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What Children Are or Should Be / Perry Nodelman

Morning Glory Monday. Arlene Alda. Illus. Maryann Kovalski. Tundra, 2003. \$22.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-620-X.

Trees Are Hanging from the Sky. Jorge Argueta. Illus. Rafael Yockteng. \$15.95 cloth. Groundwood, 2003. ISBN 0-88899-509-1.

Zipitio. Jorge Argueta. Illus. Gloria Calderón. Groundwood, 2003. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-487-7.

Rude Ramsay and the Roaring Radishes. Margaret Atwood. Illus. Dusan Petricic. Key Porter, 2003. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55263-244-X.

Stanley's Party. Linda Bailey. Illus. Bill Slavin. Kids Can, 2003. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55337-382-0.

How Hot Was It? Jane Barclay. Illus. Janice Donato. Lobster, 2003. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-894222-70-9.

The Waiting Dog. Carolyn Beck. Illus. Andrea Beck. Kids Can, 2003. \$17.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55337-006-6.

The Song Within My Heart. David Bouchard. Illus. Allen Sapp. Raincoast, 2002. \$21.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55192-559-1.

Ode to Newfoundland. Sir Cavindish Boyle. Illus. Geoff Butler. Tundra, 2003. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-631-5.

My Home Bay. Anne Laurel Carter. Illus. Alan and Lea Daniel. Tundra, 2003. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-633-1.

Click! Shutta Crum. Illus. John Beder. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2003. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55055-074-5.

Bagels from Benny. Aubrey Davis. Illus. Dusan Petricic. Kids Can, 2003. \$17.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55337-417-7.

Four Pictures by Emily Carr. Nicolas Debon. Greenwood, 2003. \$15.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-532-6.

Evie's Garden. Michael Forman. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2003. \$22.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55005-070-2.

The Small Miracle. Paul Gallico, retold by Bob Barton. Illus. Carolyn Croll. Tundra, 2003. \$22.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-650-1.

Goodnight Sam. Marie-Louise Gay. Greenwood, 2003. \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-530-X.

Emma's Story. Deborah Hodge. Illus. Song Nan Zhang. Tundra, 2003. \$22.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-632-3.

Peter's Pixie. Donn Kushner. Illus. Sylvie Daigneault. Tundra, 2003. \$22.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-603-X.

Cabbagehead. Loris Lesynski. Annick, 2003. \$18.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-805-8.

Scarlet Pony: Adventures in the Great Canadian North Country. Rachael Lewis. Illus. Stephanie Verheyen. Scarlet, 2002. \$19.95 paper. ISBN 0-9681661-0-5.

In Abby's Hands. Wendy Lewis. Illus. Marilyn Mets and Peter Ledwon. Red Deer, 2003. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88995-282-5.

Daybreak, Nightfall. Jorge Lujan. Illus. Manuel Monroy. Greenwood, 2003. \$15.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-486-9.

Ma, I'm a Farmer. Michael Martchenko. Annick, 2003. \$18.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-697-7.

Old Bird. Irene Morck. Illus. Muriel Wood. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2003. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55041-695-2.

Safe and Sound. Barbara Nichol. Illus. Anja Reichel. Northern Lights, 2003. \$22.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88995-284-1.

Pianomania! Manjusha Pawagi. Illus. Lia Milkau. Second Story, 2003. \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 1-986764-63-0.

Animachines. Debora Pearson. Illus. Nora Hilb. Annick, 2003. \$17.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-797-3.

The Subway Mouse. Barbara Reid. North Winds/Scholastic, 2003. \$21.99 cloth. ISBN 0-439-97468-2.

Eugene's Story. Richard Scrimger. Illus. Gillian Johnston. Tundra, 2003. \$18.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-544-0.

1 2 3. Tom Slaughter. Tundra, 2003. \$14.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-664-1.

Yesterday's Santa and the Chanukah Miracle. Sarah Hart Snowbell. Illus. Patty Gallinger. Napoleon, 2002. \$12.95 paper. ISBN 0-929141-14-8.

We'll All Go Exploring. Maggee Spicer and Richard Thompson. Illus. Kim LaFave. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2003. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55041-732-0.

Salmon Secret. David Suzuki and Sarah Ellis. Illus. Sheena Lott. David Suzuki Foundation/Greystone, 2003. \$18.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55054-937-5.

The Balloon Sailors. Diane Swanson. Illus. Krystyna Lipka-Sztarballo. Annick, 2003. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-809-0.

The Paint Box. Maxine Trottier. Illus. Stella East. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2003. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55041-804-1.

Suki's Kimono. Cheri Uegaki. Illus. Stéphane Jorisch. Kids Can, 2003. \$17.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55337-084-8.

Rachel's Gift. Richard Ungar. Tundra, 2003. \$19.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-616-1.

The Man Who Walked the Earth. Ian Wallace. Groundwood, 2003. \$17.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-545-8.

The Naked Lady. Ian Wallace. Roaring Brook, 2003. \$23.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7613-1596-9.

Hidden Buffalo. Rudy Wiebe. Illus. Michael Longchild. Red Deer, 2003. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88995-285-X.

Imagine a deep sigh. Here I sit surrounded by 40 or so picture books to review — and not so long ago, I reviewed about 80 others (see “As Canadian as Apple Pie and Old Glory” in *Canadian Children's Literature* 111-112). Furthermore, that last 80 did not make me very happy. In my review, I described them like this:

Viewed as a group, these books are depressingly similar to each other, depressingly similar to picture books being produced in the U.S. and internationally, depressingly similar to countless thousands of picture books pro-

duced in the last century. They are something like children's literature yard goods — nothing special, just more of the same bland serviceable stuff. (96)

Well, guess what? For the most part, the 40 I'm about to discuss here represent yet more of the same. Imagine another sigh.

I'm sighing because I'm anything but surprised by the blandness of most of these books. The economic factors and cultural assumptions about children, education, and reading that I outlined in my earlier review continue to operate and, as the 40 books surrounding me now make all too clear, continue to encourage Canadian publishers of picture books to focus almost exclusively on what's safely conventional and saleable. If you're looking for news of delightful new experiences and must-buys, you can stop reading right now. I do have a few — but only a very few — to report.

But that creates a problem for me. What *can* I report? Other than to reiterate the details of what depresses me and point to one or two interesting exceptions, what can I usefully say about these 40 books that I haven't already said about the earlier 80?

As I thought about that, I found myself remembering why the repetitively similar experiences offered by children's literature yard goods depress me so much. It's not simply because they are so repetitive, although that's sad enough. It's because of what it is that they so obsessively repeat. They offer a vision of childhood that is maddeningly consistent from book to book, maddeningly normative in its assumptions about what children are or should be, and maddeningly limited in what it so consistently takes to be normal. There's nothing particularly disgraceful about any of them — well, most of them — individually. But as a group — and together with many other picture books, TV shows, video games, toys, and other cultural artefacts adults produce for contemporary children — these books construct for children an exceedingly narrow and repressive view of who they already are or ought to try to become. It seems worthwhile, then, to focus on how these books do that — how, like so many other books for children, they work to impose a restricted vision of childhood and therefore of themselves on child readers — and thus teach children how to be less than surely they might be.

In our textbook for college-level children's literature students, *The Pleasures of Children's Literature* (2003), Mavis Reimer and I describe an exercise that we invite students to do in order to develop their awareness of their own normative assumptions about children. It goes like this:

Write down (or have children write down) this sentence:

Children's books are (or should be) _____.

Then, fill in the blank with a list of as many words or phrases as you think relevant and important. When you've finished making your list, think about why you chose those words and phrases. Are they based on assumptions you make about children? For instance, if you wrote that children's books "are (or should be) cheerful," it might mean you believe that children are or should be always happy. As you think about these matters, produce another list, this one based on this sentence:

Fill in this blank with words or phrases that represent the assumptions about children you think you based your first list on.

I've decided to look at the books under review here in terms of a variation on this exercise. Assuming that the books represent the ideas of their authors, publishers, or intended audience about what children are or should be, I've considered the ways in which what happens in them implies unconsidered assumptions about children — generalizations unlikely to be universally true. Not surprisingly, these books turn out to represent the same repressively few and rarely examined ideas about childhood that students express in response to the *Pleasures* exercise.

Let's start with this one:

Children are innocent (i.e., dumb), and it's a good thing.

