

## A WONDERFUL PLACE TO BE

by

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As children immerse themselves in books, they discover intriguing places to be and have the opportunity to explore these places along with the heroes of the stories. In some recently published children's books, the authors and/or illustrators have used place or setting as a central element or the driving force behind the story itself. The following is a discussion of some of these books which are recommended because they create "a wonderful place to be" for the child reader.

As many children know, a wonderful place to visit in the summer is grandmother's house. In *One Summer at Grandmother's House*, the French author, Poupa Montaufier, shares her memories of summer days spent in Alsace during the 1950's. The text and primitive colored paintings detail this special time spent with grandmother, who lives in a beautiful old house surrounded by trees and flowers. The author shares with readers many of her grandmother's customs and habits, such as wearing three or four aprons at the same time for doing the housework, disconnecting the refrigerator several times a day to save electricity, or losing her spectacles in a huge pot of vegetable soup! For Poupa the end of this vacation spent with grandmother comes all too soon, with the last minutes used to gather up treasures to take home with her to remind her of this special time. For Austin in Mavis Jukes' story entitled *Blackberries in the Dark* a visit to his grandmother's is not at first the same wonderful time that it had been in past summers. Since his last visit, his grandfather had died and Austin and his grandmother must build a relationship for just the two of them. It is difficult for both of them as memories of grandfather surround them and neither knows how to react to the emptiness around them. Austin thinks back to the summer before when he and his grandfather had picked blackberries in the dark and when his grandfather had promised to teach him to fly fish on his next visit. Grandmother reaches out to Austin with grandfather's fishing equipment, and they decide that between the two of them they can learn to fly fish. In fact, they do succeed when grandmother manages to catch a beautiful brook trout, and Austin, following his grandfather's ways, throws back the fish. "It's good luck to throw back the first fish of the season. Grandpa said." Austin and his grandmother share blackberries in the dark and find the link needed for them to communicate without grandfather. The black and white drawings by Thomas B. Allen capture the emotional scenes in the text and help the reader identify even more with Austin and his grandmother as they discover that being together without grandfather can be wonderful in its own way.

Not since Miroslav Sasek's *This Is New York* has an author/illustrator so successfully looked at this city from a child's point of view as does Roxie Munro in *The Inside-Outside Book of New York City*. She takes her readers on an inside-outside trip around the city with full-page scenes of familiar sites. For example, the full page spread of the

Statue of Liberty lets the reader have an outside view close-up of the crown with two children shown looking out and then when the page is turned the reader switches viewpoints and is suddenly inside the Statue's head with the two children looking out. Another double page spread shows Madison Square Garden from the outside with school buses lined up along the street. When the page is turned, readers find themselves inside enjoying a magnificent circus. The last page of the book gives facts about each site. Did you know that the Empire State Building has seven miles of elevator shafts and that on a clear day you can see eighty miles from the 102nd floor observatories? This imaginative look at New York City would encourage children to take a closer inside-outside look at their own surroundings.

