Review Articles & Reviews / Critiques et comptes rendus

OF DIDACTICISM, NONSENSE, AND SEA-TURTLES

Dennis the Dragon. Joan Raeside. Illus. Adrian Raeside. Doubleday Canada, 1994. Unpag. $5.95 paper. ISBN 0-385-25431-8. **Dennis and the Big Clean-Up**. Adrian Raeside. Illus. author. Doubleday Canada, 1995. Unpag., $5.95 paper. ISBN 0-385-25488-1. **Hairs on Bears**. Geraldine Ryan-Lush. Illus. Normand Cousineau. Annick Press, 1994. Unpag., $4.95 paper, $14.95 lib. binding. ISBN 1-55037-352-8, 1-55037-351-X. **Toes in my Nose and other Poems**. Sheree Fitch. Illus. Molly Bobak. Doubleday Canada, 1987. Unpag, $6.95 paper. ISBN 0-385-25325-7. **The Cat Came Back**. Illus. Bill Slavin. Kids Can Press, 1992. Unpag., $4.95 paper. ISBN 1-55074-183-7. **Follow the Moon**. Sarah Weeks. Illus. Suzanne Duranceau. HarperCollins, 1995. Unpag., $21.95 cloth. ISBN 0-06-024442-9.

In Russell Hoban's quietly magnificent book, *Turtle Diary* (Pan Books, 1975), one of the characters, an author of picture books for children, suffers a crisis of identity. She questions the activity of making books for children at its most basic level, asserting rather courageously that it is a spurious occupation, designed to "[get] the children to agree that [this] is indeed a world":

> Each new generation of children has to be told: 'This is a world, this is what one does, one lives like this.' Maybe our constant fear is that a generation of children will come along and say: 'This is not a world, this is nothing, there's no way to live at all.' (100)

She is right, of course. We use books *on* children, often and often, to socialize them and encourage them to behave in ways we want them to behave (although I don't believe there is any evidence whatsoever that books make children neat, polite, and civic-minded. Other people do that, or not, as the case may be). We also, more dangerously, need children to shore up and keep relatively intact our large, inchoate assumptions of how the world works, and how it should be, with all our biases, prejudices, and uncertainties thrown in for good measure. So we offer them books and songs and pictures and all the bright baubles of what we call "culture," keeping our fingers crossed. We need them to be *in cahoots* with us, and as Russell Hoban (himself a gifted children's author) knows, there is something suspect about the whole arrangement.

If we accept that books are used in this way, as tools on children, and really there's no avoiding it, then in some deep unalterable way *all* children's books are propaganda. This is true at such an instinctive level that we virtually take it

for granted. And as it isn't really an option to do without books altogether, we live with it. But we need to retain an awareness of the dangers of books with an agenda, and to remember that books can be so much more than propaganda, that at their best they open up the imagination rather than fencing it in with rules and prohibitions. Which is when they achieve poetry.

Two books about Dennis the dragon, by Adrian Raeside, illustrate this point. Raeside, a very good political cartoonist, had turned his pen to children's books, and as one might expect from a cartoonist, whose job is, after all, to make points, these are books with an agenda. *Dennis the Dragon* may be summed up thus: Don't Smoke. And *Dennis and the Big Clean-Up* says: Recycle. Worthy messages both. But when a book can be reduced in this way, when the only point of its existence is to carry a slogan into the world, it is not a good book, worthy messages notwithstanding. Fortunately, children know when they are being "lectured at" as a young friend of mine puts it, and they usually have the wit to ignore it.

Now Raeside is a clever and witty illustrator, and his dragon family is skilfully drawn and often quite funny. But the first book, originally written by Joan Raeside, the author's mother, is by far the better written of the two: the verse in the second book is often quite lame and clumsy. And even allowing the politically correct subtexts of the books (which some people might be able to do), poor versification really cannot be tolerated in a children's book. Raeside might, I feel, be a fine illustrator of someone else's books. Here, however, he even defeats his own messages, for I must confess his smoky, slovenly, but cheerful family struck me as much more appealing characters than the self-righteous Dennis. They might smoke and litter, but hey, they sure seem like fun.

Theoretically, I suppose, the opposite end of the spectrum from books-with-a-noble-message is Nonsense. The whole point of nonsense is that it has no point. It is, well, nonsense. Perhaps this is why it is such a blessed relief. We aren't supposed to learn anything from it, except, perhaps, something about the playful, giggly side of our language, its potential for fun. *Hairs on Bears*, by Geraldine Ryan-Lush, is supposed to be nonsense. A single long verse about a shedding dog, with wonderfully manic, almost surrealistic illustrations by Normand Cousineau, it details a problem everyone with a furry pet understands: hair. Nothing wrong with the concept, here, nothing at all. But the execution is weak. Because, yes, there's nonsense and nonsense. Nonsense is language in a mirror, language reflecting on itself. You can't ignore the details here, because the details are all there is. So when Ryan-Lush writes "They landed here/ They landed there/ They landed on/ most everywhere" I hear not only the hackneyed rhyme, but the offence against grammar. In fact, this is all I hear. Nonsense can, and indeed should, offend against reason ("'Will you walk a little faster?' said the whiting to a snail,/ 'There's a porpoise close behind us, and he's treading on my tail.'") But it cannot commit solecism without a very good reason because language is all it is. Put limp rhyme and lazy grammar in a nonsense verse and it winks itself out of existence. It was never there at all.

