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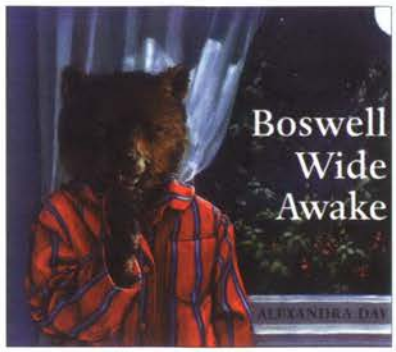

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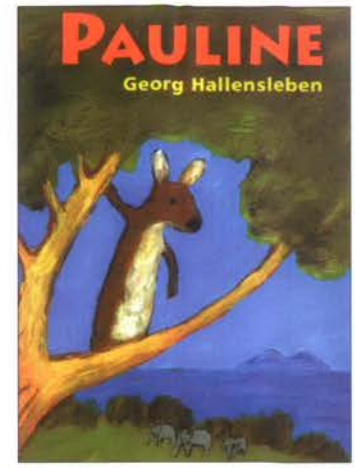

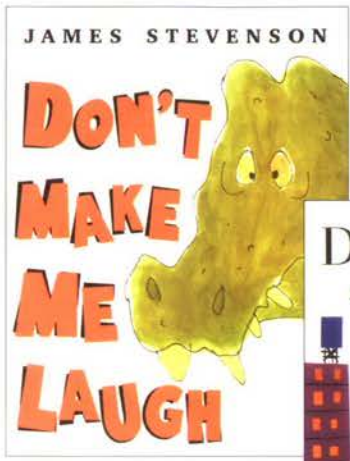

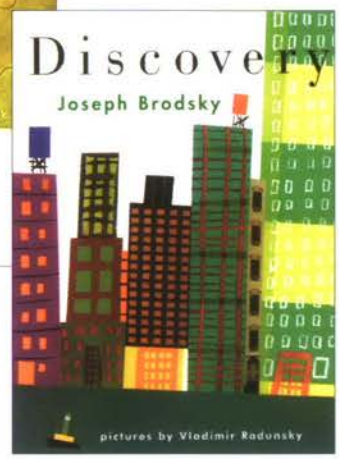

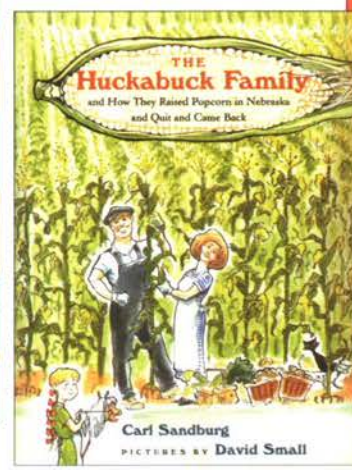

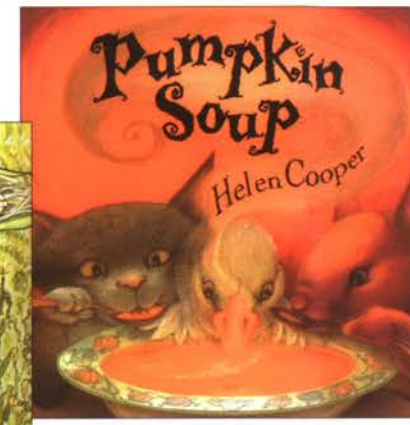

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of books for young readers

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editor's note

When I think about boys in children's books, like many people I immediately think of Huck Finn. With the controversy that hovers over this classic, concerning Mark Twain's language and his depiction of the runaway slave, Jim, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is unlikely to be assigned in middle school English classes these days, and may even be missing from many school libraries. Having reread the book this summer, I'm freshly aware of what a shame this is.

Huckleberry Finn is not simply a novel with a compelling boy character; it is a novel about what it means to leave boyhood behind, to become a man. This lesson is not one that Huck can learn from any of the (white) adults to whom his care is entrusted; he learns it from a black man who is a slave, who is forcibly and tragically uneducated, who is therefore superstitious and naive, but who exemplifies, as no one else in the novel does, the moral attributes of manhood: loyalty, honesty, compassion, and courage. Though, to the end, Huck resists being "sivilized," he is in fact civilized by Jim.

Huck Finn is as fully developed and fascinating a character as a reader will find, and, striking in this era of message-driven novels, he comes alive as a fully real boy. Twain does not tip his hand to make sure we recognize his character's mistaken assumptions, errors in judgment, or thoughtless cruelty when they occur. It is through the context of the story that the reader understands Huck's progress toward maturity.

For decades after *Huckleberry Finn* was published, there was no fully developed body of literature for children; today there is a rich store of books about and for boys and girls, many of which are more accessible than Twain's classic adventure story. But in overvaluing accessibility, what some adult readers have forgotten is that reading itself can be an adventure, for adults and children alike. It is an adventure when it requires us to think and to question. It is an adventure when it provokes us, by engaging rather than avoiding the central questions relating to who we are. Reading is an adventure when it takes us both inward and outward, encouraging solitary reflection and passionate discussion, in turn. By these measures, as well as the irresistible pull of its narrative, *Huckleberry Finn* is a truly great adventure.

In the essay that opens this issue of the *Riverbank Review*, Perry Nodelman takes a look at the portrayal of boys in books for young readers, uncovering some persistent stereotyping that many of us might have assumed to be

About the Cover Art

From the backseat of the car come the recited letters, M-I-SS-I-SS-I-PP-I. These letters are repeated over and over again in a rhythm my daughter almost shouts. I look ahead to the road and remember back to my own self, almost seven, spelling that same enormous word in that same rhythm. It was a big, important word then, and I can't believe I now live so close to this oft-spelled river.

The rivers of my childhood in Montana were much clearer and shallower than the Mississippi. They were rivers that sang and chattered as they flowed over smooth colored stones. On picnics my family found endless things to do along their edges. My brother and sister arranged stones to make dams, bridges, and small pools to lie in. My father fashioned flutes from reeds growing along the riverbanks. I made small boats out of leaves, settling them in the water and watching them sail off with the current. I imagined myself on those boats traveling to the many magical places I knew from the books that were read to me. As I grew up, my family did move to many places, though not always magical. Some of the places where we lived had no rivers at all, but a gutter full of rain was perfect for launchings. Fall was always the best season for river journeys. Its brightly colored leaves added to the beauty and magic of my leaf-boat dreams.

—By Lauren Stringer

Lauren Stringer is the illustrator of Mud, *by Mary Lyn Ray (1996),* Scarecrow, *by Cynthia Rylant (1998), and the forthcoming* Red Rubber Boot Day, *by Mary Lyn Ray (2000), all published by Harcourt Brace.*

a thing of the past. Intrigued by the questions he raises, I recently gathered together a stack of books, many of them stories I've shared with my sons, all of them featuring boy characters.

In many novels, I was surprised to find that there was little in the narrative that directly expressed the inner life of the central male character. By that I mean, the exploration of his thoughts and feelings. I began to wonder: are the characters of boys in contemporary books drawn in less depth than the characters of girls? If this is true, how is it that as a reader I feel intimately acquainted with so many boys on the page? Much of this texture, I realized, I was contributing as a reader.

In some cases, the omission of psychological details is a legitimate part of the writer's art. Deftly drawn, a character's physical behavior can tell a great deal about his thoughts and feelings. But it does seem that, in many books about boys, the writer and reader are both satisfied with rather superficial characterizations. And while there are plenty of books that concern themselves with the real struggles in girls' lives as they come of age, many books about and for boys fall into the science fiction or adventure story genres, a step removed from the day-to-day situations boys face. While novels like Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet* and Lois Lowry's *The Giver* offer much to ponder and are likely to fully engage readers for a long time to come, I think we also need more realistic fiction that explores the desires and concerns of boys in their everyday lives.

Fortunately there are books like this out there, though they may not get the attention they deserve. Throughout this issue we've scattered examples of subtle and believable portrayals of boys in books, dealing with the tensions and challenges of life. They are books worth reading, and boys worth knowing.

—Martha Davis Beck

BOYS IN BOOKS

Everett

Everett Anderson's Mama is humming
because Mr. Perry soon is coming.
Sometimes Three is too much to share,
and sometimes Three doesn't fit somewhere,
and Three at dinner crowds the dishes.
Three should be Two! Everett Anderson wishes.

From Everett Anderson's 1 2 3, *by Lucille Clifton, illustrated by Ann Grifalconi (Holt, 1977). Reprinted with permission of the publisher.*

Scott Anderson

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The Boys in Children's Books

By Perry Nodelman

I am a parent of boys. For that matter, I was once a boy myself. But until recently, I've tended to take the boyishness of boys for granted. In my career as a children's-literature specialist, I've read hundreds of books about boys, but I've never consciously thought about those books in terms of how the emotions and experiences of their male characters might have been shaped simply by the fact of their boyhood—by their authors' and their cultures' assumptions about what it means to be male.

I don't think I'm alone in this lapse of attention. Some of the things that most affect our dealings with one another are things we take for granted as obvious and natural—as being simply "the way things are." Our ideas about masculinity are a prime example. I suspect that even those who, like myself, are committed to noticing and undermining stereotypes of femininity that are dangerous to girls, are often unaware of the degree to which our ideas about male behavior are equally stereotypical, and equally dangerous for boys and men.

Consider, for instance, what happens when young boys act out aggressively. Despite a growing awareness of matters like sexual harassment and bullying, a lot of people still feel quite comfortable saying, "Boys will be boys," as if antisocial behavior is an unchangeable aspect of maleness. Indeed, in a book called *The Wonder of Boys: What Parents, Mentors, and Educators Can Do to Shape Boys into Exceptional Men* (Putnam, 1996), the therapist Michael Gurian insists that "Because of their dominance by the hormone testosterone, aggression and physical risk-taking are programmed into boys." Perhaps they are, although that would have made me, as a child, a pretty poor version of boyishness—either a freakish aberration or an exception seriously challenging the rule of biology. What really matters about biology is what we do about it. If our biological urges were uncontrollable, then none of us would ever have been toilet-trained. Our believing that boys are somehow inherently and inescapably captive to what we identify as their testosterone allows them to be dangerous to others and to themselves. Our believing it to be so does in fact make it so, at least as a powerful social truth that is too often fulfilled.

I began to think about these matters last winter as I was putting together a course in children's fiction. Usually in this course, I devote some time to questions about how literature presents and reinforces gender assumptions. I've always done that by investigating femininity in books about girls. This year, it dawned on me that doing so had become less of a learning experience than it once was. A few decades of important feminist thought has had a huge (and hugely valuable) influence on the university curriculum. My students tend to come to my courses already equipped with an awareness of feminine stereotypes and with strategies to identify and discuss them. So I decided, instead, to explore masculinity in books about boys.

To begin with, this threw my students for a loop. They were convinced there was nothing to explore. In their minds, girls were clearly victims of stereotypes, but boys—well, boys were just boys, just themselves and allowed to be whomever they wanted to be, already enjoying the freedom from stereotyping that girls might aspire to. I began by asking the class if it mattered that the main character in Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet* was male. They immediately and unanimously said no—nothing happened to the boy in this novel that

would have happened any differently had he been a girl. But then one student got a perplexed look on her face. "Hey, wait a minute," she said, "it would matter! It would be totally different." She went on to say that a girl who behaved as the boy in this novel did would have to be clearly characterized as a tomboy, as unusually brave and resilient, unusually uncomfortable with her own tears. Otherwise, she'd just seem really weird. In other words: what we took for granted as merely normal about this child depended on our assumptions about how normally masculine he was. What that normalcy consisted of, and why it seemed so obvious as to be not worth exploring, became important questions for us to consider.

We did so by working out a list of conventional assumptions about what it means to be male. In next to no time, the class came up with a surprisingly long list of characteristics: hiding or even not having emotions, bravery, interest in sports, a muscular body, and so on. It was amazing how much we did know, but had tended to forget we knew, because we took it for granted.

As my class discovered, many children's books take the same things for granted, and affirm some counterproductive assumptions about male toughness and insensitivity. In *Hatchet*, for instance, Brian isn't wild or aggressive. But his survival depends on his learning to see and think as wild animals do, to survey the world with the detached eye of a hunter looking for prey. At the end, Paulsen tells us that "Brian had gained immensely in his ability to observe what was happening and react to it; that would last him all his life." Brian now deals with the social world as he learned to deal with the wild. There's no suggestion that this might be a problem for him—it might well define him as a truly manly man.

On the other hand, there are many children's novels, like Jerry Spinelli's *Wringer*, about a sensitive boy who feels uncomfortable with conventional assumptions about what it means to be male: hiding one's more tender feelings, being competitive, enjoying violence, understanding the importance of male bonding and of communal manhood rituals. That's not surprising. As a literature traditionally written by adults for the good of children, children's narratives have always featured more well-behaved, socially responsible boy characters of the kind that mothers might like than the tough-minded, exuberant,

and rebellious kinds of boys that most other boys and many men might admire.

Intriguingly, however, books like *Wringer* tend to reward boys who defy traditional masculine values with new versions of what they profess to despise. Spinelli's Palmer disagrees with his father's macho pursuits, pursuits that give the father status as an acceptably masculine man. But magically, as the book proceeds, his father changes his mind and adopts Palmer's views, so that being antimachismo actually allows them something suspiciously like a form of conventional male bonding. Throughout the book, furthermore, Palmer has hidden his so-called feminine tendencies for fear of what others would make of them. But at the end, he stands alone in front of a mostly hostile crowd, and sees "nothing at all to fear." He has become the brave warrior, the defiant hero, the ultimate image of traditional machismo. Novels like this one reestablish, in more acceptable forms, more or less what they purport to attack.

In doing so, they merely express our society's continuing confusion about masculinity. In the current bestseller *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood* (Henry Holt, 1998), the psychologist William Pollack says, "We want our boys to be sensitive New Age guys and still be cool dudes. Is it any wonder that a lot of boys are confused by this double standard?" It's no wonder that children's books about boys express a similar confusion.

These are aspects of writing for children that need more attention than most of us usually give them. As I continue my exploration of books about boys, I find myself with more questions than answers. I'm curious about the number of novels in which male bonding and bullying become interrelated themes. I'm equally curious about another set of novels in which boys need to make a choice between two different father figures, each representing a different model of masculinity. I'm wondering how forces like the Robert Bly–inspired Men's Movement, other movements such as the Million Man March or Promise Keepers, and the growing public discussion of masculinity in the wake of tragic events like those in Littleton, Colorado (or Laramie, Wyoming), might be influencing books about and for boys. I'm intrigued by the many books for children in which boys must closet their creative instincts or deep feelings in exactly the way that homosexuality has traditionally been closeted. I intend to keep exploring these questions, and to encourage others, adults and children, to do so as well. Our boys deserve it.

Perry Nodelman explored masculinity in children's books in a symposium at the Center for the Study of Children's Literature at Simmons College in Boston this past summer. His most recent novel for young adults is A Meeting of Minds, *fourth in a series of fantasies written in collaboration with Carol Matas.*

Boys in Books

Marvin

"Go to sleep, Marvin," said a voice inside his head.

It was a girl's voice.

"Close your eyes," the voice said softly. "You're halfway there."

He rubbed his eyes.

"What's wrong with turning into a girl?" asked the voice. "Girls are better than boys. Girls are smarter. Prettier. Braver. Girls can have ponytails. Pigtails. Bangs. Girls can wear sparkles on their clothes."

Marvin's eyes shut for a second, but he quickly opened them.

"Girls can do somersaults, Marvin. Your four-year-old sister can do a somersault, and you can't.

"Girls can hang from the monkey bars upside down by their knees."

Marvin had always wished he could do that.

From Marvin Redpost: Is He a Girl?, *by Louis Sachar (Random House, 1993). Reprinted with permission of the publisher.*

bookstore report

The Reading Reptile's Spring Shindig

Children's authors and illustrators converge at this well-known Kansas City bookstore.

By Betsy Thomas

At my sister's insistence, I recently watched the movie *You've Got Mail.* While it was a pleasant enough way to let two hours of my life slip by, it didn't have the same effect on me that it did on my sister, much to her dismay. While she was swept away by the romance, I found myself mulling over the plight of the small children's bookstore in this era of the giant superstore.

What are independent children's bookstores up to these days? What are they doing to serve their communities, to keep customers coming in, and to keep themselves engaged? Are all their energies claimed by the heads-down, teeth-clenching race to stay in business? Are they having any fun at *all*? With these questions in mind, this spring I attended the third annual children's literature conference sponsored by the Reading Reptile, a family-owned children's bookstore in Kansas City, Missouri.

Located right next door to an ice-cream shop in a small shopping mall in the Westport neighborhood, the Reading Reptile looks cheery and inviting. "How cute," one thinks. But the quirky and slightly subversive imaginative bent of the store's owners—husband-and-wife team Pete Cowdin and Deb Pettid—is evident as soon as you open the door.

Wild paintings depicting familiar fictional characters cover almost every available inch of the floors, ceilings, and walls. A large heating duct has the head of a roaring dragon. As customers are assisted by staffmembers on intense book searches among the stacked shelves, giggling groups of children ride the mechanical pony (it costs a dime), and parents and children snuggle together in the front-window play area. This is no quaint, quiet museum of a store. It is really noisy in here! During most of the hubbub, Deb and Pete's youngest, baby Violet, sleeps peacefully in her crib in a relatively quiet corner.

Business seems to be going swimmingly for a Friday afternoon, and the Reptile's newsletter is full of activities on the horizon: a slew of authors will be visiting the store in the next few weeks. So, why are they putting on this big-deal wingding of a conference?

Deb explains that the idea for the conference emerged a few years ago, when the superstores were just coming on full force. "Pete and I got together and started brainstorming," Deb remembers. "We tried to think what we could do to put ourselves more in the limelight, be more competitive, and offer more to our customers. It was something we thought we could pull off... and it gave us the push to take big leaps forward with our programming." With four young kids, a bustling family business, a house, pets... how *did* they pull it off? It is a genuine team effort. "Every year it gets a little bit easier," Deb laughs.

"A lot of the authors we've had are not people who sell particularly well, but they're people whose work we really respect. It gives us an opportunity to introduce them to the Kansas City population, and then we *do* see an increase in their sales." Past conference guests have included Jon Scieszka, Ed Emberley, Byrd Baylor, and Angela Shelf Medearis. This year's conference was a two-day event featuring both a "Kids Day" and a "Grown-ups Day" with authors Chris Crutcher, Yumi Heo, James Howe, Kathleen Krull, Colin McNaughton, Chris Raschka, and David Shannon.