Stories set in other countries allow readers to travel with their minds and hearts to wonderful places. The reader can join Trina Schart Hyman in her interpretation of Dylan Thomas' *A Child's Christmas in Wales*. It's a beautiful snowy world where children could hear bells ringing inside them. As the poet describes his "useful" presents received for Christmas, child readers recognize that place and time make little difference. There were "engulfing mufflers," "mittens made for giant sloths," and "zebra scarfs." One can't help but laugh to see the central character standing among the Christmas wrappings bundled in all his new winter gear. "Padding through the still streets" to the seaward hill with the narrator and his three friends gives the reader a panoramic view of the beach, the sea, and the town in the distance, all seen through the gentle snowfall. Readers leave the Wales of Dylan Thomas and Trina Schart Hyman with a longing to return for another Christmas. Bells ring inside children not only in Dylan Thomas' Wales but also in Chris Van Allsburg's world of *The Polar Express*. The magical train, the Polar Express, takes the narrator and the reader to the very best place to be on Christmas Eve, to the North Pole to visit Santa Claus. Santa Claus chooses the main character to receive the first gift of Christmas, and the young boy selects a bell from a reindeer's harness. Back home the narrator discovers the magical qualities of the bell; only those who truly believe can hear it ring. The reader realizes that for the boy this was a once-in-a-lifetime journey, to which he can return only through memory, symbolized by the bell. Inge in *Tikhon* by Ilse-Margaret Vogel finds that her homeland of Germany after World War I is a wonderful place to live, even if it is a country that has been devastated by war. Inge, an only child who often feels lonely, finds herself with a friend when her father brings home Tikhon, a young Russian soldier who is trapped in Germany after the war without identification papers. Even though Tikhon knows only a few words of German and Inge knows no Russian, they both find that friendship does not depend on language alone. One of the wonderful things they have in common is their love for the nearby Zobten Mountain. Inge loves to watch the mountain as the sun rises from behind it and to record the colors of the mountain during various times of day. For Tikhon the Zobten reminds him of his home in Russia. Ironically, it is their love for the Zobten Mountain that causes Tikhon to be captured by the German authorities and taken away from Inge. Fortunately, Inge sees Tikhon once more before he attempts to make his way back to Russia. When Inge looks at her Zobten, she is reminded of her friend Tikhon and when a gift arrives from him she realizes that "neither miles nor years" could ever separate them.

For a small boy in *All Wet! All Wet!* by James Skofield, the meadow and woods on a rainy summer day are wonderful places to be. As he explores the woods, he discovers how various animals spend a rainy day. Cutaways show foxes and rabbits huddled in their underground burrows. As the rainy day continues, other animals retreat. The skunk crawls inside his log and the fish in the swelling creek "lurk silently deep in the pools." The rain finally stops and the boy makes his way home, passing the new mushrooms and spiders mending their webs. The rain-soaked meadow and woods have been a wonderful place for the perceptive child to explore.

One does not have to go out in the rain to enjoy the sensations of being wet. As most children know, the bathtub can be a wonderful place to be. King Bidgood in *King Bidgood's in the Bathtub* by Audrey Wood has discovered the joys of the tub. In fact, no matter how much the various members of his court try to entice him from the tub, they fail miserably and much to their amazement find themselves joining the King in his wet surroundings. Even the Queen finds herself in the tub when she orders her husband to get out for lunch. There she is served an elaborate meal and finally emerges as elegantly as she can in her dripping wet state. The detailed paintings by Don Wood and patterned text add up to a very funny picture book. Max, the rabbit, in *Max's Bath* by Rosemary Wells offers his sister Ruby a challenge. Ruby decides that Max is such a mess after trying to eat his strawberry and lettuce sandwich that a bath is in order. Max innocently takes his orange sherbert into the tub, only to turn the bath water all orange. Ruby runs him another bath, but this time it's his grape juice that sinks to the bottom leaving Max and the water a deep purple. Finally, Ruby decides it's a shower Max needs. Max is clean after his shower, but as Max quickly points out, it's Ruby who's dirty, with juice and orange sherbert! This book would even withstand being grabbed by damp hands that have just emerged from the tub as it's a sturdy board book with pages that can be wiped dry.

The beach becomes a wonderful place to explore for readers of *When the Tide is Low* by Sheila Cole. It's a warm summer day and a young girl begs her mother to take her to the beach. Her mother replies "when the tide is low, we will go." As the child swings, the mother and daughter compare the high and low tide to the up and down movement of the swing and discuss the animals they will see when the tide is low. Illustrator, Virginia Wright-Frierson has created fascinating watercolor scenes of the sea life. The mother and daughter discuss "clams that close up with a squirt," "fiddler crabs with their claws held up like violins," as well as ten other sea creatures. A glossary at the end of the book again illustrates each animal and describes it in a short paragraph. The blue endsheets done in watercolor look like an empty ocean ready to be filled with all these intriguing sea creatures. For children who wish to further explore the edge of the sea, Anota Malnig's book entitled *Where the Waves Break: Life at the Edge of the Sea* provides them with color photographs and more detailed descriptions of the animals discussed in Sheila Cole's book. Even a child who has never had an opportunity to explore the ocean beach will be fascinated by the variety of sea life a perceptive person can find.

