

Art Atchinson Aimesworth and his plucky sidekicks mount an expedition to the North Pole in William Joyce's 'Santa Calls'

Kid Lit's Growing Pains

Books: Multiculturalists and postmodern ironists invade the nursery



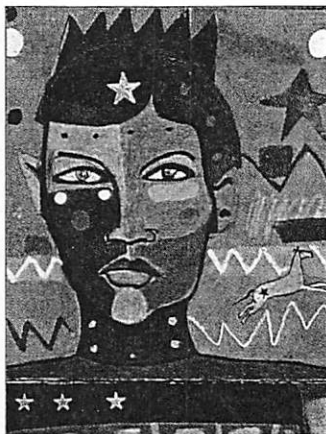
KIDS' BOOKS," CARL SANDBURG once said, "are the anarchy of language and speech." Lucky Sandburg—he died in 1967, long before kids' books fell into the clutches of the politically correct, the multiculturalists and every other do-gooder with an eat-your-spinach attitude. In the current crop of children's literature, linguistic anarchy—any kind of anarchy—is largely passé. The emphasis is all on being good—respecting others, respecting yourself, allowing for cultural differences. It's tough stuff to knock, but you have to wonder whatever happened to old-fashioned fun like gluing your sister's hair to the bedpost. You wonder even harder if the people who create these "good" books ever had childhoods themselves.

To be fair, children's literature has grown up a lot since Sandburg's time. Books now address issues (racism, the environment) unheard of just a few years ago. A lot of the efforts are ham-handed, but quite a few are extraordinarily so-

phisticated. If you want a point of comparison, check out **More Rootabagas** (*Knopf, \$18*), a collection of posthumously published Sandburg tales which today read like case studies in willed whimsy. Then read **Grandfather's Journey** by Allen Say (*Houghton Mifflin, \$16.95*), the story of Say's Japanese grandfather's immigration to America. It can't help getting the multicultural seal of approval, but this wonderfully illustrated book never preaches, never con-

descends, and it has what its competition so painfully lacks: a strong narrative. In a few hundred well-chosen words, Say describes how his grandfather spent his whole life torn between his love for his homeland and his love for his adopted country. It is a book about cultural identity and homesickness, but it offers no easy answers, preferring instead to explore the mysteries of mixed emotions. And it is told with such enchanting simplicity that even a small child can comprehend it.

Similarly, **The Boy Who Lived With the Seals**, by Rafe Martin and David Shannon (*Putnam, \$14.95*), starts off on the multicultural bandwagon (it's a retelling of a Chinook Indian folk tale) and then heads off in a wholly unexpected direction: the boy, rescued by his parents from his watery life with the seals, goes back to the seals. It's an unsettling but satisfying conclusion, just how a good story ought to end. Likewise, **This Land Is My Land** by George Littlechild (*Children's Book Press, \$15.95*), a Cree Indian, tells a story in paintings and collages and words that let you know you are listening to an individu-



George Littlechild illuminates Indian life in painted collages in 'This Land Is My Land'



One 'Happy Hocky Family' ant (above) and ducks from 'A Number of Animals'



superb Soviet émigré artist Gennady Spirin has illuminated Nikolai Gogol's **The Nose** (*Godine*, \$17.95) and **Gulliver's Adventures in Lilliput** (*Philomel*, \$15.95), with Jonathan Swift's tale adapted by Ann



Keay Beneduce. Spirin's detailed art is such a lush visual feast that you don't know whether to look at it or eat it

with a spoon. In verse, the poet Jack Prelutsky is in a class by himself, but Peter Sis's loony art is every bit the match for Prelutsky's rhymes in **The Dragons Are Singing Tonight** (*Greenwillow*, \$15), a winsome tribute to the fiery reptiles ("I made a mechanical dragon/Of bottle tops, hinges and strings,/Of thrown-away clocks and unmendable socks,/Of hangers and worn innersprings").



The one case where words matter least is picture books for small fry, and this year's entries are as strong as ever. Beginning readers can have a field day unriddling the puns and puzzles hidden in the text of **The Worthy Wonders Lost at Sea** by Jody Linscott and collagist Claudia Porges Holland (*Doubleday*, \$15). Christopher Wormell's **A Number of Animals** (*Creative Editions*, \$19.95) is by far the year's best counting book. Kate Green's text describes a chick looking for its mother, but it's Wormell's striking block prints that make the book. Counting to 10 has never looked more beautiful. And in **Noah's Ark** (*Candlewick*, \$14.95), Lucy Cousins once again proves her knack for childlike art that never gets

too cute in her retelling of the Biblical tale.

