

THE CANADIAN NORTH THROUGH THE EYES OF CHILDREN

Children of the Great Muskeg, Sean Ferris. Illus. Cree and Métis children of Moosonee and Moose Factory Island. Black Moss Press, 1985. 84 pp. \$10.95 paper. ISBN 0-88753-128-8.

This penetrating little book of black and white drawings, ten colour plates, and lines of poetry, all done by children of Northern Ontario, gives a more vivid picture of the bleak, enchanting northland than many adult books achieve.

In an almost square format, 8" x 8 1/2", Sean Ferris has collected what look like school assignments — e.g., "Me", "My struggle", "Journal excerpts" — by children whose names reveal their origin: Marcella Trapper, Jason Whiskeychan, Nelson Cheechoo. The lines tell the familiar tale of old traditions disrupted by the new. Sometimes the tense of a verb does it, as in Jennifer Sutherland's "Goose hunting":

When the geese start flying, the men would go and kill the geese.	and then they clean the geese. After, they cook the geese.
The women would pluck the geese	Boy, does it ever taste good.

In every case, the old Indian way is the beloved one. The mention of ski-doo, 4-10 guns, booze, Star Wars and Incredible Hulk strikes a harsh note in these poems.

The real charm, however, is in the illustrations. The centre-spread by Ian Archibald of Moosonee is a black and white frieze of Canada Geese flying across a royal blue sky. There is extraordinary energy and artistry in the shapes and design of the powerful birds. Others, such as the scarlet eagle by Tony MacDonald, a goose and feather design by Quentin Cheechoo, and a beaver with surrealistic man-beast drawn inside him, are reminiscent of the best work of artists like Norval Morrisseau, Daphne Odjig, or the great Inuit artist, Oonark. One lonely moose, done in black and white silhouette, could go onto the Canadian stamp forevermore, such is its timeless elegance. In contrast, the drawings of men with guns (with IRA scrawled on the side of a canoe and PLO marked on the plane overhead), starting a power-boat, or in a ski-doo, look cramped and hostile.

The book does not strain for a message, however. Whether it would appeal to twelve-year-olds, reading on their own, is another question. I would think any sympathetic adult could bring the book and its pictures to life for much smaller children, by reading it to them. It would be an addition to any household.

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