

Profile: John Ciardi

Norine Odland

There is magic in the poetry John Ciardi has written for children. He uses words with whimsical agility. Humor in his poems allows a child to reach for new ways to view ordinary things and places in the world. In a few lines, a Ciardi poem can move a listener from one mood to another; the words tell the reader how the poem should be read.

Poet, critic, translator, teacher—all were among his accomplishments when John Ciardi began to write poems to amuse and please his daughter, Myra, and later his sons Benn and Jonnel. His observations of the success of the poems, not only for enjoyment but also for expanding language, encouraged the poet to write and publish poetry for children. That poetry is the body of work which is recognized in acclaiming John Ciardi winner of the NCTE Award for Poetry for Children.

Absurdity is an element of humor to which children respond with applause. In *The Reason for the Pelican*, the absurd shape of the pelican is justified in the poem Ciardi chose to introduce a collection of verses which allow children to enjoy the bizarre and the ridiculous. The alliteration in the poem "Rain Sized" is so effective that children say they can feel the drops as well as hear them fall. "How to Tell the Top of a Hill" suggests to the reader or listener a solution which demands imagination reaching up and out, a solution far different from answers which are expected in a workbook exercise.

That John Ciardi was influenced by his children in his books of poetry, especially his early work, can be seen in the progression from an appeal to younger listeners to poems for older readers. An early book, *Scrappy the Pup* is, in children's way of describing it, a story poem. "Curly'cue ocean of blue" and "sound like sixty-six apes with their tails in the fan" provide vivid images for young children who are far from caring about identifying metaphors but relish the effect of those Ciardi has given them. The predictable ending makes children chant "read it again" so they can see how they were right in their predicting. A first printing of the book reveals that *Scrappy the Pup* was one of the Ten Best Books selected by the *New York Times* in November 1960.

In 1961, in the midst of a flurry of interest in controlling the vocabulary used in stories for children, John Ciardi wrote and published a book of poems, *I Met a Man*. The probable contention was that the words used in the poems were those of first-grade difficulty. No doubt the attention given to the book and the poems in it was influenced by the fact that it came from an established poet and critic, but not all the attention was positive by any means. The poems were not all gentle and sweet. One even conjured an image of bugs in sinks while another related the disaster which befell the discouraged whittler. Objections to the bugs in sinks were not heeded; the concern about the whittler was answered by adding two lines for those with a low imagination quotient. When the poems reached children there was no doubt about their success. Children responded to the total effect of the lyrical poems. The images have a base in children's experiences and then go on to new adventures in imaginative ways. Words are used and combined in gymnastic fashion. From *I Met a Man*, the poem "The Man in the Onion Bed" is an example of words and shapes of the poem giving clues to the pace for reading. There is a surprise ending in almost every poem, a requisite for the child who listens and immediately asks to hear the poem again in order to enjoy knowing what is coming. Riddles and puzzles are a part of the fun in some of the poems, e.g., "Have You Met This Arts Man?", the one who has no house but stays in bed and turns out to be Mr. Clam. The recording of *I Met a Man* by John Ciardi is one to which children listen, entranced, and object strenuously if they are allowed to hear fewer than all of the poems.

The man drawn by Edward Gorey for the jacket of *The Man Who Sang the Sillies* sets the scene for the nonsense within the book. It is easy to laugh with the characters, for they seem to enjoy their predicaments. Some of the poems are long, others use just four lines to convey an image such as that in "Warning" which challenges the wisdom of diving into a whirlpool.

Descriptions of children as marshmallow sweet, or in his words, angelfluff, are not found in work by John Ciardi. The naturally grumpy child and the one who falls apart and pouts can be found in *You Know Who* along with those who giggle and grin and are happy to be here. Exaggeration, hyperbole, and playing with words and ideas make poems which reflect real feelings children recognize. Many of the poems are built on the premise of a question and the reader is allowed wide range when interpreting the answer.

In *You Read to Me, I'll Read to You*, the poems alternate between those with an easy vocabulary and those with words which reach beyond the limits of beginning vocabulary. Unlike the vocabulary, the humor and the sense of understanding feelings of children are not limited. "Mommy Slept Late and Daddy Fixed Breakfast" has proven its appeal by being chosen by children as their favorite in studies of children's poetry choices. The full-page drawing by Gorey depicting Daddy and the waffles adds to the imaginative powers of the words. Enhancement with a drawing happens, too, in the exaggerated look of the child psychologist expert who leans over, hands folded, and acclaims he knows "All About Boys and Girls." There is great variety in the poems in this book, some wistful and wise, others boisterous and exuberant.

