

Changing Places

BARBARA HERD

Alphonse Has An Accident, Susan Hiebert. Peguis (Winnipeg), 1974. 30 pp. \$4.00 cloth.

Gabrielle and Selena, Peter Desbarats. Scholastic-Tab, 1973. 28 pp. paper.

Alphonse has an Accident is a somewhat pedestrian title for a pleasant little story set in Manitoba. Alphonse Thickfoot, a nine year old Cree Indian, is badly burned when playing with matches on his Indian Reserve 400 miles north of Winnipeg. His stay in the hospital in Winnipeg is not only a healing experience but a learning one for Alphonse, since he has never been off the reservation.

Alphonse seems to be a real little boy; he responds to peer pressure when his friend Tommy wants to play with matches, even though Alphonse knows it would be disobeying his grandfather. But at the time, losing Tommy's friendship is more important than *maybe* Grandfather finding out. Alphonse

didn't know what he was going to do, but he didn't want Tommy to leave. It would be too lonely without his best friend. "Come back, I'll play just a little bit," Alphonse added as he saw Tommy stop in his tracks.

However, the author isn't always consistent. From his bed in the hospital Alphonse could see a skyscraper and longed to get inside. "How could a nine year old Cree boy who did not have any friends in the city get to see inside it?" I doubt if Alphonse would think of himself as "a nine year old Cree boy"...wouldn't he just think "How can I get inside?"

The descriptions of life on the reserve and coming to the city for the first time are well done. In a few sentences the author tells enough to set the scene: his grandfather gone fishing during the week, Alphonse living with Aunt Mary while he was away, the rows of empty gas barrels on the dock. Enough is told for a city reader to get the flavor of Alphonse's life without going into great explanations. There is only one sentence that explains: "Alphonse's home is on a Cree Indian Reserve, about 400 miles north of the city of Winnipeg." Actually, even this information could have been woven more subtly into the story.

Alphonse's reaction to the hospital, nurses, and city tell even more about his life at home. The first nurse he sees has blond hair: Alphonse thought golden hair was only in pictures or church windows. He doesn't talk at first, partly out of shyness, partly because he is just learning English and the hospital staff doesn't speak Cree. His favorite thing is the skyscraper. He is amazed at the number of lights and windows.

The day he leaves for home, the blond nurse takes Alphonse on a tour of the Richardson Building, his skyscraper. Alphonse is struck by the tall buildings, the number of people, the noise "almost like a song" of the city. One reaction children will enjoy is Alphonse's to a doorman:

Alphonse could see a man in a blue uniform standing at the big glass doors. When they came near, he opened one for them. Alphonse liked that. He thought he would like to have such a man at his cabin at home to open the door for him!

Running through the story is Alphonse's worry about his grandfather--he had been sent to Winnipeg while his grandfather was away fishing. Grandfather could not write in English and Alphonse could not yet read Cree, so there is no communication while Alphonse is in the hospital. So Alphonse worries that his grandfather must be angry. He doesn't know if his grandfather will be glad to have him home. Alphonse feels guilty about his disobedience. His trip home from Winnipeg is almost all night on the bus, then by station wagon to his cabin. But his grandfather greets him with a smile and a hug and Alphonse knows all is well.

I found a few items bothering me as I read the book. The one nurse who takes special interest in Alphonse is "the nurse" until just before Alphonse gets on the bus to go home, when suddenly she is Miss Hart. Even more bothersome is the absence of medical details in the hospital. The hospital is notified that a very badly burned boy is coming. But there is no mention of pain except when Alphonse first awakens to find his arms bandaged and "slowly, painfully, he looked around." I would think that some information about his recovery would be of interest. There is also no mention of how long he was in Winnipeg.

The other thing that bothered me was the author's tendency to preach. The worst example is Alphonse's reunion with grandfather:

There was so much to tell his grandfather. So very much. But all that could wait. At the moment Alphonse just wanted to hug his grandfather hard. And be glad that he still loved him, even after disobeying his orders and having a bad accident. He was very glad that grandfathers loved boys enough to forgive them.

That is the very last page in the book. The last two lines could be omitted and the relationship of the two shown through their actions.

However, as I re-read the book and tried to think of various seven, eight and nine year olds I would give it to, I decided that this is a minor problem. To me the story is a simple one, but a bit preachy in places. The former is not a bad characteristic, the story is interesting and readable, and Alphonse himself is likeable. I don't think a child would be put off by the bits of preaching, if he or she should notice it.

