Views, Reviews & Interviews
Points de vue, comptes rendus, entrevues

Approaching the Other in Twelve Canadian Picture Books

—Debra Dudek

Bushey, Jeanne. *Orphans in the Sky*. Illus. Vladyana Krykorka. Calgary: Red Deer, 2004. $19.95 hc. ISBN 0-88995-291-4.

Carling, Amelia Lau. *Sawdust Carpets*. Toronto: Groundwood, 2005. $16.95 hc. ISBN 0-88899-625-X.

Ellis, Sarah. *Ben Over Night*. Illus. Kim LaFave. Markham, ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2005. $19.95 hc. ISBN 1-55041-807-6.

Graham, Georgia. *A Team Like No Other*. Calgary: Red Deer, 2004. $19.95 hc. ISBN 0-88995-290-6.

Johnson, E. Pauline. *The Lost Island*. Illus. Atanas Matsoureff. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2004. $22.95 hc. ISBN 1-894965-07-8.

McLellan, Stephanie Simpson. *Leon's Song*. Illus. Dianna Bonder. Markham, ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2004. $19.95 hc. ISBN 1-55041-813-0.

Moore, Sean. *Always Run Up the Stairs*. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2003. $19.95 hc. ISBN 1-894965-05-1.

Munsch, Robert. *Smelly Socks*. Illus. Michael Martchenko. Markham, ON: Scholastic, 2004. 30 pp. $6.99 pb. ISBN 0-439-96707-4.

Parlato, Stephen. *The World That Loved Books*.

Vancouver: Simply Read, 2003. $22.95 hc. ISBN 1894965-04-3.
Pogorelsky, Antony. *The Little Black Hen*. 1829. Illus. Gennady Spirin. Retold by Elizabeth James. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2003. $23.95 hc. ISBN 1-894965-03-5.
Weller, Duncan. *Night Wall*. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2005. $19.95 hc. ISBN 1-894965-13-2.
---. *Spacesnake*. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2004. $19.95 hc. ISBN 1-89496-509-4.

When Perry Nodelman invited me to write a feature-length article about twelve recently published Canadian picture books for *CCL/LCJ*, I wondered whether it would be possible to link twelve books united in the first instance by time period and place of publication only. Perhaps because Nodelman chose books that he thought might in some way relate to my current research on multiculturalism and children's literature,[1] it became obvious fairly quickly that the books were aligned around two common issues: multiculturalism and fear. One way to bring these issues together is to think about them as dealing with self-other interactions, which John Stephens argues is one of the primary themes of picture books (198–99). In this article, I examine self-other interactions via a theory of critical multiculturalism and argue that the books that move most successfully beyond assuming a universal hierarchy of multiculturalism are the ones that demonstrate how the figure of the stranger challenges the group by being simultaneously located both inside and outside it.

In his introduction to the special issue of *Continuum* titled "Critical Multiculturalism," Tom O'Regan states: "The inclusion of indigenous issues under the multicultural rubric is one reason for calling the issue '*Critical* Multiculturalism' rather than simply 'multiculturalism'" (1). In Canada and Australia at least, many Indigenous peoples do not want Indigenous issues to be subsumed under the category of multiculturalism because multiculturalism is largely understood to be concerned with migrant issues. Elsewhere, I have argued that critical multiculturalism must be put to work as a reading and writing strategy in order to examine and to contest how race anchors culture in multicultural discourses in their current manifestations.[2] In this essay, I employ the strategy of critical multiculturalism in order to include Aboriginal issues while flagging the unease with which I make this move.

In *The Ticklish Subject*, Slavoj Žižek connects

multiculturalism and racism even more explicitly:

> multiculturalism . . . treats *each* local culture as the colonizer treats colonized people—as "natives" whose *mores* are to be carefully studied and "respected" . . . multiculturalism involves a patronizing Eurocentrist distance and/or respect for local cultures without roots in one's own particular culture. In other words, multiculturalism is a disavowed, inverted, self-referential form of racism, a "racism with a distance"—it "respects" the Other's identity, conceiving the Other as a self-enclosed "authentic" community towards which the multiculturalist maintains a distance made possible by his/her privileged universal position. (216)

. . . it is useful to be cognizant of when multiculturalism is being represented from or within a privileged universalist/Eurocentric position.

