CANADIAN "CLASSICS" IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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Alligator Pie, Dennis Lee. Illustrations by Frank Newfeld. Macmillan, 1974. 64 pp. $5.95 cloth.

Nicholas Knock and Other People, Dennis Lee. Illustrations by Frank Newfeld. Macmillan, 1974. 64 pp. $5.95 cloth.

In a public library--which Dickens would have relished--in Fredericton, there is still in circulation a book which Dennis Lee would probably prefer to have off the shelves. It is entitled *First Flowering: A Selection of Prose and Poetry by the Youth of Canada* (Toronto: Kingswood House, 1956), edited by Anthony Frisch. It is everything that the imagination will allow. In it, though, is this poem by a young poetaster, Dennis Lee "age 16, University of Toronto Schools, Grade XII."

FREE VERSE

So your rhyme
Is a crime;
And your beat
Has n--4 feet
And doesn't match the line before either.
Then write in free verse--you can put
whatever you want to in it.

You've not got to rhyme
But any time
You want to, it's quite all right.

And your metre
Should make the reader
Cry.
That's modern.

And put, in punctuation!
Marks, wherev,er you wouldn?t expect, them.
And leave them out in all the others that s for effect

And then you can have great long lines that really
don't mean very much although actually that
doesn't matter.
Or little
Wee shor
T things
That
Mean even less
Because
You
've
Run out of ink part way through.
Just so long as you seem very deep and abstruse.
Backwards line a writing by achieved be easily can which.
Or up words by the mixing.

The rhymelesser
The timelesser.
The worser
The free-verser.

A delightful early poem. But what has our young poet been doing since 1956? He has been staking out a formidable position in our cultural wilderness, that's what.

Now he is: 35 years old (still a Torontonian, born and bred); A teacher (with York University, Victoria College and Rochdale experience); a founder of the educational area of Rochdale; award winning poet (Governor General's Award Winner for *Civil Elegies*, 1968, rewritten 1972); cofounder of a major Canadian publishing company (Anansi, 1967); editor (Anansi, 1967-1972, now consultant editor at Macmillan); mythmaker (Claude Bissell calls *Civil Elegies* "the best public poem written in Canada"); political, cultural, and social critic (chief literary exponent of the theories of George Grant); and Chairman of Canada Council's advisory arts panel. But primarily he is a writer and a good one. In short, he sits front and centre in our cultural core. He is Establishment, any way that you define it.

But now he is much more. He is the writer of classics; that's right, "classics" (the word we never whisper in Canadian Literature circles without self-conscious trepidation). And children did it--his own children, in fact.

Nine years ago, while reading to his two daughters from "traditional" and "foreign" children's literature (the kind on which we were all weaned), Dennis Lee laid the plans for the revolution. He decided that a change was necessary, one that went in hand with his "adult" view of our cultural climate. In the epilogue to *Alligator Pie*, he writes:

> All we seemed to read about were jolly millers, little pigs, and queens. The details of *Mother Goose*--the wassails and Dobbins and pipers and pence--had become exotic; children loved them, but they were no longer home ground.

That is not to say that *Mother Goose* and *Winnie the Pooh* have to be put out to pasture with *Black Beauty*;

> But I started to wonder; shouldn't a child also discover the imagination playing on things she lives with every day? Not abolishing Mother Goose, but letting her take up residence among hockey sticks and high-rise too? I began experimenting.

His experimenting led him apart from his established career as a national "star" poet whose work was filled with original and often dark and gloomy concerns into what he calls "a gorgeous contrast". He became a writer of children's literature.

Alligator Pie and *Nicholas Knock* comprise poems of joy and laughter, of the wonderful world of was and could be, the world of childhood. Still, many of Lee's former themes, political and philosophical, are here; this time they are getting "classic" billing.

