
Compositions

Kevin Major

Illus. Alan Daniel

Eh? To Zed: A Canadian Abecedarium. Red Deer
\$18.95

Michèle Lemieux

Stormy Night. Kids Can. n.p.

Antonio Skármeta

Illus. Alfonso Ruano

The Composition. Groundwood n.p.

Reviewed by Mavis Reimer

Eh? To Zed, an alphabet book by award-winning author Kevin Major, explicitly places the question of identity in national terms. As the press release accompanying the book explains, Major set himself the challenge of “finding four very Canadian words for each letter of the alphabet” and, further, of setting these words into rhyming couplets: “Arctic, apple, aurora, Anik/Bonhomme, Bluenose, beaver, bannock.” The paintings Alan Daniel creates to

accompany the text repeat Major's verbal games in visual terms. Each is a montage of art styles and forms that are said to "have helped build our country and shape our history": for example, a black and white photograph of a nineteenth-century drilling operation illustrates "oil," an intricate paper cutting of a runner followed by a fox illustrates "Fox," and a puzzle version of Tom Thomson's *The Jack Pine* illustrates "jack pine." The many illustrations depicting toys and games—the wooden horse-drawn cart on which Bonhomme rides, a whirligig Mountie, marionette *habitants*, a flip-book featuring Graham Greene, Lorne Greene, and Nancy Greene, a corn doll holding a lacrosse racquet, among others—point to play and craft as the organizing metaphors of this book.

Such playfulness is a feature of many recent alphabet books. While the most conventional examples of the genre continue to present commonly recognized, isolated objects floating on solid backgrounds to stand unironically for letters and sounds, more complex books acknowledge the arbitrary nature of language by making the relations among things, words, and sounds puzzles to be solved by readers. As Perry Nodelman has pointed out in a recent article about alphabet books, the pleasure of such puzzles "depends on the use of a lot of [contextual] information to discover a small bit of [linguistic] information." In Major and Daniel's book, a reader requires a vast body of knowledge about Canadian political history, physical geography, and cultural history and geography to guess what words are illustrated by objects and, therefore, what the "right" connections are. Because they appear on the "K" page, for example, a reader can deduce that the flying bird here does not illustrate "B" and the wooden sled does not illustrate "S," but which is the komatik and which the kittiwake?

What qualifies and does not qualify as a right answer in this book is troubling. There

are many traditional images and words from Aboriginal cultures, but little evidence of an Aboriginal presence in contemporary Canada. When actor Graham Greene is depicted, he is costumed in feathered head-dress and leather leggings. A turbaned Mountie and a Zamboni driver with cartooned Orientalized features allude to the putative complexity of the Canadian mosaic, to be achieved in "the years ahead" (according to the book's explanatory appendix). This is a Canada defined by its dominant settler heritages, as the intertextual references to Robert Service, L.M. Montgomery, and Margaret Laurence confirm.

The provenance of the other three Canadian books for children under review complicates any simple notion of a distinctly Canadian identity. Michèle Lemieux's *Stormy Night* is a translation of a book by (Karl) Wilhelm Osterwald (1820–1887) first published in Germany under the title *Gewitternacht*. Lemieux's book hovers indecisively between the conventions of the wordless picture book and the graphic novel, an emerging genre built on such cartoon conventions as line drawings and surreal imagery. The narrative is simple: a young girl goes to bed on a stormy night and, unable to sleep, drifts into a reverie about such existential questions as "Who am I?" and "Will the world come to an end someday?" The storm ends, the girl sleeps, and a new day dawns. The spare lines of the pen-and-ink drawings on a white ground work nicely to imply the continuity between the world of the girl's bedroom and the fantastic worlds of her imaginings. On the other hand, Lemieux regularly depicts the outside world of the storm as far more fully real than any of these inside worlds: these are typically two-page spreads filled to the edges with cross-hatched fields and inky clouds. The graphic novel generally exploits the panel format of cartoons, a format that revels in often violent action. Lemieux, however, uses the picture book convention of one illustration

per opening and returns frequently to the depiction of the young girl in bed without any accompanying text. These choices slow the pace of the narrative, often bringing it literally to a standstill. The effect overall is one of redundancy, rather than of free-floating anxiety or desire. In fact, the links between the progress of the storm and the nature of the questions asked by the girl—when a lightening strike plunges the house into darkness, for example, she confesses to her fears of robbers, monsters, and abandonment—show the child's inner life to be rigidly determined by external frames. "I'd like to invent things that don't yet exist!" she exclaims at one point, but, in the world of this text, this reads as the merest whimsy.

First published in Venezuela in Spanish as *La composición*, *The Composition*, like *Eh? To Zed*, explores the terms of its own making through the metaphors of games and play. But in Antonio Skármeta's story, these metaphors take on a dark and dangerous cast. As the story opens, Pedro, the central child character, is content to play soccer with his friends despite the political turmoil surrounding him in an unnamed South American country. After his friend's father is taken away by military police, the game of childhood—the goal of which his mother defines as "to go to school, study hard, play and be good to [one's] parents"—no longer seems a simple one. It soon becomes impossible to follow all of the rules of the game. When his class is required to write compositions detailing what their families do at night, Pedro can choose either to work hard at his school assignments, which would involve telling about his parents' listening to clandestine radio broadcasts, or to be good to his parents. Pedro solves his dilemma by resorting to metaphor: his parents, he reports, regularly play chess until he goes to bed.

In his illustrations for Skármeta's story, Alfonso Ruano deftly uses the conventions of framing and line to register Pedro's shift-

ing emotions, which are not explicitly discussed in the narrative. Circular openings communicate his sense of comfort at the opening and close of the story, a two-page spread of the neighbourhood game suggests the expansive mastery he briefly feels, while the illustrations of the police and the schoolroom are filled with vertical lines, frames within frames, overlapping objects, and bodies oddly cut-off by straight lines and frames. The final illustration of the chess game, with its squares and lines, echoes these earlier illustrations but also revises them by the oblique angle at which the board is set. Both in its verbal and its visual texts, then, *The Composition* conveys to readers an understanding of the implications of composition that are far more unsettling than any articulated by the other books under review here. As Skármeta and Ruano clearly know, composing identities can be a deadly serious game.