

Self-Made

New books show how everyday materials and a bit of imagination transport children to fantastic realms.

By **LIZI BOYD**

A FAMILIAR PLACE, a pungent smell, the distant chatter of children's voices: You never know what might arouse a childhood memory, a moment of pure sensation as you recall hours of playful abandon. Four new picture books featuring children absorbed in creative worlds of their own making are likely to evoke such memories in their grown-up readers. Children lucky enough to encounter these books will not only enjoy them, they may even be in-

THIS IS MY DOLLHOUSE

Written and illustrated by **Giselle Potter**
34 pp. Schwartz & Wade Books. \$17.99.
(Picture book; ages 4 to 8)

SECRET TREE FORT

Written and illustrated by **Brianne Farley**
32 pp. Candlewick Press. \$16.99.
(Picture book; ages 4 to 8)

A DARK, DARK CAVE

By **Eric Hoffman**
Illustrated by **Corey R. Tabor**
32 pp. Viking. \$17.99.
(Picture book; ages 4 to 8)

WHAT TO DO WITH A BOX

By **Jane Yolen**
Illustrated by **Chris Sheban**
32 pp. Creative Editions. \$17.99.
(Picture book; ages 4 to 8)

spired to find a slow day, roam through their imaginations and make something — the simplest of pleasures.

"This Is My Dollhouse" is the story of two girls and two dollhouses. One of them, our narrator, is at first alone with her dollhouse, which she built herself, out of a cardboard box, along with all the things inside. Her dollhouse family is diverse: a bear, three dolls and a mouse. Through her evocative text and illustrations, the author-illustrator **Giselle Potter** ("The Year I Didn't Go to School," "Tell Me What to Dream About") invites the reader, too, to partake in making fried eggs, noodles, bandages, an elevator and a rooftop pool.

Soon the narrator visits her friend, **Sophie**, who has a dollhouse too, but one that is manufactured, plastic and perfect. This dollhouse family is staid and expres-

LIZI BOYD is an author and illustrator of picture books including "Flashlight" and "Big Bear Little Chair." Her new book, "I Wrote You a Note," will be published next year.

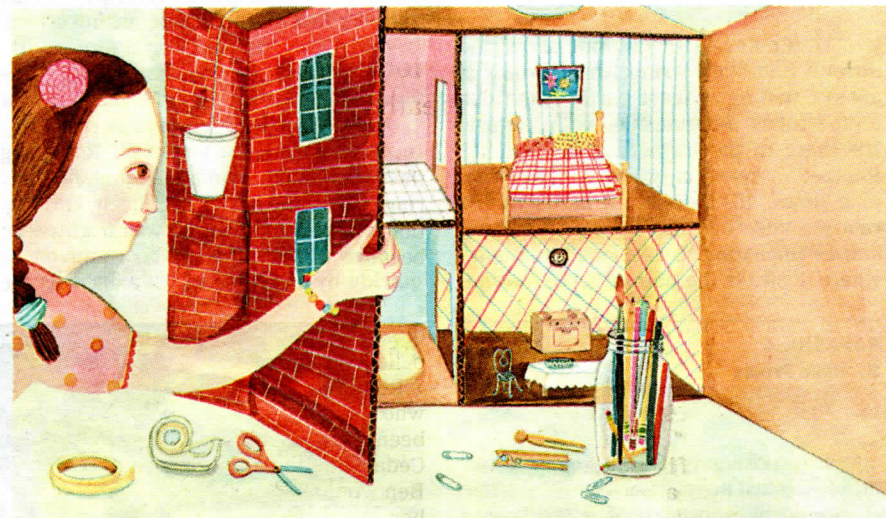
sionless. The two girls' playtime becomes scripted and stiff, and while the storyteller attempts inventiveness, **Sophie** is resistant. The narrator goes home, sadly thinking **Sophie** would never like her homemade dollhouse. So when **Sophie** visits later, she hides it. But **Sophie** finds it under the blankets, leading to an afternoon of imaginative play. Now it's **Sophie** who is sad when it's time to leave.

