

## **Variety of Literary and Artistic Styles: Contemporary Canadian Picture Books**

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Jan Andrews/Susan Jolliffe. *The Twelve Days of Summer*. Victoria: Orca, 2005. 32 pp.  
\$19.95 bound. ISBN: 1-55143-365-6.

Lili Chartrand/Rogé. *Taming Horrible Harry*. Translated by Susan Ouriou. Toronto: Tundra,  
2006. 32 pp. \$ 22.99 bound. ISBN: 978-0-88776-777-2.

Maryann Kovalski. *Take Me Out to the Ball Game*. Markham: Fitzhenry & Whiteside 2006.  
32 pp. \$ 9.95 pb. ISBN: 1-55041-899-8.

Janet McNaughton/Susan Tooke: *Brave Jack and the Unicorn*. Toronto: Tundra Books, 2005.  
32 pp. \$ 22.99 bound. ISBN: 0-88776-677-3.

Maxwell Newhouse. *Let's Go for a Ride*. Toronto: Tundra Book, 2006. 32 pp. \$ 22.99  
bound. ISBN: 0-88776-748-6.

Barbara Reid. *Read Me a Book*. Markham: North Winds Press, 2003. 32 pp. \$ 14.99 bound.  
ISBN: 0-439-95726-5.

Evan Solomon/Bill Slavin: *Nathaniel McDaniel and the Magic Attic. Bigbeard's Hook.*

Toronto: Viking Canada, 2005. 32 pp. bound. ISBN: 0-670-06386-X.

Jan Thornhill. *Over on the Meadow.* Toronto: Maple Tree Press, 2004. 32 pp. \$ 19.95 bound.

ISBN: 1-897066-08-2.

Mary Toews/Dianna Bonder. *Black-and-White Blanche.* Markham: Fitzhenry & Whiteside.

32 pp. \$ 19.95 bound. ISBN: 1-5505-132-6.

Budge Wilson/Susan Tooke. *A Fiddle for Angus.* Toronto: Tundra, 2006. 32 pp. \$ 14.99 pb.

ISBN: 0-88776-785-0.

Troy Wilson/Dean Griffiths. *Frosty Is a Stupid Name.* Victoria, BC: Orca Book Publishers,

2005. 32 pp. \$ 19.95 bound. ISBN: 1-55143-383-6.

Authors and artists of picture books have done imaginative work in a great variety of literary and artistic styles, reflecting tastes in both the fine arts and popular culture.<sup>1</sup> The potentiality of modern picture books for innovation has been stressed in the groundbreaking studies of Lewis, Nikolajeva and Scott, and Nodelman, who all emphasize the demanding quality of the text-picture relationship. As David Lewis suggests, “One of the reasons pictorialization – the promiscuous mixing together of words and images – is able to shake loose generic bonds and derail expectations, is that it enables the picturebook to look in two directions at once and sometimes permits the picturebook makers to play off one perspective or view against another” (68). This statement concerns not only picture books from England,

France, Germany, Sweden or the United States, to name just a few countries, but also from Canada, whose picture book production has increased during the last few decades.

Nevertheless, Canadian picture book artists are hardly known in Europe. While the reasons for this development are manifold and cannot be analyzed in detail here, a short overview of the influence of Canadian children's literature in Germany in general, and on the reception of Canadian picture books in particular, should reveal the preconditions for my examination of Canadian picture books as a German scholar invited to write a review article about eleven recently published ones.

"I saw, heard and was conquered by the excellence and manyfoldedness of Canadian children's literature." With this modification of Julius Caesar's famous citation, the English lecturer Hamish Fotheringham enthusiastically praised the high standards of children's books in Canada (5). Nevertheless, his project of an exhibition of modern Canadian children's books in the International Youth Library in Munich has never been realised, nor, indeed, his idea of publishing Dennis Lee's poems in German translation (see Seifert and Weinkauff 938). Although children's books from English-speaking countries have dominated the German book market since the 1960's, familiarity with Canadian children's literature is generally restricted to classic adventure stories and animal stories by writers like Ernest Seton Thompson, Charles Roberts, Grey Owl, Farley Mowat, Sheila Burnford, and James Houston. Nowadays, the best known Canadian children's book author is Lucy Maud Montgomery. Astonishingly, the Anne of Green Gables series was not translated into German until 1986, almost eighty years after the first Canadian edition. But because the Canadian film version of 1985 has aired on German television several times, Montgomery's classic girl story is still popular with German readers (cf. Kümmerling-Meibauer 1999, 748).

