# Somewhere on the fringe: TV, filmstrips, museums, music

*Dodi Robb; Joanne Culley; Carol Johnston; Brian Strachan*

## **Dodi Robb**: TELEVISION — THE SOMEWHERE MEANT FOR ME

I knew that television was "the somewhere meant for me" right from the day it started in Canada in September 1952. As a young writer, I was one of the exhilarated group who put together the first Canadian TV show ever. I felt it a rare privilege to start with a brand new industry, but more than that, I was excited by the new dimensions TV could add to my work as a story teller: electric wizardry made it easy to blend realism with fantasy, and even to recreate history.

Most of all, I loved the magnetism of the new medium. I've always believed that TV, if used correctly to educate and enlighten as well as entertain, could change the face of the world. If used mainly as propaganda, or as a vehicle to sell goods to the largest possible number of people, it can become frighteningly banal, trite, violent, and vulgar — an insult to the intelligence of its viewers. When insulting television is directed at children, it infuriates thinking parents and educators and leaves children with a feeling of dissatisfaction. Fortunately, however, not all of children's television is second rate; during my years of TV writing, I enjoyed writing for children the most.

It began in the 50's with a CBC series of fantasies for pre-schoolers called "Telestory time", and continued in the 60's with the co-creation of "The polka dot door" for TV Ontario. In the 70's I was lucky enough to be given the job of Head of Children's TV for the CBC, where I could give children what I thought they deserved — quality programmes designed to arouse their curiosity, stir their imaginations, and nurture their good taste. The challenge was to find the money to do the job, to convince my bosses that "tiny people do not deserve tiny budgets".

By the time I retired last year, my "impossible dream" had been realized — the output of the CBC Children's Department had become world-famous, purchased by networks around the globe, honoured by a multitude of pres-

tigious awards. Much of this success was due to a talented group of young, independent production houses, such as Cambium, which created "The Elephant Show", featuring three talented musicologists, Sharon, Lois and Bram, and a fantasy elephant.

I'm curious to know how much time writers, illustrators, and distributors of children's books spend analyzing their readers' tastes. We do an endless amount of this sort of research in TV, looking for just the right format for a specific age group. We've found it's fairly easy to programme for pre-schoolers because they've been thoroughly researched by successful shows such as "Sesame Street" and "Polka dot door." It's when you try to programme for the next age group, the six- to twelve-year-olds, that you run into difficulty. Once children are in school all day they develop different tastes. They do different things after school. They may be ten but they want to be sixteen, and they certainly watch the TV shows the sixteen-year-olds and adults watch. This has produced far different children from the ones I used to write for ten or twenty years ago. Some angry parents blame TV for depriving their children of their childhood. Sociologists say childhood and adulthood are merging. Childhood as it once was no longer exists. Has TV, like the Pied Piper, taken the children away?

I found some of the clearest answers to this provocative question in an essay by Joshua Meyrowitz, a teacher at the University of New Hampshire:

> Human development is based not only on innate biological stages, but also on patterns of access to social knowledge. Movement from one social role to another usually involves learning the secrets of the new status. Children have always been taught adult secrets, but slowly and in stages . . . . In the last thirty years, however, a secret revelation machine has been installed in 98% of North American homes. It is called television . . . .
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> Communication through print allows for a great deal of control over the social information to which children have access. Reading and writing involve a complex code of symbols that must be memorized and practiced. Children must read simple books before they can read adult books. On TV, however, there is no complex code to exclude young viewers. There is no sharp distinction between the information available to the fifth grader, the high school student, and the adult . . . . The world of children's books can be insulated to present kids with an idealized view of adulthood. But TV news and entertainment presents children with images of adults who lie, drink, cheat, and murder. Reading skills no longer determine the sequence in which social information is revealed to children . . . . TV not only exposes adult secrets, it also exposes the secret of secrecy . . . . In the shared environment of Television, children and adults know a great deal about each other's behavior and social knowledge — too much, in fact, for them to play out the traditional complementary roles of innocence versus omnipotence.

