

to the artistic life of the company.

An expanding repertoire of published plays which say something important about the human spirit should contribute significantly to Canada's ability to achieve, in its theatre for young people, the kind of excellence accepted as normal by companies such as the Kaze No Ko of Japan.

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*CANADIAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS: A TREASURY OF PICTURES/LIVRES CANADIENS D'ENFANTS: UN TRESOR D'IMAGES

Playing What for Whom Out in B.C.

ROWLAND M. LORIMER

The production of material specifically aimed at children is a significant cultural activity. The forms which this material takes as well as its content can provide a valuable insight into both the culture which produces the material and that culture's view of itself. Rarely is anything produced specifically for children which does not attempt to illustrate a viewpoint or, at least, convey some useful information. Even the popular media for children, e.g., comic books or television, are not purely entertainment. That so-called universal humanist, Walt Disney, has been shown to be a communicator of a fairly narrow ideology and world view (see *How to Read Donald Duck*¹).

Recently I have been examining literature for children, for the most part concentrating on the content of primary school readers. A group of us at Simon Fraser University, including Margaret Hill, Jane Lees, Margaret Long, and Barbara MacLellan have provided a content analysis of two series of textbooks in use in Canadian schools. On the basis of this research we developed a set of teacher's guides entitled *The Other Guide to Language Patterns* for one of the series. Our research demonstrated that the standard ills which have concerned educators in recent years were there in full force.² There was an unequal representation of the sexes, an unfair portrayal of racial groups, and a quite narrow focus on the values of one class, the middle class. In attempting to work on a measure to counteract these biases, we came to the conclusion that far from being inadvertent mistakes which were overlooked when the material was prepared, these biases were indications of an overall point of view or ideology. This ideology appeared to be two-faceted. The first facet was the notion the authors, editors, etc. had about children. The second was the perspective the authors had on the world. A summary of our findings will provide a basis for understanding our conclusions. In our view our findings are all interrelated, that is, they are specific examples or corollaries of the same phenomenon.

The major finding was that character interaction was determined by a single viewpoint or dimension. That dimension was typified by dominance and submission, or, to phrase it differently, hierarchy. This implies that, except in special instances, interaction between individuals was based on superior-inferior relations. Accordingly, most often, males were dominant, females

¹A. Dorfman and A. Mattelart, *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*, trans. D. Kunzle (New York: International General, 1975).

²M. Hill, M. Long, B. MacLellan, and R. Lorimer, "Reading; Consider Content: An Analysis of two "Canadian" primary language reading series" (forthcoming in *Interchange*) and "What Is Being Taught While Reading Is Being Taught?" (forthcoming in *This Magazine*).

subordinate. Adults were the authority; children were obedient and deferent. Correlated to this view, children were portrayed as needing to learn the rules of the social order rather than as being co-determiners of that order. By implications the social order was fixed. In turn, when children were presented alone (without adults), they were portrayed as imitators of adult positions, i.e., dominant, subdominant.

The larger world was an elaboration along the same lines. In keeping with the notion that the social order is fixed, "the community" was represented by the presence of paid functionaries whose job was to judge or to maintain order. Interdependence was never seriously explored. Cooperation was a device to be used by inferiors for coping with an imposed regime. The general value system complemented the view outlined above. It was that of an upwardly mobile and competitive individual of, or about to enter, the middle class. Again, relatedly, families were presented in one version, nuclear. For all intents and purposes they were of one colour, white. Reference to Canada by way of themes were non-existent. In the two series there were a total of 14 specific Canadian references. These references were to be found in approximately 4% of the stories.

