Tour Guide to Children's Literature

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Sheila Egoff, *The Republic of Childhood, A Critical Guide to Canadian Children's Literature,* 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, 1975, 335 pp. $10.95 cloth, $6.95 paper.

If the physical and psychological topography of a country can be judged by its children's literature, then a foreigner might suppose that Canada is still a romantic wilderness inhabited chiefly by Indians, Eskimos and wild animals. Furthermore, the title of Sheila Egoff's *The Republic of Childhood, a Critical Guide to Canadian Children's Literature* implies that in such a country a community based on youth and innocence may enjoy Keatsian realms of gold--provided it is not put off by the "sentimental dishonesty", the "dreary similarity", the "manipulated plots" and papier-mâché characters of a state whose progress must be measured "not author by author but book by book." Professor Egoff performs the role of "tour guide" (John Moss's term for Canadian critics in general), escorting students, teachers, librarians, parents through a somewhat rocky terrain.

The first edition of her book, issued in 1967, explored Indian legends, history and biography, historical fiction, the realistic animal story, fantasy, folk and fairy tales, stories (outdoor life and adventure, mystery, city life, careers, sports), illustration and design, and early Canadian children's books. To these have been added, in the revised edition, picture books and picture story books, a considerable amount of Indian and Eskimo material, and, as a sort of *ultima Thule,* a thinly populated area devoted to poetry and plays. Some reorganization has occurred with folk tales joining legends under the heading "Literature of the Oral Tradition" at the beginning of the book and history and biography being demoted to a less important position under "And All the Rest". As one would expect, discussions of books published since 1965 have been added, swelling the contents from 287 to 335 pages. Each chapter concludes with an annotated check list of relevant titles.

Professor Egoff's standards are high, inordinately so, some may think. In the introduction to the first edition, she asserted:

> I have endeavoured to apply, first of all, general literary standards, those that would be accepted in judging writing for adults. Should children's books be rated in any lesser way? Secondly, I have tried to judge Canadian writing in comparison with the best modern writing, particularly from Great Britain and the United States.

One cannot quarrel with her refusal to placate the gods of nationalism by accepting inferior materials simply because they are "made in

Canada''; and one must applaud her refusal to treat children's literature in a condescending manner. As has been recognised for at least a hundred years, the appeal of good children's books is not limited to good children. Many of the qualities which one seeks in books for the young are those which one expects to find in the best of literature generally -- honesty, imaginative appeal, stylistic precision, and so on. Where these qualities are present, readership is not restricted by barriers of age.

So the authors of Canadian historical fiction must take their chances with the likes of Rosemary Sutcliff and Hester Burton while our fantasists must shape themselves to the mantle of Garner and Tolkien.

In spite of such authors as Catherine Clark, Christie Harris, and Ruth Nichols, fantasists have found the Canadian wilderness unmanageable:

> there is simply so much geographical space that the Canadian imagination cannot embrace it, reorder it--or escape it. The land also lacks traditional associations. Build a fantasy on King Arthur and place names abound--from Mount Badon to Tintagel . . . . Without such aids the Canadian landscape seems inhospitable or even inimical to fantasy, and so it all too often remains a framework for, rather than a participant in, the story; that is, it does not help to shape the events.

Historical novelists, too, have produced ''a succession of failures because they are more concerned with didacticism than creativity.'' Fortunately, the condemnation heaped on such series as the ''Buckskin Books'' and the ''Frontier Books'' is not extended to Roderick Haig-Brown's *The Whale People* (1962), Edith Sharp's *Nkwala* (1958), John Craig's *The Long Return* (1959), Christie Harris's *West with the White Chiefs* (1965), James McNamee's *My Uncle Joe* (1962), and other titles comprising a list sufficiently long to ameliorate Egoff's fierce dismissal of the genre.

In contrast to the failures, our nostalgic commitment to wilderness has inspired a remarkably high proportion of well-written realistic animal stories. Roberts, Seton, Grey Owl, Mowat, Haig-Brown and Bodsworth are authors whose names are known beyond our borders and whose individual styles are notable literary achievements. Egoff's qualification that ''realistic animal stories, taken as a group, present a rather static composite picture'' perhaps ignores the fact that children cannot get too much of what they consider a good thing.

Probably the most satisfactory chapter in *The Republic of Childhood* is that devoted to Indian and Eskimo legends. Egoff finds much to admire here--the ''robust and full-blooded tone'' of Kathleen Hill's *Glooscap and His Magic: Legends of the Wabanaki Indians* (Toronto, 1963), the ''ease and polish'' of George Clutesi's *Son of Raven, Son of Deer: Fables of the Tse-shaht People* (Sidney, B.C., 1967), the universal significance of Father Maurice Métayer's *Tales from the Igloo* (Edmonton, 1972). The scholarly way in which she relates Canadian materials to the archetypes of world literature is illustrated by her comments on the Indian culture heroes.:

> The motivation of these heroes was not always purposeful, however. Much of the work they accomplished for mankind

was through trickery and even mischief. Therefore Indian legends often lack the dignity that is found in other mythologies. The image of the Greek Titan, Prometheus, chained to a rock by Zeus as punishment for bringing fire to mankind, has the awesome and direct qualities of sacrifice and perpetual punishment. Indian versions of the same story lack both impact and simplicity because the theft has either a suggestion of futility or an air of the ridiculous.

