# An Interview With Barbara Smucker

*CORY BIEMAN DAVIES*

*Barbara Smucker's two historical novels,* Days of Terror *(1979) and* Underground to Canada *(1977), have found a wide and devoted readership. Cory Bieman Davies taped this interview for* Canadian Children's Literature *at Mrs. Smucker's home in Waterloo, Ontario, on February 20, 1981. Dr. Davies is preparing a critical essay on Barbara Smucker's work for the forthcoming* CCL *special issue on historical fiction and biography.*

DAVIES: Could you tell us about the Japanese translation of your book, *Underground to Canada*, and your trip to Japan this month?

SMUCKER: I wasn't quite sure when I went what the trip was all about although I knew the Japanese had translated *Underground to Canada*. A Japanese publisher asked me if I would come to Japan and said they would buy my ticket. Fortunately I had some friends from Saskatchewan living in Tokyo I could stay with; they have lived there for twenty years and speak Japanese very well.

DAVIES: Did you speak to publishers or to groups of children in Japan?

SMUCKER: Well, we discovered that the reason I went was that there is something every year called an All Japan Essay Contest sponsored by a newspaper in Tokyo and by the Japan Library Association. The Library Association selects four books for elementary school children to write essays on, three books for junior high age children – of the three books chosen for these, mine was one of them. Isn't it amazing? And four for highschool aged boys and girls. Then they circulate the chosen books all over the country.

DAVIES: What were the other books, or do you know?

SMUCKER: I don't know. When a book is chosen they use this little insignia. It looks like Pan, doesn't it?

DAVIES: Yes it does.

SMUCKER: I thought that it was unusual that they chose this insignia but it was on everything. The children got medals with this on

it. Newbury award books in the States and Canada Council award books have something like this on them. I saw an *Underground to Canada* poster, too, over there.

DAVIES: You must have been very proud?

SMUCKER: I was really amazed. There were three million children who wrote essays. Imagine that! Of these three million, they selected sixty that were the best. Sixty out of three million. These sixty children, then, representing elementary, junior high and high school systems were all invited to come to a big celebration in Tokyo. Several of them wrote essays on my book, and I guess the publisher conceived the idea that it would be very exciting to have a foreigner come to the celebration and speak.

So there I was. All sixty children were sitting lined-up on the platform. They wore blue and white school uniforms, very nice looking uniforms. The boys wore short pants. Their teachers were there, their parents and a lot of newspaper people flashing pictures constantly. Then, because I came from Canada, they had someone there from the Canadian Embassy, Mr. John Saywell. Before I left, someone had told me that you were supposed to take many gifts to give to the people in return for the gifts they give you. My publishers, Clark, Irwin, in Toronto, gave me copies of Mr. Saywell's little paperback called *Canada: Past and Present.* It was a great book to give people because it had photographs in it, and it was, of course, Canadian. As well, the Canadian children in our school back home had made a beautiful booklet and written a letter to the boys and girls of Japan. They drew a picture on the outside of the snow, a snowman, and a Canadian flag. After I gave a little speech at the celebration, I presented this booklet and they were really pleased. I was impressed by all the people there, and all the bowing going on.

DAVIES: Did the children know much about Canada?

SMUCKER: I couldn't talk directly to them. I discovered that Japanese children all take English in school, they write it very well, they translate, but they have a lot of trouble speaking it. My Japanese editor there, who spoke English quite well, said that they didn't know much about Canada. He said, "Our knowledge of Canadian children's literature begins with *Anne of Green Gables* and ends with *Anne of Green Gables.*" But then I talked with a man who teaches children's literature in the University there, and I was telling him of different Canadian books. I've read Sheila Egoff's book a number of times, and I mentioned books like Farley Mowat's books on the Far North and Christie Harris' books on the West Coast – quite a list

actually. Then he said, "I know one you forgot! What about Sheila Burnford, who wrote *Incredible Journey*?" I thought, "They are pretty well-informed." But seemingly *Anne of Green Gables* is very very popular. When I went into bookstores, they had the whole set of the Anne books.

DAVIES: Were the Anne books part of your own reading as a child?

SMUCKER: Oh yes. They wanted to know if I had been to Prince Edward Island, and had seen Green Gables. I had.

Then I visited schools. This the Japanese publisher had arranged. I spoke to the children through an interpreter, and they had some really sharp questions about *Underground.*

DAVIES: For example?

