

## HOUSES FAR FROM HERE

*The dancing sun: stories and poems celebrating Canadian children*, ed. Jan Andrews. Illus. Renée Mansfield. Press Porcépic, 1981. 144 pp. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0-88878-196-2; *In a big ugly house far from here . . .*, Magda Zalan. Illus. Julius Varga. Trans. Rosella Calnan and John G. Somjen. Press Porcépic, 1982. 96 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 0-88878-206-3.

In their diverse ways, both of Press Porcépic's recent collections focus on houses far from here, for both consciously explore other cultures. Ms. Zalan's collection of ten short stories examines her own childhood experiences in Hungary during the Second World War, while Ms. Andrews' collection of ten stories and ten short poems examines the variety of cultures that make up the Canadian mosaic. Unfortunately, in both cases, the reader's pilgrimage to these foreign houses is not always a fruitful one. Quite simply, some houses are worth visiting; others are not.

One should note immediately that the Zalan text is a collection of translated stories, "five translated from the Italian by Rosella Calnan" and "five from the Hungarian by John G. Somjen." Though this does not in any way diminish the remarkable authenticity of the author's account of her childhood years in war-torn Hungary, it may help to explain the rather disparate nature of the collection, the fact that one is never quite sure if the tales are meant to be read as a chronological account of her wartime years or as a series of montages, brief sketches that provide, in their totality, a sense of what those troubled days must have been like. The collection, in fact, seems to suggest both approaches: the Hungarian tales (four through eight) are presented within a clear chronological framework, whereas the five tales encircling this nucleus are a series of character sketches, faces that somehow universalize a small child's very specific world. And, not surprisingly perhaps, it is in these latter tales that Ms. Zalan's world truly comes alive. More specifically, this birth takes place with the introduction of Aunt Lola, a wonderful eccentric who walks the streets of Budapest with her pet chicken on a leash. Frail, quiet and a bit crazy, Lola fascinates little Magda, largely because the old woman lives totally within a world of fantasy, a fairy world where she dances in front of millionaires and kings. The story, however, is not of fantasy, but reality, for the children refuse to allow her her dreams. "You don't live in a palace, you live in a rented room," they taunt. Shattered, Aunt Lola suddenly becomes very old and very fragile; her dance is over. Yet, we know somehow that little Magda has learned something about life and the need for such imaginary dances as she watches Lola and her chicken walking away, "never looking back."

Another of these sketches introduces us to little Magda's first fiancé, a little boy who can't go to school because he has no shoes. And when he inevitably must leave, Magda has lost a friend but found a memory. For years, she tells

us, she waited for a letter from her fiancé's mother: "My son, Zoltan Szigeti, could not come to marry you for lack of shoes."

But I think it is in the final tale of her collection that Ms. Zalan captures the true magic of childhood, a magic she aptly defends in her Preface to the collection. In this final tale, called "Liar," Magda remembers a young girl who defeated reality by making up stories about it. The story tells of her visit to a sick girl and how she presents the girl with a stone, but a stone with a story: it is a fallen star. "You're a liar," the sick girl shouts. "The liar shook her head violently. If the sick girl had looked closely she would have seen tears at the corners of her eyes. But she did not look, because she was looking at the rock with a strange smile as if she were happy — very happy. I was the liar" (p. 79). Finally little Magda understands all of the Aunt Lolas of a world gone mad.

Ultimately, this collection is not really about the war. Rather the stories, certainly the best of them, are about the way in which a child perceives her universe. As such, they are more about a universe defined by Aunt Lolas than by big ugly houses.

Ms. Andrews suggest in the Foreward to *The dancing sun* that the subtitle of her collection explains its purpose: to celebrate Canadian children. The publishers go even further, suggesting that these stories and poems, derived from various cultures, "selected with the help of many enthusiastic young readers, make up the first multicultural anthology for children published in this country." Herein lies the problem: in attempting to stress the multicultural nature of the collection, the many colours of the Canadian rainbow, Ms. Andrews often chooses tales which simply do not entertain. Often the tales try so hard to be socially and culturally enriching that they forget to be stories. Marjorie Holland's opening story, "Kodomono-Hi," for example, is little more than a detailed description of a Japanese festival. Plot demands are quite simple: get your hero to visit a Japanese family, preferably on a day when they're doing something Japanese.

Other tales simply take a traditional children's adventure story and provide a multicultural dressing. Ann Rivkin's "Awards day," the Lebanese story, for example, is nothing more than a boy-at-sea adventure while, Mary Daem's "One small spike," though it does include a kindly Chinese cook, is a typical boy-at-lumber-camp adventure.

Happily, however, some tales do succeed. Elizabeth Kaufman's award-winning "Grandfather's special magic" does, in fact, capture the special magic of the North American Indian. Similarly, 95-year-old R. Guttormsson's "The rescue of the prince" is wonderfully able to recapture the magic of the Icelandic myth upon which it is based. How can one not love a tale in which the hero has magical insoles?

Overall, then, as in the case of the Zalan collection, it is the stories that are stories first and not part of some guiding format that succeed. In this context, Irma V. Sanderson's "The muslin curtains" stands out. It tells of a mother

who sacrifices her only possession, her muslin curtains, so that her daughter can dance in the school's Maypole dance. The tale succeeds not because it is a tale of Polish immigrants, but because it is about the love that exists between all parents and their children. But this tale, unfortunately, is the exception. Attempts to be culturally significant doom most of the short stories to mediocrity.

But Ms. Andrews' collection also includes poetry, and here one can find little fault with her selections. Here — briefly, succinctly and wonderfully — she is able to suggest the variety of cultures which enrich the Canadian experience. Particularly noteworthy are the Caribbean poems of Cyril Dabydeen and the Inuit poems of Alootook Ipellie. Perhaps, however, it is Nancy Prasad's "You have two voices" which most fully enunciates the reason that the poetry succeeds while the stories do not.

Speak to me again in your mother tongue.  
What does it matter how little I understand  
when the words pour out like music  
and your face glows like a flame.

In the poetry, we finally hear the mother tongue, unadulterated by the stereotypic motifs and forms which seem to define the traditional children's story. And only then can the words pour like music and the face glow like a flame.

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## REMEMBERING

*Child of the pioneers; stories*, May Carmichael. Illus. Elsie Hadden Mole. Highway Book Shop, 1977. 80 pp. \$3.00 paper. ISBN 88954-109-4; *Time to blow out the lamp. . . and other stories*, Mary Cook. Illus. Iris Miller. Opus Mundi Canada, 1980, 138 pp. \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-920870-02-3.

"Tell me what it was like when you were little." This is a request as old as time itself, universally appealing, certainly not limited to the young. And, thank goodness, there are always the storytellers who are willing to share their store of experiences with us, as they give both continuity and a richer texture to our own lives. For the young, "remembering," however vicariously, contributes to a sense of where one is and has been. We in Canada, with such a multiplicity of ethnic backgrounds, relish good stories of our roots which inform and enchant.