Contemporary authors like Brian Doyle, Monica Hughes, Jean Little, and Tim Wynne Jones have also been translated into German, but only a few works of Wynne Jones, whose thrilling psychological novels have received a lot of attention among literary critics in

Germany, are still in print. In contrast, books written by French-Canadian authors or by native Canadian authors – with the exception of Markoosie’s *Harpoon of the Hunter* – have never become part of the German book market. Considering this situation, it is no wonder that Canadian children’s books were not usually taken into account for the “Deutscher Jugendliteraturpreis” (German Youth Literature Award) – a prize given to the best children’s books published in Germany, whether originally written in German or translated into German – until 2001, when Richard Van Camp’s adolescent novel *The Lesser Blessed* received this award in the category “youth literature”.<sup>2</sup> But this is an exception to the rule. Canadian children’s books seem to be rather invisible in Germany.

As for Canadian picture books, the situation is even more embarrassing. Before 1985 only five picture books had been published in German translation: two by William Kurelek (a revised version of *Lumberjack*, and a compilation of *A Prairie Boy’s Summer* and *A Prairie Boy’s Winter*) and three by Ann Blades (*Mary of Mile 18*, *Petranella* and *A Salmon for Simon*; the last two books created in collaboration with Betty Waterton). These books obviously satisfied the publishers’ and the audience’s image of Canada as a rural country with empty landscapes and hard-working people trying to earn their living as lumberjacks and farmers, a cultural image also emphasized by the Spanish researcher Carmen Bravo-Villasante in her *Antologia de la literatura infantil universal* (22).

In 1987, the publishing house Lappan edited the German translation of Robert Munsch’s modern fairy tale *The Paper Bag Princess*, but Michael Martchenko’s comic-like illustrations were replaced by new pictures created by the German artist Helge Nyncke. Asked by critics about this serious intervention, the publisher argued that Martchenko’s illustrations made the book look like poor-quality literature from a department store. He further justified his decision by claiming that child readers in Germany was not well acquainted with comics in picture books and would prefer Nyncke’s illustrations, which are inspired by fantasy motifs (see Seifert and Weinkauff 1002, and Seifert 232). Another picture book by the same author,

*Love you Forever* (1986), suffered the same fate. Lappan replaced Sheila McGraw's illustrations with new ones by the German illustrator Steffen Butz. Although Egoff and Saltman criticize the text's sentimentality and false pathos, *Love You Forever*, the German version of which was published in 2000, has been as big a success in Germany as it has been in North America.

Until fairly recently, no French Canadian children's literature, not even important books by authors like Claude Aubry, Monique Corriveau, and Suzanne Martel, had been translated into German. But interest in French Canadian picture books has grown since the late 1980's, and works by the artists Pierre Bratt, Marie Louise Gay, Michèle Lemieux, and Stephane Poulin have been published by renowned German publishers. Critics have especially praised Lemieux's and Poulin's picture books, stressing the challenging quality of their artwork.

Since publishers in Germany have made only such a small number of Canadian picture books available, the quality of the eleven picture books I received from the CCL/LCJ editors for review surprised me, as did their variety in topics and in style. The books range from simple texts designed to appeal to for young children to complex ones for more sophisticated readers. Some are clearly designed for both small children and adults, communicating to a dual audience at a variety of levels. The spectrum of literary and artistic style is also wide. Three books are written in verse, three are based on popular songs, and three combine a fictitious story with facts. Others start with a realistic story that turns into a fairy tale or a fantastic narrative likely to stimulate a child's imagination. As for artistic style, a child viewer/reader can choose from photo-realistic illustrations, cartoon-like pictures, illustrations that have similarities with children's scribbles, and naturalistic paintings. Although the illustrators show a preference for water colour, some books have drawings made with crayons, chalk pastel, ink, or color pencils. Two picture books present unusual artistic techniques: Barbara Reid's *Read Me a Book* is distinguished by its plasticine artwork, and the

pictures in Jan Thornhill's *Over in the Meadow* were created on a computer using photographs of common objects like pretzels, nail clippers, coffee, and hair-ties.

