



Simply Read: An Innovative Press

— Carole Scott

Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Illus. Iassen Ghiuselev. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2003. 136 pp. \$32.95 hc. ISBN 1-894965-00-2. Print.

Cinar, Lisa. *The Day It All Blew Away*. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2007. 52 pp. \$17.95 hc. ISBN 1-894965-71-2. Print.

Collodi, Carlo. *The Adventures of Pinocchio*. Illus. Iassen Ghiuselev. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2000. 160 pp. \$26.95 hc. ISBN 978-0-9688768-0-3. Print.

Crew, Gary. *The Viewer*. Illus. Shaun Tan. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2003. 32 pp. \$19.95 hc. ISBN 1-894965-02-7. Print.

Crew, Gary. *Memorial*. Illus. Shaun Tan. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2003. 32 pp. \$19.95 hc. ISBN 1-894965-08-8. Print.

Czernecki, Stefan. *Lilliput 5357*. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2006. 42 pp. \$19.95 hc. ISBN 1-894965-32-9. Print.

Czernecki, Stefan. *Ride 'Em, Cowboy*. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2004. 48 pp. \$22.95 hc. ISBN 1-894965-06-4. Print.

Glass, Eleri. *The Red Shoes*. Illus. Ashley Spires. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2008. 36 pp. \$17.95 hc. ISBN 1-894965-78-1. Print.

Grant, Joan. *Cat and Fish*. Illus. Neil Curtis. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2004. 32 pp. \$22.95 hc. ISBN 1-894965-14-9. Print.

Grant, Joan. *Cat and Fish Go to See*. Illus. Neil Curtis. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2006. 32 pp. \$19.95 hc. ISBN 1-694965-39-2. Print.

Grimm Brothers. *The Queen Bee*. Illus. Iassen Ghiuselev. Trans. Elizabeth James. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2003. 22 pp. \$22.95 hc. ISBN 09688764-4-6. Print.

Gutierrez, Elisa. *Picturescape*. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2005. 40 pp. 19.95 hc. ISBN 1-894965-65-1. Print.

- Heshka, Ryan. *ABC Spookshow*. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2007. 52 pp. \$13.95 hc. ISBN 1-894965-68-2. Print.
- Johnson, E. Pauline. *The Lost Island*. Illus. Atanas Matsoureff. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2004. 40 pp. \$18.95 hc. ISBN 1-894965-07-1. Print.
- Jorgensen, Norman. *In Flanders Fields*. Illus. Brian Harrison-Lever. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2003. 32 pp. \$22.95 hc. ISBN 1-894965-01-9. Print.
- Jossa, Isabelle. *Ned Goes to Bed*. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2005. 32 pp. \$19.95 hc. ISBN 1-894965-17-0. Print.
- Lawson, Sue. *My Gran's Different*. Illus. Caroline Magerl. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2005. 28 pp. \$19.95 hc. ISBN 1-894965-16-7. Print.
- Lloyd, Jennifer. *One Winter Night*. Illus. Lynn Ray. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2006. 32 pp. \$19.95 hc. ISBN 1-894965-48-6. Print.
- Marsden, John. *The Rabbits*. Illus. Shaun Tan. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2003. 30 pp. \$19.95 hc. ISBN 0-9688768-8-9. Print.
- Mitchell, Robin, and Judith Steedman. *Snowy and Chinook*. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2004. 32 pp. \$16.95 hc. ISBN 0-9688768-9-3. Print. Windy.
- Mitchell, Robin, and Judith Steedman. *Sunny*. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2004. 32 pp. \$16.95 hc. ISBN 0-9688768-5-5. Print. Windy.
- Mitchell, Robin, and Judith Steedman. *Windy*. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2004. 32 pp. \$15.95 hc. ISBN 0-9688768-2-X. Print. Windy.
- Nielsen-Fernlund, Susin. *The Magic Beads*. Illus. Geneviève Côté. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2007. 32 pp. \$19.95 hc. ISBN 978-1-894965-47-7. Print.
- O'Leary, Sara. *When You Were Small*. Illus. Julie Morstad. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2007. 32 pp. \$17.95 hc. ISBN 1-894965-36-1. Print.
- Opal, Paola. *Saffy*. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2008. 24 pp. \$8.95 board book. ISBN 978-1-897476-02-4. Print.
- Porter, Matthew. *ABC*. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2006. 26 pp. \$9.95 board book. ISBN 1-894965-38-8. Print.
- Ruskin, John. *King of the Golden River*. Illus. Iassen Ghiuselev. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2005. 65 pp. \$24.95 hc. ISBN 1-894965-15-9. Print.
- Savard, Remi, and Catherine Germain. *First Spring*. Illus. Geneviève Côté. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2006. 42 pp. \$19.95 hc. ISBN 1-894965-34-5. Print.
- Schofield, Louise. *The Zoo Room*. Illus. Malcolm Geste. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2005. 32 pp. \$19.95 hc. ISBN 1-894965-19-4. Print.
- Simon, Annette. *Mocking Birdies*. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2005. 32 pp. \$19.95 hc. ISBN 1-894965-29-9. Print.
- Tan, Shaun. *The Lost Thing*. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2004. 32 pp. \$22.95 hc. ISBN 1-894965-10-8. Print.
- Todorov, Boriana, and Vladimir Todorov. *The Moon Rock*. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2007. 110 pp. \$19.95 hc. ISBN 978-1-894965-77-4. Print.

