ForeWord Reviews

JUVENILE NONFICTION

Down in the Bottom of the Bottom of the Box
Jonarno Lawson
The Porcupine's Quill
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"Whimsical" is a term often slighted, or used to slight, poetry—implying insignificance or a lack of poetic thought or skill. But whimsical perfectly describes Jonarno Lawson's *Down in the Bottom of the Box*, a collection of playful, enjoyable, and yes, skillful poetry for children and adults.

Lawson's poetry features Bible tales, fairy tales, solar bears, and lunar foxes, with lots of rhyming, alliteration, and wordplay—think Mother Goose with a better vocabulary, and a wry sense of humor.

Jonarno Lawson has made a name for himself in children's literature, with numerous publications of poetry and picture books. Lawson puts the emphasis on "literature" in children's literature; while fun, the references and vocabulary in his poems will stretch most children's capabilities—in a good way. Lawson twice won the Lion and the Unicorn Award for Excellence in North American Poetry, and it's a safe bet that more accolades are to come.

Not everything in *Down in the Bottom of the Box* soars; occasionally Lawson's poems fall flat on the flawed wings of tedious word games and repetition, and puns that would make any uncle groan. But the duds are few and far between, and the standouts are many. Some poems might first seem unimpressive, revealing their value slowly as the reader becomes ingrained into Lawson's world of words, like the tongue-twisting poem "Ought a Taught Rat to Gnaw at a Taut Knot?" : "A rat gnawed at a knot, just as it was taught. / Is that odd or ought a rat to ignore a knot that's taut? / Whether you nod or not / I hope that rat gets caught."

Reminiscent of the comic verse of Ogden Nash, Lawson's poems are mostly short and to the point, often one-trick ponies of wordplay that Lawson wisely pushes just enough to get his point (or his technique) across, before retiring that idea and moving on to another one—there seems to be no shortage of ideas in Lawson's head.

Alec Dempster's illustrations strike just the right note—simple enough for children and interesting enough for adults. The book as a whole would make an excellent transition book for pre-teens who are moving from rhyming picture books to "real" poetry—because there's no

denying that, light and enjoyable as it is, *Down in the Bottom of the Box* contains real poetry. Recommended to anyone who likes to smile while reading poems.

Peter Dabbene