SMUCKER: Well, they had this question: "Why was this girl" – June Lily they called her and that's what they called the book, too; they don't call it *Underground to Canada* – "why did she want to help people? She had been treated so badly, and you would think she would be angry. Yet she helped the crippled girl, and the babies. Why would she help people if she had been treated the way she had been treated?"

DAVIES: That is a probing question.

SMUCKER: It is a good question, and no one had ever asked me that before. I had to think of something. I said that she had a very good and kind mother, who took care of her, that they were close to each other, and that I felt she picked up these traits from her mother. Then one girl held up her hand. I thought, "Oh, now what's coming?" "Why," she asked, "was the mother so good?" That wasn't a bad question either because the mother had been treated badly, too, as a slave. Then I tried to explain that the slaves were good to each other. They had to care for each other because no one else would take care of them. They had learned to do this, and the mothers in slave families were always the ones who took care of the children because the fathers very often had been sold, or very often they were not allowed to live with the families. This was very interesting to them. Now I don't know quite what they thought about the slave story. Some of them had seen the television programme *Roots.* (I watched some of it: it was so horrible I could hardly stand it. But seemingly, young people can take more violence.)

DAVIES: Did the Japanese children find *Underground* a particularly Canadian book?

SMUCKER: They seemed very interested in the history of the United States and of Canada. They were perplexed that these countries were so close together. Then I showed them a map so they could see how there is just a line – the countries really are right together.

DAVIES: Since this interview will be going to *Canadian Children's Literature*, let me ask if you ever think consciously, "I am writing a book for Canadian children?"

SMUCKER: When I started writing this slave book, I was working in the Children's Department at the Kitchener Library. A lot of kids came in working on projects on slavery. This was just one of their assignments then. But I could find very little material for them. We had this ancient book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, really out of date, and other materials on what happened to the slaves in the States. There really was nothing about what happened to them after they got here. I had been to Dresden, Ontario – there's a little exhibit there – where there's still a cabin that a slave built when he crossed the border, a school, a sawmill, and a little chapel. I was very interested in this. Then I read a book called *The Blacks in Canada: A History*, by R.W. Winks, a scholarly book, which said that in 1850 there were 40,000 escaped slaves living in what is now Ontario. I realized I was dealing with a Canadian historical event that nobody had written about.[1] Then I discovered material about Alexander Ross. It was really exciting when I found a line about him in the library. Mostly he was known as an ornithologist. The library here searched around to see if they could find something for me on him, and they found the original manuscripts at the University of Western Ontario. Western let me look at them.

DAVIES: I notice you include bibliographies for both *Underground* and *Days of Terror*. When you research a book, then, you try to read original documents?

SMUCKER: Yes, I read them if I can.

DAVIES: May we talk about the process of composition once you've completed your research? How do you work out the plot or find a main character?

SMUCKER: Somehow the stories just fall into place. In a way, it's easier to work out the plot if you're writing historical fiction because

the plots are already taken care of by the event. Then it seems that the character kind of comes to fit into the story. As I began thinking about the slave story, I knew that I wanted it to happen to a child because I write for children. It should be a child of twelve or thirteen because younger would be too young, and when you write about older children then it's almost adult.

DAVIES: Why did you choose a girl to be the main character in *Underground*?

SMUCKER: I had read stories of Harriet Tubman, a slave woman who led all kinds of slaves up here so I knew a woman could do it.

DAVIES: You must feel very committed to making history come alive for a certain age group.

SMUCKER: Yes.

DAVIES: Why? Would you discuss the way you view historical fiction – as either valuable or significant?

SMUCKER: The first book I wrote was a little book called *Henry's Red Sea*, which is historical, and also about Mennonites who escaped from Russia after World War II and went to Paraguay. This was for very young children. It was told one evening at our home by a man who participated in the whole thing. It was so vivid, and as our children listened to it, I thought, "This is really a story that should be recorded for children. Why should it just be written down factually as history? If it is made into a story then children will read it." So I did that. That was twenty-five years ago, and that little thing is still in print.[2]

DAVIES: You started writing fiction for children, then, because you thought children should have this story.

SMUCKER: Well, it's part of our heritage. Then I discovered that there are so many exciting things happening in history and that it doesn't have to be dull. I really love researching; I spend too much time on that.

DAVIES: What do you have to leave out because you are writing for children?

SMUCKER: In *Days of Terror*, for example, there were even more horrible things that happened to the Russian Mennonites. Rapes, for example. I didn't put that in because I thought there were enough

horrible things in the murders, the starvation, the stealing from and the destruction of Mennonite homes and farms. You just do not put everything in. You don't avoid the violence, but certain things you don't have to put in. If I were writing this story for adults, as Rudy Wiebe has done [in *The Blue Mountains of China*], it would be different.

