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AN IMPRESSIVE SURVEY

Modern Canadian children's books, Judith Saltman. Oxford University Press, 1987. 136 pp. \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-19-540572-2.

The 1970s and early 80s were years of startling growth in Canadian literature for the young. Rough publication figures indicate that in 1985 Canadian publishers produced 150 to 200 books for children and young adults, a 500 percent increase over the annual average in the 1950s and 60s. In *Modern Canadian children's books*, the first volume in a new Oxford University Press series of "perspectives on culture" surveys, Judith Saltman provides an overview of the 1975-85 developments and critical assessments of the achievements in particular categories: picture-books and picture-story-books, fiction, folklore, and poetry. In effect, the book is a short sequel to Sheila Egoff's *The republic of childhood: A critical guide to Canadian children's literature in English*, second edition (Oxford University Press, 1975), concentrating, as Egoff's definitive work does, on books written in or translated into English.

Saltman has impressive credentials for the job. Like Egoff, she is a library-school professor; she teaches courses in children's and young-adult literature and in librarianship at the University of British Columbia's School of Library, Archival and Information Studies. She recently edited *The riverside anthology of children's literature*, sixth edition (1985; an updated, expanded version of Houghton Mifflin's valuable, widely used anthology). And she has written an appealing fantasy for children, *Goldie and the sea* (Groundwood, 1987). The skills refined in her various activities are all evident in *Modern Canadian children's books*. Her knowledge of international children's literature equips her to apply nonparochial standards. Her experience as an editor is evident throughout this concise, orderly little book. And the eloquence of a creative writer was certainly necessary to produce a descriptive report card that covers more than 300 books and some 250 authors and illustrators in a mere 136 pages (some of them pre-empted by bibliographies and a comprehensive index). Such a project

can easily degenerate into a series of book-lists punctuated by generalizations. This one does not. Saltman may have felt constricted by a niggardly page allowance (Oxford advertises these surveys as "brief"), but the book betrays no sense of strain. In fact, some authors and illustrators receive several paragraphs of detailed appreciation all to themselves.

Chapter One is a succinct, factually dense account of the problems besetting Canadian authors and publishers of children's books, the historical development of the genre, and the indisputable and probable reasons for and features of the recent expansion. Thereafter, Saltman surveys the sub-genres, finding grounds for celebration, or at least cautious optimism, in all of them. Picture-books constitute the "most vital sector of the industry," energized by "an explosion in the range of visual style, energy of expression, and diversity of content and format." A variety of strengths is emerging in fiction: evocative regional voices, promising ventures away from the traditional Canadian wilderness-survival stories into urban and psychological realms, abatement of the didactic tone pervading earlier historical fiction, and new directions in science fiction, though Canadian fiction continues generally sparse. In folklore, "diverse traditions tentatively shape developing patterns of a new national lore. . . ." In poetry, the nonsense versifiers, led by Dennis Lee, still predominate, but a few poets are essaying more serious subjects and tones. Saltman concludes that despite "pronounced gaps" in some categories and a need for "more conscientious and rigorous editing to help writers develop their potential," the omens are good: ". . . it is reasonable to expect that the labours of 1975 to 1985, which brought the literature from an embryonic state to the threshold of maturity, must surely bear fruit that will enrich our culture even further."

Inevitably, criticism is partially subjective. No reader will acquiesce in all of Saltman's judgments about individual authors. This reviewer, for example, would not rank Kevin Major's novels with Brian Doyle's at the top of the current 'young adult' fiction and does not fully share some of Saltman's other enthusiasms. But with an author-critic so obviously steeped in her subject and intelligently thoughtful in her estimates, a reader's quarrels are almost certain to be friendly ones.

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