Van Turennot, Paula. *One Little Bug*. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2004. 32 pp. \$19.95 board book. ISBN 1-894965-12-5. Print.

Weller, Duncan. *The Boy from the Sun*. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2006. 38 pp. 19.95 hc. ISBN 1-894965-33-7. Print.

Weller, Duncan. *Night Wall*. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2005. 32 pp. \$17.95 hc. ISBN 978-1-894965-13-2.

Print.

Whitfield, Peter. *Bruno Dreams of Ice Cream*. Illus. Nancy Bevington. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2005. 28 pp. \$19.95 hc. ISBN 1-894965-23-X. Print. Zen Tails 3.

Whitfield, Peter. *Up and Down*. Illus. Nancy Bevington. Vancouver: Simply Read, 2006. 28 pp. \$19.95 hc. ISBN 1-894965-22-1. Print. Zen Tails 2.

As I delved into the box of books that arrived from Canadian publisher Simply Read, I was immediately impressed by the wide variety I found. Not only were the books of all sizes, shapes, formats, and designs, they also spanned multiple genres and audiences. Primarily picture books or illustrated books, they included board books for very young readers, books with edgy and often philosophical humour, classics with striking new illustrations, books with historical and/or cultural implications, and mysterious books exploring the surreal and twisting perspective. The company's website makes a commitment to quality productions in text and graphics, noting its intent to produce "contemporary books with a modern appearance and fresh outlook" and stories "that link the past with the present" ("About

Us"). As Perry Nodelman had promised when he invited me to review this innovative press, I found many works that are graphically startling and inventive, and many that are thoughtful and provocative, involving complex messages regarding human values and philosophical perspectives. The more accessible books for younger children have bright visuals and evocative language and sounds, and many are educational in various ways. It is not surprising that the books have garnered a significant number of awards and honourable mentions from across the world.

A global approach, with authors and illustrators drawn from a range of cultural backgrounds and traditions and distributors in Australia, Britain, Europe, and the US, demonstrates the publisher's desire to

appeal to an international audience. This sense of diversity seems particularly appropriate for a publisher in a nation that has long sought to acknowledge the variance in national cultural backgrounds rather than aspiring to create a melting pot. Publisher Dimiter Savoff established the press in 2001, with the first book appearing the following year. Though he comes from a publishing family, Dimiter's first career was as an architect, so it is not surprising that the books he selects for publication have a great deal of visual appeal, and many involve what I term an architectural design or structure. With a current output of twenty-five books per year, Simply Read has grown into a dynamic source of new books, and of books whose superb aesthetic effects merit republication. Dimiter told me that, unlike his earlier disillusionment with the bureaucratic rules and regulations governing building design (currently remodelling my own house, I echo his frustration!), he is thrilled with this venture, with having the freedom to select works that appeal to his own tastes, and with finding his creativity untrammelled (23 Oct. 2007).

The "modern appearance and fresh outlook" is not, however, pervasive. Some books offer a more traditional, even an old-fashioned, look, particularly in a couple of series for young readers that remind me of the old Arthur Mee encyclopedia I was bequeathed as a young child. Interestingly, it is one of these series, *Windy*, that is among Dimiter's favourites, and the possible pilot for studio animation later

this year. Clearly, it is old enough to be new again. This review will focus on the graphic books (picture books and illustrated books) and does not include commentary on the small number of young adult titles offered by the press. Rather than listing the books and approaching them piecemeal, I have identified characteristics of the many titles that allowed me to cluster them into groups. These groups are varied, like the books themselves, and are by no means definitive. For example, humour served as a useful category, historical perspective or reminiscence another, and books for a very young audience are clustered together. This organization provides both coherence and the opportunity for comparison among the books in this wonderfully diverse collection. I have attempted to include most of the output of the press available at the time of writing, but space limitations require that I omit a few titles.

Complex, Sophisticated Picture Books

Some of the works most intriguing to contemporary picture-book aficionados are three featuring Shaun Tan's innovative artistry: *The Rabbits*, *The Viewer*, and *The Lost Thing*. All three have received international awards, particularly for their illustrations, and were formerly published in Australia by Thomas C. Lothian and chosen by Dimiter for reissue. *The Rabbits* traces the history of an invasion, not by people but by stylized rabbits that arrive in increasingly large



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numbers to engulf the native culture and devastate the natural resources of a mythical land that suggests the Australian continent. This allegory of ecological disaster is an ironic postcolonial paean reflecting the incursion of Western civilization upon new worlds. The simplicity of colourful, barely populated desert and dusty lands is soon overwhelmed by the new visions of art, architecture, and science that drastically transform the landscape.

