

Where is here? Canadian children's literature

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Résumé: *Dans cet article, Roderick McGillis considère la notion d'espace géographique dans plusieurs oeuvres récentes au Canada anglais. Ce qui sent de prototype, au fond, dans cet établissement de l'ici canadien, c'est la duplicité de Jacob deux-deux de Mordecai Richler. Le nom même du héros semble indiquer son hésitation entre l'espace rêvé de la maturité et celui de l'enfance incompétente. Il est possible ensuite de suivre cette duplicité dans de nombreuses autres oeuvres, dont celles de Monica Hughes, Ann Walsh, Jean Little et Ruth Nichols.*

Tikta Likta, Paula Popowich, Tom Lightfoot, Sharon Fong, Jasmin Marie Antoinette Stalke, Ti-Jean, Joe Montferrand, Isaac Manyfeathers, Rose Larkin, Lisa Stein, Robin Squires, Jacob Snyder, Anne Shirley, Glooscap, Josh Morgan, May Apple, Jean Labadie, Cuculann, Peter Neufeld, Jonah Bender, Kim Chiong, Luke Baldwin, Jacob Two-Two. Names tell the story. These are Canadian names, names in books for young children written in Canada; they are Inuit, English, Chinese, French, Irish, Ukrainian, Indian, American, Jewish, Amish names. In the books in which the characters with these names appear, the question of identity is important. Even more important is the question of where these characters live. Sons and daughters of immigrant parents or native Canadians dispossessed of their land and their heritage, these characters and others find themselves in a land mysterious with ancient echoes and frightening wildernesses. This land, once merely an impediment to the east, has a geography and a climate intimidating to settlement. As recently as July 1988, I received a letter from an American colleague in which she commented on the intense summer heat they were experiencing in New Hampshire and how she thought of me up here in what she fantasized to be the cool Canadian north. Not only do we Canadians have a task to educate others concerning where here is, but we also have a task understanding just where we are ourselves.

Take Jacob Two-Two for example. His name indicates his tendency to say everything twice since he is the youngest in a family of seven and nobody ever hears him the first time. But this is not all. Two-Two also indicates that Jacob is split, divided between his desire to be older and his inability to perform tasks those older than himself accomplish, divided between his fantasy of heroism

and his fear of failure, caught between the intrepid Shapiro and the fearless O'Toole, Jewish and Irish superheroes, and split between Master Fish and Mistress Fowl. Jacob, like Canadians generally, this book seems to say, is neither fish nor fowl, neither insignificant nor particularly noteworthy. A dreamer. His dream is of a place in which he can be useful and order things in their proper way. Slimers' Isle with its blood-thirsty sharks, slimy crocodiles, poisonous snakes, buzzards, wolverines, and deathwatch beetles contains a garrison, the Children's Prison. The prison is set in a dark world forbidding in its threats and dangers. Slimers' Isle, like Canada perhaps, is a place with double perspective; it appears forbidding and inimical to children, but its commander-in-chief, the dreaded Hooded Fang, is himself childlike. Jacob's role is to shed light on the island and its chief inhabitant, not to transform them, but to reveal their dangers are not as real as they appear. Where Jacob is defines what he is: an incompetent little twerp and a well meaning, resolute little boy in an environment which frightens him and calls forth his small but sincere heroism.

Richler's book defines the Canadian where as, imaginatively, between Britain and the United States. In his study of Richler's work, Victor Ramraj notes the "split loyalties" of the community in which Richler grew up: "Exposed to British and American influences in sports, entertainment, and literature, [Richler's] community was proud of visiting British Shakespeare Companies and that the better-known Canadian writers, Stephen Leacock for instance, were writing within a British tradition. But they also felt a kinship with Americans, saw American sports heroes and entertainers as theirs, and believed New York to be their true capital" (3). Richler ostensibly sets *Jacob Two-Two* in England, but the book reflects a place between Britain and America, just as it offers us a hero who is between a time when he could not reach the front doorbell and a time when the number of things he cannot do is diminishing, even if too slowly for his complete liking. Richler states in the first paragraph that the story takes place in England, but the exchange that follows between Jacob and his mother concerning "today", "tomorrow", and "yesterday" quietly echoes one of the most famous comedy routines in American twentieth century culture: Abbott and Costello's "Who's on first?" Adult readers can find much in this vein to smile at in *Jacob Two-Two*.