DAVIES: The title of your most recent book, *Days of Terror*, is a rather violent title for a children's book. Is it your title or your publisher's title?

SMUCKER: It's my publisher's title. I called it *Immigrant Boy* originally. I thought that would be a better title. *Days of Terror* doesn't sound like a book for boys and girls, does it?

DAVIES: That didn't bother me, but I thought the title placed the emphasis on the terror in section two. I suspected you would rather place the real and final emphasis on the last section, "Deliverance."

SMUCKER: It's interesting that you say so, because that's what I felt. But the publishers said that my title was dull and wouldn't attract attention.

DAVIES: I did find your treatment of fear and terror in *Days of Terror* more immediate and convincing than your treatment of the same themes in *Underground*. Do you think that you are gaining strength as a writer with each book? Did you feel more engaged with *Days of Terror* because of your own Mennonite heritage?

SMUCKER: I think so. Maybe *Days of Terror* is more powerful because I talked with the Mennonites who experienced this. They live around here. Mrs. Nickel, who lives only three blocks from here, told me her story, and when she is telling it, it's just as though it has happened to her yesterday. Then when I was in Winnipeg I talked with people, for instance a man whose wife had been raped, and he told me about this and got very dramatic. Maybe when you hear people tell about something that happened to them, it is more dramatic. The slave story I only read about.

DAVIES: I think your involvement comes through in the style of *Days of Terror*.

SMUCKER: Do you know, one of the Japanese boys – they really did have sharp questions – said to me through an interpreter during my visit, "I didn't like Mr. Sims in your book [*Underground*]." I

said, "Well, I didn't like him either. He was a very cruel man." The boy said, "That's not what I meant. The other characters were real characters, but Mr. Sims is like a stick." And so I thought, "He was sort of a stereotype bad man. I didn't take much time working out that character, Sims. It came through!"

I think I did get more involved in *Days of Terror*. But *Underground* is the one the Japanese children like. My Japanese publisher didn't think they would be interested in *Days of Terror*.

DAVIES: Why not?

SMUCKER: In Japan they don't have any immigrants. They would not be too interested in an immigrant story. All the time that I was writing *Days of Terror*, I thought about it being the story of immigrants, because there are so many immigrant stories in Canada now, ever so many – the Jewish, the Czechs, the Chinese people who came.

DAVIES: In your books there always seems to be a movement from one country to another; you take a character from one place to another.

SMUCKER: Yes . . . well, you know, we've moved quite a bit. We moved here from the States.

DAVIES: Are both of you American?

SMUCKER: We're becoming Canadians, but Don [her husband, who is now a professor of Sociology at Conrad Grebel College, the Mennonite College which is affiliated with the University of Waterloo] is from Ohio. I'm from Kansas. We came from Mennonite communities.

DAVIES: Have you been in Canada for many years?

SMUCKER: We've been here for twelve years. We feel very much at home here now. We have relatives here because this is a Mennonite community. It wasn't like coming to a totally new and strange place, because we knew people here, and we'd been here before. We've also been to Winnipeg and Clearbrook. Our coming to Canada was different from the way the Russian Mennonites came.

DAVIES: Your Mennonite background helps to explain much about *Days of Terror*. Is there anything else in your own background which explains, in part, your interest in the Underground Railway and

your personal reasons for writing *Underground to Canada*?

SMUCKER: I was born in Kansas. When I was very little my mother was quite ill with flu, and a black woman lived with us for about seven years. I think my ear became attuned to her kind of speaking. That may be where my interest started. I know she told a lot of stories to us. This would have been when I was between one and seven years old. I don't specifically remember the stories but she must have come out of slavery because most of them did. There were a lot of pro-slave people living in Kansas. Still, Kansas was admitted as a Free State. You know that could have been where the idea started.

DAVIES: Do some of your strongest images and image patterns come from this past? You are always referring to the sun, for example, in *Underground.*

SMUCKER: The sun is important to me although I haven't really thought about that before. I remember as a child in Kansas that sometimes in the summer we would sleep outside. I remember how tremendous it was to wake up early and see the sun coming up. In the prairies it spreads all over the sky.

DAVIES: I have never seen that.

SMUCKER: Then, the sunsets are also tremendous in Kansas. That's the main thing you see because there are no trees to get in the way. There aren't any hills. You just see spreading colours. I think this has always impressed me – the sunrise and sunset.

DAVIES: Is your use of the sun deliberate, then?