Kids Day took place at the Kansas City Zoo. Why the zoo? "People know where the zoo is," says Deb. "Parking's easy, accessibility's easy, and everybody feels comfortable there." Each author had his or her own room in the zoo's Education Building, and groups of children (with their accompanying adults) rotated between them for a series of

hour-long sessions. Younger kids attended in the morning, older kids in the afternoon. The event offers a great opportunity for children to work with the creators of some of their favorite books, and it's an opportunity that few pass up. "The Kids Day is always sold out, and each year it fills up earlier," says Deb. This year, the conference accommodated about 1,300 children.

While books by the authors are readily available at the Reading Reptile, the storeowners have made a conscious choice not to sell books at the Kids Day events. "That was one thing I felt firm about from the beginning," says Deb. "As a teacher, do you want your kids to stand in line for thirty minutes to buy something, then stand in line again to get it signed? Do you want their main memory of the conference to be of standing in line?" Asked if this is a risky decision from a business standpoint, she says, "Financially, is this the right decision? Probably not. But is it satisfying to a lot of people? Absolutely. It's definitely a risk worth taking."

Grown-ups Day took place in a church down the street from the bookstore. This setting provided lots of seating, lovely high ceilings, a podium, and large, white walls on which to show slides—plus the added bonus of a slightly naughty feeling when we giggled.

The day started off with a bang with the presentation by Colin McNaughton, who had changed from the quiet and charming, jet-lagged Englishman of the night before into a wildly hilarious entertainer. He described his creative process, which involves large sheets of paper and hundreds of doodles, and strode up and down the stage giving dramatic readings of his very funny poetry. One memorable poem described a car trip, and featured his almost too-vivid use of the podium to recreate that noise from the backseat that every parent dreads: the sound of car sickness coming to fruition. The audience roared.

Other highlights of the day included David Shannon's slide presentation of his Caldecott Honor–winning picture book, *No, David!*, a project based on a book he made as a young boy, when the only words he knew how to write were "No" and his name. We got to see the original childhood drawings that inspired the book and were then led through the final version. A few insights: Shannon's dog, Fergus, makes an appearance in all of his books; one of the spreads in *No, David!* (of David running down the street in his birthday suit) was inspired by his nephew; and the spread where David is told to put away his things includes some of his own favorite toys from childhood. We were also treated to a sneak preview of two upcoming titles.

Chris Raschka, an ultrahip urbanite with a dry, matter-of-fact manner, delighted everyone with mixed-media performances of his picture books. These included puppet shows of *Arlene Sardine* and *Like Likes Like*, and musical interpretations of his two picture-book tributes to jazz musicians, *Mysterious Thelonious* and *Charlie Parker Played Be Bop*. Raschka sang the text-lyrics of each book while playing his guitar, accompanied by a pianist and a sax player.

Raschka had interesting things to say about his experience with booksellers. "I sold 11,000 copies of *Mysterious Thelonious*, which is pretty good for me," he told the crowd. "Out of that 11,000, only about 200 were sold by chain stores. They don't know where to

Authors at the Reading Reptile, from top: Colin McNaughton, Yumi Heo, Kathleen Krull, Chris Raschka

put my books." Raschka's inventive, hard-to-categorize work is one example of the kinds of books that need to be "hand sold" by a knowledgeable, enthusiastic staffperson to find their full audience. It's exactly this hand selling—of older books as well as unique, unassuming, or lesser-known new books—that stores like the Reading Reptile are known for. "The chain stores don't have the depth and breadth of titles that the independents have," says Deb. "And they don't have the people who know the backlist."

After Chris Raschka's mind-expanding presentation, picture-book artist Yumi Heo (*Father's Rubber Shoes*, *So Say the Little Monkeys*) quietly shared slides of her fresh, quirky artwork, and told the story of her journey from Korea to New York City and art school. Although she understood English when she came to this country, initially she didn't like to speak the language. "For the first six months after I met my husband, all we would do was go out to eat and smile at each other," she told us.

Kathleen Krull, author of the popular, trivia-laden biography series, *Lives of the Artists*, *... Athletes*, *... Musicians*, etc., was much more amusing than some might expect an author of nonfiction to be, and her presentation offered a demonstration of how early in life an author's direction can be set. "I've always liked the gossip," she told us. As a child, unsatisfied with the information served up in conventional biographies, she found herself wondering, "What did these people wear and what kind of hairdos did they have?" One of Krull's childhood projects was ingeniously entitled "Hairdos and the People Who Wear Them."

In conjunction with the conference, the Reading Reptile mounted an unusual art exhibit. Special pieces were created by local artisans in honor of the event, including a *Bunnicula* night light (a two-foot-tall bunny complete with vampire cape and red eyes that lit up), an *Arlene Sardine* pillow, a full-sized *Bad Case of Stripes* chair (which we all had to be dissuaded from flopping onto), a beanbag toss inspired by Kathleen Krull's *Lives of the Artists*, gently grinning soft-sculpture monkeys and accompanying palm trees from Yumi Heo's *So Say the Little Monkeys*, and a spooky hanging lamp shade embellished with the bats from Colin McNaughton's *Making Friends with Frankenstein*.

Not only were all of the pieces wonderfully imaginative, they showed the endless creative possibilities that can emerge from books for children. The

Boys in Books

Jimmy

Jimmy thought the world was divided into kids who picked up on things fast and kids who didn't. Kids whose hands were raised in class every two minutes and kids, like Jimmy, who, even when they were sure of the answer, weren't *that* sure. Some kids could master any new game in two minutes. Jimmy wasn't one of them. Some kids were what his teachers called "natural leaders." They took charge. They knew something about everything.

Jimmy knew he was bright, but still and all, he seemed to know less about most things than he should have. The reason was, he didn't pay attention. He didn't pay attention because he was daydreaming. As he daydreamed, he drew in the margins of the pages of his loose-leaf book—and sometimes when he got carried away, he even drew all over his homework. His teachers and everyone else told him that if he stopped drawing in class he'd "retain" more. He tried that. It didn't work. He didn't "retain" anything. Not the lesson, not his daydreams. He went blank. He floated away inside himself.

From The Man in the Ceiling, *by Jules Feiffer (HarperCollins, 1993). Reprinted with permission of the publisher.*

authors were all thrilled by the art their books inspired and each one took the opportunity to sign the piece that had been done in his or her honor. Deb and Pete hope to eventually auction off these artworks and use the money to fund other book-related cultural events. "You can adapt books, you can mess around with books. Books are not an untouchable art form," says Deb.

After the authors were finished with their presentations, the business of book signing and selling got underway. Deb handed the baby over to Pete. The scene was one of dizzying activity, with people looking through the books trying to decide what to buy, people waiting in line to buy the books they'd selected, people with arms full of purchased books waiting for author signatures, and children running in loops around all the book-buying grown-ups in the store. Violet was getting fussy, but Pete was unfazed. He took a candy worm from the bag the family was sharing and stuck it halfway into his mouth. Wiggling his head around and making sounds to amuse the baby, he went on with his appointed tasks.

Though it is a major undertaking for Deb and Pete, the conference is an energizing experience. "It keeps us on top of and excited about what we're doing," Deb says. What's next? "Expanding it so that it's more than a single event. We want to bring it to the level where the conference is just one aspect of bringing kids and books together in the arts community in Kansas City. Next year, we want to take a book, or characters, from each of the attending authors and adapt them in other art forms in events at other organizations in the community. I think the best thing we can do as a store is to raise the level of excitement and awareness of kids' books in Kansas City... and that's what we want." That's what they're doing. And they're doing it while making worm noises.

Betsy Thomas is a writer and former bookseller who lives and works in Minneapolis.

The Reading Reptile
4120 Pennsylvania #12
Kansas City, Missouri 64111
(816) 753-0441

Next year's conference is scheduled for the first Friday and Saturday in March. Guest authors include Jon Scieszka, Walter Wick, Marissa Moss, Reeve Lindbergh, and Alma Flor Ada. To subscribe to the Reading Reptile's newsletter, *The Post-Historic Times*, call or write the store.

The World Up Close

By Christine Alfano

When I come to the lake, I like to look outward. I'm accustomed to the blunt closeness of a city landscape, so when I'm up here I sit on the rocks near the water, and slip into a farsighted mode. Across wide-open water, my eyes rest on the thick line of evergreen and aspen that form the horizon. The view is always the same, but changing. Look up and the sky is a huge, unobstructed stage, a twenty-four-hour drama of weather. The lake itself always varies: smooth, black glass becomes a shifting puzzle of sunlit colors. Friendly little waves turn sullen, swelling eventually into slapping planks of cold gray foam.

Well, that's what I usually do when I come to the lake: look outward and upward, all day long. This time, I took the advice of some children's books. I looked down, I looked under. I watched what was close to me and looked as hard as I could. I've been coming to this same place for many years. This time I saw things I've never seen before.

Henry Cole's picture book *I Took a Walk* (Greenwillow, 1998) inspired this careful, close-up approach to observing nature. It's a quiet, lushly illustrated story that invites readers on simple walks to four different destinations: forest, meadow, pond, and stream. Each habitat is entered almost secretively: "I sat quietly at the edge of the pond and peered through the tall cattails. I saw...," and with the turn of the page, the place and its inhabitants are revealed, slowly but surely, to thoughtful observers—an accompanying list tells us which plants and animals and insects to look for. Cole's text has a calm, hushed quality. Every spread invites a slow perusal and offers the satisfactions inherent in finding and identifying what's out in our world.

Illustrations by Marie Le Glatin Keis, from Children of Summer

For five days, I resolved to look carefully at what was close by. My kids were welcomed along to test their own curiosity, and a few choice books helped us on our explorations.

Sunday

Dead Bodies Everywhere

We're on the lookout for insects, small things, creatures we've hardly bothered to take notice of, and the sun-bleached dock offers up this strange sight: lined up symmetrically, and facing the same direction, stand seven angular, brownish insects. I take a closer look (they're not moving) and pick one up. It's so light, it nearly floats out of my hand, and I see it's not alive. Some kind of insect has left a transparent and delicate husk behind. The Peterson *Junior Field Guide to Insects* (Houghton Mifflin, 1997) proves to be an invaluable resource—it lets me know that the husk I've found is the last trace of a dragonfly's nymph stage. I never would have guessed that such an elongated, colorful

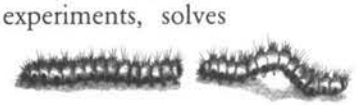
insect had begun in this squat, dull form. But why so many husks in one spot? Why facing the same direction? The field guide only begins to answer my questions.

Later, on the path, another astonishing discovery: there is a dead mouse lying off among the leaves. When my kids and I stoop down to take a look at its decomposing body, we're amazed to see that it's moving! What should be an inert body is somehow undulating. We watch for a while and make our guesses: Maggots squirming? A miraculous call back to life? An earthquake?

I pinch the tail between my fingers and lift the body to investigate, and there we spy the animators—shiny black insects with brilliant red-orange spots: carrion beetles going about their mealtime business.

Some families might go out of their way to avoid what we witnessed, vigorously squelching such morbid curiosity—"Never mind the dead mouse, just keep moving!" But we have read Margaret J. Anderson's story of the life of entomologist Jean-Henri Fabre, *Children of Summer* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997); we know that there are mysteries to solve in almost everything we see. Every chapter in this absorbing book unfolds the circumstances of a particular insect's behavior, and then asks questions. Why do cicadas sing their noisy song? How does a scarab trick a fellow beetle into helping him roll a ball of dung to his burrow? What attracts a giant peacock moth to its mate?

Seventeen wondrous mysteries are spun out in these chapters, and they impart both an awe for the odd workings of insects and a healthy disregard for easy answers. Along with his children, Fabre observes behavior, poses questions, tries experiments, solves intriguing problems. *Children of*



Boys in Books

Kiyama

It is the first time I have ever seen a dead man, but I do not feel frightened in the least. At that moment, all the ghosts and monsters which so terrified and fascinated us slip far from my mind. The old man's body lies there, gentle and familiar, like an old pair of worn clothes.

There is so much I want to tell him. About the practice match, about sleeping in a miso storeroom, about the horror story the old woman told us, about the first big fight I have ever had in my life, about cleaning the toilets until dawn, about the graveyards on the island, about the sea glittering like the back of a fish, about how I could hear the sounds within my own body when I dove into the ocean…

I press the grape against his lips. Expecting its juice to somehow loosen his closed mouth. Say something. Anything. Just say something. If you will just speak to me, I will be your slave for the rest of my life. I'll weed your garden. Massage you. Take the garbage out. Do the laundry. I'll even feed you sashimi every day. So please, please, don't go yet…

But he cannot hear me. And I finally begin to cry.

From The Friends, *by Kazumi Yumoto, translated by Cathy Hirano (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996). Reprinted with permission of the publisher.*

Summer elevates natural curiosity to an art form (and encouraged us to wonder about a rodent corpse).

Monday

Life's Rich Pageant

Now we're on a roll. Our eyesight has adjusted to a closer proximity and we're spotting interesting things everywhere we go. We take two perfect little books along with us on our walks: Anne Hunter's *What's in the Pond?* and *What's Under the Log?* (Houghton Mifflin, 1999). At 5 1/2 by 5 1/2 inches, these books fit neatly into any hiker's pocket and serve as compelling beginner field guides. Each book asks one intriguing question (see its title) and then goes on to describe ten living things that might be found in or around the place under scrutiny.

Hunter's descriptions are as neat and compact as the books themselves, imparting just the right amount of factual information to a budding naturalist. How better to describe the call of a chorus frog than to say it "makes a sound like fingernails running over the teeth of a fine-toothed comb"? Her illustrations differ from most field guides' strict, informational formats. Instead of precise pencil drawings or photographs, we are treated to evocative, crosshatched watercolors that give us a sense not only of a damselfly's appearance, but which part of the pond she might be found in and what she might be doing. The log and the pond are pictured as communities teeming with different kinds of life, and Hunter conveys the complex idea of an ecosystem in an uncomplicated way.

Here's what we saw:

- diving loons
- a very large frog sitting completely still in an inch of water
- daisies and Indian paintbush near the road, blue lupines in the meadow
- a green-and-black garter snake sliding past us
- a pair of wolf spiders, at least four inches across, that moved carefully toward and away from each other for the entire hour that we watched, at one point resting with a few legs touching
- a fat black leech with orange spots lolling in the water
- a blue heron
- dragonflies, mayflies, deerflies, horseflies
- three daddy longlegs
- a painted turtle sunning on a rock
- glowworms
- water striders doing their snazzy dance
- butterflies (black with white bands on the tips of their wings)
- a velvet mite (minuscule spiders the same color as maraschino cherries)
- a translucent strand, ten inches long, of fish eggs, tiny green dots in pearls of clear gel: the most surprising sight yet!

Illustrations by Anne Hunter, from What's in the Pond? *and* What's Under the Log?

Illustration by Henry Cole, from I Took a Walk

Tuesday Evening

Interactive Sports

A curious insect might wonder: "Why is the mosquito host scurrying from room to room in the middle of the night, wearing nothing but underpants and a T-shirt, making odd squawking sounds and wildly searching the surface of the walls and window screens with her inadequate flashlight?" To imagine this is to entertain the radical notion that Henry Cole delicately suggests in *I Took a Walk*: as the child in his story leaves each habitat, he asks a more pertinent question than "What did I see?" He says: "I followed the stream and came to a pond. I wonder who's watching me?" Cole implies that we are not only observers, we are also the observed; we don't stand outside of nature, we're a part of it, fellow creatures—in the case of the scene described above, an unwilling host to hordes of bloodthirsty mosquitoes. For a couple of days we've been looking, but until today the notion hadn't occurred to us that all those creatures we looked at might be looking at us. Who felt our approaching footsteps, or was bothered when we lifted up a log? Who scurried away from favorite sunning spots when we blundered along? Who saw opportunity in our warm-blooded bodies? Who do we think we are?

Wednesday

Nothing New in the World

We've seen it all. We stayed alert and looked everywhere; there is surely nothing we have missed. I'm tired of being on the lookout; it was fun, but once again the expanses of water and horizon beckon. My husband and I head out in the canoe. The lake is still and quiet; I stare out into the distance at an odd-shaped island up ahead. I'm lost in thought, no longer vigilant, so my husband is the one to spot it: "There's something on the water." We paddle backward to check it out and there, on the surface of the lake, in stunning contrast to the water's inky blackness, is a lime-green luna moth, as wide across as my hand, struggling to lift its lavish wings from this huge lake's hold. I've never seen a luna moth before—to find one here, in the daytime, so far from shore, feels like an extravagant gift. I scoop the moth onto my paddle and set him carefully into the boat. He shivers and rests, flapping his wings tentatively, drying them out, testing if they'll work. The moth is so gorgeous, I'm awed—a white furry body; two fat black feathers for antennae; brown, wide-opened eye-spots on each wing. We'll return him safely to the shore, but right now I just want to look. Closely. And whose great good luck was it that we happened upon each other, anyway? His or mine?

Thursday

Taking Leave

It's inevitable: while packing our stuff for the trip back home, my kids sidle up to me with assorted north-woods flotsam and ask if they can please tuck it in their overflowing suitcases. Favorite rocks (that don't look so pretty when they're out of the water and dry), significant sticks, pinecones, sandy bits of bark, dried moss... I used to try to make them choose a couple of favorites, but I know better now. They're just trying to hold onto what they have here.

I won't be taking bug husks home with me, or the magnificent pair of dragonfly wings that we found stuck to the screen door. They're too fragile, and they belong where they are. I'll be taking something else along, though. Already I'm wondering what I'll see when I get home.

Christine Alfano is a member of the editorial committee of the Riverbank Review.

profile

Gary Soto

Through poetry and prose, a Mexican American author meets his young readers where they live.

By Susan Marie Swanson

Ten-year-old Rudy has heard the story of how Grandpa came to the San Joaquin Valley "a hundred times, maybe more." Hitchhiking from Mexico to California as a young man, Grandpa found that his shoes had been stolen. He continued north, pitching a piece of cardboard ahead of him and stepping on it to cool his feet. "That's how he jumped from place to place and ended up in Fresno, working as a gardener. That's how years later he would be sitting in the backyard taping a splintered shovel back to life." *The Pool Party* (1993), the novel in which Rudy and Grandpa appear, is fast-paced and funny. What about Grandpa's story? Is it amusing? Heartrending? Symbolic?