The print is large and there are black and white sketches scattered through the book. (Instead of the illustrator's name appearing on the

title page, each picture is signed and dated. I found this rather pretentious.)

Alphonse has an Accident is not a great book, but it is a pleasant story and a realistic one, about a present day Indian, and will appeal to children.

Gabrielle and Selena, by Global T.V.'s Peter Desbarats, is not as simple as *Alphonse*, mainly because it is about two children and their families, not one. Gabrielle and Selena, two eight year olds, have been close friends all their lives. One day Gabrielle says she is bored with the sameness of her family and routine. So the girls decide to exchange places, Gabrielle going to Selena's as Selena, and Selena going to Gabrielle's home as Gabrielle. They arrive "home" at dinner time and their parents quickly fall in with the game. They serve food and assign chores that make each friend wonder about the other:

"Well!" said Selena to herself. "No wonder Gabrielle wanted to be me. Omelettes. Sweeping the kitchen. Going to bed at seven-thirty. No television. This is a terrible way to live."

and

"Boy!" said Gabrielle to herself. "I never realized that Selena was such a nut. Washing dishes. Sleeping on the back porch."

The two girls decide they would really rather live with their own families. As they are returning home they meet. And they find out that actually Selena can't stand turnips and Gabrielle hates omelettes. And, that their parents had turned the game into a joke on them.

This story has more action to it than *Alphonse*. It will probably appeal more to children because they will be able to empathize with Gabrielle and Selena; exchanging places with a friend probably has occurred to most children. The author brings in various other things typical of children. Gabrielle and Selena put their noses together and look into each other's eyes: "Selena started to laugh. 'Your eyes look funny,' she said. 'They look like one big eye in the middle of your forehead.'"

Readers will enjoy Selena's father explaining why Gabrielle as Selena can't have chocolate ice cream as dessert--because it had made Selena sick at her last birthday party. "Maybe I'd like it now," said Gabrielle. "Maybe I could try a little bit." But Selena's father doesn't agree: if she was sick she wouldn't be able to do the dishes.

The visual appeal of *Gabrielle and Selena* is strong. There are black and white illustrations by Nancy Grossman on almost every page, often more illustration than text on a two page spread. There is enough text and it is old enough in content to take the book out of the picture book range. The illustrations add to the story--this is the only way the reader

finds out that Selena and her family are black. The racial aspect is part of the story, but makes little difference to the plot: Gabrielle and Selena just happen to be one white child and one black. (It's like Ezra Jack Keats' Peter just happening to be black.) The author's description of the two girls at the beginning of the book does not explain that Selena is black, just that she has "large brown eyes. If you took a bowl made of dark wood and filled it with rainwater, that was the color of Selena's eyes." The descriptions are quite sensitive and almost poetic.

Unlike *Alphonse* where there is pain, separation, fear (although happiness, as well), *Gabrielle and Selena* is a happy book all the way through. It is a delightful, humorous story to be read and enjoyed by eight or nine year olds.

Barbara Herd has an M.Sc. in Library Science from Columbia University and has worked as a librarian in New York, England and Ottawa.

Early Canadian Folklore

GILLIAN THOMAS

Canadian Wonder Tales, Cyrus Macmillan. Clarke Irwin, 1918-1922 rev. 1974. 2 vols. in 1. \$14.75 cloth.

Cyrus MacMillan collected the tales which appear in this edition just before World War 1 and acted as the meticulous folklorist of his day in that he undoubtedly took great pains to hear the stories at first hand and to produce written versions which followed the originals as closely as possible. However, to our modern judgement, he was a biased recorder. Although many of the tales belong to various Indian traditions, he gathered many of them, not from the Indians themselves, but from European settlers. Part of MacMillan's aim as a folklorist was to show that Canadian folklore "matched" that of Europe in both senses of the word. His thesis title at Harvard, "The ballads and folk tales of Canada and their relation to those of Europe" points to this intent. He seems to have perceived the European tradition as paramount and to have regarded the Indian tales as of greater or lesser interest according to how closely they compared with European forms and motifs. As a result of this bias the tales which make up the second half of the book (originally published as a separate volume) are dubbed "Canadian Fairy Tales" although the "fairy tale" is a specifically European form of comparatively recent development. In the same way, MacMillan clearly saw no conflict in lumping together stories with French sources and the more ancient Indian stories despite the differences in their origins.