Distinguished by shape and typography, the books' cover designs vary significantly. Their impact on readers should not be underestimated, since a first glance at a book's cover might arouse interest in the books' content or, as Power suggests, if worst came to worst, stop youngsters from spending any more time with the book in question. The cover designs of two of the books, *Frosty is a Stupid Name* and *Taming Horrible Harry*, are especially unusual and eye-catching. The covers of these books concentrate on their protagonists, whose main features and whose living space is rendered in a rather abstract style, leaving gaps to stimulate the reader's imagination. The cover of *A Fiddle for Angus* also concentrates on the book's protagonist, this one absorbed by the fiddle tune he is playing against the background of a beautiful coastal landscape. Although the situation being represented here expresses calmness, concentration and love for music, the image is not static at all. Angus's fiddle and his bow jut out from the picture's frame, thus contributing to its dynamics and encouraging the reader to empathize with Angus. By contrast, the covers of most of the other books are overloaded with visual information, sometimes even cluttered with details, so that a viewer might well be distressed by the large number of things being presented.

As this description of covers might suggest, my view of these books has been influenced by my understanding of the unique character of picture books as an art form, as described by scholars like Perry Nodelman in *Words About Pictures* and Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott in *How Picturebooks Work*. But I am also interested in the influence of picture books on young children's developing cognitive abilities, particularly in terms of visual literacy, emergent print literacy, and language acquisition. *Read me a Book* by Barbara Reid interestingly highlights the intimate relationship between child and adult mediator when sharing books. On each double-page spread, a small child is seen on the righthand page enjoying a book together with an adult or older child in different locations – a living room, a

garden, a library, or a bus - and a short sentence is printed on the lefthand page. Four sentences constitute a verse with a rhyme in the second and fourth sentence: "Tell me a story, / Read me a book, / Bounce me a poem, / Let's take a look." Beneath the sentences, a single object such as a book, an umbrella, a bird or a bowl is printed. These objects also appear in the pictures on the opposite page, thus encouraging the young child to look for the respective item. In this way, this book addresses three different motivations that typically attract young children to picture books: the children's interest in common objects in their surroundings, their pleasure in searching for hidden objects, and their love for rhymes.

The first aspect, depiction of common objects, is a typical property of so-called "baby books" or to use a term introduced by my husband and me in "First Pictures, Early Concepts" in order to classify this book type more precisely, "early concept books." The main task of early concept books that display single objects, characterized by Virginia Lowe as "infant book behaviour" (23), consists in stimulating the child to point at the respective pictures and in a further step, to name the things represented in the illustrations. The bright colours and the use of plasticine in Reid's images aid in this process by creating an impression of depth, and might even prompt a young child to try to grasp the objects represented.

While *Read Me a Book* operates as an early concept book, it connects the act of naming with the more complex concept of reading and making sense of a book. The basic level concept "book" is strongly related to an activity, i.e. what is done with a book in different situations and locations. The importance of the young child's encounter with picture books is stressed in an afterword, where Barbara Reid encourages parents to share books with their babies and young children, thus "taking the first steps towards language and literacy."

Opening a door to language and visual understanding is also the focus of Jan Thornhill's picture book, whose text consists of Olive Wadsworth's counting rhyme "Over in the Meadow," which has offered young children a joyous introduction to counting, to rhyming and to animal babies for more than a hundred years. At the same time, each

succeeding picture displays an increasing number of interesting objects which a viewer might like to count. Thornhill also adds another dimension by building each of the pictures out of everyday objects. A baby crow is created from prunes and carrots, with a button for an eye. A fly's head is a radio; its body is a pine cone. A fish's scales are coins and its tail fin a fan. Thus, the game in this book consists of a language game connected to a graphic game connected to a visual game connected to a literary game, all of which play with forms of representation and meaning. While each double-page spread shows an animal family with their increasing number of animal babies, the last one offers a panorama-like view of a vast meadow with river, trees and hills, where every animal family mentioned in the counting rhyme has her own territory. Since many of the computer-generated objects in the pictures have been changed by alteration of color and size, the artist has compiled photographs of the common objects used for the illustrations in a glossary, in order to support the child's ability to detect the altered objects in the pictures.

