colourful crackerbarrel chatter of the others. And there is a lot of attention paid to what people are *doing* as they talk: Tommy's father telling stories about Mean Hughie as he helps Frank to pilot the Buick; Tommy's father making supper; Frank struggling out of his collapsed tent; Aunt Dottie getting ready to sterilise the wild berries she picks. All these actions go on while Young Tommy thinks about, talks about, and finds out about, the changing world he and Baby Bridget are in. And these cameos, concentrations of clear and specific action, sit like brilliant fixed points in the fluid constellation of that world. These are the cherished and sustaining familiars. They are the constants which allow him to steer successfully a course through the confusing mix of fears and sorrows he encounters in Mean Hughie's death.

And overall, the story is told in the manner of a tale of some good ol' boys, with lots of back slapping and high jinks, good home cooking, and the whole family pretty much where they always were. For Young Tommy it "was like a photograph. . . or a painting. . . All the people were there, in their places, all with their faces turned looking at us in our car. Like a big crowded beautiful coloured painting in a museum." In this respect, *Up to Low* draws on a favourite story-telling tradition that suits its subject, its characters and quite probably its readers, very well.

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HOME TRUTHS: ENVIRONMENT AS DESTINY

Eileen McCullough, Alice Boissonneau. Simon & Pierre, 1976. 192 pp. $9.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88924-052-3; ***The treehouse,*** Helen Duncan. Simon & Pierre, 1975. Reprinted 1982. 271 pp. $9.95 paper. ISBN 0-88924-116-3; ***Smoke over Grande Pré,*** Marion Davison and Audrey Marsh. Illus. Garth Vaughan. Breakwater, 1983. 144pp. $6.95 paper. ISBN 0-919519-25-3.

These novels, written with a young adult audience in mind, deal in different ways with the loss of the childhood home. To present the loss of a precious past time and the confrontation of an uncertain future, each uses a distinct historical period to locate its vision, thus showing the effect of the crucible of environment upon the emerging adult.

Boissonneau's *Eileen McCullough* is set in Toronto in the forties, a world pressed by the exigencies of war and filtered through the eyes of the title character, a teenage girl abandoned by the soldier who is the father of her child. Despite the prominence of the girl's name in the title, the interest in the work

lies not in her character, which is left generally undeveloped. The reader is made to feel that Eileen is just one of many such girls. An illegitimate child, she is led by a combination of naiveté, biology and lovelessness, to become the mother of another illegitimate child.

If Boissonneau's approach were maudlin, the storyline might be adapted to suit a romance magazine. But despite the dangers of cliché, the author presents a work of unusual style, with a haunting, sometimes painful, edge. The third-person narrative is insistently in the present tense, the feeling urgent, the sentences trailing, searching, like the consciousness of the sensitive and rather desperate heroine, who obeys the advice she receives from a kindly older woman, to live one day at a time. As a study of the focussing of her consciousness, it is an interesting work, which leads us through the crowded alleyways of Eileen's poor neighbourhood, into the factories where she makes gunparts, into the homes of rich, white-gloved Toronto socialites. Hers is a concrete world, where bottled-up emotions are described in sensate terms as coldness, hardness, knives of fear, waves of nausea. By contrast, the war is an abstraction of Eileen, an obscure enemy apparent only in newspaper headlines.

While such a documentary style conveys aptly the subordination of the individual to a constantly invading physical reality, at times one would prefer to see more of Eileen and less of the environment which engulfs her. Although it is clearly Boissonneau's thesis that Eileen's circumstances have caused her plight, the sketches of the upper-class women for whom Eileen works seem unjustifiably bitter. By concentrating on the world surrounding the main character, rather than upon the girl herself, Boissonneau writes a powerful case study, but an unengaging novel for teen readers.

Helen Duncan in *The treehouse* explores the loss of the childhood home in a more literal manner. The children in this novel, Chester, fourteen, Lily, thirteen, and Tim, seven, must come to terms with the death of their mother and with the loss, through fire, of their family home. Duncan's focus is on the strange but special closeness of the children and their fears that they will not be able to keep the world out.

The book is a mélange of different tones, all of them appealingly complementary. It is, first, a whimsical book about independent, if impertinent characters. The Courtney children are precocious, rebellious and disarmingly clever, somewhat like the child-heroes of Madeleine L'Engle's books. It is also a subtle book, showing Duncan's skill in character revelation. The children spend a good deal of their time trying to outsmart an unsympathetic, scheming woman bent on marrying their widowed father. Chester and his siblings can see her for what she is and plot to reveal her wheedling and amusing superficiality to their father. If such triumphing over a potential step-mother seems forbidding to a reader concerned that it would foment rebellion in contemporary homes, it must be remembered that this novel belongs to a venerable tradition in children's literature which sees children as smarter than their parents.

The novel is set in 1925, but except for casual references to Tim's sketches of Wilfrid Laurier and scenes where the children dance to the music of "When the red red robin. . ." it is contemporary in tone. Of particular interest is the reliance on parapsychology, the insistence that the children's dead mother is still watching over them and can still remind them of what is important in life. What is important is wholeness in the face of change. The house which is for the children a sanctuary is gradually invaded by such change: first, a tornado hits a maple tree outside which crashes into their mother's bedroom; their mother dies; the hired man's children steal their books; a neighbour suggests that Chester be sent away to school; Lily and Chester have their first frightening yet pleasing encounters with the opposite sex. And the invasions culminate in the loss of their home, the loss of their childhood universe, to be replaced by grown-up separateness. Yet Duncan insists that what is promised to the children is a Paradise within them, happier far. If the parapsychological aspects are less explained by orthodoxy than they are, say, in *The secret garden,* the novel is still commendably definite and accurate in its psychology.

In *Smoke over Grande Pré,* Marion Davison and Audrey Marsh show Acadia of 1755 through the eyes of Paul Cormier, described as a boy "on the verge of manhood." Young Paul witnesses many scenes of blood-and-guts adventure, and these exciting forays shared with his Indian friend, Swift Arrow, are most successful. The boys fall into the hands of English soldiers, unfriendly Iroquois tribes and even into the clutches of Abbé Le Loutre, who reveals himself, in the course of the story, to be not a pious priest, but a sanctimonious and power-hungry deserter.

History here is not only the backdrop, but the backbone. The authors provide the reader with informative footnotes and an impartial perspective. Their subject, the pending deportation of those Acadians who will not take an oath of allegiance to Great Britain (among them Paul's family), provides them with a shocking dénouement: Paul returns from his journey to discover that his home has been destroyed and that he is too late to say goodbye to his family whose ship has departed.

The Acadian past is colourfully depicted by episodes involving four generations of Paul's family; indeed, the ambience sometimes upstages the plot. The narrative is delayed, for example, so that the reader may travel back in Grand-mère Cormier's mind to the days of her girlhood.

The work suffers from a defect of many historical novels — stilted dialogue. In their efforts to encapsulate so much history into such a small form, the authors often tell more than they show. For instance, Swift Arrow's comment in Chapter Two that "there is good and bad in all mankind, being Acadian or Indian has nothing to do with it" is bald, and probably caused by too much speed in a wealth of material demanding a more leisurely approach. *Smoke over Grande Pré* is never dull, though sometimes unsubtle.

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