In Aubrey Davis's *Bagels from Benny*, illustrated by Dusan Petricic, Benny takes to heart his baker grandfather's assertion that God, not he, should be thanked for the bagels he bakes. But being an innocent child, Benny ingenuously assumes that he can thank God by leaving bagels for Him in the Holy Ark in the synagogue. The bagels disappear, Benny's grandpa laughs at him for assuming God ate them, and it turns out a poor man took them, believing they came from God. Benny's grandfather assures the disappointed Benny that he has, in fact, thanked God by making the world a better place. In other words, Benny has been right to be wrong. It's a good thing children don't know so much then — their ignorance is actually a wisdom that lets miracles happen.

A child's ingenuous faith leads to more good things in Paul Gallico's old story *The Small Miracle*, newly retold by Toronto storyteller Bob Barton and illustrated by Carolyn Croll. In Assisi, young Pepino's donkey is sick. Pepino believes that St. Francis will cure her if he can only take her into the Basilica, but the only way in for a donkey is through a walled-up passage. Unwilling to accept defeat, Pepino heads off to Rome, where his breathtaking ignorance of his own insignificance in relation to the workings of hierarchy and power get him into a meeting with the Pope, who allows the wall to be removed. The story ends before we find out if the donkey is cured, but not before we have the wonderfully wise ingenuousness of children confirmed yet once more.

Sarah Hart Snowbell's *Yesterday's Santa and the Chanukah Miracle*, illustrated by Patty Gallinger, celebrates children's lack of ability even more obviously. After Annie, a young Jewish girl, waits in line to tell Santa she wants a Christmas tree like all the other kids, she discovers that this particular jolly old elf is her grandfather's Jewish friend, out of work and willing to do any job. She innocently asks him for a Christmas tree anyway. When her father hears about it, he tells her exactly why she's been wrong, in what just might possibly be a message intended for child readers: "Religious freedom, Annie. That's what Chanukah is all about. Your friends will understand you if you tell them you celebrate Chanukah. They'll respect you as you respect them. Take it from me, Annie — it's okay to be different." Lo and behold, she does take it from him, immediately and completely acknowledges her own error, gives up her wish for a Christmas tree, and heads off to the mall to retrieve her wish and give the poor Jewish Santa her Chanukah gelt. But even this

turns out to be endearingly foolish and unnecessary — he has found a better job for himself already. Annie accomplishes exactly nothing in this story but to be cutely and charmingly wrong all the time and gets to be a happy role model for equally incapable children as a result of it.

Cheri Uegaki's *Suki's Kimono*, illustrated by Stéphane Jorisch, offers yet another confirmation of the virtues of childhood ignorance. Blithely unaware of the conformist tendencies of school life, Suki wants to wear her traditional kimono on her first day of school. At first, everyone laughs at her. But then Suki tells the class that her obāchan brought her the kimono and performs her version of the traditional dance she saw at the festival her obāchan took her to — and lo and behold, rather than laughing even harder, as various of the real children I know might, these nicer children of children's literature clap delightedly. In her blissful ignorance, Suki has done the right thing after all. These four books all invite an unconsidered acceptance of a very limiting idea of childhood innocence as a universal truth about children.

It's instructive that Benny, Pepino, Annie, and Suki come from various specified ethnicities. That makes their stories saleable in terms of current powerful curricular focuses on teaching children appropriately multicultural values (*Yesterday's Santa* makes that purpose especially obvious by offering a handy-dandy FAQ explanation of Chanukah and recipes for making latkas and your own paper dreidel — information that allows children not part of this tradition to play at being so) but also because this implies the assumption that

Children are (and should be) wonderfully diverse in their racial and ethnic backgrounds.

This might mean that children themselves are assumed to find their diversity wonderful, as the plethora of books celebrating the happy diversity of their cultures might suggest:

Children rejoice (or ought to rejoice) in their cultural diversity.

On the other hand, it might mean they are inherently intolerant:

Children are (or should, in being childlike, be) intolerant.

If they weren't, why would they need so many reminders of how they ought to respect difference? In addition to the books I've already mentioned, there's also Deborah Hodge's *Emma's Story*, illustrated by Song Nan Zhang, in which young Emma, adopted from China into a white North American family and upset because she doesn't look like everyone else, is reassured by her grandmother's utopian story of how she came to join them. In it, there is no mention of her birth parents or why she needs to be adopted, and her orphanage in China is represented only as "a big building where Emma lived with other babies and the aunties who cared for them." Aunties? Really? Grandma concludes with what just might possibly be a message for child readers: "It's not how we look that makes us a family, Emma. It's how we love each other."

Strangely, then, Grandma deals with Emma's concern about her difference less by celebrating it than by denying its significance. Difference tends to be respected primarily by means of underplaying its importance in all these books. The four

ingenuous children I talked about earlier all know less about their cultures than their elders — and none of them learn all that much more. Suki experiences her Japanese traditions without anyone bothering to explain their significance to her, and while Benny, Pepino, and Annie all have older and wiser men instruct them in the meanings of their actions, none of them learns more than one small nugget of reassurance in the value of what they know and have done already. It's their childlike innocence that matters, not their awareness of cultural values beyond the simple fact of the existence (and right to exist) of those values. While advertising an interest in cultural differences, in fact, these books actually assume something that undermines that interest:

Childhood is universal; children are (and should be) the same everywhere.

The worlds depicted in all four books are similarly simple and sunny — a contemporary festival of ethnic costumes and artifacts without much sense of the substance and intricacy of the cultures the costumes represent. Chanukah is more about dreidls than it is about faith. It's particularly telling that, while *Bagels from Benny* purports to be about Jews living in very traditional ways, it nevertheless explicitly spells out the name of the Lord — something that orthodox Judaism forbids — and gives Benny a grandfather rather than a Jewish Zaida. The blanded-out form of multiculturalism in these books is a celebration of difference that erases real and significant differences, presumably to appeal to wider audiences of blander children.

What the blandly childlike children in these books most share, furthermore, is the childlike ingenuousness that allows them to be and remain mostly unaware of negative possibilities. And that supports another common assumption about childhood:

Children are (or should be) joyously optimistic.

As is true of almost all the protagonists of children's literature but too often untrue of real children, Emma, Benny, Pepino, Annie, and Suki achieve happy endings with only minimal awareness of less fortunate outcomes. The illustrations in the books support the optimistic mood. The rosy-cheeked figures in Song Nan Zhang's pictures for *Emma's Story* live in a chintz- and flower-filled house out of *Better Homes and Gardens*. Carolyn Croll in *The Small Miracle* and Stéphane Jorisch in *Suki's Kimono* both offer simple cartoons in lively palettes almost totally lacking in shadows or, indeed, any dark tones. While the rich browns and precise hatchings and cross-hatchings that predominate in Dusan Petricic's pictures in *Bagels from Benny* imitate traditional etchings and thus imply the weight of tradition, they are also lively cartoons — beautifully evocative ones, but cartoons nevertheless. Patty Gallinger's illustrations for *Yesterday's Santa* are less happy, mostly because they are less proficient. For all the lumpiness implied by their peculiar depiction of light falling on skin, they're certainly *trying* to be warm and comforting.

The atmosphere of total bliss that these books exude becomes yet more blissful in Geoff Butler's charming illustrations for Sir Cavindish Boyle's patriotic *Ode to Newfoundland*. This early twentieth-century song refers to "blinding storm" and "wild waves" that "lash thy strand," but the pictures — in which caribou and bears mingle communally with humans and fish seem to smile at the fisherman catching

them — are always jolly. The bright, happy colours overwhelm the hint that one picture provides of the dark history leading to the extinction of the Beothuks; as a result, pictures in which the round mouths of people afloat in fragile boats on stormy seas might represent either singing or howls of pain seem anything but painful. As charmingly wacky as it is, this is Newfoundland as viewed through the naive imagination that adults conventionally attach to childhood.

While these books end up celebrating childlike innocence, all of them do describe moments like that hint about the Beothuks in which innocence leads to trouble — the kind of trouble that might end innocence. The affirmation of the value of innocence I discussed earlier amounts to reassurance that it's better not to know or to be able to do more — that you can do what you need to do just the way you already are. That implies the degree to which adults are convinced that children are aware of their inadequacies and insecure about themselves. In other words, and in contradiction to the idea that childhood is joyful, innocence must be confirmed as joyous because children often aren't all that happy about it — because, indeed:

Children are (or should be) aware of their limitations and in need of reassurance.