Also patterned on a popular counting rhyme, the traditional carol "The Twelve Days of Christmas," Jan Andrews and Susan Rennick Jolliffe's *The Twelve Days of Summer* takes readers on a journey into summer, from the discovery of three eggs in a sparrow's nest to the day when those eggs hatch. Because this counting rhyme enumerates animals and plants from one to twelve, every new picture shows an increasing number of items. A child reader can pore over the pictures, searching for that fifth bumblebee, that tenth crow, and for the toys and strange things that turn up on each page: a parachute with the goatsbeard seeds, a fan with the ruffed grouse, a sock or a piece of toast with honey. While the cover is strongly influenced by pop art design, the illustrations inside reveal that the artist Susan Rennick Jolliffe excels in all aspects of nature illustration, in particular insects and birds. The sophisticated color scheme and the accurate depiction of the animals and plants invite a viewer to pause and looking more closely at the details and the jokes (a baby snake hides in the sock, observed by a ruffed grouse; ants drag off bits of a toast with honey while bumble bees fly around). The



perspective changes with each double-age spread, from worm's eye view to bird's eye view. Sometimes the viewer is at eye level with the depicted animals, sometimes she sees them close up or from a distance. The last picture depicts a house with a big garden where all the animals mentioned in the carol are assembled, hidden among the flowers, sitting in the tree, on the roof and on the fence, flying through the air or bathing in the fountain.

What is quite disturbing, however, is that the animals, flowers, trees, and even the sun have human-like faces. This anthropomorphism contradicts the otherwise realistic illustrations, whose claim to scientific accuracy is stressed by a glossary that contains facts – common and unusual – about the animals and flowers. One might describe this book as cute and beautifully made, but like most of the books of poetry that purport to be for young children, all it offers is an attractive package and decorative pictures. And one might question whether young children really wish to read always recycled nursery rhymes or sentimental poems about nature.

The third picture book based on a popular song is *Take Me Out to the Ballgame*, a delightful tale of a family trip to the ball park, where the children enjoy the game with the classic song “Take Me Out to the Ballgame.” In contrast to the picture books discussed above, this work by Maryann Kovalski is not intended for very small children, but for those aged 5-7. The book does not start with the song, but tells an ordinary story of a grandmother who takes her grandchildren to a big baseball game for a surprise. The beginning and its moral implications are not entirely convincing. Grandmother meets with the stiff opposition of the parents, who insist that the children have to go to school. When Grandmother argues that some things are more important than school, the parents give in, and she also talks the school's principal into letting her grandchildren come with her. Meanwhile, she keeps her grandchildren guessing about what important event is going on. When they arrive at the stadium, the song “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” dominates the story, which uses caricature-like visual impressions to show the spectators' joy and excitement during the game. When the

children claim that baseball is more important than school, grandmother admits that this statement may be only partially true, “just this once.” The inconsistent message appears to be that school is important, but baseball is even more important.

Maxwell Newhouse’s *Let’s Go for a Ride* is rather problematic for another reason. According to his publisher's website, Newhouse is one of Canada’s most accomplished folk artists. His works have been exhibited in galleries across Canada, and he is especially well known for his paintings of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Musical Ride. His pictures reminiscent of big oil paintings, are fascinating. The story offers facts about the history of motorization, beginning in the early twentieth century when cars were primarily a source of recreation. They shared unpaved roads with wagons and horses and when they ran out of gas – which was often because there were few gas stations – horses had to pull them home. Newhouse demonstrates how the driving mania began to shape the landscape. Cars demanded gas stations and later, sparked the popularity of family camping, going to the drive-in, and fast food. They even spawned bridges so that people could cross rivers in the comfort of their cars. Newhouse captures the spirit of car culture perfectly, condensed in the thrilling cry “Let’s go for a ride!”

Although the artist concedes that nowadays many people walk or ride a bike for ecological reasons, he stresses the enduring love for cars despite their noises and smoke. Indeed, this book gives the impression that it is not really intended for children at all, but rather, for people who love cars and are interested in their impact on modern culture and economy. Just one double-page spread shows children in connection with cars, dealing with the history of soapbox car racing. The other pictures are dominated by young adults or older people as car drivers.

