The Time of the Wolf. Thomas A. MacDonald. Maxwell Macmillan Canada, 1994. 165 pp. $14.95 cloth, $9.95 paper. ISBN 0-02-954252-9, ISBN 0-02-954255-3. **Margy Misunderstood**. Margaret Smith. Maxwell Macmillan Canada, 1994. 216 pp., $14.95 cloth, $9.95 paper. ISBN 0-02-954249-9, ISBN 0-02-954254-5.

Thomas MacDonald's *The Time of the Wolf* and Margaret Smith's *Margy Misunderstood* are not historical fiction in the traditional sense. It is true that Smith's two Margy books relate episodes in the life of Marguerite Stratton Tennant, and capture much of the day-to-day life in a small community through Margy, the outsider's, experiences. Nonetheless, the suggestion that the books recall Lucy Maud Montgomery's fiction and that the story is "alive with historical detail" (advance notice in *Quill and Quire*) can be misleading.

Like so many children's novels, *The Time of the Wolf* and *Margy Misunderstood* treat death, change, separation from loved ones, isolation and the resulting quest for identity that the main character undertakes. Sometimes the history of a small community, its eccentric inhabitants, and day-to-day living patterns establish a backdrop for the development of such adolescent novels of character. Both MacDonald and Smith situate their stories in an historical past, a century ago in the case of *The Time of the Wolf*, and half a century ago in *Margy Misunderstood*. One major difference between the two novels is that the first is purely fictional while the second is based on autobiographical stories and reminiscences of Margaret Stratton Tennant retold by the author. *The Time of the Wolf* is a first novel for MacDonald, while *Margy Misunderstood*, is a sequel to *Margy* (1992), Smith's first novel. If Margaret Smith continues the pace at which she is telling Marguerite Stratton Tennant's life stories, one can envisage a library shelf full of Margy books since the first two novels together cover just over a year in Margy's life. MacDonald's *The Time of the Wolf* covers a similar time span, but concludes with a note about the young protagonist's adult life that precludes a sequel.

Both Smith and MacDonald portray the crises faced by a young child after the death of a parent or parents, but the treatment Aaron and Margy receive from the adults who give them shelter, as well as their reception by both school and community are strikingly different. Aaron in *The Time of the Wolf* loses both parents to a cholera epidemic when he is eleven years old, and is spared going to the orphanage in Toronto when he is grudgingly taken in by a great aunt and uncle, Morag and Archie McGregor. Aunt Morag has been worn down over the years and her stereotypical, dour personality is revealed both in young Aaron's perception of her and in MacDonald's delineation of her character:

> in his mind Aaron saw her face — strong, angular and sour. There were many such faces among the countrywomen of Upper Canada, women who had worked side by side with their men to hew farms out of the bush. Their faces were nearly always stern, often bitter — the reward of perpetual toil. (5)

This generalization about women from Upper Canada appears to be MacDonald's rather than that of eleven-year-old Aaron. Nor does MacDonald portray Aunt

Morag sympathetically the few times we hear her speaking to Uncle Archie. Her hostility mounts as the story reaches its climax, and Aaron ponders, "Why did she hate him so?" (146). Uncle Archie is kinder to Aaron, but he too rarely speaks. The farm is not home to Aaron, and once he befriends the wolf pup, he prepares it a cave-like shelter where he sometimes spends the night and where many of the visits with the wolf on the way to and from school each day and on Sunday afternoons take place.

> It was odd that this little, rocky cavity could be so homelike and comforting and that his relatives' spacious farmhouse should lack any feeling of being a home, Aaron thought. Somewhere he had read that a house was only a place unless there was love in it. Aaron looked down at the cub who had placed his furry head on his lap and seemed to be asleep. Perhaps, he thought, even a rocky cleft in a hillside can be a home, and he placed his right arm protectively around the little animal's curved body. (91)

Aaron, like Margy, has aspirations to go to the Continuation School, today's equivalent of high school. Although he is only eleven, he has been coached in reading Shakespeare aloud by his father. The teacher, after testing Aaron, is impressed with his capabilities and remarks, "I think, that at last I am to have the satisfaction of educating a scholar" (15). The other students cannot understand Aaron's interest in books, and Aaron himself makes disparaging remarks about his young friend Sophie's lack of interest in anything academic. "He knew it was useless to talk to Sophie of knights and tales of medieval battles. She was a delightful girl, kind and generous and good, but her interests did not extend beyond the activities of the village and the surrounding farms, the quilting bees and the church suppers, and her enthusiasm for the printed page was limited to the mail-order catalogue" (70-71). Like Aunt Morag, Sophie and the other supporting characters in the novel are stereotypical.

