

## Imagining History through the Eyes of Girls

*A Prairie as Wide as the Sea: The Immigrant Diary of Ivy Weatherall.* Sarah Ellis. Scholastic Canada, 2001. 205 pp. \$12.99 cloth. ISBN 0-439-98833-0. Ages 8-12. *Orphan at My Door: The Home Child Diary of Victoria Cope.* Jean Little. Scholastic Canada, 2001. 221 pp. \$12.99 cloth. ISBN 0-439-98834-0. Ages 8-12.

Sarah Ellis and Jean Little, both well-respected and established writers, are the first authors to be featured in Scholastic Canada's new *Dear Canada* series of works of historical fiction. These books, in the form of diaries of young girls, are the initial fruits of an innovative and exciting project that brings history alive through the imagined first-hand accounts of historical events written by some of Canada's best writers of fiction for young people. This publishing venture places the books in a network of other activities; Scholastic Canada features the books on an interactive website <<http://www.dearcanada.ca>> sponsored a diary-writing contest in conjunction with the books' publication. Both authors use historical research to place believable characters into exciting historical times; these books will encourage contemporary young people to consider how people their age participated in events that shaped Canadian society.

The books are lovely. Their size, shape, and format all suggest the tactile features of real little diaries. They have ribbon bookmarks, as many old diary books do, and are illustrated with a series of historical photographs in the back that call to mind old scrapbooks. Even the typefaces suggest the visual features of old books, in particular *A Prairie as Wide as the Sea*, which is printed in a quirky type that suggests the vagaries of handwriting. The covers, in subdued colors, have tinted archival photos of the fictional diarists. This attention to detail shows respect for both the past and for the young readers of today, who will likely appreciate this attention paid to creating beautiful books for older readers.

Real diaries in archival collections are often tedious and difficult to read. Writers who record each day's events have no perspective for evaluation, and diaries written for the writer's eyes only usually lack any contextualization of event and character. This means that an author attempting to write a fictional diary faces a difficult task, for what makes a novel engaging is what a diary usually lacks. A plot requires putting events into a larger framework that is absent when the writer's focus is on what happens each day. Sarah Ellis has succeeded in making the transition from the form of the diary to that of the novel in *A Prairie as Wide as the Sea*. She captures beautifully the tone of a diary without any of its tedium. She writes, as many diarists do, in declarative sentences and brief diary entries. The entire entry for August 3 reads: "Dad has another job. He's working with the railway crew who repair track. He doesn't get paid with money but they give him food. Today he came home with a HUGE pail of strawberry jam" (67). The effect of reading a diary in this style is cumulative, with satisfaction coming with the perception of the whole rather than with the building of suspense in the development of narrative. Reading *A Prairie as Wide as the Sea* offers young readers a reading experience much like that of reading a real archival diary because of Ellis's sensitive handling of the form.

Jean Little, on the other hand, has written a conventional novel that is divided into diary entries. Her *Orphan at My Door* is an interesting work of fiction told from a young girl's point of view, but she does not capture the essence of most diaries as effectively as Ellis does. Much of Little's book is told in dialogue, giving imme-

diacy to the events. Dialogue is most rare in diaries, however, and Little justifies this stylistic choice by making her narrator a gifted observer and recorder of everyday events. Her diarist, Victoria Cope writes, "Since I plan to become a writer, I'll put in lots of talking. I hate books where there are pages without anyone saying a word" (9). Victoria becomes quite polished at her handling of dialogue, writing as well as an accomplished author; her imagined narrative self becomes subsumed under the facility of Little's practiced authorial hand. Young readers, however, would not be familiar with actual diaries, and may welcome this book's conventional novelistic form with its exciting plot.

The books are grounded in solid historical research. They include epilogues that tell what happened to the diarists, their friends, and their families after the conclusion of the book, thus moving the stories beyond the immediate. Historical notes emphasize the background and importance of the events described. *Orphan at My Door*, set in Guelph, Ontario, in 1897, is the story of a family that took in a Home Child, an orphan from the Barnardo Home in London. Little has chosen to narrate the story from the perspective of the comfortable Canadian child who comes to understand the difficulties experienced by an orphan just her age. She does not shy away from the dark side of the Home Child scheme, and puts the abuse of a child at the centre of the story. *A Prairie as Wide as the Sea* explores the initial hopes and frustrated expectations of English immigrants to southwestern Saskatchewan in 1926. Ivy Weatherall, the fictional diarist, concentrates on the daily ways she found to cope with her difference from Canadian children, especially in vocabulary. Within her funny diary entries runs a thread of family disappointment, as the lush farms promised in immigration propaganda were impossible in arid land where they settled. Both authors draw on their own family's experiences, and the reader will be drawn into these stories that make history immediate and personal.

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*Barbara Powell is Associate Professor of Women's Studies at the University of Regina. She has studied many manuscript diaries in archival collections across Canada.*

### Gender Benders: Forced and Fun

*Mommy Works, Daddy Works.* Marika Pedersen and Mikele Hall. Illus. Deirdre Bettridge. Annick, 2000. Unpag. \$17.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-657-8. *Fairy.* David Bouchard. Illus. Dean Griffiths. Orca, 2001. Unpag. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55143-212-9.

*Mommy Works, Daddy Works* by Marika Pedersen and Mikele Hall is a relentlessly up-beat challenge to gender stereotyping. It is also a comfort book for young children who must endure daily separations from working parents. In brief paragraphs with a recurring pattern, the authors tell what means of transportation a mommy or daddy uses to go to work, what his or her job is called, and what that job entails. For example: "My daddy rides a subway to work. My daddy is an architect. He designs buildings and skyscrapers." The final line of each paragraph is the refrain, "But there is always time for me." Jobs listed are police officer, construction worker, dance teacher, writer, homemaker, president of a company, chef, letter carrier, ar-