Like Tan's other work, the sense of collage or pastiche imposed over the natural backdrop introduces the theme of habitat destruction. The early pictures of peace and harmony are contrasted with double spreads of huge industrialized cityscapes. The penultimate double spread and final page are almost entirely a deep brown-black: the double spread features two small, torn squares, one, bottom far left, picturing a rabbit, and one, bottom far right, picturing the original inhabitant, which resembles a stylized kangaroo; the last page offers a larger, blue-tinged central square surrounded by darkness, with a debris-covered landscape, and one small pool reflecting the stars.

The Viewer, written by Gary Crew and illustrated by Tan, carries no ecological message, though it does trace a historical development including elements of human suffering and of war. This book also explores the nature of perception, the magnetism of seeing in a new way, and the drastic effects that changes in perception can unleash. The story features young Tristan, who finds an ancient box filled with View-Master discs. As he watches their revelations, he is sucked into the maelstrom of perception and disappears.

The book captures immediate attention with its strong hardback cover punctured through with nine square cut-outs set in a circle and revealing the letters making up the title of the book on the page beneath. Tan's illustrations alternate between the dominant image of

an eye in a whirling red disk of varying design and a page that replicates the wheel from the cover and fills its windows with a series of historical and artistic imagistic allusions.

While *The Viewer* is something of a psycho-perceptual thriller, *The Lost Thing*, of which Sean Tan is both author and illustrator, is gently humorous in its approach to seeing the unusual; it is a whimsical commentary on modern life. In accord with his narrator, who finds value in bricolage, Tan's pages give the appearance of a scrapbook formed by pasting the verbal and graphic text onto old sheets of paper that seem to have come from an outdated mathematics or science textbook and that carry on a tangential background commentary with diagrams, tables, calculations, and definitions. To add further to the intrusive nature of the background conversation, a central page, purportedly from a current newspaper, carries a mixture of humorous advertisements and bureaucratic announcements from various "federal departments." This bureaucratic and science-oriented background acts as counterpoint to the informal, slangy voice of the narrator and his story of the lost thing, which is foregrounded, as are the coloured illustrations, on pieces cut from a lined yellow pad. The accent on perception, in this book as in *The Viewer*, is emphasized by the intricacy of the graphic design, which in itself tantalizes the reader's own acuteness of vision and sensitivity to the subtlety of the texture and

patterning that Tan employs throughout.

Stimulating Books for Very Young Readers

At the other end of the scale of sophistication, the range of Simply Read materials for the youngest set is also intriguing, often subtly introducing learning skills in an imaginative and entertaining way. One such example is Annette Simon's *Mocking Birdies*, which features a copying contest between a red bird and a blue bird that allows two people (perhaps parent and child) to make and echo words and sounds. Entertaining and rhythmic back-and-forths between the blue and red birds are communicated in alternating red and blue lines such as "skidoodle / skidaddle / skit scat, copycat / copycat copycat / copycat cat cat. Stop singing my song / stop singing my song." Introduced are some basic musical terms ("do-re-mi do-re-mi"), together with bird sounds ("warble whee!! Warble whee whistle wheee!"). As the book progresses, the alert reader realizes that the birds, which have been perching on telephone lines off and on from the beginning, are actually sitting like notes on a musical staff. There are several pages on which the notes can be read and sung: for example, the two birds sitting on the front end papers feature an A and a C. On the back end papers, with the addition of a purple bird, the notes A, F, and C are presented.

For those learning their numbers and simple arithmetic, Paola Van Turenhout's *One Little Bug* is

a counting book that combines snails, worms, bees, an ant, a spider, a flea, and a caterpillar to create a balancing bug pyramid. As creatures join and leave, by ones, twos, and threes, the numbers rise and fall, and the huge eyes of the little creatures make it easy to count them. Jennifer Lloyd and Lynn Ray's *One Winter Night* is an early subtraction book, counting down from ten to one. But the ten little mice, dressed in red scarves, who go skating in a line across the ice add excitement to the story of diminishing numbers as they are frightened home, one by one, by the natural perils of owls, bats, moles, and other predators. The repetitive sing-song character of the verses also offers dimension, describing the danger in a couplet, "Along hopped hare / Out of his lair," followed by the recurrent chorus, "Hurry, hurry, / Scurry, scurry, / Went one grey mouse / Back to his house. / Six little mice / Pranced down the ice."

And there are ABC board books included in Simply Read's publication list; one such book, created by Matthew Porter, with the face of a leopard on the front cover and the back of its head on the back, gently poses the notion of deciphering reading material from beginning to end. This is an animal alphabet book that looks for the unusual and offers a textured effect of wooden boards with distressed paint barely covering the wood grain beneath. Another, by Ryan Heshka, uses a Halloween theme with ghost and jack-o'-lantern images making up the letters.