Žižek is being overtly adversarial in taking this hard line on multiculturalism, but it is useful to be cognizant of when multiculturalism is being represented from or within a privileged universalist/Eurocentric position. This is not to say that *all* representations of multiculturalism are *always* flawed in this way. Indeed, when the figure of the stranger is not represented as *only* other, as *only* outside and distant, then this universalist multiculturalism becomes fruitfully complicated.

In order to understand how the figure of the stranger can be used to strategize against fear of the Other, rather than to invoke fear and racism, I employ Georg Simmel's theory of the stranger. Simmel states:

> The unity of nearness and remoteness involved in every human relation is organized in the phenomena of the stranger, in a way which may be most briefly formulated by saying that in the relationship to him [*sic*], distance means that he [*sic*], who is close by, is far, and strangeness means that he [*sic*], who is also far, is actually near. For, to be a stranger is naturally a very positive relation; it is a specific form of interaction. . . . The stranger, like the poor and like sundry "inner enemies," is an element of the group itself. His [*sic*] position as a full-fledged member involves both being outside it and confronting it. (qtd. in Allen 57)

I read Simmel's theory of the stranger as a strategy for understanding how fear of the unknown, fear of the

strange, fear of the Other, can be eliminated once one understands that the stranger is part of one's group and part of oneself.

The most visually disturbing book of the twelve under review is *The World that Loved Books* by Stephen Parlato. Even now, I open it with reluctance, wary about confronting the bold pictures, which perhaps says much about my own aversion to the seemingly familiar made strange. The basic premise of the book is that the world that loved books is a world in which beings literally became what they read. Thus, a "man reading about flowers became flowers" and "[a] dinosaur reading about frogs and salamanders became frogs & salamanders." Each page represents a single image: a garish silhouette of a reader metamorphosed into a collage of what is read. For example, the rhinoceros reading about butterflies and caterpillars is recognizable as a rhinoceros because of the outline of its body, but instead of wrinkled leathery skin, its skin is a brightly-coloured photo collage of butterflies and caterpillars. Its movements, however, do not become like a butterfly or a caterpillar; it neither flies nor crawls. The becoming, then, is a surface becoming only.

In fact, against the glossy white background, the images are without depth or movement, which suggests that the transformations are about changes in flesh tone only. Familiar outlines—of horse, rhinoceros, dinosaur, man, woman—are made disturbingly strange because each figure looks as though it is being consumed or suffocated by a horde of foreign bodies. There is no interaction between the Self and the Other it becomes, which implies both a confrontation with difference and otherness at the level of surface appearance and a fear of being taken over and threatened by a group of uncontrollable others. The most disturbing picture for me is the almost unrecognizable image of a snake whose jaws are open wide, so the reader is in the position of being swallowed, which perhaps accounts for my initial and continued squeamishness about reading this book.

The book concludes with a strangely nationalist image, which suggests that a racialized reading may be brought to bear on the rest of the images. In the final sequence of text and image, a horse reads a book about flags and becomes a collage of Canadian flags. Unlike all the other beings in the book whose flesh turns into a heterogeneous collage, the horse becomes homogenous; her skin is made up solely of Canadian flags, and she feels "proud waving even at strangers." At one level, this book is literally about becoming an other through reading, but this analysis does not hold, and, in fact, weakens the reading experience. To read about an other is to have insight into someone else's ways of being in the world, which does not happen here. Indeed, it is telling that the horse of Canadian flags waves but

does not approach or speak with strangers. While I understand the pun on the word "waving," for flags may wave in the wind, the word "even" accentuates the distance between the horse and the strangers; this is multiculturalism at a distance. Tellingly, the horse will wave at strangers but will not become a symbol of an other, even at the level of skin; this horse's skin is not covered with flags from many nations but from Canada only.