An empty room that is for rent can be a wonderful place because it holds memories of those who once lived there, as it does in *The Room* by Mordicai Gerstein. The first occupants were the young couple who loved to play music together, she the cello and he the tuba. As the years go by for the couple, the reader notices through the view offered by the room's two windows that the seasons are changing. Finally the couple, now old, move out and in through an open window flies a sparrow family, who make its home in the light fixture. Eventually, more people move in and out, including a mysterious stranger who plants a pear tree right outside one of the windows, a family of acrobats, a dentist who loves being surrounded by his pet ducks, and a band of noisy Irish musicians. Finally, the room is for rent again and the reader can't help but wonder what characters in the future will make it their home. It's certain that those who like pears and sunlight will find it a wonderful place to live.

*The First Thanksgiving Feast* by Joan Anderson and *The Pilgrims of Plimoth* by Marcia Sewall both portray life for the pilgrims in New Plimoth. Children learn of the harsh life for these new Americans which in contrast made the celebrating of the first Thanksgiving all the more joyful. While readers will not be tempted to exchange places with the harsh life that the pilgrims faced, they may feel that the first Thanksgiving feast would have been a wonderful place to be. On the day of the feast, the pilgrims were joined by Massasoit and ninety other Indians. Readers will be intrigued to learn that according to Joan Anderson the first feast "included turkey with 'puddings in the belly,' venison, stuffed cod, goose pudding, fruit tarts, corn pasties, soup, trifle, stewed pumpkin, and salad herbs." The celebration lasted for three days with the eating followed by a time for recreation. There was a tug of war, a jiggling match, and the chants and dance of Massasoit and the other Indians. Photographs by George Ancona in *The First Thanksgiving* were taken at Plimoth Plantation, the living history museum near Plymouth, Massachusetts. They make the life of the early pilgrims very real for child readers. Likewise, Marcia Sewall's paintings in *The Pilgrims of Plimoth* vividly capture life in the colony. The text of both books reflect the language of these early settlers. To further celebrate Thanksgiving, readers may turn to *Thanksgiving Poems* selected by Myra Cohn Livingston with illustrations by Stephen Gammell. The last stanza of Barbara Juster Esbensen's poem entitled "The First Thanksgiving" captures the joy of a bountiful harvest: "Now summer has come and gone, and we have survived. We give thanks. The wind and the sea are cold again but fire blazes on the hearth and the harvest is golden in our hands."

For young children both the park and the zoo are wonderful places to be. A visit to the park for the young girl in *When We Went to the Park* by Shirley Hughes is made all the more enjoyable because she shares it with her grandfather. Colored illustrations depict the walk through the park on a crisp autumn day with the surrounding trees in shades of gold and red. The walk with grandfather is even more fun because they count the things they see, beginning with "one black cat sitting on a wall, two big girls licking ice-creams" and ending with "nine ducks swimming on the pond, ten birds swooping in the sky, and so many leaves I couldn't count them all." The counting game is brought full circle on the way back home when grandfather and granddaughter again meet the

one black cat. The book's endsheets give the child a chance to review all of the people and animals met in the park by counting them once again. *A Children's Zoo* by Tana Hoban allows young children to identify and describe zoo animals. Tana Hoban's superb color photographs appear on each right hand page and are outlined in white against a black background. On the left hand page the name of the animal depicted appears in large capital letters with three descriptive words in lower case letters. For example, the giraffe is described as "tall, spotted, silent" while the descriptive words for seal are "sleek, black, swims." The last page of the book answers questions about each animal. "Where do they come from? Where do they live? What do they eat?"

