

Review Articles & Reviews/ Critiques et comptes rendus

A DOUBLY WELCOME BOOK



Little by Little: A writer's education, Jean Little. Penguin Books Canada, 1987. 233 pp. \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-670-81649-3.

Juvenile biographies, long a staple of children's publishing, are in a fallow period. Apart from the virtually text-free photobiographies of rock stars or the nutritionally adequate but flavourless series biographies, the biography shelves stand empty of new materials. Perhaps we cannot quite face the warts-and-all approach for children. We still feel that a biography should inspire the young, but we don't really know what an exemplary life is any more. At any rate, this gap makes the publication of Jean Little's autobiography doubly welcome.

In this memoir Little uses an episodic, anecdotal approach to her childhood, from her earliest years in Taiwan through her move to Canada to her graduation from university. The subtitle, "A writer's education" reveals the theme: Little's growing realization of the power of story and indeed of words themselves to comfort, protect and sustain her through painful periods in her childhood. And painful periods there were. Little's physical handicap — she is blind — made her easy prey to childhood teasing and cruelty. Little is restrained about these descriptions, and one senses she is pulling her punches somewhat, but the potency of these memories shines through in such moments as her bleak realization at age seven that "if you were different, nothing good about you mattered" (p.36).

Leavening these sad memories however are joyous, vividly realized, often hilarious anecdotes such as Little's short-lived but triumphant career as a blind basketball player, a passage that demands to be read aloud. Little's deadpan delivery and self-deprecating humour make the book a delight.

She avoids, however, the pitfall of freezing her childhood memories into oft-told anecdotes. They are fresh and real. In one tiny passage, for exam-

ple, she tells of trying to remember the shapes of the letters of the alphabet by tracing them in the roof of her mouth with her tongue. This kind of highly-specific, sensual memory of childhood gives the autobiography both its originality and its universality and is, of course, the source of Little's strength as a fiction writer as well.

Little by Little will, no doubt, be grouped with other books about the physically disabled and it is interesting from this point of view, challenging some of our current assumptions about education of the disabled. Young Jean had some of her happiest school experiences in a non-integrated class, for example. But the memoir is of far more general interest. Little simply speaks the lingua franca of childhood and it would be a rare child reader who would not find herself in the pages of this book.

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A BOW TO BIOLOGY

Looking at senses, David Suzuki with Barbara Hehner. Stoddart Young Readers, 1986. 96 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 0-7737-5078-9. **Looking at the body**, David Suzuki with Barbara Hehner. Stoddart, 1987. 96 pp. \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-7737-5116-5.

Both of these books provide an introduction to general biology for the young reader. *Looking at senses* deals with all the senses — touch, smell, taste, seeing, hearing — while *Looking at the body* deals with the functions of the major organs of the body: heart, lungs, brain, and so on. In general, each text is intelligent and interesting, and the accompanying illustrations by Nancy Lou Reynolds are excellent.

Suzuki's characteristic enthusiasm, curiosity and delight in knowledge shine through in the descriptions of biological and physiological functions, and — outstanding communicator that he is — the text does not talk down to children. It is straightforward, pitched at young people, and enjoyable.

There is, however, a major problem with both books that may represent an obstacle to many young readers. Each chapter contains three sections: the text which describes the material (e.g., the function and structure of the heart), a section called "Amazing facts" and a part called "Something to do", which compresses simple experiments or observations children can make. This format tends to confuse rather than clarify. It makes the book choppy and hinders the reader. I wish that the text and "Amazing facts" had been put together to permit continuous reading, and that "Something-