A trailer park is an unusual setting for a picture book, but in Troy Wilson and Dean Griffiths' *Frosty Is a Stupid Name*, Jenny lives in one. Nevertheless, the setting is just that, a backdrop for the story. Because Jenny thinks that Frosty sounds rather stupid, she tries to find

a better name for her snowman. Once she settles on Bartholomew Hatley Fry as the perfect name and puts a hat on his head, the snowman begins to dance around and both are ushered into a world of make-believe. Jenny has a huge imagination, inventing all kind of things: spaceships, palaces and a unicorn planet. But she is not quite sure whether her snowman is also able to imagine such things. Maybe he is only looking at the front yard and the houses across the streets. Jenny enjoys herself until she starts to wonder about the nature of Bartholomew's imagination. Her thoughts bring both back to earth, where Jenny sets out to give her snowman the best time a snowman has ever had while there's still time. Since she knows that the next day it will get warmer, she starts a fashion show, feeds him with peanut butter toasts, and loads him on her sled to show him all the sights along the way. Coming home, she shows him her paintings from art class, puts him into bed and reads him a story. In the end she says "good night" to him, but in her mind she thinks "goodbye," knowing for sure that this is farewell forever. Although she feels a bit sad, in bed she dreams of Bartholomew dancing with her in the meadow. This picture book tells a gripping story about the power of imagination and demonstrates that even the mundane setting of a trailer park does not hinder children from inventing fantastic adventures for themselves and their playmates, whether human or not.

Especially in books intended for preschool children who have not yet learned to read, pictures function to help them appreciate the text's meaning, filling textual gaps and illuminating important aspects of the story. This is the case here with Dean Griffiths' watercolour illustrations, which support the viewer's task of following Jenny's joyful play with her snowman, showing her actions from different angles. Griffiths' illustrative style is characterized by transparency, allowing for the creation of softly graded tones that let the white of the paper show through to varying degrees. The pictures are very soft in line and colour. The figures are not outlined unless it is necessary to keep them visible against a similarly colored background, and when they are, it is in soft grey pencil rather than harsh

black. The unusual layout separates this book from the traditional picture book. The difference in scale, the framing of some pictures with a thin black line, and the changes between close-up and distance suggest that the artist was inspired by the film medium. Sometimes the same scene is shown but from a different distance or a different position, as if the camera were travelling, changing with sharp cuts from one scene to the next or starting with an opening master shot with close-ups of parts of the scene in following pictures. In addition, the presence of multiple frames on the page not only changes the picture book's look, but also allows for more storytelling within these added pictures, representing the concept of "storyboard picture book," a term introduced by Amy Spaulding's inspiring study *The Page as a Stage Set*.

*Frosty is a Stupid Name* keeps the girl's fantasy life separate from the real world by putting the everyday happenings within small frames and letting the fantasies spread all over the page, reaching to the edges of paper in some pages. The girl's buoyancy and her overwhelming imagination are mirrored in the sequence of the illustrations, which contributes to the picture book's originality and vividness. Thus, illustrator and author create an ingenious combination of media in order to realize their vision.

Sometimes, for instance, there is a complex interplay between words and pictures as Jenny imagines things that cannot be seen by other people in her surrounding. But of course, viewers of the pictures, having been let into her secret life, can see the things she imagines, so there is an ironic counterpoint between what others claim is true and what Jenny believes and the viewer knows. In this regard *Frosty is a Stupid Name* might be categorized as a "counterpointing picturebook" (Nikolajeva and Scott 12), one in which word-picture-relationship reveals a potentiality for complexity. The juxtaposition of text and pictures on the one hand, and of different scales of pictures (reality vs. fantasy) on the other hand, reveals the sophisticated structure of this picture book, which thus also represents the occurrence of

irony in books intended for pre-schoolers that I discuss in "Metalinguistic Awareness and the Child's Developing Sense of Irony."