In Georgia Graham's *A Team Like No Other*, the distance in a self-other relationship is examined and reassessed when a dog sacrifices itself to save its owner's life. Inspired by an actual event and rendered in stunning chalk pastels, *A Team Like No Other* tells the story of Stephen and his Husky, Skoki. One day, while sledding with a team of eight Huskies in the Rocky Mountains of Alberta, the sled hits a log, which causes Stephen's father to jolt out of the sled, leaving Stephen alone in a runaway sled heading for the edge of a cliff. At the last moment before the sled plummets over the cliff, Stephen yells to Skoki to stop, which causes her to throw herself in front of the dogs and sled, saving them all. Skoki is hurt but only badly enough to ride back in the sled with Stephen. The book ends with the paragraph, "Skoki, Timber and the other dogs were a team of eight. But a boy and his dog—that's a team like no other."

On one hand, apart from the saccharine ending, and setting aside the fact that it reinscribes the gendered adage that there is nothing like the relationship between a man and his dog, this book is a seemingly innocuous example of Nodelman's category of the "sort-of-wild" Canadian Pastoral ("Apple Pie" 96). On the other hand, however, there is something disturbing about the comparison made between the team of dogs and the boy-dog team. The comparison distinguishes between type and ownership. The team of dogs is a team of eight that relies on equality of both species and skill, while the team of two relies upon ownership and subservience. The phrase "a boy and *his* dog" reveals in the pronoun that Skoki belongs to Stephen, and this relationship of ownership is made obvious in one of the illustrations, which labels the box the Huskies travel in as "cargo." Even the title of the book reiterates the notion that there is nothing better than a relationship with an other that relies on unequal power dynamics, which reinforce the hierarchal binaries of self/other, human/animal, and owner/worker. It is only when the other sacrifices itself for its master that the dog, who used to be kept at a distance, is brought close and allowed to travel in the sled. The stranger, then, is recognized as part of the group, but this recognition does not extend to the rest of the Huskies, for they have not made a similar sacrifice.

The Little Black Hen by Antony Pogorelsky, retold here by Elizabeth James, and *Sawdust Carpets* by Amelia Lau Carling, fall under Nodelman's category

of "Once Upon a Time in a Land Far Away," which he analyzes as books that "represent an ongoing interest in and audience for books about the multicultural heritage of Canada's citizens—and also of those in the U.S., for it's the increasing focus on multicultural issues in U.S. curricula that makes books of this sort potentially competitive in the continental marketplace" ("Apple Pie" 99–100). Both of these books are set outside Canada, one in Russia and one in Guatemala. Both books deal with a protagonist who encounters another culture and who must learn to respect the practices of this culture. Both protagonists, at one point, fail in the challenge to respect and include the stranger, but then make up for this failure and learn from their mistakes. John Stephens claims that, "[a]rguably, the most pervasive theme in children's fiction is the transition within the individual from infantile solipsism to maturing social awareness" (3), which is certainly the case here. Both protagonists become socially aware of the existence of a culture that is other to their own and also of their ability to participate in that culture, while maintaining their distance from it.

The Little Black Hen is a Russian fairy tale about the privileged Alyosha, "who was sent to the best boarding school in the beautiful city of St. Petersburg." One day, Alyosha's favourite playmate, a hen he calls Blackey, is in danger of being killed by the cook. Alyosha saves Blackey by paying the cook a gold coin. As a reward for saving him, Blackey takes Alyosha to his world below the boarding school. Here he is presented to the king, who grants Alyosha a wish for saving the life of his ambassador, the transformed hen Blackey. Alyosha wishes he "'knew all the answers at school and never had to study.'" The king reluctantly grants Alyosha's wish but warns him that, if he ever tells anyone else about this secret kingdom, then the happiness of the kingdom will be destroyed and they will suffer great hardship. Alyosha goes back up to his world and excels at school, but when pressured by the teacher to explain how he knows all his lessons, Alyosha reveals the ambassador's secret, thus betraying the stranger, who has become close. That night, Blackey returns in shackles to say goodbye to Alyosha and to say that he will be comforted only when Alyosha becomes a "kind and worthy boy again."