The first conclusion which we reached, then, was that the readers presented a single world view. Each story was a specific example of the general world view of the group. In fact, each character was a specific example of a generalized character type. In keeping with the situations as described above, the personality traits of the individuals presented were those required by the general position the character was playing out, e.g., subdominance. The second conclusion we reached was that, according to the readers, there was no such thing as a child's world. Children, when alone, imitated adults. This, of course, ignores all the literature to the contrary. It is as if the work of the Opies³ and, in Canada, Edith Fowke⁴ never existed. It also ignores a point which appears absolutely fundamental to good literature for children: the presentation of a children's or other world which is different from the adult world and not merely its opposite. I cannot think of a single significant author for children who does not use such a viewpoint. Certainly all Canadian authors with whom I am familiar—for example, Seton, Roberts, Montgomery and Mowat—have presented worlds contrasting with the normal one in their works.

It was with this background that I examined some Canadian plays for young children, all ones fairly available in the Vancouver area of British Columbia and all written within the past twenty years. Originally I restricted my

³I. Opie and P. Opie, *Children's Games in Street and Playground* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1969).

⁴E. Fowke, *Sally Go Round the Sun: 300 Songs, Rhymes, and Games of Canadian Children* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1969).

examination to plays written by Canadians. In the end I included one play written by an American, Joanna M.H. Kraus, because it was set in Canada, the Hudson Bay area, and I was led to believe that it was written as a result of the author's experience living there. Its title is *The Ice Wolf*.⁵ Some of the plays I examined were published, some not.

The first fact that would impress any person examining Canadian plays for children is how few there are. While there are a number of standard U.S.-published anthologies of no-royalty plays and a thin catalogue or two from some international (i.e. U.S.) agencies, I would estimate that no more than two dozen scripts have been written in B.C. in the last 20 years. The second fact, one which theatre people seem to take for granted, is that the stimulation for scripts is usually some special occasion. Various centennials produced a number of scripts by commissioning them. The implications of this second fact are quite interesting. First is that our cultural policy has not encouraged the development of an ongoing, regionally based, children's theatre. That initial implication is simple enough, although somewhat disturbing. But what follows from it makes less sense. On the occasion of special events it does appear to be policy to commission children's plays to commemorate the event. If a community of playwrights existed who were writing for children, they could turn their attention to a special play. But no such community appears to have been able to exist in the past. Consequently, the policy appears unworkable. The result of this state of affairs, one no doubt accountable to Provincial and Federal cultural policy (or lack of it) and not to the absence of "Canadian genius", appears to have produced the second fact of my examination.

This is that, by far, the majority of the plays examined were rather undistinguished and overly didactic. Only the historical and geographical setting of some—for instance, the gold rush in B.C.—saved them from being carbon copies of the type of material we found in the textbooks. Let me review a few examples. Gold and Judge Begbie figured in two of the plays commissioned about ten years apart for the 1958 and 1967 Centennials. The first play is called *Song of the Serpent*⁶ and was written by Betty Lambert. It is well packed with historical information. Besides the very fact of gold mining, reference is made to the H.B.C., to the presence of a large U.S. and European contingent among the miners, to B.C. (English Colony) law, to U.S. history of the time, to the social fabric of the B.C. interior of the time, and so forth. However, beyond these references in setting there is not much which is particularly enlightening.

The author too often seems to define her characters by stereotypes. We have in the play a claim-jumping bully with his loser sidekick, a silent and naive

⁵Available through Carousel Children's Theatre, 1655 West 4th, Vancouver, B.C.

⁶Available through The New Play Centre, 1655 West 4th, Vancouver, B.C.

old Indian, an eccentric European noble, a remittance man-loser who is not really a loser because he has a good heart, a girl named Priscilla who, when pushed, rises above her name, a good but fallen woman, and a silent, non-interfering (until the climax requires it), wise ex-slave, now barber. The hero of the play and thus the centre of the action is a half-breed boy. This cast of characters transforms the play into a Saturday Afternoon Horse Opera. Good, in the form of legalized exploitation, overcomes evil (claim jumping) after about one hour of suspense.

