

# Painful stories: narrative strategies of immigration

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In Canadian adult novels on immigration, the child is often a bewildered victim, a symbol of immigrant confusion. Even when he rejects his parents' perspective as in John Marlyn's *Under the ribs of death* or thinks that he is fulfilling his grandfather's dream ("A man without land is nobody"<sup>1</sup> Simcha tells Duddy in *The apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*), the child never fully understands his own behaviour. In his many experiences of entering a new society — going to school, dealing with other children, simply growing up — the child in an immigrant story takes on the complex psychological meaning of immigration. The adult narrator in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* examines her childhood self and the ignorance that she has lived through all her life. Only at the end of the novel does she learn the truth of her mother's disfigurement and death. While *Obasan* may not be precisely an immigration novel, (it is more about expulsion than entrance), the function of the child here is similar to that found in so many adult novels.

The pattern is constant. The novels begin with a child suffering consciously or unconsciously because of immigration. The child cannot understand why he is treated differently. As an adult he starts to understand and usually reaches this understanding by revising his view of the past. Sandor Hunyadi, the central character of *Under the ribs of death*, begins the novel as a young boy fantasizing that he will one day change his name and be like the English. He consoles himself with daydreams that his real father is an English lord, not a poor immigrant. After Sandor does grow up to change his name to Alex Hunter, he strives for an illusory English success available only by hurting his family and himself. In the final scene of the novel, he plays with his baby son and begins to comprehend the cost of what he rejected as a child.

Part of his confusion as a child is caused by the stories he reads. When Sandor goes to his first job, looking after the lawn of a wealthy family, his initial reaction is literary:

It was as though he had walked into a picture in one of his childhood books, past the painted margin to a land that lay smiling under a friendly spell, where the sun always shone, and the clean-washed tint of sky and child and garden would never fade.<sup>2</sup>

This fairytale world is another fantasy. After the 1929 stockmarket crash, Alex will return to find weeds growing in the one time perfect garden. The rich boy

he meets during that initial job gives him a Horatio Alger story: it is possible for the poor to become fabulously wealthy; the hardworking always succeed, given a little luck and a kind but stern patron. This story confirms Sandor's antagonism to his father's values. Marlyn ends Part One, the account of Sandor's childhood, with the description of this book. Its story legitimizes Sandor's ambition and illusions.

Novels on immigration constantly insist on the significance of story. For children, immigration too often means the rejection of old familiar stories and the adoption of new. Wanting to be accepted, children turn to the stories of their peers and feel pressured to accept the stories of their teachers. Educators concerned with immigrant children also recognize the role of story, but they may be torn as to what that role should be. Traditionally the approach has been to socialize the child into his new world, to leave the old stories behind. Recently that point of view has been criticized, but the dilemma that stories pose to the immigrant child still remains. Should stories explain ethnic identity or should they challenge it?

The best treatment of this dilemma is Adele Wiseman's *Crackpot*. Hoda is the typical confused child of the immigrant novel. The language difficulties of her parents and Hoda's innocence are used for humorous effect by Wiseman. For example, Hoda's parents do not recognize the sexual connotation of play "Doctors and Nurses" and think their daughter's new game represents a future career. It does, but not the one they think. Hoda lives in two worlds, Yiddish school and English school, Yiddish language and English, her father's stories and those acceptable at school:

English school was quite different. Here you daren't talk, and the teachers had droughty faces and crisp, unloving voices that told proudly how westerners had beaten down the wild Indians and crushed the treacherous half-breeds and made the great new continent a place fit to live in. Now our boys had to go back to clean up Europe.<sup>3</sup>

The teachers' stories emphasize new words and Hoda does not yet know how to tell her father's stories in those words. She never knows when the children will like what she has to say and when they will laugh:

Hoda had discovered that "duty" and "honour of your country" were the things you said that made you feel patriotic and just like everybody else in English. In Yiddish the words that felt right when you talked of wars and soldiers were, "When will they stop killing each other like wild animals and come home and look after their families?"<sup>4</sup>