The most obvious cue about the racialized nature of the relationship between Alyosha and Blackey is the fair skin of Alyosha and the black skin (and feathers) of Blackey, a characteristic to which the hen's name overtly calls attention. It is the only name given to the ambassador in the book. In effect, Alyosha names Blackey into being and makes the colour of his skin the central referent of his identity. Although Alyosha is a child who is not royal, he still maintains power over Blackey, effectively turning Blackey and his people into refugees, for the law of

their kingdom states that, "if our secret is revealed, we must leave the underground kingdom and move to far away lands." In order for Alyosha to become a socially aware child, then, he exiles an entire race of people, who have lived "in peace and happiness for centuries."

Sawdust Carpets more obviously engages with two prevalent dictums of multicultural ideology: unity in diversity and tolerance towards strangers who have become neighbours. Marketed by Groundwood Books in its press release as a "multicultural Easter treat!" about "beauty, religious celebration and tolerance," *Sawdust Carpets* reifies the notion of a static multiculturalism in which cultures exist beside one another and interact, but do not transform one another. Instead of multiculturalism, Vijay Prashad advocates for polyculturalism:

> Multiculturalism tends toward a static view of history, with cultures already forged and with people enjoined to respect and tolerate each cultural world. Polyculturalism, on the other hand, offers a dynamic view of history, mainly because it argues for cultural complexity, and it suggests that our communities of the present are historically formed and that these communities move between the dialectic of cultural presence and antiracism, between a demand for acknowledgment and for an obliteration of hierarchy. (53–54)

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On the one hand, the prologue explains how the Guatemalan Holy Week "is as strong as it was when the Spaniards introduced it long ago, though it has been transformed by its contact with Guatemalan native culture," which suggests a polycultural presence. On the other hand, the rest of the book goes to great lengths to show how Spanish and Chinese cultures co-exist but do not transform one another in Antigua. This dynamic is most obvious in the scene in which the unnamed girl, through whom the narrative is focalized, notices the statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe standing next to the Kuan Yin, "our Chinese goddess": "I thought they looked like friends. Incense swirled around them, bringing them together." Ironically, in the illustration that accompanies these words, the incense does not swirl around the Virgin and the Kuan Yin but instead rises between them, in effect creating a smoky wall.

This image of the two goddesses symbolizing

racial tolerance and harmony recurs again, at the conclusion of the book, and stands for the young girl's movement from solipsism to social awareness. The book's narrative follows the girl as she visits her relatives for the baptism of her cousin. The baptism takes place on Easter Sunday, at the end of Holy Week, during which the neighbours make sawdust carpets upon which the procession that honours the death of Christ will walk. When the girl realizes that her carpet will be ruined, she stands in front of it, so it will not be destroyed. One of the neighbours, Don Ortiz, takes her by the hand and explains that the destruction of the carpets is their custom, which symbolizes the cyclical nature of life and death. The book concludes with her realization that "Don Ortiz was right. We made the rug for the procession. When it was destroyed, we could think about making another one. In the corner, the Virgin of Guadalupe and the Kuan Yin glowed in the warmth of the candle." The verbal and visual texts contradict one another, however. Instead of a final image of cultural harmony, the young girl is positioned in the centre of the double-page illustration, while the Virgin and the Kuan Yin stand apart on the left margin of the image. That the picture book locates the girl in a central position—while a potentially polycultural presence embodied in the figures of the Virgin and the Kuan Yin are marginalized—demonstrates that the so-called multicultural ideology of the book does not open a centralized space to the strangers in the group.