*Joey* is a book about a little kangaroo who has a mother who tends to be overprotective and wants to keep her son in her pocket where she knows he will be safe. Joey decides that if he has to stay in his mother's pocket he may as well make it a wonderful place to be. In the pocket he is joined by his friends Billy, Betty, and Bob who decide that they need to be entertained, first by television and then by a stereo so that they can listen to music and dance, all inside Joey's mother's pouch. Next they decide to form a band and more and more instruments are added to the pouch. Mother kangaroo's pouch is so stretched out that she can't even move. Finally, Joey wins his independence when his mother can no longer take all this craziness. Jack Kent's cartoon style illustrations add to the humor of mother kangaroo's predicament.

Children who think that it would be wonderful to be aboard a train will enjoy joining Noah in *A Regular Rolling Noah* by George Ella Lyon. Noah has been hired by the Creech family who are moving their whole farm by train from Kentucky to Canada. Noah's job on the train is to tend the stock. Noah loads the boxcar with the chickens, guineas, cow, calf, mare and enough hay and feed for the trip. Stephen Gammel's full-color watercolor paintings show the train as it winds through the mountains with Noah attempting to milk Rosie the cow while the train clatters along. The next morning Noah slowly realizes what the night journey has meant as he looks out from the open boxcar. Noah describes the flat plains with poetic language: "We've run out of mountains. Sky right down to your ankles. Big wind might blow you away." Upon arriving in Canada to "land flat as a griddle," Noah receives a return ticket for his pay. It's another train ride to look forward to but this time he's moved from a boxcar to riding in style "on a fine horsehair seat." The last spread of the book shows the train heading back for Kentucky taking home a regular rolling Noah, who's enjoyed every minute of his journey via train.

Being in bed may be the perfect place to be if the circumstances are just right. Preschoolers will identify with Max, the rabbit, in *Max's Bedtime* by Rosemary Wells. Max cannot sleep without his red rubber elephant. In the book's first spread, Max is pictured lying rigidly on top of his blankets with eyes wide open. The reader will notice the trunk of the rubber elephant sticking out from under Max's bed. Max's sister, Ruby, tries to help by tossing her stuffed animals one after another into her brother's bed. By the time Ruby gives Max her last animal, she can barely keep her eyes open. Finally, Max falls out of bed and discovers his beloved red rubber elephant. At the end of the story, Max, with eyes still wide open, tucks his sleeping sister into his own bed. Ruby

discovers that after such a struggle bed is the best place to be, even if the bed happens to be her brother's and even if a lumpy stuffed pink pig happens to serve as her pillow. Whether Max himself ever goes to bed is left to the reader's imagination. The narrator of *Watch the Stars Come Out* by Riki Levinson has no such struggles with going to bed. Her bed is a cozy place where she leans against her grandmother and listens to a story about her Grandma's Mama. This special story is about the journey by ship of Grandma's Mama and her brother to America when they were children. The illustrator, Diane Goode, portrays the crowded conditions on the ship and the joy of the people who, after twenty-three days, are greeted by the "lady with a crown." The last page of the book brings the reader full circle, as the narrator is shown again in her Grandma's arms listening to the end of the story. The narrator realizes that she is bound to her great grandmother by a common interest—like her great grandmother she loves to go to bed early to watch the stars come out. Being in a new grown-up bed with a new quilt becomes a magical experience for the narrator of *The Quilt* by Ann Jonas. As she and her stuffed dog Sally go to bed, she notices quilt patches from some of her old things, such as her crib sheet and baby pajamas. As she crawls under the quilt to go to sleep, she thinks it "looks like a little town," and so it is. Sally falls on the bedroom floor and the narrator explores the quilt town looking for her. First there are the quilt pieces that have turned into a circus, then the homes near the circus, a beautiful garden, a scary tunnel, a lake with sailboats, and finally a dark forest, where Sally has fallen over a cliff. When the narrator wakes up, she too has fallen off the cliff, as she finds herself lying on the floor wrapped in her quilt. The magical journey has been worthwhile because Sally is found and because the quilt town was an exciting place to be. The reader wonders if it will come alive every night! It's bedtime and mischievous William in *William, Where Are You?* by Mordicai Gerstein finds bed the perfect place to hide because his parents would never think of looking for him there. As William hides under his blankets, his parents are searching for him everywhere—in the yard, under the table, in the hall closet. Readers can help William's parents look for him by turning the flaps to find out what's outside or what's in the closet. For example, one page shows William's mother about to open the closet door. When the flap is turned, the reader and the mother are met by four guinea pigs who declare that William is "not in here." The simple predictable text invites young children to participate. Finally, the parents, the baby sister, and all the household pets are pictured in William's room still searching for the lost child. When the last flap is turned, William is shown jumping out from the covers shouting "I'M IN BED!...I knew you'd never look for me here!"

