Not all of the poems in *Time is flies* offer either clearly resolved image or a credible fusion of form with content. The weaker poems require an act of translation to deduce the meaning; like little puzzles, they are truly more games for eye and ear than poems. Some suffer by their placement: one or two lines alone upon a page, *sans* title. It is impossible for the reader to know if these are remote bits of a titled poem from a preceding page, or if they are orphan fragments waiting for a home. The layout of the book could be criticized for contributing to this unfruitful ambiguity, since some of the poems are clearly and sensibly titled. The reader stretches reason (or faith) to link these disenfranchised fragments to their titled neighbours, but without success. And one suspects that they don't unite because they aren't meant to. Still, it makes reading aloud difficult.

Nevertheless, these problems of context are small nuisances; rather like flies, come to think of it. The book as whole is very satisfying. Small in format, as suits its content, and whimsically illustrated (although rather sparingly so for this reader's taste) by Darcia Labrosse, the collection offers if not a banquet certainly a most fortifying snack. Is it three o'clock yet?

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## HISTORY AND FICTION

***Tom, David and the pirates,*** Betty Clarkson. Borealis Press, 1980. 93 pp. $7.95 paper. ISBN 0-88887-050-7; ***Sweetgrass,*** Jan Hudson. Tree Frog Press, 1984. 143 pp. $6.95 paper. ISBN 0-88967-076-5; ***Sarah Jane of Silver Islet,*** Elizabeth Kouhi. Illus. Jeanette Lightwood. Queenston House Publishing, 1983. 144 pp. $10.95 cloth, $9.95 paper. ISBN 0-919866-87-5, 0-919866-88-3; ***The secret of Marie Broussard,*** Eileen Murphy. Borealis Press, 1983. 40 pp. $13.95 cloth, $5.95 paper. ISBN 0-88887-954-7, 0-88887-952-0.

Historical fiction may well be the most important road by which we arrive at that love and understanding of the past requisite for a humane appreciation of the present. In a sense, though historians are often contemptuous of creators of a fictional past, their task is the same: to make us grasp the paradox of how very different from us were our forebears, and yet how astonishingly like. The difference is primarily the concern of the academic historian, but the likeness, the intuition of sympathy, is the particular task of the imaginative writer.

Of the books reviewed here, all attempt in some way to make the reader sympathetic to the past, but only one succeeds at the co-requisite task of keeping

the past true to itself. Let me begin with the worst offender. Betty Clarkson's *Tom, David and the pirates,* set in the 1670s, is the story of two boys with the English fishing fleet who winter on Newfoundland. Despite the promise of the title, the pirates are peripheral: we never even get a good look at them. Instead, the boys encounter Beothucks and Great Auks which, with a callousness that belies the liberal and revisionist efforts of the author, are treated in roughly the same tone — their extinction is deplored. Logically, we might deduce that, provided they keep enough to breed, there's no objection at all to killing Indians. Not that we actually see any killed. Betty Clarkson is bound by a kind of decorum from showing anything too offensive, and the result is a thoroughly boring adventure story. More than once I wished she had thrown caution (or history) to the wind and written what the story longs to be — a swash-buckling yarn in the manner of *Treasure Island.* What history there is, despite the footnotes that manage at once to irritate and insult (a definition of *bowsprit* given in the text is repeated in a note, and even words like *wheelbarrow* and *basket* are glossed), is mere romantic dressing. Tom and David talk and think in a thoroughly 20th-century way, which historical solecism is emphasized rather than mitigated by making Tom the narrator. The book is badly edited, patchily illustrated, and apart from the inherent fascination of its subjects has little to recommend it.

Eileen Murphy's *The secret of Marie Broussard* is more promising. The heroine, having been rescued by Micmacs, later returns the favour by making a dangerous trip to warn them of a coming attack by the Acadian settlers. It's a good plot, with a ring of authenticity that makes me want to know if it has a source in the chronicles of Acadia. Unfortunately, what could have been fine story is here dressed up with tedious dialogue a là William Henry Drummond, bits of Longfellow, and an irrelevant love interest. The style is turgid and clichéd, and almost manages to kill the plot. History is not served by such ponderousness, any more than is fiction.

Perhaps the most disappointing attempt at historical fiction is *Sarah Jane of Silver Islet.* Elizabeth Kouhi is an experienced writer who appears to have done quite a bit of research to produce this quiet tale of a scholarly girl in a mining settlement. The heroine's conversion to feminism is just credible, but she herself is unlikely to win many adherents to the cause. I suppose that any young girl with a literary bent who arrives in a new home must, along with her other trials, put up with being compared to Anne Shirley. And poor Sara Jane doesn't measure up. She has no identifiable personality, as Anne so emphatically has. Any teacher who wanted to discuss the role of women in 19th-century Canada would do far better to use *Anne of Green Gables* and talk about why the story ends as it does. Better to grind your teeth over Anne's entrapment than to shrug your shoulders at Sarah's liberation. The author wants our sympathy for the women of the past, but to win it, she is willing to distort history. For example, the whole community of Silver Islet conspires to keep

the embarrassment of 19th-century Presbyterianism out of sight by thoughtfully organizing their social gatherings around an improbable band, rather than the obvious church. Mrs. Kouhi quite laudably wants girls to think about other things than marriage and homemaking, but nobody's liberation is furthered by lies.

