Monica Hughes: An Overview

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Professionals – librarians, teachers, booksellers – familiar with even a few of Monica Hughes' eight published works recognize her as one of the best Canadian – and perhaps world – authors of juvenile fiction at work today. Teenagers – including those who normally have no interest whatsoever in science fiction – respond as favorably, if with less comprehension of the reason: they anticipate each new title with the enthusiasm of *Star Wars* fans about to see *The Empire Strikes Back*. But although Mrs. Hughes' audience is both as devoted and as diverse as George Lucas' and, as will be demonstrated in a later issue of *CCL*, for many of the same reasons, she has yet to attract the critical recognition and wide Canadian readership her work merits. The present two-part study is designed, on the one hand, to introduce all of her works to those unfamiliar with the entire corpus and, on the other, to demonstrate that the best of her work is as multi-dimensional in theme, scope, narrative content, and literary technique as those works we usually think of as "serious" adult literature. Her work is as superior to what is typical of juvenile fiction as are *Who Has Seen the Wind* and *The Wind in the Willows* (both of which it resembles in many ways). It is not simply "science fiction" any more than *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is: both she and Orwell (and, again, in similar ways) so transcend their nominal common genre that the classification becomes meaningless.

Curiously, few are aware of how essentially Canadian a writer Monica Hughes is. As the overview of her work which follows will reveal, however, not only are many of her locales and subjects explicitly Canadian, but even the works set in new and distant worlds are permeated by uniquely Canadian themes. Are there, for example, more relevant "Canadian" themes than those central to her novels: the exploitation of natural resources by multi-national conglomerates? or the varieties of alienation experienced by immigrants to "new worlds"? or the importance of adaptation to hostile environments for survival?

As is a Canadian tradition, Mrs. Hughes (of Edmonton) is better known abroad than here. *Crisis on Conshelf Ten*, for example, has been published in France, Belgium, Poland, Finland, Italy, as well as in the United States and England; *The Tomorrow City* in France, Belgium, and Finland; *The Ghost Dance Caper* – set in present day Alberta and dealing with a boy's

efforts to come to terms with his mixed Indian/white heritage – has been published in Germany as well as in Australia – where it is used as a school text! The two most recent novels were published in the Netherlands and the United States at the same time as in England and Canada.

The materials which follow in this issue of *CCL* comprise an overview of the works of Monica Hughes: six novels and two novellas. These are outlined, in chronological order, by date of publication. Bibliographical information is provided with each title: when there is a Canadian edition of a work, only the Canadian publisher is cited; addresses are provided in two instances where these may prove useful. The six novels were all first published in England, *Crisis on Conshelf Ten* by Copp Clark, and the remaining five by Hamish Hamilton; English dates of publication are the same in all cases as Canadian.

This overview appears as a necessary preface to a fuller study of themes, styles, and structures in Monica Hughes' work. The article which will appear as a sequel will also examine the ways in which Monica Hughes' novels have been treated by Canadian publishers and distributors. A major portion of the blame for the author's relative obscurity in Canada is attributable to the current state of publication and distribution.

1. *Gold-Fever Trail: A Klondike Adventure*, with illustrations by Patricia Peacock (J.M. LeBel Enterprises, P.O. Box 4224, Edmonton, Alberta, 1974. 92 pp. $5.95 hardback, $2.95 paperback.) Monica Hughes' only Canadian historical novella is, unfortunately, all but unknown outside of Alberta. It is excellent; it should be considered by any teacher in Canada dealing with the Gold-rush period. (The book was originally commissioned as an "assist" for Social Studies programs.)

The simple plot concerns thirteen-year-old Harry and his eleven-year-old sister Sarah, who face separation when their mother dies; their father is prospecting for gold in the Yukon but his whereabouts are unknown. To avoid being sent to orphanages, the pair stowaway on a ship from Victoria to Skagway, then follow an overland route to the Klondike. They find their father, of course, after appropriately exciting adventures – including the discovery of some gold for themselves.

The major interest in the novel, however, is the richness of detail used to bring to life the period and the search for gold. The novel is carefully researched, and gives an impressive picture of daily life.