Life for children was certainly simpler in the pre-TV days. When I was a child I read as a child in the Boys and Girls Room of the library, and of course one of my favourite books was *Anne of Green Gables* — unread as

far as I know by my Scottish mother at any time in her life. When *Anne*, the classic children's book, became a TV classic last year, it was enjoyed by adults as well as children. About four million Canadians watched it, the largest number ever to watch a TV drama. Getting *Anne* on the tiny screen was a drama in itself, known in the trade as "The stubbornness of Kevin Sullivan". Kevin, a talented young producer/director/writer, is a phenomenon in the TV world because he's never lost money on a film. He was determined to make a work of art out of *Anne* and to bring it in on budget and it took him four years to do it. Scripting took a year with Kevin working with Joe Weisenfeld to write several versions for the various TV production partners. Casting was no easy job: Kevin auditioned three thousand girls across Canada before taking the CBC's advice to give the role to Megan Follows. Kevin Sullivan says, "I really had no thought of going beyond *Anne of Green Gables* until after its airing we were flooded with letters asking What happened to the characters next?" So a sequel was launched using three of the later Anne books.

There's nothing new about turning a classic children's book into excellent TV: Britain has been doing it superbly for years with series based on such books as *Black Beauty* and *The Prince and the Pauper* and *The wind in the willows*. What is new is the creation of children's books from TV stories. For instance, the book *Griff makes a date*, published by Lorimer and written by Jan Moore, is based on a story first told on CBC-TV in the series "The Kids of DeGrassi Street", produced by Linda Schuyler and Kit Hood. Last year "Griff makes a date" won the Prix Jeunesse in Munich, judged the best children's drama programme from one hundred submitted from fifty countries. "Griff" won an Emmy too. No sweet Disney tale, this, but gritty, sensitive, Canadian children's TV at its best. When I first saw it I knew why I'd stayed in TV for thirty-five years; why, despite TV's flaws, it's still the "somewhere meant for me."

**Dodi Robb**, *co-creator and writer of "Polka dot door", is the former Head of Children's Television for the C.B.C.*

## **Joanne Culley**: FILMSTRIPS — A PLACE TO MEET THE AUTHOR

The objective of the "Meet the author" series of filmstrips is to introduce Canadian children's authors to students and encourage them to read the author's works. Each programme, running approximately 15-20 minutes, is designed to fit into a class or library session and allow time for activities, discussion, and/or reading of the author's books. Ideas for these additional activities can be found in the teacher's guide which accompanies each kit. The "Meet the author" series is a joint production of Mead Educational

Ltd. and the Canadian Children's Book Centre, both of Toronto. There are currently 16 sound filmstrips (which are also available in VHS or Beta video format) and they include two new productions for fall 1987, *Meet the author: Janet Lunn* and *Meet the author: Bernice Thurman Hunter.*

The filmstrips include dramatized excerpts from the author's books what are meant to whet the viewer's appetite to read the whole book. Also included is a brief biography, how they started to write, what influenced their choice of writing, their sources of inspiration, their work habits, and their philosophy of life. What is conveyed to the viewer is a portrait of the author's personality which, it is hoped, will enhance the student's reading experience.

Many authors have chosen to write about their own childhood remembrances. This is especially true of Bernice Thurman Hunter. Her *Booky* trilogy is drawn from her own experience of growing up in Toronto during the Depression. Booky is a spunky, independent child whose spirit and "street smarts" shine through the most adverse circumstances her family faces. Jean Little also uses her childhood experiences. For instance, as a child she used to lie a lot and this weighed heavily on her conscience as she had never heard of any adult who admitted to such a vice. The feelings of guilt that she remembers surface in her character Janie in the book *One to grow on.* Farley Mowat writes about the antics of the coteries of pets he had as a child in one of his funniest books, *Owls in the family.* And he features Mutt, the dog who was more than a pet — almost a member of his family — in his book *The dog who wouldn't be.*

Other authors use observations of their own children as material for their books. Monica Hughes's *Hunter in the dark* is inspired in part by an incident in her son's life when he played hooky to go on a hunting trip. It is this real-life connection that she feels makes the main character, Mike Rankin, more authentic. Claire Mackay also draws on a situation concerning her rebellious son in her first book *Mini-bike hero.* It's about a young boy who buys and rides a mini-bike on the sly despite his father's demand that he stay away from such a dangerous sport. Kathy Stinson's daughter's stubbornness in wanting to wear her red stockings with her blue and white dress inspired Stinson's popular book, *Red is best.* When Robert Munsch's daughter started school and was afraid of walking home alone, he wrote *David's father*, which expressed, in a humorous way, the anxiety she felt. In all of these books, the characters have a three dimensionality that might not otherwise have been there.