If *The Little Black Hen* and *Sawdust Carpets* demonstrate an ongoing interest in Canadian heritage, then *The Lost Island*, *Orphans in the Sky*, and *Smelly Socks* extend this heritage to include Indigenous communities and narratives. Originally published as one of the stories in *Legends of Vancouver*, *The Lost Island* is written by the famous Mohawk writer E. Pauline Johnson and illustrated by Bulgarian artist Atanas Matsoureff, whose "paintings are prized for their beauty and sensitivity in depicting the world of nature" (dust cover). *The Lost Island* is narrated as a conversation between an unnamed man (one wonders why this figure is not illustrated as a woman, given that there is no gender stipulated in Johnson's text) and his "old tillicum." The book tells the story of "one great Indian medicine man," who dreamt of the rise of the "white man" and the construction of Vancouver, which would mean the destruction of the Indians' current way of life. Once one of the tribe finds "the Island," then the strength of the medicine man will return to the people. Until then, "his courage, his fearlessness and his strength" live forever on "the Island" and "never die—they live for one's children and grandchildren." The final images show the dead medicine man, four totem poles, and an ephemeral buck standing in a misty forest.

While the timbre of Johnson's words is foreboding, it does convey a feeling of hope for future generations, which is not depicted in the accompanying illustrations. Instead, the washed-out watercolours provide a sense of a time and a people gone by. Atanas's depiction of nature, and of the stereotype of the "noble savage," who exists at one with nature, does little to enhance Johnson's words in the twenty-first century. As Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer claim in *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*,

> Many texts by writers of European backgrounds depict nobly innocent aboriginal North Americans or blissfully ingenuous African Americans whose lack of sophistication prevents them from taking part in white corruption. The apparent nobility turns out to be just a polite way of asserting a belittling deviation from white normality. Like children, people of color are assumed to be closer to nature, theoretically better because they are less civilized, indeed, less human. (168)

I would extend this idea to include the depiction of Indigenous peoples by illustrators of European backgrounds. I cannot help but wonder why contemporary images, perhaps done by an Aboriginal artist, were not chosen to accompany Johnson's text. I can envision vibrant colours leaping off the page in order to invigorate an old story and to demonstrate to children that the future generations about whom Johnson wrote live today and continue to hope for the future.

Orphans in the Sky, by the award-winning author/illustrator team of Jeanne Bushey and Vladyana Krykorka, is another picture book in which a non-Indigenous illustrator (and author in this instance) construct an Indigenous text. The story was "inspired by a traditional Inuit legend," which one might presume Bushey learned about during her time living in the Arctic, for "[a]lthough she has now moved to coastal British Columbia, she hopes to keep the events of her life in the Arctic alive in her writing for years to come" (publisher's press release). While Bushey's time in the Arctic is foregrounded in both the press release and the author's biography on the book's dust cover, one might expect the publisher and/or the author to be more forthcoming about a non-Inuit author's access to an Inuit story.

Rendered in tempera on watercolour paper and Indian ink on scratchboard, the illustrations provide energy and movement to the story, unlike the static nostalgic watercolours of *The Lost Island*. *Orphans in the Sky* tells the story of a sister and brother, who become lightning and thunder. Brother and Little Sister are left behind when their community crosses the river looking for a better hunting ground. After Brother and Little Sister realize that they cannot

live even temporarily with any of the animals, they decide to live in the sky until their people come back for them. In order to entertain themselves and to stop themselves from being afraid, Little Sister strikes her flint and Brother crinkles his sealskin, thus becoming lightning and thunder.

Like *The Lost Island, Orphans in the Sky* represents Indigenous peoples as close to nature and indeed, in this case, literally becoming nature. The emphasis on the story taking its inspiration from a legend seems to invite a reading that resists criticism and celebrates authenticity. If, however, the book is *inspired* by a legend, then why not make the story contemporary? This book neither represents Inuit children to themselves nor represents Inuit peoples to non-Inuit children in ways that position them to understand another culture. Instead, Inuit peoples remain the stuff of legends and not of this world.