In the **See How They Grow** series (*Dorling Kindersley*, \$7.95 each), the stages of life of a herd of animals (from puppies to penguins) are articulated in elegantly simple photographs and uncluttered text. Here again, as in all their graphically beguiling books, the folks at Dorling Kindersley have almost singlehandedly rejuvenated if not reinvented the often moribund world of nonfiction books for children. Suddenly the field is full of engaging, informative works. In **One Small Square: Back-**



yard and One Small Square: Seashore (*Freeman*, \$14.95 each), Donald Silver and illustrator Patricia Wynne encourage budding naturalists to explore and catalog a small patch of familiar earth, from soil to bugs to birds. Carol Carrick's **Whaling Days** (*Clarion*, \$15.95), with vivid woodcuts from David Frampton, recounts the glory days of a now dishonored industry. But while Carrick freely admits her objections to modern whaling practices, she does not let her opinions cloud her research. This is balanced, exciting history.

The subtitle of **Lives of the Musicians** (*Harcourt Brace*, \$18.95) best conveys the flavor of this absorbing if irreverent work: "Good Times, Bad Times (And What the Neighbors Thought)." Briefly retelling the lives of composers and musicians from Bach to Woody

Guthrie, author Kathleen Krull, abetted by illustrator Kathryn Hewitt, unstuff a host of shirts and delivers wonderful musical trivia. Did you know that Arthur Sullivan, of Gilbert and Sullivan, wrote the hymn "Onward Christian Soldiers"?

As children's literature has grown up over the last few decades, and ducklings have made way for stronger stuff, so, too, has a generation of children's book authors come of age. Raised on postwar kids' books, the baby boomers are recycling their own pasts—or at least the typefaces and graphics. Their books are characterized by a deadpan Dick & Jane simplicity that's been fussed over and revved up. Lane Smith, half of the team that produced the phenomenally successful "Stinky Cheese Man," is

a master of this ironic style, and kids, for whatever reason, lap it up. He's up to his usual tricks with **The Happy Hocky Family!** (*Viking*, \$13.99). A series of droll situations, the book plays off the condescending "see Spot run" diction of '50s books, with hilarious results: "I like to study nature. I have an ant farm. These ants are my responsibility."



And Smith is running with quite a pack. Postmodernist irony is everywhere in children's literature. **Mr. Lunch Takes a Plane Ride**, by J. Otto Siebold and Vivian Walsh (*Viking*, \$14.99), is stupid pet tricks from the performer's point of view. Chris Van Allsburg's **The Sweetest Fig** (*Houghton Mifflin*, \$17.95) is, as ever with Van Allsburg, surreal, but these illustrations are among his best, and the story is a dandy. It features a greedy, self-centered Parisian dentist, Monsieur Bibot, who is given some magic figs that will make his dreams come true. The hardhearted Bibot remains skeptical until one morning when he winds up in his underwear on the street while the Eiffel Tower droops over limply. (Go sit on Grandfather Freud's knee and he'll explain.) Maira Kalman, temporarily abandoning (one hopes) her serial chronicle of Max the Dog, delivers **Chicken Soup, Boots** (*Viking*, \$15), a book nominally about jobs and professions but really a collection of wacky tales about colorful characters, such as Mr. Romeo Valentine, a barber who "can give you a flattop in 12 minutes flat," and the astronomer Dr. Venezuela Katz, who "is hoping to hear 'Hello, how are you, did you order a pizza?' from people living far out in the Milky Way Galaxy." Kalman can be so hip it hurts, but she tells such good stories that you can't stay mad at her.

Speaking of staying mad, Patty Jane Pep-

'Grandfather's Journey' (below) is a tale of homesickness; 'Now Everybody Really Hates Me' is an aria of pouting



ALLEN SAY



al, not a type: "I have a fear of mountains. I'm scared of closed-in spaces like those spaces in between the mountains, because I grew up on the plains where it's flat."