It takes more than a dust jacket or the buzz of the cocktail circuit to make books "classics". But Macmillan has looked in the crystal ball and these two books are published with a confidence usually reserved for Berton Books. The initial run of *Alligator Pie* is 10,000 copies; of *Nicholas Knock*, 7500 copies. (Michael Ondaatje's recent *Rat Jelly* had 2000 copies, a generous run for adult poetry in this country--and Ondaatje does have a reputation!) Macmillan also has an option to print more copies of both Lee's books, just in case. The author, of course, hopes for such success but he warns us that "classics" do not mean "artifacts";

> They're meant to be used. Children make changes in poems and the changes always make sense--to the tongue and the ear. Parents should take these new versions more seriously than mine.

Alligator Pie will probably be the more successful of the two as its appeal is directed at a wider and younger range. The poems in it are right out of the oral tradition and the "Canadian" experience. They beg for the eye and the ear for many of them are chants and songs. Margaret Laurence has already observed that "you can almost hear the skipping rope slapping on the sidewalk":

> Mississauga rattlesnakes
> Eat brown bread.
> Mississauga rattlesnakes
> Fall down dead.

Charles Taylor, in his excellent review and interview in the Toronto *Globe and Mail* (September 28, 1974, from where many of these quotations by Lee are gleaned) describes a public reading which Lee gave in the library of a Don Mills public school:

> Alligator pie, alligator pie,
> If I don't get some I think I'm going to die....
> Give away the green grass, give away the sky,
> But don't give away my alligator pie.

Taylor observed that it was "a moment of joy, pure and unpretentious. The children and the poet delighting in the fantasy, as well as the rhymes and rhythms of the sprightly verse. A moment when the artist, his work and his audience are in rare and splendid harmony."

The overall impression that one retains from this book is that Lee has captured for children and adults a real sense of place, this place, this home. The fascination of boys' literature, at least in my day, was with "faraway places with the strange sounding names." The books--*Typee, Mardi,* and *King Arthur*--everyone surely remembers; they are part of our "collective unconscious". But as Mordecai Richler *et al* keep telling us, the excitement of this country, this literature, is that the mythology and even the language is yet to be discovered. Lee has made a beginning. In *Civil Elegies* he told us with fascination of Etobicoke, Muskoka and Labrador. Here in *Alligator Pie*, he lists his favourite place names: Temagami, Temiskaning, Chicoutimi, Winnipeg, Napanee, Trois Rivières, Red Deer, Moose Jaw, and Nipigon. How much a part of each of us they are and how good it is to see them in our poetry.

Lee takes this love of sound further. He shows us his fine sense of the play of words with meanings hidden inside them:

> Skyscraper, skyscraper,
> Scrape me some sky.

Professor Fred Cogswell recently gave the introductory address at a meeting of the League of Canadian Poets. He spoke about the "nature and function of poetry," an address given for adults interested in an adult occupation--the writing of poetry. He advocated poetry as a game, and words and poems as verbal toys. He spoke of the need for "non-poems" and implied the value in our time and in our future for "non-sense". The audience was startled by his assertions. Lee would have probably applauded. He says:

> The poems come from the 35-year-old kid that's inside me. Whenever I've tried to write something I thought a kid would like, it's been a failure.

Kids are way ahead of us. They know well what we are just discovering! For example: "cicadas" is a word which turns up in poetry as diverse as that of Lee and Lampman. It's been around in literature for ages. The sound of it fascinates us and evokes many images. We like it; we repeat it; it comes to us. Lee writes these children's poems with the same principle; he answers "voices that barge into my head and want to get on to the page."

It is true that the voices are sometimes derivative. Some of the poems have rhythm structures that echo A. A. Milne and his ilk, as Laurence has pointed out. But perhaps Northrop Frye is right: everything does come from somewhere else in this literature business. The author makes anew from materials already waiting for the building. One of Lee's poems is titled"The Thing" and the subtitle is "Robert Service Meets Martin Heidegger." On the surface that strikes one as pedantic and pretentious perhaps beyond preciousness. In the poem a strange and friendly creature pursues three boys through a city and one might say that the religious and philosophical speculation here is too personal. It is but one lapse. The book is good and it is silly to quibble over such a minor point, yet undoubtedly critics will.