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In Nodelman's 2003 review of Canadian picture books, he found that "multicultural stories of life in Canada now . . . are strangely rare" ("Apple Pie" 101), and I find this absence to be apparent in the books reviewed here, as well. The only book that deals with a contemporary racialized protagonist or community is Robert Munsch's *Smelly Socks*. While Nodelman gives a thumbs-up to Munsch for "still being rambunctious and hilarious" claiming that *Smelly Socks* is "yet another brilliant picture book about children and chaos" ("Where We've Come From"), I am a little more cautious. On the one hand, I agree that Munsch and Martchenko have created another exuberant carnivalesque story that celebrates community in general and a First Nations' community in particular, which is rare enough in children's literature. Furthermore, I also enjoy the girl protagonist's dissident attitude as she challenges, or at least disregards, seemingly entrenched social standards of cleanliness. On the other hand, however, this book relies upon the stereotype that occurs in *The Lost Island* and *Orphans in the Sky*: that Indigenous peoples are at one with nature.

Smelly Socks revolves around and is focalized through a young girl named Tina. In the book, Tina convinces her grandfather to take her across the river to the big sock store. Tina is so happy with her multicoloured socks that she refuses to take them off. After twenty days of wearing the socks, a flock

of Canada geese, two moose, ducks, raccoons, squirrels, and a skunk all fall over from the smell. Tired of the smell, Tina's human friends carry her to the river, hold her, take off her socks, and wash them. The book ends with Tina (walking her pet skunk, who wears matching socks to Tina, on a leash) asking for a shirt to go with her socks. When her mother asks her to promise to wash her shirt, Tina declines, saying that her friends will do it for her. The final image shows five hands and one paw throwing a grimy Tina and skunk into the river.

Tina's refusal to follow conventions of cleanliness casts her into the role of carnivalesque heroine, as does her alignment with the skunk. Readers are positioned to celebrate Tina's dissident nature but also to see her as someone, indeed as the only one, both united with and having power over nature. Her smell affects animals of all species while the illustration accompanying her wearing her clean socks shows her, the only human, surrounded by a medley of animals. Fish high-five each other. A frog waves at a loon. Huskies howl. A bear scratches its head. A fox sits amongst rabbits. A moose grins. Mallard ducks land, and a troop of beavers file back home. And in the central foreground Tina waves at a skunk who looks lovingly back at her, an emotion made overt by the heart hovering over the skunk's head. Tina is the focalizer of the story but is a child whom no reader can possibly emulate. According to the author's biography and the dedication, the book was created for and is dedicated to Tina Fabian of the Hay River Dene Reserve Katlodeeche First Nation. That she is created for, dedicated to, and named after a "real" person suggests to non-Indigenous readers that Tina's relationship with animals is based on reality, while creating an hyperbolized version of Tina, which seems to misrepresent Indigenous peoples to themselves.[3]

While *Ben Over Night* by Sarah Ellis is a rather ordinary boy-finding-inner-strength book, it does complicate this pattern by casting Ben's sister as the person who helps Ben overcome his fear of the strange. Rendered in bold cartoon-like images with strong black outlines, the illustrations exhibit the playfulness and solidity of the characters. While Ben imagines himself as a pirate, a potato, and a cook when he is over at Pete's place, he initially fears sleeping overnight because of the "strange night noises." His mother, father, and brother offer suggestions that do not work. As I mentioned, the interesting aspect of this book for me is that it is Ben's oldest sister who offers the suggestion that Ben imagine himself at home when he most fears the night. Indeed, one of the recurring plot devices that I have been following in my studies of children's literature is that of the dissident girl figure, who is able to imagine alternative ways of being in the world, who is not afraid to challenge the status quo.

In these books, white, middle-class girls occupy space as strangers, who are inside a group because of their race and class but outside because of their gender, and thus confront the group while being part of it.

