*. Laurel Dee Gugler. Illus. Deirdre Betteridge. Annick, 1999. 24 pp. \$15.95 cloth, \$5.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-576-8, 1-55037-577-6. Ages 2-4.

Like a time-lapse photographer, in *Facing the Day* author Laurel Dee Gugler captures a series of fleeting moments which comprise a typical day in the life of a pre-schooler. Borrowing the gambolling iambic metre of "Baa, baa, black sheep," Gugler invents a clever textual pattern of tiny triptychs which reflects more than forty of a little girl's daily moods and activities, one face at a time: the essence of "breakfast face" or "drooping face" is swiftly evoked with just the right adjective — "sticky," or "down-hearted." Glimpses of a teacher, a new friend, a mischievous collie, and a loving mother add to the composite Gugler constructs. The author's well-chosen rhymes and bouncy present participles propel the book forward at a brisk pace:

Bored face  
Nap time  
I CAN'T SLEEP!  
Friend's face  
Waking  
Blanket face  
Peek.

Gugler laces *Facing the Day* with wonderfully visceral home-grown images like “wobble tooth,” “wiggle-jiggle,” and “slurpy-burp.” Her short sentences and lightning-quick scene changes capture the pace and intensity of the kindergartener’s energy and attention span. Deirdre Betteridge’s whimsical watercolour and pencil illustrations, with their warm terra-cotta tones, provide a perfect accompaniment to Gugler’s text. With a deft hand, the artist manages to render each new face as expressively and economically as does the writer. The playful childlike typeset also adds to the book’s strong visual appeal. As a study of the ever-changing faces of one little girl, Gugler’s book is a remarkable portrait. *Facing the Day* is also a delightful book to read aloud.

*A Drop of Gold*. Vlasta van Kampen. Illus. Vlasta van Kampen. Annick, 2001. 32 pp. \$18.95 cloth, \$6.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-667-2, 1-55037-676-4. Ages 2-5.

If you are not already a bird-lover, Vlasta van Kampen’s beautiful book *A Drop of Gold* will almost certainly win you over — no matter what your age. The author/illustrator has created a delightful new fable about how the world’s bird species got their colourful markings — and how the little nightingale got his wondrous voice. Busy tinting her newly created flora and fauna with a symphony of colours, Mother Nature unwittingly overlooks her white-winged children. Alerted by their melancholy songs, she quickly conscripts a pair of artful monkeys equipped with paints, brushes, and an overflowing basket of craft supplies to decorate the birds. With jazzy stripes and a splash of magenta here and a well-fitted comb and a pair of curly tail-feathers there, the monkeys speedily whip up a multiplicity of richly-hued avian breeds. When all but the brown paint can stand empty, one tardy little bird must forfeit his dreams of technicolour. A serendipitous drop of gold paint lines the nightingale’s dark cloud with silver. Van Kampen’s story is simply and gracefully put, with an effective sprinkling of alliterative catalogues. When the storyteller interrupts the narrative to let the nightingale speak for himself, our hearts go out to the tiny bird. Van Kampen’s vibrant watercolours of over three dozen actual varieties of birds are gorgeous. My four-year-old son and seven-year-old daughter eagerly pulled out our bird books, and together we found everything from a North American flicker to a roseate spoonbill. The artist manages to achieve biological accuracy while also endowing each bird with ample personality. Written for young children, *A Drop of Gold* will also appeal to beginning readers, aspiring artists, grown-ups, and ornithophiles. Though, as Vlasta van Kampen demonstrates, one should never judge a bird by his feathers, this is one book whose cover truly speaks for itself!

*Twenty-Two Feelings from Nice to Nasty*. Twyla Weixl. Illus. Twyla Weixl. Napoleon, 2000. 46 pp. \$12.95 paper. ISBN 0-929141-70-9.

