

Interior Illustration by Charles Geer

he's worried because many people are overenthusiastically trying to adopt cloning into normal life before it's been fully tested. In fact, there's a bill before the state legislature right now that would make all farmers stop breeding their livestock by natural practices and allow only the births of "perfect" cloned copies of prize animals.

Miss Pickerell is naturally horrified at this threat of shotgun-wedding her beloved cow, Nancy Agatha, to a test tube. She writes an angry letter to Square Toe's newspaper, and suddenly finds herself drafted as the leader of a protest movement to oppose the bill. But mysterious big interests are behind it and there seems little chance that popular support can be rallied in time to stop its passage. Then Nancy Agatha is kidnapped, and Miss Pickerell's search for her leads to a surprising climax that brings an unscrupulous businessman's cloning empire tumbling down and gives the Governor second thoughts about signing the bill.

This tale for fourth-through-sixth-graders will successfully explain cloning to them. I hope they'll also understand that the dangerously neurotic bulls are the result of the businessman's careless cloning of defective animals, and that they are not unsafe *because* they are clones. Ms. Pantell presents a sharply-worded Populist approach to science which is even clearer than her lesson on cloning. This is that all scientists may not be mad scientists, but they can't blame the public for thinking of them as such as long as they maintain an elitist attitude and talk only in rarified jargon incomprehensible to the average citizen. Also, that few technical marvels are absolutely perfect as they emerge from the research labs, and that everyone had better allow for a breaking-in period before throwing out the old ways to re-

place them with the brand new. Further, it's the public's duty to watchdog the scientists (and politicians) to keep them from getting carried away to unrealistic extremes.

This sounds all right, I guess, though it doesn't explain just how the general public is supposed to know which visionary projects are practical and which are unrealistic. Or how to tell when something is ready to be released onto the market vs. when it still needs more testing. I won't quibble overmuch with this Message since I do happen to believe that the public should be encouraged to take a greater interest in technological progress. I will object, however, to a villain who commits absolutely foolish crimes for no other purpose than to get caught so the book can have a happy ending. Even a fourth-grader will wonder how anyone could be so stupid. It may be nostalgia for a long-gone childhood, but I remember Miss Pickerell Goes to Mars as being a much better book than this. Buy only where young enthusiasm for Miss Pickerell already exists.

—Frederick Patten



Cover art by Bernard Colonna

STAR KA'AT by Andre Norton and Dorothy Madlee. Illustrated by Bernard Colonna.

New York: Walker. 1976, \$6.95, 122 pp. ISBN: 0-8027-6249-2 (Libr. bndg. ed., \$6.85; 0-8027-6250-6) LC: 75-36018

The latest offering in the ongoing Walker Science Fiction Series for Young Readers is *Star Ka'at*. Recently orphaned and lonely Jim Evans is befriended by a cat he mysteriously senses should be called Tiro. Jim comes across a young black girl, Elly Mae Brown, rooting through abandoned houses and vacant lots for anything that might be returned for cash which she sore-

ly needs to help her ailing grandmother. Striking up an acquaintance with Elly, Jim joins in the search for returnables. Elly is also befriended by a second cat whose name, Mer, she too sensed mysteriously. Because the children come to respect what they believe are only cats, the latter, actually Ka'ats, reciprocate. In reality, Tiro and Mer are ESP-proficient agents from a far-distant planet sent to save cats who are descendants of a Ka'at colony established on Earth thousands of years ago. The lives of the children become caught up in the Ka'at plan to abandon Earth, heading for catastrophe because of its rejection of logic in favor of irrationality and emotion, and bring back all cats that have retained enough of their Ka'at ancestry to respond to a planet-wide gathering call. Whether the Ka'ats can remain undetected as they go about making contact with Earth cats, and whether Tiro and Mer can bring the children along with them—something the Ka'at scouts are expressly forbidden to do—make up the rest of the narrative.

At first glance *Star Ka'at* has much going for it. One of its authors is Andre Norton, prominent sf novelist with a reputation for writing excellent juveniles and with a predilection for cats. Its subject matter is generally considered appropriate sf fare: imminent catastrophe facing Earth, and its visitation by representatives from a morally superior, outer-space civilization. The book's protagonists, a white boy and a black girl, should interest both boys and girls; it even has cats for co-protagonists, and animals usually appeal to children.

Star Ka'at also concerns itself with several contemporary social issues: the plight of parentless children, the effects of poverty on minority groups, and the proper relationship between humans and animals. The book enjoys well done, black and white illustrations. The dust jacket, in particular, with its drawing of two stately cats, should attract even those not usually fond of cats. Yet a narrative is only as effective as the way of all of its elements come together and work. Unfortunately, in *Star Ka'at* the actual working together does not make for a completely satisfactory narrative.

There are, first of all, the small irritations: e. g., the unintentional comedy of cats' slipping into harness and using their paws to manipulate the controls of a space ship, or the several references to Rex, a dog who preys on cats, which build suspense for a clash that does not occur. Then there are more serious matters. Characterization is obviously calculated not to offend the two groups most inclined to scrutinize contemporary children's books for possible biases. Hence, one human protagonist is a boy; the other, a girl; the book is non-sexist. (Even the cats are divided into male and female protagonists.) One child is white; the other, black;

thus, the book is non-racist. It is all a bit too contrived. At the same time, however, Elly, the black girl, is poor, in rags, and virtually without support from anyone except Granny; for isn't that what being black still conjures up for many readers? Or so the authors, it seems, would have them believe.