The gender politics in *Leon's Song* by Stephanie Simpson McLellan are primarily business as usual. The world of Leon's pond is a boys-only space. The challenge to the status quo in *Leon's Song* comes in Leon's age. Leon is an old frog, who reflects back on his life and yearns to be special. He looks around the pond and compares himself to the handsome Orlando, the fast swimmer Marco, the phenomenal jumper Alonzo, the haunting singer Romeo, and finds himself lacking. One day, while listening to Romeo's song, Leon notices an enemy in their midst, who was "raised by Romeo's beautiful strains." Leon intuits that the "large and unfamiliar" fish is something that has the power to "change the world" merely by the monstrous fish's size and appearance. Readers are positioned to sympathize with Leon and to see that, even though he is old, he can still be a heroic figure, who recognizes an enemy by sight and who protects the community from a stranger in its midst by sealing the seeming enemy away forever in an underwater cavern.

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A book that deals with a similar topic but concludes with a very different outcome is Duncan Weller's *Spacesnake*. The narrative takes place on a barren asteroid ring—illustrated entirely in black-and-white pen-and-ink—that is under threat from "a mechanical monstrosity, a sinister string of metal tubes and riveted plates. Its flight was aimless, its purpose no good, and the only results of its despicable deeds were destructive." Neither the verbal text nor the illustrations, however, depict the horrors that the Spacesnake wreaks upon the Asterians. The blue Spacesnake swirls itself around and through the asteroids causing the Asterians to run, scream, and flee, but seemingly the threat of this stranger is worse than its actual deeds. Eventually, the Spacesnake is lured by the smell of baked goodies, which causes it to slip out of its Spacesnake suit and to reveal itself as an extremely cute, humble runt of a snake more akin to a worm than a monster. The community casts the little snake into empty space, where it eventually

runs out of fuel and seems doomed to live out the remainder of its life alone and sorrowful, which, the narrator announces, "is just the way it *should* be. The End." This conclusion, however, turns out to be a false ending, for on the following page are the words "Hey, you!" beside which a ladder dangles. The final illustration shows the little snake being poured a cup of tea by a young girl who lives on a grassy, treed, green asteroid (think *Le Petit Prince*).

The simple, muted green and blue of the girl's asteroid and the absence of words stand as clever contrasts to the stark asteroid ring depicted throughout the rest of the book. The Asterians of the ring exist as a technologically based community in which people live primarily indoors, isolated from each other and preoccupied by a "special machine each Asterian had in their asteroid," the ironically named Interpet, which "was a television, telephone, computer, video eye, DVD player, HDCD crossover, a 9-wing game blaster, and QLP-3D-Zxer Vision 5, with roll-around plasma infiltrators and quadraphonic sound." The illustrations and word-heavy pages are as uninviting to the reader as the asteroid ring is to the little worm. The surface of each asteroid seems barren and full of craters, unlike the verdant world the girl has created, playing with her teddy bears, books, cards, and a snakes-and-ladders game. She lives as the dissident, the stranger, whose alternative lifestyle challenges the ideologies of the ring, which fears and banishes the Other, instead of inviting him or her to tea.

Weller's *Night Wall* deals with similar themes and features another girl protagonist whose ways of seeing and being in the world challenge hegemonic ideologies; in this case, the young girl's older cousin wants to build a wall around herself to keep strange others out. The story is set in a liminal space between "where the roads ended and the walking paths in the great forests began." Sarah and her older cousin Julie rent a cottage, and when Julie has difficulty sleeping because of the "imagined ghosts and leering monsters," she hires a contractor to build a wall around the cabin. In that in-between time after sunset and before moonrise, monsters arrive at the wall. Sarah is unafraid of them, but Julie insists that they try to scare the monsters away. The more Sarah and Julie tell the monsters to go away, the more monsters arrive. Julie calls the contractors back and tells them to tear the wall down, and the monsters never approach them again.

