Editorial: Politics and Our Anniversary

Twenty-five years ago, *Alligator Pie* was only one year old. *The Hockey Sweater, Zoom at Sea, The Paper Bag Princess* — none had been born yet. And so *Alligator Pie* enjoyed the kind of attention the only baby in the room always gets, eclipsing *Old Mother Hubbard* and *Yankee Doodle*, who gaped speechlessly, and beckoning us to skip to Casa Loma with loony goons from Nipigon, Mississauga rattlesnakes, William Lyon Mackenzie King (who "loved his mother like anything") and the slippery fishes of Kempenfelt Bay. This was no ordinary one-year-old. Indeed, in *CCL*'s first issue, the reviewer exclaims that Lee was "staking out a formidable position in our cultural wilderness" with the publication of *Alligator Pie*. This was a literature written on and about "home ground," as Lee calls it, with all its "hockey sticks and high rises," and it gave us confidence that home could be a muse.

Though much-loved from the start, the little book of verse benefited from auspicious times for children's literature in Canada. The 70s were, indeed, a revolutionary period in Canadian children's literature. It is a period that sees the rise of children's literature publishers (Kids Can 1973; Les Éditions de la Courte échelle 1975; Annick 1976; Groundwood 1977); the first awards given for children's literature and illustration (Amelia Frances Howard Gibbon Award 1971; Canada Council Children's Literature Prizes 1975); the establishment of organizations such as CANSCAIP (1977), the Canadian Children's Book Centre (1976); the opening of the Children's Book Store in Toronto (1974); the beginning of the National Library's Canadian children's literature service under the aegis of Irene Aubrey (1975); the establishment of children's magazines such as *Owl* (1976) and *Chickadee* (1979); and the printing of periodicals about children's literature such as *Des Livres et des Jeunes* (1978), *Lurelu* (1978), *Our Choice* (1978), and, of course, *CCL* (1975). Ours was the first scholarly journal devoted solely to the analysis of Canadian children's literature. As John Sorfleet, one of the founding editors (with Mary Rubio, Glenys Stow, and Elizabeth Waterston), states in his inaugural editorial, "We intend to participate in the continuing growth of Canadian children's literature while providing an essential commentary on its development as a whole." That is still our mandate.

It is not, perhaps, the most obvious time to launch an issue on the Politics in/of Children's Literature; we have long wondered whether we shouldn't have done something more light-hearted and sparkly for our twenty-fifth anniversary, involving lots of looking back and oohing. But the flourishing of children's literature in Canada, and the start of *CCL*, has always had everything to do with Politics: the politics of resistance to outside

influences (particularly British, French, and American), and the politics of inclusion (the promotion of Native stories and Native storytellers, for example). The 70s revolution in children's literature coincided with a rise in nationalism in Canada, and *CCL*, like many Canadian publishers and the National Library of Canada, reflected that nationalism. We wanted to hear the voices and stories of our people, we wanted publishers to publish them, even if initial sales weren't brag-worthy, and we wanted teachers, librarians, and parents to spread the humble word: Canadian children's literature exists. In a 1974 interview in the *Globe and Mail*, Dennis Lee remarks that "It's a political act to give kids the idea they can take their own life and times as a place where good and bad things can happen and their imaginations run free." Like many people who grew up in Canada before the explosion of Canadian children's literature in the 70s, Lee read American and British literature: "The words I knew said Britain, and they said America, but they did not say my home. They were always and only about someone else's life. All the rich structures of language were present, but the currents that animated them were not home to the people who used the language here."

While 25 years ago even writing about home might be considered a political act, today, with this special issue of *CCL*, we can look back on a rich corpus of literature that has, for the last 25 years, described our home and our politics. And what can be found there, as you will see, is much more than hockey sticks and high rises. In our lead article, Reimer and Rusnak mine twenty years of award-winning Canadian novels for their representations of home and come to the arresting conclusion that home in English-language fiction is "a place of crisis and a product of choice," whereas in French-language fiction it is "a state of being, a place of origin." The political reaches of their award-winning research are suggested in their guiding assumption that "to study the representation of home in fiction is to study an aspect of the narrative by which a nation produces and reproduces itself."

It is also with this implicit assumption that MacGillivray and Vervoort analyze two editions, published 60 years apart, of a Canadian ABC book, interrogating the works for their visual and textual construction of a Canadian identity and making us self-conscious about the evolution of our ideas of nation. Mitchell and Smith, in "Anne Frank in the World Right Now," concern themselves more with literature as a conduit to studying young readers and the emergence of political awareness than with literature as a conduit to studying a nation's psyche. They help us to read the political novel's particular emphasis on oppression as a convention of young adult fiction that may politicize readers and effect social change. Bradley-St-Cyr, writing as a parent, pursues a similar line of thinking in "*One Proud Summer*: Reading Politics to Marie-Nicole," where she asserts, with refreshing good sense, that "[i]t's in the interests of the powerful to have most people think of politics as a big, scary complicated machine that we can't touch because

we'll break something." But it's not hard, she maintains, to teach children about politics: they are already quite alert to what is fair and unfair in their own lives; to see the same in others' lives requires only information and thoughtful parental guidance.

In our final article, Charles Montpetit writes about his rather bewildering attempts to publish a book about the December 6th 1989 slaying of 14 women at the École polytechnique in Montreal and the ensuing battle against a gun lobby that Polytechnique students launched. In Montpetit's eyes, the students' efforts to change gun laws had all the earmarks of a strong young-adult narrative: "There was heartbreak, there was resolve, there were electrifying cliffhangers: every teenager, every student who felt powerless in the face of tragedy needed to know about this." But as Montpetit recounts, publishers didn't seem to agree. Was the manuscript too political? Did its prose style not meet expectations? What expectations do publishers have about young-adult works that grapple with politics? Montpetit begins to delineate answers to these questions as he compares his English and French publishers' negotiations with him.

What we offer here, then, for our twenty-fifth anniversary, are papers that made us re-think "home ground" in a manner we couldn't have imagined in 1975. We hope they stimulate more research into the way we construct home, nation, child, and young adult, in English and French, so we can keep the conversation going for another 25 years.

Marie Davis