

Children's books that make you think

Very young children can ask the darndest questions, can't they? Well there is a book that has almost all of the answers.

***What Are Clouds Made Of?*, compiled by Geraldine Taylor, illustrated by Amy Schimler. Toronto: Scholastic Canada, 2008, 14 pages, \$11.99 hardcover**

It's a neat little book for age three to five that has answers to questions like "Do trees breathe? Why do flowers smell nice? What do worms eat? How did the water in the ocean get there?" and so on. Tiny fingers can lift the flaps and pull the tabs on each page to find the answers. Older children or an adult can read the words. Part toy, part book, it's exactly the sort of thing that makes kids want to 'read' it over and over.

This first step book is a wonderful way to make children aware of the natural world around them.

***The Man Who Made Parks*, by Frieda Wishinsky, illustrated by Song Nan Zhang. Toronto: Tundra Books, 2009, 32 pages, \$12.99 paperback**

North America is fortunate to have so many magnificent national, provincial and state parks. These vast green spaces not only provide a refuge from our teeming cities and frenetic pace, they tie us to our roots in nature. They remind us Earth is where we live and breathe. They nudge us towards responsible stewardship. One of these wonderful areas is Algonquin Park. Perhaps you and your family will go there this summer.

But there are other kinds of parks, much smaller ones, tucked into huge cities. These are often the work of landscape architects and the first person to claim the title of this now important profession was Frederick Law Olmstead. This is his story.

Born in Connecticut in 1822, Olmstead had always loved the

KIDS' BOOKBAG



BY MARYLEAH OTTO

countryside of New England. A trip to England when he was a young man further sparked this interest. He was especially impressed by the English public gardens and parks. After several failed starts at various careers, Olmstead entered a contest with an established architect, Calvert Vaux, to design a park for New York City. Their winning entry was the beginning of Central Park. Olmstead later created a park on the American side of Niagara Falls as well as the grounds around the United States Capitol building in Washington. In Canada he worked on Montreal's beautiful Mount Royal area and he was instrumental in having Yosemite Valley in California made a national park.

Readers eight and up will appreciate this short, informative book with Song Nan Zhang's richly detailed full-page paintings of the scenes described in the text. Careers are often inspired by something as simple as reading books like this.

The themes in books for teenage readers are becoming more and more disturbing. And yet, they are part of the world today, a world that is at our fingertips as we sit in front of our computer

screens. The next two books are excellent examples.

***They Called Me Red*, by Christina Kilbourne. Montreal: Lobster Press, 2008, 192 pages, \$10.95 paperback**

Christina Kilbourne deserves high praise for writing about two of the worst types of criminal activity involving child abuse. In her earlier novel *Dear Jo: The Story of Losing Leah* (Lobster Press, 2006) she dealt with pedophiles who search online for their victims. The novel was highly acclaimed and rightly so. In her new book, *They Called Me Red*, Kilbourne turns to child trafficking for the international sex trade.

Devon is 11 years old. He lives with his dad, a single father who tells Devon his mother is dead. When his dad forms a relationship with Lily, a Vietnamese woman he meets at work, Devon's world starts to spiral out of control. His dad becomes seriously ill and needs a liver transplant. Lily persuades them to come to Vietnam where she claims they will find a cure in Asian medicine. The trip quickly turns into a nightmare when it becomes obvious there's no cure to be had. While his father lies dying, Devon is drugged and sold into prostitution by Lily, who turns out to have ulterior motives for taking Devon and his sick dad to Vietnam in the first place.

The young boy becomes the property of a woman called Long who runs a brothel fronting as a restaurant in neighbouring Cambodia. Three other boys and several girls are kept as prisoners, working as slave labour in Long's restaurant as well as being humiliated and

sexually abused by her clients. The story of their rescue is a riveting account of the ways international police agencies work together to help victims of these heinous crimes.

Kilbourne is highly skilled in presenting a serious social problem of global magnitude with sensitivity and compassion. She doesn't shy away from the shocking details of Devon's situation or the long hard road to emotional recovery he faces after his rescue, yet she goes beyond the mere exposition of her theme. By raising the awareness of mature teen readers and by introducing characters who are prepared to be proactive in helping victims like Devon, she points the way to a more hopeful future for the children who are trafficked every year in the sex trade.

This is an important novel for boys and girls age 14 and up as well as for family or classroom discussions.

***The Bite of The Mango*, by Maiatu Kamara with Susan McClelland. Toronto: Annick Press, 2008, 216 pages, \$12.95 paperback**

The West African country of Sierra Leone is one of the poorest in the world. Often politically unstable and racked by civil war, the country was brutalized from 1991 to 2002 by armed rebels who called themselves the Revolutionary United Front. The 'soldiers' were often little more than boys, and sometimes girls, who'd been kidnapped and pressed into service with the rebel troops.

The rebels terrorized rural areas, burning huts and randomly killing, maiming or raping villagers without regard for age, sex or condition. Mariatu Kamara was one of the victims. Just 12 years old she was snatched while walking to a nearby village to get food, and lost her hands to the cold-blooded attack. Her story became known to foreign journalists and she was sent to a refugee camp for amputees, then to England where she was fitted with prosthetic hands. Later a Canadian couple was instrumental in securing her immigration to Toronto where she lives today and is a college student. Now 21 years old, Mariatu has been named as a Unicef special representative for children and armed conflict. Her work will include a North American speaking tour and a role in a documentary film about child victims of war.

Susan McClelland is an acclaimed journalist who won the 2005 Amnesty International Media Award. Mariatu's case is just one of millions worldwide but it is one we mustn't ignore in our ever changing, ever shrinking global village. The book is suitable for boys and girls age 14 and up.

Maryleah Otto is a librarian and published author of four books for children and "Adventures of a Bigwin Inn Postmistress." She was also a book reviewer for the Canadian Library Association and the Ontario School Library Association for many years.



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