All her life, her father Danile has told her the miraculous story of his wedding, of the plague that led to a threatened pogrom, of the need to find two scapegoats to appease the plague, of the role that blind Danile and hunchbacked Rahel played through their wedding in a cemetery. After her mother's death, when her teacher invites the class to talk about themselves during Oral Expression period, Hoda makes a crucial, disastrous decision. She will tell her teacher,

Miss Boltholmsup, and the class the story of her parents' wedding. She hopes that the class will respond the way she always has giving her "all the wonder and the admiration and the respect and the popularity and the affection that would be the natural crop of her revelations."<sup>5</sup>

The amazed class does not know how to react until the teacher shows them the way. Miss Boltholmsup is horrified; the story is just another example of how her students are degraded and eager to offend her. When Hoda refers to the pogroms, Miss Boltholmsup is forcibly reminded of the number of Jews in her class:

Yes, and an awful lot of them in the school, in the city more and more of them, and nobody doing anything about it though suddenly a person could find herself surrounded by fat presences with loud voices and demanding eyes.<sup>6</sup>

The threatened teacher nears sexual hysteria when she hears the innocent Hoda refer to the marriage in the Jewish graveyard. What Hoda regards as a holy celebration that produced a miracle, the end of the plague, Miss Boltholmsup views as:

[an] obscene picture, the wretched couple of cripples copulating in the graveyard while a bearded, black-robed, fierce-eyed rabbi stood over them uttering God knows what blasphemies and unholy incantations, with the whole, barbaric townful of them avidly looking on.<sup>7</sup>

Nauseated by what her own imagination has created, Miss Boltholmsup sharply puts an end to Hoda's speech and proceeds to deflate the whole story through references to exaggeration, decorum, primitive peoples, old-fashioned ways and superstitions. She concludes by stressing fitness: "If you want to fit in with people what you say should fit the occasion and the audience."<sup>8</sup> Hoda cannot understand the teacher's response and never returns to school again. She only knows that speaking out was a mistake, that inadvertently she has betrayed her father. She never understands what precisely was wrong with her speech.

This incident can function as a parable on Canadian immigrant stories. *Crackpot* is not a children's story, in the sense that children's stories must permit a child reader. *Crackpot* keeps insisting that the central child character, Hoda, because she is a child, is incapable of understanding what is happening to her. The story implies that other children cannot understand the events and therefore it does not allow for a child reader. Only certain adults, the implied readers of *Crackpot*, can understand what happens in Hoda's classroom.

Fat little Hoda in eternal triumph anyway, hurrying home, and fat big Hoda, comprehending, in infinite grief. . . It had simply never occurred to her before. *He could have given me the scraps. You don't do that to children.*<sup>9</sup>

She also learns the true meaning of the old stories. According to Wiseman, both accomplishments are impossible to a child.

Compared to *Crackpot*, there are very few good stories for children on immigration and hardly any at all on Jewish immigration. American children have far more stories on particular immigrant groups and frequently these deal with minor groups. In Canada despite out talk about multiculturalism in children's literature we tend still to think in terms of the majority. Shiela Egoff's comment that we have slighted the ethnic story still holds true.<sup>10</sup> Jewish writers have tended to write memoirs (for example, Fredelle Bruser Maynar, *Raisins and almonds*, Joseph E. Wilder, *Read all about it: reminiscences of an immigrant newsboy*, and Bella Bytensky, *From Russia with luggage*) or have concentrated on adult immigrant fiction, as in the work of Wiseman, Kreisel, and Richler. This slighting of children's literature makes more sense when we remember Hoda's experience and Miss Boltholmsup's words on fitness. Consciousness of the implied child reader inevitably alters the function of the child character; the desire to appeal to the widest audience affects the overall portrayal as the writer omits potentially offensive or puzzling details. Under such circumstances, many writers may well abandon any hope of conveying the immigrant experience to the child reader.

Certainly the assumption that the child cannot understand his immigrant experience raises the narrative challenge of adapting the adult immigrant novel pattern to the children's story. The children's writer generally employs five strategies. He may feel compelled to provide a happy ending within childhood; he may divert the interest from immigration to other more accessible topics; he may simplify the immigration story for his readers: he may even reverse the pattern by using the child as observer of adult confusion; he may go so far as to transform the immigrant story into something almost unrecognizable. These are all acceptable and practised strategies in writing for children. Unfortunately in the process the child reader is often denied the full meaning of immigration, but this seems inevitable given our assumptions about the child's capabilities. The writer's concern for the child reader too often distorts what he gives that reader.

