

Something on Jean Little

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Résumé: *A son tour, Frances Frazer considère l'oeuvre de Jean Little, après la publication de son dernier récit autobiographique. Elle s'interroge sur le caractère psycho-social associé à cette oeuvre et conclut que cette étiquette dépend de la présence chez Little d'un personnage parental important. C'est cette présence parfois problématique qui donne à ces oeuvres leur impact émotionnel.*

"'Aha!' she cried, and waved her wooden leg" is one of the Little family's pet one-liners.¹ It is also, as Jean Little's novels, verse, and autobiographical writings demonstrate, obliquely indicative of Little's character: her high spirits, her love of word play, her apparently unquenchable interest in people and things ("Aha!"), and her willingness to wave her own "wooden leg": the vision problems that have plagued her all her life, plagued her but also given her psychological insights that she has employed to good purpose in her books.

Now in her vigorous middle fifties, Little is still a prolific writer and is showing an inclination to try new modes and aim at new readers, younger ones than the eight-to-twelve-year-olds to whom her first dozen novels chiefly appeal. At this point an assessment of her literary capabilities must clearly be provisional. But the size of her output so far and the personal revelations of *Little by Little*, (1987), her memoir of her early years, warrant some examination of that output and the ways in which her personality and experiences have influenced its character.

To begin with, then, there is a surface disparity between the "success story" of Jean Little's life and the resolutely realistic, unspectacular stories she has told. Like the fictitious heroines whom her young protagonists adore--Mary Lennox, Sara Crew, Heidi--she has worked her way through self-imposed tasks to achievements rarely accomplished by the unhampered. At seventeen she had two poems published by *Saturday Night*. Her first novel, *Mine for keeps* (1962), won the Little, Brown Canadian Children's Book Award. Subsequently, she received the Vicky Metcalf Award (1974) for her body of writing, the Canada Council Children's Literature (English Language) Award for *Listen for the singing* (1977), and both the Canadian Library Association Children's Book of the Year Award and the Ruth Schwartz Award for *Mama's going to buy you a mockingbird* (1985). In 1988 she received the Boston Globe Horn Book Honor Award. Such success compares well with the dramatic endings attained by Mary, Sara, and Heidi--and has additional lustre by virtue

of the sustained hard work that earned it and the implacable physical disability that Little cannot cast aside as Sara Crewe sheds her slavey status and Mary's and Heidi's proteges leave their wheelchairs.

Blind at birth, Little acquired some vision as her eyes grew but had to wear thick glasses and hold her books to her nose. She experienced something of the cruelty many children are moved to inflict upon the "different" and vulnerable before she was seven and her family moved from Taiwan, where her Canadian parents had worked as medical missionaries; more of it during a brief sojourn at a new school in Hong Kong; and a blistering immersion in it soon after Japan's advancing army and concern for her special educational needs had propelled the family to Canada. As *Little by Little* movingly records, her intelligent, humorous, book-loving family and her own delight in books made her youth good to joyous a lot of the time but could not protect her continuously from the taunts of brutal children, the callous interest her stumbles evoked, or the stupid, hurtful "sympathy" of the thoughtless and the thick-witted. Nor could they much assist her in her struggles to reach the milestones of her education and to make herself a writer. It seems a minor miracle--perhaps not just a minor one--that the contender against such odds should now be covered with official honours and be (probably) the most beloved children's author in the country.

Yet Little's novels do not deal in the "wonderful." In fact, her uses of that word are sometimes significantly sardonic. She has described how her prolonged effort to be "wonderful" about an onslaught of glaucoma and the subsequent removal of her left eye (1963) ended in exhaustion, grief, and a temporary loss of her sense of self.² Explaining her particular fondness for L.M. Montgomery's Jane (of Lantern Hill), she suggests that Montgomery's more spectacularly victorious Anne and Emily are "maybe, every so often, too wonderful."³ Recalling Sheila Egoff's charge (in *The republic of childhood, 1967*) that *Mine for keeps* and *Home from far*, her first two novels, are either bibliotherapy or factitious literature offering "contrived situations, quick and easy solutions, and the intimation that problems of magnitude can be solved completely," she has insisted, rightly, that problems and their solutions, wonderful or otherwise, don't dominate her books.⁴ Meg Copeland (of *Mine...*) does not experience a miraculous release from cerebral palsy. The fostered Michael of *Home from far* is only beginning to feel that he belongs in his foster family as the book ends.

Why, then, is Little so often associated with emotional uplift that a book reviewer in a major newspaper can refer to her confidently as "Canada's reigning queen of comfort for the middle reader"?⁵ I think that there are at least three reasons. One is that her novels concern internal battles that her young protagonists *can* win; they can't achieve miraculous cures of their own or their dear ones' physical or mental handicaps, but they can win fights with their own inhibitions and irrational fears and with their own inclinations to cocoon

their fragile egos, coddle their grievances, rebuff honestly friendly overtures, rest self-pityingly in their defeats. And they do win such fights, although the books don't suggest that they will never have to face interior demons again.

