Bridging The Cultural Gap

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The role of Indians in Canadian Literature has gone through various stages from the "noble savage" of Rousseau to the drunken stereotype of the pocket book westerns. Writers of children's literature have reflected these trends. School readers have included excerpts from the idyllic life portrayed in Longfellow's *Hiawatha* and there are few people who are not familiar with Mark Twain's "Injun Joe."

It is only for little more than a decade that Canadian writers have taken a more serious look at the role of Indians in Canadian Literature. In 1971 Dorothy Livesay called for a reexamination of the role of Native people in English Literature. She said, "Bit by bit and almost without being aware of it, the Canadian writer has had to find himself by finding the Indian."[1]

Much has been written about Native people by non-Native writers in the last fifteen years. This literature is often excellent; much of it is written by established Canadian authors. It can serve an invaluable purpose in helping non-Native students with their feelings of ambivalence toward Native people, but it can also further isolate and alienate Native students.

As non-Native writers include Natives in their stories there tends to be a focus on the problems confronting Native people. The problems are usually defined in terms of cultural conflicts. The struggle of Native people for a rightful place in society is often the theme of these books.

Though timely and important, these books make depressing reading. Native readers react wih further feelings of being trapped in a stereotype; every aspect of their lives is seen as problematic. Strengths of the culture are often downplayed, ignored, or not recognized by the writer. The problems of Native people are measured by their similarity or differences to those of non-Native culture. The more similar they are, the more assimilated, the fewer problems they have.

The non-Native readers may find the books uninteresting because the problems are so far removed from the lives of many Canadian children as to seem unrealistic. Or an opposite reaction may take place. The readers may be overwhelmed by guilt, the magnitude of the problems, and the futility of trying to solve them.

Yet realism dictates that these conflicts be dealt with in children's literature. We would be less than honest if we deprived non-Native children of the oppor-

tunity to read about and reach an understanding of the problems of the aborigines. For the Native readers it is equally important that they see themselves reflected in the literature of today, provided it is well enough written that they can, indeed, recognize themselves. These books can lead Native readers to a better understanding of non-Native attitudes toward them, as well as to insights into their own lives.

In the course of their education, students acquire more than skills and knowledge. They also find and continue to modify images of themselves and to shape their attitudes toward other persons, races, and cultures. Reading materials should foster self-images deeply rooted in a sense of personal dignity and of understanding of others. This must happen for both the Native and non-Native children.

"The Indian" has always been a popular topic in literature, even though misleading ideas, stereotyped characters, and outdated cultural concepts have often been presented. Better novels for children and young adults that avoid these shortcomings, at least to a degree if not entirely, now exist. Also, they deal with the basic issues about Indians and Métis: race, poverty, prejudice, and divergent cultures.

Land ownership and the dispossession of Native people is a recurring issue. This central theme is found in *A very small rebellion* by Jan Truss, *The last canoe* and *No word for good-bye* by John Craig. Closely tied to land alienation is the effect that modern technology has had on Native people. Nan Shipley, in *Return to the river* does a remarkably good job of tracing the gradual erosion of a way of life and the ultimate influence of this on the people involved. Various areas of Canada are represented in these books, showing that it is not a regional problem. The differences between status-Indians, non-status Indians, and Métis are also clearly delineated in Shipley's and Truss' books.

Poverty is an underlying theme in all the books. Jean MacKenzie's *River of stars* is not so much a general discussion of the problems facing Native people as a particular story about the development of an impoverished adolescent boy faced with a very difficult life. That he happens to be an Indian adds to his problems. His growth and maturation, his understanding and acceptance of himself and other races and cultures are processes any child might undergo.

Fifteen year old Andy Hall, a Kwakiutl Indian, comes home from residential school to help his father fish during the summer. Life has always been difficult for the family but has been made more so by the father's recent imprisonment for fighting. His defeat is total and in his despair he turns to alcoholism and wife beating.