SMUCKER: No. I've never really thought about it very much, but I suddenly remembered when you asked, how much I do like the sunrise and sunset.

DAVIES: I wondered, too, about images of chains and the movement from bondage to freedom in *Underground.*

SMUCKER: Yes, that need for freedom is important. Don and I taught in an all-black college in Mississippi. He was president there for a while. This whole idea of bondage never leaves people whose ancestors grew up in the United States. We were there during the time Martin Luther King was killed. All the dislike for white people suddenly erupted. They wanted us to leave because they really did not want white people there. This whole black story has been a very important story to both of us, all our lives. If you grow up in the

States you can hardly avoid having some feeling about it one way or the other – either having a tremendous prejudice, or feeling a burden that you have been a part of whatever caused this thing.[3]

DAVIES: Let me change the topic somewhat, but still remain in your past. What books did you read as a child?

SMUCKER: When I was a child we didn't have many books to read. You see, I'm a Senior Citizen – now that's how old I am! Our library didn't have many books for children.

DAVIES: Did you read Kipling, for example?

SMUCKER: Yes, I had his books, but I think I started reading children's books more when my own children were growing up.

DAVIES: What did you read to them?

SMUCKER: We read all kinds of things to them. However, when I decided to be a Children's Librarian, then I added other kinds of books. In the class I took in Children's Literature, we had to read a hundred books – all the medal-winning books etc. I got really fascinated, especially with the books of historical fiction.

DAVIES: Was this after your own children were older?

SMUCKER: Yes. They were junior high age or older.

DAVIES: What writer do you like and read now?

SMUCKER: I like the English writers like Rosemary Sutcliff, Henry Treece, and Leon Garfield. I like Lucy Boston too. I also like to read fantasy very much. I like Susan Cooper, and Joan Aiken, who can churn out one book after another.

DAVIES: How do you like Madeleine L'Engle?

SMUCKER: I have read only one of her books. They are more scientific. Somehow science is not my thing.

DAVIES: Would you ever like to write a fantasy?

SMUCKER: I would surely like to try one. But I do like writers of historical fiction. At one point we lived in England for a year, and I wrote a book on Mediaeval history. It takes place in the 1300's.

DAVIES: How was it?

SMUCKER: It wasn't very good! I sent it to about ten different publishers, and it came back from all of them. Finally, I showed it to John Pearce, my present editor at Clark, Irwin, and he said, "That's not your field." Mr. Pearce has been extremely helpful. He's very good at knowing the directions of books.

DAVIES: You seem to have found your fields in both *Underground* and *Days of Terror.* I have one final question about these books. In both of them, Canada is the place to which your characters come. They come to St. Catharines at the end of *Underground*, and to Manitoba at the end of *Days of Terror*, yet Canada is never fully realized as a setting in either book, is it? Have you ever wanted to write a sequel to either book?

SMUCKER: I have thought about it. When I was in Vancouver during Children's Book Week, in one of the schools I was in, all of the boys and girls in the room were from Hong Kong. They had read both of my books, and they said, "Mrs. Smucker, do you always write about people who come from one place to a new place?" They suggested, "Why don't you write about what happened to them after they lived in Canada?" because this is their situation. Here they are. What's going to happen to them now? Maybe I should write about this, but I haven't yet.

NOTES

[1]Many Canadian school children now know about this historical event because of Smucker's book. The book has become very popular in Canadian school rooms. Donovan Smucker said during a recent telephone interview that Marilyn Strand and others in the East York Board have created an excellent study guide to the historical novel based on *Underground to Canada*, called *A Novel Study Guide.*

[2]*Henry's Red Sea* is still published by Herald Press, Scottdale Pa. and Kitchener, Ontario. It is available from Provident Bookstores. Donovan Smucker, in a letter dated February 28, 1981, calls this his wife's "key book."

[3]In the same letter of February 28, Donovan Smucker writes: "Starting with *Wigwam in the City*, (still available as *Susan* from Scholastic) Barbara began to reach her maturity as a writer dealing with personal and social guilt." During the June 16 interview, Mr. Smucker also spoke of their years in Mississippi, and of their being caught up there in the "drama of guilt," although they themselves were "racially emancipated" whites. He said, "We

became [to many black people] representatives of a type," and "bearers of the past." The blacks at the college asked the Smuckers not to attend church on the day that King was assassinated because it would be "too painful" to have white faces there. They left the south because of the emerging rampant and exclusive Black Nationalism advocated by people like Angela Davis and Stokeley Carmichael.

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