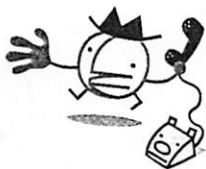
And **The Last Giants**, by François Place (*Godine*. \$15.95), is further proof that you can keep your heart in the right place without lecturing. The fictional account of a 19th-century naturalist whose hubristic discovery of a race of giants leads to their destruction, the book is a caution against scientific arrogance. It is also a wonderfully haunting tale that can be read for the sheer thrill of its adventure—and its exquisite pen and watercolor illustrations.

Increasingly, the quality of illustration outstrips the quality of writing in children's books, so it's reassuring to come upon books where the balance is more or less equal. William Joyce's **Santa Calls** (*HarperCollins*. \$18) welds vigorous art to solid storytelling. Journeys to the North Pole notoriously trip over a host of clichés, but Joyce avoids most of them by remembering that the best part of childhood is conducted behind the grown-ups' backs. His pint-size heroes make their outing appropriately unsupervised and unsanctioned. This version of Toyland tips its hat to Oz and to Nemo's Slumberland, but with redoubtable young Art Atchinson Aimesworth (inventor, adventurer and fighter of crime), his sister, Esther, and his sidekick, Spaulding, Joyce makes this a journey both classic and new. Plainly he, too, is on the side of Sandburg's "anarchs," and this paean to pluck would surely win the late poet's approval.

Even more rambunctious is Timothy Bush's stunning debut, **James in the House of Aunt Prudence** (*Crown*. \$13), in which a young boy visits his aunt's house and discovers a live bear (friendly) and a host of other (not friendly) beasts, including monkeys, mice, bats and an octopus. Drawing or writing, Bush's pen is loaded with wit.

Wild Fox (*Down East Books*. \$15.95) recounts author Cherie Mason's tetchy friendship with a crippled fox near her Maine home, and Jo Ellen McAllister Stammen's colored-pencil illustrations are a perfect complement to the author's laconic, evocative style. In a more traditional vein, the pastel master Gary Kelley continues to explore the works of Washington Irving with

Rip Van Winkle (*Creative Editions*. \$21.95), while the



An important phone call in 'Mr. Lunch'

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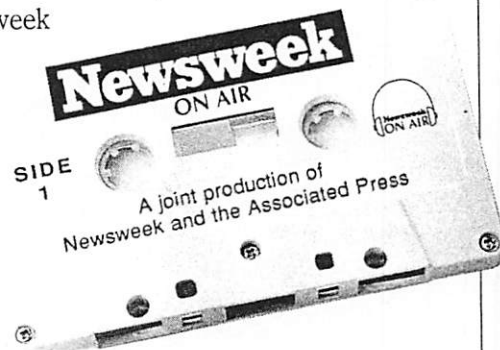
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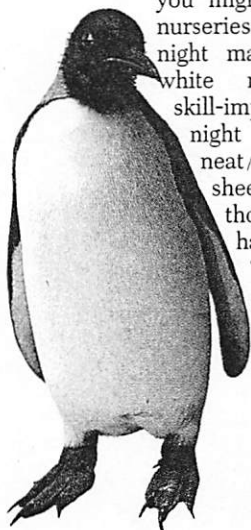


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per has decided to stay in her room for the rest of her life. The heroine of **Now Everybody Really Hates Me** by Jane Read Martin and Patricia Marx with illustrations by Roz Chast (*HarperCollins*. \$14), Patty Jane has been sent to her room for hitting her little brother on the head and calling him a dumbbell at his birthday party. She vigorously denies the charge. "I did not hit Theodore. I touched him hard." And anyway she's never coming out. Ever. "Unless we are having something good to eat tonight. If it's good it will be my last meal." This book contains no meaning, no morals, no messages. It merely captures in every poor-poor-pitiful-me detail the way children stew when they are aggrieved. But that, when you think about it, is quite a feat.

As many children's books take on more mature subjects, the best of the writers and illustrators (Martin and Marx, Kalman, Joyce) are frequently taking childhood itself as their subject. They tackle the territory unsentimentally, with humor and a keen sense of the way kids really are. So in that spirit, what could be better to end with than Sean Kelly and Ron Hauge's **Boom BabyMoon** (*Dell*. \$7.99), a fond, right-on-target parody of Margaret Wise Brown's classic "Goodnight Moon"? Instead of bears in chairs and a red balloon, this book bids good night to things you might actually find in nurseries these days: "Goodnight machine that makes white noise/And motor skill-improving toys/Goodnight contour-cornered, neat/Hypoallergenic sheet . . . Goodnight orthodontic spoon/And hardcover copy of 'Goodnight Moon'." MALCOLM JONES JR.