Evan Solomon, author of the bestselling novel *Crossing the Distance*, co-host of *CBC News: Sunday*, and host of *Hot Type*, seen weekly on CBC Newsworld, is also the author of the intricate children's story *Bigbeard's Hook*, the first book of the series "Nathaniel McDaniel and the Magic Attic." in which a boy has a dangerous encounter with the infamous pirate Bigbeard. Every Sunday Nathaniel visits his grandfather, who lives in a mansion and collects old stamps. One day he accidentally finds the key to the locked door to the attic and discovers a treasure trove, with everything a curious boy could ever dream about. The most exciting discovery is a real pirate's hook. But when he touches it, he suddenly finds himself not in the attic any more, but aboard a ship and surrounded by pirates. As a stowaway he is supposed to walk the planks, but he is able to hide below deck, where he runs into Bigbeard, the terror of Bristol. Clever Nathaniel tries to make a bargain, delivering the missing hook to the pirate in return for the promise of being released. When the hook clicks onto the pirate's stump, the ship starts to shudder and to jump, Nathaniel begins to get dizzy, and finally, returns to the attic. When he is fetched by his parents, his grandfather gives him an old stamp with Bigbeard holding his hook, inviting him to come back next week for his next adventure (which involves a sabre-toothed tiger).

This intriguing travel in time is exceptional for two reasons: the text is written in verse with changing rhyming patterns (rhyming couplets, alternate rhymes, impure rhymes), and the work is intended to be the start for a picture book series dealing with the adventures of Nathaniel in the magic attic (a second book, about a sabre-toothed tiger as promised, appeared in 2007). The cartoon-like style of the illustrations, the changing perspectives (bird's eye view, close-up, panoramic view,--and sometimes the viewer is at eye level with the protagonists), and the artist's tendency to depict scenes dominated by movement and rapid changes add suspense and liveliness. The fantastic adventure is complemented by the

humorous verses and by the unexpected ending of the story. The sophisticated humour of artist and writer combine seamlessly to create a fast-moving, apparently film-influenced picture book. Whether Nathaniel really experienced the encounter with Bigbeard or whether it was merely a dream or a figment of his imagination, remains unclear. The decision is left to the reader, another source of pleasure in this exciting story supplemented by the eye-catching pictures.

Whereas *Bigbeard's Hook* and *Frosty Is a Stupid Name* are characterized by ambiguity— whether the events described in the books do really happen or whether they originate in the protagonists' imagination - the fairy-tale-like character of *Taming Horrible Harry* allows it to avoid this type of ambiguity. Originally titled *Le Gros Monstre qui aimait trop lire* when it appeared in French, *Taming Horrible Harry* is a story about a really bad monster who learns to change his ways. Horrible Harry usually lies in wait at the gates of a beautiful forest in order to scare people who stroll near. One day, he frightens a little girl, who runs away leaving a book behind. Since Harry, who picks it up, does not know what a book is good for, he bites it, spits it out, and throws it down in a fury, just like a young child who is not accustomed to the rules for using books. He is, nevertheless, fascinated by the brightly coloured illustrations. A gentle monster, Dolores del Dragon, teaches Harry to read, and his life is changed forever. Because he forgets to do his job, more and more people come into the wood where the monsters live. Although threatened by the chief monster, Harry refuses to give up reading, and hides in the wood. By and by the other monsters get curious about Harry's strange behavior, visit him in his cavern and are thrilled by his stories. In the end, all the monsters, even the chief, gather around Harry to hear him read the books he gets from Dolores. Ever since that day, all the monster's heads have been so full of beautiful pictures and wonderful stories that they cannot be bothered to do their jobs. They are too busy daydreaming about beautiful princesses and the brave monsters (instead of the brave knights)

that come to rescue them. The last picture shows Harry reading a book about monsters together with the little girl.

This gripping story might well enchant young readers and encourage them to discover the power of storytelling. Although the endpapers show pairs of eyes staring at the viewer, the monsters are not really threatening. Horrible Harry has a figure like Humpty Dumpty, with an egg-shaped body and thin arms and legs. Although he has sharp white teeth, he looks rather funny with his red skin, green checked trousers, goggle eyes, long nose, and blue hairs sticking out from his head in all directions. In his outlook and his emotional behavior, Harry resembles a child more than a monster. Thus, a reader is encouraged to empathize with Harry and his growing love for books and stories.

