Freeing the creative imagination: an interview with Claire Mackay

Barbara Michasiw

The first part of this interview with Claire Mackay took place on Monday, April 24, 1989, at the home of Barbara Michasiw in Clarkson, Ontario. It focuses on her development through a sequence of books for children which in their variety made increasing but different demands on her writing abilities. This process shows an author gradually giving herself permission to access and make conscious use of the unique resources of her creative imagination. For this issue of CCL *Barbara Michasiw and Claire Mackay reviewed and in 1991 updated the records of the earlier interview.*

Michasiw: Is it accurate to say that writing is your third career?
Mackay: I've had any number of careers; I fell into things. It had to do with geography and availability of jobs. I started out in a library, when I was ten years old, dusting the books. I've tried to avoid dusting ever since. And then, in a delightfully circular way, my last paying job was at a library. In between, when I was a student, I had about nineteen jobs, then I was a librarian again right after marriage. Later, as a social worker having to write social histories, I found my way into what I really should have been doing all my life.
Michasiw: That was one of the things I wanted to ask you. Was professional writing your ultimate goal all along?
Mackay: Yes, but not consciously for a long time. Only as a dream somewhere at the back of my mind perhaps. I abandoned it for most of my young adulthood thinking that my ability was small and my talent mediocre. I was perfectly aware that a ton of mediocre garbage was out there floating around. That didn't encourage me to add to it. It just persuaded me that we didn't need any more, that I should maybe turn my talents, whatever they were, elsewhere.
Michasiw: When the time came, why did you venture into children's literature?
Mackay: It was largely accident but I had reached the point in my life (just turned forty) when major decisions are made or unmade, when I felt if I was going to do any writing at all I had better get at it. I had developed a little more confidence because of returning to school as a mature student, and receiving

encouragement from a magnificent woman, a professor of human behaviour at the University of British Columbia, who felt that I did have some talent in writing. At the same time my son was going through an identity crisis, trying to establish a place for himself in the family. His older brothers, who were strong personalities, had areas of competence that gave them a sense of self, I suppose, and poor Grant didn't. He chose as his interest – which kids often do – something he knew was regarded by his parents as disreputable and proceeded to become an armchair expert first. It was of course, mini-bikes. Considerable family trauma was connected with his selecting an interest that didn't meet with his parents' approval, and then pursuing it to the point of obsession. It was uncomfortable in the household for a while with father and son at war. When Grant asked for a story about a mini-bike it coincided with my long-suppressed, but now very vigorous, desire to write something longer than a sonnet. So that's how it came about and I suppose I've called it an accident on more than one occasion, but is there any real accident in life? Then I had the temerity to send the manuscript to a publisher in the expectation it would be immediately returned. So, that's how I got into children's writing and it's largely been a matter of being weak-willed thereafter. The first one was such a success, I was persuaded to try another and then it's just been one thing after another. No, no. It was strictly unplanned.

Michasiw: ... but I am struck when I read them by the action, the suspense that you build, the straightforward but not over-simplified vocabulary. How did you know how to do this? How did you know how to write to keep readers – even adult readers – turning the pages?

Mackay: First I'd have to say that I knew how to do it because I had absorbed it unconsciously from all the reading I'd done. I started reading as soon as I knew what books and letters were. I learned (almost osmotically) by reading all those years, how a story went together. And the kinds of stories I liked as a child continue to be the kinds children like. I still like stories, narratives, people having problems and working their way out. I like plot and it's my feeling that most kids do too. Most children will not sit down and read an experimental novel. Even in adult fiction I like a story. So I think that's part of the explanation. I suppose another part of the answer is that the age group I write for was a particularly satisfying one for me as a mother. My three sons were willing to communicate – in fact they sometimes communicated more than I really wanted to know – at that age, and I was willing to listen. We had a close and talkative relationship throughout all those years, say ten to fifteen. I know that teenage boys are supposed to clam up at the age of twelve but mine didn't, particularly the boy who started me writing. The house was full of boys and girls at that time. Because I felt close to them, I felt I could communicate well – I could even hear the things they weren't saying – and perhaps that's given me an edge.

Michasiw: I find a pattern of development through the mini-bike books. The

first book is primarily action. Yes, there's the conflict between Steve and his father, but primarily it's action. In book two there is more of a conflict built up between Steve and Kim, the friend from whom he becomes alienated, and there is more of an attempt to examine character, moving away from straight action. When you come to the third one where you are talking about Julie Brennan and her problems, I find a greater consciousness of setting, a greater depth of characterization. Now is this because the book came after *Exit Barney McGee*, because you had done the very different treatment of another kind of subject, or is this just natural development? Perhaps I'm asking the same question in two different ways.

Mackay: Yes, you may be. But there's another angle to this. For the first two books, obviously I utilized my sons, their friends, their experiences, their conversation, and their behaviour. I felt unsure about mining my own childhood, even though I think I was doing it in a minor way, because I could probably not have written the early books without doing so. But in the third mini-bike book much of Julie is me. The first scene is right out of my own life because my mother happened to throw away a favourite sweater of mine. It was a lucky sweater. I wore it for exams. I obviously couldn't pass anything without wearing that sweater. When the book came out, I sent my mother a copy. She phoned immediately and with a great wail said, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" I started to be sure enough of myself (and you have to remember that part of *One proud summer* was written before *Mini-bike rescue*) to feel that it was okay to use one's own childhood – why I didn't think so before or why I didn't *consciously* think of using it, I don't know – and it opened up a huge resource for me. I also felt the publishers would let me get away with a lot more, to tell you the truth. For Scholastic I had already written two, three successful books and when *Rescue* finally got written – which they'd been waiting for with bated breath for some time – I pretty well had my way. Now I think they might have been a little tougher with me. I've reread portions of that book and have discovered that it's overwritten here and there.