Emma of *Emma's Story* gets reassured directly. While Abby of Wendy Lewis's *In Abby's Hands* (illustrated by Marilyn Mets and Peter Ledwon) seems to move beyond her sense of inadequacy, it is nevertheless peculiarly reaffirmed. Compared to her now dead Gran's hands, which "had brought new babies into the world and placed them in their mother's arms," Abby believes her own childish hands are useless. When the dog she has named after her Gran begins to give birth while the adults are away, our plucky heroine learns, despite her self-doubt, that the puppies are "safe in Abby's hands." But while it's nice that Abby is finally able to do what's needed, the angst of her thinking she can't has far more intensity and seems to me to survive the supposedly happy ending more or less intact — an expression of the depth of adult conviction in childhood inadequacy that I suspect is likely to communicate more to child readers than does the confidence Abby supposedly gains. That's in part because Lewis allows Abby's parents to show up and take over after just one pup is born — a reintroduction of adult management that supersedes Abby's newfound ability and allows her a clearly happy return to dependent childhood. It's also in part because Mets and Ledwon's decidedly weird pictures convey far more angst than confidence. They look either like photographs manipulated to appear more painterly or like paintings trying to imitate photographs. In either case, the result is a deadening and broodingly eerie atmosphere of shadows and severely foreshortened figures that makes sense in relation to the text only by implying something dark and terrifying in it — even at the supposedly happy end, where just one beam of light penetrates an otherwise enveloping darkness. Insecurity wins despite all claims otherwise.

Marie-Louise Gay's *Goodnight Sam* and Richard Scrimger's *Eugene's Story* celebrate insecurity more directly by not allowing their child protagonists to move beyond it. Gay's Sam can't sleep without his dog Fred and can't accept his sister's proposed solutions to his problem because of what he identifies as the dog's insecurities: the dog won't go outside because he's afraid of the dark or in the closet because a monster lives there. These are clearly Sam's inadequacies — as is his inability to count sheep as a soporific because he can only count to three. While Sam's problems are annoying to his sister, they're clearly meant to be adorably and

conventionally childlike for readers of all ages — including children, who will need to see how silly Sam's fears are in order to be in on the joke of the book and who will be helped to see it by the light whimsy of Gay's pictures, which somehow manage to make even forbiddingly dark rooms look pleasantly cozy. Such child readers will thus have confirmed once more that old truth underlying most child culture:

Children are (or should be) cute — and are at their cutest when they are most inadequate.

It's cute when children dress up and look funny in adult clothes or fail to pronounce hard words. It confirms for children that adults *want* them to be cute — to try to be adult but fail. It's cute for Sam to be so foolishly frightened of non-scary things in such a conventionally childlike way, which confirms for child readers that they, too, are most loveable when appearing to be most inaccurate in their perceptions.

Inaccuracy of perception is also the basis of the joke in Scrimger's *Eugene's Story*. Eugene's sister — a much less helpful sister than Sam's — continually interrupts his attempts to tell a story about himself by reminding him of what he can't do. He is not, as his story claims, old enough to dress himself because he puts his shirt on backwards — which leads him to retell the story so that he *wanted* to put the shirt on backwards. But his sister continues to interrupt his tale of himself by denying each of his claims to expertise or power. Finally, Eugene arrives at the only logical solution to his problem. He imagines his sister into non-existence and makes the story be about himself as an only child.

I suggested earlier that Scrimger confirmed Eugene's insecurity by not allowing him to move beyond it. In a sense, that's true: Eugene's disappearance of his sister is a confirmation of her rightness about his inadequacy, which he can only escape by not having her there to point it out to him. On the other hand, Eugene does figure that out — so maybe he's not so inadequate after all. It's certainly possible to read *Eugene's Story* as a challenge to the assumption that children can't deal with their own problems — to see it as a book with the commercial smarts to offer conventional cuteness but to do so in a way that might actually acknowledge and empower childhood capability — and especially the capability to imagine. That actually suggests another common assumption:

Children are (or should be) imaginative and resourceful in their use of imagination.

As I'll suggest later, a number of other books also support this idea. And I have to admit that it's not necessarily a bad assumption, for unlike so many of the other generalizations people make about childhood, this one at least gives children some credit for being able to do something worthwhile on their own. Even so, the thoughtless but widespread adult conviction that all children are automatically and completely imaginative merely as a result of being children might well prove burdensome to those individual youngsters who, however sterling their characters are, are not automatically prone to dreaming up wild and wonderful fancies at the drop of a hat. All children are no more fanciful than all women are excellent bread-bakers or all white men bad at basketball. It's the unthinking generalizing that's the problem with all the assumptions I'm outlining here — and the depressing regularity with which writers and publishers support the thoughtless generalizing by of-

fering books that simply take it for granted.

But *Eugene's Story* is not so thoughtless, for it accompanies its praise of imaginativeness with its theme of childhood inadequacy. That makes this ingenious story intriguingly ambivalent, even somewhat disturbing — for despite the triumph Eugene claims for himself, just how happy is an ending that so completely isolates its hero in a world of his own imagining? Gillian Johnson's final picture, while theoretically as jolly and unthreatening as the rest, shows him confined by the boxy lines of his own room, on his bike but unable to actually go anywhere as the family dog looks eagerly but impotently at the bright light outside a closed window. In its unresolved ambivalence, *Eugene's Story* clearly moves beyond the blandness of most of the other books I'm looking at here.

Nevertheless, I find myself unwilling to forget that the ingenuity the story ascribes to Eugene actually belongs to his author. Like many others, this book represents an adult imagining of a childlike imagination. I might then propose a paradoxical variation on the assumption I just offered:

Children are (or should be) imaginative, but adults need to show them how to be so.

Some of these books literally represent that happening by offering adult authors' versions of the perceptions of children in what claim to be the voices of children. The cutesy poems in Loris Lesynski's collection *Cabbagehead* might actually be spoken by the adult poet, but the illustrations reveal their implied speakers as children. So it is a child who says,

Sometimes I'm a cabbagehead.
Sometimes I'm a star.
Always I'm amazed by where
My best ideas are.

I am less than amazed that a child's best ideas are actually located in the mind of an adult being childlike. Similarly, Jane Barclay's *How Hot Was It?*, illustrated in expectably bright and happy cartoons by Janice Donato, offers a poetic evocation of a hot day as a boy himself describes it and presumably imagines it: "It was a **muggy**, / **sluggy**, / **hair-teasing**, / **air-squeezing**, / **can't-get-out-of-bed**, / **both legs filled with lead** / kind of hot. . . . I waited for the whisper of a breeze" (bolds in original). The publisher of this book conveniently forgets the existence of its imaginative adult author long enough to advertise it as "a heartwarming tribute to the brilliant imagination of children." Similarly again, the children who visit forests around the world in Maggee Spicer and Richard Thompson's *We'll All Go Exploring*, illustrated in bold black outlines around richly saturated colours in the satisfyingly energetic and simple style of Kim LaFave, speak their own openness to sensuous delight in natural objects — thus confirming another common assumption:

Children are (and should be) inherently connected to and aware of the sensuous delights of the natural world.

These children share what Wordsworth once identified in "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" as an inborn ability of all children to perceive the "splendour in the grass" and the "glory in the flower" (78) — and therefore, it seems, a respect for

nature that provides them with an inherent awareness of ecological implications that just might be intended to function as a message for child readers, as in this passage from *We'll All Go Exploring*:

We'll listen and watch
Then we'll come away,
So you can visit
On another day.

The placing of this obvious affirmation of high-minded adult values in the mouths of these children reveals how much the delight in sensuous impressions that precedes it here (and throughout *How Hot Was It?*) is also an adult creation — a construction of childhood designed to please widely-shared adult ideals of what children and childhood ought to be.

In light of those widely-shared adult ideals and their effect on children's publishing, it's interesting to note that four of the books I've just discussed are sequels to earlier books. Gay has done four previous books about Sam and his sister Stella, Scrimger and Johnson two previous books about Eugene and his siblings, Barclay and Donato a companion to *How Hot Was It?* about being cold, and Spicer, Thompson and LaFave companions to *We'll All Go Exploring* about going flying and going sailing. The continuing success of these franchises reveals how much they represent currently powerful ideas about how children should be imagining themselves.