My first reaction to the monsters' attraction to the wall is the infamous quotation from the movie *Field of Dreams*: "If you build it, he will come." What I enjoy most about this book is that the narrative is neither obvious nor the resolution simple. Monstrous others do exist—and, indeed, they multiply the more they are shunned—but they are cartoon-like and not threatening to the child. Once the wall is torn down, however, once the Self tears down the barriers to the

Other, then fear, too, disappears, and in this case, the monsters shrink to become the small dolls that Sarah and Julie discover hidden in a small violet chest in the forest, which Sarah takes home with her. The metaphoric implication here is that, if people carry the Other within their chests, then there is nothing to fear.

The final book I shall discuss, *Always Run Up the Stairs* by Sean Moore, also resists a simple resolution. The story unfolds in monochromatic sketches, with each page washed in varying tones of a single colour. Thus, the unnamed protagonist changes skin tones in each illustration and becomes the same colour as the monsters. The narrative follows a rather simple premise: no one can assure the protagonist that there are no monsters in the basement, so he (although arguably the gender of the protagonist also is not obvious) advises the "you" to whom the story is addressed to "always run up the stairs." The child protagonist tries to seek comfort from his parents that there are no monsters, but they offer no reassurance. He develops strategies to overcome his fears, which include baking cookies, playing cards, building laundry forts, and playing hide-and-seek with the monsters, but, in the end, he does none of these activities. The book ends with two questions: "There must be someone who knows somewhere, do those things really live down there? Should I ask the thing that's hiding under my bed?"

As in *Night Wall*, the illustrations demonstrate that monsters do exist; these books do not try to convince readers that the Other is not present. The repeated questions throughout *Always Run Up the Stairs* act as a challenge to the reader to name an authority who will provide the truth, who will set the child at ease about the presence of strangers in the house, but the interrogative ending provides no such closure. Furthermore, the narrative extends beyond the final question to the author's biography. The author's image is rendered as a caricature not unlike the illustrations within the narrative (but drawn by a different artist), and the biography reads as a poem:

Born and raised in Toronto,
He moved to Vancouver.
For someone who
Had been nowhere else,
This was quite a manoeuvre.
One summer quickly
Turned to five years, as
One child's dream became
A young man's career.
From a boy to a man,
He was left in amazement
But he was still afraid of
A noise in the basement.

Thus, a rather simple story about a commonplace fear of basement noises addresses larger fears about the proximity of strangers, who confront one's sense of security, a fear that does not disappear with adulthood.

These twelve picture books, published in Canada between 2003 and 2005, demonstrate one of the recurring issues in picture books for children: self-other interaction, which represents the figure of the child developing into a socially aware being. Nearly half of these books are marketed to address multicultural issues, which, when read via critical multiculturalism, includes Indigenous issues. Another large portion of these books addresses fear of the Other, who is strange. The most thought-provoking, and in my opinion the most interesting and important, books resist platitudes and easy resolutions that affirm the status quo. Instead, books such as *Spacesnake*, *Night Wall*, and *Always Run Up the Stairs*, all published by the small, experimental West Coast publisher Simply Read, challenge the reader to acknowledge and approach the Other, and indeed to recognize the positive relationship of the stranger within the group, for it is the stranger who confronts, makes visible, and challenges hegemonic ideologies and thereby becomes a figure of social change. These three books demonstrate how the Self is always already in the process of becoming, and encourage the reader to replace building a wall with inviting a stranger to tea.

Notes

[1] I am currently working with Clare Bradford and Wenche Ommundsen on an ARC-funded project entitled "Building Cultural Citizenship: Multiculturalism and Children's Literature."

[2] See Dudek, "Dogboys and Lost Things; or Anchoring the Floating Signifier: Critical Multiculturalism and Australian Children's Literature,"*Ariel*, forthcoming.

[3] It is worth noting that placing the names of real people in hyperbolized fantasy situations is a typical Munsch convention. While insider audiences may be aware of this misrepresentation and enjoy it as comedy, strangers to the group may find themselves feeling left out.

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