Another reason is the presence of at least one perceptive, wise, dependable parent or surrogate parent in every novel. Jean Little's natural setting is a middle-class neighbourhood, usually in or near Riverside, the fictitious small city that she has modelled on Guelph, Ontario, where she herself resides. Her families live comfortably and follow conventional routines. Delinquency, drug abuse, divorce, and other such disruptive misdemeanours do not occur in the Little fictional milieu, and family life is at least all right--usually better than all right. Her subject matter is the fears, longings, jealousies, growing pains, and aspirations of untraumatized youngsters, though she often employs a handicap to intensify feelings and to convey her favourite theme: that who a person is and what he or she is capable of becoming are immeasurably more important than such incidentals as curly hair or dependence on crutches. Good parents are the norm, she implies. And she can use them to help her convey her truths. It is also probable, given the high incidence of Little's personal experiences in her characters' lives, that her own eminently satisfactory parents tend to get into her novels, under various thin camouflages.

A third reason for the faintly disparaging "queen of comfort" label is that Little usually ends a book with a happy ritual coinciding with a protagonist's internal victory...a Christmas party, a picnic feast...or with a moment of shared happiness and anticipation. These endings don't promise undiluted happiness ever afterward, but they do state or imply that the protagonists have grown in spirit and strength, and that pleasant new prospects are opening to them because of that growth.

The foregoing may suggest that Little's novels are rather muted ones. In fact, they give their readers some very bumpy emotional rides. The principal characters have children's thin skins and their obsessive need to feel fairly treated; they feel and worry intensely; they are quick to infer dislike, indifference, or withdrawals of sympathy from the words and actions or mere expressions of others; and they are themselves mercurial in their moods. Since Little is given to detailed realized scenes, as every wise writer for young readers is, she allows herself ample room and opportunity to communicate sudden joy, sudden rage, sudden fear, occurring in rapid succession just beneath the surface of a terse or superficially innocuous conversation. Usually she narrates in the third person but from the point of view of her major character. Her commentary keeps the reader anxiously alert to that character's understanding of an encounter. But she is also adept at conveying when and why such an understanding is wrong. In *Take wing*, for example, the central character, Laurel, after protectively shadowing her backward little brother to school, realizes that a promising new acquaintance, Barbara, may have misconstrued

her furtive behaviour as an avoidance tactic. Laurel starts to explain herself, only to be cut short:

She couldn't say James was mentally retarded. Even the doctor had not known for certain. But, perhaps, if she could put it in some roundabout way...

"Barbara," she began breathlessly, "suppose you had a brother or sister who needed you, who was...different...."

Barbara drew back. Her eyes seemed to grow bigger all at once, and something in her taut face made Laurel pause. Before Laurel could finish her sentence, Barbara fled from her, banging into people as she went.

Any attentive young reader will recognize that Barbara is not, as Laurel fears, incredulous and angry, but appalled. Precocious ones will also recall fleeting allusions to a mysterious Alice connected with Barbara.

Narrator's clues to what is bothering or distracting characters often, as in the passage just quoted, take the form of body language. Backs straighten, toes tap, faces are averted as people absorb shocks, become resolute, grow bored or impatient, or need to hide a traitorous teardrop. The device contributes to economical storytelling. It also poses salutary challenges to developing readers. In *Home from far* a conversation touches a raw spot in Jenny. She "turns her back on her mother suddenly." She is clearly crying, or in danger of doing so. Little pays readers the compliment of not telling them so.

As I've said and these samples illustrate, Little's novels are full of emotionally fraught scenes. On the other hand, they are full of fun too. As she herself has said, her heroes and heroines "lose their tempers, are bullies sometimes, grumble, and are lazy and afraid," but "They are also kind, joyous, helpless with laughter, brave, generous and even industrious."⁶ In their sunny periods they frolic, stage plays and circus acts, form writing and dog-training clubs, throw parties, laugh good naturedly at each other and themselves. There is plenty of straightforward levity in the novels.

They also contain humour of a sharper, rarer kind, and it is perhaps this element that gives them their tang, counteracting the tinge of bland Pollyannaism that occasionally creeps in. This sharper humour arises from Little's piercing insight into the primitive, amoral feelings we prefer to rationalize or simply not see in ourselves. Possibly she developed the discomfiting insight, and the power to treat it humorously, out of her childhood ordeals at the hands of unselfcritical young barbarians. In her novels she usually manifests her wry, startling realism in brief concluding sentences. In *Home from far*, six-year-old Mac falls into wet tar. Black from head to foot, he is dragged home by his brother:

He smelled like a freshly tarred road.
He was bellowing at the top of his voice.
He was obviously having a good time.

In the same novel, Jenny's mother is unexpectedly tactful. Jenny "had been ready to be furious with Mother again. Now she had no excuse." In *Mama's going to buy you a mockingbird*, Jeremy refuses to give his little sister a boatride, and she droops. "She looked so sad and small that he wanted to hit her." "Having a good time," "no excuse," and "wanted to hit her" all give pleasurable but shaming little shocks--pleasurable because the narrator is baring Awful Truths usually kept decently under wraps, shaming because we realize that recognition of them indicts us.