Other books that offer poetically imaginative insights confirm the ways in which children's publishing postulates the internationally uniform childhood I described earlier and also operates within an increasingly global economy. The children who speak their whimsical fantasies in Jorge Argueta's *Trees are Hanging from the Sky* (illustrated by Rafael Yockteng) and in Jorge Lujan's *Daybreak, Nightfall* (illustrated by Manuel Monroy) are at least as imaginative, as poetic, and as responsive to the natural landscape as the children who explore and worry about the heat in the books I've just looked at. Argueta's boy makes it equally clear that his imaginativeness constitutes a recommendation of how to be childlike for child readers who are invited to identify with him when he says, "I want to dream like this every night." But unlike the all-Canadian characters of the other books, these children have been imagined by an American from El Salvador (Argueta) and an Argentinian from Mexico (Lujan) and illustrated by a Mexican (Monroy) and a Colombian (Yockteng). In the light of these South American connections, it's not surprising that the theoretically childlike imaginings they communicate have the bizarre aura of the magic realism of the adult Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez. Argueta's hero imagines the upside-down trees of his book's title. One of Lujan's poems is about a girl who uses her hands to erase her mouth, the other about a merry-go-round ride with the death-like Lady-as-Pale-as-Bone. Nevertheless, both books have been published by a Canadian publisher, Groundwood, for the North American market, in Spanish versions as well as these English ones, presumably for the ever-growing market of Spanish-speaking Americans. Despite the conventional assumption that the circumstances of their publication imply — that all children everywhere will and should respond similarly to whimsical imaginings — I'm pleased to report that these two books, especially *Daybreak, Nightfall*, do have a satisfyingly unsettling strangeness quite at odds with the clichéd childlikeness of the books by Barclay and by Spicer and Thompson. There's a calmly matter-of-fact acceptance of unset-

ting impossibility in both the words and pictures of these books that seriously challenges the complacent norms and conventional utopianism of almost all the other books being reviewed here.

The books I've been looking at disguise the extent to which the imaginings of children they represent are actually adult imaginings offered as recommendations of correctly childlike thinking to child readers. Ian Wallace's *The Naked Lady* is far more forthright about this process. It describes how the elderly artist who moves onto the farm next door shows young Tom Sims how to be an artist both through direct instruction and simply by being intriguingly artistic himself. The book ends with a note in which Tom tells us he grew up to be an illustrator of picture books, including this one — which metafictionally implies that this story is somehow autobiographical. If it is, though, it's hard to tell if the author/illustrator is more like the boy being trained in being imaginative or the imaginative artist doing the training. As the producer of this book, Wallace is certainly more like the latter, passing on the wonderfulness of his own art to child reader/viewers and thus encouraging them to share his own imaginativeness. Buried in this is another assumption:

Children are inherently artistic, because artists are essentially childlike.

Like children, artists are not practical — they fill their fields with sculptures of vegetables rather than the real thing. And they are not conventional — they transcend repressive conventions and feel free to make sculptures of naked women. Indeed, one picture shows Pieter's "naked lady" hovering over Pieter and Tom like the resident spirit of their relationship, representing their shared freedom from adult constraints. It seems illogical (but understandable in terms of our current panic over child pornography and the habit of children's books of closeting the dark undersides of the worlds they explore) that the statue Pieter makes of Tom shows him with his clothes safely on.

Another book about artists, Maxine Trottier's *The Paint Box*, confirms the connection between the freeing creativity of children and artists by telling how the daughter of the Renaissance painter Tintoretto escapes the constraints of her time by dressing as a boy, learning to paint, and befriending an enslaved cabin boy who also loves to make art. Both children see themselves as enslaved, one literally and one symbolically, and both achieve freedom in their art. Unfortunately, Stella East's sumptuous but fussily overblown illustrations undermine the idea that art is freeing by constraining and overwhelming Trottier's relatively straightforward text.

But let me go back for a moment to *The Naked Lady*. In depicting a relationship between a young boy and a much older person, Wallace's book represents another common assumption shared by a surprising number of these books:

Children and old people have an innate connection to each other.

As well as Wallace's Pieter and Tom, there are Annie and the Santa in *Yesterday's Santa*, Benny and his grandfather in *Bagels from Benny*, Emma and her grandmother in *Emma's Story*, Suki and her grandmother in *Suki's Kimono*, and Abby and her grandmother in *In Abby's Hands*. I suspect this represents an assumption about old people as much as it does one about children — that old people are childlike in their lack of duty and their freedom to indulge in play, and also in their marginalization, their freedom from the burden of family or social responsibility

that makes them available as companions for children.

In many of these books, there is also a faith in the (often childlike) wisdom of the aged and especially a sense that they represent a connection between children and the traditions of their ancestors — for certainly, it is grandparents who pass on culture in these books far more than parents or teachers do. In *Evie's Garden*, a book by the British author/illustrator Michael Forman and republished in Canada by Fitzhenry & Whiteside, the old gardener, George, passes on his knowledge of gardening to young Evie, who then continues his work of gardening after he dies. In this characteristically optimistic children's variation on the Eden story, Evie remains untempted, there is no Adam or snake apparent, knowledge (of gardening at least) is a good thing, and paradise continues even after death occurs. But there is a hint of a snake in the absences from the garden caused by Evie having to attend school. She will learn to become a responsibility-ridden adult and no longer belong in the paradise reserved for the very young and the very old.

Evie's Garden connects her not just with the wisdom of age but also with the beauties of the garden itself, which confirms the assumption I discussed earlier about the connections between children and nature. Many of the books I'm considering here develop this connection in terms of the idea that what's natural is what's unrepressed, and that, therefore:

Children are (and should be) anarchic free spirits.

In some cases, their connection with what's natural allows them to introduce it into repressively unnatural environments. In the American author Arlene Alda's *Morning Glory Monday*, illustrated with bravura energy by the Canadian illustrator Maryann Kovalski, a girl living amidst the crowded tenements of New York's Lower East Side deals with her mother's homesickness for Italy by planting on the fire escape the magic seeds she brings home from the anarchic carnival of Coney Island. The morning glories that result twine around the building and eventually around the entire city, bringing a refreshingly natural disorder to its mean streets and making everyone childlike, natural, free, and happy.

Rudy Wiebe's *Hidden Buffalo*, illustrated with paintings by Michael Longchild, is a far more solemn version of what seems a surprisingly similar story. In an unspecified past on the prairies, Young Sky Running deals with his Cree people's starvation by leaving the confines of his people for the isolation of the open landscape and having a vision which, as "the lake chuckles as softly as his heart beating," makes him one with the natural world, puts him in touch with the Great Creator, and shows him where the buffalo are — a vision that makes him laugh out loud like the lake did and thus makes him one with it. The Chief, restricted to more narrowly conventional views and fearing the fierce Siksika people who dwell where Sky Running's vision pointed him, doubt the vision — but youth, nature, and thinking outside the box do in fact save the day and bring the People to a valley "black with numberless buffalo" — as abundant as the New York morning glories. As well as confirming the connection between the young and the naturally unbounded, *Hidden Buffalo* also provides Sky Running with a wise grandmother he intuitively connects to and who points him toward his vision. While it depicts a culture in a different time, *Hidden Buffalo* confirms the same conventional assumptions about childhood as do books set in the contemporary world.

So, also, and more surprisingly, does David Bouchard's *The Song Within My*

Heart, illustrated with paintings by Allen Sapp — or perhaps I should say that Bouchard's text, based (according to the jacket copy) on remembrances of Sapp's childhood, illustrates Sapp's paintings, many of which existed prior to the text. This book won the Governor General's Award for children's literature (illustration) in 2003 — a peculiar choice in the light of the unclear status of its images. I have no doubt about their worth as paintings. They evoke the lives of Crees on the prairies in a style that combines the unsophisticated charm of Grandma Moses with the sombre emotional depth of Rembrandt, and they are astonishingly subtle even while maintaining the simplistic mannerisms of untrained outsider art. But since they existed as free-standing paintings before they became illustrations of a text designed to account for them, I wonder if they can be considered illustrations at all.