In addition to being lucky in his academic achievements, Aaron is lucky in his rivalry with the school bully, big Josh Grossler, the blacksmith's son. Fury and anger at the injustice of the treatment of his friend Sophie by Big Josh are sufficient to propel Aaron into a fight which he wins, and Grossler, who is finally expelled from school for his demeanour towards the other students, bides his time to get his revenge on Aaron. Roland, Aaron's pet wolf, helps defend his friend, however, and things work out well for Aaron. Although credible in his struggle to understand and live through his loneliness, Aaron is almost too good to be true, an eleven-year-old going on fifteen. Like Montgomery's Anne, he lives a charmed if somewhat turbulent existence.

Thirteen-year-old Margy, on the other hand, perhaps because she really did exist, is a much more believable and natural child growing up in a small Ontario town in 1932. Like Anne, she and her friends get into awkward situations. Margy is orphaned after the death of her mother. The remarriage of her father four years later to his current housekeeper, Mrs. Johnson, precipitates Margy's isolation. The new wife makes the ultimatum "either she goes or I do" (10). Margy's father considers sending her to an orphanage, but luckily her Sunday school teacher writes Margy's mother's maiden aunt sisters, and they set about raising her in

the big house in which her mother grew up. Incidentally, their house in Bancroft is now the home of the author, Margaret Smith. Although Aunt Alice and Aunt Edith are new at parenting, the big house becomes a real home, and the aunts are supportive of Margy in every way possible. Margy, like Aaron, is not without her trials and tribulations, but she can depend on support from Aunt Alice in particular: "Aunt Alice was a solid oak tree that a hurricane could not uproot; Aunt Edith was a slender reed that pitched and tossed in the slightest breeze" (71). Margy decides to be independent and model herself on Aunt Alice, who is kind, independent, and seemingly self-sufficient. As local librarian, she also fosters Margy's love of literature, giving her *The Tangled Web*, Montgomery's latest book, for Christmas.

Margy, like her teacher, Mr. Warren, who has been in the community fifteen years, is considered an outsider. It is she who gets blamed for stealing the "Christmas Cheer Fund" when it goes missing and for months has to live under suspicion by all except her three closest school friends. She refers to this period of her life as "The Lonely Time." Like Aaron during his "time of the wolf," Margy shows courage and independence; also, like Aaron, she is reluctant to expose the misdemeanours of others. Margy's similarity to the fictional characters of L.M. Montgomery is most pronounced in the life-likeness of young Margy, the way she represents young girls' dreams and aspirations in the early thirties, their friendships, acceptance at school, as well as their home life — those very elements which contributed so much to the success of Montgomery's "Anne" and "Emily" books in particular. Readers of the Margy books learn much about the socialization of the young child and gain knowledge of daily life in Bancroft in 1932. Although Margy's goals and objectives may seem dated — Margy dreams of becoming a hair stylist, and, like Aaron's friend Sophie, likes to "leaf through the Eaton's catalogue" (34) — young readers will identify with her and understand the grief she suffers when she is ostracized by her school mates. *Margy Misunderstood* has both depth and texture whereas MacDonald's book suffers somewhat from an overuse of adjectives. This was pointed out to me by my sixteen-year-old daughter who also commented on the predictability of the plot. Nonetheless, we were both saddened by the end of the novel. The extraordinary friendship between Aaron and his pet wolf, Roland, makes this book worth reading. In contrast, the books about Margy, although they focus on the main character, introduce and allow us to identify with various members of the community. They afford a much more comprehensive view of community living, while ostensibly relating one child's quest to find a place to belong. Each child protagonist has a lonely time, and the external appearance of both Aaron and Margy belies the internal struggle each is undergoing as part of growing up in difficult circumstances. Although their individual experiences are separated by a half century, collectively they illustrate that many aspects of coming to terms with life never change.

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