

# Every old person is Somebody: the image of aging in Canadian children's literature

*Patricia de Vries*

The percentage of our population which is sixty-five and over has doubled since the start of the century and is growing rapidly.<sup>1</sup> With "improvements in medical care", more of us are making it to a ripe old age. Thus, concern for that period of life is burgeoning. People interested in children's literature and education have been demonstrating a growing awareness of the aging of the population and, along with that awareness, a concern about the negative stereotypes of old age that are prevalent in our society. When we are old, how will our children, then middle-aged, regard us?

Direct measurements of people's attitudes toward aging and the elderly have been going on for some years. In 1976, for example, Richard K. Jantz interviewed children and found that even three-year-olds had an aversion to old age. The children he interviewed denied that they themselves would ever become old. They saw old people as sick, unattractive and passive. Most had limited contact with elderly relatives and knew no old people outside their families. Yet they had definite ideas about old age. As a publication of the Council on Interracial Books for Children put it in 1976:

While stereotypes reflect injustices in our society, they also reinforce and contribute to perpetuating those injustices.<sup>2</sup>

Because of this, a sense of responsibility and concern combined with the itch of curiosity has led researchers to study children's books, looking for possible reinforcements of these stereotypes.

There were five major studies, all done in America in the 1970s. Two looked at books for young children, two at novels read by adolescents and one at books written for children in the intermediate range. One researcher dealt with an exhaustive list of 656 books; the others examined random samples from selective lists. Because of these differences, it is difficult to compare the results. Some general trends did emerge however. Although they found less negative stereotyping than they expected, one researcher said:

What may be more important than the direct negative stereotyping is the indirect picture of the older population that is shown. In an overwhelming number of cases, older people were portrayed as only shadows who moved into and out of the major

flow of the story at expeditious times. They were not within the mainstream of the plot; they were the bit players who inhabited the fringes of the stage and who received neither the love nor the hate of the heroes or the villains.<sup>3</sup>

Another researcher, Phyllis Barnum, found that old people appeared less frequently than their actual occurrence in the population would justify. Old women were less frequently present than old men, although they are more prevalent in the population. They were most often stereotyped as housewives. Old men were over-represented in employment but almost never shown in jobs that require mental acuity. Elderly people were seen as less active and more dependent than other adults and their social lives were portrayed as severely limited and not particularly pleasurable. On the whole, they were two dimensional and lacking a range of emotion.<sup>4</sup> Barnum comments:

The young child learns, from these books, unfortunate lessons about old people: that they are not active or interesting, that old age is a period of restricted social activity, and that, unless they are relatives, one does not associate with them.<sup>5</sup>

More research is needed to determine the effect of books on children's attitudes and beliefs. If there is such an effect, how does it work? Are first-hand experiences the major factors in determining perceptions held by children? Does literature reinforce or modify? What is the relation between television images, portraits in books and the reality of old age in our society? Do opportunities to share and discuss books with adults help to shape children's attitudes and beliefs?

Although the studies examined found less negativity than the researchers expected, all five did find the elderly presented as essentially superfluous to the lives of the young. These studies were done by American researchers and dealt with American books and American children. The Canadian children's books I have reviewed seem to show richer characterization and a more varied assortment of roles than the American studies indicate.

It is interesting to watch the changes in roles and characterization over time. In L.M. Montgomery's *Jane of Lantern Hill* (1937), Grandmother Kennedy is possessive, aloof and dictatorial. She takes every opportunity to make Jane feel miserable and inferior. As a strong negative force, she is in marked contrast to Gramma in Patti Stren's *There's a rainbow in my closet* (1970). Whereas the 1937 termagant has a wicked witch quality in the way she poisons her daughter's marriage and her granddaughter's daily life, the 1970 Russian-born Gramma, who lives in a Florida beach house and paints seagulls, "always has a way of making Emma feel even better than she (is) feeling." She respects Emma and helps her believe in herself enough to enable her to show her drawings to the whole class and

to talk about herself. Gramma reads aloud to Emma from Van Gogh's letters to his brother Theo; Grandmother forces Jan to read aloud from the Bible. With opposite motives, each tries to affect the child in a way she perceives her daughter to have failed. One disciplines; the other nurtures. Both sorts of grandmothers still exist in Canada today, both in and out of children's books. But you will not find a grandmother quite like Emma's in any Canadian book of fifty years ago. As a well travelled and educated woman of leisure, she would have been an anomaly indeed.