If children's immigrant stories are unsatisfactory, perhaps the fault lies with our view of the child, both as character and as reader. Judging by our children's immigrant stories, we see the child reader as timid, in constant need of reassurance — the future will be better; yes, he too will succeed. Our immigrant stories generally follow the deceptive pattern of Sandor Hunyadi's fantasy rather than the honesty and intensity of Hoda's experience. Until the last decade, nearly all children's stories were dominated by the need for a happy ending. Recently interest in immigration has focused on the simple lines of the young child's story book, but the brevity of the form has not allowed for complexity of situation or response. Thus two of the strategies, the happy ending and simplification, imply a condescending view of childhood. The strategy

of using immigration as background for an examination of something else, essentially assumes the truth of the adult immigrant novel's view of the child. Since the child cannot understand immigration, such books seem to say, it is best not to dwell too long on it; let's talk about the problems that the child can really grapple with. The final two strategies alone rise to the narrative challenge without belittling the child reader. In books such as D'Oyley's *Between sea and sky* and Paperny's *The wooden people* we see that the children's story can interpret immigration perceptively and honestly. Such strategies are not inferior to Wiseman's procedure, but they do result in interpretations of immigration very different from the pattern found in adult novels.

A brief survey of the five strategies will indicate the direction the children's immigrant story set in Canada has taken during the last eighty years from the optimism of the early novels to the transforming imaginative strength of *The wooden people*. It will demonstrate how narrative strategies determined by a view of the child reader ironically can create stories that may further confuse the child. The child protagonist's confidence, good luck, and easy adaptation to Canada too often contrast with the immigrant child reader's own hesitancy and confusion, turning the immigrant story itself into part of the strangeness around him. A confused child protagonist might be less confusing to the reader.

Two early examples of the first strategy with its emphasis on optimism are C.L. Johnstone's *The young emigrants: a story for boys* and Captain F.S. Brereton's *A boy of the Dominion: a tale of Canadian immigration*.<sup>11</sup> In the former, eleven year old Johnnie Wilmot emigrates to Canada with a band of boys led by Rev. George Evans. The tone of the book is evident when Johnnie is more comfortable in steerage and sleeps better than the man in first class. The novel is clearly directed at future English emigrants. The narrator advises the reader that it is useful to emigrate with a character reference, and explains Canadian terms:

Then there was a shout of "Hurry up, all on board" — the Canadian way of saying "Please make haste."<sup>12</sup>

He repeatedly informs the reader that there are no get-rich-quick schemes in Canada. British emigrants should settle near each other to avoid loneliness and permit attendance at church. Johnnie has lots of problems: he occasionally feels homesick and nearly freezes to death in the snow. But the ending is optimistic: a bright future is predicted for Johnnie as a popular M.P. and maybe even Secretary of State. In many ways the story is similar to the deceptive one that fascinated Sandor Hunyadi. Johnstone provides a succinct cautionary moral for future emigrants: "The moral is, that many a young emigrant does not fit at once into the right place. But neither he nor his friends should despair."<sup>13</sup>

*A boy of the Dominion* published fifteen years later combines an argument on the right kind of emigrants for Canada with the standard romance plot of

secret inheritances and assumed identities. Seventeen year old Joe Bradley in a "little northern town"<sup>14</sup> in England after his father's death takes a policeman's advice to emigrate: "Out there, in Canidy, there's room for me and you, and thousand like us."<sup>15</sup> He is told that Canada want only certain kinds of emigrants. One character tells him:

Slackers get deported; but young active fellows, with pluck behind the, and with grit and strength and health, they make good every time, sir. They help to form the backbone of Canada.<sup>16</sup>

Joe is no slacker. His steerage is paid by the victim of a car accident he rescues. On board we are told that he is exceptionally capable for an emigrant and this is certainly demonstrated when the ship catches fire and Joe not only leads the volunteers but takes over the Marconigrams as well. He lands in Quebec badly burned, with no hair and bandaged hands, but \$750.00 richer.

