photographs and illustrations, which will help the younger reader through the fairly lengthy work.

Like *Thomas George Prince*, the book could certainly be suggested to a student wishing to present a paper on an exciting heroic event taking place in Canadian waters.

In conclusion, all four books are capable of opening doors to our heritage. When children view the American comic book superhero as an ideal, it is refreshing to know that with the aid of these works students can glean insights into the absorbing deeds of "real-life" Canadians. By showing these individuals in an honest light, detailing their character quirks and still proclaiming them as heroes, the writers illuminate a facet of the Canadian identity.

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A Prairie Tradition

LAURIE RICOU

Especially Babe, R. Ross Annett. Tree Frog Press, 1978. 192 pp. $9.95 cloth.

There is very little to say about a collection of stories that have the same cardboard brightness as a Norman Rockwell painting. *Especially Babe*, that is, seems, now, a book more interesting for its contexts than its content. What might hold our attention for a moment is the "surround" of the stories: the patterns of popular literary conventions, the particular use of the eternal child figure, the tastes of the late Depression audience, or the glimpses of bygone rural life.

Especially Babe is a reprint of a 1942 publication, a collection of the first thirteen of some 70 "Babe" stories which R. Ross Annett wrote for the *Saturday Evening Post* between 1938 and 1962. The stories themselves are set during the years from 1932 to 1941, in a not very

particularized Jenner, Alberta, where the author taught in the 1920s. Annett dotes upon the unending struggles of a farm family: Babe, the perfect child, Big Joe, her father, Little Joe, her older brother, Uncle Pete, lovable alcoholic, and Miss Hans, live-in tutor and housekeeper. Despite the sometimes forced focus on the precious five-year-old Babe, these are hardly children's stories. Juvenile fiction, in all its senses, might be a better description: these stories suggest a time when books were more of a family property, to be read by all ages, perhaps even aloud. When Big Joe tells a story of his own we find Annett's deliberately ironic self-description of the "Babe" stories: " 'O-o!' moaned Babe. A hot tear fell on Big Joe's hand and played hob with the stern realism of the creative artist . . . Having decided upon a happy ending, Big Joe made a thorough job of it . . . Babe sighed happily. Big Joe wished the Lord would banish grown-ups' troubles as quickly as he himself could wipe away Babe's."

Annett wrote stories – perhaps uneasily, this bit of self-mockery suggests – to wipe away the troubles of moaners and sighers. Each story begins with a different threat to the economic survival of the farm and/or the happiness of the single-parent family. With a surprise reversal, often through the *deus ex vino* intervention of Uncle Pete, each story ends in blissful harmony: a little cash bonanza, or a victory of the little man over the monied establishment, wrapped in a warm-your-heart platitude. Annett's stories draw upon the popular formula which John Cawelti calls social melodrama: the social setting gives considerable attention to the corruption and human folly underlying the Depression, but the grab for the emotions of the audience leads to excesses usually best realized in endings which neatly reveal "the operation of a benevolent, humanly oriented moral order."

As Dickens, the best writer of social melodrama, knew, there was no better vehicle for emotional appeals than the child. Yet Annett's Babe is less Dickensian than Wordsworthian, a symbol of purity and inherent goodness. Babe is the angelic figure who redeems the straying or confused adults. Thus Annett seldom attempts to express the child's point of view. Babe is the "softhearted" half-orphan, and "the givingest kid", but she has no personality. She's a dream of purity, a hope for the golden future installed by the Depression past. She has none of the character of W.O. Mitchell's Brian, nor even of her own Uncle Pete.

Pete at least has some humour; Babe is too innocent for humour. Despite Babe, one of Annett's continuing charms is his occasional dry, vernacular humour. Pete gets tangled up in the difference between salon and saloon, while Big Joe complicates his life misunderstanding tooter and tutor. There's a memorably spunky,

ungrammatical letter which Big Joe sends to the Machinery Sales Corporation:

> This bill is for the tractor the wind buried. I didn't bury it. Now the wind has uncovered it again and you can have it. But that's all you can have. It ain't in the best of shape, but neither would you be if you was buried for six years. And it's too bad you wasn't.

And there are the hoary jokes about the weather: " 'It's sure gettin' to be a wet country,' Uncle Pete said. 'Rained only last year, an' here it is rainin' again!' " Such moments lead Rudy Wiebe, in an introduction to this reprint to identify Annett's main significance as the "first of the popular prairie humourists."

Sensing Annett's place in an emerging tradition, that is seeing this book historically, is the best way to appreciate *Especially Babe*. For example, the stories' ambivalence about the 49th parallel (suitably for a mass-circulation magazine, Big Joe is an American immigrant and lingering republican) links them to a fascinating aspect of prairie culture which Dick Harrison has taken the lead in exploring. The antecedents of several prairie types identifiable in W.O. Mitchell, Robert Kroetsch, Ken Mitchell, or Andy Suknaski, are obvious in Annett; and such connections might send us back, as well, to Ralph Connor and Nellie McClung whose fiction surely contributed in its turn to Annett's dryland sentimentalism. A casual reference to a 30s diet of "oatmeal and potatoes", a vignette describing the niceties of a charity concert, or an account of the slow process of raising registered seed, are valuable bits of documentary realism.

One final context for these stories is more speculative. We might reflect on how much of the need answered by the popularity of Annett's stories lies there, subconsciously, in the climate of prairie regionalism which made this reprint possible. Wiebe tells us that the readers of the *Saturday Evening Post* would not, when polled, allow Babe to grow up. Babe couldn't be seen as growing, as being at a stage in her development toward a different personality. This desire for stasis is the essence of nostalgia. In the reprinting of Annett's stories we might detect, amidst the ebullience of a New West, some fear of change, a yearning for the clouds of glory, before violence, before sexuality, before exploitation, before bigness. For in *Especially Babe* not only does Babe not get older, but even Big Joe is no more than a big kid.

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