Much better is Sheree Fitch, whose light-hearted rhymes in *Toes in My Nose* often ring with the laughter of nonsense:

> Poor little Billy
> Lost the button
> From his belly.
> Think that sounds
> A little silly?
> Well, just ask
> His sister Shelley.

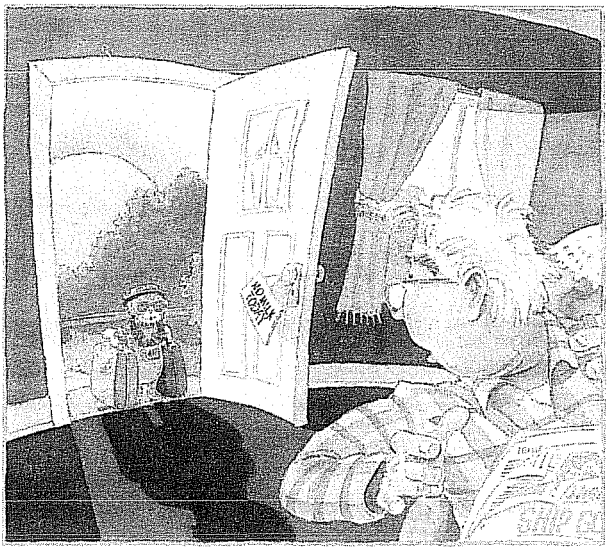
The book is a collection of light verse, on the small domestic subjects dear to the ears of young children: food, home, and whimsical minute fantasies like "The Wind Witch." Fitch is not always in top form, sometimes lapsing into clichés and ending her poems weakly or arbitrarily, as if she just can't think of anything else to say. But she strives against didacticism and has the nonsense poet's ear for the rich vagaries of sound and sense in words.

My main objection to this book is its design and illustration. Several of the pictures show that Molly Bobak *can* draw, but too many of these coloured line drawings are simply muddy and inept, and detract considerably from the poems. Likewise, the use of different type faces for each title in the book makes it seem, not lively, but scattered and frantic. The design and illustrations together give the book an ill-conceived and patchy look: it lacks focus, doesn't hold together with any integrity.

Finally, we have to consider two genuine picture books, where the pictures and the text are not merely indispensable to each other, but come together to form more than the sum of their parts. They both, in very different ways, exemplify what is meant when text and illustration are "well-married." First is Bill Slavin's *The Cat Came Back*, a traditional song about an oblivious and irrepressible feline who simply cannot be got rid of. Slavin's light-palette watercolours depict the cat as a cousin to Dennis the dragon's parents, a happy-go-lucky slob, fond of television and junk food. But of course there is the suggestion implicit in the book that persistent cats like this one "know" who belongs to them even before their owners are conscious of the bond. The cats choose. The humans involved simply take a longer or shorter time to realize it. This is a "soft" book, in tone, colour, and atmosphere — a happy rollicking rhyme without any dark shadows. Even before the cyclone comes, we are assured no mere act of God could ruffle a hair on this cat's tail.

By contrast, *Follow the Moon*, by Sarah Weeks, is a picture book with an edge. And its dark side, its shadow, gives it immense power. (Some people are like this too.) *Follow the Moon* is an extraordinary book. My first reaction to it was to read it again, and again, and again. It is a small but exceedingly satisfying tale married to amazingly lovely illustrations, and its effect is rich, vibrant, and moving. The design of the page and the elegant typeface add to its timeless aesthetic appeal.

Now the interesting thing is that *Follow the Moon*, like *Dennis the Dragon*, might be called a book with a message. Here, in fact explicit in the author's note,



Illus. by Bill Slavin, from *The Cat Came Back*

it runs something like this: Don't interfere with sea-turtles on their way to the sea, or more generally, Be good to wild creatures. But the important distinction is that the message is not the *raison d'être* of the book. The book is a small story about two individuals, a sea-turtle and a boy who befriends him. It is told from the turtle's point of view. The dangers to hatchling sea-turtles are quite real, not simply from humans, but more often from other animal predators, as the illustrations make clear. So the suspense in the story is genuine as well. We feel how very long a journey it is from the nest to the sea.

The text is a song, sung by the author in a tape accompanying the book (which is pleasant, but unnecessary. A book has its own integrity and doesn't need accoutrements). The words are not particularly explicit — it might be anyone talking, not just a sea-turtle. But this works in the book's favour, because it gives Suzanne Duranceau room to work. And what work she does! Her finely-textured illustrations render both boy and turtle unique beings, and are never mawkish or sentimental.

Probably we cannot avoid indoctrinating children with books. Perhaps not all indoctrination is a bad thing. But I still feel uneasy with any book with an agenda separate from literary value and truth to its own structure. The best achievement of *Follow the Moon* is that its ultimate message speaks on the side of mystery: the world is a much larger place than we think. We understand little of it. It can be wondrous.

Melody Collins Thomason *still objects to being lectured at. She is the author of a children's book,* The Magic Within.