

4-1-1993

Reviews: Children's Books

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Recommended Citation

VanStee, S., & Jacobson, J. M. (1993). Reviews: Children's Books. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 33 (4). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol33/iss4/9

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Reviews

Children's Books

Two books for the middle grades

Reviewed by Sandy VanStee
Northern Hills Middle School

Backfield Package. Written by Thomas J. Dyard. Morrow Junior Books, 1350 Avenue of the Americas, New York NY 10019. ISBN: 0-688-11471-7. 1992. 202 pp. US\$14.00.

In Thomas Dyard's newest book, four high school football players have the potential to take their football team to their first conference championship. Joe, Lew, Tracy and Coley are referred to as the "Backfield Package" and at the height of their success, they agree to keep the backfield intact by going to the same college. The only school offering them football scholarships is small Ryder State College, but they all agree to stay together despite opposition from several of their parents.

Joe Mitchell, the quarterback and main character, is an exceptional player and he finds out that Randolph University is interested in offering him a scholarship to attend their prestigious school. Joe seems to be unaware of his talent until a sportswriter praises his ability and gives him sole credit for the Cardinals' success. Joe's parents subtly try to suggest that he keep his options open, but he believes he needs to remain loyal to his friends.

Dyard has included lots of playing action in this book to satisfy the sports fan, but he has also created a dilemma with no easy solution. Even though Joe wants to remain loyal to his friends, he faces a difficult decision. What is in his own best interest? Many young adults will be able to identify with the tough choices that must be made when leaving high school and entering a new lifestage — often without those friends who were so important.

The Witch of Maple Park. Written by Stephanie Tolan. Morrow Junior Books, 1350 Avenue of the Americas, New York NY 010019. ISBN: 0-688-10581-5. 1992. 154 pp. US\$14.00.

Casey Corrigan's best friend is Mackenzie Brewster. Mackenzie is a true individual and is into psychic powers, meditation and a few other New Age ideas. Mackenzie lives with her mother, a struggling caterer, who must find a way to make a living when Mackenzie's father leaves them. Mackenzie babysits to make money and one day while in the park with her charge, Barnaby, she and Casey see a strange looking woman who seems to watch little Barnaby, and who Mackenzie claims is a witch. Casey, the level-headed one, doesn't believe in witches and does some research at the library to prove that the strange lady is just strange — not a witch. Her research, however, only proves that Mackenzie is right and the girls try hard to protect Barnaby, at the same time that they are helping to save Mrs. Brewster's failing business. However, when Barnaby disappears they know the witch must have him. This is a delightful story that will keep middle school readers laughing and in suspense at the same time. The characters have lots of personality and the plot moves quickly.

Timmy Green's Blue Lake. Written by Donna Bergman. Illustrated by Ib Ohlsson. Tambourine Books, 1350 Avenue of the Americas, New York NY 10019. ISBN 0-688-10747-8. 1992. Hardcover, 32 pp. US\$14.00.

Reviewed by Jeanette Jefson
Western Michigan University

What is there to do on a summer's day when all your friends are away on vacation? Timmy Green solves this dilemma when he finds an old blue tarpaulin and lets his imagination change it into his own private lake. Adventures on his lake are suddenly interrupted when his friend Sherry Lou returns. Her misadventures with the blue tarp force Timmy to create new ideas, filling his summer days with hours of fun and enjoyment. This fanciful story of a young boy's adventures is enhanced by Ib Ohlsson's colorful, playful illustrations, which capture the carefree spirit of the main character. "It's a funny story with great pictures and Timmy has a real sense of humor," comments a nine year old after reading this story. *Timmy Green's Blue Lake* shows children that a little imagination can change an ordinary situation into an exciting adventure.

Popping out of a hat... Bunnacula!

Rabbit-Cadabra! Written by James Howe. Illustrated by Alan Daniel. Morrow Junior Books, 1350 Avenue of the Americas, New York NY 10019. ISBN: 0-688-10402-9. 1993. 48 pp. US\$15.00.

Everybody's favorite vampire-bunny is back, and The Amazing Karlovsky has come to town. How can it be that sheltered little Bunnacula, who rarely leaves his cage except at midnight (after which all the carrots are drained white), is pictured — complete with flaming red eyes — on Karlovsky's posters? Chester the cat investigates, and the usual hilarious chaos ensues. As an added feature, there are directions for the pull-the-rabbit-out-of-a-hat trick, provided with punch-out props. Applause! Applause! (JMJ)

Replete with revelry

Aster Aardvark's Alphabet Adventures. Written by Steven Kellogg. Mulberry Books, 1350 Avenue of the Americas, New York NY 10019. ISBN: 0-688-11571-3. 1993. 40 pp. US\$3.95.

