

“O” Canada: Four Alphabet Books and One to Count On

A Seaside Alphabet. Donna Grassby. Illus. Susan Tooke. Tundra, 2000. Unpag. \$19.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-516-5. *Play Mas'! A Carnival ABC*. Dirk McLean. Illus. Ras Stone. Tundra, 2000. Unpag. \$18.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-48-X. *The City ABC Book*. Zoran Milich. Kids Can, 2001. Unpag. \$15.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55074-942-0. *“C” is for Canada*. Vicki Berger Erwin. Illus. Mark Thurman. GHB, 2000. 60 pp. \$29.95 cloth. ISBN 1-892920-30-1. *One is Canada*. Maxine Trotter. Illus. Bill Slavin. HarperCollins, 1999. Unpag. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 0-00-224556-6, 0-00-638663-6.

Once upon a time, alphabet and counting books were the domain of the very young child. Over the years the acquisition of letters and numbers has been made joyous (and painless!) in the works of celebrated authors and illustrators such as Kate Greenaway, Brian Wildsmith, and Eric Carle. This type of material is invaluable as a primer for simple identification of objects interesting to a small child — a for apple, b for book, d for dog, and so on. In recent years we have seen an evolution of sorts, with alphabet and counting books emerging for an older audience. No longer basic primers, books on particular themes or subjects use numbers and letters as an organizational tool. Since the intended audience is already familiar with introductory concepts of the alphabet and counting, the language in these books for older readers can be much more complicated, using alliteration and rhyme. The illustrations in these books are also more elaborate works of art, often with lots of hidden objects to be discovered by a curious child. Sometimes this marriage of facts and concepts is successful, sometimes less so. The five titles examined here are good examples of what works and what does not.

The two titles from Tundra, *A Seaside Alphabet* and *Play Mas'! A Carnival ABC*, are similar in format to Tundra's earlier alphabet books, *A Mountain ABC* and *A Prairie ABC*. Each page contains a letter of the alphabet, in both upper- and lower-case letters, and a corresponding alliterative phrase. Author Donna Grassby begins the introduction to *A Seaside Alphabet* with the exuberant statement “I love to be by the sea!” That emotion is clearly felt on every page of this joyous celebration of seaside life; by the end, the reader will love to be by the sea too. Grassby's eloquent language rolls off the tongue as she takes us to places where “imposing icebergs idle in inlets,” “happy humpbacks heave hefty heads high into the heavens,” and “perky puffins prosper in perilous places.” Her choice of language is a perfect match with Susan Tooke's gorgeous illustrations of seaside life in both Eastern Canada and the United States. Each painting invites the child to look further and explore this wonderful life by the sea. Included at the end of the book is an alphabetical list of more items to be found in each painting, encouraging the child to take another look. A glossary of further information is also given, so that a child interested in the ocean caves referred to under letter O can find out more detail about these caves at the end of the book. This format works well because it allows the child to enjoy the simple lyricism of the main body of the book without the facts becoming intrusive, all the while making further information available for curious minds.

Tundra's second alphabet book, Dirk McLean's *Play Mas'! A Carnival ABC*, is a visual feast that introduces children to the festival of Carnival, celebrated in many shapes and forms around the world. The title *Play Mas'!* is derived from the French tradition of the Masquerade, where Carnival has its roots. McLean's book endeavours to capture the joyous spirit of Carnival and overall it succeeds, although his

language does not flow as smoothly as Grassby's. Attempts to incorporate words associated with Carnival from a range of cultures is laudable, but it would be necessary to provide definitions for terms such as "quetzal feathers" and "Xante" and "Kiskidee." An alphabetically arranged information section at the end of the book encourages the reader to search each illustration for various items listed. We are also invited to find the hidden letter in each painting — appealing to fans of the "I-spy" type of book. The illustrations by Ras Stone are bright and busy, capturing the crowded and festive air of Carnival. Initially, it seemed surprising that he would choose watercolour illustrations for a subject matter such as Carnival, but it does work and perhaps brighter colours on such crowded pictures would have been overwhelming. *Play Mas'!* will provide children with a pleasant introduction to an exciting fun-filled celebration.