Whereas *Song of the Serpent* was commissioned by the B.C. Centennial Committee in 1967, its predecessor, *The Magic Nugget*,⁶ by Poppy McKenzie, a play of much the same style, was commissioned by the B.C. Centennial Commission for the 1958 Centennial. If the former could be said to be equivalent to a "Horse Opera", the latter falls more into the "Lassie" or "Rin Tin Tin" genre. While in the former the community had to come together to defeat the powers of evil, in the latter the children can lead the action with the help of a pet bear. The cast of characters again gives one an idea of the basic play. There are two American gold miner-apparent desperadoes (one normal, one stupid), a stereotyped browbeating school teacher by the name of Miss Tethering, one white boy who hates school, his pet bear, one Indian boy who is maligned for his race, one pillar-of-society crook, and Judge Begbie. The wisdom is to be found in the boys who see through the mask of the swindler but must prove it to the adults. The subtle racism implied as typical of the time is quite unnecessary and unfortunate.

In both these plays, then, what is presented is a distorted world made interesting to children through sensationalism. It is made into a cops and robbers game. But it is a simplified, stereotyped world. The plays are both didactic in the sense that they provide a certain amount of history in their setting. But there is nothing more to them than that. They are both versions of standard U.S. popular culture with a little injection of Canadian history.

Several other plays are available that have been written along these same lines but without the historical content. They might be classified as light entertainment. A musical adaptation of *Pinocchio*⁶ by Marge Adelberg is an example. The story of *Pinocchio* is reduced to the familiar stereotypes of obedience, good, and evil. *The Strange Disappearance of Princess Gloriana*,⁶ by Ray and Jane Logie, plays with a "rape/violation" structure with normal class, sex, and racially stereotyped overtones.

In the last few years, Vancouver has seen the development of a much healthier theatre scene. A number of companies specializing in plays for children are now in existence. The "light entertainment" area, incorporating some audience participation, appears to have been developed by The Green Thumb Players. Three of their plays were available to me—*Hokum the Giant Spider*⁷

⁷Available through Green Thumb Players, 1156 East 11th, Vancouver, B.C.

and *The Great Christmas Kidnapping*,⁷ both by Dennis Foon, and *The Nose Knows*⁷ by John Carroll. Their work plays on familiar character types and familiar child situations, e.g., unfulfilled expectations, the bully, the hostile kid. For the most part, subtle denigration is avoided. The treatments are fairly matter-of-fact. Usually everything comes out right in the end. The best of the group, and apparently in performance the most successful, was *The Nose Knows*. While the play contained familiar elements—the absent-minded professor, the family being reunited, the triumph of good gaining access to power over evil—the appeal of the play rested in device. The professor's invention was a playback machine which allowed events to be rerun and changed while in re-process. For the same reason that children find *Alice in Wonderland* appealing, this little quirk would be an intriguing turn of events.

What distinguishes light entertainment from the plays mentioned in the following section is that the latter plays provide or apparently attempt to provide an insight to, or a viewpoint on, the world which will enhance meaning rather than confirm fairly simple ideas. I will mention four plays, two by Eric Nicol, *The Clam Made a Face*⁶ and *Beware the Quickly Who*,⁶ and also *The Ice Wolf* by Joanna Kraus and an adaptation of *Beauty and the Beast*⁵ by Christopher Newton. The first two were commissioned by the Canada Centenary Commission in 1967. The latter two have been produced in Vancouver during the past two years by Carousel Children's Theatre.