Michasiw: Only a little.

Mackay: You should have seen it before, Barbara. I know my editor sent me back a page at one point and she said, "Claire, do you realize that you have twelve similes on this page? Would you mind reducing them to half a dozen maybe?" I feel this is the last residue of Claire trying to be a poet, thinking in images and trying to express it.

Michasiw: Still I like the images ... particularly when Julie is out looking at birds and the dead swamp.

Mackay: Yes, but I think they probably slow things down. I've had letters, from boys in particular, saying, "I really liked the first two, but there's too much scenery in *Mini-bike rescue*."

Michasiw: I'm not sure whether you agreed with me that there's development.

Mackay: I think there's development because I was beginning to know that I could use more inner resources. I was allowing myself to do more. This is important because the expectation set up after the first book was "Here's a writer of page-turners, the fast-action stories for young people, especially boys who don't like to read a lot. I was labelled immediately. That happens to children's writers more than any other group. And I even also resented for some time, and occasionally still do, being called a children's writer. We don't call Margaret Atwood an adults' writer. I got crammed into a double pigeonhole. You're a children's writer and apart from that you write action-filled, fast-moving page-turners.

Michasiw: Well, since you left the Mini-bike series, you have been much harder to pigeonhole. Each book is quite different from the books that have gone before. Maybe this is something you have done consciously.

Mackay: It was partly because I was asked to do a certain kind of book too. *Mini-bike racer* had been written mostly in response to the publisher desperately wanting another book that would sell a quarter of a million copies and in response to fan mail. There were hundreds of children who wrote letters, in addition to that first and now moderately famous fan letter from a boy who had never read a book in his life, wanting another adventure with Steve. And in response to those letters, I sat down in some bewilderment because my life had simply been turned upside down – people were calling me a writer, of all things – and put together that second book. I have occasionally regretted that I didn't take longer with it. I've often felt I should rewrite it, but of course you can't. So those two books came out relatively close together and then I sat back and took a deep breath and with great trepidation began to write *Exit Barney McGee.*

Michasiw: But *Barney* was not commissioned, was it?

Mackay: No, *Barney* was a voyage of discovery. I felt I could try a few different techniques. There are at least four different points of view and one critic took me to task for that, I remember. I tried to make it a novel more of character than action.

Michasiw: It's obviously a quest novel, but it's also a novel of initiation.

Mackay: What do you mean by a novel of initiation? You're not going to use jargon on me are you?

Michasiw: Just this once. In it we take Barney from a protected, limited knowledge of the world. Although he thinks he's been taking care of himself and his mother since he was a little guy, in fact when he sets off on his trip to Toronto, he's pretty naive. He learns not only about his father, he also learns a lot about himself. He learns that he cannot turn his back on someone and let him drown, no matter how hard it's going to be to save him, no matter what that person has done to him before. He is initiated into some of the street smarts of Toronto. He is initiated into the failure of adults. He thinks his stepfather has failed him, but this is a different ball game from the failure of Mike

McGee. So it seems to me two things are at work in the novel: quest and initiation. Which do you feel is more important – the quest for his father, the search for his identity – or his initiation into the adult world?

Mackay: I have to say that they're both important and I don't think you can separate them. You don't sit down and say "Well, I think I'll write a quest novel today." The critical grid is put on afterwards. I was delighted to discover I had written a quest novel. I adore quest novels. Joseph Campbell has this pattern: separation, adventure, return. I read it and realized I did that! Smart me! But, of course, it's in our culture, this prototypical kind of story. It's hard not to write a quest novel in a way, isn't it? Every novel is a kind of quest.

Michasiw: Especially if you are writing for young people, because growing up is a kind of quest and ultimately what most children's stories are about is growing up.

Mackay: The fact that it's a physical quest, a geographical search, is incidental. It's nice to have that underpinning, that support for the novel, but he might have been able to do it in his own home town. Now, I think there's another important aspect to the novel and that's the search for the father. That's in a lot of books too as you well know. I didn't do it because it's a powerful thing, but when I say *Barney* came out of my own desires and, in some respects, my own childhood, that's exactly so. My father resembled Barney's and in some ways I felt, certainly as a child and even as a young woman, cheated of a father. It wasn't until I was grown that I came to understand that my father was ill. And before I wrote *Barney* I was conscious of the fact that many children had nothing but contempt for some of the pathetic creatures whom they saw downtown. At any rate that element of the search for the father, the longing, I suppose, of every child for a hero father entered into the writing of it too. So there's a whole lot of stuff in *Barney* and I just felt I had to write it, but when I finished I thought, "I haven't done a good job." Of course no book is what it is when it's a dream in your head. I can write a book in my head in ten seconds and it's perfect. It's perfect! Then I try to put it down and it becomes imperfect. I suppose that's why some people keep writing, keep trying for the vision that they see.

Michasiw: The next one will always be the perfect one. But back to *Barney*. Do you feel that the problem of alcoholism concerns children?

Mackay: It certainly does. The fan mail on *Barney* is heart-breaking and an indication of how widespread this problem is. I've had continuing correspondence with a number of young people, with some of them for eight years, and, at the risk of being immodest, I think that my letters have helped them get through difficult patches. Things they couldn't perhaps say to their own parent or parents, they have felt comfortable saying to me. This is quite rewarding though it has nothing to do with being a writer. But I think it's not uncommon in the children's writing field. I've talked to other writers sufficiently to know that in the letters they get the children open up their hearts and their homes.

They say things they probably shouldn't, these kids, and it's a huge compliment that children feel that comfortable with you just from reading something you wrote.

Michasiw: I hesitate to break off this part of the discussion about children's letters, but I would like to move on to another aspect of your work. One of the remarkable things about your books is that once you accept the commission you make the book uniquely your own. *One proud summer* was a book that you were not only approached to write but you were also asked to collaborate on it with another person, so in this instance you had two constraints on you.