Nicholas Knock and Other People is the brother volume to *Alligator Pie*. For older children, it is perhaps more profound, more "mysterious", but every bit the treasure of its fellow. Children are

never spoken down to by Lee and this book stands without apology:

> There's no real discrepancy between those and *Civil Elegies*. The children's poems aren't just chirpy and cheerful--sometimes they're quite savage.
>
> ...It's a political act to give kids the idea they can take their own life and times as a place where good and bad things can happen and their imaginations can run free.

Nicholas is such a thinker. He is a boy who "went for walks in the universe" and in his wanderings discovered a silver honkabeest whom everyone told him was unreal. But he is not put off; Nicholas persists against the slings and arrows of the outside. On the way, like Christian in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Nicholas meets some very interesting dramatis personae: Mister Hoobody (a "grubby sort of fairy with manners of a pig"), a worm who plays hockey with a toothpick, Oilcan Harry, the Cat and the Wizard who miraculously find one another in a rough cold world and provide mutual entertainment at a fabulous dinner in the deserted Casa Loma, and Ookpik, the magical character who is part of our "true" and "native" mythology. He dances away the zoo and frees all those in children cages. In the world of Nicholas, children and animals live in zoos and parks and are a part of a world of bicycles and parking meters. Ookpik offers them salvation:

> Ookpik
> Ookpik
> By your
> Grace
> Help us
> Live in
>
> Our own
> Space.

The concept of "our own space" is, of course, the key to Lee's adult poetry. He has spent a lifetime, from that early poem at age 16 until now, trying consciously and painfully to free himself from the British and American garrison. He is looking for a "Canadian" space, one he can live in and one he can name:

> The words I knew said Britain, and they said America, but they did not say my home. They were always and only about someone else's life. All the rich structures of language were present, but the currents that animated them were not home to the people who used the language here.
> ....[After reading George Grant] To find one's tongue-tied sense of civil loss and bafflement given words at last, to hear one's own most inarticulate hunches out loud, because most immediate in the bloodstream--and not prettied up, and in prose like a fastidious groundswell--was to stand erect at last in one's own space.

Lee extends the quest for space from the philosophical realm to that of history. He doesn't moralize or sentimentalize, nor does he give propaganda in the name of children's literature. He calls upon a real Canadian hero and begs that his spirit become an active agent for our own awareness:

Mackenzie was a crazy man,
He wore his wig askew.
He donned three bulky overcoats
In case the bullets flew.
Mackenzie talked of fighting
While the fight went down the drain
But who will speak for Canada?
Mackenzie, come again!

Lest the reader fear that Lee gets out of control, there is a poem which even shows Lee seeing himself. It is called "Homage to Moose Factory, Ont." and it is a good-natured and wise satire on too much trumpet-sounding from our nationalists.

But the poems are undoubtedly Canadian. Sheila Egoff from the University of British Columbia, a leading critic of children's literature, has written of the poetry of this country. She sees it as being small, insignificant, and poorly written. She calls this work by Lee, "one of the greatest gifts that Canadian children have had for a long time."

Lee is not the "onlie begettor" of these new Canadian classics. The poems are accompanied by splendid illustrations by Frank Newfeld, who will get secondary billing in the reviews though this is unfair. Both artists complement each other, and obviously this is a shared epiphany. The drawings are exactly right for the poems. They are strange and compelling pictures of wonder which bear re-examination. Their fantastic and vivid colours are superb. It is hard to describe how fine they are, how necessary and perfect for the poems. Like the verses, the drawings stay in the mind's eye of child and adult alike. These two fine books may prove that the separate categories, as everyone has probably discovered already, don't really exist. Wordsworth knew it well: "The child is father of the man." These two excellent books form a good bridgehead.

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