2. *Crisis on Conshelf Ten* (Copp Clark, 1975. 144 pp., $4.25 hardcover.) Monica Hughes' first novel is epic in scope, structure, and theme. Experimental stations, both on the continental shelves underseas and on the Moon, are imagined as having grown into self-contained societies by 2005, each with its distinctive values and lifestyles. Both Conshelf and Moon societies, however, remain colonies of the United Nations on Earth, and

both want independence under U.N. mandate so they can control their own development and stop exploitation of their resources by multi-national conglomerates.

Sixteen-year-old Kepler Masterson, the first child born on the Moon, accompanies his father, Moon governor, on a diplomatic mission to present the case for Moon independence to the U.N. Because he was born and reared totally on Moon, Kepler cannot cope with Earth gravity; he is sent to Conshelf 10 where gravity underseas is offset by SCUBA equipment and water pressure. All of Kepler's values are called into question by Conshelf attitudes: in place of the regimented, impersonal society on the Moon, Conshelfers value individuality and freedom of self-expression in all areas of life. Young revolutionaries, led by Kepler's new friend Hilary and her brother, are determined to force a break with "Topside" (Earth) by destroying offshore mining equipment. Many of the revolutionaries have had themselves transformed by surgery into "gillmen" (capable of taking oxygen directly from the water like fish.)

Kepler takes a dangerous middle position between his father's diplomacy and passive resistance and the active, property-destroying revolutionaries. It is his heroism – a blend of diplomacy and revolutionary tactics – which resolves both Moon and Conshelf crises.

The colonies described in *Crisis on Conshelf* (and in *Earthdark*) are based on fairly straightforward sophistications of presently existing technologies such as SCUBA equipment, underseas exploration vehicles, space modules and shuttles. In addition, all the "facts" about life both underseas and on the Moon – the effects of water pressure and relative gravities on physiology, for example – have been carefully researched and, so far as the science-oriented students I have consulted and I myself can tell, are completely accurate.

Methuen (of England, not Canada) has acquired Canadian and U.S. paperback rights to *Crisis*; it is scheduled for paperback publication in January 1981 in the Magnet series.

3. *Earthdark* (Hamish Hamilton, London, 1977; distributed in Canada by Thomas Nelson & Sons. 122 pp. $11.50 hardcover.) The author's problem in *Earthdark* was to flesh out Moon society in such a way that it is consistent with its outlines in *Conshelf* and simultaneously suitable for new themes. In this novel, Kepler returns to his home on Moon with his father bringing the new U.N. mandate; conglomerate exploitation is, in theory, to cease immediately. Enforcement, however, is impossible until the U.N. mission arrives. The action takes place during the interim.

Kepler finds that everything on the Moon has changed during his three months on Earth; the careful reader sees that the only change is in Kepler's perspective. Forced back into a barracks-like communal existence after the

freedom of Conshelf life, Kepler is miserable, alienated from his former friends and even from Ann, the girl whom psychologists have determined he is to marry at eighteen. Kepler rebels in a number of ways, all psychologically realistic and parallel to contemporary adolescent rebellion.

Reconciled with Ann, the two steal supplies and a vehicle, and follow a map into the "Earthdark" region of the Moon, that side of the satellite never visible from Earth. Adventures with villains and double agents follow. Resolution of the plot ultimately, however, depends upon the youngsters' intimate knowledge of, and ability to adapt to, the Moon's hostile environment. The novel ends with the opening of a new frontier on the Moon, one made possible by an ecological approach to local conditions.

4. *The Ghost Dance Caper* (Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1978. 122 pp. $7.95 hardcover.) Monica Hughes was initially unable to publish this, her first modern novel, in Canada – in spite of the fact that it is set in Alberta and centers totally on Canadian materials and themes. The Nelson edition, which was, in fact, printed and bound in England, was issued here after the original Hamish Hamilton English edition. The novel is currently being used as a school text in Australia.

Fourteen-year-old Tom is the son of a white mother and a Blackfoot father who has left the reservation to become a highly successful lawyer in an unnamed Alberta city. Tom's great-grandfather remains on the Blackfoot reservation as Chief. The novel concerns itself with Tom's attempts to come to terms with his multiple heritages, to reconcile the conflicting demands of each.