Other books for little ones include *Saffy*, by Paola Opal, a board book that features a small giraffe and teaches independence and problem-solving skills; and *Ned Goes to Bed*, by Isabelle Jossa, in which a fearful puppy meets some stars looking through his window and, riding a pop-up space ship, learns a little about stars and constellations, and how the moon rises and the sun sets. Though the information given is very limited, the book directs the child's eyes to the heavens, provides a general sense of the cosmos, and includes a perforated pop-out picture of stars to hold up to the light. Another small series, including *Windy, Sunny, Snowy and Chinook*, and *Foggy*, introduces children to different kinds of weather. Unlike the bright graphics of *Mocking Birdies* and the softer, more impressionistic colours of *Ned Goes to Bed*, Robin Mitchell and Judith Steedman's weather series uses photographs of an assortment of wooden girl and boy dolls, named Windy, Sunny and so on, like the titles of the books, and dressed in weather-appropriate clothes, roughly crafted from scraps of fabric to show they are handmade.

The celebration of imaginative skills and crafts that encourages children to make things for themselves continues in the animal figures. In *Windy and Snowy and Chinook*, the owl is made from a piece of a knitted garment, with other scraps cut from various fabrics stuck on for eyes, beak, and claws; the origami rabbits are folded from pink and blue amaretto biscuit



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wrappers; and the beaver is made from a potato, with paws of peanut shells. Reminiscent of “Things to Make and Do” in Arthur Mee’s classic encyclopedia for children, the paper jacket for *Sunny’s* hootenanny gives instructions for making a shoebox guitar and a cup shaker filled with beans. The book jacket for *Snowy and Chinook* gives recipes for various kinds of pancakes, and *Windy* includes directions for making a kite. Many of the scenes are embellished with pieces of branches, twigs, and flowers. Also included are CDs with songs about the stories, such as a vocal entitled “snow.” Musical expression is encouraged by Sunny, who listens to the sounds of the city and infuses his playmates with enthusiasm to make their own concert by singing, whistling, banging, and stomping. Music for a song is included facing the title page.

Gentle Guides and Overt Instruction

Books that present some insights into the use and misuse of the imagination offer guides for younger readers as they learn to see the world. Both Duncan Weller’s *Night Wall* and Elisa Gutierrez’s award-winning *Picturescape* employ some distortion in the images, signifying the impact that imagination can have on the process of perception, while Susin Nielsen-Fernland and Geneviève Côté’s *The Magic Beads* and Duncan Weller’s *The Boy from the Sun* reflect the power of the imagination in transforming one’s environment and experience.

Picturescape, suggesting both “picture-scape” and “picture-escape,” as well as picturesque, has very few words, including just “day at the art gallery” on a calendar and instructions on entering the gallery, such as “do not run” and “do not take photographs.” The images present a cartoon-like figure with a shaggy haircut getting up

and setting off into a world that includes extraordinary perspectives: a cityscape with large buildings confined into a shrunken footprint, and an indoor view of a many-storied gallery turned on its side. The picture-narrative continues with a succession of small, framed works of art followed by complete double spreads of the enlarged picture with the child's figure entered into it. The child takes an imaginative journey by bird, ship, balloon, bicycle, horse, or water as he envisages himself in each environment. The persistent, dynamic movement of the figure, sometimes enhanced by foreshortening so that huge feet are foregrounded with a small body and smaller head, intensifies the sense of perceptual turmoil that the imagination has created, inspired by the graphic works of art.

Duncan Weller's *The Boy from the Sun* also introduces new perspectives, but is much more obviously pedagogical. The figures of children are suggestively formed from emoticons and basic shapes. The three sad children who sit "on a cold grey nothing sort of day," saying and seeing nothing, are joined by another figure with a yellow head with yellow rays emanating from it. This boy from the sun tells them to keep their eyes open and introduces them to increasingly complex, lush landscapes, populated by a wide variety of animals and people from many lands, all presented in colour and in action. As the children replace frowns with smiles, the concrete sidewalk on which they are running breaks and they run to

play in a field. The tale ends with a two-page poetic sermonette from the sun boy, telling them that "when you take the time / To fill your worlds within / You will join the world without." This book has received critical acclaim, earning the 2007 Governor General's Literary Award for Children's Literature, Illustration.

The Magic Beads describes a young girl's fear of shaming herself before her class in show and tell because she comes from a broken home and, living in a temporary battered women's shelter, has nothing of value to share with her classmates. The "butterflies" in her stomach seem to become larger animals each day, until they take the shape of buffalo. But her imaginative presentation of her plastic bead necklace as a leash for elephants, a snake to scare monsters, or a wand to combat evil wizards causes her classmates to admire her creative thinking and desire to create their own "magical" accessories.

Weller's *Night Wall* is, again, overtly instructive. This psychological thriller carries a lesson about overcoming fears: building a wall to keep them away does not work; in fact, it makes them even more terrifying. While the two girls, Julie and Sarah, are depicted very accurately and realistically, the creatures representing their fears are monstrous and misshapen. The creatures ooze from the forest that surrounds the house, threatening to penetrate the comfort zone of the cousins. Only by tearing down the wall do Julie and Sarah confront their fears; they enter the forest, where

they find a chest of little figurines representing the monsters of which they were so afraid. “‘They’re so small,’ said Julie. ‘See—they’re not so scary,’ said Sarah, smiling.”

