

# From the Pacific Rim

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*One Ocean Touching: Papers from the First Pacific Rim Conference on Children's Literature*, edited by Sheila A. Egoff. Scarecrow Press, 1979. 252 pp. \$12.00 hardcover. ISBN 0-8108-1199-5.

On May 10, 1976, the opening date of the first Pacific Rim Conference on Children's Literature, pink and white blossoms burst forth in the University of British Columbia's Japanese Gardens. Three days later, they reached full maturity, and by the end of the Conference, the petals had begun to fall. Some of the Conference delegates expressed sadness at this last sight, feeling that the flowering, like the Conference, had been too brief.

Now, the Conference can be remembered, as Conference Coordinator Sheila Egoff has gathered the twenty-one major addresses together in a book: *One Ocean Touching*. Not only will this volume revive memories, it will also provide a picture of the state of Children's Literature in the middle of the last decade, and, as such, a marker against which to measure such changes as have taken place since then.

The people delivering the addresses came from eight countries: Canada, the United States, England, Peru, Mexico, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan. Most of the speakers were authors or illustrators, although there were professors, librarians, editors, publishers, and two psychologists. They spoke of the problems of their crafts and of the logistics and difficulties of editing, publishing, and distributing children's books. Given the diversity of nationalities, personalities, and occupations, there were a surprising number of recurrent themes and preoccupations in their statements.

Mercifully, there were few discussions of the nature of the child or childhood, although educational psychologist David Bain explored, in his keynote address, the child's acquisition of transtemporal communication, the ability to understand people living in other places and other times, and emphasized the role of literature in the development of this faculty. Several authors spoke movingly of their own childhoods and of the role their early years played in their becoming writers. Ivan Southall reported, "I do not perform as a child, but the heart of the child remains within me." Ruth Nichols commented on the difficulty of being a child prodigy trying to write

to please those around her. Claude Aubry discussed the terrors of growing up in the northern Canadian wilderness.

Many of the speakers told of the difficulties standing in the way of the creation in their countries of an indigenous Children's Literature. For Vilasini Perumbulavil of Singapore the greatest obstacles were colonial influences and a pluralistic society; for Momoko Ishii, a risky distribution system and the large numbers of foreign imports. Carlota Carvallode Núñez of Peru explained that the incredible poverty of most South American countries made impossible both the publication of children's books and a large audience of readers. Not surprisingly, Canadian authors and publishers spoke critically of the position of Children's Literature in our society. Ruth Nichols and Elizabeth Cleaver both noted the small incomes of most Canadian children's writers, while May Cutler emphatically proclaimed: "I think the state of Canadian children's books is a national disgrace."

While each of the authors, in speaking of his own development as a writer, presented a unique viewpoint, two ideas appeared sufficiently regularly in the speeches to assume almost the status of general characteristics of writing for children: the influences of the landscapes of their childhood on the works of most writers and the importance of folklore materials and dreams. Ivan Southall states: "I remain an Australian writer . . . I see a writer's origins as critical. His origins determine what he is, and what he sees, and what he says and how he says it." He drew attention to "a vast, hard, and frightening land, to which people clung as if the planet were about to topple and tip them off." Ruth Nichols remarked that in Canada, "the wilderness inhabits us".

In several countries, folklore was seen as the basis of a national Children's Literature. Vilasini Perumbulavil noted that only recently had Singapore publishers begun issuing folktales of the various cultural groups, while Elsie Locke remarked that the early development of the Industrial Revolution in New Zealand had prevented the use of much traditional material. Canada's Anne Anderson emphasized the need for authentic renderings of Native stories.

Many of the writers saw themselves as articulators of dreams. Leon Garfield told a Sleeping Beauty-type story in which the hero "had the courage to awaken his dreams and his imagination." Elizabeth Cleaver characterized her artistic life as "a journey travelling inward, and consciously searching for and discovering what meaning stories, myths, and legends have for me." Ruth Nichols felt that her books were "basically explorations into the subconscious; I often take a significant dream as my starting-point."

Looking back at the Pacific Rim Conference through the essays in *On Ocean Touching*, one suspects that were it to be held today, the paper delivered would not be significantly different. This is not meant as criticism but rather as a recognition of the facts that the ideas expressed are perhaps so fundamentally important as to be considered universal and that the problems enumerated can be neither quickly nor easily solved.

There is one exception. Since the Pacific Rim Conference and in part because of it, Canadian Children's Literature has become much healthier. Since 1976, four major Children's Literature conferences have been held in Canada. The Children's Book Center has been formed, giving encouragement to both writers and readers. Canadian children's books are being acclaimed beyond our borders, and within Canada, librarians, teachers, professors, and members of the media are starting to give our good children's books the attention they deserve. The growth of and respect accorded to this journal, *Canadian Children's Literature*, is further evidence of the improved state of our children's books.

If, in the end, there is a criticism of the Pacific Rim Conference, and it may only be an indication of this reviewer's own concerns, it is of the Conference's relative lack of attention to the creation of a literate young readership. The skills required to read literature fully and intelligently are, it is becoming increasingly evident, learned ones. Because so many children are being raised on audio and visual rather than print materials, many of them are not able to bring to children's books the reading ability a good book deserves. However, the Pacific Rim Conference did so well with what it did do, that we should not criticize it for what it did not do. These may be other aspects for another conference at another time.

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