Photojournalist Zoran Milich's wordless alphabet book *The City ABC Book* is a book of photographs taken in his Toronto neighbourhood, featuring places and things an urban child might presumably encounter on a daily basis — a playground, a park bench, a manhole cover. Each page features one or two black-and-white photographs on white paper with upper- and lower-case letters featured in bright red. Within each photo the featured letter is highlighted in computer-generated red. Milich has chosen interesting items for his letters — the T-bar of a swing, a fire escape, a hydro pole. The whole alphabet is displayed on one page at the end of the book, giving the child a chance to view and compare all the photographs. The publisher indicates the hope that *The City ABC Book* will enhance children's imaginations and increase their powers of observation. To some extent, the book succeeds in that children have the opportunity to view letters in the cityscape. Unfortunately, there is no real need for children to explore the photos to find the letters — they are clearly delineated in bright red, impossible to miss. Comparisons to Stephen T. Johnson's Caldecott honour book *Alphabet City* are inevitable. Although Johnson's illustrations are realistic paintings and not photographs, he states the same intent — to encourage children to see the world around them with fresh eyes. His book does so more successfully than Milich's because he allows the reader the opportunity to explore the picture and find the letters unaided. By highlighting the letters, Milich has denied the reader the fun of discovery.

A book that uses the alphabet needlessly as an organizing tool is Vicki Berger Erwin's *"C" is for Canada*. It contains an index, a feature not usually necessary in an alphabet book. This is a very simple information book but not a particularly useful one. It begins with a two-page spread of very general information on Canada — national symbols, a map, a list of provinces and territories, and some minimal historical and geographic information. Within the body of the book a double-page spread is devoted to each letter of the alphabet, featuring upper- and lower-case letters, a word beginning with that letter, and some further descriptive information on the subject matter. The typeface is very large, as though intended for beginning readers, yet the language is too difficult for this group. The illustrations include both black-and-white sketches by illustrator Mark Thurman and photographs from a variety of sources, also in black and white. Thurman's simple sketches relate to the item featured but lack the spirit and sense of fun of his illustrations for the Douglas and Albert books or *Too Many Chickens*, whereas the photographs are adequate but uninspired. *"C" is for Canada* sets out to "inform and entertain youngsters of all ages" but proceeds to do so in a purely superficial manner. Erwin has chosen unimaginative and stereotypic representatives for many of her letters, in-

cluding the Queen, a lumberjack, and a zoo. It is no surprise her choice for letter B is the beaver — “a Canadian national symbol” which she describes as “Canada’s largest rodent,” suggesting a country overrun with rodents of various sizes. Particularly startling is the statement under letter F for French heritage: “in many areas in Canada, the French influence is still strong.” This suggests complete lack of awareness of the cultural and political climate of this country. This book would certainly not entice one to further explore things Canadian.

Teacher and award-winning author Maxine Trottier presents a much livelier, enthusiastic view of Canada in her counting book *One is Canada*. She cleverly uses numbers as the method by which children are introduced to facts about our country — three oceans, five great lakes, ten provinces, the Group of Seven. The book is cumulative in style, making it a splendid read-aloud book that will be well used in primary classrooms. A useful “notes on Canada” section at the back elaborates on information introduced in the body of the book. Bill Slavin’s bright, bold paintings give the book stunning visual appeal. They cover a double-page spread with the number and corresponding phrases appearing in an overlay on the left side. There is even an illustration within the large number itself. Slavin ingeniously uses different perspectives to show us Canada from space, under the sea, or from the four points of the compass. He captures a wild sail on the Great Lakes and the beauty of monarch butterflies at Point Pelee. There is a fine harmony between Trottier’s words and Slavin’s paintings.

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Superbly-Illustrated Lessons in Native Awareness

The Encyclopedia of the First Peoples of North America. Rayna Green with Melanie Fernandez. 1st Canadian ed. Groundwood, 1999. 212 pp. \$35.00 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-380-3.

The Encyclopedia of the First Peoples of North America is a visually rewarding foray into the history and current status of native North Americans from about 1,000 C.E. First published as *The British Encyclopedia of Native North America*, this first Canadian edition, released the same year, should prove an excellent reference work for upper elementary and secondary school students. In reading this book, I was struck first and foremost by the high quality and rarity of many of the illustrations, many of which will appeal to the young reader. Rich and vibrantly coloured pictures of Native material culture items, both past and present, as well as relevant photographs and coloured maps, are strategically placed throughout the book to keep the reader’s interest. This is not a traditional Eurocentric inventory of Native North American culture. I found the book refreshing in its perspective, which gave me pause to think about some of the biases inherent in traditional histories. For instance, on page 107 a picture of artist James Luna lying on his back in a museum case, complete with his diploma, music tapes, and family photos, confronts how non-Native North Americans, and especially archaeologists, focus on the minutiae