One way or the other, what surprises me about *The Song Within My Heart* is that it replicates so many mainstream assumptions about childhood even though its source is Aboriginal. I might assume that Wiebe, a non-Aboriginal despite his acclaimed adult novels about Aboriginal culture and history, has unconsciously shaped his tale of Sky Running according to the story patterns and assumptions of his own European heritage. What, then, might account for Sapp's focus on an elderly grandmother who passes his tradition on to him and "taught me how to hear and see" that the rhythm of the pow-wow drum is the rhythm of his soul — a truth beyond mere ordinary perception? It might be that ideas about the connections between children, the aged, and the infinite beyond transcend cultural differences. But it seems more likely that the Aboriginal values being passed on here have been shaped by the centuries of contact between Aboriginals and Europeans or are being reshaped here to accord with the conventional assumptions of the contemporary marketplace for children's books. Considering their similarities, it's interesting that *The Song Within My Heart* contains a warning against the kind of cultural appropriation of Aboriginal stories represented by *Hidden Buffalo*: "never use another's tale unless he knows and he approves."

As creatures we like to think of as less civilized and therefore more natural than ourselves, we tend often to call children little kids or little pigs or even little rats — inviting them to identify with animals:

Children are (or should be) like animals.

It is not surprising, then, that some of these books replicate the longstanding convention of providing children with stories about animals meant to be understood as childlike. In Linda Bailey's *Stanley's Party*, illustrated with an appropriately indecorous exuberance by Bill Slavin, Stanley the dog realizes that there's no one there to stop him from doing as he likes when his people go out, gradually escalating his criminal behaviour from lying on the couch to dancing up a storm to holding a party that fills the house "with every kind of dog you can imagine" — an outburst of dogs as innumerable as *Morning Glory Monday's* morning glories or *Hidden Buffalo's* buffalo, for indeed,

Children are (or should be) in love with excess — especially excessive disorder.

That disorder is a gloriously desirable thing — a principle established in many books by Dr. Seuss and Robert Munsch — becomes clear at the end of *Stanley's Party* when, after having been discovered in full riot by his people, Stanley is not

much punished; he is simply not left alone again. Apparently, dogs — as well as the children being invited to relate to them — are not capable of establishing their own order; they are incorrigibly and delightfully irrepensible, and that's why they need adults to constrain and supervise them.

The tendency toward irrepensibility in animals — and therefore in children — becomes especially apparent in Carolyn Beck's *The Waiting Dog*, illustrated in meaty detail by Andrea Beck, a book that has engendered some intensely negative response from less anarchy-loving and more tight-lipped adult readers. One reader on the Amazon.ca website claims that "it will encourage children predisposed to violence while sickening the others," while another writes that "Hopefully this book will find its audience and be marketed to adults and not as a children's book." As a hungry dog waits for the mail to arrive, he fantasizes in rhyme about nipping the mailman's fingers and then ups the ante, imagining himself chowing down on the mailman's hand, then his arm, then his nose, lungs, and intestines, a veritable butchery of delights, until

I'd suck each bone,
All 206,
Then pile them up,
Like stacks of sticks.

Finally, the dog realizes that he can only dream of this horrific repast — that, like the implied child readers of this book, any movement he makes beyond the pale of human adult-enforced social constraint must be purely in the imagination. You can dream about it and you can read about it, but you can't do it. *The Waiting Dog* is a gutsy book, in more ways than one — and I suppose I'd find it shocking if I hadn't read so many texts by children's writers from Heinrich Hoffman to Jack Prelutsky that played the same extravagantly anti-social game.

The connection between children and animals also occurs in two books about horses. One, Rachael Lewis's ever-so-strange *Scarlet Pony: Adventures in the Great Canadian North Country*, illustrated in muddy and mainly pointless pictures by Stephanie Verheyen, features a talking horse — and therefore one that book-experienced children know they should relate to — who has become a uniform-wearing member of the Great Canadian North West Mounties. (We are not, thank goodness, told exactly what it is he mounts.) Sent off on an expedition, Scarlet Pony meets Raven Chief, who is wounded and who needs Scarlet Pony's help. Scarlet Pony's Mountie map guides Raven home in exchange for Raven's wisdom, which might just possibly be intended as a message for child readers: "Wisdom will come to those who seek to do good and you can only do good by following your heart." It's hard to resist reading this book as a rather complacent allegory about relationships between Europeans and Aborigines in Canada's north, in which European rational know-how and intuitive Aboriginal knowledge have something to teach each other and there are no conflicts or territorial concerns. If so, there's something heartening about the admission at the end that the tricky raven, far from being a completely willing partner in this compromise, might have something sneaky up his sleeve. Raven's trickiness provides yet one more version of natural childlike anarchy.

So, too, does the old horse Papa brings home in Irene Morck's *Old Bird*, illustrated in nostalgic and somewhat inappropriately melancholy shades of blue by Muriel Wood. Papa wants the horse to stay out of the barn and believes it is too old

to plow — but the horse has other ideas and eventually breaks into the barn and joins the plow horses often enough to get her way. There's something interestingly ambiguous here: this horse represents the spirit of natural anarchy as she defies Papa's repressive control of her and the farm. But in doing so, she gets to live in the humanly constructed barn and pull the human plow — activities which make her more domesticated and more like the normally controlled horses of the farm. Unlike Scarlet Pony, this horse is not necessarily meant to stand as a surrogate child, and so her fate might not contain assumptions about children. But in fact, the children in the book feel an innate sympathy for her and stand up for her right to do as she wants — and so she does represent one more old creature with whom children feel an inevitable empathy. Her story might then easily be read as an allegory of the desire for the freedom to be mature, which eventually deprives children of their childlike freedom from responsibility — here read as a good thing, in support of an assumption opposite to those that celebrate anarchy:

Children want (and should want) to move beyond the irresponsibility of youth.

It's not surprising that this sort of assumption is as widespread as its opposite. Like all the beliefs and values that we usually act on and take for granted without doing much real thinking about them, our assumptions about children are shot through with intriguing contradictions.

Michael Martchenko's *Ma, I'm a Farmer* is another example of that. Martchenko is best known as the accomplished illustrator of anarchic stories by Robert Munsch. Here, he illustrates an anarchy-besotted text of his own, about a computer operator oppressed by the constrictions of the city, which are making his "eyes go square," who finds in the country a supremely disorderly version of the freedom he seeks — an explosion of farm animals who aren't house-trained enough to stay out of the house and more work than he can handle. Clearly, then, order is better. Or is it? Having learned the woes of disorder, Fred solves his problem with complicated electrical machinery, which controls the animals and keeps the house in order and which results in an explosion that creates even more disorder, a disorder Fred deals with through an ecologically sound use of solar, wind, and waterpower. This might just possibly be intended as a message for child readers, but it appears at the end to be leading up to yet another explosion. As in all those books Martchenko did with Munsch, all that's clear is that anarchic explosions of excess are fun but discomfiting, and orderly control of chaos is comforting but constricting and rather dull. This is a case of having it both ways:

Children do (and should) enjoy anarchy and do (and should) understand how awful anarchy is and therefore try to control it.

Another contradiction that I suggested earlier — that adults must write books to show children how to have appropriately childlike imaginations — appears again in two books that play on the contradictory assumptions I've been investigating by describing how older figures — like Morck's old horse or Wallace's old sculptor — bring a necessary and delightfully childlike anarchy into the otherwise placidly constrictive lives of children. In another book by Wallace, *The Man Who Walked the Earth*, the father of André and Elise has been gone from the farm for eight months in search of work on the dusty prairies of the 1930s. On Christmas night, a stranger

shows up instead and sits at the extra place their mother has insisted on setting ever since their father left. He is a magician who performs mysterious tricks and brings exotic scents and wild colours into the otherwise sombre atmosphere. Before he arrives, Wallace's impressively stark, brooding pictures, much less detailed than much of his illustrational work, contain little more than browns and blues, with no greens or reds or bright yellows. The magician then gives André a copy of *A Boys' Handbook of Magic* so that he can learn to bring as much exuberantly child-like anarchy into his bleak constrained environment by himself.

