

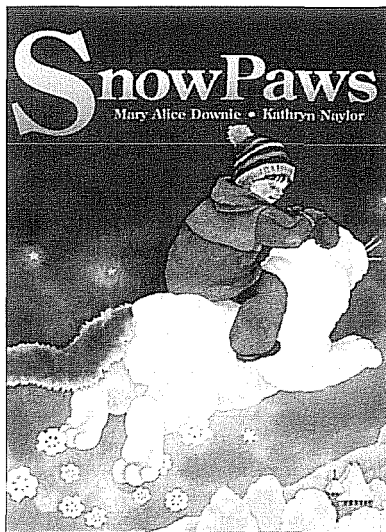
Guided to Unfamiliar Worlds

SnowPaws. Mary Alice Downie. Illus. Kathryn Naylor. Stoddart, 1996. Unpag. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-2968-2. *Jacob's Best Sisters*. Teddy Jam. Illus. Joanne Fitzgerald. Douglas and McIntyre Groundwood Books, 1996. 32 pp. \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-229-7. *Kele's Secret*. Tololwa M. Mollel. Illus. Catherine Stock. Stoddart, 1997. 32 pp. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-3007-9.

The main characters (all young boys) in these three recent books are taken to places outside their familiar worlds, entering these realms with varying degrees of willingness and difficulty. Guided on these journeys by a snowcat, four pioneer dolls and a hen, these boys make valuable discoveries about themselves and others.

Sam, the young boy in Mary Alice Downie's *SnowPaws*, begins his journey with excitement, confidence and a lack of fear, jumping on SnowPaws' back while reasoning with wonderful logic that "If it was a dream, he'd be safe. If it wasn't a dream, it was magic, and he'd still be safe." Making use of the familiar motifs of the snow creature coming to life and then melting in spring, the flying animal taking the child into the sky on its back, and the lost pregnant cat returning with her offspring, Downie's book offers its reader a memorable character in SnowPaws. The attempts of SnowPaws to function in Sam's world are humorously depicted in Kathryn Naylor's illustrations. We see SnowPaws in a restaurant inadvertently melting his paw as he daintily dips it in his hot chocolate, winning hide and seek because he can "disguise himself as a snowdrift," and skating without skates.

SnowPaws is a successful book in a number of areas. The winter city with its narrow streets and "tiny gardens among the fire-escapes" is a vivid urban setting, attractive in spite of its crowded appearance. The description of Emilie, the real cat, who "pretend[s] not to watch from the window above," is accurate enough to evoke recognition in even the youngest reader familiar with feline



behaviour. The conclusion of this book is ambitious in its attempt to deal with the child's sense of loneliness and loss, his guilt for neglecting others as he was once neglected and his perceptible recognition of renewal and rebirth. Downie deals sensitively with these classic childhood issues, avoiding an overly sentimental tone. The final page of text and illustration with "all three of us" (Sam, SnowPaws and the new kitten) together fills the gaps and needs experienced by Sam and by a world which is continually touched and healed by the cycle of rebirth and renewal.

Teddy Jam's *Jacob's Best Sisters* is a weaker book than *SnowPaws*, primarily because the complexities of Jacob's motivations and reactions are downplayed to the point that he is a flat character, eliciting little interest or sympathy from the reader. Entering a contest on a cereal box, Jacob wins a pioneer log cabin complete with four pioneer dolls. By the end of the book, Jacob and the reader are tired of the dolls, whose speeches are delivered in squeaky voices and invariably end with exclamation marks. The spoiled dolls invade Jacob's world, whining and demanding attention and action, forcing Jacob into the role of a parent of tiresome children. Acting unlike the stereotypical pioneers in Jacob's mind, the dolls destroy his ideal of the selfless and self-sufficient pioneer. Like most depictions of miniature figures in a full-sized world, Joanne Fitzgerald's illustrations fascinate the viewer; and, like *SnowPaws*, the four pioneer dolls are amusing in their attempt to function in a world not made for them. Unfortunately, this story begins to take on the qualities of the dolls, becoming annoying rather than humorous, and reflecting a superficiality which readers would like to get beyond, just as they would like to experience more of the inside of that log cabin and its pioneer world.

With Mollé's *Kele's Secret*, readers are privileged to gain entry into the unfamiliar world of the author's childhood in Tanzania, attractively portrayed through Catherine Stock's illustrations. Yoanes, the young boy, works towards the goal of market day and is rewarded with that event much as the reader is rewarded with Stock's vivid and colourful illustration of it. The narrative builds effectively to this much coveted event and scene, offering an abundance of rich detail — "the beans, bananas, sweet potatoes, *nyafu*, avocados ... rice cakes, *mandasi*, dates, roasted peanuts, and fried cassava and fish." This setting is as warm and colourful as Downie's city is old and cold.

Yoanes's venture into a shed to pursue Kele, the hen, involves a confrontation with fear. This is a psychological journey involving perseverance and determination, eventually leading to not just the physical rewards of the marketplace, but to the satisfaction of overcoming doubt and terror. The reader, unfamiliar with the interior of the shed or what market day entails, shares Yoanes' ignorance of the secrets of the shed, while gaining in the eventual exposure to market day the knowledge that has inspired and driven Yoanes all along. Readers thus enjoy the dual viewpoint of sympathetically viewing the world through Yoanes' eyes, while simultaneously remaining outside the main character, who possesses an understanding of an event and place (the market) as yet unfamiliar to the reader.

Each of these books concludes with the promise of the cyclical nature of experience as emphasized in the newborn kitten and the assurance that *SnowPaws* will return next winter, the enticement of the sailing ship to be won from the next box of cereal, and Kele warming her eggs to be hatched. These writers do not



suggest that loss, loneliness and fear will permanently disappear or be conquered, but that there will always be renewed support for dealing with such emotions. The settings of the old, cold city and the coffee farm of Tanzania in Downie and Mollel's books are an added bonus in their ability to take the reader to another world, not imaginatively removed as an escape from the real world, but solidly based in that everyday world, which is magic in itself.

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Two Picture Books with Physically and Developmentally Challenged Heroes

How Smudge Came. Nan Gregory. Illus. Ron Lightburn. Red Deer Press, 1995. 32 pp. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88995-143-8. *The Moccasin Goalie.* William Roy Brownridge. Orca Books, 1995. Unpag. \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 1-551-143-042-8.

The publication of *How Smudge Came* and *Moccasin Goalie* fills the gap in the picture book market for stories about developmentally and physically challenged people. These two good books serve as lead-ins to discussions about the special life circumstances that face the heroes of these stories.

In *How Smudge Came* Nan Gregory's developmentally challenged hero lives in a group home and works in an AIDS hospice. The story revolves around Cindy trying to hide a homeless puppy — a suspenseful tale which will fully engage young readers to the end. Although the puppy brings joy to the AIDS patients at the hospice, Smudge finds himself unwelcome in Cindy's strict group home and is removed to the SPCA. To Gregory's credit, Cindy attempts to resolve