"This Is My Dollhouse" celebrates the best of free play, capturing what it's like to be fully engaged and inspired. While **Potter** might have made the line between the two friends' styles of play seem less absolute, the charming illustrations have their own voice. Her ink and watercolor paintings are familiar and friendly, making it easy to slip into her world. This is **Potter's** distinguishing strength. She has even cleverly included illustrated instructions for dollhouse making on the inside of the book's dust jacket. This final detail mimics the scene when **Sophie** finds the storyteller's hidden dollhouse, allowing the child reader his or her own secret discovery.

Brianne Farley's "Secret Tree Fort" follows two sisters, an older, serious one and a younger, frolicking one. The older reads a book as her sister tries to entice her to play: "I have a secret tree fort and you're not invited!" We see a rope ladder dangled



From "Secret Tree Fort."



Maker kid: From "This Is My Dollhouse."

hopefully out of the secret fort. When the older sister still declines, the spirited little sister embellishes the offer, with the text and illustrations building to show the fort with a water balloon launcher, a second floor with a trapdoor in the roof for stargazing and a basket for snacks and other emergencies. Soon there are monsters below, flags to fly, a lookout perch, a pirate ship, an underground tunnel, whales and a refrain: "Don't you wish you were invited?"

At last, distracted from her book, the older sister looks up and says, in a grown-up voice, "That doesn't exist." The little sister replies, "Fine! I made it up." As she sheds a tear, her older sister softens. "Maybe we just need to build it," she says. A collaboration begins as they draw plans for a tree fort together.

Farley's illustrations consist of elements that vary stylistically: The sisters are painted in spare poses, the landscapes are fluid and the younger sister's imaginary world is rendered in childlike outlines of red, expanding in color and depth as the fantasy tree fort becomes more elaborate with each new description. Creating a world of one's own as a child is the beginning of our stories, **Farley** shows — and is sometimes made more vivid when shared with a sibling or friend.

In "A Dark, Dark Cave" **Eric Hoffman** builds his story with a rhythmic, unbroken cadence: "The pale moon glows / as a cold wind blows / through a dark, dark cave." Bats and other scary features of the repeated "dark, dark cave" appear as the story builds to a "Rooooaaar!"

It's only then that the reader discovers two children on an adventure inside a cave constructed of blankets. Dad appears, saying: "That's too loud, kids. Find a quiet game. The baby's sleeping." There is a moment of thoughtful consideration before the two children continue

their play: "Two horses run / in the bright, bright sun / to a blanket barn, / wearing manes of yarn, / playing happily / in what used to be / a dark, dark cave."

Corey R. Tabor's offbeat, expressive illustrations work wonderfully to support **Hoffman's** text. **Tabor's** palette begins with a deep, dark tonality as each child illuminates the way with a flashlight. When Dad opens the "dark, dark cave," the colors change. When the children become horses playing in the "bright, bright sun," the pages are suddenly filled with light and air.

The book's second surprise is created through colors, as the reader finds the children are still inside the house — but in a sunny new world they've invented. The loosely rendered endpapers, featuring overlapping patterns of fabric in blue and white, suggest a trove of blankets that will tempt any child to build a cave of his or her very own.

Jane Yolen's "What to Do With a Box," illustrated by **Chris Sheban**, is a book made of soft words and soothing visuals. **Yolen** and **Sheban** work in tandem: Rather than giving directions, **Yolen's** minimal text and **Sheban's** dreamlike illustrations only suggest how the book might be read, and where things might go from there. They give the reader inspiration without instruction, allowing for the endless possibilities of creating with a cardboard box. **Sheban's** use of cardboard as the surface for his paintings nods to the simplicity of the idea. His filmy illustrations in paint, watercolor and pencil show just how easily a box can transform into a library, palace, nook, car or boat — journeys to take, places to go. The final pages urge a child to begin the hunt for an empty box to work with: "A box! A box is a wonder indeed. The only such magic that you'll ever need."

Books like these are wonders, too. □