Rather than introducing history in a popular culture format, Nicol, in *The Clam Made a Face*, portrays Indian culture of the West Coast by, more or less, playing out a ceremony, the potlatch. The potlatch is a ceremonial giving which accrues power to the giver. The Government found it expedient to make potlatches illegal some time ago. The play presents three Indian legends. They are played out on the stage for the audience. They appear potentially interesting to children. However, the play is marred by a number of unfortunate devices and portrayals. The first is the presence of a fool. As I understand it, there is no equivalent character in Indian culture. For the purposes of the play, the fool acts like a smart-ass kid, to create action and excitement when there is none. Whatever its success as a device, this transforms an Indian institution into something more resembling a European-Canadian one. Because the play is supposedly presenting a potlatch, its inclusion is extremely unfortunate in its tendency to assimilate the customs of the Native culture into mainstream culture. The tendency not to respect the integrity of the Native culture is revealed in one other major way. In the presentation of the children, who participate in the potlatch with their father, the girl is portrayed as a rather passive creature dotting on father, while the boy is portrayed as quite active and rebellious, and as wanting to take on the trappings of white culture.

A reading of the play did indicate two highlights. One involved an exchange between the father and the boy. The boy had overextended himself, and the father gave him a device for solving the problem. What was commendable was that Nicol didn't have the father take over the situation. Regrettably, in using his father's help, the boy makes a mistake and creates insect pests. This

lack of competence is a familiar one from our textbook research. These children were presented as succeeding outside the family situation in only 22% of all stories. The second highlight was the content of the legend where a man and a woman were changed into stone as a reward. In Judeo-Christian culture, being turned into stone has a ring of punishment. That Nicol didn't adjust the legend as he did the potlatch is a tribute to his wisdom.

In short, there is a certain amount in *The Clam Made A Face* to recommend it. On the other hand, Nicol all too easily slides into stereotypes and familiar mainstream cultural patterns. He may believe, as do many authors of undistinguished children's literature, that children must be provided with overly drawn-out, familiar patterns in order for them to understand. The presence of "other worlds" in notable good children's literature argues that this is not the case.

Beware the Quickly Who attempts to inject a sense of Canadian identity in a generalized form into its audience. However, it makes two fundamental errors. First, a generalized and a personal identity are not one and the same. Only the latter can be internalized (see Erickson, 1952⁸). Secondly, as Jung has pointed out, the sum total of all interpersonal interactions is an inadequate basis for an identity. It is so for adults; it is similarly so for children. Consequently, while the approach of the play manages to provide an excuse for the inclusion of a lot of Canadian information, its main point, that the central character gains identity through his interaction with these generalized Canadian characters and situations, rings false. Nor does the play ring true as an expression of "mosaic" as opposed to "melting pot."

The play is also full of annoying references which appear to be for the benefit of the adults who might attend the play with the children. There are many word plays [the (Irish) jig is up, or the Scottish (drunken) reel] and amusements that could only be appreciated by members of the audience who bring a good amount of information to the situation. The humour doesn't exist in the situation but instead depends on previous knowledge that the child is unlikely to have. It is rather like a bad joke a teacher might tell to try to teach a lesson. It is adult humour, not child humour. As a whole, the play exists as a commendable idea by an author unused to working with this medium for this audience, a not uncharacteristic trait of many Canadian cultural works.

The Ice Wolf deals in identities in a much more successful way. Perhaps one of the reasons authors find primitive cultures so appealing as settings for works for children is that many of the cultural ideas are expressed in a personal rather than in an abstract form. Certainly *The Ice Wolf* provides a vivid exploration of the tension between the individual and the community. The vividness is, in a significant way, due to the presence of the Wood God and the

⁸E. Ericson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1952).

transformation of the outcast albino girl into a marauding wolf. Thus, some tension has its source in the girl's peculiar identity. However, her significance is both double and conflicting. The community demands her exclusion. But her parents obey their feelings of loyalty to her as an individual.

There are at least three major points which recommend the play. The first is the one already mentioned, the manner in which the exploration of identity is handled. The second is the tensions that are brought to bear around the notion of identity. They are loyalty to the individual and loyalty to the community. The third is the resolution of those tensions. The play is truly a tragedy. In choosing individualism over community, the parents die, the child kills and then dies, and the community casts out and kills. And yet the alternative would be to kill from belief but without knowledge.