Who can doubt that fluency, elaboration and originality are characteristic of the creative artist after even a glimpse at Steven Kellogg's work? On the front cover, parachuting pigs playfully plaster the alphabet across the sky, and within, hotdog it happily as they helicopter upside down, handing out the Alphabet Award. Spring may be late this year, and skies gray, but cheerfulness erupts here with every turn of the page. Rush out, rampage through the mall, root out this wonderful book and relish the rambunctious relaxation. (JMJ)

Folktale

Two of Everything. Retold and illustrated by Lily Toy Hong. Albert Whitman & Company, 6340 Oakton Street, Morton Grove IL 60053-2723. ISBN: 0-8075-8157-7. 1993. US\$14.95.

Once long ago, in a humble little hut, lived Mr. Haktak and his wife, Mrs. Haktak. They were old and very poor. The story of the elderly impoverished couple, amiable and hard-working, rewarded with a marvelous container that fills itself, is common to many cultures. Here the miraculous pot, when one thing is placed in it, magically produces its double. But how will the Haktaks get sweet cakes, when they have none to put into the pot? Clever Mrs. Haktak solves the problem — but what happens when she falls into the pot herself? Hong's retelling, with her charming illustrations, creates a double delight. (JMJ)



Water, water all around

Water. Written by Francois Michel. Illustrated by Yves Larvor. Lothrop, Lee and Shepard Books, 1350 Avenue of the Americas, New York NY 10019. ISBN: 0-688-11427-X. 1993. 10 pp. US\$19.95.

For students to wonder at, manipulate and pore over; for families to treasure; for teachers and librarians to share with care, here is a gorgeous expository text in the form of a very elaborate, and fortunately very sturdy, pop-up book. Each double page section has its own topic. "Underground Water," for example, includes four movable features, three fold-out sections, and a variety of multi-layered illustrations, one of which shows an underground cave in which stalagmites and stalactites can be made to grow. Short, clear pieces of informational text are placed everywhere: on clouds, beside a three-dimensional illustration of an aquifer, beside a well which can be made to show different levels of the water table. It is thrilling to have publishers of factual books continually moving into territory hitherto only the province of the storybook. (JMJ)

World Water Watch. Written by Michelle Koch. Greenwillow Books, 1350 Avenue of the Americas, New York NY 10019. ISBN: 0-688-11464-4. 1993. 32 pp. US\$14.00.

Watercolor wash drawings in lovely greens and blues accompany the handsome text by author-illustrator Michelle Koch. In each section, a child watches the sea and the creatures whose domain is the sea: in Alaska, sea otters; in Mexico, sea turtles; in Antarctica, penguins; in Chile, fur seals ("The Juan Fernandez seal that inhabits the offshore islands belonging to Chile is now protected by the Chilean government... When every country joins in protecting them, fur seals will be free to play safely on all beaches"); in Norway, polar bears; in Maui, humpback whales. A poem — *watch over the world, watch over the water* — illumines this beautiful book's beginning and end. (JMJ)



A Creation Story...

And God Created Squash. Written by Martha Whitmore Hickman. Illustrated by Giuliano Ferri. Albert Whitman & Company, 6340 Oakton Street, Morton Grove IL 60053-2723. ISBN: 0-8075-0340-1. 1993. US\$14.95.

Reviewed by Mary Radtke
Western Michigan University

And God Created Squash is an artistic rendition of the Genesis creation story. The book begins with a universe "all darkness and swirling water." In a pleasant, chatty format, the author shows God adding light, water, land, plants and whirling planets, followed by creatures of the sea, sky and land in turn. And then God makes people — to care for the earth and for company. "Welcome," God said. "You are my most ambitious creation. You are a lot like me. I have given you power. Not to mention a brain. I hope you are happy, and that you love the world I have made. I do — it is quite wonderful."

Author and illustrator have, together, created a tender, playful religious text for preschool and primary age children and for storybook collectors everywhere.

Eve Merriam — a poet for all seasons

The Singing Green: New and selected poems for all seasons. Written by Eve Merriam. Illustrated by Kathleen Collins Howell. Morrow Junior Books, 1350 Avenue of the Americas, New York NY 10017. ISBN: 0-688-11025-8. 1992. 102 pp. US\$14.00.

Eve Merriam — prolific, honored, anthologized, loved — shows once again that language can delight readers of any age. In this bubbling celebration of words we follow her into dreams of competing frogs and snakes each with their own cheering squad ("sis, boom, bog! Roll 'em off the log..."), into mysterious faraway places ("...I want to connect with Schenectady, the town I select is Schenectady...I'll take any trek to Schenectady"), into the night ("I swim in the skybloom sea").

Merriam seems never to have met a word she doesn't find intriguing, or even a letter (Q and J are separately celebrated here) and she catches us up in her sparkling, endless delight. (JMJ)

