

Does *The Hand of Robin Squires* qualify as “Canadian historical fiction?” It deals with no great issue in Canadian history, uses an uninhabited setting, at time almost “pre-Canadian-history,” and contains no characters who are Canadian (except, perhaps, Actaudin!) But remember that Joan Clark, the author, has chosen an almost 200-year-old, still-living mystery centred at a very real place in present-day Canada, just up the coast from where she spent her childhood, and has used it as the warp upon which to weave her fiction.

It is the tight, patterned weft of her fiction, her plausible story, that makes her book good “Canadian historical fiction”. After reading *The Hand of Robin Squires* I thought of Barbara Smucker’s *Underground to Canada* and Paula Fox’s *The Slave Dancer*. I have made no specific comparisons but remain content in thinking that if this book even suggests comparisons with those two it has something to recommend it, and perhaps something even international and beyond the narrower confines of “Canadian historical fiction.”

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Will the Real Riel Please Stand Up?

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A Very Small Rebellion, Jan Truss. With Essay by Jack Chambers and illustrated by Peter Millward. LeBel Enterprises, 1977. 96 pp., \$6.95 cloth, \$3.95 paperback.

A Very Small Rebellion is the second book by Alberta writer Jan Truss. It follows her highly acclaimed *Birds at the Window* and marks her debut as a writer of children’s fiction. The book, which contains a narrative essay by University of Toronto linguistics professor Jack Chambers, and illustrations by Peter Millward of the University of Alberta Fine Arts Department, was published to commemorate the 91st anniversary of the death of Louis Riel.

More has been written about Louis Riel, perhaps, than about any other figure in Canadian history. Another Alberta writer, Rudy Wiebe, offered us a fictionalized Riel a few years ago in *The Scorched Wood People*. Earlier this year Thomas Flanagan gave us a more historical portrayal through the analysis of documents, diaries and letters in *Louis "David" Riel: Prophet of the New World*. Now, Jan Truss attempts in her work to give the younger reader a look at the man and his times through the eyes of some modern-day Métis children. In this almost impossible task, Ms. Truss is only partly successful.

The design is a clever one. First, take a story with a native theme, featuring one of Canada's most colourful, historic figures and write a fictional account of a Métis child's discovery of Riel. Second, build into the story the idea of a group of children performing a Drama Festival play based on Riel's life. (It so happens that Ms. Truss wrote a play, also entitled, "A Very Small Rebellion", which was performed by Alberta Theatre Projects in Calgary in 1975.) Third, through the play's performance let the children come to realize Riel's importance to the struggle for minority rights. What is the result? A three-in-one, 96-page work that attempts to combine a fictional children's story, a stage play and a historical perspective. Needless to say, this complex combination is not without its problems. To begin with, the fictional narrative alternates chapter by chapter with the historical one. At first, the two do not even appear to be related to one another, but later, fiction and history merge quite harmoniously, and by the end of the book both are at approximately the same point. Although it tends to break up the continuity of reading, this in itself is not the problem. The difficulty becomes clear when one applies a readability formula. I applied the Fry test to the separate elements, and found the fiction is at a grade 4 reading level and the historical essay is at a grade 9 level! To test the hypothesis that this would create problems for the young reader, I asked a number of children, all good readers between the ages of 10 and 14, to read the book and offer their evaluations. Predictably, the younger ones enjoyed the "story" but were turned off by the essay. The older ones thought the story too babyish, and the essay dull.

On the whole, the book would seem to have greatest appeal from grades 4 through 8. I suspect that younger readers would fail to recognize the relationship and interplay between the two (three?) stories. Older readers would certainly dismiss the book as being insignificant on the basis of the opening sentences of the story alone.

Louis Riel's life was surrounded by controversy, and historians even now are re-evaluating his contribution to the development of our country. Was he a statesman who, had fate dealt its hand a little more kindly, might have been one of the Fathers of Confederation? Or was he the dreamer, a martyr, a madman and a rebel? It is not our place to offer a conclusion

here. However, one cannot help but draw attention to the rather simplistic view of history that is presented, even in Mr. Chamber's essay. What this book fails to do is decide what it wants to achieve. Presumably it is intended to be a literary work making a valid social comment, and not a history book. The concern, therefore, is that while literature is viewed as a carefully constructed commentary housed in fiction, history is usually seen as an accurate and unbiased reiteration of facts. Would children at either end of the age spectrum be able to profit from this cotton-candy version of history?

For cotton-candy it is. Riel is pictured as a true martyr, elevated almost to the pinnacle of sainthood. In the view of many historians, he was certainly a revolutionary, a mystic, a visionary who may have been ahead of his time. But he is seen by many as a traitor. In this work, he is portrayed as a quiet, intelligent, studious man who was the hapless victim of circumstance and conspiracy. One questions whether the best interests of history and of our young people are being served by presenting this one-sided image. There is no doubt in my mind that Riel has been misjudged and misunderstood, but my impression of *A Very Small Rebellion* is that the writer has gone too far to the other extreme in attempting to correct the unfortunate image.

Taught by a competent teacher, this book might be an excellent tool both for the discussion of literary design and for the development of social awareness. It could also be used to stimulate discussion or research into a highly relevant, yet frequently misunderstood portion of Canadian history. It shows quite well the relationship that exists between historical and current events. It raises the question, for example, "Did Louis Riel drive a wedge between English and French speaking Canadians whose full effects are only being felt today?"

Even as independent reading, this book does have value for the child who is capable of reading beyond the printed page. It could serve to open avenues of literary and historical exploration that would not only aid their studies, but also enrich their lives in other ways.

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