The story seems to be a bit too didactic in its stressing of the importance of reading, transforming a wild monster into an educated being who develops human-like characteristics like empathy, tolerance, and imagination. However, the delightfully ghoulish paintings by the Quebecois artist known simply as Rogé intriguingly visualize the setting, atmosphere, and characters, as well as helping readers to predict the direction of the story. Rogé's artistic style is reminiscent of children's paintings, characterized by vibrant colors, abstraction and a lack of detail, and thick brushstrokes. Rogé's illustrations stand out from the pictures in the other books reviewed in this essay because of their originality and the dynamics of their composition and layout, creating an impression of spontaneity and freshness.

In comparison to this book, the illustrations in *Black-and-White Blanche* look rather dull, whereas the text conveys the mood of a didactic narrative whose purpose is to ensure that a specific lesson is conveyed. Set in Victorian times, the book tells of Blanche's struggles with her stubborn father who insists that his family live in surroundings determined by the colours black and white – just like Queen Victoria (**but this is not true, it is just the father's opinion**). For this reason everything in the house – including the girl's clothes, the dog, and the furniture – is black and white. When Blanche wishes for a pink dress and flowers for her

birthday, but is only given new black and white clothing, she runs away and stays with the flower lady in the street. In the end, her parents, **who were really alarmed about Blanche's disappearance and are relieved that her daughter was not kidnapped by a criminal, are convinced by Blanche's glowing face** that colours, and especially flowers, would improve their black and white lives. Mary Toews, who seems especially drawn to the Victorian age, brings a knowledge of history to her stories that gives them a depth of detail. She introduces the child reader to Victorian vocabulary and vintage clothing such as petticoats and long stockings. Nevertheless, the story is too straightforward and predictable to be really exciting, and my eight-year-old daughter, to whom I read the book, found the story strange and the pictures boring, whereas she was attracted by the illustrations in *Taming Horrible Harry*.

The creation of convincing characters is fundamental to the success of a visual narrative, as can be demonstrated by two picture books, *Brave Jack and the Unicorn* (written by Janet McNaughton), and *A Fiddle for Angus* (text by Budge Wilson), both with illustrations by Susan Tooke, whose work is admired for her craftsmanship and range of technique. Tooke, who has won several prizes with her extraordinary picture books, continues to experiment and innovate across a wide range of texts and ideas. Her drawings are capable of conveying every emotion through her extraordinary ability to get inside the characters she draws. Her illustrations for both works are imbued with a totally convincing sense of the uniqueness of each individual character.

The story of *Brave Jack and the Unicorn* is a variation of a traditional folktale and draws on motifs from the Middle Ages, Newfoundland folklore, and Celtic influences. Jack – the youngest of three brothers – is neither handsome nor clever and causes his widowed mother much concern. The family is convinced that he is nothing but a fool. When his brothers go off to seek their fortune and do not return, Jack is sent off to find them. Along the way he performs good deeds for helpless creatures, who repay his kindness in magical ways. Hearing of an evil magician who controls the life of a princess, Jack poses as a suitor and



faces three tests. In the end he is able to catch the unicorn, thus saving the princess and his brothers who were turned into stone. The text is very poetic and seems mystical. But when placed next to the beautiful illustrations, it fades because the pictures are so eye-catching. In fact, I suspect the text would seem less dramatic without the pictures.

What makes this picture book so interesting, however, is the interweaving of modern and ancient times, and the ways in which it merges reality with fantasy. The book starts with a realistic story of a widow and her grown-up sons, who live under poor conditions on Newfoundland's coast. The landscape, the houses, and the clothes give the impression that the story is situated in the present. However, the situation changes when Jack dreams of the queen of ants who gives him a magic whistle in exchange for his help. When he wakes up, he finds the whistle clenched in his hand. Gradually, the story turns into the magical past times of fairy tales, where Jack discovers a tree with golden apples, fights a dragon and tames a unicorn. Despite the time shift, the countryside does not change, which connects the past with the present. This strong bond is emphasized by the final picture, which shows a little boy, a girl and a unicorn foal happily playing together in a meadow. The accompanying text reveals that the boy and the girl are the children of Jack and the princess, and the foal is a descendant of the unicorn on whose back Jack and the princess fled from the threatening magician. Tooke possesses that rare gift of a childlike approach to shapes, colors, and drawing combined with a deeply sophisticated sense of design and a passionate and cultured mind. She combines extraordinary skill and craftsmanship with a fabulous dark vision that is particularly effective in the interpretation of folk tales.