For all the reasons sketched above, and more besides, Little's books are compulsive reading, especially for child readers, as is attested by children's unflagging demand for them. But her realism has its price. The absence of strongly defined plots and sustained suspense may give casual readers a sense that although the stories have involving beginnings and satisfyingly happy conclusions, they lack palpable currents between the two. Little has perhaps shared the feeling, for her use of symbolism to mark thematic cores has increased. In a comparatively early book, *From Anna* (1972), she employed metaphor rather than symbol. Anna's literal semi-blindness is shown to be comparable to the figurative blindness of others, notably and poignantly her siblings and her imperceptive, somewhat childish mother, who have failed to "see" the swan potential in the awkward, suffering family duckling. Late in the story, Little has Mama make the metaphor explicit in case any reader has missed it. By the time she wrote *Mama's going to buy you a mockingbird* (1984), she had become considerably more adroit and subtle in her deployment of thematic markers. In *Modern Canadian children's books*, Judith Saltman singles out this feature of the book for particular praise:

A pattern of symbolic imagery--a series of images of birds and flight that reverberate with meaning--gives shape and texture to the story. The bird, as symbol of the spirit and the resurrection, weaves and dips throughout this narrative of death and rebirth. The images move from the title itself, to the bird-watching of father and son and the owl-carving that is the father's gift to Jeremy, to Dennis Lee's poem of the Ookpik's grace (a kind of Canadian Holy Ghost), and finally to Jeremy's winged flight at the books' end to wake his family to the healing, archetypal celebration of Christmas.⁷

Jean Little deserves her popularity and her laurels. If her novels linger in readers' minds as pleasant experiences rather than memorable stories, and I suspect that they do, the fact is largely due to characteristics of our age and to her Canadianism rather than to any failings peculiar to her. In this age of quick fix and half-hour (less time for commercials) television dramas, there is little appetite for literary stodge. Carroll's Alice has no use for books without

pictures and conversation. Most moderns have no use for books with anything *but* pictures and conversation. Little consciously caters to their taste as virtually all her writing colleagues do. She cites an early mentor who advised, "...make people come alive through conversation and don't start off with solid chunks of description."⁸ Yet the classics that Little and her preferred characters love are full of prosy passages. Perhaps those passages give the old books the third dimension that modern ones, including Little's, seem to lack. On the other hand, perhaps (heretical thought) we cherish our memories of the old ones because they made us work so hard to reach their great moments.

American and British children's authors who recognize the difficulty of achieving impact in short, conversation-laden novels, now often accomplish their dramatic effects by treating the bizarre or desperate plights of members of minority groups: ghetto children, racial misfits, runaways. But with characteristically Canadian restraint, Little refrains from such sensationalism, sticking to her own outwardly quiet domain. She is right to do so. It must be acknowledged, however, that her most memorable characters are her most troubled ones: Anna Solden, shadowed by both the clouds over Hitler's Germany and her undiagnosed eye condition; gawky, clever, semi-neglected Kate Bloomfield (Little's "dearest child" in Mama Sodlen's terminology and "author" of Little's verse collection *Hey world, here I am!* 1986); Jeremy Talbot, Little's only protagonist to suffer the death of a loved one in a novel's present.

In her poem "Two doors,"⁹ Little exhorts children to find refuge and riches in books:

Oh listen, child who looks so lonely
(Whether fifth or one and only,
Child who's driving people crazy,
Child everybody knows is lazy,
Child who's frightened of the dark,
Child as happy as a lark,
Busy child or child who's bored,
Child who's left books unexplored,
Come and be bewitched, beguiled,
For blessed is the reading child.

In fact, her own novels not only provide such refuge and riches but also point out the ways to dozens of other "book worlds," for her most likeable characters are all avid readers and talk about so many favourites that my list of their titles is too long to cite. Little's appreciative readers are therefore joining a club, and it's a good one to belong to, made up of fun-loving, dog-loving readers. The presiding genius, part Girl Guide and part mirthful, clear-eyed, undismayed reader of souls, keeps life interesting all of the time and sometimes electric. No wonder her fans greet each new novel with an exuberant "Aha!"

NOTES

- 1 Jean Little, "Springs of the Imagination," talk, Kaleidoscope IV, Calgary, Alberta, 22 October 1988.
- 2 Little, Kaleidoscope.
- 3 "But What About Jane?", *Canadian Children's Literature* 3 (Autumn 1975) 77.
- 4 Catherine Ross, "An interview with Jean Little", *Canadian Children's Literature* 34 (1984) 12.
- 5 Tim Wynne-Jones, "Windows, dragons and sight," *Toronto Globe and Mail* 20 Sept. 1986.
- 6 "My own imagined world: a panel of three authors," *Canadian Children's Literature* 48 (1987) 48.
- 7 *Modern Canadian children's books*, Perspectives on Canadian Culture Series (Toronto: OUP, 1987) 64.
- 8 Ross, interview, 10.
- 9 *Canadian Children's Literature* 21 (1981) 4-7.

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