All three. So is the scene that concludes the novel, when Rudy comes home happy from the pool party at a rich classmate's house. Rudy sits down to a plate of enchiladas that will fill him up where dainty party food did not. "You wouldn't believe it, but they had food small as my pinkie," he tells his parents. Too tired to eat with the rest of the family at the table, Grandpa falls asleep with a book on his lap, *How to Build a Swimming Pool.* There is a freshly dug hole in the backyard. This emotional complexity and resonance is a trademark of Gary Soto's writing.

Soto's books for young people—including about a dozen novels, three volumes of short stories, three books of poetry, a play, and five picture books—have been appearing regularly since *Baseball in April and Other Stories* was published in 1990. He began as a poet, though, and his first book of poems, *The Elements of San Joaquin*, came out in 1977, when Soto was twenty-five. In a recent essay he describes the day he took a copy of that book to his grandmother, who could read neither English nor Spanish. She honored her grandson with a big meal of eggs, frijoles, and tortillas, and fitted the slender book into a picture frame to display in her living room.

Carolyn Soto

Twenty-some years later, Soto conceives of himself as a writer who has gone out to meet his readers, starting with kindergartners "most of whom are Spanish-speaking and weigh in at forty-five pounds." A child could grow up on Soto's books, beginning with the picture books, like the warmly funny *Snapshots from the Wedding* (1997), told from the flower girl's point of view, and the sharper-edged *Chato's Kitchen* (1995), in which a family of mice new to an East Los Angeles barrio outwit the cat that invites them to dinner. Then come novels for elementary-school-aged readers, including *The Pool Party* and *The Skirt* (1992), comic novels with a disarming blend of lyrical language, emotional sensitivity, and episodic plots peppered with easy humor.

Soto's books of poems for children, *Neighborhood Odes* (1992) and *Canto Familiar* (1995), emerge from the same neighborhoods as the comic novels. Kids butter tortillas, run through the sprinkler, and scrub the *mole* sauce off dirty dishes. The language is informal, but rich in patterns of sound and imagery, like "Ode to Mi Perrito," a poem about a little dog, which includes these lines:

He's brown as water
Over a stone,
Brown as leaves and branches,
Brown as pennies in a hand.
He's brown as my mitt
On a bedpost,
And just as quick:
A baseball rolls
His way and his teeth
Chatter after it.

On to books about the junior-high-aged Lincoln Mendoza, *Taking Sides*

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(1991) and *Pacific Crossing* (1992), and the short stories, including a piercing new collection, *Petty Crimes* (1998). Two novels for older teens, *Jesse* (1994) and *Buried Onions* (1997), make a compelling pair, one about a young man trying to make it on his own during the Vietnam War years, doing field work and going to college; the other, the story of a contemporary nineteen-year-old trying to steer clear of gang violence in present-day Fresno. There are the books of autobiographical essays to read along the way, including *Living Up the Street* (1985); and, of course, the poetry for adults, including *New and Selected Poems* (1995) and, most recently, *Junior College* (1997).

How many American authors have mapped such a journey for us to follow? Soto's is an extraordinary achievement.

Born in 1952 into a working-class Mexican American family, Soto grew up in Fresno, graduating from high school with a 1.6 average. "I was a marginal kid," he said years later. "I could have gone from playground to prison or college."

He discovered poetry while he was a student at Fresno City College, eventually earning a Master of Fine Arts degree from the creative writing program at the University of California at Irvine. By the time *The Elements of San Joaquin* came out, his literary influences had shifted from the Beat poets to other contemporary poets like Philip Levine and Galway Kinnell. Along the way he married the daughter of Japanese American farmers, and they raised a daughter.

Soto taught at Berkeley for nearly fifteen years, but left formal university teaching in 1993, just as his career writing for young people was taking off. In recent years he has traveled all over California, reading, writing, and spending time with young people and their teachers and families. "I've taken the show on the road," says Soto, "and built a name among the *gente*, the people."

How did Soto come to write for children? In a sense, they came to him first. *Living Up the Street*, a memoir on growing up and coming of age in Fresno, was published in 1985 by a small press. Soto was heartened to receive letters from young readers, particularly junior college students, who saw themselves in the book. While *Living Up the Street* was winning over such readers, he wrote *Baseball in April*, a collection of short stories for young people. A selection of his poems for adults appeared in a volume for young readers,

Boys in Books

Jesse

By the time I was seventeen, in junior college, and living on fruit snatched from neighborhood trees and Top Ramen, I no longer thought God was the creaks rising from the wood floor. I knew God was found in prayer, not in the sudden closing of the hallway door just as you stepped from the bathroom. But when I was a boy with squares of black space instead of baby teeth, when the door closed with a sigh, I thought, *That's God. God made that happen.*

I dropped out of high school and moved out of my house because it was scary there. My stepfather drank from the time he got home from work until the time everything funny on television became news or talk shows. At night, Mom leaned her fear on two pudgy elbows at the kitchen table. She liked fashion magazines, Mexican music, plant cuttings rooted in jam jars, and bingo on Friday nights at St. John's Cathedral. No one was happy. There was more music from our nearly deaf neighbor's house than from ours.

From Jesse, *by Gary Soto (Harcourt Brace, 1994). Reprinted with permission of the publisher.*

A Fire in My Hands (1990). A large publishing house published *Living Up the Street* and two other books of autobiographical prose in inexpensive paperbacks for young adults.

Coming to literature for young people, Soto was drawn not so much to a *genre* as to an *audience*. He has stated firmly that he writes for Mexican American children and teens. They are his inspiration. "I see them in my mind when I write," he says, adding that while "literature always makes a big leap beyond race and beyond country and time as well... still, I think you can try to focus on a particular audience. That's not to exclude others, but to help you out as a writer."

The autobiographical narratives in *Living Up the Street* are full of kids who don't have books like *The Pool Party*, *Neighborhood Odes*, and *Baseball in April* to read—including one kid named Gary Soto. In "1, 2, 3," Soto is seven, playing with five-year-old Rosie at the playground. A well-dressed man arrives with his daughter. While Rosie is pushing the girl on a swing, the little girl falls. The father lashes out. Yelling "You filthy Mexican," he shoves Rosie against a chain-link fence. Seven-year-old Soto wants to tell the man the truth, "to explain it was a mistake; that we also fell from the swings and the bars and slide and got hurt. I wanted to show the man my chin that broke open on the merry-go-round, the half-moon of pink scar." When he tries to cheer Rosie up, she tells him to go away.

Rosie, hunched over her spilled sunflower seeds, crying as she picks them up, is the shadow of Maya, the exuberant flower girl of *Snapshots from the Wedding*, or the girl who gets snow cones for free because her daddy drives the ice-cream truck in *Neighborhood Odes*, or Miata of *The Skirt*, who dances *folklórico* in a skirt the "colors of Mexico."

In Soto's books tears are a constant in life. When Rudy takes a crayon away from a baby in *Boys at Work* (1995), he is amazed at how hot the baby's tears are. In *Jesse*, revisiting the spot where he once spent a cold night stranded outdoors, Jesse's eyes fill with tears. Listening to "Ninety-six Tears" in *Local News* (1993), Melinda screams, "*Ay*, my favorite." She asks her friend, "Patty, you ever count how many tears you cried?" In another story, a frightened boy's "dime-sized tears" fall to the ground.

Coins are another recurring image. In *Off and Running* (1996), Miata turns a question "over and over like a coin" in her mind. In *Buried Onions*, Eddie hears "the joyful music of coins clapping like tambourines," as he pedals his bike. At Norma's junior high school in *Petty Crimes*, "every afternoon there were fights that drew blood and anger bitter as pennies."

And there are sparrows. A group of girls is "huddled like sparrows in the oil-spotted parking lot in front of a 7-Eleven" (*Petty Crimes*). A child rips a piece of tortilla to feed the sparrow that drops from the tree (*Neighborhood Odes*). Speaking about his work as a writer, Soto has compared *himself* to a sparrow. "That's OK," he remarked in a moment of humility and metaphor, "OK to be one of those little birds jumping in the grass. Only a very few of us are eagles or condors. Most of us are sparrows."

Susan Marie Swanson is a member of the editorial committee of the Riverbank Review.

Finding Poetry

Excerpt from the keynote speech given by Karla Kuskin at the Seventh Annual Hubbs Children's Literature Conference.

UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS, FEBRUARY 1999

If you start listening for poetry, you will find it practically anywhere, everywhere. Years ago, when I took a lot of pictures, I noticed that if I had black-and-white film in my camera, I paid attention to arrangements of positive and negative spaces. I saw buildings, people, and landscapes as gradations in light and texture; in other words, as black-and-white pictures. When I walked around with color film, a white gull against a deep blue sky, a red-sweatered child on a green field—these images hit my eye and made all the difference, because I was looking for color.

It works the same way with poetry. If you keep your ears open and listen for it, you'll hear it. When I watched *The American Experience:* "The Irish in America" on public television, I listened to a man read a letter written by an immigrant who had gone West and seen the Rockies for the first time. "Pat," he wrote his brother, "you have to get out here right away. They have so much land they're stacking it."

On the Weather Channel the other night, tucked in the customary evening predictions was this phrase: "a rumble of thunder must not be ruled out." Rule out a rumble of thunder? Not me. You could dance to it, or make a poem out of it.

A couple of weeks ago on the Long Island Railroad, I heard the conductor coming through the cars chanting, "Change for the Huntington train…" Suddenly a small "oh my" appeared in my head, and I realized I was hearing, "Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!" Words and rhythms, rhythms that are in us, that we respond to—simple poetry is made of these.

For me, writing has been an extension of an internal conversation. I have always talked to myself—that's a habit that comes with only childhood, with keeping oneself company. To entertain myself I began making up stories and verses from an early age. This is a poem I wrote so long ago, I dictated it to my mother because I couldn't write yet:

A Flower Was Knocking at the Door

A flower was knocking at my door.
The snowball bush at the head of
the door
is waving and knocking at my door.
She said to me
when I opened the door
"Isn't it a lovely day today?"
"Yes," I replied
as I drank my orange juice.
"Do you like orange juice?"
I was going to say
as suddenly she turned
and went far away.
The wind had blown her away.

I don't think I've done better since, for good unself-conscious imagery, but

SEVENTH ANNUAL

HUBBS CHILDREN'S LITERATURE CONFERENCE

one has to keep trying. Children and nonwriters always ask where you get your ideas. I suspect the answer for most of us is from all that stuff outside one's head that filters through what's inside one's head. Generally I just ask the question back:

Where Do You Get the Idea for a Poem?

Where do you get the idea for a poem…
does it shake you awake?
Do you dream it asleep
or into your tiny tin head does it creep
and pop from your pen
when you are not aware
or leap from your pocket

or fall from your hair
or is it just silently
suddenly
there?
In a beat
in a breath
in a pause
in a cry
one unblinking eye
that stares from the dark
that is deep in your head
demanding attention
until it is written
until it is rotten
until it is anything else but
forgotten
until it is read.

I fell for language when I was very young, and continue to believe in its power to educate, solace, and provoke. When I first started talking about poetry for children, back in the late 1950s, I approached the subject warily, afraid that once the fatal word—*poetry*—was mentioned, folks would begin yawning or heading for the exits. I think that bad reputation had less to do with the subject than with the ways that adults who introduce poetry to children were introduced to it themselves. Too much emphasis on forms, dusty language, symbolism, and memorization of words one didn't care for to begin with, and too little emphasis on the music, on the word sounds, the swing and humor of the lines.

With words, and at times illustrations, I have tried to satisfy a wish, built into my DNA perhaps, to simplify and clarify. Short, pared-down poetry uses language that way. For instance, expressing anger:

I am very fond of you
but I get tired of you too.

Or:

I am making soup of soap.
James will drink it up I hope.
I have not been friends with James
since he called me all those names.

Or a very concise description:

Spiders are all right I guess
or would be
if their legs were less.

You can put a rather complicated thought into a short, neat package. This is a poem of mine that, in retrospect, seems to be about the creative process:

There is a tree
that grows in me.
A tree that no one else can see.

There is a bird upon the tree
upon the tree
that grows in me.
The tree that no one else can see.

And when the bird
upon the tree
begins to sing
you think it's me.

Picture books are more complicated than short, simple verse, but, nonetheless, I write prose the way I write poetry —listening for rhythms and word sounds, building sentences. It is the telling that counts.

I like beginnings that reach out and invite the reader in. Perhaps a quiet opening like the first lines of *The Philharmonic Gets Dressed*:

It is almost Friday night. Outside, the dark is getting darker and the cold is getting colder. Inside, lights are coming on in houses and apartment buildings. And here and there, uptown and downtown and across the bridges of the city, one hundred and five people are getting dressed to go to work.

This book is about music and underwear. It is also about art as work. Where did the idea come from? I remembered my childhood dolls, how I always looked under the skirt to see what was going on—wanting to know how everything worked. Also, from being married to an oboe player for twenty-three years, watching him get ready to play a concert —and watching our children watch him.

Because the subject of this book is music, it was especially important to me to build musically to the end:

The conductor raises the baton in the air. Way up, on the ceiling of Philharmonic Hall, six chandeliers sparkle silently. The conductor brings the baton down, and the hall, which is as wide and long as a red velvet football field, fills with music.

The music floats and rises. It sings and dances from violas, violins, cellos, double basses, flutes, a piccolo, bassoons, clarinets, oboes, French horns, trumpets, trombones, a tuba, a harp, drums, cymbals, chimes, and one thin silver triangle.

It is 8:30 on Friday night, and the one hundred and five men and women dressed completely in black and white have gone to work turning the black notes on white pages into a symphony.

They are the members of the Philharmonic Orchestra, and their work is to play. Beautifully.

When I look through my written work I notice that I almost always try to find an ending that makes a final statement, rather than just fading away. Perhaps this has to do with a lifelong love of punch lines. These few lines that I once wrote on a scrap of paper describe the circle that seems to be the creative process, whether you are writing, drawing, or speaking:

Without a beginning
you wouldn't need an ending.
Without a piece of paper
you wouldn't need a pen.

Consider the beginning
then when you find the ending
go back to the beginning
and begin again... again.

A few years ago I was asked to write an autobiography for children. I went

back in my mind to the roots of my devotion to rhythm and words. I went back to my father who was shy with people but was never shy about sitting down at the piano and playing through every song in an old musical, with me glued to his side on the piano bench, singing every word. I went back to the verses my father wrote for me, to my luck in having parents and teachers who loved to read aloud, were good readers, and loved poetry.

At around the same time that I was reflecting on these things, the Manhattan Transit Authority started a program called Poetry in Motion. I remember the first time I was sitting on a subway train and looked up to see the opening lines of T. S. Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" fitted between an ad for a midtown dermatologist and an ad for Preparation H. "Let us go then, you and I, / When the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherised upon a table..." I couldn't believe it. About a year later, my own words appeared in a similar spot. I was thrilled. I only wished my parents could have seen my verse immortalized on the Number 6 train. This poem is now playing buses in the Atlanta Transit System:

The Question

People always say to me
what do you think you'd like to be
when you grow up
and I say why
I'd like to be the sky
or be a plane or train or mouse
or maybe be a haunted house
or something furry, rough and wild
or maybe I will stay a child.

Well, it's obvious I did not remain a child, but, as with many who write for children, the connection to my childhood has stayed strong within me. Perhaps it is what underlies that desire to take what might be complicated thoughts and get them down to essentials, to explain the way the world works, to my child self.

Karla Kuskin was born in New York City. Her first children's book, Roar and More, *was created while she was a student in the graphic arts department at Yale, and she has been making books ever since. A recent collection of her poems,* The Sky Is Always in the Sky *(HarperCollins, 1998), was a* Riverbank Review *Children's Book of Distinction. Her next book, a picture book entitled* I Am Me, *will be published by Simon & Schuster next spring.*

Boys in Books

Ben

We drink sometimes, me and Digit, but not to lose ourselves. It's great in the early fall on a really crisp evening to get a bottle or some beers and sit in the woods, up past my house or in the cemetery. When the four of us get drunk together, we might act like jerks, but if Hatcher isn't around—when it's just me and Al and Digit—we can get down to some serious stuff.

One night, maybe two weeks ago, we sat under the stars till really late, talking about getting out of here next summer, maybe going out West. Al said he'd like to work in the rodeo. He's never been on a horse, I don't think. But you say things like that when you're really relaxed, when you know you can get away with it. If Hatcher had heard that, he'd never let Al forget it; he'd be calling him Tex or something. But I get it, and so does Digit, even if it's not really about the rodeo or working on a fishing boat or going to Wyoming. It's about getting out. Breaking the pattern.

From Wrestling Sturbridge, *by Rich Wallace (Knopf, 1996). Reprinted with permission of the publisher.*

interview

Allen Say

Following lessons learned from his former teacher in Japan, this picture book author and illustrator artfully transfers memory to the page.

By Martha Davis Beck

Allen Say was born in Yokohama, Japan, in 1937. From the age of six, he dreamed of becoming a cartoonist, and when he was twelve he began an apprenticeship to Noro Shinpei, a cartoonist in Tokyo whom he had admired as a child. At sixteen he moved to the United States, where he attended several art schools and universities before settling into a career in commercial illustration and photography. Say published his first children's book in 1972 and has written and illustrated many critically acclaimed picture books since then, including *The Bicycle Man* (1982), *Tree of Cranes* (1991), the Caldecott Award–winning *Grandfather's Journey* (1993), and, most recently, *Tea with Milk* (1999), reviewed in this issue. The following interview was conducted by phone this summer.

MDB: *Your autobiographical novel,* The Ink-Keeper's Apprentice, *tells of the time you spent as a teenager in Tokyo, apprenticing to Noro Shinpei. In your early children's books, one can see the influence of this training, as the illustrations depend more on pure line. But you soon shifted into paintings in a more realistic style. Can you talk about the evolution of your style as an illustrator?*

AS: It wasn't really intentional. My early books were done in the dark ages of children's-book production. In those works, I didn't have the privilege of doing anything in full color—that was reserved for big guns in the business, and I was unknown. I had to either do my books in black and white or do color separation by hand, as I did in *The Bicycle Man.* A lot of people think that it's a full-scale watercolor; it is not. That was the first time that I had done color separation on my own—and I have never done it since.

The first full-color work that I did was with *How My Parents Learned to Eat.* When the book came out, I was so devastated by the terrible color reproduction, I quit doing children's books. I did not do anything for three years. Then Walter Lorraine called me and said that they had purchased this book—*The Boy of the Three-Year Nap*—and would I do it. I said absolutely not, I was through with children's books. Anyhow, he cajoled me and humored me, bribed me. And he promised that he would take it to Italy and have the book printed there. That was going to be my last book...

Were you happy with the way it turned out?

