

series books would invite children to discover other books worthy of reading by pursuing the work of a single author – a strategy all readers follow.

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Pioneer Life in Ontario

Lamplichter. Bernice Thurman Hunter. Scholastic Canada, 1987. 115 pp. \$5.99. ISBN 0590713736.

Bernice Hunter's *Lamplichter* offers a benevolent view of late pioneer life in the Ontario of the 1880s. Above all, this novel is a story narrated by a kind-hearted and loving storyteller, much like the main character's grandfather, who on certain evenings opens *Stories for Leisure Hours* and reads to the family by the fireside.

The story centres on William, a boy who has just turned seven, and follows him through one whole year, from July to June, from being the family baby to being a "young man" (110). During the year he and his mother are confronted by a bear, the children are housebound by a terrible blizzard, William falls off a horse and breaks his leg, and there are many other seemingly less significant events, all of which he absorbs and responds to. William also becomes aware of birth and death, the latter through the death of his grandmother and — equally disturbing for the boy — the drowning of kittens, and the slaughter of his favourite turkey (which ends up on the Christmas table). In short, like any boy, he experiences happiness and disappointment as he attempts to redefine his place in the family circle.

Hunter's treatment of setting is often very convincing. Her handling of the blizzard and the anxiety it arouses is one of the most memorable scenes in the novel. However, in her affection for a past world, she tends to romanticize what would have been an often extremely harsh existence. For instance, William's reticent, stern father responds to his wife's wish for a water pump and resignation at having to draw water from a stream, with "it was healthful for the children to fetch water up the hill. It would make men and women out of them" (40).

"Old-fashioned" virtues such as this are central to the novel, and to the title's significance: William decides he wants to be a lamplighter when he grows up in order to help keep the "streets safe for folks" (15). Gradually, as the novel progresses, the repeated but unobtrusive presence of lanterns, firelight, and candles contributes to the feelings of love and caring that this novel quietly promotes.

Gritty Realism in Mid-nineteenth Century Nova Scotia

Hannah. Diana Vasquez. Coteau, 1999. 133 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 1-550501496.

The community of immigrants working in the mid-1800s Nova Scotia mining settlement where Diana Vasquez's novel is set live a desolate, harsh existence. Young

readers may initially find the unrelenting bleakness (at the beginning especially) of *Hannah* difficult to manage, but if they persevere, they will be rewarded with an experience that celebrates individual creativity and spirited determination. This is a story about survival. It centres on a family of girls whose mother is bedridden and whose father has died in a mining accident. The two eldest, Grace, and Hannah in particular, scramble to find a means to stave off the pressures and fear of hunger, cold, and sickness.

Vasquez is adept at creating mood and atmosphere. Hannah's terror as, disguised as a boy, she goes down into the mine to work is almost palpable: "Hannah could only see the dim globe of light in John's hand and his rumpled pants, and beyond that, nothing. Black air, black floor and ceiling floated around her, and she felt she was drowning in space" (86). The visual quality of Vasquez's writing is often extremely evocative, as in this early scene:

The train swept in, breaking the quiet in the clearing, its flared iron skirt pushing through clouds of dust. The pony boys steadied their animals and men moved forward, their shovels readied. The bustle of loading coal had no sooner started than it stopped abruptly as a single passenger stepped off the train, a young woman wearing yellow. Yellow. Many of them had never seen cloth that colour. Yellow, like cream churned to butter and left to ripen, a yellow that would melt if you touched it. (2)

The broad perspective, with its bustle and noise, narrows to foreground the yellow dress, capturing the grim deprivation of the miners' lives. Dialogue is also convincing, with its blend of brash defensiveness and desperation. In the following exchange, Hannah's identity has been discovered by her friend's brother, John:

'Who do y' think y' are?!'

'Y' look stupid like that!' He pointed to her pants.

'I can work faster'n all of 'um,' Hannah said emphatically.

'No y' can't, because it's not your place. Putting on a pair of pants doesn't make y' fit for it.'

'I'm as steady as the next,' she insisted.

'Y' can't be relied on. You're a liar.' (42)

All of this, combined with the heightened suspense and quickening pace built around an adept juxtaposition between a spontaneous and gay ceilidh and the miners' discovery of Hannah's identity, will leave readers satisfied that they chose to accept the gritty realism over the romance of so many other stories for young readers.

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