

Illustrated children's books spell excitement

WHEN JACKIE Gordon, publicity director at Jacobson's, (yes, that Jackie Gordon) called recently, all excited about a series of books she had discovered in the children's department, she brought me back into a world about which I had almost forgotten — the world of illustrated children's books.

After some 10 minutes of trying to describe the books in question — the "Ophelia" series produced by Seattle shopkeeper Michele Durkon Clise — Jackie said, "Well, you just have to see them." And so I did. The books, published by Clarkson N. Potter and distributed by Crown, are hardbound collector's editions and range in price from \$12.95 to \$17.95.

Ophelia B. Clise is a bear who runs a shop filled with silver flutes, paper fans, fine fabrics and lace, sachets, chachos and teas. Her shop, Bazaar des Bears, is on the Rue de Bac in Paris. Coincidentally or not, Ophelia's creator shares her last name and also has a Bazaar des Bears — only hers is in Seattle.

THE BOOKS are lavishly illus-



book break
Mona Grigg

trated with exquisite photographs by Marsha Burns — and the photographs are what make the books. Using fine antiques — lace, jewelry, toys, costumes and dozens of well-worn bears — Burns creates Ophelia's World (also the title of the first book of the series).

Steffi, incidentally, is coming out with toy Ophelia and Schnuffly bears and Hallmark is creating greeting cards.

Ophelia and her deliciously eccentric entourage — including Zenobia Onassis, Jean de Noel, Schnuffly the sugar-loving concierge, Conrad the reformed kleptomaniac, Mona Lisa the former ring picker, and Zenobia's "dear, good friend" Clarence — are caught up in a mystery in each book.

The books are gorgeous, and fun

for an adult to read — though I doubt that the text would appeal much to young children. There's far more musing than mystery. "Yesterday Zenobia began to take an accounting of the contents of the entire shop — placing ribbons here, shawls and linens there, boxes with buttons and boxes with coins, Limoges cups, and tottering piles of annotated manuscripts on the tables and floor."

There are also hints of some pretty scandalous behavior, even for bears: they adore champagne and the high life; Zenobia falls in love with Conrad the kleptomaniac and elopes; and Ophelia (not Ophelia!) cuddles up in bed with Clarence without benefit of clergy. Oh, it's all very tastefully presented, but I have to wonder for what age group it is

really meant.

WELL, WHAT I'm learning is that there is an increasingly active adult market for illustrated gift books — especially those found in the children's book departments. Collectors snap them up as quickly as they appear on the shelves.

Michigan's own Chris Van Allsburg is a good example of a collectible writer/illustrator. His Christmas book, "The Polar Express," stayed for months on the New York Times Bestseller list — in the adult column. "The Wreck of the Zephyr," "The Stranger," "Ben's Dream" — in fact, all of Van Allsburg's books — are published in hardcover by Houghton Mifflin at \$15.95 each. You have to experience Van Allsburg's books to appreciate them. They are to get lost in. Beatrice Potter's books are still collectable — even by the children. The tales of Peter Rabbit, Squirrel Nutkin, Flopsy Bunnies and Jemima Puddle-Duck happily never go out of style. At Jacobson's we found all of the above, plus the beautiful "Beatrix Potter — Artist, Storyteller and Country Woman," by Judy Taylor (Frederick Warne, hardbound, \$24.95).

AND I found (and bought) "A Treasury of the Great Children's Book Illustrators," a real treasure by Susan E. Meyer from Abradale Press-Harry N. Abrams Inc. (hardbound, \$19.95).

Here's Potter, Arthur Rackham, N.C. Wyeth, Kate Greenaway, Randolph Caldecott, Edward Lear and Walter Crane. And here's Kay Nielsen's glorious illustrations from "East of the Sun, West of the Moon" and "Powder and Crinoline." And don't I feel silly now that I know Kay is a man's name, too. All of this time

I'm also just discovering Joan W. Blot, who lives right in Ann Arbor, for Pete's sake, and is the winner of both a Newbery and an American Book Award for "A Gathering of Days."

Jackie and I found Blot's "Old Henry," illustrated by Caldecott Honor Book winner Stephen Gammell (William Morrow, hardbound, \$11.75),

and flipped. It's a simple story, told in rhyme, but, let me tell you, Old Henry lives!

Later I wandered over to the Birmingham Book Store and owner Bonnie Weinstein told me she can't read that book without tearing up at the end. So disregard what you've ever heard about children's book authors not being real writers — or that illustrators are not artists.

Bonnie introduced me to the award-winning Woods — author Audrey Wood and her illustrator husband, Don. In their latest, "Heckedy Pog" (hardbound, \$14.95), a mother saves her seven children from a wicked witch. It is hard to keep their books in stock, Bonnie said, and it is mainly collectors who buy them. The stories are wonderful, and Don Woods' work is star quality.



Let there be light

Light is the focus of the collection of nine paintings by Norman Rockwell, Maxfield Parrish and N. C. Wyeth that are currently enjoying their first public showing at Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn. The temporary exhibit, "What a Difference Light Makes: Advertising Arts from General Electric," runs through Oct. 30. Shown here is a Norman Rockwell cover reproduced in Ladies Home Journal, April 1925.

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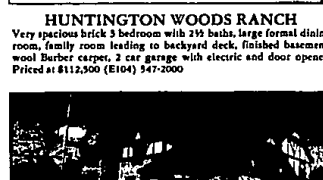
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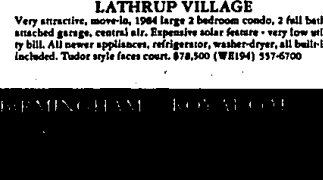
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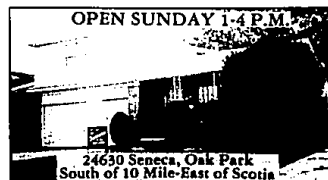
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