Hard to Categorize

Personal taste can lead to special insight into books that appeal to one personally, but it’s hard to prevent bias against books that don’t. Stefan Czernecki’s *Ride ‘Em, Cowboy*, “for little cowpokes everywhere,” depends on detailed photographs of cowboy carvings, patchwork fabrics, and a few handmade accessories. These images picture a day in a cowboy’s life, with the stiff, carved figures posed to illustrate their round of activities: riding, roping, branding, playing the guitar, and square dancing. This cross between the depiction of a folk art collection and a minimal story told in stereotypic “cowboy” language—“Wrestle stampeadin’ steers,” “Yippee yiyo kiyay!”—is a rather awkward mix; I feel that it will satisfy the collector of folk art rather than the child.

Another, to me, unappealing book is Louise Schofield and Malcolm Geste’s *The Zoo Room*, where a family is invited by Aunt Zelda to celebrate young Max’s birthday at the Zoo Room restaurant, where zoo animals serve as both wait staff and diners. Avoiding the tables of carnivores, the family settles down at a table of their own and selects a meal of lamb chops, fish, sausages, and a plate of insects. The pictures are somewhat cartoonish, with elements of the grotesque, particularly in the images of the human family, and the notion of animals serving parts of other animals as food certainly reflects Tennyson’s observation of “Nature, red in tooth and claw” (LVI, line 15) but also a certain insensitivity.

Lilliput 5357, by Stefan Czernecki, may very well entrance



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small children passionate about robots, vivid colours, and few words, many of them onomatopoeic verbal depictions of sounds such as “EEUUWW,” “SQUEEEEEAL,” “KA-BOOM KER-POW KRRRUNNCCCH,” or exclamations such as “PEE-YEW! TOO STINKY” and “ICKY, STICKY, OOEY and GOOEY.” While I accept that rambunctious children might be fascinated by the wide variety of robots, or double spreads picturing diabetes-inducing messes of candies, ice creams, cookies, cake, jam, and marshmallows piled in a sticky heap, my heart goes out to the despairing adult whose child selects this as a favourite book to be read over and over again. Certainly, the book is striking in its photographic realism and primary colours set against extensive white space that accentuates the violent impact of the images. Those who love robots, bright colours, plenty of action, and noise will love this book!

The Moon Rock, by Boriana and Vladimir Todorov, is unusual in a number of ways. Poised between an illustrated short novel and a picture-book form, with vivid, hyperrealistic images incorporating both grotesquely surreal and cartoon-like elements, its format alternates one, two, or more full pages of text with full-page or double-spread pictures.

This science fantasy engages with space and time travel as Elliott, its young protagonist, encounters the forces of both good and evil that are drawn by the moon rock he has taken from his astronaut

grandfather’s collection. His dream-like state mingles elements of his own life with the lives of the strange inhabitants from the other side of the moon. Much of the action is concerned with the creation of a future for the world he enters, and the remaking of a future in the world from which he has been snatched. After epic adventures and heroic acts in which he helps to save the moon world, Elliott travels back to Earth through a passage that wipes his memory clean of the events and reverses time, so that he arrives home the day before he left. This movement back in time alters the sequence of events with which the book began, enabling him to guide his mother from their burning house and to forestall the critical burns that she had suffered in the earlier narrative.

The story is action-packed and thrilling, with graphics that encompass a variety of artistic styles and characters drawn from a range of cultures and periods. Some images are photographic, and some are reminiscent of Star Wars, while others suggest Breughel. Some incorporate traces from a number of contrasting genres, including elements of the baroque, the surreal, the grotesque, and the mechanistic within one picture, mixing the classical tradition with a contemporary realism.

Intriguing Books with Humorous Dimensions

A number of clever books manage to inspire deep thought while being funny, or perhaps because they



“When you were small
we used to give you
baths in the teapot, and
when you were done
we could just tip it over
and pour you out.”



are funny. The Zen Tails series, whose pun already alerts us to the playfulness of the books, is provocative in this way. Written by Peter Whitfield, lecturer in Philosophy, and illustrated by artist Nancy Bevington, each book in the series relates a classic philosophical story with a profound moral. The major characters include three Teachers, “enlightened ones,” three Students “on the path,” and three fools who have “forgotten the way.” Each story involves a teacher and a fool, and sometimes other characters as well. Thus, in *Up and Down*, the Monkey, who represents Agitation, learns from Shri Shelly the tortoise, representing Knowledge, that “the restless mind is a horrendous master. The calm mind is a wonderful servant.” To communicate this psycho-philosophical message, the book tells the story of a very bored Monkey who can find nothing whatsoever to do and demands that Shelly keep him occupied. After several events, Shelly creates a very long ladder and tells him to run up and down. Monkey repeats the action until he is exhausted, at last realizing the many interesting things he might have done instead if he hadn’t wasted the day running up and down the ladder because he was bored.

The format of the book is predominantly text-picture-picture-text, except for one double spread. The recto and verso are duplicates of each other, each portraying two insets of Monkey climbing UP and DOWN, capturing the monotony of the frenzied activity. The UP picture shows Monkey’s lower half, with his head and shoulders already above the picture frame, while the DOWN picture shows just his head, shoulders, and hands as he descends below the frame. This gives zest to the action, communicating not only the movement, but also a perspectival dizziness that ably captures the turmoil in Monkey’s mind.

