

Multicultural Children's Picture Books

Crabs for Dinner. Adwoa Badoe. Illus. Belinda Ageda. Sister Vision, 1995. Unpag., paper. ISBN 0-920813-27-5. *A Fish Tale, or The Little One that Got Away*. Leo Yerxa. Groundwood, 1995. Unpag., \$17.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-247-5. *From Far Away*. Robert Munsch and Saoussan Askar. Illus. Michael Martchenko. Annick Press, 1995. Unpag., \$16.95, \$4.95, cloth, paper. ISBN 1-55037-397-8, 1-55037-396-X. *The Magic Braid*. Rina Singh. Illus. Farida Zaman. Sister Vision, 1995. Unpag., paper. ISBN 0-920813-25-9.

One of the principal elements of Canadian children's literature has been the theme of being a stranger: moving to the new country of Canada; fighting against a loss of cultural values and identity; and rediscovering a sense of self and belonging. Most of these narratives have been historical fiction for older readers. A growing number of picture books, however, have examined with emotional authenticity and contemporary realism the second stage after arrival in Canada: the adaptation to a new culture while keeping alive the memories and traditions of the home country.

Three picture books take different approaches to this subject of cultural heritage and diversity. Munsch's *From Far Away* focuses on the full cycle of immigration (exodus, arrival, acculturation). *Crabs for Dinner* dramatizes generational conflict in the struggle to keep cultural customs and traditions alive. *The Magic Braid* stresses the value of memory and imagination in overcoming homesickness and alienation.

From Far Away is a fascinating collaboration between Munsch and Saoussan Askar, a seven-year-old Lebanese-Canadian girl whose letters to Munsch told a poignant story. Together they developed that story into an epistolary, autobiographical picture book: a letter from Saoussan to her reading buddy, dramatizing her frightening experiences in war-torn Beirut and her rocky adjustment to life in Scarborough.

The first person storytelling voice has a simple strength and dignity rarely found in Munsch's usual frenetic prose. The authentic child-perspective adds a clarity to the amorphous and painful experiences. Concrete details summarize: a seven-year-old's perception of war ("Even where my sister and I slept there were holes in the wall"); the strain and humiliation of adjusting to a new language and culture (Saoussan crawls to the washroom because she doesn't know how to speak English and she pees in the teacher's lap when frightened); the disorientation caused by new rituals and traditions (the child is traumatized by the image of a Halloween skeleton, believing another war is imminent. Michael Martchenko's illustrations are appropriately less cartoon-like than in his art for other titles by Munsch, demonstrating greater realism and range of emotions in the portraiture.

Martchenko captures the comfort of new friends and pride in beginning fluency in English. His illustration for the humorous face-off of Saoussan and her mother is a witty encapsulation of a moment of cultural and generational conflict as Saoussan decides to change her name to the more Scarborough-like Susan, "but my mother told me to change it back."

The conflict between parents and children around old traditions and new Canadian norms is also a major theme in Adwoa Badoe's *Crabs for Dinner*. The

children of a family from Ghana reject the traditional African foods that delight their parents. Instead of crab, fufu, or palm nut soup, they choose North American french fries, hamburgers, and pizza. But when their grandmother visits from Africa with gifts of traditional dress, Ananse folktales, and authentic cooking, the children are won over.

The charm and warmth of this brief narrative come from the same child's first-person point-of-view that is so engaging in *From Far Away*. The colloquial style is simple, colourful, and expressive and the cumulative, patterned structure provides a taste of the rhythmic quality of a folktale.

A major strength of the book lies in Belinda Ageda's vigorous art work. The expressionist style, bright colours, and strong draughtsmanship offer lively vignettes of family and African life. Close-ups of large, friendly faces, arms, and legs around the dinner table effectively build the visual sense of a small child's perceptions in the midst of warm people, life in a multigenerational family. The nurturing comfort of this tale is tangible.

Rina Singh's *The Magic Braid* is also about the importance of family, but its focus is on the isolating distance between generations living in different countries. As Amrita's mother combs the girl's long braid, they talk about India, the far-away grandparents, the family photo album. In a day-dream fantasy, the girl journeys to India to embrace her grandparents via whale, camel, and cloud.

The text lacks clarity. The omniscient point-of-view shifting between Amrita and her mother is confusing. The child's transition into fantasy via the talisman of her braid is abrupt and unconvincing. The language lacks the concrete colour and freshness of the other two, more child-centred, texts.

Farida Zaman's richly patterned and softly coloured wash paintings add a loose, dreamy quality to the book which parallels the fantasy element. The simplistic cartoonlike portraiture, however, detracts from the overall effect.

All three of these books were written by authors who lived the experiences of immigration, the trials of acculturation, and the pain of missing family and country. *From Far Away* and *Crabs for Dinner* cast the narratives in a convincingly authentic child's voice which conveys the experiences and emotions more credibly than in *The Magic Braid*.

Canadian picturebook authors and illustrators are increasingly drawn from the talent of our ethnically diverse population. Many writers create out of a cultural tradition and tell stories that reflect the uniqueness of a particular cultural vision. First Nations author and illustrator Leo Yerxa did just that in his first picturebook, the award-winning *Last Leaf First Snowflake to Fall*.

In his second book, *A Fish Tale, or The Little One that Got Away*, however, Yerxa creates an animal fable (actually a fish story) that is parable pure and simple. The subject and tongue-in-cheek, storytelling tone may owe something to native legend. Certainly, the casual, slightly rambling, oral storytelling style and offbeat humour are close to the colloquial quality of certain forms of native lore. But on the surface, the story is more related to the classic fish fable *Swimmy* by America's Leo Lionni. The narrative is simple: A young adventurous fish out-smarts a tricky older fish and saves himself from seductive lures, hooks, and flies to live to a wise old age and write a book about his experience.

Yerxa's remarkable paintings give life to a shimmering underwater world with arresting mixed media of watercolours and stencilled pastels. This is a fascinating, expansive book with roots in multiple traditions and the commonality of children's literature.



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Video, film and play reviews

Getting Involved: Interactive Theatre for Young Adults

Veronia. Daniel Liebman. Produced by Quest Theatre, Calgary. *Tag*. Clem Martini. Produced by Quest Theatre, Calgary.

Daniel Liebman's *Veronia* and Clem Martini's *Tag*, two recent productions by Calgary's Quest Theatre, suggest well the impressive range and ability of the company as well as the strength and diversity of contemporary playwriting aimed at young audiences.

Martini's *Tag* (which I saw at St. Cecilia's with a K-6 audience) is the starting piece for an examination of conflict among children and possibilities for avoiding such situations or, at least, resolving them. The story involves the antagonism between two nine-year-old friends, Kelly and Jason, over Jason's prized baseball cap. The action, set in an abandoned building represented by a simple climbing frame structure that allows a variety of movement and levels of action, involves escalation from name-calling and a little shoving to a series of serious accidents. The exaggerated consequences of a trivial incident fit with Martini's generally exaggerated form for his play: his technique is broad farce and