It was wonderful. And that eventually changed my life. Walter called and said that the book had been awarded the Boston Globe–Horn Book Award, and I said, what's that? I had never heard of it. Mine is a completely accidental career, I want you to know. I never dreamed that I would be doing this.

After my initial experiences with production, I began to really load up on color. My reasoning was that even if the reproduction got screwed up and the colors came out lighter than I intended, there would still be something. A lot of people don't realize that my paintings are still done with watercolors.

It seems as if you've been able to get a full, saturated effect with your colors, since those early books.

Well, I started going on press checks. The first time I did this was for *El Chino.* After that, if they didn't let me go to the printer, I made it clear I was going to quit doing children's books—again. I've been a difficult child!

How do you go about creating the paintings for your picture books? When you're depicting family members, for example, do you rely on memory, or do you paint from photographs?

I've done so much life drawing since I was a youngster that I can draw

the human body in almost any position. I used to draw hundreds of faces until I would hit upon an expression that I liked, and I would develop on that. But recently I started using models. The first model I had was the mother figure for *Tree of Cranes*. Then I had a model for *Tea with Milk*—an American-born Japanese woman. The wonderful thing that happened there—the thing that I feel I succeeded in doing in *Tea with Milk*—was the depiction of a Japanese woman born in America. There are differences between, say, a young girl who was born and raised in America and one raised in Japan.

In the way they carry themselves?

Yes. But it's a difficult thing to achieve in a painting—the differences are subtle.

In Tea with Milk, *the girl's style and presence are established right off, and after she returns to Japan you can see how constrained she feels, so these details must be right. You say somewhere in* The Ink-Keeper's Apprentice *that Noro Shinpei taught you to pay attention.*

Yes. Watching him look at something was like watching somebody eat a ripe peach. Probably the most important lesson he taught me when I was his apprentice was that to draw is to discover. Later, he added another concept: astonishment. That it should surprise you. I think about that more and more as I grow older.

In The Ink-Keeper's Apprentice, *the character Kiyoi, who is based on you, is encountering many things for the first time, living on his own in the big city. One important thing is great art. With Tokida, his fellow apprentice, he spends a lot of time looking at the art of van Gogh. And he is carried away by a particular painting by Degas. What have been the biggest artistic influences on your work as it has developed? Were you strongly influenced by European art when you were young? I think many readers would also presume an influence of Japanese art—there is a stillness and a simplicity to your illustrations; qualities that do not seem especially Western.*

Illustration by Allen Say, from Tea with Milk

As a boy, one of my greatest heroes was Toulouse-Lautrec. He was one of the greatest draftsmen ever, in my opinion. There was a sketchbook of his in a glass case in a gallery in Tokyo. The sketches were done when he was eighteen years old, the captions said. His drawings were frightening to me, they were so well done. Some were of animals, some of people, animal tamers. I was fourteen at the time, and I said to myself, I have four more years before I have to be able to draw like him... His lines were absolutely precise. I don't think he really painted—he drew with brushes, was my impression.

You've said that a good story should change readers' thinking, or the way they look at things. You seem to accomplish this by very delicate means—it is often what is at the edges of the story, what isn't shown or said outright, that is most affecting. How do you think about what to say and what not to say in a story, what to show and what not to show?

I am blessed with a very great editor, and he is a great minimalist. I think we suit each other. He's also very visual—he is a person who can decipher images, which is extremely unusual among editors, I think.

It seems pretty important, for a picture-book editor...

Very important.

There is an assumption among many people that children will only be interested in stories about children. In many of your books—Grandfather's Journey *and* Tea with Milk, *for example—you focus on older characters, and on relationships between and across generations.*

I never have children in mind when I do these things. I have a very simple yardstick. I wait for the little hairs on the back of my neck to rise, and then I know I have something. I like to think that when that happens to a person, the experience must be fairly universal. By that I mean, children can certainly feel it, or some of it, and so can adults.

Many children's stories seem "plot driven." In your books, plot seems almost secondary; it seems to emerge out of other elements you've put in place.

It's probably a Japanese influence. The most honored manner of writing

in Japanese is called *zuihitsu*. Roughly translated, it means "random brush." It is actually the Japanese idea of "essay." It's not exactly stream of consciousness, but, by Western standards, it's quite formless.

You've said elsewhere that you create the paintings for a picture book first, and write the story later.

With two of my books I actually wrote the story first—one was *Grandfather's Journey*. It came to me in its entirety one afternoon while I was walking to my usual lunch place in San Francisco. But that doesn't usually happen. With *The Lost Lake*, I began painting the first frame, not knowing where I was going. Then, when the first painting was done, the second image was there, almost composing itself. It was a revelation to me, and I've been working like that ever since. Before that, I used to do the appealing images first. I would do a rough layout and then pick out the scenes that I wanted to illustrate first, and just jump all over the place. I don't do that anymore. My new method was codified in *El Chino*.

The method of letting one thing lead to the next?

Yes. In *El Chino* I had no idea what the revelation of the story was until I came to the frame where Billy Wong [the boy who is determined to become the first Chinese bullfighter] stands in this Spanish plain, dressed like a Spaniard, holding his suitcase and his cape, looking for work. I was going to paint his eyes in at the end. I was looking at the picture and then the little hairs on the back of my neck stood up and I said, "That's the story: he has no identity." He has no eyes, if you look at that picture closely. The eyes are completely obscured by the bill of his cap. Had I groped verbally for that story, I don't think I would have gotten it.

From El Chino

Identity seems to be a theme in a lot of your books: in El Chino*; in* Stranger in the Mirror*, where a young boy suddenly finds that he appears as an old man to his family and friends; in* Allison*, which explores the identity of an Asian girl adopted by Anglo parents; and in* Tea with Milk*, where the young woman, based on your mother, rejects the traditional Japanese ways of her parents. What are the roots of your interest in this theme, the search for identity?*

It probably goes back to my father. I had a very bad relationship with my father. He was a very smart, domineering, strong, athletic man. And brutal. He was always disappointed in me. He considered me a sissy, because I exhibited all the tendencies of becoming an artist. He was alarmed and, quite frankly, scandalized. He wanted me to be a beautiful, normal male. An athlete, a businessman perhaps. Anything but an artist. So my interest in art was probably initially a rebellion on my part, and I persisted for some reason.

Do you think that gives you some empathy for others who have to struggle to be who they are?

Yes, I do. But a lot of the revelations in my books come from my subconscious mind. I only see them afterward. I liken this process to the act of dreaming. You dream first, then you decipher it afterward, if you can. I closely identify with that.

In your books there's a tension between stillness and restlessness, satisfaction and longing.

There's a concept I discovered through painting and also in fly fishing: that things happen at the edges. When you're fishing for trout, the fish holds between the fast current and the slow current. I view life that way. Tension is form.

After writing Grandfather's Journey*, you said that once you'd come to America, you were increasingly aware of parallels between your experience and that of your grandfather. There's a connection between the grandson and grandfather in that book—yet also a feeling of separateness, which I see between the parents and children in other books of yours. Can you talk about this combination of closeness and distance as an element in family life?*

Well, it pretty much describes my family relationships. The so-called dysfunctional family, my God! You see, my mother was an American-born Japanese who eloped with my father, who was a Korean orphan. It was a union unholier than just about anything you can imagine. My mother was instantly disowned by her mother. She had a very sad life. *Tea with Milk* is in a way a posthumous happiness I gave her, to give her a little sense of triumph that I would like to have seen in her life.

In The Ink-Keeper's Apprentice*, Noro Shinpei tells you that "memory is the most important asset to an artist." Do you think we sufficiently appreciate the importance of memory?*

I'm not really sure. We try to live in the present and the future, it seems to me. I think artists, like myself, live almost entirely in their memories. Artists are people who cannot forget their pasts. We have to live with our memories. So, we give shape and form to them.

I was interested to read that when you went back to the village where you had gone to school right after the war, where the incident involving the American soldiers in The Bicycle Man *had occurred, no one there remembered it. Was this a case of collective forgetfulness?*

Yes. It was a very painful period in Japanese history. I have photographs of children from that time, many of them barefoot, in rags, their hair cut

short because of lice... it was a period that many collectively forgot.

I have shared The Bicycle Man *many times with my children. One of the special things about the book, for an American reader, is that the American soldiers aren't introduced until the story is in progress, so the reader's perspective is that of the Japanese children in the schoolyard. When the soldiers appear, the reader sees them as different, and comically so. Their height, the black skin of one, the red hair of the other, make them strange to the children. The story has such a lightness to it that is refreshing in this era when we take our differences so seriously. I also found it interesting that the soldiers aren't feared by the children. Was this kind of friendly encounter typical during the Occupation?*

The soldiers used to drive around in their open jeeps and throw candy and chewing gum, and mobs of raggedy children would chase after them. That memory is very clear in my mind. Overall, the soldiers were extremely friendly. We had been warned, you know—the women were hidden and dressed like men, in fear of being raped. Then our experience was totally contrary to the warnings we had received. I was seven years old when the war ended, just turning eight.

The natural landscape seems important to you. Were you tuned in to your surroundings as a child?

I have moved so many times in my life that each time—I've done this since I was a kid—I try to memorize the place, thinking that it might be the last time that I'm going to see that scene. It started when I left Sasebo, the village where *The Bicycle Man* takes place, when I was being sent up to Tokyo to go to school. I remember it clearly—I looked at the landscape very hard, trying to get it into my mind so I would not forget.

From The Lost Lake

What's happening now is that the American landscape has finally entered my bloodstream. I'm working on it right now in a book called *The Sign Painter*. It's my tribute to the land, and a comment on what we're doing to it.

Who is the main character in the story?

It's me, at eighteen or nineteen years old. I plagiarize Edward Hopper heavily in the book, because—I don't think he was a great painter, but what separates him from all the rest is that he was truly an *American* painter. When you look at his paintings, you know it's America. He was as American as Diego Rivera was Mexican. And there isn't really any other American painter that you can say that about.

The Ink-Keeper's Apprentice *was an autobiographical novel; in the years since, you've mined your life experience to create many picture books, but no more long prose works. Do you have another novel in you?*

I really don't know. I've thought about this frequently, but the sequel will be a much darker story.

Would you pick up where you left off, with your arrival in America?

I've been thinking about it for over forty years. I was thrown into a military academy in Los Angeles County, and it's the one experience that haunts me to this day. But I'm not ready to write it yet. I have to get over the anger first.

I can understand that; but I hope you do. Because I loved The Ink-Keeper's Apprentice, *and I think it would be wonderful to have the story completed.*

Well, if my eyesight fails me and I can no longer paint, I'll seriously think about it.

Martha Davis Beck is the editor of the Riverbank Review.

Making Connections

How a diverse group of students come to see themselves in what they study.

By Julie Landsman

I put the book down and look at the seventh and eighth graders in front of me. I have just read aloud a letter from a man to his wife, written in 1944. The man was part of a group of Americans who liberated one of the Nazi death camps. He tells his wife that he hopes never again to see what he has seen this day, never again to witness the evil that human beings are capable of doing to one another. At the same time he says he wishes everyone could see it: then they might understand.

The students are unusually quiet, thoughtful. I ask them to write the two phrases "I hope never again" and "I wish" at the top of their paper, and underneath each, to make their own lists.

They work silently, biting on their pencils, thinking. Each one bends over his or her paper, all of them writing, absorbed. After ten minutes, I ask them to finish up. Students begin to read aloud, going in a circle. Some hope never again to see poor people living in shelters, to see old women being knocked down on the street, to hear gunfire at night. Some hope never again to see any war; others wish that their families may be reunited. One prays that her dog will not die, another that his grandfather will get well. Shantae, a black student, is the last to read: "I hope never again to feel the kind of prejudice I feel every day when I walk down the street, or go into a store, or stand in line somewhere." She only has one wish: "I wish I was an American."

There is silence. Shantae's family has lived in this country since the mid-1600s, when they arrived as slaves in chains. She does not yet feel American. Not one of the students—black, white, or Asian—questions her last statement. They nod their heads in understanding. While I cannot counter her perception, I can hope, as any teacher would hope, that she *will* feel a part of this country some day.

One of the ways that Shantae can come to feel like an American is by hearing her ancestors' stories and seeing her parents' faces in her school experience. When we celebrate Shantae's culture, when we include her history, when we integrate her life into every subject in our classrooms, she may begin to feel that America is a place she can truly call her country, her home. Shantae's Hmong classmate and the Somali girl who sits across from her in science class have the same need for inclusion.

My goal for Shantae and her classmates, during our three-month study of the Holocaust, is that they begin to see their own lives as relevant to the work we are doing in school, that they somehow connect to that time in history. To do this I must choose themes that resonate with my diverse group of students, that bring them into the novels, memoirs, and diaries that are part of the extensive material documenting the Holocaust. In past classes, by building an emotional connection between what we are studying and what my students experience each day of their lives, I have been able to bring young men and women, Hmong and African American, white and Somali, into the literature we are reading.

I decide to organize this unit around the theme of "insider/outsider." All adolescents feel like outsiders at one time or another. They may feel out of place at home, at school, or in their neighborhoods. At church or temple or mosque, they may begin to question their religious beliefs. Adolescents are continually wondering where they fit and how their bodies will help or betray them in their search for identity. Shantae has already told me, by her response to my opening exercise, that she feels like an outsider in her own country.

I often use poetry as a way into longer works of literature. About one-third of my students cannot read English very well and have some difficulty speaking the language. However, if I present them with a poem or two, they

do not feel as overwhelmed. Students often find they not only can read such poems, but write them, too.

I search for poems on the insider/outsider theme. I go to multicultural anthologies—*Unsettling America, Poetry Like Bread, The United States of Poetry*—and look for individual poets who write about this theme: Marilyn Nelson Waniek, Gwendolyn Brooks, Li-Young Lee. By building an inclusive list, one that captures the experience of being an outsider or insider from many cultural perspectives, I hope my students will see themselves on the page.

I begin the next session with a George Ella Lyon poem entitled "Where I'm From," included in the *The United States of Poetry*. I play a videotape of the poet reading this poem, and then I ask my students to write about their own homes, their own lives. We make a class poem from the lines they write and put it on the wall in poster form:

I am from the family of Xiong,
which is maybe everywhere in
the world.
I am from baseball and the old
run-down fields.
I am from a big family that loves
me. I am from green-bean casse
role and clocks.
I am from the night who is up
when the morning is sleeping.

Once we have explored what makes us who we are, what is part of us, we talk about what is *not* us, about the feeling of not being part of what surrounds us. I introduce poems about being an outsider: "Rib Sandwich," by William J. Harris; "Jorge the Church Janitor Finally Quits," by Martín Espada. A guest poet, Angela Shannon, brings poems into the class that also fit our theme: "We Wear the Mask," by Paul Laurence Dunbar; "I Ask My Mother to Sing," by Li-Young Lee. Angela reads beautifully. She asks one young man to strum his guitar as she reads a final poem. Jamar, a student who is often restless and distracted, is mesmerized and truly delighted as he watches and listens to her.

I want the students to see that the experience of being an outsider can be presented by writers of all cultures, from all points of view. Angela and I end the class session by reading a poem together. The poem, by Pavel

Friedmann, a child who was in a death camp in 1942, is entitled "The Butterfly." It includes these lines:

For seven weeks I've lived in here,
Penned up inside this ghetto.
But I have found what I love here.
The dandelions call to me
And the white chestnut branches
in the court.
Only I never saw another butterfly.

That butterfly was the last one.
Butterflies don't live in here, in
the ghetto.

I want the students, after hearing this poem, to take time to connect to the poem's feeling in their own words. This time I ask them write about when they have felt like outsiders:

I feel like an outsider because I'm not
one of them skinny toothpicks.
I felt like an outsider when we
moved to Brooklyn Park when I
was younger, 'cause it was more
white people then than blacks at
the time.
I feel like an outsider when my
family is going on the fritz.
I feel like an outsider when I am the
only girl who likes to play football.

Next I ask them to identify times when they have felt like insiders, when they have felt at home:

I feel like an insider when people
defend me when other people say
stuff about me.
I feel like an insider when I am with
Jessie, Sandy, Nate, and Ann.
I feel like an insider when I lose
twenty pounds.
I feel like an insider when I join a gang
but I also feel like an outsider too.

Making these lists, reading poetry, and doing exercises in automatic writing have prepared my students to think, to talk, and to read more complicated material on the Holocaust. Now I want them to think about how we make ethical decisions in our lives, how we are influenced, what it means to take independent and courageous action. Such action will be a central theme in all three books that are assigned for this unit. I have put quotations up on the wall at the front of the room, including the famous one from Martin Niemöller:

First they came for the Communists,
but I was not a Communist—so I
said nothing. Then they came for the
Social Democrats, but I was not a
Social Democrat—so I did nothing.
Then came the trade unionists, but
I was not a trade unionist. And then
they came for the Jews, but I was
not a Jew—so I did little. Then when
they came for me, there was no one
left who could stand up for me.

a poem for fall

September

The breezes taste
  Of apple peel.
The air is full
  Of smells to feel—

Ripe fruit, old footballs,
  Drying grass,
New books and blackboard
  Chalk in class.

The bee, his hive
  Well-honeyed, hums
While Mother cuts
  Chrysanthemums.

Like plates washed clean
  With suds, the days
Are polished with
  A morning haze.

—John Updike

Often students will be struck by the way a theme is reflected in the music they are listening to, or in a movie they have seen. I try to incorporate such examples into the class whenever possible. One day Ryan, an eighth-grade student, comes in with a song that gets us thinking about the divisions that make one person an insider, another an outsider: "Imagine," by John Lennon. I distribute the lyrics for everyone. We have a heated discussion around the lines: "Imagine there's no countries, / It isn't hard to do. / Nothing to kill or die for, / and no religion, too." Shantae is thoughtful. "He has a point," she says, shaking her head. "But I know my mama and daddy believe in their church, and I do, too."

I ask the students to consider the tone of the song, the sound of it, the overall theme, the use of language. These are the same things we will look at when we approach the works of literature ahead. I want them to see that what they listen to every day, what they are familiar with, can be a bridge to new and unfamiliar work.

In the next session, I read two final poems: "The Porter," by Marilyn Nelson Waniek, whose uncles were part of the black American flying squadron in World War II known as the Tuskegee Airmen, and Susan Dambroff's "There Were Those," a poem that describes the different ways in which individuals resisted the evil of the Nazis.

Finally, I am ready to ask the students to read a full memoir or novel. The school's teaching team has chosen works that span reading levels from fourth to tenth grades: *Night*, by Elie Wiesel; *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*; and *Behind the Bedroom Wall*, by Laura E. Williams. I read aloud the opening paragraph of each book. We talk about how these passages relate to the theme we have been exploring.

