

## A STUDY OF THE CHILD HERO

**The child hero in the Canadian novel.** Theresia Quigley. NC Press, 1991. 183 pp. \$17.95 paper. ISBN 1-55021-069-6.

In recent years the study of childhood as depicted in literature has come of age. Prior to the Second World War, the children in the novels of such writers as Dickens were rarely mentioned more than in passing, but since then, and with increasing frequency since the nineteen sixties, there have been several studies like Neil Postman's *The disappearance of childhood* which have sought to place literary children in their historical, intellectual, and social contexts. Early in *The child hero in the Canadian novel*, Theresia Quigley quotes Postman to the effect that there are "two intellectual strains" affecting the perception of childhood in North America: "the Lockian, or...Protestant strain that views the child [a]s an unformed person who...may be made into a civilized adult" and the "Rousseauian, or...Romantic" strain that views the child as a *potential victim of civilization* who, in Wordsworth's famous phrase, enters adulthood like a prison-house (6). Professor Quigley occasionally breathes such rarefied and reified air, but, by and large, she contents herself with more down-to-earth accounts of several English and French Canadian "adult novels" published since 1940 in which children appear as main characters. Among the novels discussed are W.O. Mitchell's *Who has seen the wind?*, Marie-Claire Blais' *La Belle bête*, Margaret Laurence's *The diviners*, and Gabrielle Roy's *Rue Deschambault*.

*The child hero in the Canadian novel* is divided into five chapters whose very titles—the first is "Childhood revisited" and the last is "The mourning of childhood"—reflect the darkening vision of childhood which Professor Quigley sees as characteristic of the post-war years in Canada. This leads her to an almost apocalyptic vision of contemporary Canadian society:

The corruption of childhood, as depicted in English-Canadian fiction, and the virtual death of childhood, as portrayed in French-Canadian fiction, especially in [Yves Beauchemin's] *Le Matou*, are danger signals that, in our world of today, childhood, the traditional symbol of the spirit of innocence, is on the verge of disappearing; that, in fact, through the death of innocence, we are losing an effective counterbalance to evil, and that, as a result, society itself is gravely threatened. (134)

To support this socio-religious position, Quigley draws frequently on the work of Alice Miller (*Thou shalt not be aware, The drama of the gifted child*) and emphasizes such themes as physical and psychological violence against children by adults and other children. Not least of the virtues of *The child hero in the Canadian novel* is its expression of profound and passionate sympathy for the plight of children in the contemporary world.

Several pages near the end of *The child hero in the Canadian novel* are given over to "Plot summaries" of the novels discussed in the central chapters. It is hard to see what purpose these summaries serve, but their presence reinforces the

impression conveyed by the body of the book that Quigley is more comfortable describing novels than discussing their philosophical and literary dimensions. Despite their importance in shaping English- and French-Canadian conceptions of the child, neither Freud or Sade is so much as mentioned by Professor Quigley, and when a gloss on the symbol of the horse in Anne Hébert's *Le Torrent* is required it comes from Jung by way of J.E. Cirlot (33). This lack of intellectual and critical sophistication sometimes draws *The child hero in the Canadian novel* towards banality, but it also serves as another indication that Professor Quigley's book is written from the heart as well as the mind.

With its striking cover from Len Gibbs' *Tadpoles*, *The child hero in the Canadian novel* is an attractive book whose clear style is matched by an equally readable typeface. It contains a useful "Bibliography" and a helpful "Index," as well as a thoughtful appendix on "French-Canadian novels in English translation."

**D.M.R. Bentley** is a professor of English at The University of Western Ontario. He has published widely in the fields of Victorian and Canadian literature, most recently on Dante Gabriel Rossetti in the Dalhousie review and Thomas Chandler Haliburton in Canadian poetry: Studies, documents, reviews.

#### A SUCCESSFUL MONTGOMERY

**L.M. Montgomery.** Genevieve Wiggins. Twayne's World Authors Series. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992. 191 pp., cloth. ISBN 0-8057-3980-7.

It is certainly a mark of Montgomery's continuing popularity and growing critical reputation that Genevieve Wiggins' is the third full-length study of Montgomery's writing to appear in two years: one from Sweden (*A life and its mirrors: a feminist reading of L.M. Montgomery's fiction*, Gabriella Ahmanson), one from Canada (*The fragrance of sweet-grass: L.M. Montgomery's heroines and the pursuit of romance*, Elizabeth Rollins Epperly), and now one from the U.S. As a volume in the Children's Literature section of the Twayne World Authors Series, Wiggins' study is meant to examine Montgomery's writing in light of other successful children's writers' works and to give a brief account of the author's life and accomplishments. Wiggins offers a fair summary of Montgomery's life and a compact discussion of Montgomery's twenty novels, seven volumes of short stories, and two volumes of verse. She draws conscientiously and sensitively from Montgomery's letters, journals, and autobiographical *Alpine path* and gives a clear overview of the criticism. This is a good, solid piece of work and will be invaluable to those wanting a guide to Montgomery studies up to 1990.

I am, however, disappointed that Wiggins' study may help to perpetuate the view of Montgomery as a victim of an "obsessive desire to please" (171).