Mackay: Well, the major constraint, of course, was the historical event itself. One of the people who had to approve the manuscript (for the very practical reason that she wouldn't release the pictures that appear at the end of it unless she did approve) was Madeleine Parent, who is a real character in the story of the strike in Quebec in 1946 –. Madeleine remembers almost photographically everything that happened. She took exception to several portions of the completed manuscript. We wanted her marvellous shot of the nine-year-old being arrested by the Quebec strike squad, so we did change some of the events to correspond more closely to her recollections. One thing that I refused to change was the scene where Lucie at the dinner table begins to twist her linen napkin. Madeleine pointed out that this was a poor family and they would not have linen napkins, but I said, "If she twisted a paper napkin, it would come apart in her hands," and I didn't want that to happen in that particular scene. I saw the napkin as one valuable thing that had been passed down, a tangible piece of family memory. I pleaded and Madeleine conceded the point. So the first constraint was history. This novel is almost documentary fiction. It's so close to what truly happened. As for collaborating, that worked marvellously well because Marsha Hewitt, who had been working away on this book for a year before I came on the scene, has skills that are different from mine and strengths different from mine. Her skills in primary research helped in interviews, and then being thirty-five miles from the scene in Montreal meant she could get me information in a hurry or elaborate on descriptions. Her major discovery was the grandmother who is indeed based on a real person. She was a marvellous woman who actually had participated in this strike. In the final writing I think a touch of my own grandmother crept in. She was an independent-minded, radical woman who had to make her own way in the world and did a number of things to disturb the bourgeoisie. After an initial period of awkwardness between us, both emotional and creative, Marsha and I got along extremely well and our talents seemed to mesh so it was a very happy collaboration. We are at present negotiating the film rights for *One proud summer*. There's a scoop for you. It will be in French, naturally. One could hardly expect Lucie to be chattering to her grandmother in English, so it will appear in French first. There were the constraints of history, the constraints of having to be faithful to Madeleine Parent's recollections, the constraints of working

with somebody else. There were others because the publisher, Women's Press, has a certain way of looking at reality and a certain desire to publish a kind of book that perhaps other publishers don't wish to. The manuscript was read by eight women at the press. We either did an end run around their comments or accommodated them in ways that were satisfactory to us. Eventually out the book came. I am delighted that you think it and the other books don't seem like a commissioned works, though why "commissioned works" should be a pejorative phrase I'm not exactly sure.

Michasiw: I think it's a hangover from the Romantic Movement, the idea that one had to be inspired by the Muse. But it's well to remember that Dickens wrote *Pickwick Papers* as a commissioned work. Did you have difficulty meshing the fiction and the fact in *One proud summer*? It reads without a seam, but I'm wondering if this was a particulary difficult challenge for you.

Mackay: It's hard to remember the nature of the difficulties – this is, after all, almost ten years ago. All books are very difficult for me. I do not write books easily nor do I write them quickly except for the one that should be rewritten, *Mini-bike racer*. There are times in the writing of every book when you are convinced that you cannot do it, you will never finish it, you have failed. The one thing that sometimes keeps you going is that you have signed a contract. You've got to do it no matter what if you are a person of honour, which I think I am. The other thing that gives one courage at these points is the sure knowledge that every other writer goes through this including the great and the mighty. We all get to that stage and knowing we have been there before and somehow miraculously finished the book gives enough, not courage maybe, but determination to persist for three hours of the day and see what happens....Back to the difficulties of the *One proud summer*. Because the fiction is almost confined to the character of Lucie, I was not conscious of that particular difficulty or constraint. I felt that I could successfully live inside this girl's body for the hundred days of that summer, partly because I was just about the same age in 1946 and probably of the same cast of mind even though I was not a young French Canadian mill worker who had to quit school. But you will note once again the relationship with the father. The father is gone when the novel begins, but the father is much loved.

Michasiw: The father's loss is part of the grievance against the company.

Mackay: That's right, but I certainly drew on my own childhood there once again and the funeral scene is my father's funeral. So all of those parts which I hope give some depth and colour and verisimilitude to the characters in the book are not dependent on the things that befall those characters. Let me make myself clear. If Lucie's character came through as legitimate, as real, as true, as genuine, then it didn't really matter what piece of history she was moving through. Naturally she was reacting to this history. I hope she reacted in a credible way. I suppose this is what every writer hopes. Really you paid me a high compliment by saying the book seemed to be mine. Do you want money?

Michasiw: No, I want some further discussion. I'd like to move on to *The Minerva program* which is a real departure, it seems to me, from what happens in *One proud summer*. Once again I know you were asked to write it, this time by Lorimer. And one of the things I find fascinating is that as Minerva was learning to use a computer, you were also learning to use a computer, so I would like to start this section of our discussion by asking you whether you found a computer affected the way in which you write?

Mackay: That may be a sensitive subject at this point. *Minerva* came out in 1984 which is five years ago now. You will not have failed to observe, as I have, that I have not written a full-length fiction work since that time and ...

Michasiw: I didn't think it was that long.

Mackay: It doesn't seem that long because *Minerva* is still doing very well. But it struck me recently that I've done a non-fiction work and I've written quite a number of short pieces – but I have not written a full-length fiction work. Now I'm not going to say it's all the computer's fault. I had written most of the first draft of *Minerva* before I switched to the computer even though, as you pointed out, I was trying to be like my young heroine and learning how to use a computer. There are some drawbacks; there are also some wonderful advantages but I don't think the wonderful advantages have anything to do with creativity. The computer can do a whole lot of mechanical things very rapidly, but it can't write the book. The person who owns the computer has to write the book. The drawbacks that I'm beginning to see are these: in all my other fiction works the page I was working on was always in the typewriter, visible as I walked by. Its imperfections were also visible and every time I sat down I looked at it, I knew very well it was not my final draft. All its blemishes were there in front of me as evidence. With the computer, because you can correct on the screen, you make your mistakes disappear almost right away. You can print a perfect page every time. Half the time it's very imperfect and full of things that shouldn't be there.

