Editorial: Australia, Strange and Familiar

To many Canadians, Australia — despite its warm climate, strange landscape, and "backward" seasons — is oddly familiar: like Canada, Australia relies on its primary resources, and it has similar legal and federal political systems, similar aboriginal issues, similar problems with health care and university funding, and similar patterns of immigration. So when in 1998 I announced to my University of Winnipeg classroom that Rosemary Ross Johnston would be visiting them as a guest lecturer in Australian children's literature, I shouldn't have been surprised at their enthusiasm. But I was. It wasn't just their enthusiasm that surprised me, but their confidence that she would be talking about a literature that would be familiar to them already (even though they hadn't read much Australian children's literature). As one student, a children's librarian, put it, the "cultural direction" of American children's literature didn't resound with her the way Australian children's literature had. That opinion countered the one I generally hear — that Canadian children's literature is barely distinguishable from American children's literature — and so I remembered it well. As Johnston was later able to uncover in her discussions with the students, they thought of Canada and Australia as having roughly parallel histories as colonies and colonizers, that the countries' shifting perspectives on its aboriginal peoples and its immigrants were not dissimilar, and that the mainstream cultures of both countries valorized the anti-intellectual bushman/lumberjack.

In many ways, the questions the students had for Johnston are answered in this special issue of *CCL*: How are aboriginal literatures different from mainstream ones? How is the landscape represented in children's aboriginal and non-aboriginal literature? How are current and historical racial tensions represented? And the answers do indeed beg to be compared with Canadian trends.

As we may well infer from Johnston's paper in this issue, there is much to be said about subtle parallels between the countries in the way the landscape is currently represented in picture books. The "national space" and "sense of before-us" may well be entwined with notions of aboriginality rather than with the colonial narrative involving hewers-of-wood forefathers. If the desert and bush occupy a central place in the Australian psyche, what are the equivalents for the Canadian — the forest? prairie? tundra? Johnston's work should stimulate clearer thinking about our own landscapes, their ideological subtexts, and the phenomenology of mind they imply. The

same is true for Bradford's fascinating work. Looking at aboriginal autobiographical narratives, she examines their implicit political agendas from the perspective of both indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. Do certain texts about aboriginals appeal more to white people by placing racism in the past and by constructing aboriginal characters who share the anxieties of mainstream white culture? Bradford's work interrogates the mainstream use of aboriginal texts in new and instructive ways that may be applied to texts written on this soil.

Finally, Carole Carpenter's engaging interview with Maurice Saxby will give readers a sense of the history of Australian children's literature and the astonishing reach of Saxby's influence over its documentation and development. What we offer in this issue, then, is an opportunity to look at another nation's children's literature, its scholarship, and its history; perhaps we can thereby understand better why Australia seems so strange and yet so familiar.

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