

Poems and Poetics for Growing Up

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A Child Growing Up, compiled by David Kemp. Simon & Pierre, 1979. 126 pp. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 0-88924-103-1.

Of Dogs and Cats and Things Like That . . . Mika Publishing, 1979. 96 pp. \$5.00 paper. ISBN 0-919303-29-3.

Round Slice of Moon and other poems for Canadian kids, compiled by Fran Newman. Scholastic-TAB, 1980. 164 pp. \$2.50 paper. ISBN 0-590-71029-X.

It Scares Me But I Like It, Creating poetry with children, by Russell Hazzard. Fizhenry & Whiteside, 1979. 128 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 0-88902-568-1.

The Surprise Sandwich, Poems for children, by Red Lane. Black Moss Press, 1978. 32 pp. \$4.95 paper. ISBN 1-887-53-046-X.

Thinking, compiled by Joyce McDonald Moller. City of North Vancouver Public Library, 1973, 1975. 36 pp. \$1.75 paper.

We Make Canada Shine: Poems by children, ed. Peter Craver. James Lorimer & Co., 1980. 30 pp. \$9.95 hardcover, \$3.95 paper. ISBN 0-88862-289-9; 0-88862-288-0.

The Wind Has Wings, Poems from Canada. Compiled by Mary Alice Downie and Barbara Robertson. Illustrated by Elizabeth Cleaver. Oxford, 1978. 96 pp. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0-19-540287-1.

The most definite conclusion that emerges from an examination of these eight children's poetry books is that the achievement of *The Wind Has Wings*, the 1968 prize-winner now reprinted, remains unequalled. Its seventy-seven poems from Canadian "name" poets, past and present, are splendidly presented with brilliant and integrated colour illustrations. (My one quibble is with the decision to print only the first half of D.C. Scott's "The Forsaken"; since the two parts are in tandem surely the reader should get both or none.)

To be fair, a number of other volumes have quite different goals than

Wings. And that brings me to my second conclusion: it must be difficult to be a child faced with such a confusing array of literature – it's tough enough to be an adult and reviewing it. Some of the works, like David Kemp's *Growing Up*, have high and discernible standards. With others, like *We Make Canada Shine*, the goal seems to have been self-expression, the encouragement of children's use of language.

And if you are a language teacher charged with stimulating expression and competence among the reluctant or deficient (a difficult life too) perhaps the reading of less-polished examples from pupils' peers is more suitable and strategic than the reading of classics in *Wings* like Bliss Carman's "The Ships of Yule," Robert Service's "Dan McGrew," George T. Lanigan's mid-nineteenth century "Threnody" on "The Ahkoond of Swat" –

For the Ahkoond I mourn,
Who wouldn't?
He strove to disregard the message stern,
But he Ahkoondn't.

And skeptics mock the lowly mound
And say, "He's now of no Ahkound!" –

or the reading of modern efforts that deserve to be classics (also in *Wings*) from George Johnston, Al Purdy, Earle Birney, James Reaney, and others.

An experienced teacher, in short, determined to assign some parallel work or discussion, may make much more than this reviewer could from *We Make Canada Shine*. The volume is in the Lorimer "Where We Live" series, "a set of beginning readers developed specifically for classroom use" with advice from three cited teacher-consultants. About twenty-five short, almost unrhymed, poems are well spaced out – no illustration or colour – on about that many 11 x 8 inch pages – "about" because there are no page numbers. (Doesn't that make things more difficult in the classroom?)

The Surprise Sandwich is about the same length, in 9 x 7 3/4 inch format, is also unpaginated, but has longer poems and some colour illustration on almost every page. Red Lane's poems are more ruminative and touch upon more definable issues such as hunger:

And sometimes
when I'm eating my lunch
I think
what about all the people everywhere
who have no lunch to eat
and maybe no supper
and maybe not even a snack before going to
bed.

Most of the poems end in queries designed, I suppose, to encourage some pondering. But the questions are non-leading, such as “What would you do?” “Do you ever do things like that?” “Did you ever think about that?” – the kind of questions that, as I remember help make a child’s life difficult because when adults ask them a kid never knows what answers they expect.

Although *It Scares Me But I Like It* contains more poems than either of the two aforementioned volumes, it’s not a poetry anthology but an informal classroom journal wherein Russell Hazzard recounts how he tried to inspire eight-to-ten-year-old Ottawa children to write verse, gives examples of the results, and speculates on why things went right or wrong either with him or the children – his hopes for “Fern Hill” (by Dylan Thomas) as a stimulator, for example, came to naught. Hazzard describes the process of twenty-four different classes in which poems from Birney, Purdy, Margaret Atwood, Alden Nowlan, haiku, and real insects are among the starter-objects experimented with.

His chief goal, Hazzard says, was to increase the children’s desire for language skills and allow them to have some fun doing it – which meant not worrying about grammar or syntax or spelling. Obviously, the classes did move beyond the basics though, to the use of images which the author describes as “very striking and beautiful” such as “A storm is like a crow diving” and “Writing a poem is like a roller coaster”. I think the book would be an excellent guide and a useful and stimulating read for anyone engaged in similar enterprises.

