

mythic and the realistic approaches to narrative to work more easily together.

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"Just like Manitoba": Didacticism, Universalism, Eurocentrism

Naomi: The Strawberry Blonde of Pippu Town. Karmel Schreyer. Great Plains Fiction, 1999. 180 pp. \$12.95 paper, ISBN 1-894283-05-8.

In the story of a twelve-year-old Manitoba girl's cultural adjustment to Japan, the author's didactic mission overwhelms what otherwise might be a moving story: the back cover promises that "Readers will learn that they too can overcome challenges, and that people have the same basic needs, no matter where they live." Not only does the book's didacticism often become so acute that it moves beyond a challenge to a major impediment, but this statement prefaces the Eurocentric strategy of universalism at work throughout the text.

The book, divided into chapters whose titles give most of the plot away, opens with Naomi waking in an "unfamiliar" room and whispering to her sleeping mother, "Why did you bring me here, mom?" (11). Within the next few pages, her mother proceeds to answer that very question, at once informing the reader and reminding Naomi that "things haven't been easy since your father and I got divorced" and that "when I got laid off" it became clear to her that they would eventually have to leave Manitoba (13). The relationship between mother and daughter — usually one of communication, negotiation, and compromise — works well throughout the book, but what emerges in this first scene is that the decision to move to Japan for a year is entirely Naomi's mother's. Naomi's fear of the unknown is made much more acute by the implicit realization that she has been placed in this unfamiliar room largely against her own will.

The general story, told by a third-person narrator who follows Naomi's perspective, is reasonably believable, and Naomi's feelings of displacement and uncertainty are entirely genuine — except, of course, when she consciously "began to really feel sorry for herself" (16, 39) or when she "wondered if she would ever feel so self-assured in this strange place" (22). Perhaps the book's generalized Eurocentrism cannot be entirely avoidable given the perspective of a Ukrainian-Canadian pre-teenager, but the third-person narrator who often interrupts the flow of the story to insert a moral or a lesson should not let Naomi take everything for granted: Naomi affirms in the narrative that *ocha* tea is not like "normal tea" (19), identifies a beautiful building as a "church" (40) and later asks her new Japanese friends if they "know the Bible" (57): no one bothers to comment on Naomi's internalized Christocentrism and, surprisingly, her friends answer in the affirmative — the Christian missionary discovers that the heathen have already been converted.

Further, though Naomi decides she must learn the Japanese language and customs, she never takes these skills beyond basic words; instead, the Japanese characters in the book speak to her in English. Naomi acquires a new name, Nowmee, but it is rarely used by her or anyone else. (Incidentally, this Eurocentrism is not entirely Naomi's; she refers to a teacher as Takenaka-sensi, but the narrator favours the prefix Mr.) As a cultural outsider exiled to a Japan that is exoticized and essentialized, Naomi does experience racism to a certain extent, but the racist lexicon is limited to *gaijin*, the Japanese word for "outsider"; for the most part, she is likewise exoticized because of her "interesting strawberry-blond hair" (55).

Problematic, too, is the back cover's attempt to link Naomi to a Canadian popular icon exoticized in Japan, calling her a "modern day Anne of Green Gables." No one in the actual text makes that connection; instead, Naomi idolizes a girl who masquerades as Anne at Canadian World for her self-assurance. (Equally noticeable is the book's misspelling of the name of Anne's author: L.M. Montgomery's middle name was Maud, not Maude.)

Ultimately, Naomi is exoticized for her hair and for her language, giving her a monopoly on identity and voice, while the Japanese characters are mostly cardboard replicas of each other and are constantly "searching for their words." My biggest concern with this book is the way Naomi learns these cultural lessons by essentializing and universalizing cultural practice: she gradually understands "the Japanese way of life" (14) by seizing cultural artifacts and realizing again and again that everything is "just like Manitoba" (17, 40, 55); rice fields viewed from a train are perhaps "what Alberta looks like" (17). This strategy is even validated by Keiko, the story's grandmother figure (and one of the story's most believable characters): "you took the situation you found yourself in and you turned it around. You made it ... yours" (her ellipsis [151]).

I wonder, then, about the implicit messages Schreyer seems to be transmitting to her younger audience about affirming a strategy of taking everything "different" and foreign and making it the same. This validation of white appropriation and white privilege should be examined, not taken for granted; otherwise, the "lesson" of the book is that cultural artifacts can be manipulated to ensure that everything becomes "just like Manitoba."

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When the Piper Speaks

When Night Eats the Moon. Joanne Findon. Red Deer, 1999. 175 pp. \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-88995-212-4.

"There are many ways of fighting and of winning." The words of the sorcerer Borekarak carry the central message of this time travel fantasy. In order to convey