The split within Tom is paralleled by a family split. Every Sunday two rituals are followed: father and mother argue violently in front of Tom about his weekly visit to his great-grandfather on the reservation. His mother says: "He comes home in a daze with his mind filled with crazy dreams, and it takes him half the week to settle down to school again." (2) His father knows that Tom's visits are important to the "old man", and essential to Tom: his great-grandfather is helping him find himself as he approaches manhood.

Tom comes to believe that if he and his great-grandfather can re-enact the ancient "ghost dance" ritual together, he will see a vision which will help him choose the right path in life. The first part of the "caper" is Tom's "reclaiming" tribal property from the local museum at night. He and the old man perform the required ritual, but no "spirit" manifests itself. After more "capers" – including reconciling himself with museum officials – the vision is granted. Tom learns that "I do belong to two worlds. And know how to listen – to myself, I mean – instead of to everybody else telling me what I ought to do." (121)

5. *The Tomorrow City* (Hamish Hamilton, London, 1978; distributed in

Canada by Thomas Nelson & Sons. 137 pp. $10.95 hardcover.) Like an updated variation of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, this novel is set in an obviously very near future. Its locale is Thompsonville, a typical medium-sized North American city.

The father of fourteen-year-old Caro has developed and installed in the city a voice-responsive and voice-responding computer system. The computer will make possible the dream shared by its designer and city officials alike, "a dream of a perfect city, safe and clean and enjoyable to live in."

The computer does not (as many might expect) run amuck; it simply, with flawless logic, begins following its prime directive more literally than its designer intended. Caro begins noticing frightening changes, but her father is inevitably able to see the overall advantages to the city of the computer's manipulations. Father and daughter grow apart.

The situation climaxes while Caro's father is away encouraging other cities to duplicate his brainchild. Caro (joined by friend David who understands more about computer technology than she) decides she must act immediately to save the city. As is typical of Hughes' protagonists, even in moments of crisis the young people are aware of divided loyalties. Caro and David succeed finally, but only at great cost; Caro accepts the consequences, whether temporary or permanent, of her actions.

6. "The Beckoning Lights" in *Western Moods,* ed. Theresa M. Ford, pp. 227-293. (Alberta Education, Devonian Building, 11160 Jasper Avenue, Edmonton, Alberta, T5K 0L2. 1979.) *Western Moods* is an anthology used in Alberta schools; the overriding theme is the many moods of the West. The Monica Hughes novella depicts "An Uncanny Mood." The anthology is not normally sold to the general public, but copies could be procured through the address above.

"The Beckoning Lights" depicts an encounter with a UFO. Central characters are twins Julie and Jack who are able to communicate telepathically with each other so long as they are not separated by any great distances. Although twins, they are highly dissimilar: Jack is adventurous and daring; Julie, initially, is shy and filled with fears. Central to the story and the development of her character is her claustrophobia.

While camping in the Rockies with her father and two of his High School students – one white, one Indian – the twins sight a UFO. Jack, predictably, approaches it and he, followed by his father, is taken aboard. Julie is able to conquer her fears sufficiently to communicate with Jack; the aliens in turn are then able to communicate with both. The aliens eventually depart after releasing father and son, and, as once earlier in human history, leave behind a gift. Julie's father is given a clue to the development of a new science; Julie's gift is that she is no longer so terrified of the world.

As in the majority of Hughes' works, a central interest is the maturation

of the central character. All is told through Julie's point of view, and the way she matures through her response to the encounter is very well handled.

7. *Beyond the Dark River* (Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1979. 152 pp. $13.95 hardcover.) This novel marks Monica Hughes' break (perhaps temporary, perhaps permanent) with techniques common to her earlier science fiction; the novel is, in many respects, closer to *Ghost Dance Caper* than to *Conshelf, Earthdark*, or *Tomorrow City* – works based on extrapolations from existing technology. Like *Ghost Dance*, its materials and themes are strictly Canadian. Does this make it inevitable that the novel will be prized everywhere but in Canada?