The authors' work habits vary as widely as the books that are produced. James Houston's method of writing is very visual — he will usually make a drawing of a scene before he starts writing. This is so that if the characters are required to move from one space to another space he can work it all out in his head first. He attributes his visualizing to the Inuit influence

in his life. (He spent twelve years living and working among the Inuit on Baffin Island.) When working on her historical novels, Barbara Smucker uses an enormous piece of cardboard on which she writes all the dates and events that are important to her story. She puts this in front of her as she sits at her typewriter, along with a map and photos of the period. She finds the research fascinating. Eric Wilson, the mystery writer, also does a lot of research. He travels to different locations across Canada that he uses as settings for his books. He gathers as much information as possible, then sits down to synthesize all his facts into an adventurous and exciting story.

Every author talks about his or her philosophy of life. Farley Mowat would like young people to realize "that we human beings are only part of the living world, and that the rest of the living world, the non-human part, is just as important as we are." He believes that recreational hunting should be stopped — a common theme in his books, especially *A whale for the killing*. Janet Lunn feels that it is important to learn about history because "we cannot know where to go in our lives if we do not know where we have been. It is like knitting a sweater. You have to pick up the stitches from the last row before you continue." Patti Stren believes that people should try to forget their differences and learn to get along with one another, a theme that surfaces in *Sloan and Philomena*, a humorous book about an anteater and the ant he wants to eat. Stren tells her readers that everyone is special and needs to find a place in the world. She says, "You can do anything you want, you can aim for the stars!"

Most of the authors talk about how reading books has made a difference in their lives. Jean Little says, "I still think of characters in books I've read as being my close friends. And that is what I want children to feel about my books — that the kids in them are friends of theirs." Kathy Stinson thinks that a good book makes people want to read more books and maybe even write one. She says, "Books can add so much to life! It pleases me to know that I have excited kids about books." Dennis Lee was a voracious reader when he was young. He would raid the library at his father's school at the beginning of summer vacation, and would finish reading all the books in two weeks! His favourites were the books about Freddie the pig. Janet Lunn loved *The secret garden*, from which she gained the theme that is central to all her writing — that unhappiness does not have to rule you if you care for others as much as yourself.

The series has included some authors who are also artists. Elizabeth Cleaver, perhaps Canada's finest picture book artist, used collage to illustrate Indian and Inuit legends and European folk tales. Her colourful, textured creations are reproduced in the filmstrip, and students can see the unique process she used to create her art. James Houston's own drawings accompany the excerpts from his books, *River runners* and *The white archer*. Also shown are his glass sculptures which reflect his love of Arctic

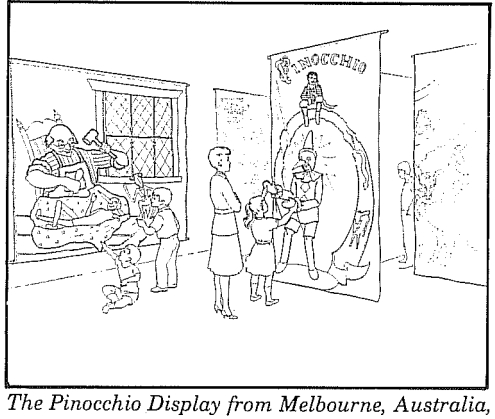
life.

Through the *Meet the authors* programmes, students will become aware of the wide range of Canadian literature available for them to read — the science fiction/fantasy of Monica Hughes, the historical fiction of Barbara Smucker, the Inuit legends of James Houston, the time travel books of Janet Lunn, the nonsense poetry of Dennis Lee, the action-packed adventure stories of Gordon Korman and Brian Doyle. It is hoped that their lives will be enriched by these books in the same way that the authors themselves were influenced by the books they read as children.

**Joanne Culley** *works out of Toronto for* Meet the Author. *Filmstrips in the series are available from School Services of Canada, 66 Portland St., Toronto, Ont. M5V 2M8*

**Carol Johnston**: SOMEWHERE MEANT FOR EVERYONE

If you love to tell stories, if you love to read stories, or if you just like to hear a good story, you should have been there. The London Regional Children's Museum was host for an evening of the First Summer Institute, that was "right on theme" with the concepts of the whole programme. A potpourri of activities had been planned to allow exploration and discovery of the story lines of the Children's Museum's Galleries, to brush shoulders with some famous authors, to hear some great tales, and to culminate with a sit-in around Robert Munsch, telling stories to the child in us all!




