A Child of the Outports

KENNETH RADU

Good-bye Momma, Tom Moore. Breakwater Books, 1976. 70 pp. $3.95 paper.

Stories and memoirs of childhood abound in Canadian literature. W.O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind*, Fredelle Maynard's *Raisins and Almonds*, Robert de Roquebrune's *Testament de mon enfance*, L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*, as well as works by such writers as Alice Munro, James Reaney, and Margaret Laurence, demonstrate the enduring attraction that the subject has for our writers. But until fairly recently, we have not had stories of Newfoundland childhood. Until the formation of Breakwater Books, perhaps one of the most energetic new publishing houses in this country, literature about Newfoundland life has been limited to notable contributions like Harold Horwood's *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday*. Tom Moore represents a new breed of talented writers who may put Newfoundland more firmly on the map of Canadian children's literature.

Good-by Momma, is a well-written story depicting the compelling experiences of Felix Ryan, a lively and intelligent boy who lived in a Newfoundland outport village a generation ago when local culture still retained its original vitality and distinctiveness. The novel successfully explores the child's emotional turmoil first when his mother dies and later when his father eventually remarries. The value of *Good-bye Momma* is essentially twofold: it provides a sharp, realistic account of various details of outport life without romanticizing; and it describes the complicated inner life of Felix without condescension or sentimentality.

A pleasant and moving nostalgic tone is the result of Moore's narrative technique of recalling childhood from an adult perspective many years after the events. But Felix, the young boy, emerges with gusto and conviction. We see him, very much a child, in day to day encounters with family and friends. The fine prose is that of a mature man, but the voice and emotions depicted are those of an authentic child.

One of the good passages in the novel, concerns Felix's responses on the day of his mother's funeral. The child, not yet fully absorbing and comprehending his loss, is somewhat overwhelmed by the ritual.

> When she died, she went out softly like a light. The next thing I knew she was no longer around. It was a jolt for me to realize this, like when you realize an elevator is no longer rising. The wake followed, but I was too short to see in the coffin and no one offered to lift me up. I

> wandered in and out of the living room where the coffin rested, and walked among the visitors. I was enjoying all the attention being paid to us, and the occasional pat on the head. "And there's little Felix. Poor little fellow." I would try to look as pitiable as possible. Some women would cry over me, and some men would talk to me gravely. Reverend Squires took me aside and told me my mother was in heaven and I must pray for her. When he insisted on my giving him an answer, I told him, yes, I would. That night as I lay alone in my big bed, I couldn't help but wonder why I must pray for her if she were already in heaven. However, I reasoned, Reverend Squires knew more about religious matters than a child like me, so I did as he advised (p. 27).

His grief, in a sense, remains unexorcised until Felix learns about another woman in this father's life through the cruel and taunting words of a boy whom he has just defeated in a fight. Like so many children, Felix has assumed that his father would never remarry and he feels betrayed. Tom Moore gives his young hero a full range of emotions and the boy is fully capable – because he is so humanly depicted – of tremendous anger and wretchedness.

> What was happening to me? I felt frustrated and wretched. There was a cold empty feeling growing in my stomach. It was like a hate, but more passive, like a loneliness (p. 49-50).

His conflict is finally resolved in an extraordinary and memorable scene in the graveyard where Felix's mother lies buried. The boy, unable to accept his father's new wife, instinctively seeks the first and, quite literally, prepares with his friends to battle his father. Understanding and his father's love win the day, however, and Felix is able to say "good-bye momma" and to accept life without her.

Episodic in structure, the novel is composed of scenes of varying dramatic intensity, scenes made vivid by Moore's eye for appropriate detail and by his knowledge of what will hold a child's interest. There is a marvellous tale, for example, told by Felix's grandfather, of seal hunting and survival on the ice. This scene is particularly fine because it is told matter-of-factly, without any attempt to gloss over the events, and because it is an account of an elemental struggle between life and death.

> After an hour we see it was hopeless. The wind were pushing the whole ice pack out to sea faster than we was moving in to land. By now it was dark and snowing and the wind were rising. The sea were choppy and we was all soaking wet. It were time to do something quick if we was to be saved. The two Bonavist' men sat down and began tearing off their clothes. I thought that they was gone crazy, and I shrank away from them. Then they begun wringing the sea water out of their clothes so as they wouldn't freeze (p. 23).

Above all, *Good-bye Momma* succeeds because Felix is presented fully, in various situations and incidents, against a cleanly and accurately

described background of a world very few children, or adults for that matter, know very much about. His angers and joys, his fighting and his friendships, all treated with honesty and insight, are emotions and events with which many children over the age of eight can identify.

Tom Moore shows every sign of becoming a notable writer and I look forward to reading his other works, such as a second children's novel, *Tom Cods, Kids and Confederation*, and a biography, also for young readers, of Sir Wilfred Grenfell, when these books become available on the "mainland." Breakwater Books is also to be congratulated for producing a fairly sturdy, pleasingly designed, and inexpensively priced paperback. A few carefully chosen illustrations, however, would help the non-Newfoundland reader's understanding of what, taken all in all, is still a fairly remote world.

Kenneth Radu's stories and poetry have appeared in various literary periodicals. A resident of Quebec, he has taught children's literature courses at John Abbott College and at Concordia University.

The Animal Story – A Canadian Specialty

WM. H. MAGEE

Great Canadian Animal Stories, ed. by Muriel Whitaker. Illus. by Vlasta van Kampen. Hurtig Publishers, 1978. 232 pp. $12.95 cloth.

During the last century the animal story has become something of a Canadian contribution to literature. In 1894 Margaret Marshall Saunders wrote one of the bestselling Canadian books of all time in *Beautiful Joe*, a sermon on the humane treatment of pets. A few years later, Sir Charles G.D. Roberts explored simple animal psychology in what he declared in *The Kindred of the Wild* (1902) to be the epitome of the animal story. As I have explained in "The Animal Story: A Challenge in Technique" (*The Dalhousie Review*, XLIV: 156-164 [Summer 1964]), he based his claim on the theory of evolution and developed an art which adapts it to fictionalization. Now, Muriel Whitaker shows us in a new anthology how animals have thrived in fiction during the three quarters of a century since Saunders preached and Roberts probed their welfare.