The elderly people in L.M. Montgomery's novels, while they may seem straitlaced to us today, had far more life than those depicted in books written by her contemporaries. In *Anne of Green Gables* (1980), Anne and Diana jump, definitely by mistake, on Diana's Great Aunt Josephine as she lies asleep in the spare room bed. Yet this old lady has enough imagination and sense of humour, albeit rusty, to be amused by Anne's histrionics and forgive the girls.

There are far more Canadian children's books published today than there were thirty years ago. When I was a child growing up in Ontario in the 1940s and '50s, we used to listen to *The just Mary stories* by Mary Grannon and *Jake and the kid* by W.O. Mitchell read aloud on CBC radio. Both of these were also published as books of short stories.

All I remember about the "Just Mary" stories is squeaky-voiced Maggie Muggins who always went hippety hoppity (I don't think I'm confusing her with Peter Rabbit) and the benign "old" Mr. McGarrity, whom she went to visit in his garden. Looking at the book now, in the library, I find Mr. McGarrity labelled "old" three times in the first two pages. It is interesting that it was never necessary to term Maggie Muggins "Young".

*Jake and the kid* I remember much more clearly because I heard them when I was older and have read them since. Jake is a many dimensional older person of patience, wisdom and love. He is not, in any sense, a peripheral character. In *The kite*, a book easily accessible by adolescents, W.O. Mitchell has created a delightful and stubborn old codger named Daddy Sherry. On his hundredth birthday, he is taken on a goose hunt but, when the old gander he has known for years flies over, Daddy, cackling with laughter, refuses to shoot. In *Who has seen the wind*, there is a mean grandmother, reminiscent of Montgomery's Grandmother Kennedy. (One could perhaps accuse Mitchell of sexism but not of ageism.) Even Brian's proper Scottish grandmother is, however, portrayed with some sympathy. The reader is allowed to glimpse her point of view.

Among recent books which are written for children, several of Jean Little's books present old people who are important, full scale characters: Mrs. Kent, in *Spring begins in March* (1966), and Mrs. Thurstone, in *Look through my window* (1970), and Mr. Medford, in *Mama's going to buy you a mockingbird* (1984). In *Spring begins*, Meg resents her grandmother's

coming to stay. Meg finds her intensely annoying because she complains about slammed doors, draws attention to uneaten vegetables, calls Meg "Margaret" incessantly...but Grandma also reads bedtime stories and does jigsaw puzzles. Toward the end, Meg finds and reads her grandmother's childhood diary and come to appreciate and love her. This grandmother is central to the story since Meg's growing maturity is evident chiefly in her changing relationship with her grandmother. Mrs. Thurstone, in *Look through my window*, lives alone in a huge house, next door to Emily. She gives presents and "corrects your grammar". She likes watching baseball on TV and teaches Emily and Kate to play Bezique. She is a neighbour, not a relative. Jean Little's most recent book, *Hey, world, here I am!* (1986), is a collection of poems and short prose pieces written from Kate's point of view. One poem, which shows Mrs. Thurstone's influence on Kate's thinking, I will quote at length because I find it a perfect device for saying something important without preaching.

#### About Old People

It all started when I told Emily that I didn't like old people.  
Well, I don't. They scare me, especially the really ancient ones.  
I never know what to say to them.  
They stare as if you had dirt on your face.  
They grab at you, and their hands are hard and bony.  
They always want to kiss you. I hate their prickly kisses.  
"She's got her father's ears," they say.  
As if you're made out of used parts.  
Sometimes they smell musty. Often they're nosy.  
And you have to be polite, no matter how rude they are.  
As I said, I don't like them.