Michasiw: I would worry that I might eliminate something that afterwards I wanted back.

Mackay: Exactly. That can happen too. Now I even save the little notes I take on the computer. I save everything in the hope that if I'm going to reuse something it won't have vanished into the ether. The other thing that happens, at least with my word processing program, is that you have to go through a whole lot of things to call up what you're working on. You turn the machine on. There are clicks and buzzes. A menu comes up and you select from the menu what you want; then you sub-select and finally up comes page one of your manuscript. What you want is page forty-nine, the last page written, but before you can get to page forty-nine, you eyes fall on page one. Because you see each page on the way to forty-nine, you feel compelled to change and polish. On page one you remove a comma, on page twelve an adverb which seems to throw the rhythm of that entire paragraph out, so you work on that. Often by the time

you get to page forty-nine, where you would have been had you been using a typewriter or a pen and a piece of paper, it's time to get lunch. And what you have done is rewrite a whole lot of little bits. You've lost the momentum of the story. This is what has happened to the novel that I'm working on. I have written the first hundred and ten pages at least eight times and I'm in the middle of the story and I'm not at all sure that I can get to the end. The other thing is that because there's an element of play in using a computer, because the keyboard is so responsive, the screen so delightfully obliging, you run off at the keys. There's more physical work involved in writing and correcting on the typewriter, consequently you tend to be a little more careful with your words. And you may even get it right the first time or the second time or the fifth time. With the computer, you put down any old thing because you don't want to lose the thought and then sometimes you think that any old thing is good enough; but it's not. *Because you can print a perfect page, you think you have written a perfect page.* So those are the real drawbacks and I'm even considering for this novel going back to the typewriter. Maybe it's just one of those writer's superstitions. Hemingway wrote standing up and another fellow always used purple ink. I went so far as to buy a $79.00 second-hand typewriter and put it in my little den at home just in case. Some writers have gone right back to pen and paper. Audrey Thomas, for example. She says there's actually a neuromuscular connection and perhaps even an emotional connection between her brain and her hand and it gets lost in electronics. She may have a point. Certainly I cannot write poetry on the computer. I write poetry with a pencil and paper.

Michasiw: So this really underlines the emotional connection. There are two other questions I would like to ask you about *Minerva*. One of them is about the names and I know, because you've spoken to my classes about this, that you gave careful thought to all the names in *The Minerva program*. Is this just a writer's game or has it the significance of naming that we find in fairytale and myth?

Mackay: It's probably a bit of both because words and the names of things have always fascinated me. I don't think that any writer lightly chooses a name. When Katherine Paterson named Gilly Hopkins she wasn't exactly sure where it came from. She was thinking of writing a story about a foster child and as a family the Patersons were reading *The Lord of the Rings* aloud. When Galadriel entered the story, she knew she was going to use that name. It seemed to fit and immediately she knew more about the mother of Gilly. She wasn't at all sure where Hopkins came from until she remembered Gerard Manley Hopkins, her favourite poet. So even when she doesn't choose names consciously, she *is* choosing them.

Michasiw: They choose her.

Mackay: Yes. They pop up. And I know Jean [Little] does the same thing. It's no accident that Emily appears in the book *Kate* and again later in the poems. There are Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson, who is Jean's favourite poet,

and Emily Carr, all big influences, the writing Emilys. Back to my own exercise in naming. I thinks it's evident early on in my work. There's a section in *Mini-bike rescue* where Julie talks about how she likes to name things. By naming things you own them.

Michasiw: This is what I was thinking of when I suggested the fairytale and myth connection, that to name something is to have power over it.

Mackay: Well, I believe that myself deeply. I look back on my own childhood and I *had* to name things; I had to know the names of things, just like Julie. Then I could make order. Otherwise the world was chaotic and menacing. I know I've read other writers, perhaps wiser writers, who say they don't want to know the names of things. It robs them of their emotional appeal and power, their mystery. To me it adds to the power, it adds to the significance of that object or event or person to know its name. It adds a whole other dimension and this is what I try to do when I'm naming – add an extra dimension. Whether young or older readers pick up on the significance of the names – the code in the names – doesn't matter to me. They may, even if they don't realize it, because we all carry a huge store of unrealized knowledge in our minds and hearts, the almost Jungian racial memory. I think many of the names will ring a faint bell, or a very loud one, with some people even though they don't realize it. They will add the little bit of extra resonance that I want and will give the character depth and credibility. In the article I've written on names in *Writers on writing* I mention Sue Alderson's "Bonnie McSmithers" – is a stroke of genius, a wonderful name and very musical. And I note in this article too what Janet Lunn does in *Shadow in Hawthorn Bay* when her spelling counts. The second word in the book, I believe, is Mairi, M-a-i-r-i. With that one stroke, Janet made her whole story reverberate because there's the magic of second sight in that name, there's the music of the Highlands, there's a sense of differentness, of other-worldliness, all implied in that name. Whether or not Janet knew she was doing it or not, it's there and the reader will pick it up too.

Michasiw: I even want to say it differently with my inward voice.

Mackay: Sure, you drag out the central vowels. So important, very important, the names. I took immense care – apart from having a few private jokes of my own – throughout the book.

Michasiw: Your sense of humour really doesn't come into its own until *The Minerva program*. Was there something about this particular story or your approach to it or maybe even about the computer that released your sense of humour to its full potential?

Mackay: I would hope, Barbara, it's not my full potential, not yet. Once you reach your full potential, that's when you retire.