The summer is off to an auspicious start when they rent a fishing boat, but before the season begins the stove on the old boat explodes, hospitalizing Andy's father. Andy decides to fish alone, in spite of his tender age, and learns much about human nature in the process. The other fishermen are a mixed lot; race and color do not seem to matter to most of them, but there are some who take

pleasure in increasing the pain and despair of the less fortunate. Andy sees the easy interaction of other Indian, Japanese, and white men of various nationalities, but cannot rid himself of his feelings of jealousy and inferiority. He resents small kindnesses toward him, but the elderly Dutch fisherman, Willem, steadfastly befriends the struggling boy. When Andy says no one understands his problems Willem counters with:

> You are not the only people whose lands have been taken from them. There is injustice and cruelty all over the vorld . . . . I do know how you feel, because I vas just about your age vhen the Nazis invaded Holland. I too have seen my country seized. My people hungry. My father ruined and killed . . . . I have seen things you could not believe . . . .So! You see. I know how you feel.[2]

MacKenzie has written an excellent book. Every child could relate to the moral truth that Andy learns during this difficult summer: "Nothing was ever simply good or bad."[3]

The land issue in Ontario is dealt with by John Craig through the experiences of the Crooked Lake Reserve Indians in *The last canoe.*[4] Life on the Mississauga reserve was drastically altered when "Bill Number C-137" was passed by the Canadian government. Without warning and without consulting the Indians, two-thirds of the land was incorporated into a new national park and game preserve. Hunting and fishing were prohibited. The park, they were told, would provide employment, improve the standard of living, and "bring the Indians into the twentieth century." The promised work lasted only a few months, leaving welfare, apathy and alcoholism in its wake. The chief, Arthur Nogawa, decides to paddle his canoe to London, because, he explains, treaties were signed with London, not with the Canadian government. He hopes his act of desperation will prompt the government to intervene. When he actually is allowed to die, the rest of the reserve decides to follow and every three days another canoe paddles off into oblivion.

The last chance is not a particularly good book, and yet the reader is reluctant to put it down. The issues are real, the insights into human nature penetrating. But Craig's moments of near genius are tarnished by weak characterization and an implausible ending. The thought of the Mississauga Indians perishing on their journey may be unpalatable, but would in all likelihood have happened. To find them eventually in a small settlement on the north shore of the St. Lawrence still being harassed by government officials is somewhat ludicrous.

Yet the memory of the book stays with the reader, the questions continue to occupy the mind. If the land had been returned, would the problems have been solved? If a small group of people really feel strongly enough, so strongly that they are willing to lay their lives on the line, can they force parliament to act? And most haunting of all, when people have nothing left to lose, what do they do?

No word for good-bye,[5] by the same author, is a better book. Plot, style and characterization all make for more satisfying reading. Ken Warren, a non-Native boy, spends his summers at Kinniwabi Lake in Ontario. He and an Ojibway boy become friends. This is not so much a story about the problems of the Indians as the story of a non-Native boy's awakening to the fact that prejudice and discrimination do exist and manifest themselves in various ways.

Ken's Aunt Marion constantly makes derogatory statements about Indians, but her world and the world of the Indians never meet. The station agent, D.R. Morely, is in a position to inflict greater damage and he uses his position to do so, though his bigotry is eventually revealed. But it is the Empirico Company, an anonymous giant, which has the power of life and death over the Indians. Ken learns what it is like to try to fight the giant and lose. He is impatient with the defeatist attitude of the Indians; when they are forced to move, they leave without a trace and with no indication of where they have gone.

Craig has not escaped the trap of stereotyping entirely in this book, although his intentions, no doubt, are an attempt at realism. The characterization of non-Native people is better than that of the Indians. The Ojibway are always silent, always impassive, never tired, never communicative. They are not well-rounded and are not quite real. They are seen from Ken's point of view and in this respect the stereotyping may be very realistic. However, Craig's attempts at dispelling these stereotypes are not entirely successful.

Land is again the issue in *A very small rebellion* by Jan Truss. In this case the issue is not as clear cut. Do Métis and non-status Indians have the right to possess land because of aboriginal rights? The book is written in two parts, an historical essay by Jack Chambers and a fictional part which shows that for the Métis the struggle for a place to live is still going on.