I ask the students to watch for ways in which the people in their books are made to feel as outsiders: to notice how this might change, how they might be insiders in one situation, outsiders in another. I also ask them to think about what they would feel, or do, in the situation of each protagonist. I want them to empathize.

I assign books to students according to their reading level. As I hand them out the room becomes quieter and quieter. They settle down. The room fills with that wonderful silence that comes when everyone is concentrating. Makeup is put away, the constant jostling and physical play cease; an argument with another student or a parent is forgotten, if only for a while.

They do not hear the bell when it rings a half hour later. I know they are inside the literature, caught up in it, connecting to it. It has taken two weeks to lead them here. Shantae, an American who does not feel like an American, smiles at me as she leaves.

I have learned, in my teaching, that we have the means to make our classes inclusive, even if the curriculum is limited. We can enrich assigned material with poems, essays, quotations, and songs that reflect a wide range of viewpoints, so that Shantae and Mai, Sothol and Wahid, feel a part of their classroom, their community, their country. When we help them to engage with material that may not, at first glance, seem relevant to them, we give them the opportunity to make connections to books of all kinds, and to see themselves—and our common humanity—in many works of literature and art.

Julie Landsman is editor, with David Haynes, of Welcome to Your Life: Writings for the Heart of Young America *(Milkweed, 1998). She has recently retired from teaching in the Minneapolis public schools.*

Ten Great School Stories

The Chocolate War
By Robert Cormier
KNOPF, 1974 / *paperback,* DELL: $3.99
OLDER
Corruption and intimidation thrive in a tradition-bound, Catholic boys' high school.

Crow Boy
By Taro Yashima
VIKING, 1955 / *hardcover:* $15.99, *paperback,* PUFFIN: $4.99
YOUNGER / INTERMEDIATE
In rural Japan, a quiet and observant boy is recognized at last by a sensitive teacher and accepted by his peers.

Did You Carry the Flag Today, Charley?
By Rebecca Caudill
Illustrated by Nancy Grossman
HOLT, 1966
hardcover: $16.95, *paperback:* $3.95
YOUNGER
A creative and inquisitive child adapts to the structure of classroom life with help from perceptive adults.

First Grade Takes a Test
By Miriam Cohen
Illustrated by Lillian Hoban
GREENWILLOW, 1980 / *paperback,* BANTAM: $4.99
YOUNGER
A class of children progresses through the early grades with grace and joy in this and other books in a series, including When Will I Read? *and* No Good in Art.

For the Life of Laetitia
By Merle Hodge
FARRAR, STRAUS & GIROUX, 1993
hardcover: $15.00, *paperback:* $3.95
OLDER
For two young teenage girls in Trinidad, remaining in school is terribly hard—and terribly important.

Frindle
By Andrew Clements
Illustrated by Brian Selznick
SIMON & SCHUSTER, 1996
hardcover: $15.00, *paperback:* $3.99
INTERMEDIATE
Of all the things that happen to Nick when he coins a word, pleasing his teacher is the least expected.

Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse
By Kevin Henkes
GREENWILLOW, 1996 / *hardcover:* $15.00
YOUNGER
Hurt feelings change to anger, then remorse, for the passionate Lilly when her teacher, the beloved Mr. Slinger, takes away her treasured purse.

Miss Nelson Is Missing!
By Harry Allard and James Marshall
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN, 1977
hardcover: $16.00, *paperback:* $5.95
YOUNGER
Just who is the fearsome substitute who chastens the most notorious class in school?

The View from Saturday
By E. L. Konigsburg
ATHENEUM, 1996
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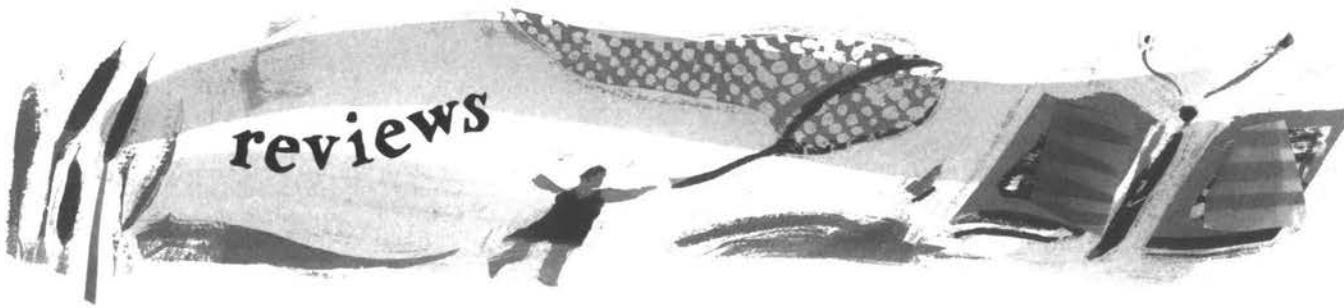
INTERMEDIATE / OLDER
This cleverly structured book about a team of friends competing in an academic bowl indirectly praises excellence and kindness.

The Wheel on the School
By Meindert DeJong
HARPER, 1954 / *hardcover:* $15.00
INTERMEDIATE
While trying to attract a pair of storks to the roof of their school, the children of Shora discover amazing truths.



Picture Books

Animal Music
By Harriet Ziefert
Illustrated by Donald Saaf
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN
32 pages, Ages 3–6, $15.00
ISBN 0-395-95294-8

Let's not call it a picture book—let's call it a libretto with beautiful backdrops, a joyous introduction to rhythm, an invitation to the ball! *Animal Music* is more than a picture book—it's verbal and visual music, and reading it with little ones is bound to provoke one of two things: an instantaneous marching band, or a boogie-woogie dance party/jam session. Either way, you cannot lose.

Harriet Ziefert divides the book into two separate sections: "Mr. Lion's Marching Band" and "Sheep's Dance Band." Although both stories describe a group of animals playing instruments, each evokes a very different kind of musical experience. Put John Philip Sousa on a bench next to a banjo player and see what happens.

Zoo animals form the marching band in the first section: elephant, monkey, zebra, tiger on trumpet, and polar bear. Lion leads the way, of course, and they all look resplendent in bright red uniforms with neat white piping. Ziefert keeps her language simple and rhythmic: "The elephant thumps the big bass drum. A-boom-a-boom... a-dum-a-dum!" The bold contrasting colors of Donald Saaf's artwork create a marching music all their own. Like visual cymbals, the red of the uniforms crashes brightly into the greens of grass and sky. Repeated stripes on uniforms, instruments, and animals reinforce the beat.

"Sheep's Dance Band" introduces a country hoedown: "Dog plays piano. Pig plays drum. Mama mouse claps and starts to hum." Farm animals take center stage this time and Saaf's artwork once again creates a distinctive mood. His pictures are deceptively simple. Large shapes comfortably fill the page: peach-colored clouds move like dirigibles across cheerful turquoise skies. All of the animals are defined by slightly wobbly, almost childish black outlines, more mass than detail. But every animal is imbued with personality—you can see it in their eyes, in their posture, and in their clothing. The singing rooster stands at the microphone, beak opened to the heavens, wings clasped beneath his breast; his wide-eyed, emotional demeanor is undercut by the smart blue-and-white-striped frock coat that he wears, lending wry characterization and playful humor to an animal that is usually assigned a boastful swagger. The tiger plays his trumpet intensely, striving to hit all the notes. The geese are just goofy about dancing.

Coupled with Ziefert's upbeat text, Saaf's expressive illustrations for *Animal Music* set an infectiously jubilant tone. The two stories in this book fully demonstrate the lively emotion involved in a gathering of musicians, and best of all, they let us in on the fun.

—Christine Alfano

Illustration by Harriet Ziefert, from Animal Music

Basket Moon
By Mary Lyn Ray
Illustrated by Barbara Cooney
LITTLE, BROWN
32 pages, Ages 4–8, $15.95
ISBN 0-316-73521-3

Throughout much of civilization, people depended on handwoven baskets for carrying and storing items. Today, surviving examples, like many crafted utilitarian items of our past, are considered folk art—displayed in museums and sold for impressive prices at antique-Americana auctions and shows.

But once upon a time, people in the Hudson River Valley earned their livelihood making baskets. *Basket Moon* is the story of one such family who lived about a century ago, told by an un-named boy who dreams of being a basket maker with his father and, especially, of making the long walk into the town of Hudson, baskets dancing on a pole balanced across his shoulders. The trip must be made by full moon, "to have it for a lantern if he was late returning"—hence the book's title. When the time finally comes, the boy exults in the trip, the town, and the trading. But as they leave Hudson, he and his father are taunted by townspeople for being hillbilly bushwhackers. The boy is crushed and loses all heart for his work, until his neighbor reminds him that the skill of weaving baskets is a gift from nature. He is then able to claim his craft.

The language is simple and poetic; Barbara Cooney's signature-style paintings instill a quiet ambience. The splint ribbons curling free from the logs are faithfully depicted; the baskets are beautifully rendered. Figures are generally shown from a distance, primitive and spare against the hills, trees, and modest homes. But at key emotional moments in the story, the characters are fully drawn, as when the boy learns to weave splints; in stark contrast to his image on the facing page, where he appears as a tiny stick figure in the snow, here he sits under a small tree, bathed in green-gold sunlight, weaving.

Basket Moon recreates a time when everything was made by hand and tells of the making in clear, evocative detail. The story itself, though, never gathers its full strength. While Ray explains in her closing note that the woods of Columbia County where the basket makers lived and worked seemed "spooked" to outsiders, and that "parents warned children against the bushwhackers," these notions are never fully expressed in the tale. Her note is, in fact, more tantalizing than her story.

Illustration by Barbara Cooney, from Basket Moon

Any book illustrated by Barbara Cooney is a gift, and I am grateful that Mary Lyn Ray has chosen to share her knowledge of an American folk-art tradition by telling it from a sensitive child's point of view. Adults who appreciate handicrafts will treasure *Basket Moon* and want to share it with their children. I doubt that children will find the story compelling enough to read more than once, but even one reading will make them look more carefully at baskets for the rest of their lives.

—Krystyna Poray Goddu

Good Luck, Mrs. K.!
By Louise Borden
Illustrated by Adam Gustavson
MCELDERRY
32 pages, Ages 6–10, $15.00
ISBN 0-689-82147-6

Good Luck, Mrs. K! joins a growing number of teacher tributes—including, among others, Patricia Polacco's *Thank You, Mr. Falker* and Joseph Slate's Miss Bindergarten books—which celebrate the intuitive and creative teachers in the authors' memories. Author Louise Borden draws her inspiration from the memory of teacher Ann Kempczinski, who shares her last name with the heroine of this picture book.

Mrs. K. begins the year in her third-grade classroom by helping her students to phonetically pronounce her name: Kemp-chin-ski. Little Ann Zesterman takes a liking to her teacher's name and turns its syllables into a comfortable rhythm that accompanies her out to recess and onto the basketball court.

But Mrs. K.'s name is not the only charming thing about her. No, indeed. This teacher makes learning come alive by immersing herself in each subject as if she's discovering it for the first time. That means plopping worms on desks and handing out magnifying glasses to signify the beginning of Worm Day.

"That day we were third-grade scientists. We named our worms and wrote about them. Mrs. K. even wore plastic worm earrings to celebrate our Worm Day," Ann recounts with admiration.

"'It's the third-grade way,' said Mrs. K. as we munched on candy worms she gave us for our snack."

The students are swept up in the activities of their strong, creative, and energetic teacher. Illustrator Adam Gustavson's

Rockwell-esque paintings of Mrs. K. and her class convey this teacher's allure: the children's faces are innocent and eager and enthralled, Mrs. K.'s expressions range from quizzical to triumphant.

So, when the principal announces that Mrs. K. will be out for the rest of the year to undergo cancer treatments, the children are unable to process the information. Mechanically, they go through the motions of school, numb with grief and frustration. They try to behave for the substitute. They write loving letters to Mrs. K. But it is the principal's inspired idea to have them return after school has let out for the summer—so the visiting Mrs. K. can see them skate down the hallways—that brings them the closure they desperately need.

Illustration by Adam Gustavson, from Good Luck, Mrs. K.!

Mrs. K. does return the following year, readers are assured, but what we (and the students) have come to understand on a deeper level is that she never left the minds and hearts of the children she touched.

—Sue Stauffacher

Tea with Milk
By Allen Say
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN
32 pages, Ages 4–8, $17.00
ISBN 0-395-90495-1

Among Allen Say's gifts as an illustrator is his ability to convey a young person's precise unhappiness. As the title preschooler in *Allison* learns of her adoption, Say captures first her disoriented sadness, then her supremely angry brattiness: a pout, a lifted chin, and rolled eyes. One illustration in *Emma's Rug* shows a child scrunch-faced in blinding fury. These accurate, unexaggerated, even dignified paintings complement a spare text, and they comfort with familiarity; here children and parents will recognize themselves, and each other.

Tea with Milk opens in Northern California, where a little girl dreams of visiting the city across the bay. She stands in a crisp white dress on a very American front porch. Behind her, an adult's face peeks out, half-hidden by a curtain; the girl has her back to the adult's quiet discomfort. For her, growing up Japanese American in California is fun: she can eat Japanese food and speak Japanese at home, while at her friends' houses she speaks English and develops a taste for American breakfasts, including "tea with milk and sugar."

But turn the page and everything has changed. An adolescent in a kimono, she's posed stiffly off center, chin down, head slightly tilted, brow nearly furrowed, mouth in a stubborn nonsmile. Her homesick parents have brought her, a new high school graduate, back to Japan. She hates it: "Her new home was drafty, with windows made of paper. She had to wear kimonos and sit on floors until her legs went numb."

May/Masako endures an unfriendly second high school, learns Japanese arts, dashes the plans of a professional matchmaker, and at last dons a bold red Californian dress in which she flees to Osaka. She feels both courageous and welcome among the city's people and glittering cars, the office buildings and the "department store that looked like a gleaming palace."

In Osaka, May finds lodging, a job, then a better job, and an English-speaking friend who in time becomes her husband. If the conclusion of her story is a constriction after the journey she took to arrive there (even the final illustration is smaller than the rest, a half-page snapshot-like portrait of the couple), at least we know that May chose her husband and her life with him. And the story achieves a cosy sense of closure when the narrator steps forward as the couple's child. May, he reports, "never got used to sitting on the floor for very long"—and her child acquired the habit of taking tea with milk.

—Jessica Roeder

Three Cheers for Catherine the Great!
By Cari Best
Illustrated by Giselle Potter
DK INK
32 pages, Ages 6–8, $16.95
ISBN 0-7894-2622-6

The Catherine in the title of this wise and witty picture book refers *not* to a grand empress but rather to a grand*ma*, a Russian immigrant who received "her first little bit of English" when her name was changed from Ekaterina to Catherine by a hurried Ellis Island official. With an ever-present scarf tied neatly below her chin, *this* Catherine holds sway as the emotional hub of an apartment building full of slightly eccentric tenants: a moody tap dancer, an opera singer and her wailing baby, a hairdresser and his well-coiffed daughter. Above all, Catherine is the loving matriarch of her family—a grown and working daughter named Anna, and a cherished grand-

Illustration by Giselle Potter, from Three Cheers for Catherine the Great!

Bookmark is a regular feature in the *Riverbank Review*, a quarterly magazine about children's literature published in affiliation with the Univ. of St. Thomas in Mpls./St Paul, MN. For subscription information, call (651) 962-4372.

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Riverbank Review

Ten Great School Stories

The Chocolate War
By Robert Cormier
KNOPF, 1974 / *paperback,* DELL: $3.99
OLDER
Corruption and intimidation thrive in a tradition-bound, Catholic boys' high school.

Crow Boy
By Taro Yashima
VIKING, 1955 / *hardcover:* $15.99, *paperback,* PUFFIN: $4.99
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Detach bookmark here. →

Riverbank Review
of books for young readers

daughter, Sara. The world within *Three Cheers for Catherine the Great!* revolves around this generous babushka, but the story itself is told though the whimsical voice of young Sara. And Sara's got a dilemma.

Just days before Grandma's seventy-eighth birthday, she proclaims: "This year for my birthday, I want no presents!" but qualifies her request: "A good NO PRESENT can be anything... as long as it comes from deep inside you." What is Sara to do? As she spends time in her Grandma's company, cooking with her, doing favors for the neighbors, playing gypsy dress-up, Sara gathers clues to help her to come up with the perfect no-present. Looking carefully for hints in her Grandma's bedroom, Sara finally realizes what her grandmother needs, and what she is able to give. All of the books in Grandma's room, all of the notes, lists, and labels are written (and understood) in Russian. Sara has English to give to her grandmother, a gift from the heart.

Kind and loving grandmothers are featured in many children's books, but rarely do they display the extraordinary spark that Catherine does. On her birthday she hangs her laundry out to dry, and Sara is startled by the very public display of it: "Then look what I see! Grandma's underpants all in a row. As big as tents and as loud as six firecrackers on the Fourth of July." To Sara's embarrassment, Catherine replies in Russian, "Let them shout all over the neighborhood!... Happy birthday to me!"

Flamboyant characters, a sweet and lyrical narrative, Giselle Potter's humorous, decidedly unsentimental illustrations (reminiscent of Maira Kalman's work, though less busy, with a toned-down palette) all work to make *Three Cheers for Catherine the Great!* a singularly satisfying story. Why, it even has a recipe for Russian borscht on the back cover—more cheers to it!

—Christine Alfano

Twister

By Darleen Bailey Beard
Illustrated by Nancy Carpenter
Farrar, Straus & Giroux
32 pages, Ages 3–7, $16.00
ISBN 0-374-37977-7

Set in the country on a hot, summer day, this exciting story conveys a sympathetic view of children and the nurturing power of young imaginations. The opening scenes of a sister and her younger brother playing in the yard contain the first of many sensory details that make the writing of Darleen Bailey Beard a pleasure to read. There is the screechy sound of the swing, the "tickly" grass, and, as the rain begins to fall, the sister's comment that "The sky looks green, like Mama's guacamole."

Illustration by Nancy Carpenter, from Twister

One of the clouds resembles a lion, with its tail hanging down. "Twister!" shouts their mother. She races toward the cellar, plants her legs against the wind, and lifts the door. After the children dash below, she runs to find their neighbor, Mr. Lyle. It's scary and dark in the cellar, and the children can't help wishing for their mother. Together, they make shadows on the wall. They look at each other's scars. They think about the noise outside and wait.