Michasiw: Sorry! To its greater potential. Can I say that?

Mackay: You're not the first person who has observed this. It was a question of giving myself permission to write this way. I've had to learn the courage to be more and more myself in my books. All writing, I suppose, is self-revealing,

but some more than others. And this was an aspect I was both unsure I should reveal and unsure whether I could reveal. Now, that's part of the answer, but you raised another point. Was it because of the story? Yes, in large part it was because of the story. It's a contemporary story of kids who are in a way streetwise and sophisticated and it's also a genre book. I can glibly call it a computer mystery and it's almost true. Not quite true, but almost true. Very consciously in my mind, during the writing of this, was a recent development that I see in modern fiction, a development that has been designated by a woman writer as "exploding the genre." That is you use the genre say of a mystery story, a detective story, a science fiction story, so that the reader says, "Oh yes, that is what this is." And then you proceed to push against the boundaries of that genre, take some risks within it. The reader isn't at sea, but all kinds of rather interesting things are occurring within this set of expectations. That intrigued me. It seemed delightfully subversive, to tell you the truth, and I thought that if I could, using a mystery form – and you can see, it's pretty classical where you have all the suspects gathered together in the final scene.

Michasiw: Everyone except the butler.

Mackay: Yes. No butlers in Minerva's life. So it's a very classical form, it's a genre form, but some odd little things are happening throughout. There's the subplot, of course, which, in a sense, deals with what I was originally charged to do and that's write about the social implications of high tech. Certainly that was in my mind. If I could explode the genre, that might be kind of satisfying.

Michasiw: Well, basically humour is subversive.

Mackay: Of course, And once again I felt freer to use some of my own high school experiences. My five-year battle with my gym teacher ... at last I got revenge. So a lot of it is straightforward development, as you said, and the beginnings of some degree of certainty about where to put my feet which I didn't have before. Naturally I think it is the best written of my novels, and thank heaven because it's the latest written too. It would be awful if you just kept getting worse. Now, before we move from this, I have to pay tribute to my editor.

Michasiw: To what degree have you relied on editors? Are editors an aid or a hindrance?

Mackay: They have been both. They have been a real pain in the neck a couple of times because they weren't being editors. They wanted to rewrite the book, please. They were frustrated writers. I have forgotten their names.

Michasiw: Good, we'll avoid a libel suit.

Mackay: They were freelancers hired by one of my publishers; but when I came to write *One proud summer*, I was assigned by Women's Press this particular editor, Charis Wahl, and in every book since then I have acknowledged her help in a foreword or an author's note. She has managed to convince me that I can write, which I think is a marvellous thing for an editor to do for a writer. Even though she's superbly critical of early drafts, and unerring when

I do put a foot wrong, she ends all her written comments with "I really loved this book" or "This is a good story and only you could tell it." Fortunately, she has a sense of humour. But without her organizational intelligence, without her way of being cruel only to be kind, the three books I've written with her help would not be as good as they are. It's too bad we can't do a whole interview on editing sometime. Indeed, it might be worth devoting a whole issue of *CCL* to editing.

Michasiw: Yes. Think of some of the great editors! I was rereading the interview with Christie Harris that appeared in *CCL* last year and included her tribute to Jean Karl. I was fortunate enough at the Pacific Rim Conference to meet Jean Karl, I have never forgotten that.

Mackay: With the first couple of books, because I didn't know anything about the whole game, I just let them do whatever they wanted to do and it backfired. Backfired with the first book right into the pages of *Canadian Children's Literature*, where I was taken to task for being racist. That charge would not have been levelled had several paragraphs in my original manuscript of *Mini-bike hero* been allowed to stand. But they were edited out and that was a real gaffe. I should never have let it happen, but what did I know? Scholastic should not have allowed their editor to do it, but they just felt that it wouldn't play in Australia with all this history stuff in it, so it was out. In a later edition of that book, we essentially rewrote it so that all mention of native peoples was removed because both of us, as publisher and as writer, were very upset over this charge.

Michasiw: Understandably.

Mackay: Understandably, not just because we wanted to appear to be without prejudice, but also because of my own background and work settings to be accused of racism against Métis children with whom I had spent two years of my life was a really tough charge.

Michasiw: I hate to leave *The Minerva program* without further comment because I find it such a pleasing book, but perhaps we should move on to *Pay cheques & picket lines*. I know that labour and the union movement are causes you have had sympathy with for a long time, but when you were faced with the task of making them accessible to children was it a challenge that you welcomed or did you find it initially rather daunting?

Mackay: Initially I was very excited and unless I'm excited by the idea there's no way that I'll undertake it, just no way at all. This I was excited about. I was also, I suppose, feeling a little bit like a missionary. I was well aware there was nothing on the shelves (or not very much) on this topic for children and also I felt that, generally speaking, the establishment media give unions a bad rap and always have. In talking to kids before I even started the book, I had discovered a kind of contempt for workers who were on strike, an impatience with the desires of folks who weren't lawyers and stockbrokers and doctors. So I felt emotionally committed to it right from the beginning. But then the work

began. It wasn't so much the difficulty in explaining complex and sophisticated concepts, I could find the words for that, it was the compression of what amounted to something like two hundred years of history (three hundred maybe) into what the publisher at first said was going to be sixty-four pages. It was quickly determined that I could not do this in sixty-four pages and do any sort of justice to the topic, so I begged for a few more pages: "Can I have eighty?" "Well, maybe." The final number of pages is a hundred and eight. And still I wonder if I did the whole topic justice. Compression was the big difficulty. How to get this mass of information into something not just comprehensible, but also something almost fun to read, and if not fun to read at least easy to read. This was the big problem.

Michasiw: The organization must have been an enormous task. It is partly the tone and the way in which the material is presented, but also partly the organization that makes it so accessible to young readers.