All three points come together to recommend the play as one significant to Canadian audiences. The problem is one which faces every Canadian—how to come to terms with an individual identity. The tensions brought to bear are the ones Frye has said are basic to any work of literature, the myth of freedom versus the myth of concern, the right of the individual versus the demands of the community.⁹ In this play, the exploration of these myths is particularly Canadian. For, as Robin Matthews has pointed out, the epitome of individualism, the adolescent anti-hero, may be an incredibly important U.S. myth, but he is of little significance in Canadian literature.¹⁰ Canadians have had to work too hard to establish and maintain a community to worship the individualistic anti-hero. Yet the demands of survival at one level may spell death at another.

In the play itself there is a continual reverberation of significance. When cast out, the girl goes to the woods, a place alien to Inuits. She takes on the meaning of another world separate from that of her community, to which she can never return. In returning to view and later to kill, she violates the terms of her existence. In attempting to avenge the killings, the community violates its own strictures by venturing into the alien woods, where it kills one of its own through lack of recognition.

All in all, Kraus has done what is necessary to make the play suitable for children. She has provided characters with whom the children can identify. She has personalized ideas. Most importantly, she has not given in to comfortable thematic or character stereotypes. Finally, she has, consciously or not, explored themes salient to a Canadian identity.

⁹N. Frye, *The Critical Path* (University of Indiana Press, 1971).

¹⁰R. Mathews, "Canadian Literature: The Necessary Revolution", in *The Politics of the Canadian Public School*, ed. G. Martell (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1974).

Christopher Newton's *Beauty and the Beast* does not have as much to recommend it as does *The Ice Wolf*, and yet it, too, has a rare sophistication. As with all popular folktales, the story lends itself to stereotyping, especially when it is presented in a form suitable for children. Thus, the story *might* go that the two ugly, greedy, ill-mannered sisters got their just desserts while the beautiful, polite, generous Beauty transformed her Prince by her love and lived happily ever after with more riches than she knew what to do with. Newton treats the tale with a good deal of subtlety, however. As directed by Elizabeth Ball, the two sisters come off as conniving, but not stereotypically bad. They have a demonstrated fondness for their sister, Beauty. For one thing, they do not appear jealous and resentful.

Beauty is certainly the central character of Newton's version. In a manner which would make the noted French structuralist-anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss happy, Beauty is the basis of an exchange between the two males, her father the merchant and the Beast. But however universally true that portrayal is—and Levi-Strauss maintains that women are exchanged by men—a second treatment is more important.¹¹ Newton makes use of a mirroring process. Thus the downfall of the merchant, which causes him to give away his daughter, is a lack of wealth. The Beast in no way lacks wealth. The two daughters desire only wealth. Beauty turns wealth down as inadequate. The rose-Beauty-freedom-love triumph over evil. That is, the rose is obtained for the daughter. The daughter is granted freedom and, in return, gives love. Love transforms the Beast back into a Prince. Still further, Beauty is able to give exactly what the Prince was unable, love without regard for physical beauty. What doubt made go sour, love turns sweet.

With all this subtlety, the play remains simple. (In contrast is the adaptation by William Glennon put on by the Manitoba Theatre Centre at Christmas, 1976. The latter version seemed like a bus tour of the original folktale.) In Newton's version, all the action reflects on the ideas he is exploring. As a consequence, it is clear to children. But clarity does not require oversimplicity. Newton avoids stereotyping his characters, yet they play recognisable roles. He demonstrates the skill of a person in control of his medium and aware of the abilities rather than the limitations of his audience.

Good literature for children gives the feeling that it has been written at their request and with their comments as inspiration. Mediocre literature for children appears to have been written by adults for the good of children and given their stamp of approval. The plays examined here appeared to me not quite to fall into those two categories. With the exception of the last two, they appear to come from an adult mould but to have been liberally coated

¹¹C. Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1963).

with goodies in hopes that the kids wouldn't notice. The last two, however, had earmarks of good children's literature.

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