This text-picture-picture-text format is the same, with a few minor

alterations, in each of the three Zen Tails books. Each page has as background a kind of watermark design (accentuated in darker shades of brown on the endpapers), in faint beige on cream or in pale green on white, which gives a slightly oriental feel to the whole; it is not a yin-yang symbol, but is reminiscent of it. This subtle background contrasts with the vivid colours and sharp lines of the graphics, whose distinctive style leans somewhat toward a cartoon effect. And each book ends with the verso page titled Zen, which tells the original story that inspired the book, and the recto page titled Tail, which gives the direct message to the reader. A sense of fun permeates the books so that the message is carried with some subtlety and sophistication. In *No Presents Please* and *Bruno Dreams of Ice Cream*, the philosophical undertone is also reflected in humorous ways by details within the illustrations. For example, the Beaver, one of the students representing Studiousness, is carrying books entitled *I Think Therefore I Think* and *The Tao of Beavers*.

The touch of a visual Carrollian humour in these tales/tails is delightfully captured again in Sara O’Leary and Julie Morstad’s *When You Were Small*, which sets up a marvellously inventive graphic play on the notion of size. Set in the context of a bedtime ritual between father and son, the parent’s gentle humour is initiated “[e]very night at bedtime” by Henry’s same request, “Dad, tell me about when I was small.” The premise of

the book is that *small* means not just young but really tiny. For example, “When you were small you used to have a pet ant and you would take him out for walks on a leash.” “When you were small we used to give you baths in the teapot, and when you were done we could just tip it over and pour you out.” The charming pen-and-ink, textured illustrations with a colour wash sometimes give a hint of background, but are generally silhouetted against a plain white page. The humour is deftly carried through in the illustrations. For example, “When you were small you used a thimble for a hat” is expanded by the image of Henry, with the thimble hat falling low over his eyes, groping his way blindly past stacks of cotton reels of different colours, with a needle tied to his belt like a sword. Absent the philosophical depth of *Zen Tails*, nonetheless, the humour of the book speaks to both children and adults. One of Dimiter’s favourite books, and the winner of the 2007 Marilyn Baillie Picture Book Award and an award for Excellence in Book Design, it has recently been followed by *Where You Came From* by the same author and illustrator, which offers similarly whimsical images to answer another of Henry’s questions: “Where did I come from?”

Other fanciful and amusing books are Eleri Glass and Ashley Spires’s *The Red Shoes* and Lisa Cinar’s *The Day It All Blew Away*. Unwilling to accept her mother’s or the shopkeeper’s vision of sensible lace-up shoes in white or brown, a young girl hears instead

the “ruby whispers, shiny silver giggles” of the red shoes that attract her. The humour of the piece relies on both words and images. The young girl’s sense of an animate world is reflected in the personality of the shoes “squatting on the shelves” and the independence of her feet that “huff, puff like two tired trains.” The illustrations are complementary in their wit, picturing a child whose face and body reflect that she is absolutely fed up, and a delightfully pursed-mouth saleslady in huge triangular spectacles, eyes turned obstinately away, dangling the red shoe above the child’s head, out of reach.

The Day It All Blew Away owns a more sophisticated, edgy humour. This absurdist book pictures Mr. Tadaa, whose hat is too small, and a hat called Ah that is much too large for the little person it belongs to. These situations make the polite gesture of tipping one’s hat almost impossible: it takes Mr. Tadaa two hours to find his on his huge head, and the little person, who rides on Ah to avoid being smothered, falls off when the hat tips itself. One day, the wind blows furiously, hats and people get separated, and the narrator tells us that we should all expect that the hats were exchanged and that everyone lived happily ever after. But this false ending is immediately revised. The two protagonists find the new hats “uncomfortable and unnecessary,” greet with laughter and derision anyone who tips a hat to them, and have great fun together repudiating the social mores that have made them

unhappy. This book is clearly subversive and great fun.

Provocative Repicturings

The success of a newly illustrated classic story for children depends upon an original interpretation, a fresh contemporaneity, or an outstanding aesthetic effect. Iassen Ghiuselev is a talented, award-winning illustrator who has created several graphic reinterpretations of classics for Simply Read Books, including Carlo Collodi’s *Adventures of Pinocchio* (which earned an illustration award), Ruskin’s *King of the Golden River*, the Grimm Brothers’ *The Queen Bee*, and Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. In each case, the rendering is responsive to the text in a different way, well crafted, but not always eye-catching. For example, the Ruskin story inspires a somewhat chiaroscuro style in grey tone, with faint suggestions of colour, while the Grimms’ story tends to earth tones, predominantly greens and ochres, with splashes of reds, blues, and purples, but muted with the omnipresent greens and browns; in each case, the palette selected is appropriate, even evocative, but not really memorable. The illustrations for *King of the Golden River* are small, distributed throughout the text in a variety of formats. The line of the illustrations for *The Queen Bee* is more definitive, and the larger pictures—many full-page and including several double spreads—offer particular graphic interest because the negative white-space surrounds the illustrations like



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a cut-out, intruding into them in a variety of recognizable shapes. Streaming ribbons, tree branches, leaves, balustrades, and other clearly defined shapes of indeterminate reference tantalize the reader to identify them and perceive their relevance.