The main plot concerns Joe's fight with the bully Hurley, a madman who has already beaten and killed his wife, and who proceeds to steal Joe's money and a mystery letter that concerns the hero's unknown inheritance. Clearly Hurley is not the right kind of emigrant and after much plotting to kill Joe and pose as his father to gain the inheritance, Hurley is killed. Joe learns of his fortune but chooses to stay in Canada.

More recent children's immigration stories have set aside the romance adventure elements but have retained their naive optimism and happy endings. This is especially true of books written in the fifties, for example, Anne Macmillan's *Levko* and Lyn Cook's *The little magic fiddler* and *The bells on Finland Street*.<sup>17</sup> In *Levko* the Ukrainian Warnichuk family has been in Canada since 1894. Hence the adolescent Ivan is a third generation Canadian who is generally content to be so but occasionally questions his identity: "Galicia, Austria, Ukraine, for gosh sakes, what am I anyway?"<sup>18</sup> This self-questioning process is accelerated by the arrival of his grandfather's brother's grandson, Levko, a thirteen year old who has spent four years in a DP camp in Germany and two years before that in a Polish labour camp. The story concerns Levko's suspicions and hostility. He is so used to a police state and so desperate for money that he accepts a bribe to protect a criminal. After his traumatic experiences, he can believe in neither the law nor in the grandfather who likes to boast that Canada will become a great nation and tells him:

I do know that those who come seeking homes, peace and security, liberty and a good way of life will find what they're looking for.<sup>19</sup>

The dénouement points to the difference between the adult and children's immigration story. Levko's puzzling behavior can be traced to his belief that he ran away and left his parents to be shot. The theme of betrayal has interesting parallels in both Phyllis Gotlieb's *Why should I have all the grief?* and Henry

Kreisel's *The betrayal*. In the former the protagonist cannot forgive his father for choosing to save his brother only from the Nazis; in the latter Theodore Stappler never forgives himself for betraying his mother to the Nazis. *Levko*, however, has the traditional happy ending of the children's story. Guerrillas have saved the parents and they are now waiting to come to Canada. With this surprise conclusion, Levko's guilt vanishes and he becomes one with the community. The problems of this child immigrant are no more.

In Lyn Cook's fiction, immigration provides ethnic colour; the real problems are not about immigration at all. In *The little magic fiddler* the Ukrainian family has reached the stage where the children are in danger of forgetting the language. When the immigrant grandmother visits, it means, "for two weeks there would be poppy-seed cakes and tales of Ukraine!"<sup>20</sup> Babchia teaches her granddaughter embroidery; there is a Ukrainian Christmas dinner and when Donna visits the New York World's Fair she sees Ukrainian dancers, but the real narrative interest lies in her career as a musician. Even the story Babchia tells her of Myro, the murdered peasant whose violin music can still be heard in the Ukrainian village of Borshow, is subsumed in the main theme. Unlike Hoda's provoking story, Myro's story is simply an inspiration that helps Donna in her career. There is no conflict between old and new worlds. Similarly in *The bells on Finland Street*, the references to ethnic prejudice are very light and quickly discounted. Elin is initially afraid to take skating lessons because she has heard that no one from Finland Street does so. Such a perspective may comment more on class than ethnic bias. In any case her skating teacher reprimands the other children when they are making fun of immigrants: "In Sudbury there are no longer New Canadians."<sup>21</sup> Elin's visiting grandfather, a former prizewinning skater, pays for her lessons and arranges for her to be in the Carnival as Finland. He tells her that she cannot return to Finland with him. Her place is in Canada and her future role will be to skate for Canada. The optimism in Cook's treatment of immigration is dramatized in the book's ending: Elin represents Finland during a Carnival that celebrates the happy history of Canada's immigration.

