Our theme in this issue of First Opinions, Second Reactions is identity, and these two lovely picture books give us an opportunity to think about that theme from a slightly odd angle: how do we respond when we meet someone unlike us?

Dunrea’s book is a new iteration in his Gossie & Friends series, and nearly everyone in my audience will gasp with delight at the news. Gossie doesn’t make an appearance in this book, but Jasper and Joop don’t stray far from the patterns established by earlier goslings in the series. Here, Jasper is a fastidious fowl who nonetheless loves his good friend Joop and his everlasting love for mud puddles. Jasper is generally content to watch Joop’s nonsense from afar, but when his unkempt friend upsets a hive of bees, Jasper realizes he will have to make quite a mess to save the day.

Folgueira and Bernatene offer the story of a swamp full of creatures outraged over the behavior of the newest member of their neighborhood: a pig who insists on sounding more like a frog. News of the pig draws the attention of the other critters, who are appalled at the disruption of conventional boggy life.
Both books are very strong on nearly every point of execution. Both, for example, make clever use of point of view. *Ribbit!* places the eye of the camera close to the eye of the offending swine, implying the book’s sympathy for what the pig is attempting. Elsewhere, the audience’s eyes are swung to melodramatic perspectives, playing up the foolishness of the other swamp creatures as they react to the pig’s trifling subversion. The illustrator of *Jasper & Joop* uses point of view in a much less showy manner that is nonetheless just as effective. Audience’s attention is drawn to the characters’ profiles as they walk from left to right in spread after spread, a technique used in the other books in the series. Those books also featured a deadpan tone that contrasts beautifully with the wee geese and their, let’s face it, charming underbites.

The plot of each book hinges on ways the protagonists and antagonists view the world, and in each, the resolution is marked by the relaxation of boundaries. The point of both books is that there’s an awful lot of fun and companionship awaiting creatures who are willing to try things from someone else’s perspective.

Thematically, then, the author and illustrator are attempting to do something difficult. They hope to describe playfully the transition from one identity to another, with the incentive that trying on new identities can be delightful. What I like about these books is that they depict play as a way of undermining the taboos and baggage of identity. It strikes me that this is a useful, generative way to talk about identity and one that children’s literature, which is much more comfortable with play than is literature for adults, is uniquely qualified to explore.

But what I dislike about the execution of that idea is the glib portrait of transitioning between identities. I don’t mean to suggest that Dunrea’s freakishly cute goslings, for example, should have spent a few pages listening to The Cure and wallowing in angst. However, I do wish the author had included some observations about the complexities of choosing to shift one’s identity by mimicking others.

They’re very good books, thoughtfully constructed, and if I’m disappointed in their handling of identity, I’m also impressed at their willingness to take on a very difficult issue and treat it with playfulness. We’ve put a lot of energy into talking about identity in very serious tones, and we’ve made some progress. Maybe if we tried playing with identity, we’d make even more, especially if we could figure out how to play without cheapening the ideas we’re playing with. These books make me think that children’s literature has an important role in that experiment.
About the Author

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