

The Tom Austen mysteries do not pretend to have social significance nor to be memorable literature. Mysteries offer children delight via the mental challenge of the criminal puzzle and excitement through vicarious experience and wish fulfillment. Each book provides practice in reading skills and contributes to the acquisition of the reading habit. Adults who decry the mystery's value should remember that such books contribute to producing the child who has not given up on reading and who may still be led by the concerned teacher or parent to the wider realm of children's literature.

NOTES

¹Marjorie Earl, "Adventure, Mystery Book Attracts Reluctant Readers", *The Tribune*, Wednesday, October 3, 1979, p. 22. All subsequent quotations from Eric Wilson are taken from this article.

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Quality and Quantity in Canadian History

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Larger Than Life, Janet Lunn. Illus. by Emma Hesse. Press Porceplic Limited, 1979. 78 pp. \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-88878-097-4.

CANADIANS ALL 2, Portraits of Our People, Terry Angus and Shirley White. Methuen Publications, 1979. 112 pp. \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-458-93860-2.

CANADIANS ALL 3, Portraits of Our People, Charles Kahn and Maureen Kahn. Methuen Publications, 1979. 122 pp. plus vi. \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-458-94250-2.

My earliest recollection of Canadian history is of having been compelled, in the fourth grade, to memorize the routes followed by various explorers. I never could remember them because I didn't care where they went. History provoked only yawns, and figures from history were dusty, boring and above all, not real.

Fortunately for her readers, Janet Lunn's *Larger Than Life* is a different kind of history, one that should have enormous appeal to children in the middle elementary grades. This is storytelling at its best, combining historical facts with adventure, humour, suspense and vivid characterization.

The book tells the true stories of ten Canadian "heroes": Madeleine de Verchères, Alexander Mackenzie, Elizabeth Roblin, Annie and John Harvey, John A. Macdonald, Cornelia de Grassi, Maria Wait, Paul Kane, Gabriel Dumont and Crowfoot. Some of these people are much better known than others and their contribution to Canadian history more obvious. What they share is the quality of courage, which may be said to be the unifying theme of the book, and every one of them becomes real to the reader.

In one story, the author comments that "people still tell stories about him as though it were only last week or last month when he lived there." That is exactly how Ms. Lunn tells her own stories, and her characters are real because they are at once "larger than life" and very ordinary. Mrs. Roblin recounts her remarkable experiences while shelling peas. John A. Macdonald takes off his socks in public. Gabriel Dumont, as a child, is sensitive about his short stature. The author's heroes are all appealing, but they aren't perfect and they are never ponderous. Madeleine de Verchères is no martyr, but an impatient girl who seizes her first chance to have a real adventure, and Cornelia de Grassi has, frankly, more than her fair share of vanity. It is these mundane details and familiar feelings that give the reader a sense of immediacy about the lives of Ms. Lunn's heroes. These are figures that don't need dusting off.

This book is beautifully written by a woman who clearly loves words and is extraordinarily skillful at using them to portray children's perceptions. Every young reader will recognize instantly "her grandfather's crackly old voice" and "small cruel eyes in a big red face". The author's language is lively and her descriptive passages evocative. We can see a summer day that is "soft and hazy and peaceful" or a spring day "smelling of melting snow and early spring plants".

Ms. Lunn has a good ear for the way real people talk. There is nothing awkward or contrived about her dialogue, so often a problem in children's

books. Conversations occur naturally in these stories, and they invariably ring true.

There are nice touches too, in the author's portrayal of animals. Children will enjoy the big dog that sits in the stern of the boat "for ballast", and the cat that watches birds "with his one good eye".

The book is attractively printed and sturdily bound with a brightly coloured cover. Black and white illustrations are pleasing, if not exciting, and a brief "Afterword" provides further information about some of the figures in the stories.

Designed for older children, *CANADIANS ALL (2 & 3)* are two volumes in a series intended specifically for use in schools, and indeed it is difficult to imagine them receiving much use elsewhere, since they are inescapably textbook in format.

Each volume contains twenty detailed, short (1500-1800 words) biographies of Canadian persons. Content is equally divided between men and women - there is no sexism here. Following each chapter is a section entitled "Probe", consisting of assignments for the student, and another section of suggestions "For Further Reading". Preceding each article is either a black and white photograph or a drawing of the subject. The books are attractively printed and bound with eye-catching covers and a minimum of typos.

There is much that is positive about these sometimes engaging volumes. Here are scientists (Banting, Suzuki), athletes (Henri Richard, Nancy Greene), doctors (Bethune, Penfield), reformers (J.S. Woodsworth), artists (Kurelek, Pitseolak, Ashoona), actors (Gerussi, Bujold), entrepreneurs (Timothy Eaton), writers, ecologists, singers and others too numerous to mention, as well as figures from a variety of regions, from the past and the present. Famous or not, each has made some contribution to Canadian society. The authors have undoubtedly succeeded in their attempt to provide "interesting reading" while demonstrating the diversity of the Canadian people. In a short note to the reader, the authors caution that their subjects should not necessarily be regarded as "heroic figures". That is reassuring.

The authors also emphasize that the biographies have been kept short on purpose, since they are intended to be merely introductions to the subject which can be expanded by further reading. This idea is reasonable up to a point, but it causes some problems. What, for example, was the reaction of Bethune's wife when the doctor left Canada for China in 1938? What were the "sweeping reforms" relating to adoption and child welfare brought

about by Judge Marjorie Bowker in 1965? A student reading these articles might be moved to go and look up the answers to these questions if he can overcome his initial irritation at their exclusion from the text. Some subjects are larger than others, and some of the biographies are too short to be adequate.

On the whole, the articles are briskly well-written, smooth and lively. A variety of styles, inevitable in a multi-authored series, does not detract from the books' appeal, although experimentation with dialogue rather than straight narrative is notably unsuccessful in one instance (Banting).

The difficulty with these books is the very diversity so well attained by the authors. The right degree of diversity is stimulating; too much has led, in this case, to mere diffusion. If these are simply collections of interesting articles, then why all the scholastic accoutrements? If they are school texts, for what courses, and on what grade level? Or are they merely library reference books for general courses in Canadian culture?

"Probe", although stimulating and imaginative, is equally puzzling for the same reasons. The reader's efforts are directed to everything from advertising, nutrition, sexual stereotyping and art, to creative writing, personal fantasy, moral judgements and social change—all too often within the same chapter. Again, one has to ask why? What is the student studying? If the books are not for a specific course will the students pursue the themes raised?

There is a chronic shortage of Canadian material in our schools, and even books with limitations should therefore be welcomed with some degree of courtesy. *Larger Than Life* will be greeted by elementary school teachers with unreserved enthusiasm. As for *CANADIANS ALL*, no doubt skillful teachers at the secondary level will find ways to use these books in class, but the librarians may find the books are cut into pieces.

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