1995

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Brinton Turkle: An Artist Who Is a Gentle Activist

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Brinton Turkle is, by his own admission, up to subversion. He is fighting "against the hypocrisy, materialism and brutality that so pervade our society. As my readers leave childhood behind, I hope they will carry with them an appreciation for such alternatives as integrity, mutual respect, kindness and reverence for life."

How does Turkle go about his subversion? "In writing I use all sorts of tricks to capture the attention of my young audience—suspense, humor and even charm, when I can muster it" (Something About the Author Vol. 2, p. 249). Readers can find suspense in Clifton’s story of The Boys Who Didn’t Believe in Spring. Turkle’s illustration shows the boys marching determinedly through a large city in search of spring. In the last two pages, near an abandoned car they find a nest of robin eggs and are shocked to see "crops are coming up" (dandelions).

Humor and suspense abound in Deep in the Forest, the Goldilocks tale in reverse. It is laughable when the baby bear lands on his face for tipping Goldilock’s chair too far. His crossed eyes and awkward position show the impact of his fall. He even looks like he’s laughing as he jumps on a bed and watches feathers drifting out of a torn pillow. And suspense—the page showing the broom-wielding mother and the enraged father grabbing for baby bear convinces the reader the bear may not escape. The diagonal positioning of the pursuers is so dramatic that the sound of their running feet can almost be heard. It is a relief to turn the page and see the baby bear safely crawling out the end of a hollow log.

Charm is another distinguishing characteristic of Turkle’s books. Miss Moody is a charmingly independent beachcomber (in Do Not Open) who doesn’t seem to be afraid of anything. Her only companion is a cat (named Captain Kidd) whom she nursed to health after finding him half drowned on the beach. Who can resist a woman who loves storms because in their aftermath she furnishes her house with the treasures washed up on the beach? She has everything she wants except a banjo clock that runs. A quick glance at Turkle’s illustrations reveals Miss Moody’s cozy seaside cottage (built by a sea captain)
and her beach combing outfit—green plaid shirt, rubber Wellies over sturdy trousers, and a ragged straw hat with a bright red ribbon—just what a beachcomber should wear. The illustration of the snarling Captain Kidd when he spots the purple bottle again adds suspense and builds tension. Readers wonder, what is in that bottle?

What about Turkle’s subversive messages? They are there. In both the tales he illustrates for others and in his own, Turkle’s stories are gentle and non-violent. The boys who didn’t believe in spring are filled with wonder when they find signs of spring; the little bear in the twist on Goldilocks is as curious and innocent as the golden-haired girl in the original. Turkle also adds some mischievous fun to the tale. Miss Moody is the soul-of-compassion who can not stand hearing a child cry. Turkle’s Obadiah books are gentle stories about friendship and helpfulness; Anna and the Baby Buzzard (by Helga Sandburg) shows the beauty a little girl finds in what many consider an ugly carrion eater.

How does Turkle handle the problem of evil? He does not avoid it; rather, he outwits it with cleverness. When Miss Moody unleashes the hateful and violent monster in Do Not Open, she refuses to be intimidated. She tells the monster he is not real. When he gets uglier and larger, she says she is only afraid of mice. When he turns into a mouse, Captain Kidd eats him. When Miss Moody anxiously asks the cat if he is all right (after swallowing the mouse/monster), the answer is marvelously funny, and so is the look on the cat’s face as he burps. The final triumphant twist is that Miss Moody gets the only wish she had—the banjo clock starts to run.

There is also another uglier side to evil—the consequences that come to the people who choose to be cruel and who feel some kind of fiendish joy out of being destructive and hateful. Turkle’s portrayal of such consequences is in a book written in response to the Vietnam War: The Fiddler of High Lonesome. Now out of print (writing to Penguin USA 375 Hudson Street, New York, N.Y. 10014 might help bring out a reprint), it tells the story of gentle, orphaned Lysander Bochamp, who goes to live with his only kin, the Fogles—brawny, brawling, hunters, who make their own whiskey, and only let Lysander stay because they like his fiddle music. Turkle’s dancing men show his mastery of action pictures—the diagonal positions and the exuberant expressions indicate how rowdy and loud these men are.

Even more than dancing, the Fogles like to drink whiskey, and when the still is threatened by the law, they leave the dance and the frightened Lysander who is afraid to go home alone. Turkle’s rendering of the moment when the burly brothers tell Lysander he can not come with them effectively captures the boy’s fears. Lit only by a full moon, the outlines of the rough men and the giant gun look menacing and evil as they tell the boy he can’t accompany them. But Lysander soon learns he can charm the wild animals with his fiddling.
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Taken from The Fiddler of High Lonesome. Copyright ©1968 by Brinton Turkle. Reprinted by permission from Brinton Turkle.
When the Fogies find this out, they promise not to hurt the animals if they can watch. However, they break their promise, slaughter the animals, and rejoice over Lysander's ability to make their killing easier. Lysander picks up his fiddle, disclaims them as kin and leaves. Old Man Fogle shoots himself while cleaning a gun and the boys leave when there are no more critters to kill. What remains are the memories of Lysander, the fiddler; some people still claim that when the moon is full, the "wild sweet sounds" of the fiddler of High Lonesome can be heard. The final illustration shows the mountain from which the sad sounds came.

Thus, Turkle adds another example showing that those who "live by the sword, die by the sword." The effect of the story is not anger towards or hatred of evil men but of sorrow that these big brawny hulks chose to get drunk, quarrel, fight, and kill rather than use their strength to help others. No one mourned their leaving, while the memory of the gentle fiddler lingered on. Turkle's tragic story of the consequences of evil rounds out his subversive message. As he says, the alternatives to "hypocrisy, materialism and brutality . . . are in my books and I pray that exposure to them will play a part in the construction of a better world. If, having read The Fiddler of High Lonesome one child finds it impossible to pull a trigger. . . ." Turkle's subversive message will indeed have been heard (Something About the Author Vol. 2, p. 249).