Egoff makes effective use of quotations from published tales and from anthropological sources in order to define the characteristics of the genre. She notes, too, that the recent appearance of books by Indians themselves is an important trend since it enables us to read versions of oral materials unshaped by the patterns of European tradition that white redactors are likely to impose. Although myths, hero tales and folk tales were originally devised for the edification and delight of an entire social group, their imagery, simplicity, and humour make them particularly appealing to children. (It does not follow that *all* collections of native legends are suitable for the young; *vide* H. T. Schwarz's recently published *Tales from the Smokehouse.*)

Another area in which notable gains have been made since the first edition of *The Republic* came out is that of book illustration. Elizabeth Cleaver, Laszlo Gal, Ann Blades, William Kurelek, Frank Neufeld, and Noval Morriseau have brought to the children's book graphic skills and imaginative concepts hampered only by the public's reluctance to buy expensive books in large numbers.

So many acceptable books does Egoff bring to our attention that her frequent depreciations sometimes seem the complaints of a Widow Douglas "grumbling a little over the victuals, though there warn't really anything the matter with them." She is perhaps too determinedly set on defining what children *should* like without taking sufficient account of what they *do* like. Nor can I always agree with her critical judgements. Having recently re-read *Anne of Green Gables* and *Emily of New Moon,* I think that it is an underestimation of L. M. Montgomery to dismiss her with a few derogatory remarks:

> Montgomery belongs to that breed of writers who give themselves away in their second and succeeding books. Of Anne, we are inclined to say "Her I can accept," but the increasingly sentimental dishonesty of the succeeding books tends to destroy the first. Only the most avid Anne fans will refuse to admit that the appealing qualities of the first book are soon dissipated. It is sad but true that the Anne books continue to evoke great nostalgia from many adults to whom much vastly superior modern Canadian writing is unknown.

Similarly dishonest in Egoff's view is Sheila Burnford's *The Incredible Journey.* Yet it has proved enormously popular with adults as well as children because of its realistic depiction of animal behaviour.

Reviewers are never satisfied with the limits which authors of necessity must impose on their materials. I am no exception. If we are to consider Fred Bodsworth's *The Last of the Curlews* and Markoosie's *Harpoon of the Hunter,* for example, as children's books, why not Emily Carr's *Klee Wyck* and *The Book of Small,* W. O. Mitchell's *Who Has*

Seen the Wind and *Jake and the Kid*, and even Mazo de la Roche's Jalna novels which have enthralled at least two generations of teen-age girls?

But *The Republic of Childhood* is far more than a critical evaluation of individual works. Many contemporary concerns are grist for the author's mill--misguided nationalism, fadism, the "it doesn't matter what they read as long as they read" theory, the base materialism of publishers, the mediocrity of commercial series, the impact of new technology upon the Eskimo, the desirability of acquainting Canadian children with their own history. The book is not to be valued for its uniqueness alone--is there another critical guide to Canadian children's literature?--but for its comprehensiveness, its skillful definition of genre, and even its asperity. One suspects that Sheila Egoff, like the archetypal Victorian parent, mentally prefaces her chastisements with an assurance that "this hurts me more than it hurts you."

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Imaginative Zoology

SHIRLEY LORIMER

The Nature of Birds, The Nature of Mammals, and *The Nature of Fish* (in the series *The Illustrated Natural History of Canada*). Natural Science of Canada Ltd., 105 Bond St., Toronto, 1974. 160 pp. ea. $6.95 cloth.

On almost any bookshelf there is a commodious niche available for books of the type represented here. They are neither as large and heavy to handle nor as expensive as the coffee-table book; they are pleasanter to browse in than a subject encyclopaedia; and, unlike identification guides, they are topic-oriented. For the child who is carrying out a school project in natural history, or who has simply an awakened interest in the field, they possess an unparalleled quantity of information, presented accurately and with authority, but also with brevity. There are coloured photographs, full-page paintings, black and white illustrations, all designed to feed the imagination as well as to illustrate zoology. Small children, who may find the text too difficult, can enjoy the pictures. Adults can not only take pleasure in the books but can brush up, in not too much time and with no effort at all, on contemporary topics in the field.

Having said that much in praise, I must, unhappily, turn churlish, and wish that Natural Science of Canada, or more particularly Jack