

BOOKS

As you check out of your favorite bookstore with all the latest queer titles before you, you feel a little tug at your T-shirt. Dad, what about me?

Of course! Your little one needs to read, too. This year offers a crop of books for tykes by queer authors you may (or may not) want to bring home to baby.

First, some bad news: British lesbian author Jeanette Winterson's (*Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*) first children's book is almost as single-layered and riddled with polarities as the current U.S. president.

Although she is known for her gender-bending and thoughtfully allegorical novels, *The King of Capri* (Bloomsbury, 2003, \$16.95 hardcover) is a surprisingly un-Wintersonian tale in which a baaaaad, selfish straight king learns a lesson and marries a goood, generous straight laundry woman.

It's mind-boggling, really, why such a brilliant and enormously capable writer would produce such a mysteriously uninventive book. Resting heavily on her own biblical background, Winterson has produced a lazy parable about gluttony and avarice: "Why have I got two hands but only one mouth?" wondered the King. "Sire, think of all the poor people in your kingdom..." But the King never did think about the poor people. He thought only about himself."

The story is as conventional and weak as Jane Ray's accompanying illustrations are whimsical and bold. Winterson's god-child, who prompted the writing of this book, got a bit of a raw deal, to say the least.

Winterson has been known to compare herself to our legendary queer heroine Virginia Woolf, but there is a much better posthumous jewel out from the literary luminary herself. *Nurse Lugton's Curtain* (Gulliver, 2004, \$16 hardcover) was retrieved from the manuscripts of Woolf's masterpiece *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Predictably, there is no queer content, but what a great opportunity to treat kids to this powerful feminist spirit! Magnificently illustrated, *Curtain* is a Platoesque tale of animals who exist solely on the protagonist's drawing room curtain. They only come to life when she sleeps: "Over them burnt Nurse Lugton's golden thimble like a sun; and as Nurse Lugton snored, the animals heard the wind roaring through the forest. Down they went to drink."

The language is lyrical and superb, with plenty of new words

Honey, I've pinked up the kids

The ups and downs of new children's books by queers

BY ELS DEBBAUT

for kids to absorb (e.g., quinces, palanquin, ogress, precipices, chasms).

Peter Ferguson lushly illustrates *The Boy Who Cried Fabulous* (Tricycle Press, 2004, \$15.95 hardcover), another picture book by the heroine of queer kid's lit, Lesléa Newman (*Heather Has Two Mommies*). The storyline, rendered in simple rhymes, was inspired by Newman's good friend Roger.

The book's subtext is richly tongue in cheek for even those with only mildly developed gaydar. Our main character Roger finds everything just a bit too fabulous to be an ordinary boy. On the very first page, Mom reminds the gleeful redhead to stop enjoying the journey quite so much: "Now, Roger, you go straight-straight to class, and don't be late."

But it is, of course, in the nature of the kid to be halted by fabulous couture in the shops and by other obvious simple pleasures of life: "What a fabulous purse, it's simply divine," pipes Roger.

Eventually, his parents learn that words like "beautiful" or "stunning" are not, well, fabulous enough for Roger, and they ultimately embrace their son's differences.

The recent *Poodlena* (Bloomsbury, 2004, \$16.95 hardcover) was both penned and drawn by Bay Area lesbian E.B. McHenry, who's been getting her illustrations published (*Highlights*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*) since the age of 5.

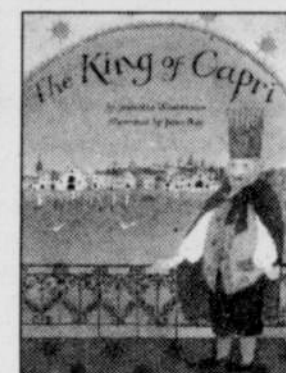
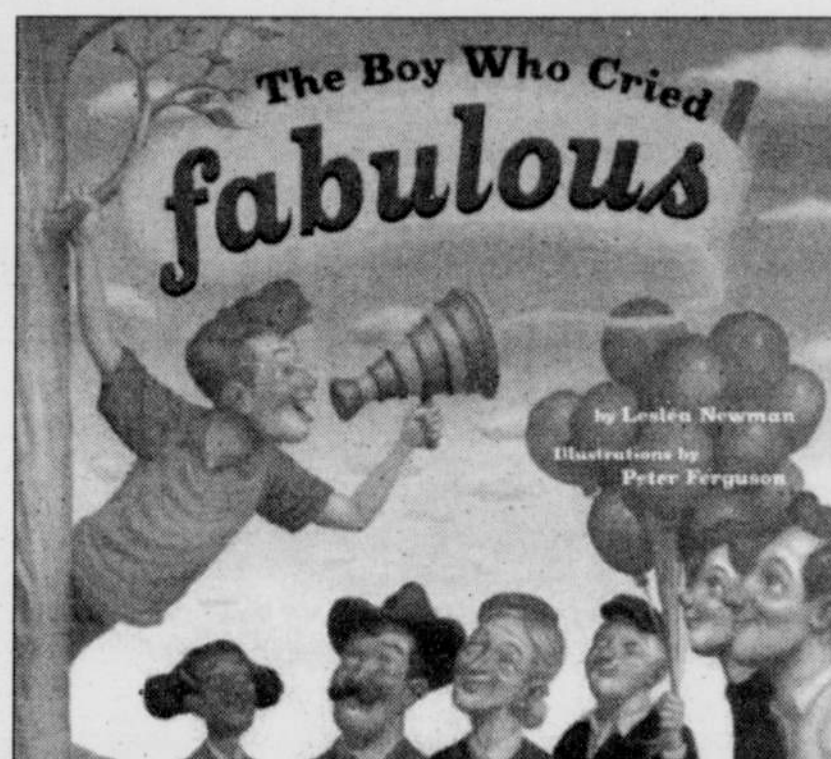
McHenry's rosy debut book introduces a hot pink primping poodle with a giant, cotton candy bouffant and painted toenails: "It took lots of work and a good bit of spray, To look pretty and

perfect in just the right way. She'd fuss and she'd tweeze, She'd paint and she'd fluff, She'd powder, perfume, And pink herself up."

The meticulously coifed dog inhabits the elegant top floor of a ritzy apartment building in the big city. Roger who cried fabulous could have taught her, but it is a fall in the mud that ultimately awakens Poodlena Pampadour's eyes to enjoying life more (and striving to look perfect less).

Poodlena seems irrefutably gay, and E.B. Henry confirms that the dog "might very well be a male expressing his/her feminine spirit." But why, then, not be less humdrum and make the dog male (maybe even have him refer to himself as she)? Wouldn't that be much more fabulous? **JM**

ELS DEBBAUT is a Portland free-lance writer who doesn't sport a bouffant but is fabulous nonetheless.



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