While these books are of some interest, the most striking reinterpretations are found in Ghiuselev's illustrations of *Pinocchio* and *Alice in Wonderland*. The illustrations of *The Adventures of Pinocchio* offer startling three-dimensional effects, with cityscapes that resemble cardboard cut-outs juxtaposed with almost photographic city scenes that involve a mixture of fantastic, realistic, and surrealistic elements. Similarly, the illustrations of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* create a tension between a realistic, fantastic, and iconic depiction of the characters, also presenting both flat and three-dimensional elements within one illustration, supported by appropriate shadowing. Especially effective are the dramatic perspectival shifts both between and within illustrations, which achieve a sense of dizziness and being off-balance, echoing in physical sensation the intellectual and emotional imbalance of Alice's experience where the self and the known world are both under challenge. It is not surprising that this book has earned several awards for illustration.

First Nations Legends

The Innu legend of the *First Spring*, written by Remi Savard and Catherine Germain, with illustrations by Geneviève Côté, and *The Lost Island* from E. Pauline Johnson's *Legends of Vancouver* are stories of Canada's First Nations. *First Spring* tells of early days when “human beings and animals had not yet grown apart and indeed could speak each other's language.” Côté's use of colour and design imitates a style of First Nations art.

The Lost Island re-presents a legend written by E. Pauline Johnson, daughter of a Mohawk chief and a British-born mother, with illustrations by contemporary watercolourist Atanas Matsoureff. In contrast to the creation legend of *First Spring*, *The Lost Island* tells the story of earlier times from a postcolonial setting. In the legend that old tillicum tells the boy, a medicine man has a vision of the future.

It was more than one hundred years ago. This great city of Vancouver was but the dream of the Sagalie Tyee at that time. The dream had not yet come to the white man; only one great Indian medicine-man knew that some day a great camp for Pale-faces would lie between False Creek and the Inlet. This dream haunted him; it came to him night and day . . .

Though he is most powerful, the medicine man cannot fight what is to come, and, as an old man, he travels to a far-away island where he leaves “all his courage, his fearlessness and his strength, living, living for ever” for future generations. For many years, this lost island has been sought by young and old, for the great medicine man said that one’s courage and bravery “never die—they live for one’s children and grandchildren.”

With careful detail, the illustrations depict many aspects of First Nations’ material culture: weapons; woven bowls; rattles; totem poles; canoes; dwellings;

clothing, including garments decorated with designs and ornaments; a young man in a canoe in informal dress; an old man wrapped in fur wearing a headdress; and the medicine man and others in hunting garb. There are paintings of animals: bears, wolves, owls, eagles, and starfish, and pictures of woods, rocks, and seashores in long vistas and in close-up. The pictures are both informative and evocative.

Books with a Message

Many Simply Read books provoke not only independent thinking, but also the perception and joyful acceptance of difference. In some cases, the graphic design of a book is especially striking in its support of the notion of perceptive stimulation and discovery. Two examples are *Cat and Fish* and *Cat and Fish Go to See*, which are characterized by minimal verbal text and provocative black-and-white illustrations. Written by Joan Grant and illustrated by Neil Curtis, the books pair an unlikely couple “from different worlds,” the land-based cat and a fish from the water world. Each introduces the other to its own medium, and they decide to live “where the sea and the land me[e]t.”

The most arresting aspect of the work is the illustrations in stark black and white, suggesting the style of engraved prints. Because of the heavy lines and the repetitive design elements bordering the cross-hatched areas, many of the pictures have a dazzling,

almost psychedelic effect where the two contrasts seem to vibrate. In some cases, the pictures are set upon a primarily black background; in others, they are starkly white. And they are fantastic: each creature can breathe and live in the unaccustomed atmosphere, and the friends can row a boat across a sky or through a city.

The verbal text, which runs from about five to a maximum of twenty-five large words per page (the average is about ten), begins in standard linear form, but often takes various shapes and positions: rising up like a hill when the fish learns to climb, in wavy lines when the pair takes to the water, and in a circle when they come to their final decision about where to live. The words also migrate to the top of the page when the sun rises. Some scenes where repetitive shapes dominate—for example, a large school of identically shaped fish or multiple tiny wavelets of water—give a sense of Asian influence as the images take on strong design elements. As in, for instance, *Zen Tails' Up and Down*, these design elements provide a pictorial mimesis of the concepts, subtly reinforcing them in the young reader's mind.

A more explicit message about accepting difference is Sue Lawson and Caroline Magerl's *My Gran's Different*. Each recto page introduces a grandmother of one of the narrator's friends. Turning over to the verso page, the reader finds the same statement repeated each time: "But my Gran's different." The

recto page shows the friends' grandmothers engaged in some characteristic activity: baking a cake, putting on lipstick, watching sports, delivering flowers. As the boy ranges through the list of his friends, it becomes clear that their grandmothers have come from a variety of traditions and cultures, and are called by different relationship terms: *nanna, grandma, granny, nonna, oma, grandmother, Gramma, nanny, and baba*.