One of the magician's gifts is a brilliant yellow sunflower. A flower also appears unexpectedly after another mysterious stranger shows up and then leaves in Richard Ungar's *Rachel's Gift*, illustrated by Ungar himself in a cheery style devoid of any black — not even outlines — and very much enamoured of the extravagant paintings of Chagall. This time the flower is a rose, a gift left for a girl living in a traditional shtetl who earlier wished for a rose and thought having one in early spring to be impossible. Like *The Man Who Walked the Earth*, *Rachel's Gift* refers to the Jewish tradition of setting an extra place at the Passover meal for the Prophet Elijah, who will return to earth to announce the coming of the Messiah. Wallace's transference of the story to a non-Jewish home at Christmas — and his having the stranger precede the coming, not of Christ, but of the children's father — is rather peculiar. As the flowers suggest, however, the strangers in these books represent not anything so specifically and non-commercially religious as a visitation of divine grace, but instead a conventionally and commercially viable intrusion of glorious exuberance, imaginativeness, and natural beauty into otherwise repressively constricted spaces where children can think big but where imperceptive adults tend to interpret anything unexpected as mere childish fantasy. In other words, the connections these books make between children, openness to possibility, nature, and the divine hidden behind the ordinarily narrow perceptions of a constricted reality are more or less the same ones that Wiebe makes in the context of a quite different cultural heritage in *Hidden Buffalo* and that Wordsworth made 200 years ago. International conventional childhood triumphs over cultural specifics.

It does so yet once more in Donn Kushner's *Peter's Pixie*, illustrated by Sylvie Daigneault, which describes how the safe order of Peter's family is interrupted by an anarchic pixie not long before the expected arrival of a new baby. Not surprisingly, Peter's rational, disciplinary, and therefore unseeing parents blame the disorder on him, and it's Aunt Agnes next door — yet another childishly wise oldster — who knows that "pixies are mischievous . . . but very good companions." As the story ends, Peter's mother calls the newborn baby "a regular pixie" — presumably the same pixie redivivus, just another delightfully wild child trailing clouds of pixie dust and signalling the foolish limitations of adult perception. Sylvie Daigneault's somewhat frenetic pictures show the square lines and peaceful order of the family home always intruded upon, surrounded by, and dwarfed by chaotic outbursts of leaves, flowers, and what might be angels orimps that signify the pixie's mayhem — another version of the by now depressingly familiar connection between the natural, the anarchic, the innumerable, the imaginative, and the childlike.

Kushner and Daigneault's pixie-celebrating chaos represents a triumph of child-like insight and anarchy over adult blindness and restraint. Jorge Argueta's *Zipitio*, illustrated by Gloria Calderón and, like Argueta's *Trees Are Hanging from the Sky*, also available in Spanish, is less clear-cut. Set in an El Salvadorean village, it describes how Rufina, who speaks Nuhuattl, meets the Zipitio, a frighteningly de-

formed little creature who “appears to all girls who are about to become women” and begs for their love. It’s not much of a stretch to read the Zipitio as representing the young girl’s fear of her own awakening sexuality, a sexuality understood from the viewpoint of innocent timidity as unsettlingly chaotic and ugly. In this case, then, the anarchic, as a sexual disordering of the calm purity of childhood, is the opposite of childlike. Nevertheless, Rufina’s mother teaches her how to rid herself of the Zipitio. It takes adult wisdom to calm the potential outbreak of anarchy and make Rufina the kind of adult-approved woman who has resisted the threat of the Zipitio and who thus keeps her sexuality safely under control. While the Zipitio plays a role similar to Kushner’s pixie and Wallace’s and Ungar’s mysterious strangers, the brave insistence on his connection to developing womanhood makes this as unusual a children’s book as Argueta’s *Trees Are Hanging from the Sky* — for as just about all the other books I’m considering here make clear,

Children are not (and should not be) sexual beings.

The children in these books have many things on their minds, but none of them appear to have any awareness of bodily pleasures — except, perhaps, the pleasurable ingestion of food, descriptions of which are the children’s literature equivalent of pornography. But for all the strangeness of *Zipitio*, the fact of its publication by a mainstream Canadian house in the North American market implies a faith that children far removed from El Salvadorean village culture will respond to its concerns: Argueta dedicates it to “native boys and girls, but also for children of all the other races in the world.” Perhaps then:

Children are (and should be) unsettled by their own sexuality and need to be both reassured about it and persuaded to control it.

And while I don’t have time to do so here, it’s possible that I might read the many outbursts of anarchy in the other books I’ve discussed as having similarly sexual resonances. There’s certainly something sensual about the desire of a young girl for a fragrant rose or of a dog for the succulent flesh of a postman.

While nowhere near so sexy (in any obvious way, at least), Manjusha Pawagi’s *Pianomania!*, illustrated by Lia Milkau, also assumes an interest in the chaotic and offers an ambivalent attitude toward it. Unlike the exotic Rufina, Priya is a desperately typical middle-class Canadian child — her Indian name represents a conventionally blanded-out multiculturalism by being the only ethnic-specific thing about her. Priya hears music in her head and demands piano lessons from her parents. But unable to make the sounds she hears, she calls all her piano-playing friends together, and they create what her parents call an “AWFUL NOISE.” Later, at a school concert, she and even more Munsch-like excesses of anarchy. It’s clear that child readers are expected to mirror the response of those in the book: “All the children were loving it.” But this book wants to have it both ways — to love childlike disorder *and* to pronounce against it. The celebration of anarchy is undermined by Priya herself, who “had stopped playing and was frowning. This didn’t sound like the music in her head.” After everyone leaves, she begins to practice as her piano teacher tried to tell her to — a newly obedient observer of the discipline and harmonious order that represents mature adult insight. That suggests an assumption contradic-

tory to the faith in childlike exuberance I've been exploring:

Children are (and should be) taught to see the joys of restraint.

But since the anarchy is also being celebrated, the two contradictory assumptions together might suggest an even more widespread and more contradictory assumption:

Children are (and should be) anarchic and orderly, childlike and mature, unrepressed and repressed.

I suspect it is this idea that most adults often have in their head, taken for granted and not ever particularly thought about, when they deal with children and children's books. And perhaps that's a good thing. For all their conventionality, these books taken together have the potential of making children confused enough to escape convention and chart their own destinies.

Two other books represent similar confusions — Anne Laurel Carter's *My Home Bay*, illustrated by Alan and Lea Daniel, and Barbara Nichol's *Safe and Sound*, illustrated by Anja Reichel. Both these books mirror a key identifying characteristic of children's literature by centrally concerning their characters' feelings about home. For, as innumerable texts of children's literature suggest,

Children have strong and ambivalent feelings about home, as both a secure place of adult-engendered comfort and a repressive place under adult control.

As I and many other theorists have argued, then, a concern for the meaning of home is a key generic marker of children's literature. In *My Home Bay*, young Gwyn shares her feelings as her family moves from Vancouver to a new home in Nova Scotia. These feelings are primarily negative. Gwyn thus represents another assumption about childhood, this one directly antithetical to the idea that children are anarchic:

Children are conservative.

They don't like anything new and instead cleave to old stuffed toys (like Gwyn's Rose Bear), familiar blankies, and established rituals and routines. Strangely, however, Gwyn's new home in *My Home Bay* is actually an old one — a place where her family has roots, where her mother comes from and is returning to — and there's something paradoxical about Gwyn's refusal to accept the newness of her circumstances by longing for her "brand-new school in Vancouver" and refusing to let her feet walk where "the stairs dip in the middle, worn down by a hundred years of feet." Not surprisingly, however, the book ends with Gwyn accepting the new place representing old things as "my home bay" — and doing so because she no longer accepts her younger sister's idea that it represents anarchy. Her sister says, "Everything's mixed up out here," but, having new friends and interesting new places to visit, Gwyn admits, "I don't feel mixed up anymore," and seeks the comforting safety of her new house when feeling threatened by fog — thus realizing that the new place is as safe as the old one once was. The purpose of the book is clearly to bring Gwyn — along with the children who read about her — past her reluctant

conservatism and into an acceptance of the need for change (albeit change that happily turns into more or less the same old safe thing and confirms yet once more as so many texts for children do that home is best). Even if they are conservative and not anarchic,

Children are involved in a process of growth and change and must learn to accept it.

They are growing up, developing ever new aspects of their lives and selves, inevitably and necessarily learning how to move beyond what they are and what they have already — even though, it seems, they support their elders' admiration for the childlike by firmly resisting doing so. In allowing Gwyn to achieve growth by accepting a new place, which is actually in a number of ways a safely old one, *My Home Bay* somehow confirms that children are triumphantly conservative even while in the process of changing.