*A Fiddle for Angus* is an excellent example of a picture book that might appeal to an audience ranging from non-reader to literate adult. This beautifully designed book with a well-crafted text is both my daughter favourite and my own. Its main focus is homage to Cape Breton and its musical tradition. Angus lives with his family on the Cape Breton seaside. His family is musical and has formed a small orchestra, but as the youngest, Angus

only hums along to the melody. One day he stops humming because he wants to play a proper instrument. After a visit to a ceilidh (**i.e. a place where the traditional Gaelic dance ceilidh is performed**) he decides to take up the fiddle. With determination, practice, and a year's worth of lessons, Angus ends up ready to join the family orchestra. Susan Tooke, who specializes in mural painting and landscapes, demonstrates here her talent in portraiture. Her depictions of Angus, his family, his teacher, and the fiddlers of Cape Breton are very life-like, as if taken from real people. The lavishly colored paintings of the landscape, the family's house, the music shop, and the ceilidh nicely complement the striking story, and their portrayal of the family emphasizes the tenderness of their relationship.

A passion for working on location distinguishes Tooke's work from that of other artists, giving her pictures an atmospheric depth and a convincing sense of authenticity. Her illustrations for both books express a strong sense of place. Although *Brave Jack and the Unicorn* is based on a fairy tale and *A Fiddle for Angus* tells a realistic story, their Newfoundland and Cape Breton settings ground them both in a believable reality. Tooke captures the rich colors and teeming life of a ceilidh, the comfortable atmosphere of the houses, and the characteristic shapes of a countryside dominated by steeply hills, flowering meadows and a stony desert in *Brave Jack and the Unicorn*, and by a coastal landscape in *A Fiddle for Angus*. Both works are distinguished by the attempt to rediscover the magic and power of the Canadian countryside and Canadian folklore, threatened to be erased by increasing trends towards urbanization and globalization.

The art of illustrating picture books has received increasing critical attention in recent years, and the scholarship confirms that at its best, picture book illustration is a subtle and complex art form that can communicate on many levels and leave a deep imprint on a child's consciousness. And although the international book market in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century is increasingly dominated by globalization and a money-grubbing mentality, there nevertheless seems to be growing awareness of the opportunities picture books offer people with an

interest in narrative, design, and communication, and talented artists continue to be attracted to the medium of the picture book as a creative outlet. Against this background, most of the Canadian picture book artists reviewed in this article testify to the artistry and importance of modern picture books for the child's developing visual and print literacy. Illustrators like Dean Griffiths, Barbara Reid, and Susan Tooke have created works that are demanding and involving for young children and adults alike, visual experiences that allow the opportunity for auditory ones and that are likely to leave children with a taste for books and the unbounded reading possibilities they offer.

## Notes

1. I would like to thank Linda Dietrick of the Department of German Studies, University of Winnipeg, for her helpful editing suggestions.
2. In 2005 the German Youth Literature Award was given to the novel *Die Kurzhosengang* (The Gang with Short Trousers, 2004) written by Victor Caspiak and Yves Lanois. According to the imprint, the book was originally published in Canada with the title *The Mysterious Adventures of the Short Ones* in 2001. But shortly after the appearance of the German edition, some critics suspected that the book was in fact written by the supposed translator Andreas Steinhöfel, a well-known German author of young adult novels. At the prize presentation Steinhöfel confessed that he wrote the novel together with Zoran Drvenkar, another children's book author. They invented pen names and pretended that the book was written by hitherto unknown Canadian authors. The footnotes and commentaries made by Steinhöfel in his function as "translator" contribute to the book's humorous style. In Steinhöfel's and Drvenkar's view, this work was pure fun, playing with the readers' expectations. *Die Kurzhosengang* was an immediate success in Germany. Urged by the publishers, both authors wrote the sequel *Die Rückkehr der Kurzhosengang* (The Mysterious Return of the Short Ones) in 2006.

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