More recent children's books on immigration may not be as broadly optimistic, but the writers still use various strategies to depart from the pattern of *Crackpot*. The second common strategy is to use immigration as the background for a serious consideration of other problems as in Jean Little's *From Anna* and *Listen for the singing*, Frances Duncan's *Kap-Sung Ferris* and North Perez's *The passage*.<sup>22</sup> In Little's books the story of a German family's opposition to Hitler and their emigration to Canada is secondary to the story of Anna's need for glasses. In *From Anna* the child's handicap is discovered. In the sequel *Listen for the singing*, set five years later, immigration is again secondary, as first to the family's reaction to the prevalent anti-German sentiment during World War Two and then to the accidental blinding of Anna's older brother. Jean Little does pay some attention to the conflicts of immigration:

the immigrant's ambivalence to his Old World roots is developed when Anna's brother Rudi no longer wants the family to speak German at suppertime and must decide whether he will fight against Germany; the family's involvement with Germany is explored through the Nazis' treatment of Anna's aunt Tania. Although Little does show Anna's initial reluctance to speak English, the books are primarily a protest against stereotyping: not all Germans are Nazis; not all blind people make wonderful knitters. Anna's reaction to the family's problems is to behave normally and thereby protect her family; her response to not understanding is to try not to worry about it. This strategy may succeed, but it does not allow for much examination of a child's reaction to immigration.

Similarly *Kap-Sung Ferris* is a problem novel more about adoption, relationships with mothers and ethnic identity than about immigration. The story concerns Kim, an adopted Korean girl who undergoes a crisis of identity in which she rejects her Canadian family and fantasizes that she will return to Korea to find her true mother. The immigration theme is offset by the narrator, Kim's friend Michelle, who is also alienated from society and her mother:

And I wondered if it was easier to have all the not-belonging hidden, as it was with me, or have it hanging out, as it was with her.<sup>23</sup>

Parallel with the patriotic Carnival that ends *The bells on Finland Street*, *Kap-Sung Ferris* concludes with the children singing the national anthem and Kim inquiring about Canadian citizenship. She has found her Canadian identity through first establishing her family identity.

Norah Perez's *The passage* is a thesis novel with a feminist slant. Intending to portray the "inhuman conditions endured by . . . Irish emigrants during the ocean crossing to Canada to escape the famine in 1847,"<sup>24</sup> Perez creates an anachronistic heroine Cathleen O'Faoláin who not only wants to be a scholar and writer, and argues with her mother over woman's role, but while watching her mother give birth wonders why men have not invented something to assist women in labor. An upper class woman befriends her and loans her Wollstonecraft's *A vindication of the rights of woman*. Immigration is again secondary, here to a metaphorical voyage of female self-discovery:

She thought of the universe, vast and orderly, stars and planets fixed and predictable. It was men and women who were all in confusion, and muddling along through it all was baffled Cathleen O'Faoláin in a voyage of her own, trying to discover her place in the scheme of things.<sup>25</sup>

The details may differ from *A boy of the Dominion*; steerage is no longer a pleasure and the food is terrible, but the need to teach the child reader still remains.

Often this teaching function leads to a third strategy, simplification, which culminates in either the one-incident story or excessive reliance on direct ad-

dresses to the reader to provide essential information. Paradoxically, the story form either tightens or is nearly abandoned under the stress of giving the child reader the historical context. Yvonne Singer's *Little-miss-yes-miss*<sup>26</sup> limits itself to the first two days a Jamaican child spends in Canada. The story ends with the child somewhat happier after her initial foe races with her to the door. Like Rosemary Allison's *The pillow*<sup>27</sup> the narrative indicates that once the child passes the initial test in the playground, he will face no more trouble as an immigrant. Such a fantasy may well comfort the immigrant reader, that is until he returns to school the next day. *Stone soup*<sup>28</sup> is a similarly compact falsely hopeful one-incident story. When a teacher is faced with a class of too noisy Canadians and excessively quiet immigrant children, a janitor saves the day with the game of stone soup. Each child has to add something from its culture. The game does produce a group of happy talkative children and certainly a valid point is made about the equal value of all cultures, but the story's concentration limits what the authors can say about immigration. *Stone soup* is not the chicken soup that will instantly cure all the immigrant child's woes.