Something even stranger happens in *Safe and Sound*, in which two unquestionably childlike dogs (they are small and cute and star in a story for children to relate to) satisfy their theoretical lust for adventure by traveling around the world. Their adventures seem designed to satisfy a child reader's assumed love of danger and anarchy. But far from being entertained by what's different and exciting, the dogs merely find it annoying. Planes go too high, chairlifts in the Alps are scary, and generally,

. . . feel free to disagree,
But Europe as a continent is not our cup of tea.
The money's funny colors. We are stymied by the phones.
The cinema is tainted with salacious overtones.

The rest of the world is no better. The book the dogs write about their adventures can be found in the bookstore "in the section labeled BITING OFF MUCH MORE THAN YOU CAN CHEW . . . upon a shelf marked JUST TOO SMALL TO GO SO FAR AWAY." For any reader who might doubt that this could possibly be intended as a message for equally small child readers, the author adds, "There's nothing wrong with those who have / A thirst to stay at home." Once more, home represents safety and is assumed to be the only good place for small creatures. I'd like to believe that all the complaining these two dogs do about the new and the strange is intended to be humorous — that they are figures of fun and simply ridiculous in their conservatism. But the blatant message at the end asserts that they are right to be doggedly unadventurous. Anarchy is fun to imagine and laugh at, but most adults want dogs and children to believe that home is best.

Eventually, then, both *My Home Bay* and *Safe and Sound* come down firmly on the side of what's safe. Home is best, period. Another book about home, Barbara Reid's *The Subway Mouse*, remains intriguingly ambivalent right to and even beyond the end. The mouse in question, Nibs, lives with his family below the platforms of a busy subway station — a place they call Sweetfall — but dreams of the apparently mythic Tunnel's End, "a dangerous, roofless world filled with mouse-eating monsters" but also a land of beauty and abundance. Paradoxically, the mice of Sweetfall accept the danger of the trains that constantly roar through their home as just the normal way things are, but yet more paradoxically, its danger for Nib is in fact its constriction, its being so much less interesting than the freer land he dreams

of. When his obsession with Tunnel's End leads to his disruption of and then expulsion from the group, he multiplies the paradoxes by creating a second home nearby, "a snug hideout" of his own which thus signifies both his freedom and his safety. After other mice invade and disrupt the safe hideout, he heads off for the land of his dreams, a voyage that gives him a companion, a series of unsettling disruptive adventures, and eventually, in a development reminiscent of Plato's allegory of the cave, a view of the light at the end of the tunnel. Even then, though, Tunnel's End turns out to be paradoxically both as beautiful and as dangerous as its reputation promised, and Nib's response to it is one final layer of paradox: he builds another "snug nest" to raise a family in. The pulls of the comfort and constriction of safety and the thrill and anguish of disruption are exactly equal here, so that they remain in a precarious and energetic balance that is likely to make this fine book survive innumerable re-readings by both children and children's literature scholars.

The Subway Mouse was on the shortlist for the 2003 Governor General's Award for illustration, and I believe it should have won. Reid, whose earlier work making picture book illustrations out of plasticine was already pretty remarkable, has here discovered a potential for subtlety in that lumpy and unaccommodating medium I could never have imagined possible. The often sombre blends of colours are amazingly subtle, the images energetically communicative of action and deeply resonant in their expression of emotion. *The Subway Mouse* is a brilliant, engaging, and important book — the one book out of all the 120 I've been reviewing that I'd keep if I had to choose just one.

Only a little less remarkable, Margaret Atwood's *Rude Ramsay and the Roaring Radishes*, illustrated with an incisive cross-hatching and an equally incisive satiric wit by Dusan Petricic, is equally subtle in its ideas about what home means. Fed up with his rambunctious relatives and the bad food they serve him, Ramsay crosses the border to find a more orderly world in which Rillah lives, rich and tidy but lonely and wishing for a rumpus. After Ramsay takes her back across the border for a wild time, the two return happily to the peaceful world she once inhabited alone. With two such different homes represented, and with both anarchy and peaceful quiet being celebrated as desirous, this book plays with the conventions of children's literature I've been discussing in ways that both sustain and explode them. Atwood's obsessive focus on the letter R in her anarchically rambunctious but rigidly repetitive text entertainingly confirms the richly artful ambiguity.

Diane Swanson's *The Balloon Sailors*, illustrated by Kystyna Lipka-Sztarballo, is also about a border. When the king of a mythic kingdom divides his country between his warring twin sons and they build a wall between their territories, a previously happy family is divided from its relatives. Unwilling to accept this disruption of their home, they build a balloon out of drapes, old clothing, and a conveniently discarded gas burner and fly in it over the wall to reunite the family. It's clear here that home is best and family matters above all, and that anything disruptive of it is merely evil. W.H. New has suggested that borders — boundaries between countries and between people individually and in groups — are a key trope in Canadian writing: "boundaries function both as descriptions of concrete agreements and as metaphors of relationship and organization" (5). It's possible, then, that the focus on borders in both *Rude Ramsay* and *The Balloon Sailors* might be read as distinctly Canadian. If so, then Atwood's complex interweaving of similarities and differences might suggest something of the complex relations between cultures and

provinces in Canada and between Canada and the astonishingly different and astonishingly similar country south of its border. *The Balloon Sailors* reveals nothing so interesting or so politically aware. It does, nevertheless, include an endnote that points out the obvious connections of its wall, not to the Canadian scene but to the wall that once divided Berlin. But even then, it stays silent about the international rivalries and the complex politics that led both to the creation and the destruction of that wall, focusing instead on the unexplained personal animosity of two brothers in a way that makes the book seem simplistic and desperately one-sided in its privileging of the personal over the political and the family over all.

As I've suggested so often about other books I've discussed earlier (and always with tongue firmly in cheek), this might possibly be intended as a message for child readers. Children, too many adults assume, need messages — clear and obvious messages. With rare exceptions like *Eugene's Story*, *The Subway Mouse*, and *Rude Ramsay* that imply a somewhat deeper respect for their intended young readers, that seems to be an assumption underlying the books I've discussed so far:

Children are ignorant and simple-minded, and they need to be taught things in simple obvious ways by simple, obvious adults.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that children's literature is, more than anything else, a didactic literature — that it exists to teach children things. As I've suggested above in a number of different ways, it teaches them how to be childlike — how to conform to the patterns of childhood adults most often want them to conform to. But it also exists to teach them a whole range of other kinds of information — about culture, about science, about the nature of the world they live in — information that, once they gather enough in enough bulk and with enough complex accuracy, will help end their childhood and turn them into adults. There's a paradox here, then. Children's books work to support two opposite assumptions about adult responsibilities toward children:

Children need to learn how to be childlike, and adults must teach it to them.

But:

Children need to learn how to become adults, and adults must teach it to them.

The ways that these opposing assumptions intersect becomes particularly interesting in informational books. Many such books undermine their own efforts to teach by doing so in ways that confirm the desirability of an appropriately childlike innocence. Debora Pearson's *Animachines*, illustrated by Nora Hilb, shows how animals are like machines by setting side by side on each spread pictures of cheetahs and racing cars, whales and submarines. I'm not sure I understand the usefulness of this information. The publisher says it demonstrates "action concepts like **dig**, **crawl**, **squirt** and **carry** . . . to create three levels of learning fun" (bolds in original), which makes it sound very, very deep indeed. But on another level, the learning is undermined by the fun. Playing a game tediously similar to so many earlier books for beginners, Pearson hides a little elf-like being straight out of conventional childhood fantasy somewhere on each spread, and children would have to already know what's real and what's just cute before they could make use of the intended infor-

mational content. Furthermore, this cheery book remains cheerily silent on the ecological implications of the parallels, the chilling implications of human technology replicating the animal world in the process of extinguishing it. It would seem that this is knowledge that children ought to be protected from while they learn other more important things.

There's a little less silence about such matters in Shutta Crum's *Click!* (illustrated by John Beder), which, while more a poetic fantasy than an informational book, also juxtaposes animals with human activities on each side of a double-page spread. This time, the parallel is between the experiences of a bear cub and his mother and a "little hunter" and his hunter mother. These hunters hunt not with a gun but a camera, so the book appears to be ecologically sound, even in spite of the wilderness-interrupting snowmobile the hunters use, an apparently soundless vehicle that allows them to get right near the bears (or perhaps the bears are deaf or just plain stupid?). The boy and bear confront each other up close and personal in a way that allows Beder to emphasize their equally cute, equally round eyes, without any damages done to either. It's a utopian dream world that purports to be informative about nature but actually presents a decidedly one-sided view that leaves out the savagery and potential for doing damage of both bears and humans.

