

For the Elementary School

A Wealth of Good Feeling

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There has been a time in my life when I was greater in girth than huge in height, richer in ridicule than secure in self, and more lost in loneliness than motivated into motion. In William Pene Du Bois' Porko Von Popbutton (Harper & Row, 1968-1969), I feel with Pat, better known as Porko, when he is uptight; I know the scourge of obesity - receipt without reciprocation. And, too, I re-experience the unexpected transformation from squat to statuesque under the influence of athletic involvement.

In a state where winter sports play an important part in our day-to-day lives in some manner or other, the story of ice hockey as experienced by Porko is a hilarious involvement for the children in my room. For those who do not know hockey, the author neatly explains the terminology; for those who do know the game, Porko is so perverse in his approach that he offers the game a whole new slant. I find, also, that the children are intrigued by the beautiful control of words from the first sentence to the very last as Mr. Du Bois casts a spell in the music of language.

Mr. Du Bois frosts his story, if you will pardon a Porkian view, with delightful illustrations that enhance an already compelling story.

What is a friend? With variables acknowledged, a friend is someone who shares your likes and dislikes, who has something in his nature that you seem to lack in your own, who bosses and is bossed in return, who joins the exciting moments in your life and adds to them, and who also irritates you at times. Meet Elizabeth, who in turn will give you a picture of Jennifer and of a beautiful friendship (Jennifer, Hecate, Macbeth, William McKinley, and Me, Elizabeth by E. L. Konigsburg; Atheneum, New York, 1967). Jennifer is a witch; she is a witch because she says she is and goes on her mysterious way proving it to Elizabeth, a vibrant fifth grader, who is subtly gnawed by sporadic skepticism. Elizabeth is an only child; nevertheless, acquaintances and parents are caught up in the ripples of her apprenticeship and advancement to journeyman witch under the strict regulation of Jennifer.

This is no Hallowe'en story. This is a ten year old speaking the words of a curious mind and the explicit nature, at times, of ten year olds. The story appeals to the boys as well as the girls; it covers several months; it underlines Jennifer's statement, "I'm a witch all the time and not just on Hallowe'en," because its theme is not confined to time or age.

And, just in case it is important, Jennifer is a Negro and Elizabeth is white; it is mentioned once, on page fifty-six. There is something about friendship

Come home. Elizabeth Witheridge brings us home, to Minnesota, in her study of the world of the blind, Dead End Bluff (Atheneum, 1966). A review of this book brings the impact of the many facets of the title into an interesting exploration: the dead ends of the blind, the meaning of bluff in relation to the Mississippi River or in relation to the extent at which one being psychologically approaches another, and the author's skillful strengthening of many meanings into one solid child-appealing story.

Quig is almost fourteen. I found it unimportant; he fit in well with my fifth graders. His younger brother, Tommy, is totally reminiscent of Little Arliss in Old Yeller (by Fred Gipson; Harper & Row, 1956). Peers and adults encourage or obstruct in a sympathetic manner. Unite the compelling story of a blind boy struggling with self and world into the appeal of a mystery surrounding the disappearance of a dog he so desperately wants, and there should be few children who resist this work.

There is happiness in this book: a tail-wagging excitement of competition, success over handicap, and warm puppy tongues-- a pleasant relief in an often high-charged world.

Tom Walton, reviews books regularly for MEJ. He is now looking into evidences of "sexism" in elementary school texts for a future review article.