The beautifully illustrated *Michi's New Year*<sup>29</sup> comes closer to balancing the need for simplicity with the ability to suggest complexity. On New Year's Day an unhappy and cold child, Michi, looks out at the bleakness of a Vancouver winter and remembers happier New Years in Japan. Her new boots don't keep her warm in this cold country. She tells her doll: "Nothing has been fun since we came to Canada."<sup>30</sup> The illustrations contrast through vibrant colours the warmth of her memories of Japanese children with the greyness and isolation of the Vancouver setting. Michi is temporarily cheered up by a big family party that retains some of the old traditions and by the promise of outings to Stanley Park, but there is no pretence that her problems are all over. *Michi's New Year* is a book geared for the young child that still manages to portray some of the pain of immigration.

Unlike the previous four books, Ethel Vineberg in *Grandmother came from Dworitz: a Jewish story*<sup>31</sup> does not use the simple story line alone. Her book based on the weaving together of several generations of family stories, also relies on the direct address to the reader: "I begin with a little history so that you may understand my ancestors."<sup>32</sup> Soon the necessary background outweighs the story whose focus blurs as Vineberg, sounding like a grandmother herself, tells us: "This all sounds pleasant enough, but life was not easy."<sup>33</sup> Our interest in the characters, Sarah Elca and then her daughter, is constantly dampened by the need for more information. The format of the short children's book does not work well with Vineberg's eagerness to set down nearly one hundred years of history. Sarah Elca is suddenly grown up and our interest shifts to her daughter Nachama who just as quickly grows up and emigrates. Disjointed by the highlights of family memory, the book does not give us the opportunity to slow down and experience what Nachama felt as an immigrant at that time. Everything is recounted in past tense. We are even

told that Nachama came to America to give her children, "the glorious opportunity of being born on this side of the Atlantic ocean."<sup>34</sup> Perhaps this is what she recalled later, but at the time as an unmarried girl was she really thinking of her unborn children?

The result of this use of past tense is to convert Vineberg's ancestors from children experiencing to a child remembering adult recollections. Indeed this approach is the fourth common strategy of the children's immigrant story, using the child as an observer of the immigrant world. The writer thereby avoids the problem of a child reader confronting a confused child protagonist by turning the focus to adult uncertainty. In this approach, the child may still have difficulties as an immigrant, but they do not prevent an acute observation of the equally severe problems of others. A good example of this approach is *Call me Danica*<sup>35</sup> where the first person narration by the thirteen-year-old heroine affords ample opportunity for recording the rest of her family's reaction to immigration: her sister's bitterness over leaving a fiancé behind, her brother's fights at school, her mother's financial problems as a chef. Unlike Jean Little's books, which also examine a family of immigrants, the focus is truly on immigration — the shock at moving from the Croatian village to a Vancouver basement apartment, the loss of friends, the change in foods balanced by the beauty of English Bay, the desire to be a doctor forgotten temporarily under the trauma of adjusting to a new place. Using the child as observer of adult confusion also allows the child far more ambivalence towards immigration. Without the pressure of the one-incident story, *Call me Danica* permits a recognition of complex responses and still provides the requisite happy ending. Also once an author admits unresolved adult feelings, childhood uncertainty becomes less threatening. Danica is bewildered by her feelings upon seeing a Croatian tablecloth replace a Canadian plastic one. After her mother sews her a dress that does not fit, she admits that she hates being an immigrant. She longs to be a Canadian but does not know how. Yet Madison ensures that the other characters are just as puzzled. The child does not have to bear the symbolic weight of immigration's complexity.

A more extreme example of shifting the focus to adult confusion is Enid D'Oyle's *Between sea and sky*<sup>36</sup> where a family returns to Jamaica to "expose" their girls to their "cultural heritage." The girls have an entertaining summer; it is their mother, Mrs. Darrell, who experiences mixed emotions. She keeps looking for landmarks that are no longer there. She is shocked by how much her mother has aged whereas her children are simply pleased to have at last a real, loving grandmother. Although one child does dream of not recognizing her mother, essentially our interest lies in the mother's reactions to her native land. Wanting her children to see the Jamaica she once knew, she is disappointed when either they are not impressed or the landscape itself has changed. Places are smaller than she remembers; the effects of industrialization are everywhere. In her memory are only the good things but now she is

a tourist, one of those she resents for changing the island's way of life. She admits that it is the act of living in a foreign land that has made her interested in her roots so perhaps the trip will have the same impact on her children with regard to Canada. To her children, Canada is no foreign land; their dreams are different:

But neither of them dreamt about grinding corn with a pestle and mortar to make cornmeal dumplings, or grating cassava to make cassava bread. No, no, their dreams of yesteryear were all nice, neatly arranged and northern-like.<sup>37</sup>

*Between sea and sky* is an unusual children's book because it is so much a story of adult growth. By the time the family returns to Toronto, the mother has come to accept that her children are different. Their childhood realities lie in Jamaica just as hers lie in a quickly vanishing Jamaica.