*The Pinocchio Display from Melbourne, Australia, at the London Children's Museum.*

This adventure began with Pinocchio, visiting the Children's Museum in the form of eight very creative, participatory, fabric panels from Melbourne, Australia. Hard to imagine? These panels had the characters and props that highlight the story beautifully appliqued in such a way that by pulling a zipper, putting your hands through an opening, or lifting a panel, you could help the story "unfold". Sue Barnes and Andy Moog told the story and led Institute registrants through the participtory process.

Then it was on to see each of the ten galleries, each representing a special theme that has resulted in a special environment. Each gallery provides raw material for pretending "to-be-there". In the Dinosaur Gallery, put on

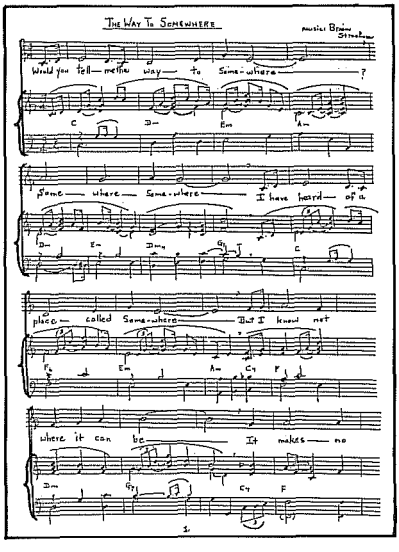
a costume and there you are, an extinct creature walking the footsteps of a dilophosaurus; approach the dig-site with your trowel just as a palaeontologist might and dig to find fossils and bones. The Inuit Gallery invites the same participation: sitting in the igloo, on buffalo and seal skins, beside the dudlick, is almost like being there. Each gallery has its special magic to weave for those who bring their imaginations and a sense of fun. There is much to find that will stretch the limits of play.

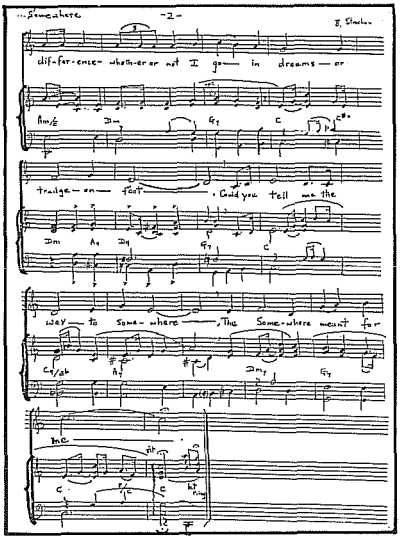
Young story-tellers, Nan Bailey, Margaret Fleer, and Wendy Sears, gathered people in different galleries to spin their tales. This combination of space, time and stories made the long day disappear into a fresh look at the world.

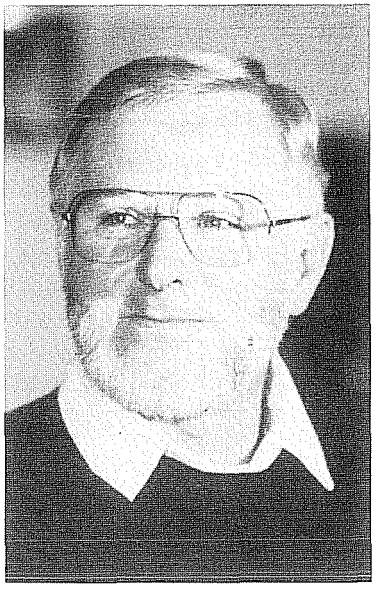
Along came a surprise vistor, Robert Munsch. This quiet, unassuming man tried all the exhibits at the Museum, joined in the fun everywhere and then agreed to tell some of his stories. It was a sight: all those "grown-ups" sitting at the story-teller's feet with their faces and postures showing absorbed involvement. There were the favourite Munsch stories such as *The paper bag princess* and *I have to go!*; there were even new ones, yet to be released in print. One was like an Inuit legend; another was about Moira's birthday. But the poignant story, *I'll love you forever* was the perfect point to say "good-night" till the "somewhere meant for me."

**Carol Johnston** *works at the London Children's Museum*

**Brian Strachan**: THE WAY TO SOMEWHERE



**Brian Strachan** *works at Althouse College in London. He has set to music words from Walter de la Mare's poem,* "Somewhere meant for me".