Mackay: Yes, and once again a tip of the hat to my editor and also to the in-house editor, Val Wyatt. The lot of us decided early on that we had to compartmentalize the material and we also knew that it was going to have x number of sections which made it easier for me to write. Much of it fell into place once we had that safety net of the form. Probably most non-fiction can be characterized that way: once you know the form, once you have it sliced into appropriate chunks, then at least you know this little piece of information is going in there. It's like sorting buttons. The other difficulty, and it's a corollary of the necessity for compression, is that when you compress facts into general statements or overviews, you might not do justice to the real truth of that particular event. So I had to be conscious all the time that yes, I must compress; yes, I'm forced to generalize; yes, I'm forced to deal with thirty years of history in two paragraphs; but at the same time I must not bend the truth. Yet because I write (I hope) in an illustrative way, even when I was generalizing, I wanted to pick out colourful bits which would illustrate the compressed general truth I had just stated. So I was always on the lookout for the detail that would lend drama, the detail that would jump off the page, and make a child see the truth of that general statement. All of these processes were going on at once. That's where the difficulty was. Also the research ... one entire room in my house is now the union book.

Michasiw: I can believe that. I think the time chart that you include at the very end is a particularly useful device for a child.

Mackay: Oh, that's good because it almost didn't get in there. We almost didn't have room for it.

Michasiw: Given the chart, the parts of the book fell into place. You've mentioned already the fan letters you get. What sort of response have you got from children towards *Pay cheques*?

Mackay: Not a lot. I think I've only had two, maybe three, letters so far. The book still has to filter its way down through the system. It goes to older kids

and usually I speak to junior grades. Just this past week I was in Mississauga talking to four grade eight bunches, I guess three hundred kids altogether in four sessions, and they had been primed a little bit ahead of time. One boy showed up with a Canadian Auto Workers' sweat shirt on. I asked how many of their parents belonged to a union. Half the kids put their hands up. Half again of those had parents who had been on strike, so there was a lot of prior knowledge and a lot of interest particularly, of course, in strikes. We had an extensive discussion about how strikes were really a rotten way to settle anything, but that in North America we seem to be stuck with it, at least for now, and that in the last analysis it's the only thing a worker can do, the ultimate weapon. I've also talked to some kids in Saskatchewan about this book. They had studied it ahead of time and when I arrived there was a complete picket line around the school! They had written a play based on that first little anecdote about Mary and the biscuit factory and it was just splendid. Oh, and they had formed a union in the school and the teachers were quite fearful of what it might bring in its wake. So if the book is presented in the proper manner, I think kids will turn on to it. Again, one of the reasons I wrote the book and why it may appeal is that labour union history is full of colour and drama and violence and humour and, up to now, in any exposition of this matter for kids none of that colour and drama has appeared. I hope it does in this book, enough so kids will see this is worthwhile and it's part of our history.

Michasiw: I like the way you use the microcosm of the Piggin' Out Restaurant to bring a union within the sphere of understanding of the young reader who has his or her first job.

Mackay: I hope you also noticed that I use the second person pronoun throughout that particular section which was really a ruse, a little technique to get the young reader right into the spot. It seemed to work.

Michasiw: Because you've brought up the subject of working with students in the schools, I'd like to move from *Pay cheques* to ask you about your experiences as a Creative-Artist-in-Schools and then a Writer-in-Libraries. What is entailed and what kinds of contacts did you have with the students?

Mackay: This is a special program under the Ontario Arts Council where writers, storytellers, visual artists, illustrators, any number of people can go in for *x* number of hours per week and deal with an assorted group of children. I had two classes of twelve children, from grades four to six, each for one morning a week for six successive weeks. Given the size of the groups and the extended period of time that I had with them, we were able really to take a project through to completion. At the end of that time, most of the children had completed either a poem or a story. One even did a non-fiction. Because the kids were preselected for interest in writing, the level of creative activity was pretty high. I think possibly the person who learned the most was me. I don't think I had ever analyzed, in an intellectual way, what was involved in writing, so I was forced to examine some of my own habits.

Michasiw: This was another stage in your development.
Mackay: Yes, I think so because I had to think critically about what I was going to say to them about the craft of writing, because I had to review their work and say, "Well, you've lost it here," or "Do you need ten words when one will do?" or "Really, we don't need to know that he breathed in and then he breathed out." That just boomeranged right back into my own work where I could see, to my discomfiture, some of the same things cropping up. So I hope they learned something. They claimed they did, the school was very pleased, and the kids were just delightful. Some of them are still writing which is very gratifying. I'll say one other thing: just because you write doesn't mean you can teach. I began that gig with great trepidation. I really did it because the school librarian is a friend of mine and she has had me to the school several times and she begged me. Once again I was responding to someone who was asking me to do something. I found it quite stressful. Then, about two months later, the librarian called me up and invited me to the school for a special ceremony. They had put together all the kids' writings in a specially bound volume with their pictures and a little note from each of them. One child – a little wee kid in Grade 3 who had hardly said a word and wouldn't read her work, she was so shy – had written a story about the kidnapping of a chipmunk. She wrote it from the chipmunk's point of view and it was quite wonderful. She had become the chipmunk. First person. This little nine-year-old. As far as the children were concerned, I guess it was a worthwhile experience. Now, Writers-in-Libraries. Once again I was responding to someone asking me to do something. This was another wonderful program from the Ontario government that all of us writers want to continue. It was a scheme to place a fairly well established writer in a local library and serve the community of aspiring writers that everyone assumed was out there. The children's librarians in Toronto asked me to take it on for all their six boroughs and I was the first appointee, a real pioneer. It was a bit of a burden placed on me immediately that I had better try to make the program work or the government, in its capriciousness, would simply stop writing cheques. It involved eighteen hours of work a week officially ...
Michasiw: That's a fairly heavy schedule.
Mackay: ... and the established writer who was in residence was supposed to be writing his or her own work during the rest of the time. Unfortunately it didn't work out quite that neatly. I got an enormous response: not just from the six library systems. Because the publicity was run in national newspapers and on national radio, I actually dealt with manuscripts from as far away as London, England, Vancouver, and every spot in Ontario and a couple of spots south of the border.
Michasiw: Eighteen hours a week!
Mackay: It was not eighteen hours a week. My particular charge in this was to interview and help writers who wished to write for children, to do work-