The novel is technically science fiction in that it is set in the future; but since our perceptions are alien to the ways in which the protagonists and narrators perceive reality, neither they nor Mrs. Hughes will answer questions about exact dates. For, stylistically, the work is a tour de force in point of view and modes of perception.

Fourteen-year-old Daughter-of-She-Who-Came-After is a member of the Cree tribe; fifteen-year-old Benjamin belongs to a Hutterite Bruderhof. Monica Hughes' Introduction to the novel traces the histories and characterizes the lifestyles of the two societies; they are "very different groups, who are yet similar in their ideals and their deliberate isolation from civilization." (viii) "Events" between now and then – on which the plot depends – are never precisely specified in the novel; instead, in portions of the novel presented from Benjamin's point of view, we see what the Hutterites perceived to have occurred: the city (clearly, to us, Edmonton) was to them "Gomorrah . . . God sent his judgment on the land and slew the evil-doers. And when that was done he cleansed the vile city with flames." (29-30). Alternately, from Daughter-of-She-Who-Came-After we learn that the Cree do not concern themselves with causal relationships: the "Old Ones" who had built the "Place of the Dead" had somehow lost their power and gone away; "power" is as inexplicable as the reason why, of two identical canoes, one would be swift and the other useless.

Both Cree and Hutterite societies are described in sufficient detail to satisfy an adult sociologist; the novel's teenaged protagonists are characters as complex as any modern, intelligent members of such societies. Both alternately accept, then question, the values of their elders; both alternate between taking pride in the positions the societies have assigned them and resenting the obligations and alienations from their peers which these positions impose. The girl is tribe Healer not by choice but because her grandmother requires her to follow in her footsteps; she is required to await – and attempt to heal – both an epidemic affecting the Hutterite community and the grotesque and deformed survivors and descendants of the "event" which destroyed the city. The boy has been required to learn English for the good of the community, so that he can use the old books the

community preserved. The girl uses her Indian skills to help him travel by river into the city. Here they find a library – and even an ancient librarian – only to discover that without the technology to implement it, the cure described in books is useless. They do, however, find a way of coping with the disease from an unexpected (but perfectly logical) source.

The novel ends optimistically. The final lines are spoken by the girl: "Whatever happens our future will work out properly, if we leave ourselves open to the working. The tree falls, but the forest goes on. And out of the decayed trees, new things grow. We have made such changes, you and I, Benjamin, in our small way. Who knows what will come of it?"

8. *The Keeper of the Isis Light* (Hamish Hamilton, London; distributed in Canada by Thomas Nelson & Sons. 1980. 136 pp., $12.95 hardcover.) Monica Hughes' newest novel approaches its subject and themes in a totally different way: it is as different from *Beyond the Dark River* as that is from the earlier "technological" novels.

In many respects it is the best work Monica Hughes has produced; it is, however, so unique that comparisons are not really valid. The time is the very far distant future, and the locale a planet Isis, far across deep space from Earth. Isis is in contact with Earth by means of its "light", a beam which transmits information about the planet's environment to Earth and spaceships.

The planet is inhabited by only two "people" as the novel opens: Olwen, a sixteen-year-old girl, and her sole companion, Guardian, a character whom the reader will recognize as a highly sophisticated robot, but whom Olwen assumes to be as human as she. Olwen, because she is idyllically happy and has no memories of any companionship other than Guardian, does not ask questions which will concern the reader until near the end of the novel: How has she come to be on Iris? Where are her parents? Why do colonists from Earth respond to her as they do? All questions, as in a mystery novel, are answered, but the reader should be forewarned that adults are likely to find themselves blubbering through the final scenes like responsive children.

Olwen is unquestionably the most fully realized and complexly drawn character in the Hughes novels, even though ironically placed in so non-realistic a setting. Although the focus of the novel is on Olwen's character and maturation, there is some adventure (but not nearly so much as in the other novels). Guardian is a variation on the computer in *Tomorrow City*. Contrasting ways of perceiving reality are explored, as in *Dark River*. The problems of maturing youths, coming to terms with their heritages, peers, and environments, are all explored as they have been in all Monica Hughes' novels.

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