It is not until two-thirds through the book that the format changes. The last pages, focused solely upon gran, describing what she does and her surroundings—her empty armchair and her windowsill with pots on it—are followed by her image in close-up, and then her hands receiving flowers. The narrator informs us that "My gran stares out the window and rocks in time with the breeze." A double spread reveals her sitting by the windowsill, smelling the flowers the grandchild has brought. The penultimate two pages picture the boy leaning over the back of the chair in which gran sits, telling us that she is different because "She can't remember who she is." His statement on the final pages of the book, showing the pots on the windowsill with the flowers in them, is one of love and acceptance: "But that's all right, because I remember who she is." This touching picture book, with its gentle, evocative illustrations, expresses the emotional commitment to a person who is different from others, and asserts the uniqueness of each individual.

Looking Back: Focus on War, Memory, and Contemporary Relevance

The makers of books, television series, and films continue to be drawn to the World Wars of the last century, entranced with depicting heroism, intense personal sacrifice, untold devastation, and the utter stupidity and incompetence of statistic-driven martial bureaucracies that depersonalize individual lives for ends that often seem inconsequential or untenable. This seemingly perpetual need for reconsideration may reveal itself in re-enactments of particular, moving events, or it may turn toward a more philosophical understanding of the nature of war, of human dignity and emotion, and of the search for and affirmation of ethical and philosophical values. Frequently, the temporal perspective, the sense of looking back with modern eyes, discloses the attempt to make sense of the past in contemporary terms.

Two historical books from the Simply Read list, centring upon war and the place it holds in human memory, have received international recognition with awards from Australia, Canada, and the United States, all countries that represent, in the diversity of their immigrants, the heritage of many nations. *In Flanders Fields*, created by Norman Jorgensen and Brian Harrison-Lever, and inspired by the John McCrae poem, features illustrations in a spectrum of brown to grey, relieved only by the red breast of the robin trapped in barbed wire that the young soldier enters

into no man's land to free. This red colour echoes in the red of the poppies on the final page that "blow/ Between the crosses, row on row, / That mark our place;" and, in a paler hue, of the brazier in the damp, cold trenches. The book celebrates the well-known ceasefire of the Great War that occurred spontaneously on Christmas Day when both entrenched lines laid aside their weapons and joined in singing carols, only to resume killing each other the following day. As such, it is primarily a historical representation, with images depicted in line drawings somewhat like plates made from engravings, which could have been taken from photographs or drawings of the time.

The second book, *Memorial*, created by Gary Crew and Shaun Tan, and previously published in Australia by Lothian, more obviously asserts Simply Read's objective to "link the past with the present." This work focuses upon a living memorial, a tree planted by soldiers returning from the Great War, and memorializing those subsequently lost in the Second World War and the Vietnam War. Centred in the heart of a young boy who recognizes the sacrifices that have been made by earlier generations and the significance of the tree in memorializing them, the verbal text explores the old soldiers' reminiscences in the conversations that the boy has with each of the generations that fought—his great-grandfather, his grandfather, and his father. It is not the glories of war that emerge, but the importance of remembering the

sacrifices for which the tree stands as a living memorial. As such, the steady encroachment of roadways, bitumen, and automobile pollution upon the natural surroundings of the tree, and its identification as a traffic hazard by the local council, which threatens its survival, become a comment upon the loss of important memories and, concurrently, upon the loss of the natural environment.

This award-winning book is as much a picture essay as it is a textual one, for every page is illustrated, with the verbal text situated upon the picture. Words and images appear on a variety of textures: tree bark, worn pieces of fabric, leaves, threadbare scraps of sackings, grommetted sheets of canvas lashed to wooden frames, windowpanes set in weathered shutters, and wooden picture frames enclosing photographs. These natural materials are contrasted with a double spread of the bitumen or asphalt, complete with white-painted pedestrian crossing lines and a large arrow.

The individual images are many and varied: line drawings of people, representations of military medals, and scraps of old photographs of men in uniforms, of nurses, of the tree-planting and the park after the tree is gone, of scenes of desolate, trenched land with white crosses, and of children playing. The span of memories is interspersed with the growth of the tree, paralleling

the sense of time passing and, concurrently, through the artefacts that are vividly remembered, the sense of time captured.

Final Comments

Dimiter Savoff has earned the right to be proud of his publishing record, and, though he may mention one or two particular favourites—*Windy*, *When You Were Small*, and Shaun Tan’s work—to assert emphatically, “I love them all!” (23 Oct. 2007). In selecting books for publication, he is drawn to those with a visual impression that catches his attention, and it is certainly the sense of design and of perspective that I find among the most unique features of Simply Read’s production. He explained to me during our telephone interviews that the market for books appears to be on the upswing after some difficult years, and he hopes that the popularity of the picture book will be a strong aspect of this swing. He believes that, in this field, the small publisher can be an especially effective force in providing thought-provoking and aesthetically enchanting books for discriminating readers. The Simply Read catalogue is proof of Savoff’s delight in the printed page, and he looks forward to the possibility of seeing one of his books transformed into animated form in the future.

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