

## GROWING UP DIFFERENT

*So, I'm different*, Joan Weir. Douglas and McIntyre, 1981. 107 pp. \$5.95 paper, \$13.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88894-334-2, 0-88894-320-2; *A perfect day for kites*, Monique Corriveau. Trans. David Homel. Douglas and McIntyre, 1981. 116 pp. \$5.95 paper, \$13.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-012-X, 0-88899-011-1.

According to their publishers, Douglas and McIntyre, *So, I'm different* and *A perfect day for kites* are "extraordinary books" aimed at readers between ten and fourteen. The claim to unusual merit is based on the extent to which both works "respect and reflect the world children live in and the ways they view the adult world."

Joan Weir's book is more plainly didactic than this description would suggest. She has two messages to convey. The first is that in functioning successfully in society, "the important thing is how a person feels about himself"; the second is that since we all differ from one another, the kinds of difference that make us susceptible to stereotyping are in no way special, and hence need not affect "how a person feels about himself."

On the face of it, the first of these ideas may seem morally ambiguous, and the second paradoxical, yet Joan Weir's lively account of a few days in the life of eleven-year-old Nick transcends any weaknesses it may have on the didactic level. Within the scope of what is, despite its book format, a short story, she convincingly presents a complex experience. Moreover, she achieves this although nearly a third of the text is devoted to two tales-within-a-tale that Nick tells. One is a traditional legend recounting the origin of the rainbow, and the other, much longer, a story Nick has heard from his grandfather in which myth and his grandfather's own boyhood experience are inextricably mingled. Both these inner narratives are well-integrated with Weir's storyline. The telling of the legend serves at once to characterize Nick, and also to develop his relationship with an understanding adult, Tony, a student teacher. The second story is crucial to the development of the author's theme.

This theme is the outsider's wish to escape the sense of his "otherness." Nick, an only child, has recently moved to a new neighbourhood, which he dubs "Uppercrustwich," from Riverbend, where he has had good friends at school and the companionship of a much-loved dog. The family's move has not only separated Nick from his friends, but also, by chance, led to the dog's being killed by a car. Nick is at once very much on his own at school, and grieving for his dog at home. The familiar situation of a child trying to settle into a new community is complicated by Nick's own sensibilities, and by the circumstance that he is not only the sole Indian at his school, but the first ever to attend it. As such, he arouses the curiosity of a markedly tackless social studies teacher, who has discovered the child's race from his records. Until

that moment, since Nick does not look like the stereotype of the Indian, no one has known that he is, as the teacher puts it, "one of our native people." She proceeds to saddle Nick with the task of talking for an entire period about what the differences are between him, as an Indian, and all the other children.

The bright and articulate Nick is nonetheless appalled at the prospect looming before him. He is "sort of proud of having folks that are Indian. They're kind of special," but feels that he does not understand his people. This kind of inner conflict is dramatised by a quarrel that erupts at the family dinner table over whether an Indian should grieve for a dog. Nick, already under considerable stress, has a tantrum, bursts into tears, and declares that *he* is not an Indian. His grandfather, serenely free from the tensions that plague his son and his grandson, plays the role of peacemaker, and it is from him that Nick learns to turn to the legends of his heritage, and stories of the actual experience of Indians for the wisdom he needs to see him through his school-boy trial. When the dreaded class comes, he holds his fellow pupils enthralled by his story, and discovers that they envy him for having so interesting a grandfather. Nick emerges from his experience conscious of being not different, but definitely "kind of special," and happy in his new sense of identity.

While one feels that Joan Weir has been much influenced by Louise Fitzhugh, her approach is fresh and her writing crisp. But in this story, parents are not very understanding, and ordinary teachers are downright dense. Grandfathers and denim-jacketed student teachers hold a monopoly on tolerance, warmth and imagination. One might wonder, too, whether most Canadian children have had as little exposure to Indian legends as this story would suggest. Yet, such quibbles aside, many readers will find Joan Weir's *So, I'm different* a skilful and convincing distillation of the experience one child has of coming to terms with his own individuality and heritage, the "difference" that Nick comes not only to acknowledge, but to make an integral part of his new-found assurance.

*A perfect day for kites* makes available in English *Le garçon au cerf-volant* (1975) one of the last publications of the well-known Quebec author, the late Monique Corriveau. In his translation, David Homel has toughened up the original a little, wisely, in my view. Corriveau's style has often been praised as sensitive and evocative, but can also turn mawkish, and her trick of writing in short free-standing units can sound breathless. Homel is faced with turning children's nick-names into English, and while he renders "Nonthalie" (Mon père m'appelle Nonthalie parceque je lui tiens tête; je dis souvent non . . .") as Notalie," he sensibly makes no attempt to do anything with the name of Nonthalie's little cousin, called "Evidemment" (à casue de ce mot qu'il fourre dans toutes les phrases"). For English readers, he becomes just plain Charles.

*A perfect day for kites* also deals with a small boy attempting to adjust to new circumstances, but in Arnaud Colin's case, rejection by his peers is just a minor background detail. Set in a Laurentian village in holiday time, *A perfect*

*day for kites* attempts to portray a boy's struggle to renew his relationship with his father after his mother's death in an accident. The father, a writer, has become a recluse, and only through the regenerative powers of the child can he be brought back to full life. Such huge themes were favourites with Corriveau, and in the situation of Arnaud, she had a promising vehicle for one of her portraits of sensitive, introspective, isolated youngsters coping with unhappy circumstances. Unfortunately, in this novel, unlike her earlier *La fille du printemps*, 1966), she cannot resolve her plot in a way appropriate to domestic realism. When Arnaud strives to establish communication with his depressed father, and at the same time to engineer the publishing of the book that is the symbol and memorial of the family's former happiness, we find ourselves caught up in something perilously close to the power fantasy of the Hardy Boys or Nancy Drew.

The book's characterization is as thin as its plot is contrived. Though the work deals with psychological change, the landscape is thick with stereotypes. We have a wise old fisherman, a gossiping cleaning woman, three frightful old maid aunts. Notalie never shows any signs of the ego-assertion her name implies, but is Arnaud's little help-meet on all occasions. He swims out to rescue her beach-ball; she applies the skill in tying bows derived from curling her dolls' hair to making him a superior kite's tail. Her elder brother, aged sixteen, is a first-rate literary critic, and spends a summer's day reading the manuscript thrust upon him by Arnaud, whom he met but ten minutes before. Perhaps one could argue that these caricatures result, as the publishers Douglas and McIntyre claim, from Corriveau's respect for the way a child views the world, but I think the case would be hard to make.

Physically, both *So, I'm different* and *A perfect day for kites* are pleasant enough, well-printed, and inoffensive in design. This English version of the Corriveau work, however, can in no way match the distinction Les Editions Fides gave to their Collection du Goeland, to which *Le garçon au cerf-volant* belongs.

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