The book is replete with references to such standards of British culture as *Oliver Twist*, *Alice in Wonderland*, greengrocers, British popular ballads ("The false knight and the little boy"), Regent Street, and *Pilgrim's Progress*. American culture is evident in allusions to Ernie Kovacs, western movies, Rogers and Hammerstein's *The King and I*, Batman and other superheroes of American comics, the Black Power and Gay Power movements, and Charlie Chaplin. Chaplin tips us off to the allusions that combine British and American culture: James Bond, wrestlers, pre-shrunk blue jeans, and pinball machines. Put two and two together and you get Canada. In Canada, where our heroes

are often noted for their magnificent failures, the superhero is a little guy, an unassuming Jacob Two-Two or a Jacob Snyder in Barbara Smucker's *Jacob's little giant* (1987) which tells of Jacob, the youngest of the Snyder family, who learns pride and self worth by caring for a family of giant Canada geese. In the same year that Steven Freygood asked, "can we use a hero like Cuculain in Canada?" (Freygood 27), O.R. Melling published *The Druid's tune* (1983) her story of two Canadian children transported to Ireland's mythic past where they adventure with this very Cuculann. These children however, do not become heroic in the way the great Irish hero is; they will not kill in battle and they see no point in fighting since no one wins. But Melling's book too flirts with doubleness; Cuculann's heroism may be futile, but it is also beautiful and enriching. The doubleness here seems uncertain. Richler's is more satisfying because it is more playful and less self-important. Richler's book is one rather short exercise in twoness.

Aside from the obvious play with the word "two" and Jacob's habit of repeating everything he says twice, the book has fun with "too" and "to" and double uses of words and phrases such as "Bang, bang," or "Right there, right then," or "rowboat, a leaky rowboat" (22,23,31). Often adjectives come in twos: for example, "tangled gray hair," "weepy blue eyes," "a lovely plump trout," or "firm, red tomatoes" (12,53,6). Verbs too come in pairs: "It flips, it flops," "ducked and flew" (14,9). This last example illustrates Richler's use of the pun, a form of word play in which the individual word is duplicitous. The constant doubleness, although playful and comic here, might remind us of Richler's remark that his upbringing armed him "with a double hook" (quoted in Ramraj 2). "The minority man," as Richler says quoting Mailer, "grows up with a double-image of himself, his own and society's" (Ramraj 2). Canada, at least English-speaking Canada, is a minority country with its own double image, part British and part American.

What gives *Jacob Two-Two meets the Hooded Fang* its strength is the way it plays with this idea. Richler never mentions Canada, yet his book is richly, and I daresay consciously, Canadian. Canada is always caught between two places; it is the great stretch of formidable and forbidding land barring the way to Cathay (see Frye 217). Our writers, hunters in the dark, are forever trying to bring the sunshine to this dark land, as Jacob brings sunshine to Slimers' Isle. To do this is to tell stories, stories which reflect the land and its meaning for us. Rarely do we get children's books in Canada (I refer to books written in English) with the richness of form and the confidence of direction that such writers as Alan Garner, Jill Paton Walsh, Virginia Hamilton, or Robert Cormier display. In Canadian fiction for the young, discourse or the structure of narrative transmission is generally straightforward, the narratives offering little in the way of disruption and obliquity. Yet our writers constantly return to the doubleness of the Canadian experience, the tentativeness of what it means to be Canadian. Unity and separation is the paradox of our

sensibility. A character in Colin Partridge's *Thunderbird* (1979) explains that "what comes together. . . always moves apart. No sooner does a person or a group join up with another to become stronger, than it starts to separate out again. There's something very Canadian about that. . . this coming together and separating out--it's our weakness and our strength as a People" (130).

Caught between a desire to belong and a desire to be separate, many protagonists in our fiction for the young struggle towards some means of compromise. If Paula Popowich, in Monica Hughes's *My name is Paula Popowich!* (1983), accepts her mother's choice of a German husband, then her mother must accept Paula's choice to develop and take on her dead father's Ukrainian culture. In Hughes's *The ghost dance caper* (1978), young Tom discovers that he is not a "kosher Indian", but that he does nevertheless "belong to two worlds." He is certain that belonging to two worlds does not have to make him "muddled or split down the middle," although he does not know how to accomplish the balancing of these two worlds. Hughes returns to this theme in several of her books, including the recent *Log jam* (1987) in which the Indian boy Isaac Manyfeathers discovers not only his heritage in the woods, but also the girl Lenora Rydz from another culture and another place. They learn mutual respect, but also irreconcilable difference. Similarly, in Barbara Smucker's *Amish adventure* (1983), Ian McDonald learns more than respect for the Amish way of life; he becomes so much a part of it that his friend Reuben tells him that he isn't an "Outsider" any more. Yet he is. He decides at the end of the novel that he will always come and visit his Amish friends and that he himself might become a farmer someday. The future remains open. Another treatment of this theme of two worlds is Paul Yee's *Teach me to fly, skyfighter! and other stories* (1983). Sharon Fong and the other children from the Chinese community in Vancouver must live with the sense of their own history as Chinese people and with their unique Canadian identity. The central friendships in this book are between Sharon and Samson, a Canadian born Chinese girl and a Chinese born Canadian boy, and between Sharon and Christine, a Chinese girl from Vancouver's Chinatown and an English girl from the rough housing project nearby. This book shows, in its own way, what Joseph Green's *Come from away* (1981) articulates rather eloquently: communities strengthen individuals, but only when those individuals have come from away.