The final strategy of handling immigration I have called transformation although perhaps assimilation is a better word. This strategy has produced an award-winning book yet few readers would recognize that Myra Paperny's *The wooden people*<sup>38</sup> is about Jewish immigration. For whatever reason, to appeal to a larger audience, or more likely because Paperny wants to portray a family in which the Jewish heritage is not that important, she transforms the Steins' immigration and ethnic status. The journey to Canada becomes the never-ending odyssey within Canada from small town to small town, according to Lisa twelve schools in eight years. Chapter Two is even called "A new world." The family stories that meant so much to *Crackpot's* Hoda are still important to Lisa, but the point of view has changed. Papa is a half-comic, half-frightening figure. The children ask for stories, even stories about pogroms, as a way of humouring him:

Papa always gave lectures about the wonders of Canada. "You can't believe how terrible life was in the old country. Half the people starved, and we lived in ramshackle wooden houses. And sometimes the Cossacks liked to set our homes on fire; just for fun, you understand."

"Tell us some more stories about when you were a boy, Papa" Mike would ask, as if he hadn't heard the stories a hundred times.<sup>39</sup>

The children do not seem particularly impressed and there is no conflict between Papa's stories and the stories that they hear at school. Cossack pogroms are just another example of the way parents like to tell whoppers about the bad old days. Even Lisa, who loves her father's stories, does not seem affected by their content. She likes his storytelling because: "He seemed to change character when he told them stories. . . even his harsh voice mellowed."<sup>40</sup> However her next thought is to compare him with Scheherazade, a comparison that makes her laugh. We do not hear many of the stories, a clear indication of their relative insignificance to the children.

Paperny transforms the tension between immigrant parent and child into

the father's opposition to the theatre. But her initial description is standard immigrant material:

Sometimes Lisa wished her father's rules were easier to understand. He was a concerned but strict parent. She wished that he was quiet and serene like the parents of her friends. He had a disastrous temper and, when angry, shouted at them in Yiddish.<sup>41</sup>

When Lisa has to convince her teacher that her parents must not know about the puppet theatre, her only feeble justification is to say that her father is from Europe. Yet when her brother Teddy becomes obsessed with the puppets and prefers them to children, Paperny definitely establishes that Teddy's need for friendship and his antagonism to his father are themes no limited to immigrant experience.

Once in Canada this Jewish family seems to have suffered no anti-Semitism. Hoda as a child quickly learns to handle anti-Semitic remarks. When the Stein children arrive in Chatko Falls they too are laughed at for being different. No one knows that they are Jewish; a potentially hostile difference has been comically transformed into the folly of living in the purple house. Being Jewish involves baking Challah for Shabbath and having parents speak Yiddish when they do not want the children to understand. Papa's opposition to the theatre stems from his sister who became an actress and married a Russian. Although he says, "my sister Ida was a tragedy, a waste. The theatre stole her from our people, I tell you,"<sup>42</sup> there are no signs that he worries about the children's lack of a Jewish education. Small towns would not likely have either *cheder* or synagogue, yet no mention is made of this. When her parents plan to send Lisa to private school in Edmonton, nothing suggests that it will be a Jewish school.

By its very success *The wooden people* demonstrates how difficult it is to write a convincing children's immigrant story. The best of its kind, *The wooden people* succeeds by transforming the tensions of immigration into a story about play, children's imagination, and the need for friendship. But like so many other children's immigrant stories, it avoids considering the harder choices immigrant children must make when like Hoda they must decide whether to tell their parents' story and risk the confusion and pain such a telling entails.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Mordecai Richler, *The apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1959; rpt. Middlesex: Penguin, 1969), p. 48.