Besides bringing atmosphere and drama to the story, Nancy Carpenter's pictures linger on the evidence of a family's life—the clothesline and the flowers and the fences in the unprotected yard. After the tornado passes over and the children venture out, they see a world of broken things. Everything is twisted, blown, or bent—everything, that is, except their mother and the buoyant Mr. Lyle, who crawl unharmed from underneath a porch.

"Say hey!" greets Mr. Lyle, as if nothing has happened.

One can enjoy *Twister* purely for its reassuring story and its realistic pictures—the pictures of the children, with their lively and expressive hands and feet, are especially fine. But if a reader grasps a theme along the way—the strength of children to get through a brief yet very frightening incident, connections that last when other connections are severed—so much the better.

—Mary Lou Burket

Weslandia

By Paul Fleischman
Illustrated by Kevin Hawkes
Candlewick
40 pages, Ages 4–9, $15.99
ISBN 0-7636-0006-7

All kinds of readers, from second graders to scholars of colonial dominion, will relish this tall tale, narrated in the matter-of-fact voice of the earnest anthropologist. In a gently satiric spirit, Newbery honoree Paul Fleischman (*Graven Images*) introduces Wesley, a skinny kid with owlish spectacles. Tired of being

Illustration by Kevin Hawkes, from Weslandia

"an outcast from the civilization around him," Wesley calls upon his world-history lessons to devise the ultimate summer project: "He would grow his own staple food crop—and found his own civilization!" Thus is Weslandia conceived.

"Following ancient tradition, Wesley's fellow gardeners grew tomatoes, beans, Brussels sprouts, and nothing else," the academic narrator solemnly intones. But when Wesley tills the soil of his suburban backyard, unusual plants surface. The boy watches as weird blooms of brilliant cardinal-red open toward an exquisitely blue sky. The plants grow taller than sunflowers and provide Weslandia's sole inhabitant with ample food, shelter, and hand-spun clothing. Wesley "divided the day into eight segments—the number of petals on each plant's flowers. He'd adopted a new counting system as well, based likewise upon the number eight." Later he invents a language, and his pictograph alphabet (intriguingly undecoded) decorates the book's endpapers.

Wesley effectively tames the savage neighborhood kids, who once rejected him but now revere his superior Weslandian technology. In a gesture of imperial benevolence, Wesley allows them to make lotion from plant oil, then sells "small amounts to his former tormentors at the price of ten dollars per bottle." A diminutive punk, sporting a Mohawk, fans Wesley with a leafy wand while another forks over a ten-spot.

Kevin Hawkes, illustrator of Jack Prelutsky's *Imagine That: Poems of Never-Was* (1998), contributes splendid acrylic paintings that recall the work of Mark Buehner and William Joyce. In a bird's-eye view of Wes's nondescript suburban neighborhood, Weslandia appears as a verdant oasis, populated by indigenous raccoons and exotic wildlife like peacocks and iguanas. In close-ups of the environment, Wes always has an invention handy, from graceful cooking utensils and organic furniture to sporting equipment that uses "many different parts of the plant." Puzzled neighbors peer across picket fences as the young overachiever casually goes about his business.

In all, Wesley converts hostile outsiders (i.e.; neighborhood kids) to his belief system, cultivates a plant more miraculous than hemp, and reassures his concerned parents, who quail at his dislike of pizza and pro football. With abundant wit and lush visuals, Fleischman and Hawkes offer a triumphant revenge-of-the-nerd story that has nothing to do with computers.

—*Nathalie op de Beeck*

Fiction

The Birthday Room
By Kevin Henkes
GREENWILLOW
152 pages, Ages 9–13, $16.00
ISBN 0-688-16733-0

One word that describes Kevin Henkes's prose is *elegant*. Early in this beautifully crafted novel, twelve-year-old Ben tells his mother that he would rather visit his uncle in Oregon than accept the birthday gift that she and his father have given him, an attic room to use as an art studio. It is a hot summer night in Wisconsin. He walks ahead of her into the house. "The cool blast of indoor air met Ben like a wall. He stood on the threshold, separating the cold and the light within the house from the heat and the darkness without."

We learn that Ben lost the little finger on his left hand in a woodshop accident when he was two years old—and in Uncle Ian's care. Though Ben, at twelve, doesn't fret over this injury, his uncle has disappeared from his life.

When Ben and his mother arrive at the Portland airport, Ben recognizes his uncle, even though he has not seen him since he was two: for Ben, "looking at the man approaching them in the airport terminal was like looking at his mother through the dense, swirly glass of the French doors between the living room and dining room." In the tense moment the estranged siblings meet, Ben observes that his uncle's eyes seem to be "following an invisible bird from Ben's mother's shoes to Ben's shoulder to an exit sign above their heads and away."

The characters sparkle: Ben, who finds that what he needs is a sketchbook, not a studio; his mother, struggling to manage old griefs; his furniture-building uncle Ian who has been playing with the neighbor children, practicing for parenthood; Nina, Ian's good-humored (and pregnant) wife; and the Deeter kids, whose family runs the orchard adjoining Ian and Nina's property, thirteen-year-old Lynnie and her high-spirited siblings, five-year-old twins named Kale and Elka. Rooms are also important in *The Birthday Room*: attic rooms in the Wisconsin house; then rooms in Oregon, especially a kitchen and an art studio; a one-room house that Ben and Lynnie build from branches; and, finally, the guest room

that Ben's family makes in their attic, so the Oregon relatives can visit.

By the end of the novel, Ian is back in Ben's life. Home in Wisconsin, the boy is engrossed by the task of drawing hands in the sketchbook his uncle gave him: "Ben mostly drew his left hand, because he was right-handed. Putting down lines lightly at first, setting boundaries, building the form. It was hard to do." The missing finger on that hand doesn't even enter his thoughts.

—Susan Marie Swanson

Bud, Not Buddy
By Christopher Paul Curtis
DELACORTE
272 pages, Ages 9–12, $15.95
ISBN 0-385-32306-9

This second novel by Christopher Paul Curtis (*The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*) tells the story of an African American boy living in Flint, Michigan, during the Great Depression. Ten-year-old Bud (emphatically "not Buddy") is in an orphanage when we first meet him, but soon he embarks on a journey in search of his father and a true home.

Bud's mother, who died when he was six, left him a handful of clues to his father's identity that Bud keeps in a battered, beloved suitcase; among these, a stack of flyers advertising the performances of a jazz band led by the bass player Herman E. Calloway, whom Bud presumes to be his father. Within him, Bud also carries bits of advice his mother imparted, and his own inventory of rules for getting through life. "Rules and Things Number 83" asserts: "If an Adult Tells You Not to Worry, and You Weren't Worried Before, You Better Hurry Up and Start 'Cause You're Already Running Late."

In the book's most extreme (and somewhat overwritten) scene, Bud escapes from an abusive foster home by using his wits and summoning up the pluck that will get him through many fixes. Several good turns from strangers also help. He takes refuge in a public library where a librarian offers him books, food, and a geography lesson that points him on his way. Accosted by authorities when he arrives at a soup kitchen too late to be served, he is rescued by a man who pretends that Bud is his son.

Details of the Depression come alive in Curtis's narrative. At a hobo encampment—one of many so-called Hoovervilles of that era—Bud's eyes are opened to the vast, equalizing force of poverty: "The raggedy little huts were in every direction you looked. And there were more people sitting around than I first

The Cooperative Children's Book Center announces the

Second Annual Charlotte Zolotow Lecture

"The Invisible Child"
presented by
Katherine Paterson

Thursday, October 7, 1999
7:30 p.m.
Wisconsin Union Theater
University of Wisconsin, Madison

Highly acclaimed for her contribution to children's literature, Katherine Paterson has received the Newbery Medal for *Bridge to Terabithia* and *Jacob Have I Loved*, as well as a Newbery Honor for *The Great Gilly Hopkins*.

Established in 1998, this lecture was named to honor Charlotte Zolotow, distinguished children's book editor and author of more than sixty-five picture books.

For further information contact:
Kathleen T. Horning
Cooperative Children's Book Center
608-263-3930

thought too... They were all the colors you could think of, black, white and brown, but the fire made everyone look like they were different shades of orange."

When police descend on the camp, torching the cardboard homes, Bud sets out on foot for Grand Rapids and is helped by a stranger in a passing car—a baseball-playing railroad worker and labor organizer by the name of Lefty Lewis, who knows the dangers that face a black boy wandering in unfriendly territory at night. Mr. Lewis also knows the famous Herman E. Calloway, and drives Bud to the door of the musician's nightclub. The lively members of the band, The Dusky Devastators of the Depression, take Bud in, and his true relationship to Mr. Calloway is finally revealed.

Curtis weaves elements of his family history into the tale, providing an afterword about his two grandfathers —a big-band leader, and a baseball player in the Negro Leagues—who are models for characters in the story. As in his first novel, Curtis writes with humor and sensitivity and makes readers care about the characters he creates. In the process, he offers up a significant slice of American history.

—Martha Davis Beck

The Garden of Eden Motel
By Morse Hamilton
Greenwillow
154 pages, Age 10 and up, $16.00
ISBN 0-688-16814-0

Eleven-year-old Dal still calls his stepdad "Mr. Sabatini." They've shared a bunk in a Pullman car and peed by the side of the road, but even after coming all this way to Idaho, where Mr. Sabatini has a job with Purity Seed, Dal can't call him "Dad" or even "Harry."

Spending the summer in Idaho should help them get acquainted. Dal isn't the kind of kid to seethe with unresolved resentment toward his stepdad; nor is Mr. Sabatini overbearing in his role. So, there is hope. When Mr. Sabatini gives Dal tips for shaking hands, or runs to intercede between Dal and a snake, he says just what he needs to say and does just what he needs to do. The more Dal learns of other men, the more affection and respect he has for Mr. Sabatini.

One of the special satisfactions of this novel is the window it opens to Dal's unspoken thoughts: Why do grown-ups talk so much? What does "decapitated" mean? Dal has questions that only the reader is able to hear. "He always wondered personal things about people, like if they really closed their eyes when they said their prayers."

Of course, things happen outside Dal's head, too. He buys some shares in a long-shot mine, befriends a boy whom no one likes, and rides a headstrong horse to the end of a field. Best of all, he meets a girl named Patty, who is friendly and intriguing: "Even without exactly looking at her, Dal could see everything she did, and he could see himself, too. He had left his body and was flying around overhead."

Just as the summer is nearing its end, Dal and his friends find themselves in a desperate fix—something to do with a snakebite and a truck and one of Mr. Sabatini's rules for living: *You're not beaten till you think you are.* Somehow Dal comes through in a conclusion that is funny, fast, and true. Not a rotten way to end a summer, or a book.

—Mary Lou Burket

Mind's Eye
By Paul Fleischman
Henry Holt
108 pages, Age 12 and up, $15.95
ISBN 0-8050-6314-5

Though *Mind's Eye* is written in the form of a play, it is a young adult novel. Like Fleischman's other recent novels, including *Whirligig* and *Bull Run*, *Mind's Eye* has been hammered together by an author

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get to know

The Books of Hilary McKay

In British author Hilary McKay's six novels for children, life is never neat and orderly. Children are exasperating; parents lose their patience; pets eat entire burnt Christmas turkeys and throw up under the bed; grandmothers wear men's pajamas, drink whiskey at bedtime, and warn neighbors that their granddaughters "have no manners" and "weren't fit to be let out hardly." You can seldom predict what outrageous acts or inappropriate remarks McKay's characters will come up with next. But you can anticipate that whatever they say or do will be highly unique, charming in its own way, and, more often than not, utterly hilarious.

McKay's first novel, *The Exiles* (1992), introduces the four Conroy sisters, a sort of unruly modern-day version of the March girls in *Little Women*. Instead of Alcott's Marmee, who helps her daughters overcome their faults with her loving instruction, the Conroys have Big Grandma. "Big Grandma thinks we're awful," says Ruth, the oldest, when her parents announce that the girls must interrupt their summer routine (racing maggots that their father uses for bait, and lying around the house groaning about how bored they are) to go stay with their grandmother. Well, maybe not awful, but she does think her granddaughters are lazy and spend far too much time reading. In order to insure they experience plenty of fresh air, hard work, and exercise during their visit, she hides the bulk of her vast library before they arrive. Book addicts Ruth, Naomi, Rachel, and Phoebe are reduced to dismally thumbing through the only reading material she has left out—greasy cook books and a crushingly heavy three-volume annotated Shakespeare. Despite this rocky beginning—and, truth be told, a rocky middle and huge boulder of an end—the girls and their grandmother develop a measure of respect and affection for one another. When the summer is over, you wish their time together would continue; and, luckily, McKay has seen to it that it does in *The Exiles at Home* (1994) and *The Exiles in Love* (1998).

A second wonderful set of books by McKay features Robin Brogan, who lives at Porridge Hall where his mother runs a bed-and-breakfast. McKay's latest in that series, *Dolphin Luck* (McElderry, 1999), concerns Robin's neighbors, the Robinson clan, who also appear in *The Amber Cat* (1997) and *Dog Friday* (1995). It is the holiday season, and, in typical Robinson style, nothing goes as planned. For starters, ten-year-old Sun Dance, a boy who definitely marches to the beat of a different drummer, unintentionally sabotages the Christmas cards his older brother Perry passes out at school. How was he to know "it was the fashion among seventh-grade boys to be very, very casual about Christmas cards"? He just thought he was being helpful when, unbeknownst to Perry, he added his own name plus the closing "With lots of love" and a row of kisses to his brother's signature on each card. Then the family's cantankerous elderly dog, Old Blanket, goes missing on Christmas Eve. The children fear he may have gotten blown off the cliff path. ("We should be so lucky!" mutters Mr. Robinson.) Old Blanket comes home smelling as if he'd been "rolling in washed-up dead seagulls again," only to gorge himself on ruined holiday dinner before expiring the next day. Sun Dance, Perry, and their sisters, Ant and Beany, console themselves by packing Old Blanket's grave with provisions for the afterlife. More troubling than their dog's demise, however (they do plan to dig up his grave in the spring to make sure he's gone to heaven), is their mother's pneumonia. Her husband decides to take her on a tropical vacation to recuperate away from stressful elements (i.e., her children), thus setting off a new chain of extraordinary mishaps. Beany thinks she might be able to put everything right again if only she could find the wish-granting dolphin sword Robin's mother told a story about. Is it hidden in Porridge Hall? Is it at the bottom of the sea? Should anyone ever come across this sword, please wish for Hilary McKay to have a long and prolific writing career.

—Christine Heppermann

Paperback editions of all but the newest Hilary McKay title, Dolphin Luck, *are available through Simon & Schuster.*

determined to create one-of-a-kind narrative structures. The setting is a room in Briarwood Convalescent Home in Bismarck, North Dakota. The main characters are Elva, an elderly woman with failing eyesight, formerly a high school English teacher, and Courtney, a sixteen-year-old girl who has just arrived at the nursing home, recently paralyzed in an accident with a horse.

The opening reads like an absurdist drama, the old woman rambling to her new roommate, the teenager making clipped replies or no response, both of them marooned in their beds. The most frequent "stage directions" in the early going are *Pause* and *Long pause*. Elva quotes poetry and preaches the importance of the inner life to the despondent girl. She says, "You, my girl, must be your own Scheherazade. You must keep yourself alive. But how will you do so if you haven't any poems or stories?" She's right, but we don't blame Courtney for not wanting to listen. As for Courtney, she is poor company—for Elva and for the reader.

But then their stories unfold. Courtney's only parent is a stepfather who will not care for her. Elva, who can no longer read, is eager to play a game from her childhood, using travel guides to take imaginary journeys. She talks Courtney into embarking on a "trip" to Italy with her and her husband Emmett, who died years before: "Tell us what islands we're passing, and what's on them, and where the lighthouse is, and whether we can see Mount Vesuvius. That sort of thing."

Fleischman offers an unflinching portrait of a teenager who is deeply angry and has only begun to cope with the image of herself in a wheelchair. She imagines gazing into the eyes of Medusa: "But I don't die... It doesn't even hurt... Because I'm as ugly as she is." Later, during a "visit" to the Uffizi Gallery, Courtney recounts how she sets *The Birth of Venus* on fire. When she describes the museum in flames, readers are likely to empathize both with Courtney's anger and Elva's horror. Then comes a lovely moment when Elva sees that Courtney needs a different kind of trip. "Perhaps we should head for the country," she says. Courtney answers, sniffling, "Could we?"

When we leave her, Courtney is deep in fantasy, but she is stronger. She understands her—everyone's—need for love. Though we might be discomforted by this girl, she has become someone we care about.

—*Susan Marie Swanson*

Rachel Field's Hitty, Her First Hundred Years
A new edition by Rosemary Wells
Illustrated by Susan Jeffers
SIMON & SCHUSTER
112 pages, Ages 6–12, $21.95
ISBN 0-689-81716-9

Hitty, the story of a six-inch doll carved of mountain ash, as written by Rachel Field and illustrated by Dorothy Lathrop in 1929, is a children's novel, filled with the doll's adventures, told in her singular voice and accompanied by period black-and-white illustrations. A Newbery Award winner in 1930, the original was beloved by generations of readers. By the 1990s, though, Hitty has been relegated to icon status among doll collectors, who have formed a Hitty club complete with newsletter, conventions, and an award-winning video, and among doll artists, some of whom make a career of recreating her. For decades, children have not been reading this engaging story.

Rosemary Wells and Susan Jeffers, both lovers of *Hitty* since their childhoods, took on a noble mission: retell and reillustrate *Hitty* to make her come alive for today's children. The result is, at first glance, successful: a large, rich, and colorful picture book, rendering Hitty and her adventures with the panache she deserves, the story shortened to increase its appeal for younger readers. This is a good idea; the original is written for a girl of ten or eleven, and today few girls of that age would be attracted to a book about an old doll. It is wonderful, too, to bring attention back to the stoic, philosophical Hitty, whose hundred years with a succession of owners took her through much of American history, from the whaling voyages of the early 1800s through the sorrows of the Civil War to automobiles in the 1900s.

But the cost of adapting something from another age to suit ours is always high. Susan Jeffers has given lush life to Hitty, but her character is in no way identifiable as a primitively carved wooden doll with carved hair and no fingers save a thumb (which Hitty laments often in the original text). Here she appears to be of porcelain with real hair, fully molded fingers, and details impossible to achieve with a jackknife. Her story, too, has changed. Rosemary Wells writes in her opening note that, midway through the tale, she asked herself "what if?" things had happened differently, and she began to create new adventures for Hitty in "a noisier and more diverse American landscape." It is one thing to abridge, eliminating scenes and characters; it is another to add them, and still call the book "Rachel Field's Hitty." Perhaps Wells, instead, should have taken Hitty through her second hundred years, which would have allowed her the creative freedom she took.