When I said so to Emily though, she was stunned!  
You'd think I said I hated newborn babies or kittens.  
"But you like Mrs. Thurstone, don't you?" she said at last.  
I hadn't been thinking of Mrs. Thurstone.  
She used to live next door to the Blairs, before they moved.  
She's old all right. Eighty-six is no spring chicken.  
"Sure," I said, laughing.  
Just thinking about Mrs. Thurstone makes me laugh.  
She's so fierce and scary, and then she hands you a present.  
I could see what Emily was getting at, of course.

"But she's Mrs. Thurstone," I tried to explain.  
"She's somebody we know.  
I meant I don't like old people in general."

Emily let that sink in...  
"You know, Kate, every old person in general is somebody...  
Somebody in particular..."

That was when her cousin James butted in....  
"You dope, Emily, everybody is somebody. Not just old people."...  
"Everybody is somebody," James had said.  
He's only nine but he's somebody, that's for sure.  
So's Emily and so's Mrs. Thurstone.  
And I know I'm somebody.  
And...old people?<sup>6</sup>

One technique for portraying old people convincingly to children is to jump back in time and show them as children too. Whereas Jean Little uses the diary, Monica Hughes employs a scrapbook. Paula Popowich<sup>7</sup> finds a book of photos and clippings of her mother's in the attic and, with its help, actually traces her father's mother. This grandmother helps her to a more realistic acceptance of her parents and to a pride in her Ukrainian heritage. In *Blaine's way* (1986), Monica Hughes first gives us an old man remembering his childhood to record it for his newborn grandson. On the second page, however, a flashback takes us directly to 1930 where Blaine is six. The story deals with his experiences up through adolescence before the reader is reminded, at the finish, that Blaine is now a grandfather. Children reading this book may realize, for the first time, that their grandparents had grandparents too and that, even then, the generations did not always see eye to eye. Janet Lunn, in *The rootcellar* (1981), uses a mysterious door into a root cellar as an entry into the 1860s, for her heroine Rose Larkin. Lunn makes history real by allowing a contemporary child to move about in it, and old people more interesting because Rose meets them as the young adults they once were. Margaret Laurence shows a little girl and her grandmother at odds in the early part of *The olden days coat*; a magic dream sequence helps open the door of understanding.

One of the interesting features in the image of aging in Canadian children's books is the increasing ethnic mix and the regional diversities. L.M. Montgomery's old people are Scottish, reflecting the predominantly British background found in early Canadian books. Patti Stren's Gramma, as noted, had immigrated from Russia in her youth. Paula Popowich's grandmother is Ukrainian. There is a Finnish grandfather in *Bells on Finland Street* (1950) and German Mennonite grandparents in Mabel Dunham's *Kristli's trees* (1984).

The fact that ours is a recent immigrant population, is still immigrating, and no longer uniformly Caucasian, is evident in recent portrayals of the elderly. Most of these portrayals are predominantly positive or, if they do begin negatively, they end on a positive note. *Camels can make you homesick and other stories* (1985) is a collection by Nazeen Sadiq. In one of these, a grandmother comes to visit from Bengal and is taken to a McDonald's fast food outlet. Her grandson is resentful of her intrusion into his life and embarrassed by her. Yet Sadiq skillfully, in one brief story, builds the

relationship between the two until the child, at the end, enjoys and is even proud of his grandmother. In the process, we see him also become proud of himself, without the author having to say so.

Joy Kogawa writes of the Canadian Japanese experience during the war. She has written a child's version of her adult novel *Obasan*. Called *Naomi's Road* (1986), it concerns a little girl, Naomi Nakane, who is left with her older aunt, Obasan, and uncle and is interned during the 1940s. The strength, endurance and love of this elderly couple see Naomi through this time essentially unscathed. Their steady belief in the values of hospitality, family, friendship and beauty support them all through the misery, ignominy and betrayal they experience from Caucasian Canadians.