On the book cover, Harry Daniels, Director of Aboriginal Research, Alberta Métis Association, says,

The Métis people themselves should read this book . . . especially the young. The situation dealt with in the book will continue to happen until a greater awareness and understanding is created.[6]

Like the Ojibway in *No word for good-bye,* the Métis are forced to leave the settlement and the reader does not know where they are going. Throughout the book there is the expectation that the government will change its plans and not force the Métis to relocate. The reader expects the community to support the Métis because cultural barriers are all but erased at school. However, even as the children stage a highly successful play about Riel, eviction notices are being given to the parents. As during the Riel Rebellion of 1885, the government has turned a deaf ear and there has been no support from non-Natives. The Métis know that they can rely only on themselves. The only note of hope comes from the spirit of the people. As their homes go up in smoke Paul anxiously asks his father if he has remembered the poster of Louis Riel: " 'I would not forget Louis Riel' his father answered."[7]

This book is very well written and does an excellent job of portraying not only Métis children, but children generally. Truss has really captured the essence of the integrated classroom as well as life in a Métis settlement. The historical essay interspersed with the story is perhaps unnecessary, for the content of the essay is less captivating than the faster paced story and the reading level is more difficult. Though Riel was at one time an obscure "rebel" and there was little awareness of his role in Canadian history, this has been rectified to a large extent in recent years. This book could have been written without the historical information and would have been equally successful.

Return to the river by Nan Shipley ends on a more hopeful note than the books written about the land issue. Shipley does a remarkably good job not only of telling a good story, but also of focusing on the problems Native people face in their adjustment to a changing technological society. The book is essentially the story of Nona Hawk, daughter of an enfranchised Indian father and a mother who lost her status through marriage. As long as life on the Welcome River in Manitoba was undisturbed by modern development, it was a good life; hunting, fishing and trapping made a fulfilled, independent life possible. This independence was envied by the nearby reserve dwellers because of the constraints of the Department of Indian Affairs and the Indian Act.

This good life changes rapidly when a dam for a hydro-electric project is built. Liquor, unemployment, and jealousy combine to create a highly explosive situation. Nona's parents decide she would be better off in the city. Her search for a better life is futile; loneliness, prejudice and persecution soon drive Nona back to the river. There she lives with Daniel Blackbird, a young Métis whom her father once rejected because he offered no hope for a better future for Nona.

The ending is logical, realistic and convincing. Daniel is accepted in a mechanics course in Winnipeg and there is hope for a better life. Their first child is born in an airplane "between heaven and earth." This is seen as a good omen; for one young couple, at least, the poverty trap has been sprung.

Shipley has some strong biases, the most obvious being that a "reserve" Indian is inferior to an enfranchised one and that the revision of the Indian Act would create dramatic changes in the lives of Indian people. In this respect she is reflecting non-Native thinking of the sixties. The revisions of the Indian Act of 1951, though accurately chronicled in the epilogue of the book, did little to improve the lot of the Indian people and had no effect on non-status Indians and Métis.

In spite of these biases the book is worth reading. Plot will keep readers engrossed to the end and Shipley's portrayal of Indians as well-rounded characters within their own cultural context is very good. She recognizes many aspects of the problems faced by Native people and manages to weave them into her story skillfully and without being didactic. Despair never overwhelms the reader because the strengths of the Native culture and basic human kind-

ness are ever present.

In her Epilogue she says, "Chiefly progress is built on public attitude toward the underprivileged and those discriminated against because of color or social status.

Progress moves only as fast as human understanding and compassion permit, qualities that cannot be legislated."[8]

Literature is generally considered an appropriate vehicle in ethnic programs to build respect for individuals across cultures. All the above mentioned books will foster attitudes that will lead to progress in understanding and compassion. However, all these books are written about Natives by non-Native writers. The question "How would this book have been written if it had been written by a Native person?" should always lurk in the back of the reader's mind. We have come far in bridging the cultural gap, but we will go further when Indian and Métis writers tell their own stories, both for themselves and for non-Native readers.

NOTES

[1]Dorothy Livesay, "The Native people in our Canadian literature" *The English Quarterly* 4 (1971), 22.

[2]Joan MacKenzie, *River of stars* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971) p. 103.

[3]*Ibid,* p. 15.

[4]John Craig, *The last canoe* (Toronto: PMA Books, 1979).

[5]John Craig, *No word for good-bye* (Toronto: PMA Books, 1969).

[6]Jan Truss, *A very small rebellion* (Edmonton: J.M. LeBel Enterprises Ltd., 1977).

[7]*Ibid,* p. 90.

[8]Nan Shipley, *Return to the river* 2nd ed. (Winnipeg: Peguis Publishers, 1976) p. 186.

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