

engagement with nature and various (oral, written, documentary and mystical) traditions. This book works because Charles has something of significance to say, namely a reverence for nature and the magic of the Andes. And, as C.S. Lewis would have it, a children's book is the best way for her to communicate her message.

Children's books that treat traditions with respect can be compelling and enhance the intellectual and emotional understanding of young readers. But disregard for the true nature and demands of traditions — the wisdom of the ages and what has worked over time — generally results in lesser works which diminish rather than enrich children's life experiences.

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### The Place of History

*Zack*. William Bell. Doubleday Canada, 1998. 169 pp. \$14.95 paper. ISBN 0-385-25711-2. *The Last Safe House*. Barbara Greenwood. Illus. Heather Collins. Kids Can, 1998. 120 pp. \$14.95 paper. ISBN 1-55074-509-3. *Tubman: Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad*. Rosemary Sadlier. Umbrella, 1997. 96 pp. ISBN 1-895642-17-5. *Mary Ann Shadd: Publisher, Editor, Teacher, Lawyer, Suffragette*. Rosemary Sadlier. Umbrella, 1995. 80 pp. ISBN 1-895642-16-7.

The spring of 1999 was the time of Kosovo, cruise missiles, refugee camps, Littleton, Colorado, gun control, and Tabor, Alberta. Just over two hundred years of mass media saturation has given us a daily redefinition of the new as an ongoing renewal of something we still wish to call "history." For all of the trauma of the present, the triumph of a notion of time as history generates a counterforce of active forgetting that utilizes the shock of the new as way of forgetting yesterday's concerns. The question of history for an information society becomes a crisis of excess: there is too much in the news *today* for us to bother with memory. The return to basics movement in Ontario's schools implies this: forget media studies and history; science and math are all that matters.

All four books here have something to do with the history of slavery in North America and make claims that history is a topic of some importance. Rosemary Sadlier's two books, *Tubman* and *Mary Ann Shadd*, operate from her perspective as President of the Ontario Black History Society. The two women who are her subjects have heroic status — leaders, revolutionar-

ies, visionaries, authors of change — but their individual stories are not given priority over larger patterns of change and resistance that frame the entire experience of African Americans in the New World. Harriet Tubman was a conductor on the Underground Railroad, and Sadlier understands that the meaning of Tubman's life for younger readers will depend on their knowledge of all the conditions surrounding the secret passage of African-American slaves northward to freedom. The fact of slavery is represented visually in the book through maps that spatialize historical time into borders, territories, passages, and migrations.

Place has returned as an object of interest for historical thought in order that the relentless onslaught of time as history might be contained by relative calm of spatiality. During the 1850s, Harriet Tubman's resistance to slavery was based in St. Catharines, Ontario, which experienced an economic boom after the Welland Canal was opened in 1829. Sadlier's broad historical interests lead her towards many fascinating digressions concerning the geopolitics of the Niagara Peninsula. Readers also learn that Tubman and other travellers along the Underground Railroad did not exactly find freedom north of the border: "Advertisements in the St. Catharines *Standard* required teachers with at least a third-class standing qualification for the Coloured School, established in 1856, while White students would be taught by teachers with no less than second or first class standing." Sadlier concludes her book with a consideration of Tubman's return to the United States, a chronology of significant events, and a long consideration of the Tubman genealogy in both its Canadian and American branches. Familial ties suggest the material legacy of Tubman and a series of complex linkages that operate across the Canada-US border.

Though not as famous as Harriet Tubman, who was involved in the planning of John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry and in carrying out the Combahee River raid of 1863, Mary Ann Shadd is also an African-American hero. As a writer and journalist, Shadd was involved early on with the *Voice of the Fugitive* newspaper, founded in Windsor, Ontario, to promote "the abolition of slavery, emigration from the United States to Canada, temperance and the education of Blacks." Readers of Sadlier's book learn of all the politics behind the publication of the *Voice of the Fugitive*, the establishment of the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada in 1851, and the rise and fall of Black communities in Ontario, such as the Dawn Settlement near Chatham, once the home of Josiah Henson, Harriet Beecher Stowe's main source for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Canada's involvement with resistance to slavery is the topic of Barbara Greenwood's *The Last Safe House*. As a collection of fiction and historiography, the book hints at suggestions that many historians have made concerning the limitations of objective history. Clearly, when history is aimed at children, the dry objectivity of dates, treaties, elections, economic change, and national identity is something to avoid. For contemporary historical consciousness, the "how" of representation reaches a crisis with what

is essentially (and ethically) unimaginable: violence, slavery, genocide. Greenwood and her illustrator, Heather Collins, generally steer a wide course around horror; when they don't, such as in the illustration of a fifteen-year-old boy being whipped, readers may question the whole enterprise. While the desire to educate here is admirable — day-to-day life on the plantation is well represented — an interlude on how a white child might make gingerbread cookies is highly insulting to those of us who remember how widely racist stereotypes circulated in pre-Civil Rights North America. An interlude that is valuable, however, involves a brief workshop in effective techniques of oral storytelling.

In reading *The Last Safe House* and William Bell's *Zack*, I'm left unsettled by an underlying assumption that history must be edited for children, that we as Canadians need refuge in the illusion that Canada was a safe haven from the racism of antebellum America. In *Zack*, the son of a famous African American Blues singer and a White, Jewish father comes to terms with both his racial identity and collective, African-American past while living in Fergus, Ontario. Although most readers won't feel for a minute that William Bell has got under Zack's skin, the paint-by-numbers feel of fiction for young readers carries Zack through so many landscapes of cultural politics that we can't help but be interested in Zack's journey. History here asserts itself as archaeology when Zack discovers a box of artifacts once owned by Richard Pierpoint, an African-American veteran of British military action during the Revolutionary War and the war of 1812. Zack's history essay on Pierpoint is one the book's strongest passages.

Bell has skill as a writer, especially during a scene where Zack is roughed up by US State Troopers while on a journey to Natchez, Mississippi, to visit his mother's father. The reason why Zack's mother shuns her father — won't even speak of him — is unclear until Zack the detective discovers that it is because after years and years of Southern racism, he dares to dislike Whites. Even after Zack has been exposed to Mississippi racism, he completely rejects this kind and hospitable man. The racism in Fergus is conveniently displaced onto a girl who is visiting from Detroit; Zack's beautiful blond girlfriend suggests that love and acceptance of African-Canadians is the norm of the North. While William Bell has filled his novel with historical specificity, he seems unable to conceive of how Zack is able to sing the Blues. The Great Migration from Mississippi north to Chicago was an above ground railway, but it did not eliminate the racist legacies of slavery. I do not believe that Zack could possibly reject his grandfather, because if as historical beings history doesn't mean *everything* to us, then it means nothing.

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