Jean Little's Latest

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Stand in the Wind, Jean Little. Illust. Emily Arnold McCully. Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1975. 247 pp. $6.66 cloth.

I remember reading somewhere that whereas American children's fiction nowadays tends to deal with "real life" things such as parental divorce, alienation, drugs and the like, in Canadian children's fiction kids still go to summer cottages and ride ponies. This made it sound as though our fiction for children was aeons out of date and naive to the point of silliness. Well, I am not one who believes that kids should be muffled up in security blankets of niceness and a lack of knowledge of the real world, but what *is* the real world? Surely, many-faceted. Aren't summer cottages and ponies as real as parental divorce? I grant you, many urban children in depressed areas do not get to experience summer cottages. I also grant that we need many more books dealing with the real-life situations of city children, the children of immigrants and so on. But I do not believe it is necessary to present children totally with the gloom-and-doom view of life, nor do I think it would be an accurate reflection of most children's lives in this country to do so. The summer cottage experience is still a pretty common one to Canadian children, and I'm delighted that Jean Little, in her new book, deals with a subject which will, I am convinced, touch chords in the hearts of many of today's children.

Martha Winston, about twelve years old, is excited at the prospect of going to a camp. The Winston family--parents, Martha, older sister Ellen, and two younger brothers--have been spending the summer at their cottage. Mrs. Swann, an old school friend of Mrs. Winston's, is arriving for a visit with her two daughters, so the Winstons have to go back to the city house for a week, as there isn't enough room in the cottage. The opportunity is being taken, therefore, to give Martha what she longs for--a week at a real camp. Martha, who envisages camp life as a kind of paradise, is all packed and ready to go, complete with flashlight and a plastic dish for her soap.

But alas, disaster strikes. Martha, at the eleventh hour, slips and breaks her arm. It isn't too serious a break, but the arm will have to be in a sling for some time, and the camp refuses to take the responsibility. Martha, usually ebullient and humourous, is cast into the depths. To cheer her up, it is decided that the four girls--Martha and Ellen, together with Kit and Rosemary Swann--will stay the week by themselves at the cottage, which will, hopefully, be nearly as much an adventure as going to camp. Ellen, who is about fourteen and is capable and rather motherly, will be in charge.

It sounds good, but upon meeting the Swann girls, who are respectively about the same ages as Martha and Ellen, the prospects for the week don't look so rosy. Kit, the younger girl, has been dreadfully over-protected by her mother, and is timid, mousy and horrifyingly tidy. Rosemary, the elder, considers herself a sophisticate and is condescending towards the Winston girls and bossy towards her younger sister. It should be stated right away, however, that neither Martha nor Ellen are portrayed as well-adjusted super-terrific Canadian kids, in contrast to the mother-smothered or spoiled American Swanns. Not at all. One can always be certain, with Jean Little's characters, of true feelings and characteristics. There are no good guys and bad guys; all are ambiguous mixtures. Martha is capable of maliciously hurting Ellen's feelings, and of failing to realize that Rosemary, the snobbish one, is not as secure as she seems. Ellen is capable of treating Martha like a little kid, or of embarrassing her in front of the newcomers. There are also some very perceptive nuances of feeling, as when Martha, having previously and patiently tamed some seagulls, allows Kit to feed them and then feels a sharp and also half-ashamed sense of loss, wanting the birds to be hers alone. The sense and love of place are very strong here, and the descriptions of the shore and the land, although necessarily brief, are tellingly done.

The story is concerned with the ways in which all four begin to adjust to one another's flaws and to discover points of common interest and respect. Stated thus briefly, it may sound as though this were a moral tale. In a sense, all serious writers, whether for children or adults, are moralists at one level, in that they examine both the strengths and weaknesses of individual human relationships and the responsibilities involved in these. This is only a drawback in fiction when it becomes didactic, and Jean Little's writing is not didactic. It has, rather, a sense of faith in the possibilities of human relationships, and that is another thing entirely. These four girls learn something about one another and about themselves through a series of mishaps, through laughter, and through unexpected moments of joy, such as that experienced by Kit in feeding the gulls.

The only overt moralizing which bothered me to some extent occurs when the American-Canadian theme is introduced, and when it turns out that both have some stereotyped concepts of the other's national characteristics. On the other hand, we *do* have stereotyped concepts of each other's national characteristics, and perhaps it is as well that these should be brought into the light and dealt with. The resolution of this situation here, however, seems slightly strained, when they proceed to teach one another their respective national anthems.

The main theme, however, remains that of individual personal relationships. Rosemary keeps putting down Kit, and Martha attempts to bolster up Kit's confidence. Kit turns out to be a whiz at learning card games, but when the four play together, she is so intimidated by Rosemary that she loses when she could have won. This small scene is chilling, and is meant to be. Rosemary does not even realize the effect she is having on her young sister. Thus do members of families unwittingly hurt one another.

The key scene in the book is the one in which Martha, who is

fearless in an outdoors which is familiar to her, drags the reluctant and terrified Kit out into a hugh wind. Kit finds that she can overcome her fear of storms, can indeed "stand in the wind". I like this central image, both theme and title. It works very well indeed, and is never overplayed or unnecessarily explained.

Through a series of humourous scenes which will, I think, appeal to kids very much, the four girls come to a better understanding of one another. Even the intrepid Martha, so fiercely independent, learns that she must follow the faith she tried to give to Kit, to stand in the wind. She still longs for a "real" camp, and tries to make the cottage life into one, with predictable failure. She is disappointed and depressed, ready to give up. But the others, and notably Kit, finally give her, as a true surprise gift, a day and night of "real camp", when they sleep out under the stars. Martha is younger than her sister Ellen, and in some ways, in terms of experiencing life's sadness, she is the youngest of all four girls, but she is at the same time, within herself, actually the strongest. She learns--and this is never explained, only implied, but sensitive children will understand--that it is a good and lucky thing to be strong, but the strong must be able to accept love and help, too.

In the end, the lives of the four are not radically altered. They go back to their own situations; the week is over; the parents reappear. But they go back with some newly found insights which they don't analyse or even totally understand, some sense of growth of the spirit.

It is difficult to say which age group a children's book will appeal to. However, I would say that this book would hit its peak readership among eight to twelve-year-olds. It will probably be put forward as a "girls' book", but I hope that boys will read it as well, not just for what they may learn from it, but because it's a funny and sad and interesting story for all.

The illustrations, by Emily McCully, are vivid sketches, filled with a sense of action and of the external world--the lake and the grasses and the wind. Like this book, they are humourous in the main part, but they contain serious and subtle undertones.

Margaret Laurence, who has written a children's novel, Jason's Quest, *is one of Canada's best known authors of novels for adults. Her most recent novel is* The Diviners.