Step by step, from fresh hatched to full grown, a penguin grows up in the 'See How They Grow' series

PHOTOS BY © DORLING KINDERSLEY

American Gothic With a Twist

Movies: Those cool Addams ghouls are back

Addams Family Values (superb title) continues the saga of those cool ghouls created by New Yorker cartoonist Charles Addams. "The Addams Family" (1991) grossed \$113.4 million; this sequel cost \$50 million to make and will no doubt gross out—er, outgross the original. The constituency is huge: after all, inside every normal family there's a monster family straining to break out. Addams's inspiration was to spot that. The major event in any family is a blessed event (which in the reverse world of the Addamses is, of course, a damned event) and so the new movie opens with the birth of the baby announced by Morticia (Anjelica Huston) at the end of the last movie. Baby Pubert is the image of his papa, Gomez (Raul Julia)—including the mustache. Brother Pugsley (Jimmy Workman) and sister Wednesday (Christina Ricci) greet the newcomer like properly sinister siblings: they try to guillotine him, toss him out the window, drop an anvil on him.

It's togetherness Addams style, and Pubert just keeps gurgling happily. In the main story line, love comes to Gomez's doorknob-headed brother, Fester (Christopher Lloyd), in the sumptuous shape of Debbie Jelinsky (Joan Cusack), a nanny who's really a notorious husband-killer. The virginal Fester falls doorknob-over-heels, they marry and set off in their car, to which the celebrants have merrily tied a corpse. The chief conjugal event of the honeymoon is attempted spousicide, and events escalate to a showdown between Debbie and the Addams clan. The latter has no objection to Debbie's lethal instincts: "You have placed Fester under some strange sexual spell," says Morticia. "I can respect that." What offends them is Debbie's tacky taste—her pink furbelows, the blond wig she makes Fester wear.

Paul Rudnick's clever screenplay is deftly cartoonified by director Barry Sonnenfeld. There are nice bits for all the Addamses: Granny (Carol Kane), Lurch the butler (Carel Struycken) and Thing, the family's handyman without a man. If you put each Addams on a T shirt, I'd want the one with Huston, who makes Morticia a pure grande (guignol) dame, an aristocrat to the graveyard born.



MELINDA SUE GORDON—PARAMOUNT

Togetherness: Huston and Julia do the monster mash

An Honorable Four—Hankie Flick

IHAVE BEEN HALF IN LOVE WITH EASEFUL Death," wrote John Keats. No half-way measures for Bruce Joel Rubin; Death seems to be his main squeeze. Rubin wrote "Ghost," in which Patrick Swayze was a posthumous hero, and "Jacob's Ladder," in which Tim Robbins was a prehumous one. In **My Life**, which he wrote and directed, Rubin gives us a Los Angeles public-relations man, Bob Jones (Michael Keaton), who learns he's dying of cancer as his wife, Gail (Nicole Kidman), is pregnant with their first child. Fighting to stay alive until the baby is born, Bob makes a series of videotapes as a legacy for his child.

This is called a tear-jerker, an ancient and sometimes honorable genre. What lends honor to "My Life" is Rubin's touch, tact, humor and dignity. He doesn't squeeze your tear ducts, he caresses them. They will respond. Only a diehard Terminatornik could resist Keaton earnestly explaining to his unborn son why his mom might remarry even though she loves Daddy. Or starting to advise the kid about sex and turning off the camera in embarrassment. Keaton is an ideal die-er with his chin-scratching, eyebrow-arching, mouth-gaping way of casually expressing real emotion. And Kidman has enormous appeal with her great movie face and glowing strength. Sometimes the film overglows: Gail's doctor has a smile so full of caring it may give you hypoglycemia.

But mostly "My Life" works on its own terms. The film's ending has a certain courage as Rubin looks death in the eyes. One other thing. Jones's Sony video camera is practically a character, and cynics may see the film as one long commercial for Sony, which owns Columbia, the releasing studio. Could it be that a smart Sony exec, knowing Rubin's death fetish, suggested the idea to their mutual benefit? Nah, only Robert Altman would dream up a scenario like that. But just in case, enjoy the movie and go buy a Panasonic.

JACK KROLL

J. K.