<sup>2</sup>John Marlyn, *Under the ribs of death*, introd. Eli W. Mandel (1957; rpt. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971), p. 64.

<sup>3</sup>Adele Wiseman, *Crackpot*, introd. Margaret Laurence (1974; rpt. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978), p. 35.

<sup>4</sup>Wiseman, p. 38.

<sup>5</sup>Wiseman, p. 97.

- <sup>6</sup>Wiseman, p. 100.
- <sup>7</sup>Wiseman, p. 101.
- <sup>8</sup>Wiseman, p. 103.
- <sup>9</sup>Wiseman, p. 200.
- <sup>10</sup>Sheila Egoff, *The republic of childhood: a critical guide to Canadian children's literature in English* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 261-2.
- <sup>11</sup>C.L. Johnstone, *The young emigrants: a story for boys* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1898); Captain F. S. Brereton, *A boy of the Dominion: a tale of Canadian immigration*, illus. William Rainey (London: Blackie and Son, 1913).
- <sup>12</sup>Johnstone, p. 33.
- <sup>13</sup>Johnstone, p. 171.
- <sup>14</sup>Brereton, p. 10.
- <sup>15</sup>Brereton, p. 15.
- <sup>16</sup>Brereton, p. 29.
- <sup>17</sup>Anne MacMillan, *Levko* (Toronto: Longmans, Green and Co., 1956); Lyn Cook, *The little magic fiddler*, illus. Stanley Wyatt (Toronto: Macmillan, 1951); Lyn Cook, *The bells on Finland Street*, illus. Stanley Wyatt (1950; rpt. Toronto: Macmillan, 1978).
- <sup>18</sup>Macmillan, p. 17.
- <sup>19</sup>Macmillan, p. 75.
- <sup>20</sup>*The little magic fiddler*, p. 19.
- <sup>21</sup>*The bells on Finland Street*, p. 87.
- <sup>22</sup>Jean Little, *From Anna*, pictures by Joan Sandin (1972; rpt. New York: Harper and Row, 1973); Jean Little, *Listen to the singing* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977); Frances Duncan, *Kap-sung ferris* (Toronto: Burns and MacEachern, 1977); Norah A. Perez, *The passage* (Philadelphia and New York: J.B. Lippincott, 1975).
- <sup>23</sup>Duncan, p. 47.
- <sup>24</sup>Perez, p. 4.
- <sup>25</sup>Perez, p. 108.
- <sup>26</sup>Yvonne Singer, *Little-miss-yes-miss*, illus. Angela Wood (Toronto Kids Can Press, 1976).
- <sup>27</sup>Rosemary Allison, *The pillow*, illus. Charles Hilder (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1979).
- <sup>28</sup>*Stone soup*, story retold by Carol Pasternak and Allen Sutterfield, design and illus. Hedy Campbell (1973; rpt. Toronto: Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1974).
- <sup>29</sup>Shelley Tanaka, *Michi's New Year*, illus. Ron Berg. Northern Lights (Toronto: PMA Books, 1980).
- <sup>30</sup>Tanaka, p. 6.
- <sup>31</sup>Ethel Vineberg, *Grandmother came from Dworitz: a Jewish story*, illus. Rita Briansky (1969; rpt. Montreal: Tundra Books 1978).
- <sup>32</sup>Vineberg, n.p.
- <sup>33</sup>Vineberg, n.p.
- <sup>34</sup>Vineberg, n.p.
- <sup>35</sup>Winifred Madison, *Call me Danica* (New York: Four Winds Press, 1977).
- <sup>36</sup>Enid D'Oyley, *Between sea and sky*, illus. Albert Huie (Toronto Williams-Wallace Productions International, n.d.), p. 5.
- <sup>37</sup>D'Oyley, p. 91.
- <sup>38</sup>Myra Paperny, *The wooden people*, illus. Ken Stampnick (Toronto Little, Brown, 1976).
- <sup>39</sup>Paperny, pp. 20-21.
- <sup>40</sup>Paperny, p. 21.
- <sup>41</sup>Paperny, p. 18.
- <sup>42</sup>Paperny, p. 17.

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