Of Dogs and Cats and Things Like That . . . is the result of an enterprise in Hastings County, Ontario, on behalf of the Ontario Humane Society. Children from the county’s schools submitted animal stories, poems and drawings from which selections were made and published. The illustrations, black-and-white and colour, are reproduced with excellent quality. The stories and poems vary widely in skill and thoughtfulness since the academic level of the contributors ranges from Grade One to Eight.

My favourite anecdote is from a Grade Two girl in Belleville who describes a fish that got hungry looking for plants and popped above the water for a look. “He saw a man. The man was fishing but was only catching plants. Then he knew why there were no plants to eat.”

Most of the selections emphasize the love and loyalty of pets. One that doesn’t, from a Grade Four boy in Marysville, emphasizes the necessity of caring for a pony, and warns “it is not as easy as you think.” Something of that lesson may lie behind another item from a Grade Four boy, in Maynooth, whose Dad told him their horse, Mike, had to be sold. The story ends: “I try to think of a hundred ways to prevent Dad from selling Mike because I really love him. He is my special pet and friend.”

The implicit conflict in equine care raises an issue made more pointed in a brief dog story by a Grade Eight girl in Bancroft. The dog's owners "grew tired of having to look after me. Now . . . I have to eat out of garbage cans. I wish that I had never been born." These touches of sober reality amid pages of pet worship reminded me, at least, of recent newspaper articles about irresponsible owners and unwanted increases in pet population and pollution. If another Board of Education in a more populated area than eastern Ontario follows Hastings' worthy example — the project is excellently carried out, and must have caused a great outburst of enthusiasm, writing and drawing in the county — perhaps the enterprise could be focussed more in advance on, for example, *care and control Of Dogs and Cats and Things Like That . . .*

More advance focussing by the editor or the publisher would have improved *Round Slice of Moon* which combines established poets of yesteryear (like D.C. Scott with "At the Cedars," "On the Way to the Mission," and both parts this time of "The Forsaken"), established contemporary poets (Al Purdy with "Detail," Miriam Waddington, Elizabeth Brewster), anonymous ballads, poems by the lesser known, and poems by children aged 6, 10, 11, 12. The table of contents is in sixteen untitled subsections, and the organizing principle is not always immediately clear or consistent.

Again, the book could be adapted readily enough I suppose by a classroom teacher to suit particular needs. But the editing is unnecessarily quixotic. The volume's title comes from the editor's own poem which is placed at the end of the book and which, in the text, is one of the few poems that is untitled. Another quibble: the Robert Stead whose name is listed with those authors "the publisher has [unsuccessfully] attempted to contact for permission to reprint" is the western novelist (1880-1959) whose *Grain* (1926) and *The Homesteaders* (1916) are still very much in print. His poem, "The Squad of One" is in *Prairie Born* (1911) and in *Kitchener and Other Poems* (1917) and it, one soon realizes, is Stead's lively re-echo from the prairie of Service's Arctic favourite, "The Cremation of Sam McGee":

There are things unguessed, there are tales untold, in the life of
the great lone land . . .

Then the Sergeant sat and smoked and talked of the home he had left
down East,
And the cold and the snow, and the price of land, and the life of
man and beast . . .

The Stead-Service connection is a serendipitous discovery and welcome, but an example perhaps of how any insights that emerge from the volume will be self-germinated.

The *Thinking* librarian's anthology, the results from a five-week poetry workshop at North Vancouver Public Library with eighteen children aged nine to thirteen, has a little more obvious direction in its shorter span. Each week a professional writer gave keynote presentations and encouraged the children to explore in words the possibilities of their emotions and ideas. The selections have more consistent quality than the children's work in *We Make Canada Shine* or in the more extensive *Of Dogs and Cats*, although the latter has superior illustration.

The consistently high-quality material in *A Child Growing Up* has been combed by editor David Kemp into the most thematic anthology of the lot. The range of contributors is from Charles Dickens and Walter Scott, Pauline Johnson and Nellie McClung, Ogden Nash and Barry Broadfoot to Irving Layton, Dennis Lee, W.O. Mitchell and Alice Munro. The selections from all are in general accord with the volume's subtitle: "A Journey Through The Bittersweet Joys of Childhood Experience" and in accord with ten subsections of the table of contents: "Childhood Innocence, Children and Parents, Child Death, Children at Play, Children and School, Children and Make Believe, Children and Relatives, Children at Christmas, Advice to Children, Child Love." Black and white illustrations introduce each section.

An added touch of quality in the editing, to go along with the tradition and excellence of the selections, is a brief biography section at the back of the book which cites the essential data and some critical assessment for each contributor.

Kemp's book is not the showpiece that is *Wings*, but it is more comprehensive and solidly edited. Perhaps I like it too because that "bittersweet" note corroborates my bias and the dark misgivings of my cankered soul which prompted me to say at the start that growing up, even with all this poetry to help, remains forever difficult. Somewhere, nonetheless, in this wide-ranging display of wares from the muse, readers will find solace for past ills, balm for the pessimist, and, most certainly, help in fostering the skills and joys of language.

Gerald Noonan, of Wilfrid Laurier University, reviewed an earlier group of poetry books by children in Canadian Children's Literature, 7, 1977.

