

TRIUMPHS OF UTTERACHURE

Mabel Murple. Sheree Fitch. Illus. Maryann Kovalski. Doubleday Canada Limited, 1995. Unpag., \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 0-385-25480-6; **There Were Monkeys in My Kitchen!** Sheree Fitch. Illus. Marc Mongeau. Doubleday Canada Limited, 1994 (1st published 1992). Unpag., \$6.95 paper. ISBN 0-385-25470-9.

Sheree Fitch calls her work “utterachure” to stress its oral qualities. She has appeared on radio and television and is an accomplished performer of her work. Not surprisingly, her poems move with ease and never distort word order to force a rhyme or a rhythmic pattern.

Doubleday has reissued *There Were Monkeys All Around*, a very funny narrative about a little girl who suddenly finds her house full of assorted raucous simians. Ms. Fitch says that the book grew out of a moment when her sons brought basketballs into the kitchen and she shouted at them, “You monkeys get these basketballs out of my kitchen!” The book won the Mr. Christie Book Award for children under age eight. The language of the poetry fits the uproar of the action, with triple rhymes like “hilarious” and “gregarious.” The vocabulary is noteworthy. A few years ago an Alberta children’s author had an appearance in an elementary school cancelled because the principal read her book and decided that words like “bouillabaisse” were too difficult for his students. Fitch understands the value of an occasional unexpected word — “gorgonzola” or “crinolined.” Her story is illustrated with droll and colourful pictures by Marc Mongeau, who can portray chaos in superbly composed patterns. There is a lot going on in each illustration, much to discover, but his work doesn’t seem cluttered. His best picture shows a monkey lying in bed playing the bagpipes with puffed-out cheeks as other monkeys try on kilts.

The monkeys create pandemonium on a scale that *The Cat in the Hat* would savour. The story ends with the exit of the monkeys just as 49 RCMP officers enter chewing bubblegum — a truly Canadian dénouement. The narrator is hard put to explain why she called the Mounties for assistance when no monkeys can be seen. On the last page it appears that a new invasion is imminent: an elephant enters the front door and the narrator suspects that there may be several hundred more. Indeed, the reader can see the elephants stacked on the roof.

Mabel Murple is not so exuberant a book. It is entertaining, certainly. Mabel is a character mentioned in Fitch’s *Toes In My Nose*. Here she has her own book. She’s an imaginary purple character living in a purple universe. Fitch has her cook “super duper purple stew,” which “was served with purple ketchup/And Mabel’s maple syrple too!” There is no predicament to solve in this book, which decreases the humour, and Maryann Kovalski’s illustrations are not as entertaining as Marc Mongeau’s, though admittedly she had to work with a rather limited palette: purple with a few touches of brown, yellow or pink where needed. The book even has purple end papers. The vocabulary is lively in this book also:

“portico” makes an appearance, and Mabel’s teddy bear is named “Snickerknickerbox.” As in *There Were Monkeys in My Kitchen*, Fitch ends the book with an imaginative twist, introducing a character named Gertrude Green. Sheree Fitch’s talents are considerable and we can look forward to a long series of interesting characters and situations from this writer.

Bert Almon is a poet and teacher of creative writing at the University of Alberta. His seventh collection, *Earth Prime* (Brick Books, 1994) won the Writers’ Guild of Alberta Award in 1995.

A PENNY FOR YOUR THOUGHTS

Grandma’s Heart. Shenaaz Nanji. Illus. Rossitza Skortcheva Penney. Toronto: TSAR Publications, 1993. Unpag., \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-920661-35-1.

Teeny Weeny Penny. Shenaaz Nanji. Illus. Rossitza Skortcheva Penney. Toronto: TSAR Publications, 1993. Unpag., \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-920661-36-X.

Shenaaz Nanji’s two picture books, *Grandma’s Heart* and *Teeny Weeny Penny*, centre on the child’s growing awareness of the world outside herself and the interconnectedness of the family circle. To use Piaget’s terminology, Shaira—she is the central character in both books—wavers between the pre-operational phase, in which she views the world from a self-referential, egocentric perspective, and the stage of concrete operations, where she receives the first glimmerings of the relationship of parts to a whole and wholes to the parts. In short, she learns much more than the importance of sharing through her discovery and acceptance of the intricate web of family relationships.

In *Grandma’s Heart* Shaira moves from a world where everything works according to “My game. My rules. I always win,” and in which “Nani-Ma is MY grandma,” to “Nani-Ma is OUR Grandma.” Shenaaz Nanji orders this recognition in the form of a cumulative narrative which reflects the puzzling pressures the little girl experiences as each member of the family claims Grandma’s attention.

Shaira ventures further from her private world in *Teeny Weeny Penny* when she faces various pressures by friends and family to spend or save a special penny she has found. The Shaira who always wins in *Grandma’s Heart* this time has the advantage of a lucky penny. Winning pennies from her father enables her to satisfy the expectations of oth-

