

Mini-Reviews

Two So Small. Hazel Hutchins. Illus. Ruth Ohi. Annick, 2000. 32 pp. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-651-9.

Every so often a book comes along that can be heart-warming and delightful yet frustratingly inconsistent to the adult mind. Do young children notice or mind these inconsistencies? Perhaps it depends on how much the story moves them, or how well they can relate to the characters, or how exciting the story is. Or perhaps it depends on how magical the tale is, for one cannot expect logic where there is magic. *Two So Small* can be both delightful and frustrating to the adult reader, but the story works if one can set aside logic and enter into the fun of the fantasy.

The book is about a boy who, like Little Red Riding Hood, sets off to visit his grandmother. His father gives him clear instructions on how to get there and, predictably, the boy forgets. At every turn, the child goes in the opposite direction. It is easy to see immediately where the logical problems arise. If the boy had made the first decision incorrectly, going over instead of under the bridge, then the second prescribed direction, to go around the trees instead of through them, would no longer be there as an option, nor would the third turn, and so on. However, in this story, all the father's directional signposts are there, even though the child reverses every single one.

But surely it is the manner of fairy tales to not follow the logic of the mind but rather the logic of the heart and imagination — the logic of magic. If the magic of the story can be enjoyed for the sake of magic, then the story is full of delight and, of course, a wonderful ending where everything is put right because of the kindness of the boy and his goat.

The colourful, expressive, and detailed illustrations by Ruth Ohi match the light-hearted magical quality of the story well. Without being realistic, the illustrations suit the story perfectly in both tone and content, making this book a great addition to any small child's collection.

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There Have Always Been Foxes. Maxine Trottier. Illus. Regolo Ricci. Stoddart Kids, 2001. 24 pp. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-8838-3278-5. Ages 4-9.

There Have Always Been Foxes is a marvellous picture book for four- to-nine-year olds that combines a fascinating story about a piece of Canadian history with simple yet expressive diction and a clear style. It tells the story of the French stronghold Fortress Louisbourg, established on Cape Breton Island in 1713 until it was sacked by British troops in 1758. Since the Fortress was built again this century as an historical monument, there have been reported sightings of a fox dancing with a

cat within the walls of the rebuilt fortress. This story is the basis for Trottier's retelling of the history of the fortress.

Trottier succeeds in making the story so enchanting because she tells it from the fox's point of view. Telling the story as he heard it from previous generations of foxes, the fox who dances with the cat shows the supremacy of nature over all human works while at the same time telling precisely what happened to the fortress and the people it housed. He also tells of the rebuilding of the fortress and the "strange creature" he dances with there. This clever technique immediately captivates the reader's attention, holding it to the end of this short tale.

The oil paintings by Ricci are another strong point in this already strong book. The foxes and the land they inhabit are portrayed more strongly than the people, although the various fates of the fortress are clearly shown. Having animals to identify with and watch throughout this book will keep young readers focused on the story, especially since the narrating fox appears on every page. The only problem with the art — and it is perhaps a minor one — is that the "strange creature" the fox reports dancing with looks more like a dog than a cat. Otherwise, the book is superb.

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Wish Upon a Unicorn. Vicki Blum. Illus. Alan Barnard. Scholastic, 1999. 138 pp. \$4.99 paper. ISBN 0-590-51519-5.

Wish Upon a Unicorn, a fast-moving fantasy adventure for pre-teens, centres on nine-year-old Arica, who falls through a crack in her grandmother's floor only to find herself the prisoner of some hideous trolls that take her to a forced-labour camp where she works alongside elves to mine for the bad fairy Raden. Arica ultimately escapes with the help of a baby unicorn named Wish and Arica's grandmother, who now, it appears, is the Queen Fairy of this land.

Immediately, problems with the plot are obvious. A story about a forced-labour camp, complete with descriptions of cruelty and torture, is much too mature in content and theme for the intended audience of pre-teens. There are also incongruities in the plot: Arica's grandmother, whom all the good characters in Bundelas love and admire, has let this atrocity continue for some time for reasons that are never explained, except for the one lame possibility that she does not know about it. Arica, although the daughter of a human and of a fairy who has forgotten his heritage, is a specially marked fairy herself, which is never really explained. The evil Raden turns out to be Arica's uncle. The coincidences go on and on. The frequent jumps from one action to another are disorienting.

The writing itself is completely inappropriate for the age group, especially the thoughts of Arica, from whose point of view the story is told. For example, she describes one of the trolls who captures her as "dressed like an eighteenth century gentleman come upon hard times," which is hardly a description that is likely to be given by a modern nine-year-old child. Although she is likeable enough, Arica swings constantly from adult perceptions and thought patterns to very childish ones, so she is hard to get to know as a character.

In some ways the setting is also a problem: it is more like Nazi Germany or some other repressive state than a fantasy world. The elves and fairies of this land are basically indistinguishable in characteristics from humans, which weakens the fantasy element considerably. Given these weaknesses, the book is not likely to engage children at all.

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Tribe of Star Bear. Victoria Mihalyi. Borealis, 1998. 238 pp. \$16.95 paper. ISBN 0-88887-832-X.

Tribe of Star Bear is a first novel by Victoria Mihalyi, whose prior experience as an environmental journalist shows very clearly throughout this book, which celebrates the life of the forest creatures set against the destructive greed of humans and their machines. This book is not as grim as it sounds, however: Mihalyi has set the plot in a fantasy world where human children and all forest creatures can communicate easily, where humans themselves are not the perpetrators of the horror but rather machine-like creatures called Rumlbers, and where the Saroo, who released the Rumlbers through their own greed, are now forced to serve them. This delightful fantasy world is far enough away from reality to be acceptable without being too confrontational.

However, there are inconsistencies within the story that spoil it at times. Although it is common to anthropomorphize animals within such a fantasy, the dialogue and narration oscillate between extremely complex, very adult-sounding words and very childish or inappropriate slang. The grating juxtaposition of these speech patterns shifts the appropriate age group from for six- to eight-year olds to teenagers. The characters themselves are reasonably consistent most of the time, but there is no sense of development, only a confusing and disorienting switching of roles.

The setting of the story is well drawn — both the forest and the clear-cut, ravaged wasteland that is left after the Rumlbers have been through. The plot is fast-paced, exciting, and engaging. The gratuitous violence of the Rumlbers gorging on animals as they go, complete with descriptions of shredded flesh and screams, seems excessive for this age group. Although the ending is a little incongruous as the human member of the group goes back to her parents who have been joined by searchers using lots of machinery, the novel has some very good qualities.

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Ahmed and the Nest of Sand. Kristin Bieber Domm. Illus. Jeffrey C. Domm. Nimbus, 2000. Unpag. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 1-55109-338-3. Ages 3-6.

In *Ahmed and the Nest of Sand*, the writer has a message to convey rather than a story to tell. In seeking to enroll our efforts at caring for the lives of the threatened Piping