Those who meet Hitty for the first time in this full and bright book will undoubtedly enjoy her adventures and Jeffers's illustrations, but original Hitty lovers will protest strongly. This *Hitty* is a vastly different book from the first, albeit a lively effort.

—Krystyna Poray Goddu

The Trolls
By Polly Horvath
Illustrated by Wendy Anderson Halperin
FARRAR, STRAUS & GIROUX
144 pages, Ages 8–12, $16.00
ISBN 0-374-37787-1

Polly Horvath's latest novel is a quirky and entertaining collection of outrageous tales, told in the author's distinctive, arch tone. The interplay of the wacky and the quotidian begins on page one, when we learn that the Anderson family's baby-sitter has contracted bubonic plague just as the parents are to leave Ohio for Paris. Mr. Anderson's mysterious older sister, Aunt Sally from Vancouver, is summoned, with great—and to the children, puzzling—trepidation on Mr. Anderson's part.

Aunt Sally, with her preposterous wardrobe and hairstyle, arrives and quickly wins over the three children. Her mysterious references to family history soon develop into full-length, nearly unbelievable stories from her childhood on Vancouver Island—stories the children have never heard, peopled by relatives whose names they barely know. The children are suspicious, but drawn in, and by the visit's end they understand why they have never met Aunt Sally.

The Trolls begins promisingly, but fans of Horvath's previous books will be disappointed by the lack of a sympathetic protagonist, and the absence of appealing relationships comparable to those of Imogene and Josephine in *An Occasional Cow* or Ivy and Alfred in *When the Circus Came to Town*. The children in *The Trolls*—ten-year-old Melissa, eight-year-old Amanda and six-year-old Pee Wee—serve primarily as unchanging frames for Aunt Sally's narratives, which are filled with so many idiosyncratic figures we can hardly keep track of who's who, much less take anyone to our hearts.

The ending has a sober message; the children learn that giving into your hateful urges can have sad and irredeemable consequences. We understand that Aunt Sally's final story about the trolls and her own dark deed is meant as a warning to the sisters to treat their brother well.

On the surface, *The Trolls* is a funny book. Hidden within the humor, though, is a tale of a family separated by the darkness that lurks in the human spirit. Exploring this theme in an amusing and inventive narrative is ambitious. But, lacking fully developed characters and solid relationships, the book falls just short of its mark, leaving us with the troubling feeling that we're missing something important.

—Krystyna Poray Goddu

Traditional Literature

Stockings of Buttermilk: American Folktales
Edited by Neil Philip
Illustrated by Jacqueline Mair
CLARION
124 pages, All ages, $20.00
ISBN 0-395-84980-2

It's hard to justify a new collection of folktales when so many are published each year that cover the same ground, but Neil Philip's *Stockings of Buttermilk* is a notable exception. A folklorist and mythologist, Philip is a respected and original editor of anthologies for young readers. Though British, he has explored American tales in some depth. In an earlier collection, *American Fairy Tales* (1996), he focused primarily on literary fairy tales written by American writers like Carl Sandburg and L. Frank Baum.

While the sixteen stories in this collection are distinctly American, they hail from the oral tradition and are less elegantly crafted than their literary counterparts. Yet therein lies the charm, for they have the distinct twang of real storytellers. In "A Stepchild That Was Treated Mighty Bad," a retelling of the Grimms' Snow White tale, by Aunt Lizbeth Field of Kentucky, the narrator frequently skips between scenes with comments like, "I don't know if she found any place or how she made out. I reckon I just forgot that part."

Other retellings include inventive versions of "The Musicians of Bremen" and "Jack and the Beanstalk." Folktale aficionados will find echoes of King Thrushbeard and Till Eulenspiegel. Some stories will seem new, though Philip's notes at the end remind us that there is almost nothing new under the sun in folktales, with each belonging to some tale type or amalgam of types.

Jacqueline Mair's colorfully presented illustrations are filled with the same simply rendered folk-art motifs that readers will find in the stories: her paintings appear stitched, in quilt fashion, to brightly colored backgrounds. The turns and twists of the story plots are as obviously joined as the pictures, but children will be delighted nonetheless. For the oral story related without the finery of carefully crafted prose is closer to the tales that parents and grandparents make up at bedtime, and these are just as precious to a child as the beautiful language of a Hans Christian Andersen or Robert Louis Stevenson.

Philip derived his title from the fine presents that listeners can expect to receive if they attend the grand weddings that conclude so many of these stories, including "shoes of paper and stockings of buttermilk." But in this collection, the story is gift enough and will make readers and listeners feel as full as if they'd attended the banquet and eaten their fill.

—Sue Stauffacher

Sword of the Samurai: Adventure Stories from Japan
By Eric A. Kimmel
BROWNDEER/HARCOURT BRACE
114 pages, Ages 10–14, $15.00
ISBN 0-15-201985-5

Although the samurai of feudal Japan were professional warriors, trained to fight for their masters, storyteller Eric A. Kimmel assures us that the greatest of them were "nonviolent men at heart." They generally would have preferred writing poetry to severing heads; but they had a duty to perform, so they did it. The eleven stories Kimmel engagingly retells in *Sword of the Samurai* reinforce this characterization, sporting heroes (and, surprisingly, heroines) who win as many victories with their wit as with their might. This isn't to say that heads don't roll, or swords and arrows don't meet their marks. Yet, in contrast to modern action/adventure tales, the violence doesn't feel mindless. The samurai code of conduct Kimmel introduces to Western readers in his retellings and succinct historical notes has a definite logic, not to mention a certain elegance. What the *sensei* imparts in the story "The *Rōnin* and the Tea Master" rings true: "The art of the sword is like the art of the tea ceremony. Both take a lifetime to learn."

From Sword of the Samurai

The samurai's art also apparently involved a sense of humor. The stories assembled here are full of comic relief, much of it slapstick, as when the three warriors in "The Oxcart" retch and moan inside a posh but torturously uncomfortable vehicle intended for women. The values samurai espoused, according to Kimmel, especially included humility, which enabled them to laugh at and even critique themselves. The most pointed comedic moment in the collection comes in the final story, "No Sword," about Tsukahara Bokuden, a samurai intent on changing the way his profession does battle. During a ferry ride, he tells another samurai about the school he founded to teach students how to "win without violence whenever possible." When the listener scoffs at this idea, demanding to see the school, Bokuden instructs the ferryman to land at a nearby island. There the doubter disembarks, sword raised in anticipation of an attack, only to find himself stranded, with Bokuden calling to him from the boat as it pulls away, "See! No sword." Too bad the man on the island didn't have a copy of Kimmel's book with him to keep himself entertained and to further expand his definition of what it means to fight with honor.

—Christine Heppermann

The Troll with No Heart in His Body and Other Tales of Trolls from Norway
By Lise Lunge-Larsen
Illustrated by Betsy Bowen
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN
96 pages, Ages 5–12, $18.00
ISBN 0-395-91371-3

In trying to shield children from the danger that exists in the world, we have prettified our myths. We've given rosy cheeks and little red caps to trolls, changing them from life-threatening menaces into silly nuisances. We've even reduced them from the giants they once were into little pocket-sized people with fun-to-style hair. What a loss for children! In her superb collection of Norwegian troll stories, Lisa Lunge-Larsen points out the loss and reintroduces readers to the original trolls: huge, ugly creatures "with eyes the size of potlids" and noses "as long as rake handles," who are borne out of the earth and return to it, a part of the wild landscape themselves. Though trolls love to eat little children (and billy goats), they are quite dim-witted and prone to bragging. Dangerous? Heavens, yes! Unconquerable? No. *The Troll with No Heart in His Body* restores a terrible power to the trolls, but, in doing so, it restores a fuller triumph to the clever, often kindhearted children who manage to defeat them.

There are nine stories in this collection, each one as captivating as the one before, with intriguing notes from the author before the tales and source information at the end. Lunge-Larsen's extensive experience as a storyteller shows in the rhythm and structure of each tale. Unforgettable characters emerge: we all know the billy goats Gruff, but what about silly Butterball, the forgetful little boy who is captured and escapes, repeatedly, from a very hungry troll hag? Or Per, who must confront the great North Wind?

Betsy Bowen's splendid woodcuts are rough-hewn and primitive looking,

Illustration by Betsy Bowen, from The Troll with No Heart in His Body

inspired by Norwegian wood-carving and design. Bowen is at her best when she keeps her prints simple. In a story about a troll who has waded through the sea to Greenland, she presents a stunning image: defining the outline of the illustration, Bowen has carved a thick, U-shaped line that begins and ends with a muscular scroll. Inside that U, the sea is represented by a plane of vivid green-blue. Through that blue moves the ponderous green-gray hulk of a troll. With back hunched and head down, he plods through water to the craggy land off in the distance. He is outlined with the thinnest white line imaginable, and made to look larger because of it!

What Lunge-Larsen says is true: read these stories and you'll see trolls everywhere, in piles of rocks, uprooted trees, weather-beaten islands. When children hear these stories, they'll believe that they, too, have the wit and courage and determination to outsmart something as huge and awful as a troll. You'll see it in the gleam of their eyes as they're listening. You'll know they *need* stories like these when they ask for them again and again.

—Christine Alfano

Nonfiction

A is for...?
A Photographer's Alphabet of Animals
By Henry Horenstein
GULLIVER/HARCOURT BRACE
32 pages, All ages, $16.00
ISBN 0-15-201582-5

Photographs of animals in books for young children tend to go in one of two directions—the cute and cuddly or the weird and amazing. In this striking animal alphabet, each photograph is a puzzle, but the mood is quiet and contemplative, the surprises gracefully conveyed. What's special, in each image, is the intimacy achieved by a telephoto lens, and the view that is afforded by the photographer's exquisite composition and his choice of unusual perspectives. The delicate wing above "B" is clearly that of a bat; the surprise is its crepelike texture, and the way its fine bones spread out like the veins of a leaf. Close-up, the hair on a zebra's back looks like a windblown patch of grass, dramatic in its mix of bright and dark tones. You almost want to reach out and touch the smooth, curving horns, soft fur, fine feathers, and iridescent wings on these pages. Yet, the delicacy of each living thing pictured is so evident it seems a privilege to simply look.

In some cases it is easy to deduce the whole from the part that is shown. The back end of a diving duck could not belong to another bird, especially as we see the blur of webbed feet underwater. But who has had the chance to gaze, in a leisurely way, at a duck's speckled belly? Other images are less obvious: the soft, curving end of the shark's tail seems too quiet and graceful to belong to a creature generally thought of as fierce. Our attention goes first to the matter of identification, but then glides back to the view at hand, encouraged to take a longer look.

Often the pairing of images offers rewards. The single leg of an elephant and the legs of a flamingo appear on opposite pages, striking in contrast: a heavy, bulging, wrinkled pillar, and two slender stems. Yet, juxtaposed, it's clear that both serve the same function of support and balance.

Photograph by Henry Horenstein, from A is for...?

Henry Horenstein is a wonderful photographer. The images he has created for this book are astonishing in their beauty. Though the photos are black-and-white, in the developing process he has used paper formulated for color film, which gives the images a warm sepia tone. But it is his overriding aim one is most struck by. In an endnote he talks about the making of the book and describes his approach to photographing animals in the wild, an approach that is curious, patient, and respectful. This lovely book encourages young readers to slow down and look at the living world in a new way.

—Martha Davis Beck

Clara Schumann: Piano Virtuoso
By Susanna Reich
CLARION
118 pages, Ages 10–14, $18.00
ISBN 0-395-89119-1

One hundred eighty years ago, a child named Clara Weick was born with a gift for playing tunes. Her father was her teacher and he managed every aspect of her life. He wanted his daughter to be a virtuoso.

When Clara was nine she began to appear in concert, sometimes playing compositions of her own, to great acclaim. Eventually, she fell in love with one of her father's students, Robert Schumann. Despite her father's violent objections, they were married and began a life of teaching, playing, composing—a life of their own.

Clara never stopped performing, but Robert descended into illness and despair. Admitted to a home for the insane, he died when Clara was thirty-six, forcing her to raise their seven children all alone. Fame, rejection, loss—through it all, she was sustained by the demands and consolations of her music. "The practice of art is the very air I breathe," she wrote to her protégé and friend Johannes Brahms.

In this concise, involving work, enhanced with period photographs and prints, Susanna Reich stands on the shoulders of her mother, Nancy Reich, musicologist and author of the book *Clara Schumann, the Artist and the Woman.* When Susanna was young, her mother discussed the Schumanns while writing her book. Perhaps as a result, Susanna grew to understand the Schumanns' lives and the times when they lived especially well, and she writes very sympathetically of Clara as a person. Her own book is supported with quotes from memoirs, letters, diaries, and reviews of Clara's celebrated playing, but she stops short of assessing Clara's reputation in the modern world of music.

All the evidence suggests that Clara's father was a tyrant, a tempestuous, ambitious man who sought to exploit his daughter. For her part, Clara liked the attention she got from him and others; she loved to perform. When she grew up, she said she was glad to have had a father who was strict. "I have thanked him all my life for his so-called cruelties," she wrote in a letter when she was sixty-three. With him, and without him, she became one of the most accomplished artists of her time—a true virtuoso, indeed.

—Mary Lou Burket

In My Hands:
Memories of a Holocaust Rescuer
By Irene Gut Opdyke
with Jennifer Armstrong
KNOPF
272 pages, Age 10 and up, $18.00
ISBN 0-679-89181-1

If this astonishing memoir were presented as fiction, the heroine's adventures would be simply unbelievable. Irene Gut Opdyke, born in a Polish town six kilometers from the German border, was a seventeen-year-old nursing student when World War II began. By the time she turned twenty-four, she had been a prisoner of the Russians, a server and spy in a German officers' mess hall, a daring protector of Jews, and a member of a Polish guerrilla group.

Opdyke's startling account of six years of subversion—as told to historian and novelist Jennifer Armstrong (*Shipwreck at the Bottom of the World, The Dreams of Mairhe Mehan*)—is not to be missed. The book best suits a mature high school and adult audience, but mature younger readers of Anne Frank's diary and Esther Hautzig's *The Endless Steppe* will likewise find it impossible to put down.

Inevitably, there is a great deal of violence. The narrator escapes a bombing raid and weathers a Polish winter outdoors, only to be raped and left for dead by two Russian soldiers; she witnesses atrocities, including tortures, mass murders, and executions. Opdyke and Armstrong leave much to the imagination, but their choice to avoid graphic description makes the horror all the more palpable. Unease permeates the narrative. After one nightmarish incident, Opdyke says, "At the time, to speak of it seemed worse than sacrilege: we had witnessed a thing so terrible that it acquired a dreadful holiness. It was a miracle of evil." Even at the end of the war, there can be no joy: "We were all doomed to remember."

Each chapter brings greater anxiety and anger. Irene cannot contact her fam-

ily, nor can she find her way in a once-familiar town whose streets have been renamed by the Germans. Nevertheless, she controls her fear and patiently awaits chances for defiance. Well aware that her "Aryan" blond hair and blue eyes enable her to pass as a German sympathizer, she takes every advantage of the people she resembles. Challenged by a refugee ("You're only a young girl. What can you do?"), she becomes a "champion liar" and flirts with men she hates in order to save her friends. "If you are only a girl, this is how you destroy your enemies," she threatens coolly.

At first, readers may feel ambivalent toward young Irene, who enjoys immense privileges during the Holocaust. Her kitchen work is not grueling, she eats regular meals, and she has warm clothing to wear—all because she charms a German commander. Yet as the years pass she repeatedly flouts the Nazi law that declares "Whoever helps a Jew shall be punished by death." When she overhears plans for anti-Jewish raids, she warns would-be victims; when she becomes a housekeeper in a spacious villa, she hides twelve people in the basement. The events sometimes have a perverse slapstick edge, as when she stashes six fugitives in a Wehrmacht officer's bathroom wall. "Under any other circumstances, it would have been hilarious, because this was the stuff of farce," Opdyke admits.

This resonant account of war is both thrilling and crushing. Even at giddy moments of success—as when Irene uses a German pass to save a condemned woman—the reader is overwhelmed by the enormity of war and genocide. If there are any complaints, they will be that the memoir ends abruptly, with Irene on the way to America and many of her family members unaccounted for. But no reader can emerge unaffected by this profound firsthand narrative of the Holocaust.

—Nathalie op de Beeck

The Perilous Journey of the Donner Party
By Marian Calabro
CLARION
192 pages, Age 10 and up, $20.00
ISBN 0-395-86610-3

Mention the Donner Party, the eighty-one pioneers stranded in the Sierra Nevada during the winter of 1846–47, and cannibalism jokes fly fast and furious: their expedition was a recipe for disaster; their story leaves a bad taste in the mouth. Marian Calabro (*Operation Grizzly Bear*) fully expects her readers to know only the sensational side of the ordeal. Starving people really did eat their pet terrier, which "sustained them for a full week," and then they ate each other. On the other hand, Calabro rightly sees the Donner Party's infamy as a chance to teach about the nineteenth-century American frontier, and she credits the survivors with a kind of grim heroism. Young readers bewitched by the G-rated prairie tales of Laura Ingalls Wilder can graduate to this uncompromising story of the wilderness, in which things go from bad to much, much worse.

This nonfiction adventure has all the drama a historian could desire. In April 1846, the optimistic Donner and Reed families leave flat, safe Springfield, Illinois, for California. As they make their leisurely way across the Midwest, several more groups join them. When the trail gets tough, the ever-more-contentious travelers pick an untried "shortcut" touted by a charlatan. They move bulky covered wagons through America's most unforgiving landscapes, from forested canyons to the empty Great Salt Lake Desert. They endure heat and drought. Their oxen die of starvation and are killed by Native Americans, whom Calabro presents as justifiably hostile to white settlers.

Calabro's third-person point of view enables her to give facts but distances

her from individual personalities; ample photos, illustrations, and maps help put faces on the protagonists. Yet, from the short-tempered and long-suffering group, a plucky heroine emerges: thirteen-year-old Virginia Reed, who survives along with her parents and three half-siblings. In a lengthy May 1847 letter to her cousin, reprinted as a postscript, Virginia describes the harrowing weeks before and after snowfall traps the Donner Party in the mountains. "O my Dear Cousin you dont now what truble is yet," the teenager warns, recalling her plight from her family's safe new home in California. Virginia is the book's most fully realized character, drawn with a middle school audience in mind.