A different order of preaching occurs in *Salmon Secret*, by science broadcaster David Suzuki and children's writer Sarah Ellis and illustrated by Sheena Lott, a book that uses the occasion of a walk in the woods to allow Kate's maddeningly garrulous father to tell her everything (and I do mean everything) there is to know about the dependence of salmon on the ecological "merry-go-round" of their environment. In the forest, they meet a family that appear to be Aboriginal — "we call ourselves fish people" — and who bolster the book's ecological message with a foundation in what purports to be Aboriginal spirituality: "our people say, 'In nature, everything is connected.'" The relatively little I know about First Nations cultures makes me doubt that, before there was an ecological movement to reinterpret traditional beliefs in the light of contemporary concerns, "our people" said any such thing. *Salmon Secret* represents the same unfortunate co-option and distortion of Aboriginal heritage as does Susan Jeffers's notorious *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky*, which illustrates a recently written text purporting to be an environmental message from the nineteenth-century Chief Seattle that is nothing like what the less ecologically sound Chief actually said. Sheena Lott's images, while intensely sensuous and gorgeously evocative of dappled light on salmon, are surprisingly similar to Karen Reczuch's illustrations for Annette LeBox's equally ecological *Salmon Creek*, published a year earlier and discussed in my earlier review. Thus do popular curricular choices and marketing concerns doom publishers to repeat each other's choices.

Finally, there are two books that provide useful and interesting information in ways that do not also undermine their educational content with reinforcements of childlike behaviour. Tom Slaughter's *1 2 3* is a counting book intended for young beginners, but its confident and beautifully simple images imply a deep respect for their sophisticated minds. Each image contains a variety of different elements adding up to the number in question: not just two pairs of glasses, but two pairs of an object chosen because it has two arms and two lenses, and not just six dominos, but six dominos whose various conformations of dots all add up to six. As both puzzles and art are boldly sophisticated enough to hang in a good gallery, these pictures are winners. Equally winning are Nicolas Debon's delicate but brooding comic-

strip images for his *Four Pictures by Emily Carr*. Debon's text, which describes how the British Columbian artist lived her life and specifically how she came to paint four characteristic pictures at four different times in her life, is forthright about the intriguingly eccentric details of Carr's character and lifestyle. But the images are what's most interesting here. Unlike Pascal Milelli in his illustrations for Susan Vande Griek's *The Art Room*, a recent book about a child studying art with Carr that I discussed in my earlier review, Debon does not try to imitate Carr's style in his images (although his palette of colours certainly echoes hers) until the climactic moment in which she walks in a forest and discovers her own way of seeing and "the full pure joy of life." This apparently simple comic strip offers a refreshing level of verbal and especially visual subtlety.

And so, I've finished with two engaging and interesting books — and managed to find two or three others among the 40 I've discussed here in addition to the two or three others in the 80 I discussed in the earlier review. But the overall impressions I'm left with can be summed up in one word: the word is "Blah." It's yet more of the same old same old, representing yet more commitment to exceedingly conventional ideas about what children are or should be and to assumptions about what story experiences adults should provide for young people that have been prevalent throughout the history of children's literature.

Ah, but there's the thing, isn't it? These things *have* been prevalent throughout the history of children's literature. The fact that there's nothing new going on here means that business is going on more or less as it usually has been. So, is there really any special or unusual reason for me to be depressed? Sure, some sad and scary things have happened to the children's book business recently. Some sad and scary values are controlling the agenda. But when have they not? Are things really all that different or that much worse than they have ever and always been? Perhaps, I find myself trying to tell myself, not. Perhaps 'twas ever thus. Perhaps I have simply turned into another annoying old codger lost in the fog of my failing memory, bemoaning the loss of a non-existent golden age, sometime inevitably before now, when things were purely wonderful and no one ever had to burp or compromise or die. Perhaps there never was such a time. Perhaps children's publishing was always more or less the way it is right now.

I find myself thinking back to a golden time of my own, the mid-1970s — a time when the Canadian children's publishing industry was just beginning to exist as, simultaneously, I myself was just beginning my adult experience of reading, teaching, and writing about children's literature. As a newcomer to this exciting material, I certainly did experience it as golden. Secluded in the insular world of adult literature, I had never imagined the delights of a Maurice Sendak, a Pat Hutchins, or a Charles Keeping. There were so many fine stories, so many terrific pictures, so much that was fresh, imaginative, unexpected, exciting. I felt like Shakespeare's Miranda on her first view of a sexy hunk: "O brave new world, / That has such people in't."

To which her more experienced and less horny father replied, "'Tis new to thee." In the 1970s, older hands at children's literature than mine might have told me the same. Indeed, if I'm honest, I have to admit that even back then I was aware that not everything was so completely glittery. For every Sendak or Hutchins I delighted in, I was also discovering multitudes of silly or preachy picture books about cute pigs or puppies, endless reiterations of the same clichés about childhood I've been investigating here. More significantly — and as my own critical writing later went

on to declare in some detail — even the brave new books I was delighting in were not so completely new and innovative as I was imagining. Distinctive as it was, Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* turned out to be most interesting as a variation on a story pattern used also by Beatrix Potter, Virginia Lee Burton, and numerous others. What was new to me was not necessarily so new after all.

Nor, if I think about it, could it ever be. In its essence, as writing done specifically for inexperienced beginners, children's literature is a simple literature. It's possible for clever, imaginative writers (like Sendak or Richard Scrimger or Margaret Atwood or Barbara Reid) to do elegant, even complex variations on its characteristic themes and patterns. But those themes and patterns are characteristic, I believe, simply because they are basic, the ones writers across history have constantly identified as the most elementary components of the literary experience, the ones most comprehensible to beginners. The farther a text written for children diverges from these components, the less likely it is that many people will recognize it as children's literature. Most children's books now are as much like most other children's books always were. Whatever tendencies to complexity the field has, writers and publishers are always drawn back to basics by the simple fact that, however much adults might know and be bored with the same old stories, the audience of children that books are being bought for, at least as it is understood by those who do the buying, is always new — and new to these stories. What strikes me and other adults as old hat will be, most purchasers of children's books believe, excitingly strange for most child readers. And, in fact, it probably will be just that.

Reminding myself of that goes some way toward diminishing my depression about the picture books I've been reviewing. For many inexperienced child readers, books like these are an entry into what will strike them as a brave new world. Furthermore, the specific economic circumstances that led to them being so ordinary and me being so depressed by them may be extreme — but economics have always been a factor in the nature of children's literature, ever since the crafty John Newbery realized it could be a way of making money some centuries ago, while simultaneously inventing the tie-in, toys that came with the books even before there were fast food places to sell them in. Economics always dictates that you get rich by giving the public what it already wants and believes it needs — hence, most children's literature produced in most places most of the time.

So maybe more of the same old same old isn't necessarily a completely awful thing — maybe just mostly awful. Sure, it sells too many cheap toys and nutritionally unsound but nevertheless deliriously Happy Meals, and sure, it invites children to imagine themselves as the same impolite, timid, unthinking, limited creatures we've been encouraging our young to be for some centuries now. But it also offers them the same old — and undeniably pleasurable — pleasures. Most of all, the sea of undistinguished books now joined by most of the books I've discussed here provides a medium in which the few special ones — books like Nan Gregory's *Amber Waiting* (which I discussed in my earlier review), *Eugene's Story*, and *The Subway Mouse* — can live and have their being. Furthermore, *Amber Waiting*, *Eugene's Story*, and *The Subway Mouse* are not special because they are totally new and unique. As I've tried to show, they are special because they both replicate and ingeniously vary from the ongoing characteristics and central concerns of children's literature, in a way that's likely to make them transparent and available for inexperienced young readers and likely also to intrigue scholars with a wider knowledge of the existing children's books they evoke and vary from. Like all the really good chil-

dren's books, they are complex in a way that does not prevent them from being read simply — or perhaps simple in a way that allows complexity.

Such books exist, few but there, comfortably recognizable as children's literature but also still refreshingly new to me. I will try not to be so depressed, then. I encourage my readers to do the same.

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