

Soon they discover that there is little money and they cannot have the family house unless their great-aunt moves in with them — but she believes they are imposters.

The ensuing struggle of the three to adjust to their heritage is told from the point of view of fourteen-year-old Aggie in snappy present-tense scenes, quite different in style from the author's previous novels. What isn't different is Julie Johnston's usual vivid characterization. The sisters are immediately real: serious Helen, "smart-ass" Jeannie, and Aggie, who sees life as a movie and "believes she's becoming quite interesting." This is an understatement. Aggie's exuberance and optimism, her passion for vintage clothes, and her touching belief that her lost mother will return make her an immensely appealing hero.

The peaceful lakeside setting is a shimmering contrast to the cruelly suspicious reaction of the small community to the girls. The lucid writing is deepened by metaphor. Aggie's constant fear that her restless older sisters will abandon her is intensified whenever she goes down to the dark cellar. Great-aunt Lillian's presents of warm bread are symbolic of the family love Aggie craves. The killer bees of the title are "like knowing that the worst that could happen is finally starting to happen." The movie metaphor infuses the whole story. In the end, after surely one of the most satisfying Christmas dinners ever portrayed, the scene fades beautifully into a statement of hope.

These strengths keep the novel at almost the same high level as the author's previous ones. The plot, however, is strangely slow. All the ingredients for suspense are here: the mysterious disappearance of objects from the house, their long-lost mother turning up, Aggie being accused of stealing, whether Aunt Lillian will live with them. Yet somehow these elements don't pull the reader along, and in places the action almost drags to a standstill. Despite these reservations, however, this is a heartfelt and at times hilarious novel that celebrates the kinship of family and the unquenchable courage of an unforgettable young girl.

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*Kit Pearson is the author of six children's novels. Her seventh, **Between the Lion and the Eagle: the 1812 Diary of Susanna Merritt**, will be published in the fall of 2002.*

### The Materials of History

**Canada: Our History.** Rick Archbold. Doubleday Canada, 2000. 160 pp. \$29.95 cloth. ISBN 0-385-25971-9. **Building Canada.** Bonnie Shemie. Tundra, 2001. 40 pp. \$22.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-504-1. Ages 9 and up.

Historians are accustomed to finding clues to the past in unlikely places; often the most prosaic artifacts turn out to be the most revealing. In this truism of the historical profession lies the value of these two books. In *Canada: Our History*, Rick Archbold spins the stories of some of the most significant events in the life of the country — homesteading in the west, the Halifax Explosion of 1917, Hurricane Hazel striking Toronto, the FLQ crisis, the Canada-Russia hockey series of 1972. But each of the vignettes in this ingenious book begins with a single photograph, with the author imagining how the child in the photo might have been affected by the events, and might have described them as they occurred. This *Forrest Gump*-esque device is

very effective, and Archbold nicely captures a mixture of wonder, bewilderment, excitement, and fear as his fictional kids try to come to terms with what is occurring around them. Sidebars which provide the historical context for the events do not disturb the flow of the narrative, and the diction is relaxed and naturalistic throughout the book; an internet chat between two teens on New Year's Eve 1999 is particularly effective, as is a young woman's lovestruck account of Expo67 in Montreal that is positively dripping with teen angst. Without giving away any secrets, Archbold also does a wonderful job of using the final vignette to bring the book full circle in quite a charming way.

The buildings we encounter every day also tell stories, and Bonnie Shemie uses the nation's architectural heritage to describe Canada's evolution from colonial outpost to modern country. It is partly a guide to architectural forms (the sumptuous illustrations and handy glossary will be useful to any young traveller with an interest in buildings), but it is also a primer on Canadian history, for the author shows how architecture has reflected changing times and influences. The First Nations and early settlers built with the materials that were available to them, their designs determined by the harsh realities of the landscape and climate. Later, styles were imported from Europe so that European societies could be reproduced in North America, but even then allowances had to be made for local conditions. Newcomers from other nations also brought different architectural features, turning streetscapes into fusions of different styles, and modern architecture blended the old and the new, with old elements being interpreted in new materials and forms. In *Building Canada*, Shemie has focused on some of the country's best-known buildings, but one can easily walk the streets of any town with the book in hand and find the same kinds of stories told in wood, brick, and stone.

Both of these books are ultimately about finding great stories from the past where they are least expected, whether it be in the photographs that exist in countless attics or in the structures that line our streets. The nation's history is imprinted on a thousand different artifacts that we encounter every day. With a little imagination, we can read in those artifacts the story of Canada's past in the same way that Archbold and Shemie have done in these fine books.

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### Two Realistic Narratives of Maritime Life

*Duncan's Way.* Ian Wallace. Groundwood, 2000. Unpag. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-388-9. *Boy of the Deeps.* Ian Wallace. Groundwood, 1999. Unpag. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-356-0.

Unlike his colourful earlier books (such as *Chin Chiang and the Dragon's Dance* and *Morgan the Magnificent*), which focus on moments of celebration and adventure, two of the latest books by multiple award-winner Ian Wallace introduce young readers to the harsher realities of everyday life in both Newfoundland and Cape