Jacob Two-Two finds acceptance in community at the end of Richler's fantasy, he receives a Child Power uniform, sign of his acceptance into the play world of his brother and sister, but his uniform is unlike the others. In short, Jacob remains an individual while he joins a community. Earlier he had found friendship and community with Pete and Oscar (of course he has to have *two* friends) on Slimers' Isle, an ironic parody of community life, the garrison closed to the outside world and functioning on fear within.

This insistence on family and community as islands either literally as in *Come from away* or figuratively as in *Skyfighter* or *Amish adventure* might

well take us back to that sense of the garrison Frye has perceived in the Canadian imagination. The drive to form closely knit communities is countered by the fear of the individual pulling away from the community, and the result is anxiety, the kind of anxiety, as I have implied, parodied on Slimers' Isle. The garrison mentality is an anxious mentality, and many of our books for children reveal an anxiety about what it is to be Canadian. In Ann Walsh's *Your time my time* (1984), Elizabeth Connell remarks on her first trip to Barkerville, British Columbia, that she half expected "to see gunslingers in the main street," but Evan Ryerson quickly retorts: "Oh, no. . . . It may look like a western town in America, but it was very Canadian, even then. Absolutely no gunslingers were permitted!" (14-15). A place free of the menace of guns and human violence, Canada is a place in which to relax, a place in which to stand and to grow. Rose Larkin in Janet Lunn's *The root cellar* (1981) comes from away to appreciate the ordinariness of her Canadian life. Thirteen-year-old Shandy Johnson in Phyllis Gotlieb's *Sunburst* (1964) is a modest super-child without special genetic traits such as psi or unusual physical strength. To be Canadian is to be strongly average. The great danger in being average is boredom, as Claude Aubry's *The King of the Thousand Islands* (1963) and Margaret Laurence's *Jason's quest* (1970) indicate. Only when we come from away can we appreciate the openness of Canada. Ian McDonald in *Amish adventure* crosses the border at Windsor and immediately feels different than he did in crowded America: "It was less crowded, with great silent spaces leading north. He conjured up images of majestic pine trees pointing skyward, natural and undisturbed" (21). Nary a mention of acid rain.

Great silent spaces, openness, forests, lakes, these cast a haunting spell. They speak of mysteries and secrets. Now the notion of secrecy is something all children's literature plays with. The secret appeals to the young: secret pacts, secret places, secret hopes, secret fears, secret objects, secrets buried deep beneath the earth. Canada itself is a secret place, guarding its identity stubbornly. This perhaps helps explain why until relatively recently Canada has not produced any significant body of fantasy literature. Nor has it produced the kind of experimental fiction we find in British and American books. Our most significant achievement has been in the realistic animal story, and our most common narrative form is the chronological story whether told in first or third person. We have, of course, Kevin Major's two multi-narrative and multi-leveled stories *Far from shore* (1980) and *Thirty-six exposures* (1984) and Sean O'Huigin's paratactic *the ghost horse of the mounties* (1983). But such experimental work is rare. Before we can experiment or fantasize, we must know where here is.

But our narratives, like all narratives, spring a secret or two to give our readers pause. Even a book as straightforwardly plotted and apparently realistic as Jean Little's *Mama's going to buy you a mockingbird* (1984) signals in its title and throughout the book its inter-textuality. The title's reference to

the traditional nursery rhyme and allusions to Dennis Lee's poetry for children ask the reader to reflect not only upon the thematic significance of the allusions, but also upon performance. The nursery rhyme may be spoken as it is by Mrs. Talbot or it may be sung as it is by Anne Murray on her record *There's a hippo in my bathtub*. Each performance may, as Jeremy notices, alter the words. The change in words brings a change in the emotional effect of the rhyme. Words change; life changes. Nothing is permanent. The reader who knows Dennis Lee's "A song for Ookpik", quoted near the end of *Mama's going to buy you a mockingbird*, will have a clearer sense of the ambiguity of language and, of course, of life. The many allusions in Little's novel--to the Pooh books, *The great Gilly Hopkins*, *Kim*, *Nicholas Knock*, *The sword in the stone*, *Alligator pie*, *Alice's adventures in Wonderland*--stop the attentive reader while she reflects on their significance. In Lee's Ookpik poem, the speaker asks for help to live in "our own space". First we must find out where our own space is.