shops for them and also for children who had shown some promise in writing. I did thirty-five workshops in five months, lasting one to two hours each. I read in the neighbourhood of three hundred and fifty manuscripts, and wrote to or saw I don't know how many children. I must have talked to about eleven hundred people. A young girl, age fourteen, came from Haliburton one day and landed in a Scarborough library. She's going to be a writer. People wouldn't arrive with just one manuscript. They would bring their last six – since we had neglected to set up guidelines. I'm not ascribing blame to anyone; we just didn't know what was going to happen. It was as if we had offered water to a bunch of thirsty people. They just came in droves, especially as it percolated through the community: "Hey, there's a writer in the library!" Considering travelling time, it was almost like a full-time job. So very little of my own writing got done and since this was one of the prime concerns of the government, I was a little disturbed about that. I am now a kind of informal advisor to writers who take these positions and I immediately send them a bunch of caveats: be careful you don't do this ...

Michasiw: Lay down some rules.

Mackay: Yes, have some guidelines about the number of submissions at a time. The response is still coming in. This was two years ago and I had a letter just last week from a woman who had neglected to thank me. She said "The local newspaper just published my story." A lot of people really only needed someone to take them seriously. From the point of view of the ministry and the point of view of the community it was a raving success. From the point of view of the writer – I needed a rest. I entered a sort of catatonia around the fourth month.

Michasiw: I was wondering how close you came to a nervous breakdown.

Mackay: It was a tough job, but I wouldn't have missed it for the world. Besides I found three wonderful writers, two magnificent illustrators, and ten kids who are going to be writers. One young woman actually had a story published in *Canadian Children's Annual* after she came to try my workshops.

Michasiw: That's your triumph, Claire. Now, before we finish, there are two additional questions I would like to ask. You have already mentioned that you are working on another book, tentatively titled "Waiting for the sunrise" ...

Mackay: I'm waiting and waiting and waiting ...

Michasiw: ... and you've said a little bit about the difficulties of writing it and the slowdown, thanks to the computer. We've been talking also about your development as a writer. You may regard it as a kind of jinx to say anything in advance about this book; but if you feel comfortable talking about it, would you comment on the further development you're finding in this new work which is obviously coming out of your own life and experience?

Mackay: First I want to go right back to your third sentence about the computer slowing me down. I don't want to use the computer as a cop-out here. I suspect that much of the slowdown does not lie in the computer. It lies in the

writer. Part of the difficulty with this book, I believe, is a desire not to upset certain members of my family who took part in some of the events which will appear in it. My view of those events then and now is quite different from their perceptions. I'm always reminded of that Japanese movie, *Rashomon*, which is told from four different points of view, a completely different view of the same event each time.

Michasiw: Or Browning's *Ring and the book*.

Mackay: Much more literary. Part of it has to do with the fact that – yes, you are right – I am another rung up in my development because the book doesn't know what form it wants to be in and I've become very sensitive to the power of form. I know you can't separate form and content. At the same time I have tried this in several different ways: one way being what I've termed a clothesline approach (it may not be original with me, that term). I mean there are a series of connected stories.

Michasiw: Do you mean like *A bird in the house*?

Mackay: *A bird in the house*, even Alice Munro's work to some extent where there is the same protagonist in many of the stories. And for a while I was almost settling nicely into that; then I felt that especially for a young reader, and I still had in my mind that this would be for young readers, it might not be as satisfying as a longer narrative. Also I was feeling some loss of dynamic in it myself. Even though the separate stories might be connected through character and chronology, the form didn't allow for much growth in the character. Given the set of events that I am immersing myself in, which is the Depression and essentially the politicization of a family, how they dealt with the Depression, considerable growth has to be demonstrated. So I went back then and tried to make it a continuing narrative but changed the voice from third to first person. Then I decided I didn't think I could sustain first person throughout a fairly lengthy novel, especially if the first person is a fifteen-year-old girl.

Michasiw: Well, she is going to have limited perceptions of what's going on.

Mackay: Exactly and she has to be on the scene or you have to use those really corny devices of someone telling her about an event or she gets a letter or she overhears a conversation. They're really too tired to even consider unless you do it so skillfully .... But mostly it was what I've noticed in some of young people's fiction I've read that is first person: there's such tunnel vision. The narrator is intrinsically a boring personality and you get so sick of that voice after eight chapters or so that you just say, "I've had it."

Michasiw: Especially in a trying situation, that voice tends to develop self-pity which really grates on the reader.

Mackay: So then I went back and did what is almost first person, that is, third person subjective which is used in *Minerva*. I was fairly happy with that for a while; then I discovered the events were forcing the characters to behave in ways I didn't wish them to behave and at that point I just stopped. That's where

it is right now. I've decided to go back to first person and I've rewritten the first sixty pages with a voice I think I can live with. The voice is faintly ironic, the way Minerva's is in a sense, but definitely not Minerva. I suppose in many ways it's my own young self and you're quite right that in this book, more than in any other book I have tried, I'm utilizing huge areas not only of my background, but also of my family's background, my grandmother's background. So it may be rather longer than what I have written so far, it may be for older people, for older kids. It may be for adults. This is another thing I find a little alarming. It may be crossing over ... if it's ever done.

Michasiw: It will be.