In any event, best not get to know the other characters too well, lest they perish. This prompts a question: Will children read through the edifying first half of the volume, or will they flip directly to Chapter 7, enticingly titled "The Last Taboo"? The narrative, which approaches its grisly climax as implacably as any slasher film, arouses morbid curiosity and tests the parameters of suitability for young readers. Calabro lingers on stomach-turning details ("the nauseating broth made from boiled hides of oxen" is but an hors d'oeuvre to the main course of human brains, hearts, and livers), and even the seemingly benign cover illustration, a placid winter scene of a person at a campfire and hikers in the distance, is based on an 1891 etching called *Leaving the Weak to Die*.

Such ghoulish content can be read as pure horror or, more productively, treated as an exercise in appreciation of dauntless settlers. Calabro takes the latter course and works to redeem the much-maligned Donner Party. By the time she remarks that icy Donner Pass, now an interstate highway, sometimes leaves "drivers sitting in their heated cars and feeling terribly inconvenienced" by blizzard conditions, her queasy readers won't take those warm vehicles (or the road itself) for granted.

—Nathalie op de Beeck

Through My Eyes
By Ruby Bridges
Articles and interviews compiled and edited by Margo Lundell
SCHOLASTIC
64 pages, Ages 8–12, $16.95
ISBN 0-590-18923-9

Ruby Bridges was two months into first grade on the night in 1960 when she learned she would transfer to William

Frantz Public School. Her mother warned her that "There might be a lot of people outside the school." The next morning, her mother and four federal marshals accompanied her to William Frantz. When she saw the large building, the crowd, and the policemen, she was certain she'd come to a special place: "It must be college, I thought to myself."

The adult Ruby Bridges brings to this story of integrating the New Orleans public schools a faithful and detailed memory. At every turn, she remembers the particulars; for instance, of the nearly empty school, she recalls "the noise the marshals' shoes made on the shiny hardwood floors." As a child, she's unable to comprehend the full significance of integration, but she never stops paying attention. Readers, in their parallel but different experiences of school, will be impressed by the six-year-old's bravery even as they try to imagine themselves in her place.

Without her perspective, the book would be unbearably painful. *Monstrous* is the only word for the segregationists—many of them mothers—who spent their mornings yelling obscenities and threats at a small black girl (and, around back, at the few white children whose families dared to send them to school). One woman consistently hollered, "I'm going to poison you. I'll find a way." The crowd carried props: hand-lettered signs, large crosses, Confederate flags, a black doll set in a coffin, all documented in the text and in photographs. And racist parents brought their children along to participate—because, as Ms. Bridges writes, "Young children never know about racism at the start. It's we adults who teach it."

The book places the child's experience in ample context. Ms. Bridges relates stories of her family and fills in background information she did not have as a child. Passages from news items, magazine articles, interviews, and other writings are carefully placed throughout. The photos—of the racist crowds, of Ruby climbing the school stairs between four marshals, and of Ruby and her young white teacher working together, in isolation, in the classroom—contrast the small child with the group hatred, fear, and ignorance that she had to pass through every day.

Associated Press photo, from Through My Eyes

For many years, Ruby Bridges did not understand the importance of what she'd done. In second grade, she found a classroom full of children, some of whom were black. The school was integrated, but her new teacher offered her no help in assimilating her difficult experience; in fact, she chided Ruby for the accent she'd developed in her year with her first-grade teacher, Bostonian Mrs. Henry. The educational opportunities her mother had hoped would come with her daughter's role in history did not materialize. When Ruby graduated from high school, she could not find a way to attend college.

In her adulthood, her brother's violent death drove her toward activism. She became involved again in William Frantz school, which her brother's children were attending. She began to address the paradox of an "integrated" school system in which inner-city schools struggle for lack of resources while schools in wealthier neighborhoods thrive. Ms. Bridges is an adult hero now, someone who witnesses injustice and does not turn away.

—Jessica Roeder

26 Fairmount Avenue
By Tomie dePaola
PUTNAM
58 pages, Ages 7–11, $13.99
ISBN 0-399-23246-X

All the little details add up to rich and textured storytelling in Tomie dePaola's first chapter book, *26 Fairmount Avenue*, in which he retells a period from his early childhood. Devoted fans will be happy to find the same characters that appear in dePaola's many autobiographical picture books, such as *Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs*, *Now One Foot, Now the Other*, *Tom*, and *The Baby Sister*.

The story opens in 1938, the year of Tomie's fifth birthday and The Big Hurricane. The hurricane prepares the reader for the many disasters, natural and man-made, that thwart the family's desire to move into their new home. But the strength of the book does not lie in the big action scenes. Rather it rests in dePaola's ability to render the members of his family as quirky and charming characters.

When little Tomie describes his memorable visits to Nana Upstairs, the reader is allowed a peek into the loving, idiosyncratic world of dePaola's extended family: "Nana Downstairs would help Nana Upstairs into the big Morris chair next to her bed. She'd take out a long cloth and gently tie Nana Upstairs in her chair so she wouldn't fall out." Little Tomie enjoys sharing Life Savers with Nana Upstairs (they are left around by Nana Downstairs). But one day, when none can be found, they split a pack of chocolate candies that he discovers. These little chocolates turn out to be laxatives.

Equally memorable is the scene

where little Tomie, his mother, and his older brother Bud attend the long-awaited Disney version of *Snow White*. When Bud becomes frightened of the Evil Queen, Tomie refuses to leave the theater with his mother and trembling sibling. Unmoved by the film's pyrotechnics, he resists the way the Disney adaptation departs from the folk version his mother has read to him. "I stood up and hollered, 'The story's not over yet!... Where's the red-hot iron shoes that they put on the Evil Queen so she dances herself to death?'"

Despite street levelings, mud slides, and other acts of man and God, the dePaola family's home is finally built. The book concludes with a trademark dePaola illustration of little Tomie straining to reach the doorbell of his new residence. His mother and father are peeking out from behind the partly opened door. Though some readers may yearn for a final scene in which young Tomie finds himself comfortably settled, we have to content ourselves with remaining on the front stoop. DePaola does promise sequels in his afterword, as well as with his ambiguous conclusion: "THE END (for the time being)."

—Sue Stauffacher

Poetry

Knock at a Star:
A Child's Introduction to Poetry
Revised edition
compiled by X. J. Kennedy and Dorothy M. Kennedy
Illustrated by Karen Lee Baker
Little, Brown
178 pages, Ages 8–12, $18.95
ISBN 0-316-48436-9
Paperback: $10.95
ISBN 0-316-48800-3

With any luck at all, this wonderful anthology of poems will find its way into the hands and backpacks of many children and be awarded plenty of smudged fingerprints.

This revised edition is distinguished by the same effective organization as the original 1982 version. The first part, "What Do Poems Do?," is divided into five sections, each titled with an answer to that question, like "Make You Smile" and "Tell Stories." A new section of poems about people is a good addition. Ray A. Young Bear's "grandmother" is especially intriguing: "her words / would flow inside me / like the light / of someone / stirring ashes / from a sleeping fire." The second part of the book, "What's Inside a Poem?," is devoted to tools and techniques of poetry, including sections on "Images" and "Beats That Repeat." A new section called "Word Play" gathers poems that revel in the curiosities of language, like Jack Prelutsky's "I Wave Good-bye When Butter Flies." Brief and matter-of-fact notes introduce each section. Poems, not explanations, guide readings of other poems.

Illustration by Karen Lee Baker, from Knock at a Star

Where other anthologies group poems about weather or animals, this one relies on broader principles. A poem about a thunderstorm could fit into any section of *Knock at a Star*, depending on whether it exemplified narrative, for example, or sense imagery, or rhythm. Ted Kooser's "Child Frightened by a Thunderstorm" can be found in the section called "Likenesses": "[Thunder's] beak was bright, / sharper than garden shears and, clattering, / it snipped bouquets of branches for its bed."

The last fourth of the volume includes specialty material, like limericks and haiku. The segment on writing poetry is a disappointment: the suggestions for writing seem perfunctory, and a pointed distinction between "gifted" poets and others is out of place. In the "Afterword to Adults," an invitation to share poetry with children, the editors' caution to avoid overvaluing poetry written by children seems misguided.

The new edition collects seventy-five new poems and retains 104 from the 1982 edition. Individual readers might quibble with some changes—did Roethke's "Child on Top of a Greenhouse" really have to come out?—but the update is a success. Kuskin, Worth, Brooks, Koch, and Updike now have the likes of Clifton, Florian, Cisneros, Wong, and Janeczko for neighbors. Expressive drawings by Karen Lee Baker appear throughout, a small picture or two on most of the two-page spreads.

Like the Kennedys' big and bright anthology for younger children, *Talking Like the Rain*, *Knock at a Star* is just the ticket for its prospective audience. And best of all, a paperback edition has been simultaneously printed.

—Susan Marie Swanson

My Man Blue
By Nikki Grimes
Illustrated by Jerome Lagarrigue
Dial
32 pages, Age 6 and up, $15.99
ISBN 0-8037-2326-1

Some years back, Charles Barkley declared himself "not a role model" while selling a brand of court shoes. Predictably, young people wanted the shoes. What else but product could they derive from Barkley, or any celebrity? Parents might have hoped they'd imitate his self-confidence (if not his Attitude) or perhaps take up basketball. But role models (and anti–role models) of the advertising sort offer up only superficial traits. Even the term *role model* is suspect; it suggests that the best adults show children a pre-patterned way of fashioning themselves into acceptable fillers of roles.

Illustration by Jerome Lagarrigue, from My Man Blue

In a new sequence of poems, Nikki Grimes constructs a different sort of adult-child relationship. Damon, the young narrator, does not want to imitate his friend Blue's tough appearance—sunglasses, dark clothing, an intimidating musculature. Blue, to his great credit, never tries to recreate the child in his image. Instead, he brings Damon companionship, safety, lessons in survival, and an unmistakable regard, all of which allow Damon to remain true to himself.

Grimes is an agile poet. Always attentive to meter, she may or may not choose to rhyme. In "Second Son," for instance, Blue and Damon converse within the rhyme scheme—an odd choice that gives Blue a measure of control over his grief as he explains how he failed his own son. "When We First Met" is a sonnet; "Damon and Blue" is an anthem, a proud celebration and display of their friendship as they walk together. Grimes's language, too, ranges from the conversational to the lyric, but she plays along that range from line to line, as here: "His leathery skin's / Like indigo ink / This rugged dude / Who some folk think / Looks fierce in clothes / Of midnight black." Damon's voice rises naturally out of both the slang and the surprising vocabulary. He is a strong-willed and sensitive boy who enjoys making dinner for his mother, reading, climbing trees (with a little encouragement), and playing basketball.

Each poem is set against an acrylic painting rather than a blank page. Most often, the background painting is an abstraction textured by brushstrokes, modulating color, and the original Canson paper. On the facing page, another painting illustrates the poem. Jerome Lagarrigue paints the urban neighborhood and its people with deep, carefully blended tones; bright blue and purple highlight Blue's skin, and even the street's asphalt glows with green, brown, violet, and sky blue.

Though the story opens and closes with tender portraits—both in paint and verse—of Blue alone, there is a coda. In a final, smaller painting, an enormous Blue sits alongside a tiny Damon. Their heads are turned toward each other, but Blue looks over Damon's head, and Damon almost smiles at Blue's T-shirt sleeve. They are comfortable together, even in quiet moments, and they're safe in the space created by Blue's vigilance.

—Jessica Roeder

Reviewers in This Issue

Christine Alfano *lives in Minneapolis with her family. A former bookseller, she has written about children's books for the* Hungry Mind Review *and other publications.*

Martha Davis Beck *is the editor of the* Riverbank Review. *She lives in Minneapolis with her husband and two sons.*

Mary Lou Burket *is a longtime reader of children's literature whose reviews have appeared in* Publishers Weekly, The Five Owls, *and other publications.*

Krystyna Poray Goddu *is the author of* A Celebration of Steiff: Timeless Toys for Today *(Portfolio Press) and co-author of* The Doll by Contemporary Artists *(Abbeville Press). She lives in New York City.*

Christine Heppermann *is a freelance writer who lives in Minneapolis with her husband and daughter. A former bookseller, she writes a regular column for the* Horn Book Magazine.

Nathalie op de Beeck *writes about children's and young adult literature for* Publishers Weekly, The Book Report *(www.teenreads.com), and other publications.*

Jessica Roeder*'s writing has appeared in the* Pushcart Prize, The Threepenny Review, The American Poetry Review, *and* Denver Quarterly. *She lives with her husband and two rabbits in a very small apartment.*

Sue Stauffacher *is a journalist, children's-book author, and reviewer. She lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan, with her husband and two sons.*

Susan Marie Swanson *is the author of* Letter to the Lake *and* Getting Used to the Dark *(both DK Ink). She reads and writes poems with children in her work as a visiting poet in schools.*

one for the shelf

The Animal Family
By Randall Jarrell
Illustrated by Maurice Sendak
HarperCollins
180 pages, All ages, Hardcover: $14.95, Paperback: $5.95

Sometimes, when the mermaid in Randall Jarrell's *The Animal Family* converses with the lonely hunter drawn to the beach by her singing, she can't find the words in his language to describe what she means. So she says, "Oh well!" The hunter asks her to explain why she, unlike the rest of her people, has become captivated by the land. "The mermaid immediately told him, but in her language, not his. He laughed, she laughed and wrinkled her nose and forehead, searching for the words but they wouldn't come, so she said, 'Oh well!'"

Faced with the task of trying to convey the singular beauty of *The Animal Family*, one is tempted to take the mermaid's way out. Except it doesn't seem quite fair to her to give up so easily, since, as she ventures farther and farther from the ocean, eventually taking up residence in the hunter's cabin, she keeps striving to express herself. When things please her, such as the flowers in the meadow, she compares them to the most beautiful objects in her old life: shells. *The Animal Family*, the last work published by acclaimed poet Randall Jarrell before his death in 1965, is itself like a perfectly formed shell. Yet it is also a cozy and inviting haven, which welcomes child and adult readers alike.

The book's modest size and wide margins, carefully framing each block of text, make you feel as if you are peering through a window at the hunter, the mermaid, and the odd but enviable family they assemble. Jarrell's graceful language provides such close familiarity with his characters, it is hard to believe they are not pictured anywhere in Maurice Sendak's pen-and-ink "decorations." Instead, Sendak graces the pages with haunting, intricate drawings of the craggy coastal forest where the story takes place. Within this wilderness, it appears the hunter and the mermaid will remain contented but alone—until the hunter brings home a bear. Then a silver-eyed lynx joins the trio, followed by a boy, whom the lynx discovers huddled next to a dead woman in a boat that washed ashore after a storm. Once the five of them come together, the pain of their respective pasts fades, and it seems they never existed apart from one another. In fact, the boy never truly believes the story his "parents" tell about how they first laid eyes on him when they returned from a walk in the forest and found him curled up asleep on the hearth next to the bear. This is because all his memories, save for "one or two confused, uneasy dreams," are "memories of the mermaid and the hunter; he knew that the hunter was his father and the mermaid his mother and had always been." Gradually his mother and father relinquish their explanation of how he came to live with them and declare simply, "We've had you always."

The Animal Family is not Jarrell's only children's book that examines what it means to belong. In *The Bat-Poet*, also illustrated by Maurice Sendak, he envisions a little brown bat caught between two conflicting desires. If the bat stays "snuggled together" with the other bats as they sleep in a pack under the porch roof, he can be warm and comfortable and secure. Yet he finds himself increasingly drawn toward waking during the day to create poetry. His peers understand neither the art form nor his passion for it, and so the bat is often alone. Ultimately, he realizes the same thing that the hunter realizes before his family enters his life—that beauty must be shared to be fully enjoyed.

Likewise, *The Animal Family* is not a book to keep to yourself. Once you hear the mermaid's voice, "like water gurgling in a cleft in the rock," you will want everyone you care about to hear it as well.

—Christine Heppermann

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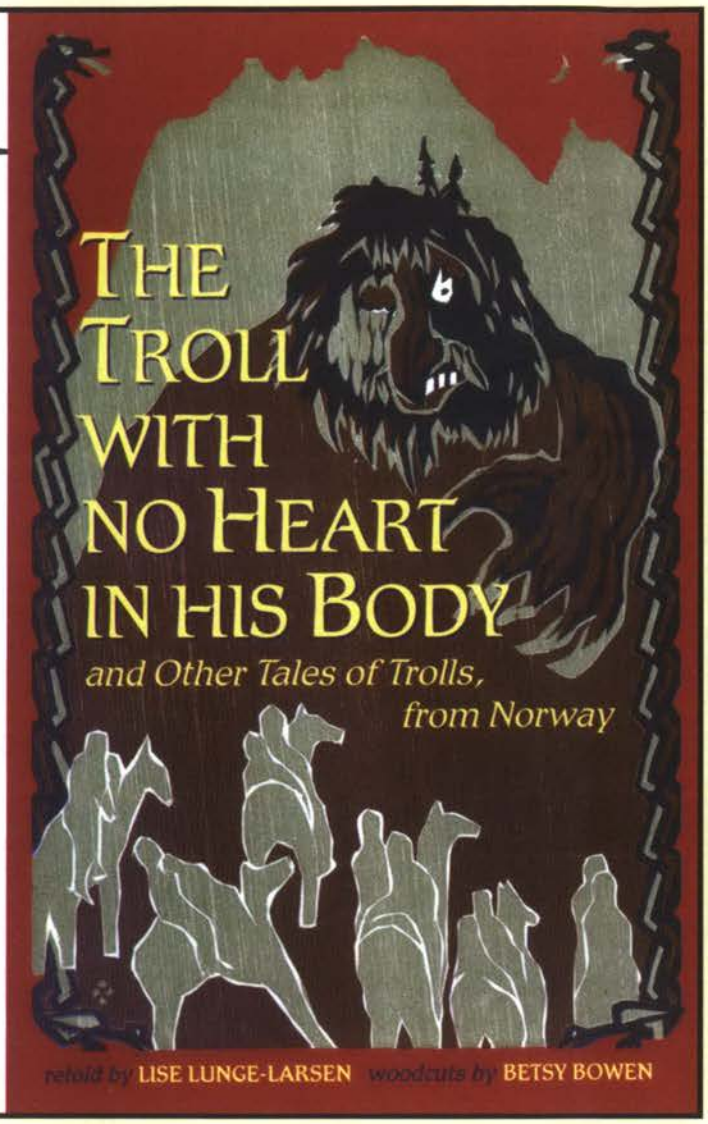

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