Our here is a collection of islands of multi-cultural richness: the Chinese community of downtown Vancouver, the Amish community of southern Ontario, the fishing villages of Newfoundland, the small towns of Quebec, the ranching communities of Alberta, the Ukrainian community of Edmonton, the Indian communities from province to province, the Inuit communities of the North, the prairie farming communities. Our task is to maintain these communities, not turn them into garrisons. This means protecting the land and its openness, not destroying it. Slimers' Isle once again provides us with an appropriate image: a rural island turned into an industrial wasteland with its "two gigantic chimney stacks," and "filthy gray fog billowing from both of them" (30). Our land may be large and ancient and terrifyingly wild, but it is also delicate and precious. No book for children expresses this more openly than Barbara Smucker's *White mist* (1985), in which the slogan, "if we destroy the earth, we destroy ourselves," expresses the whole force of the book. *White mist* is somewhat strident in its attempt to articulate where here is; it lacks the amused perspective of *Jacob Two-Two*. But then its message is urgent. To produce a strong literature we need a strong sense of where we are, and it is perhaps this sense that gives strength and certainty to a book such as Cora Taylor's *Julie* (1985), in which Julie's preternatural attachment to nature reinforces the importance of the land to our psyches. Julie's love of people, animals, and growing things grounds her certainty of who she is and makes her know where she is. Once this sense of where we are is firm, we will produce more books with the richness of Roch Carrier's *The hockey sweater and other stories* (1979) or Kevin Major's *Hold fast* (1978).

Perhaps the strongest indication that Canadian children's literature in English has gained the confident knowledge of where here is, is in the work of Ruth Nichols. Unlike many of the writers I have mentioned, Nichols is a native Canadian whose work spares little room for direct confrontation with

the fact of Canada. Her best work is challenging in the way any strong literature is challenging. Her early books, such as *The marrow of the world* (1972), are clearly derivative, drawing on such fantasy writers as George MacDonald and J.R.R. Tolkien, and bringing into a Canadian context such ancient mythic material as that in the Arthurian cycle and Greek and Hebrew myth. Linda, daughter of the witch Morgan, chooses not to stay in the fantastic land she and her cousin Paul discover, but rather she chooses to return to the Canadian shield with "little more than ordinary mortals." The book has gaps as any narrative must have, but it does not complicate point of view or plot structure. In tone and style the book clearly speaks to an audience of young readers, although even here indications of a strength not usual in children's book surfaces. The voice that speaks from the text is cool, detached, and without anxiety. One has the sense that the story is so well known that no hesitancy or self-consciousness obtrudes. The westward journey of Paul and Linda is truly a westering of ancient material comfortably among the sumacs, pines, and maples of central Canada.

This impulse to bring west ancient myth is accomplished with more complexity in *Song of the pearl* (1976) and *The left-handed spirit* (1978). In these books Chinese, Sumerian, English, Greek, and Roman history and myth rest comfortably with native Canadian history and lore. The theme is Power and its necessary abnegation. Submission to cultural and historical and personal memory is the lesson of fulfillment. The reader of these books must also submit to a bewildering array of allusions and references that suggest the connectedness of cultures, times, and places. In *Song of the pearl*, a seventeen-year-old Toronto woman discovers that she has lived before as a Sumerian Princess, a Chinese wife, a Mictec maid captured as a slave by the Iroquois, and a sixteenth century mother. She ends the book about to be born as an American who will travel to Africa where she will meet her husband, a Chinese American. The challenge in this book and *The left-handed spirit* is their angle of discourse. Just whose voice we hear is problematic, even in the first person narrative of *The left-handed spirit*. The reader has little in the way of direction from a voice that explains. Instead the voice describes carefully and seemingly without engagement. Just to whom the voice speaks is unclear. The range of reference is obviously beyond most young readers, but not many adults will know the work of the Chinese poets Tu Fu or Li Po. Adult and child alike must feel the humility of unknowing and the challenge of understanding. Nothing is self-evident.

What Nichols has shown in her books, what the other writers move towards, what *Jacob Two-Two* articulates is that there is an identity in unity. Our culture has connections with many cultures; indeed, its strength is the unity formed from variety. The blustering of an oversized bureaucrat such as the Hooded Fang is wind. Once deflated, he can only cry for his mother and in this country she speaks from the vast and separate solitudes of the land, a

land that beckons to be crossed. The desire to cross the country--a desire echoed in such children's books as *Hey, Dad!* (1978) by Brian Doyle and *Lucifer and Lucinda* (1975) by Kenneth Dyba--has often been the reflection of the hope that there is someplace better and that this country will provide the passage, the northwest passage, to that better place. Franklin, Mackenzie, Thompson and the rest call us somewhere. But when we get there, we discover that where is here. Megan Hughes, in *Hey, Dad!*, can close her eyes a bit in Port Alberni and think she is home in Ottawa because the A & P stores and the Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurants are the same. Stan Rogers says it best when he sings of throwing away his settled life "To seek a Northwest Passage at the call of many men/To find there is but the road back home again."

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