

Learning to Hold Fast

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Hold Fast, Kevin Major. Illus. by Mark Cserepy. Clarke, Irwin & Co. Ltd., 1978. 200 pp. \$7.95 hardback.

Kevin Major is familiar to readers of *CCL* as the editor of *Doryloads*, a book of Newfoundland writings for young people. His interest in nature and the outdoor life in Newfoundland is reflected on several levels in his novel *Hold Fast*, which is a joint recipient of the Canada Council Language Award prize for 1979.

Hold Fast is a novel surrounded by death. It begins with the burial of Michael's parents, who have been killed in a car crash involving a drunken driver, and ends with his grandfather's death in sickness and old age. In between, we have the struggle of a fourteen-year-old boy to maintain his identity in a world of harshness, ignorance, and insensitivity.

Michael and his younger brother have been used to a free boyhood filled with the pleasures of exploring the Newfoundland coast and the inland woods, skidoing in winter, squid-jigging in October, setting lobster traps and rabbit snares. All of this comes to an abrupt end with their parents' deaths and Michael is sent to St. Albert's to live with his Aunt Ellen and Uncle Ted, whom he barely knows.

Simply coping with the difference in life-style would be traumatic enough without the shock of sudden death. Brief flashbacks reveal Michael's parents to have been energetic people, stern but loving and closely bonded to their children. The household of Uncle Ted and Aunt Ellen, on the other hand, is a kind of death-in-life, ruled by the cruelly autocratic, self-made and scornful Uncle Ted, whose destructive personality has already created a mouse out of his own son and a robot out of his wife.

Into this tense atmosphere arrives Michael, who immediately shows generous sympathy and concern for his oppressed aunt and cousin. Above all, Michael is a realist. Preferring books on naturalism, he will have no truck with detective or science fiction. Although he runs away at several points in the novel, he quickly faces up to reality and is prepared to defend his position with stubbornness and sense, even if it means standing up to the tyrannous Uncle Ted or a bureaucratic bus driver after he has been abused by a drunken fellow passenger.

Michael is faced with other obstacles as well: his outport dialect is mocked by students at school in St. Albert. He has to defend himself in a fight which leads to a painful interview with the principal and subsequent

suspension. Other problems are less insuperable: in a skilfully depicted episode, he copes maturely with his awakening sexuality and his attraction to girls.

We are firmly ensconced in Newfoundland and the most obvious contrast is between the hardy fishing village of Marten and the stereotyped middle-class neighbourhood in St. Albert. Yet, along the way we are given graphic glimpses of squid jigging and the art of snaring and skinning rabbits. We can enjoy Michael's descriptions of these activities and his pride in other aspects of Newfoundland. He is proud of Gander airport, for example, knowing full well that Montreal's or Toronto's might outdo it in size.

Hold Fast is divided into three sections, each of which contains the motif of escape and return to reality by the hero. The first escape is simply a brief but meaningful run to the seashore during the burial of his parents; the second, also brief, is a running away from the circumstances concerning Michael's fight with a classmate. The third escape, more elaborate and adventurous, is a kind of initiation rite into young manhood and an assertion of pride in his heritage when he "borrows" a car and survives by his wits for two wintry days in the washroom of a deserted campsite. These three escapes have considerable character-building power and when Michael is faced with his grandfather's death, there is no running away: "In the cemetery I watched the casket go into the ground, and never once did I move from the spot where I stood."

Probably what one notices most readily about this novel is the style of the hero-narrator. His colourful, earthy, rhythmic idiom may jar at first, but then it settles into warm, colloquial undulation:

All the way up the sidewalk along Alexander Street we was laughing like crazy, running sometimes, she dragging me by the hand, me wasting time by trying to tell her I had twisted my ankle. Cripes, if anyone heard us they must a thought we was cracked. Too bad.

The diction is salted with four-letter words too well known to fourteen-year-olds but there is an occasional arresting phrase which rolls out of the narrator just as naturally: "Downstairs, me and Brent walked in on a kitchenful of miserable silence." One wishes there were more of these.

A definite weakness in the novel is Kevin Major's delineation of adults. Admittedly, there is always a difficulty in portraying adults in children's books. Either they come off as weak, flat characters as in E. Nesbit's *The Treasure Seekers* or they are merely absent for the better part of the action as in Arthur Ransome's *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*. Quite obviously, Mr. Major sees adults in *Hold Fast* as symbolic destroyers of freedom and naturalness in human relations – qualities of life that are so precious to Michael. Whether it is the busdriver, the official at the airport, the principal or Uncle Ted, Michael must face a world of repression and red tape totally foreign to his upbringing. The only adult who can communicate with

Michael is his grandfather, but they share only brief memories before being separated at the beginning. Yet, it is surely a falsification of reality – in this most realistic of novels – to view adults as a predictable series of Uncle Teds.

In spite of this stereotyping, the novel does work – and work admirably. Kevin Major, according to the note on the dust jacket, would have us believe that his novel “is a plea for us Newfoundlanders to be like certain of the species of seaweed that inhabit our shores, which, when faced with the threat of being destroyed by forces they cannot control, evolve an appendage to hold them to the rocks, a holdfast.”

The message is not just for Newfoundlanders. The values emphasized here are some of the most significant and universal: pride in oneself and one’s heritage, courage to express and hold to one’s opinions, the necessity to find a balance between emotion and reason and to cultivate a fine sensitivity for others and absolute honesty in assessing social relations.

Hold Fast may be a novel surrounded by death, but it pulses with an unbounded love of life which is attractive and meaningful. It well deserves the award it has received.

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Une nouvelle grammaire française

LOUISE VANHEE-NELSON

Eveil à la Grammaire, Livre 1, Gérard Boulier, Michel Broschart, Alain Thomas. Illus. de Denise Chabot et Georges Grammat. Editions Champlain Ltée, 1978. 80 pp. \$4.45 hardcover. \$4.35 Teacher’s Guidebook.

La composition d’une grammaire est oeuvre difficile, surtout au niveau le plus élémentaire. Les auteurs – Gérard Boulier, instituteur à l’Ecole Publique Gabrielle Roy à Toronto, Michel Broschart, directeur de l’Ecole St. Noël Chabanel à Downsview, et Alain Thomas, chargé de cours à l’Université de Toronto – ont tâché de relier la grammaire et la communication tout en utilisant une terminologie de base. Le livre de l’élève est accompagné d’un guide pédagogique indispensable à l’éducateur.

Une grande importance est accordée à l’étude des pronoms sujets, d’opposition (ici, là-bas) et aux niveaux linguistiques. Le point de départ fort concret permet à l’enfant d’exprimer son identité et de déterminer celle