From foreign countries, to bathtubs, to parks and zoos, these authors and illustrators have created stories where children will find "wonderful places to be," some familiar, some unfamiliar, but all of which stretch the imaginations of their readers.

## Books Reviewed

Anderson, Joan. *The First Thanksgiving Feast*. George Ancona. Clarion, 1984. (Ages 8-11)

Cole, Sheila. *When the Tide is Low*. Illus. Virginia Wright-Frierson. Lothrop, 1985. (Ages 4-7)

Gerstein, Mordicai. *The Room*. Harper, 1984. (Ages 5-8)

Gerstein, Mordicai. *William, Where Are You?* Crown, 1985. (Ages 3-6)

Hoban, Tana. *A Children's Zoo*. Greenwillow, 1985. (Age 3-6)

Hughes, Shirley. *When We Went to the Park*. Lothrop, 1985. (Ages 2-5)

Jonas, Ann. *The Quilt*. Greenwillow, 1984. (Ages 3-6)

Jukes, Mavis. *Blackberries in the Dark*. Illus. Thomas B. Allen. Knopf, 1985. (Ages 7-9)

Kent, Jack. *Joey*. Prentice-Hall, 1984. (Ages 4-7)

Levinson, Riki. *Watch the Stars Come Out*. Illus. Diane Goode. Dutton, 1985. (Ages 5-7)

Livingston, Myra Cohn. *Thanksgiving Poems*. Illus. Stephen Gammell. Holiday, 1985. (Ages 7-11)

Lyon, George Ella. *A Regular Rolling Noah*. Illus. Stephen Gammell. Bradbury, 1986. (Ages 5-8)

Malnig, Antia. *Where the Waves Break: Life at the Edge of the Sea*. Illus. Jeff Rotman, Alex Kerstitch, and Franklin H. Barnwell. Carolrhoda, 1985. (Ages 7-10)

Montaufier, Poupa. *One Summer at Grandmother's House*. Trans. Tobi Tobias. Carolrhoda, 1985. (Ages 7-10)

Munro, Roxie. *The Inside-Outside Book of New York City*. Dodd, 1985. (Ages 7-11)

Sewall, Marcia. *The Pilgrims of Plimoth*. Atheneum, 1986. (Ages 8-11)

Skofield, James. *All Wet All Wet!* Illus. Diane Stanley. Harper, 1984. (Ages 4-7)

Thomas, Dylan. *A Child's Christmas in Wales*. Illus. Trina Schart Hyman. Holiday, 1985. (Ages 9 & up)

Van Allsburg, Chris. *The Polar Express*. Houghton, 1985. (Ages 5-8)

Vogel, Ilse-Margret. *Tikhon*. Harper, 1984. (Ages 9-12)

Wells, Rosemary. *Max's Bath*. Dial, 1985. (Ages 1-2)

Wells, Rosemary. *Max's Bedtime*. Dial, 1985. (Ages 1-2)

Wood, Audrey. *King Bidgood's in the Bathtub*. Illus. Don Wood. Harcourt, 1985. (Ages 4-9)