Mackay: I'm nervous about it. I'm scared to show it to anybody even. It's in a tender state. My editor has seen some and made some comments, useful as usual; she has backed off a little because she knows that I am going through some difficulties with it and there's no point in pushing it. I did read some bits to Jean Little and I was so nervous I could hardly believe it. She thinks it's terrific (I don't believe her) and well worth going on with. She also sees it as a leap forward from previous work. So I'm bearing out your thesis here. Maybe that's why I'm having difficulty finishing it. Maybe I haven't really gathered together sufficient courage to go on with it yet. Every bit of growth comes out of a certain amount of pain and cowardice ...

Michasiw: And overcoming that.

Mackay: So I'll have to persist because the bottom line is I want to tell this story; I hope I can do it justice. To me it's the story of ordinary people triumphing. I hope I can tell it so that it's a tribute to my parents and grandparents. And maybe that's part of what's holding me back.

Michasiw: That seems like the right place to stop and yet there may be something else you would like to say.

Mackay: Well, I guess this has been said before, but I think I was very lucky to be in the right place at the right time. Fifteen years ago I might not have been able to make a career, let alone a decent living from writing. Fifteen years from now we might all be back numbers. I have a sense that children's literature in Canada is fashionable right now and while there is a promise of another few years of popularity, it may end. It seems to me that my own desire to see if I could be a writer coincided with a number of other things happening in the country and in society that prepared the way for me. Once again I ask, is there such a thing as coincidence? The other thing I would like to say is this: I am profoundly grateful my books have found readers and grateful too that this affirmation has lent me the courage and confidence to proceed. It has made me believe, almost, that I am a writer.

[Post-script, 1991]

Michasiw: Since we last talked, Claire, you have won two awards from Parenting Publications of America, an Honourable Mention in 1989 and a First

Place Award in 1990.

Mackay: These were for a monthly column I write for a Toronto tabloid newspaper called *Kids Toronto*. I'm allowed to write almost anything I please as long as it's remotely connected to children and nobody edits me. One I wrote recently arose from a walk down a street where I used to live. The walk evoked memories of the late thirties and early forties in Toronto, all grist to the particular mill I use for the column.

Michasiw: And some grist too for your most recent book, *The Toronto story*.

Mackay: All the writing I'm doing – nonfiction, journalism, novel – is part of the same motherlode especially for *The Toronto story*. I used my mother's diaries, my mother's stories, my mother's recollections, my own recollections, in reconstructing the nineteen thirties and forties. That was just *part* of a massive job of research.

Michasiw: I was struck on every page of *The Toronto story* with the enormous amount of research you had to do.

Mackay: It took two and a third years of many ten-hour days.

Michasiw How did you find all those human tidbits about people and history?

Mackay: Much of it was in letters or diary entries and I owe a great deal – as does my illustrator – to Edith Firth, who collected all the early papers of the town of York. She included things many people may find boring. But where else could I have discovered the great variety of merchandise that Toronto's first department store sold, or the long list of items that purchased Toronto from the Mississauga tribe? I looked always for the colourful detail. Any touch of character or idiosyncrasy, comedy or tragedy, I filed away, especially where it concerned children.

Michasiw: But you don't pull any punches either. For instance, the description of the American attack on York in 1813.

Mackay: I suppose that springs partly from my own *Weltanschauung*. It was a ghastly scene – all carnage is – and when I discovered that the apprentice-surgeon, William Beaumont, had kept such graphic notes, I knew I had to use them. Violence has been glorified for, or at least distanced from children through television and videos so that they don't make a connection between what they are watching and being hurt and bleeding and dying. I myself was shocked when I read these entries and I tried to be *there* with these characters. Above my computer was a quotation from Penelope Lively and it operated as a watchword. It reads "...places have a past, ...they are now but also were then, and...if peopled now, they were peopled then." I wanted young readers especially to experience firsthand the many-layered history that they move through every day and the reality of the people who have gone before then. I'm concerned that children, that all of us, have a sense of continuity. The other characteristic of both my nonfiction works is that I put myself in the books. I didn't hesitate to insert my personality, to express my own convictions in my prose, a departure from earlier nonfiction written for children. It's more fun for the

writer this way and I believe it's more fun for the reader too.

Michasiw: But *The Toronto Story* is different from any other books you have written because fo the illustrations.

Mackay: It was serendipitous that Johnny Wales had dropped off his portfolio to Annick about three months before we conceived this book. Johnny is a Torontonian from way back. His style complements mine and we share a similar sense of humour. Anyone who looks carefully at the illustrations will notice all kinds of delightful detail and hidden jokes. In the 1930 double-spread, for example, one can see that a stockbroker has heaved himself out a window and is lying on the street with an ambulance beside him. Every illustration, small or large, has an element of fun in it. But also – and I'm sure Johnny would want me to make a point of this – every illustration is historically and architecturally accurate. It was an enormous amount of work and I think it shows.

Michasiw: It's a beautiful book that bears repeated reading not only of the text, but also of the illustrations. You were both mining a wealth of Toronto reference.

Mackay: But, Barbara, my investment in *The Toronto story* may have robbed the novel. I suspect some of the novel's narrative energy got redirected into *The Toronto story*, even into my columns because of the similarity of the material. I'm fearful about reentering the novel. Some of the stories I was going to tell in the novel, I have already told. Whether I will want to tell them again is a question I'm not sure I can answer right now. Although worthwhile in many respects, *The Toronto story* was a detour from the novel emotionally and creatively. Soon I must find out whether the novel is still alive.

Publications by Claire Mackay

Mini-bike hero. Scholastic, 1974; rev. ed. 1978, 1984, 1991.
Mini-bike racer. Scholastic, 1976; rev. ed. 1979, 1985,1991.
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Barbara L. Michasiw *is a retired teacher of English and children's literature.*