One English language book, written by Claire MacKay and Marsha Hewitt, contains a strong-minded French Canadian grandmother, Monique Chatel. It is *One proud summer* (1986), based on an historical event in the summer of 1946 in Valleyfield, Quebec. Mme Chatel, not yet seventy, is "bent, shrunken almost" from working at the textile mill since she was ten years old. She encourages her granddaughter Lucie to fight for a Union and joyfully fights along with her throughout the ensuing struggle. Mme Chatel is, of course, a native born Canadian. Yet her distinct cultural identity is a significant part of her portrayal. The same is true of the Newfoundlander grandfather in Kevin Major's first novel, *Hold fast* (1978). The main protagonist, Mike, has to deal with the deaths of his parents at the beginning of the book and with his grandfather's death at the end. The grandfather is present only at the start and finish of the story but his existence is one of the things which Mike can "hold fast". He is the "only one now who could remember it all, all the times that went on before. He was able to share things that nobody else could any more." One passage is a gem for its positive portrayal of what most books would probably call "deafness and absent mindedness", deficits of aging.

You had to know how to go about speaking to Grandfather too. It was no use to say something to him and be looking out the window or fiddling with whatever was on the table or have your mind half on something else. You had to look right straight at him and talk loud. If you learned that, you wouldn't have to go repeating what you was saying to him more than once.<sup>8</sup>

This could be a comment on the art of conversation and attentive listening to everyone, except for the "talk loud".

As our population ages, our concept of what actually constitutes "old" age is changing with it. People may still be retiring at sixty-five, but they are no longer bent and shrunken by hard labour like Monique Chatel. Four generation families are common for the first time. Grandparents are often energetic travellers, active volunteers or beginning second careers. Budge Wilson presents this changing concept beautifully on the first page of *Mr.*

*John Bertrand Nijinsky and Charlie* (1986).

Mr. John Bertrand Nijinsky lived by himself in a small house in a little town in Nova Scotia called Wolfville. He was 65 years old. Sixty-five is a lot older than 25, and a lot younger than 95. Therefore you might say that Mr. John Bertrand Nijinsky was of middling age. But unfortunately he was convinced that this was not the case. He was so sure that he was old that he had long ago stopped trying.<sup>9</sup>

Without saying so, Wilson demonstrates that life need not be all downhill after retirement. When Charlie, a cat as scruffy and stubborn as J.B. himself, comes into his life and stays, J.B. perks up. This book for younger children is interesting because the character who works the transformation in Mr. Nijinsky is not a child but a cat.

There are clearly several good children's authors in Canada who are, at least, armchair gerontologists and free of the stereotypic thinking prevalent in the minds of the general population. By fostering an interest in their books, we can combat society's unthinking attitudes toward aging — as well as the effects of television's stereotyped view of the elderly. Perhaps if we read such literature aloud with our children, we will find it helps to change some of the hidebound beliefs that may be lurking in our adult minds as well.

In an essay called "The Lords of Time", Jill Paton Walsh, an English author of children's books, explains why she thinks it is so important to include old people in books as major characters, to portray old age and death.

Children cannot yet imagine change and therefore do not yet know who they are... We write to teach them about change. We write to tell them about loss and death and sorrow; and about growth and joy as compensations. We write to teach them that actions have effects and that effects have causes. We write for people whose span of memory is short and those span of hope is long... (It) is necessary in children's books to mirror death, to show a projected end and to teach that nothing is forever so that the child may know the nature of the game he is playing and may take a direction, make purposeful moves.<sup>10</sup>

In the Canadian children's books that are worth reading — and there are many more than those mentioned here — the older characters always have their annoying side, but attempts are made to appreciate their point of view. The portrayals are not just disparaging nor stereotypic nor are the real problems of aging minimized. There is a "humanistic" concern for understanding the elderly and their value to the children in the stories is one of the most important points made. The books our children need to combat stereotypes are there, if they can be helped to find them. Books are no different from any more resource. There are the trivial; there are the satisfactory; there are the treasures.

## NOTES

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- 4 Barnum, Phyllis Winet. "Discrimination against the aged in young children's literature". *Elementary school journal* (March 1977), pp. 300-6.
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- 8 Major, Kevin. *Hold fast*. Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1978.
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**Patricia de Vries** is a nurse who is doing post-graduate study at Simon Fraser University in the field of gerontology. She lives and works in British Columbia.