There is playful taking of sides between adults and children in *The Monster Den*. Nonsense prevails most of the time, but in good proportion. There is an occasional strand of real humor, of reflection on human behavior. Three children are introduced, each with a poem, before the monsterring begins. Imaginative, lyrical, with no hint of condescension, the poems are accentuated with stark and strident drawings.

There is variety in topic and form in the poems in *Someone Could Win a Polar Bear*. Whimsey is the predominant accomplishment whether it comes with real or fanciful subjects. The poems demand a certain amount of sophistication from the reader and listener. "The Rover," with a direction to be recited loud and with gestures, uses alliteration which young children devour for the over-all sound of it; older readers enjoy the more complicated finesse with words and meanings.

The title page for *Fast and Slow* suggests that these are "poems for advanced children and beginning parents." Satire in literature for children is often referred to as gentle, but that modifier is not appropriate in many of these poems. "On Being Too Right to Be Polite" is sharp but not cruel. "When Happy Little Children Play" is another satirical piece, one which exemplifies Ciardi's belief in those feelings. A poem about sharks, a subject which both children and Ciardi seem to like, contrasts danger and safety, and does it all with humor. The pun is lyrically developed in "Bear With Me and You May Learn." There is quick change of pace from one poem to the next. Pre-reading by an adult will assure greater verve when reading aloud to children.

In answer to a query about future books for children, Ciardi explained that he continues to fill his files with poems for children and that he has at least enough for three books. He wants to do a limerick book for children, a form he considers difficult but more appropriate for poetry in the English language than the haiku. Publication of those books is projected for the time when he finishes work on Volume 2 of *A Browser's Dictionary*.

During his career as a professor of English and later as a writer, Ciardi was poetry editor and contribution editor for *Saturday Review*. For twenty-five years he was associated with the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference, serving as director from 1955 to 1972. Today he combines writing, occasional lectures and teaching, and commentary for National Public Radio.

John Ciardi expressed his beliefs about poetry in a book, *How Does a Poem Mean* (1959) which, with Miller Williams, he revised in a second edition in 1975. His approach to poetry is that of concern for how the poem says what it does, not on what the poem means. Illustrative poems in the text are grouped in pairs with emphasis on comparison and contrast.

The beliefs Ciardi holds about children are reflected in the poems he has written for young readers. He believes children can and do have fun with both learning and poetry and that they like to tackle an unfamiliar word now and then. He believes children are often underestimated in their sense of wit and humor, that they are more irreverent than many adults believe them to be, and that word lists do not represent the language power of a child.

Awareness of language differences began for Ciardi in his childhood in the Italian community of the Boston area. In school, he recalls, teachers were something more than ordinary mortals until an incident in second grade. While allowing his imagination to soar, he heard his name called to read aloud. He lost his place in the book so he recited the text from memory until the teacher, with a "very well," directed him to be seated.

John Ciardi is convincing in his arguments for teachers to be readers. Unless a teacher has some openness of mind, some intellectual life, some awareness of the arts, all is lost." The admonition is balanced with recognition when he says "Bless the good teachers. They shine."

Books by John Ciardi

Fast and Slow. (illus. by Becky Gaver) Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975.

How Does a Poem Mean. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960. Sec. ed. with William Miller, 1975.

I Met a Man. (illus. by Robert Osborn) Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961.

I Met a Man. (illus. by Robert Osborn) New.ed. pb. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973,

John J. Plenty and Fiddler Dan. (illus. by, Madeleine Gekiere) Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1963.

The King Who Saved Himself from Being Saved. (illus. by Edward Gorey) Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1965.

The Man Who Sang the Sillies. (illus. by Edward Gorey) Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1961.

The Monster Den; or, Look What Happened at My House and to It. (illus. by Edward Corey) Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1966.

The Reason for the Pelican. (illus. by Madeleine Gekiere) Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1959.

Scrappy, the Pup. (illus. by Jane Miller) Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1960.

Someone Could Win a Polar Bear. (illus. by Edward Corey) Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970.

The Wish-tree. (illus. by Louis S. Glanzman) New York: Crowell-Collier Press, 1962.

You Know Who. (illus. by Edward Corey) Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1964.

You Read to Age, I'll Read to You. (illus. by Edward Gorey) Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1962.

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