

PRODUCTION PROBLEMS

Margaret Atwood

I'M NO AUTHORITY ON CHILDREN'S BOOKS, either as a reader or as a writer. As a reader, I tend to choose books for my child that will not drive me crazy the tenth, fiftieth or hundredth time I read them. I like them to have a strong plot, humour, and bright pictures, though I require these things not out of any theory about what such books ought to be, but simply because they hold the interest of small children.

I suppose I hope that the stories I write will have similar qualities. I haven't written very many children's stories. Those I have written have been for the youngest age group possible. They have simple plots and vocabularies, they are very short, they tend to rhyme, and they always have happy endings.

A critic of the type prone to analyzing Beatrix Potter's Dark Period would probably say that I write these stories not just for children but for myself, because I can do things in them that the age denies me in adult fiction and poetry. Such an analysis would not be entirely wrong: I wrote *Up In The Tree*, for example, at the same time I was writing *Surfacing*. Perceptive readers may find a similarity in theme, though a slight difference in treatment.

Writers who work in various forms are always in danger of being thought frivolous. This comes from the specialist view that we tend to have, now, about all forms of work. "Work" is the one narrow area you are supposed to dedicate yourself to. "Work" is what you don't enjoy. "Work" hurts. "Play," on the other hand, is enjoyable, but, because of the absence of pain, it is somehow not serious. Sooner or later, every writer encounters from almost every interviewer some question aimed at getting the writer to divulge how much he suffers. Descriptions of suffering somehow validate a writer in the eyes of his audience. This is probably why writing for children is still viewed as a kind of non-writing: it doesn't look as though it hurts enough to be taken seriously. It does no good to say that your "adult" writing, even your most dismal and depressing stories and poems, is a joyful experience. If writing contains pain, it must have been painful to do.

And I know many will flinch in disbelief when I say that in some ways *Up In The Tree* was a much more painful book to work on than *Surfacing* was. Not that it was painful to *write*; but, in a fit of enthusiasm, I had said that I would illustrate it myself. And that was when the pain set in.

Up In The Tree is not “Canadian” in content; in fact, I think self-consciously “B is for Beaver” books for children are probably a mistake, since it is very hard to make them interesting. (“Q is for the Queen of England” would have exactly the same problem. Children instinctively rebel against books that are heavily weighted in favour of instructing their minds as opposed to delighting their imaginations.) So the writing of it had nothing to do with my Canadian citizenship. But the choices about the illustrations — how many, how big, what kind of printing, how many colours — had a lot to do with the fact that the book would be published in Canada. Anyone who has shopped for children’s books knows what the competition is like. Low-priced, excellent, four-colour English and American books abound. Canadian books are often either higher-priced or somewhat drab. Why? It’s the economics of publishing once more: except for blockbusters like *Alligator Pie*, the print runs in Canada simply aren’t large enough to bring the price down.

All the choices I made about the appearance of the book were determined by this fact. *Up In The Tree* was originally to have been eight by ten, with alternating two- and four-colour two-page spreads. To cut costs, it came down to four by five, with two colours throughout. To save on typesetting, I hand-lettered the whole thing. At one point I was going to do the colour separations myself, to avoid those costs as well, but I found it too painful to work with acetate film, so my publisher took this over. I did the line drawings and the publisher’s art department did the overlays for each colour. What we avoided by this method were the high costs of photographing a finished, painted picture and separating the colours afterwards. But because of this, and the two-colour limitation, the illustrations have a rather stencil or folk-art quality. I would have preferred watercolour, which allows for more blends and shadings, but we had to be aware at every turn of the necessity of keeping the cost down. That is why the trees are blue rather than brown and the sun is pink rather than yellow. Pure economics.

Why was this experience so painful? Only because I didn’t know what I was doing. Although I had once done lettering and illustration for the poster business I ran in youth, I’d forgotten everything about it, and I was faced at every turn with my own incompetence and with the strictures of the form. How do you get everyone’s heads and bodies the same size? How do you draw a giant owl, flying, *sideways*? I tortured myself with peeks at Helen Oxenbury and other mistresses of the art. I longed for an art course or for some catastrophe that would get me out of this mess. Measured on the pain scale, *Up In The Tree* is my most serious book.

But the lesson, if any, is that producing books for children in Canada is something like making movies for adults in Canada. The small potential market limits what you can do successfully and still compete with the low prices of imports. Does this mean that in order to have a financially viable children's book culture, unsullied by subsidies or special tariffs, we will have to practice a kind of minimalism?

IN THE GARDEN OF THE LOST CHILDREN

David Knight

In the mansion of lost children
white predominates
and sometimes in their minds
there are no more walls
as such
but long unsought limits
respected
disquieting in their precision;
the small details of half-remembered
realities traced and
traced again
with painstaking attentiveness.

In that garden they are like children
in their innocence and trust;
mute to the world
their thoughts
a solitary walk through landscaped
lawns that slip away.

The lost children linger
among the paths and hedges
trimmed so neat
and with infinite patience
they wander and murmur their legends
to the uncaring flowers.