

Editorial: Storytelling

In any nation, stories told to children encapsulate tradition, convey a sense of present-day values, hand on a local tang of humour, and purvey a regional version of romance. In Canada, we tell our children stories from many sources — Indian and Inuit legends, European fairy tales, American animal stories, anecdotes from our own provincial histories, futurist fantasies. Canadians made up stories long before the first printing presses were set up here; and in the recent proliferation of publishers, storytellers have popped up everywhere in Canada, ready to begin with their newest narrative.

But this issue of *CCL* is not about stories, but about storytelling: not what we tell, but how the work of telling goes. Academics are directing learned attention to “narratology” these days, so we’re in stylish company; but the techniques of telling stories to young readers are different from the technique of structuring fiction for adults. (One of our articles, on Marian Engel, gives a case-history of the shifts that occur when she moves from an adult to a child audience.) The special tricks in storytelling for children become clearer as we hear from Robert Munsch, or Sofiah Friesen, or Sonja Dunn: their accounts show how they work, where they position themselves vis-à-vis the tale and the audience, how they revise and sharpen, how they move from oral telling to written work.

Our reviews deal with good, bad and indifferent storytellers. Several reviewers fault the publishers or editors for letting awkward bits of writing slip into print. Our own feeling is that the faults often come from the storytellers themselves, when they have gone to the publishers too early in the process of telling and re-telling the story. Better to wait, to hone the tale until it has the heft, the shine, the swing and the chuckle, all perfect. Then the storyteller is truly ready to delight not just her own circle of children, but also all the young readers who come at the call of the old magic invitation: “Let me tell you a story . . .”