Finally, there is the most serious weakness—the various explanatory passages that retard the narrative. These passages constitute a quandary which the authors do not satisfactorily resolve. On one hand, they are necessary to inform readers about the history of Ka'ats and Tiro and Mer's mission. On the other hand, they not only hold up the action but even portray the Ka'ats who do all the explaining as stuffy and pedantic rather than inscrutable and logical.

In spite of its considerable assets, then, *Star Ka'at* is not on a par with other Andre Norton novels for young people.

—Francis J. Molson



Cover art by Patricia Coombs

DORRIE AND THE HALLOWEEN PLOT

Story and pictures by Patricia Coombs
New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard,
1976, \$5.95, unpagged [48 pp.]
ISBN: 0-688-41764-7 ISBN: 0-688-
51764-1 (libr. bdg.) LC: 76-3643

When you are no longer a child, it can be difficult to sit down with a book intended for very young readers and gauge the effect it will have on minds far more receptive and willing to invest limitless amounts of imagination than your own.

Dorrie and the Halloween Plot is the eleventh in a series with which I am not familiar but, by sheer numbers, is obviously a popular one. Unfortunately I cannot

see its value to young readers. It is a "safe" and innocuous little volume, with a simple, straightforward plot that demands almost nothing from the children who will read it (or have it read to them).

On Halloween morning, Dorrie jumps out of bed with great excitement. She is a little witch and her mother, the Big Witch, had promised her the year before to teach her to fly on a broomstick this Halloween. Dismayingly, however, a Halloween Pageant for the Great Sorceress is planned for this year's celebration, and worse yet Dorrie is not only *not* going to get her flying lesson but must dress up as an icky-sweet Princess for the Pageant. It isn't long before Dorrie has managed to slip away to give herself a flying lesson, thereby stumbling upon a plot by the Halloween Demons to disrupt the upcoming celebration and steal the revered Book of Shadows from the Great Sorceress.

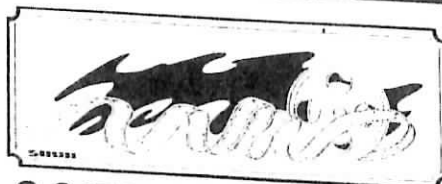
What is most troublesome about a book like this is its total lack of gumption. I would think that young children, especially, would be prone to dismiss Dorrie for being as bland as watery custard. In the end she does hop into the middle of the battle to save the Book of Shadows,

but her actions don't really have much spunk and are obviously necessitated by the author's need to get some excitement into the story and not by Dorrie's need to prove her worth. Children may be able to identify with Dorrie and the Big Witch, but only in the sense that these characters are unimaginative models for an ideal mother-child relationship—at the end of the book, when Dorrie goes to sleep, the Big Witch kisses her goodnight, not a very witchlike action since it reeks with a stench of unnecessary sentiment.

The illustrations are rather pleasant—carefully shaded pencil drawings occasionally tinted with orange and blue—and Dorrie and her black cat, Gink, have the most appeal, since the adult characters are there only to provide a plot for Dorrie. (How much nicer the book might have been if the flying lesson episode had been elaborated, giving Dorrie the opportunity to make her own problems and then make her way out of them again.)

Even for the youngest children, there isn't much excitement here and only a scanty amount of humor. Halloween should never be this drab. . .

—Richard Delap



MEDIA ARTS cinema

STEP RIGHT UP! I'm Gonna Scare the
Pants Off America by William Castle
New York: Putnam, 1976, \$8.95, 256 pp.
Photos.
SBN: 339-11470-X LC: 75-43519

William Castle is a Hollywood producer-director who carved out his own niche—he saw a market and went after it. His movies were generally horror movies, occasional sf thrillers, and sub-Hitchcock psychological melodramas. Titles include *Macabre*, *Homicidal*, *I Saw What You Did*, *The Tingler*, *House on Haunted Hill*, *Strait-Jacket*, *13 Ghosts*, *The Spirit is Willing*, and, most recently, *Bug*. He always gave the impression of having more ability than he used, as if he felt that his subject matter was strong enough in itself to get the desired return (thrills and plenty of money), that he didn't have to extend himself. An interview in a recent book, *Kings of the Bs* (*DF&SF*, May 1976) confirmed this suspicion—Castle came across as a witty, intelligent man who knew precisely what he was doing. At that time I began looking forward to his autobiography. I needn't have bothered.

The book begins when, as a child, Cas-

tle first became interested in fantasy and horror (while still in his teens, he directed Bela Lugosi), and hits on the high points of his career since then. The most interesting sections of this terribly superficial book are about his involvement with Orson Welles in the making of *The Lady From Shanghai*, and the much longer section on *Rosemary's Baby* (which Castle produced and Roman Polanski directed). But Castle now tries to claim that the production of the latter film was plagued with the same sort of mysterious happenings reputed to have affected the shooting of the later *The Exorcist*, lessening this part's value. For some reason, Castle doesn't mention several films he directed and/or produced, including *The Old Dark House*, *Project X*, and *Riot*. It can't be that they were too bad to mention, for some of his other films are worse. It must be that they lost money.

For years Castle has cultivated his image of a cheerful shockmeister, forming fan clubs for himself from time to time, going on tour with his films and interacting with his young fans, and occasionally appearing on screen (among others, he's in *Mr. Sardonicus*, *Zotz*, and *Rosemary's Baby*). Lately, as in *Shampoo* and *The Day of the Locust*, he has been working as an actor, playing Hollywood types. Apparently he felt that what those who would buy his book would want to read would be the same sort of schlocky material his films were made of. But he's wrong—his audience has grown up.

This book goes wrong in so many ways, it is so very inadequate, that it's virtually