Paradoxically, in *Sweetgrass,* Jan Hudson has far more persuasively argued a feminist position by giving us a heroine who wants only to be allowed to marry. Sweetgrass is a Blackfoot girl of fifteen, and like the heroines of fairy tales, she can win the prize of a husband only after she has been proved. The test is by starvation, smallpox, and demons. The new didacticism that forbids our children any glimpse of the darker side of life, and that seems to have laid its meliorist hand on the other novels reviewed, has not been here. Though Sweetgrass begins by sounding too much like a Judy Blume heroine, unable to see past her nipples, she grows to a vision of power, and to know death and the sweetness of life.

Miss Hudson has taken risks by making Sweetgrass the narrator. She has sometimes to invent language that sounds stilted, but she has wisely kept the narrative as spare as possible. Wonderfully, the result is a novel that I am tempted to call poetic. For example, the heroine complains to her grandmother that no one praises her. Later, the grandmother answers obliquely:

> "It is the bitter berries that come to us just before the earth freezes." She looked deep into my eyes. "And bitter or not, we need them. What's the use of all Otter's buffalo, if you and I don't dry his meat? Yet no one will praise us. Some things must be done without sweet words."

Two other things set *Sweetgrass* above the other books reviewed here. One is its respect for history, and the other is its structure. One of the problems with both *Tom, David and the pirates* and *Sarah Jane of Silver Islet* is that their climaxes are marred. In *Sarah Jane,* the death of Sarah Jane's sister Susie which is the book's most moving passage, comes a little more than a third of the way through the book, and the rest inevitably feels like anticlimax. In *Tom, David and the Pirates,* the story is episodic, and the crowning episode, the encounter with the pirates, comes two pages from the end, and so feels rushed and a bit of an anticlimax itself. No such difficulties mar *The secret of Marie Broussard,* but the shapely story is almost buried in debris. In *Sweetgrass,* the plot follows the seasons, from spring to spring, and so has a natural shape, and a climax in the darkest days of winter. A short final chapter returns us to spring and the fulfillment of the heroine's desire.

More importantly, *Sweetgrass* has a respectful communication with its setting. The bibliography at the end here is both a list of sources and a door for the reader whose imagination has been made restless. While the other three books come perilously close to confirming what we always supposed about how boring our own past, *Sweetgrass* should awaken in a young reader a keenness to know what it was really like to live in that place and that time. As a blow

against stereotypes, Indian or female, it is worth any amount of genteel condescension or well-intentioned anachronism.

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## MEG TO THE RESCUE: FICTION WITH A SOCIAL MESSAGE

***Trouble at Lachine Mill,*** Bill Freeman. James Lorimer, 1983. 128 pp. $5.95 paper. ISBN 0-88862-672-X.

Bill Freeman's latest novel is the fourth in his series about Meg Bains (now aged fourteen) and her brothers, all of whom work very hard to help their widowed mother in her efforts to support her family. In this story, Meg and her twelve-year-old brother, Jamie, go to work in a Montreal shirt factory.

As in most series, the characters and the squence of events are, at least in part, predictable. The children are generally naive about the working conditions which they face, and these conditions are inevitably far worse than they had expected. The boss is brutal, insensitive and drinks too much. The workers at the factory/at the logging camp/on the ship are underpaid, underfed and ill-treated. Eventually these workers, encouraged by Meg, are determined to deal directly with the owner. He is forced to accede to their demands for union recognition and better working conditions in order to protect his own interests. There are variations from story to story, but these components are generally present.

The format of the books is similar also: map at the front, photographs of the period inserted, all together, in the centre. The more recently published books appear to have been printed on better quality paper stock. This is fortunate because the yellowing paper of the earlier books is unattractive to young readers.

The dust jackets (or covers in the case of the paperback versions) are colourful. The cover of *Trouble at Lachine Mill,* painted by Alan Daniel, is very eye-catching in its depiction of a horse rearing in front of two frightened children.

Many children feel comfortable with series books, and the characters become friends. But it is for other reasons that the Freeman novels should be read by Canadian children (9 to 13 age group). These books are well researched and accurate in historical detail. The photographs are informative and representative of the themes. The children are credible human beings who become tired, hungry and cranky from time to time. The main protagonist is a young girl