

Review articles & reviews / Critiques et comptes rendus

FROM QUÉBEC

My cow Bossie. Gabrielle Roy. McClelland & Stewart, 1988. 48 pp., paper. ISBN 0-7710-7761-0; **Seasons of the sea.** Monique Corriveau. Douglas & McIntyre, 1989. 96 pp., \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-086-3.

Although French and English Canada have always had their differences, one thing they do have in common is high quality children's literature. With these recent releases, unilingual English readers receive an all-too rare opportunity to read two books that have long delighted French children.

The original French versions of Gabrielle Roy's *My cow Bossie* and Monique Corriveau's *Seasons of the sea* were published in Quebec in the mid-1970's. Each book is a look back at a particular time in a young heroine's life. *My cow Bossie* begins with an unusual gift to an eight-year-old – a cow! In *Seasons of the sea*, eleven-year-old Mary Lou McGuire faces major upheaval: her family is moving from her beloved island to the bustling city of St. John's. In both cases, the girls must adjust to change and new responsibilities.

My cow Bossie is a picture book aimed at children ages four to eight. Set in Manitoba in the early 1900's, its light-hearted story is a charming piece of nostalgia. Bossie was purchased for her ability to provide good milk for the children. The narrative provides numerous descriptions of the little cowherd/dairymaid leading Bossie through traffic in town, chasing her across the pasture, and, when Bossie starts producing too much milk, selling the surplus door-to-door in 40-below-zero temperatures.

Gabrielle Roy successfully weaves this appealing story with believable characters, unaffected dialogue, and honest emotions. Children will have no trouble relating to the narrator's exasperation with her "pet" and to events that almost, but don't quite, get out of control.

Seasons of the sea is a very different kind of book. For one thing, it is written for an older reader; however, it is hard to say how much older. At 96 pages (and only six black and white illustrations), the book would be quite a challenge for most eight-to-ten year-olds, although the content would certainly interest them. Perhaps it would be best read aloud to this age group, due to the length and language level (words such as "malleable" (34), "nonchalantly" (33), and "chronological" (14) appear regularly). Those aged twelve to fifteen would

probably have little difficulty reading it on their own, but some teenagers might find the story too "young" for them.

Set in 1910, *Seasons of the sea* describes the last year Mary Lou McGuire and her family will spend on the island of Oderin in Placentia Bay, Newfoundland. Beginning with winter, it shows the island and the McGuires in the changing seasons, giving the reader a solid understanding of both. The characters are vibrant, the descriptions of the island vivid. Mr. and Mrs. McGuire's uncertainty about whether to stay on the Oderin when the island school closes forms the framework for the story, but their decision to move is only hinted at until the very end. The story is a collection of sketches more than it is an organized, interconnected plot. Linked by the seasons and by everyday activities – tobogganing, baking bread, visiting friends – *Seasons of the sea* is a mural of words depicting life in a certain time and place.

The change of seasons reminds us that the life cycle continues: a baby is born on Oderin and two island fishermen drown just off its shores. As Mary Lou stands on the deck of the boat taking them to St. John's, "she carried the island within her just as surely as her own heart" (96). With this realization comes the strength to face the future and accept the challenges it holds.

Besides being for two different age groups, the two books differ in their faithfulness to the French versions. *My cow Bossie* retains every word of the original text as well as the illustrations, the layout, and even the typeface. The translation is a good one, with only one glaring error: the verb "paitre" appears as "to grass" instead of "to graze." Louise Pomminville's illustrations are fitting; background is nicely done and filled with historical detail. Her drawings of people have a definite "70s" look, however, and their faces have a cartoon-like quality. As in the French version, a two-page spread of text is alternated with an illustrated spread. *My cow Bossie* is true to the author's original work on all levels.

The same cannot be said for *Seasons of the sea*. While many of the superficial changes – typeface, illustrations, size and shape of the book, and design – are for the better, the publisher's decision to abridge the text weakens the finished product. Approximately one-third of the original story, including two entire chapters, was cut for the English edition. In some cases, deleted sections were descriptive passages that added nothing to the advancement of the plot. In others, however, material that foreshadows major revelations at the end of the story (David's decision to become a missionary, the identity of the person who stole Mary Lou's dog and the reason behind the theft) has been removed. The impact of the resolution of these various subplots is reduced to the point of being almost meaningless.

Much of the missing material describes the characters' responses and thoughts. To remove these reactions is to change the nature of the book from a subjective, impressionistic account to a more objective, factual one. For example, in Chapter One, the teacher in Oderin tells his students that after the

holidays there will be no more school on the island. The students are glad. In the English version they run out the door, shouting, "Thank you, sir. Merry Christmas!" This rather callous, abrupt response is not explained or alluded to further. In the French version, however, there is a short paragraph before the children flee that prepares the reader. The teacher is thinking to himself, and understands the students' reaction to his news. Most of them are poor, with the sea being their only livelihood; they must grow up fast and take their place alongside their parents. No wonder they don't care about school. The difference this one short paragraph makes, both to the flow of the story and the reader's understanding of the situation, is immense.

As for the two chapters that have been deleted entirely, they provide readers of the original version with excellent background to the history of the island and the McGuire family, and to the future of the children. There is more talk and reflection than action here, but these sections provide a richness that is noticeably absent in the abridged version.

Because of the extensive cuts, the text is often choppy and transitions are extremely jarring at times. While what is left is, for the most part, well translated, it is unfortunate that so much has been removed. What remains does not do full justice to Monique Corriveau's work.

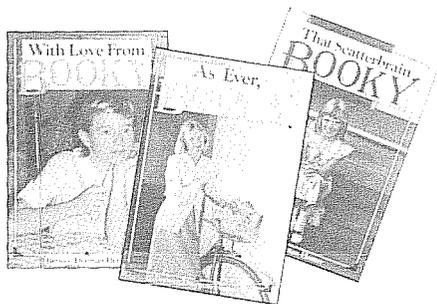
Despite any weakness, however, it is encouraging to see that English Canadian publishers are recognizing the value of French Canadian children's writers enough to have their works translated. This cultural exchange will further enrich the already excellent children's literature of both languages.

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THREE BOOKYS AND A NEW HUNTER BOOK

That scatterbrain Booky; With love from Booky; As ever, Booky. Bernice Thurman Hunter. Scholastic-Tab, 1989. \$9.95 paper, boxed set. ISBN 0-590-73408-3. [Each book published separately 1981, 1983, 1985 with individual

ISBN's]. **The railroader.** Bernice Thurman Hunter. Scholastic-Tab, 1990. 150 pp., \$4.50 paper. ISBN 0-590-73421-0.



The three volumes that comprise the Booky series have the special strength of novels that were lived and researched. These first-hand accounts of growing up in a working-class family in Toronto during