Joyful, fearful, competent, sad. Author/illustrator Tweila Weixl's book *Twenty-Two Feelings from Nice to Nasty* presents a catalogue of human emotions for young readers. As a study of how we feel, I like Weixl's comprehensive, well-observed list of good and bad feelings. However, my reactions are truly mixed as to how the author depicts and analyses these feelings. A picture book in the "learn your alphabet or numbers" vein, *Twenty-Two Feelings* introduces a series of characters, each in a different situation, which embody a particular mood or response. Weixl accompanies each page of text, written in the same alliterative six-sentence pattern, with a facing-page illustration that mirrors each feeling. For example, holed up in his tree-house (in feeling #5) solitary Shamir is feeling sad, while (in #6) baby Severn swings serenely cradled in her sister's arms. Reading the text out loud to my son, I feel that a little taste of these repetitive tongue-twisters goes a long way; so much emphasis on alliteration clouds rather than clarifies our empathy for and understanding of how each character feels. I also find Weixl's illustrations very uneven, both aesthetically and in their rendition. While, to my eye, her use of heavy black outlining, intense skin tones and often strident reds and murky pea-greens lends a harsh quality to many of her drawings, there are some notable exceptions; "loving Louis" surrounded by llamas and "hopeful Hattie" with a hairdo full of hamsters, which I like very much, both reveal a subtler palette and a more delicate hand. My most serious concern with *Twenty-Two Feelings* is Weixl's frequent use of grotesquely rendered, obese figures to represent "negative" emotions (anger, greed and rejection); with the exception of "calm Cora" who looks a bit plump, most of the other characters are pencil-thin. For a book presumably intended to help juvenile readers acknowledge and understand their emotions, *Twenty-Two Feelings* may send the wrong message to kids grappling with impending puberty and the attendant issues of body image, self-esteem, eating disorders, and stereotypes. Age and weight aside, how do "anchor-eating Annie" and "greedy Gwendoline" make us feel about ourselves and others — nice or nasty?

*Jillian Jiggs and the Secret Surprise*. Phoebe Gilman. Illus. Phoebe Gilman. North Winds, 1999. 36 pp. \$15.99 cloth. ISBN 0-590-51578-0. Ages 3-8.

What do you do if today is your little sister's birthday, your piggy bank is empty, and her party is about to start at any moment? If you are Jillian Jiggs, you put on a play. But it *has to* be a surprise! Phoebe Gilman's delightful story, *Jillian Jiggs and the Secret Surprise*, reveals the pitfalls awaiting any aspiring young actor-manager. Making up a play about a princess and a dragon is not difficult for Jillian and her friends, Rachel and Peter; keeping it top-secret is a different kettle of fish! Preoccupied with impromptu set-painting, costume make-over and rehearsals, the trio are set upon by a brisk stream of birthday guests, all eager to trip the boards. Jillian's inventiveness is truly tested as she strives to accommodate an ever-burgeoning cast; a second dragon's head, a Queen mom, a porcine chorus, and a heroic mouse fit the bill nicely. When the curtain rises in Jillian's garden, the empty lawn-chairs reveal a serious directorial oversight. Guess who steps in to provide an audience?

"I've thought of someone, and I'm very certain  
That SHE will not want to be part of the show.  
She will be happy to sit down. I know." (25)

Phoebe Gilman's playful gouache and pencil illustrations provide a colourful, swirling accompaniment to the text's bouncy rhyming couplets in *The Secret Surprise*. An established artist before she became a writer, Gilman's whimsical drawings are replete with expressive faces, snippets from other Gilman stories, and delicate surprises. It's fun to follow the mischievous antics of Jillian's omnipresent kitten — a would-be four-footed thespian. Readers wishing to emulate Jillian's *Secret Surprise* will also discover therein Gilman's engaging original playlet *The Chicken Princess* (complete with text and author's permission for homegrown productions), as well a myriad of creative staging suggestions found at Phoebe's enclosed website address.

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*I Went to the Bay.* Ruth Miller. Illus. Martine Gourbault. Kids Can, 1998. 22 pp. \$12.95. ISBN 1-55074-498-4.

*I Went to the Bay* is a quiet little book of soft pencil colour drawings and simple verse. It tells the story of a bookish-looking boy who goes out on a bay in his dinghy in search of frogs. Frogs escape his notice (though they are everywhere in Gourbault's illustrations) but he does see a number of other creatures, including a blue heron,

