Intergenerational Picture Books: The World, History, Grandma, and Me

Wild Cameron Women. Maureen Hull. Illus. Judith Christine Mills. Stoddart Kids, 2000. Unpag. $19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-3219-5. Ages 4-8. ***The Memory Horse.*** Troon Harrison. Illus. Eugenie Fernandes. Tundra, 1999. Unpag. $17.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-440-1. Ages 6-9. ***Wild Girl and Gran.*** Nan Gregory. Illus. Ron Lightburn. Red Deer, 2000. Unpag. $18.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88995-221-3. Ages 4-8. ***Music from the Sky.*** Denise Gillard. Illus. Stephen Taylor. Groundwood, 2001. Unpag. $15.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-311-0. Ages 2-6. ***The Biggest Fish in the Lake.*** Margaret Carney. Illus. Janet Wilson. Kids Can, 2001. Unpag. $15.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55074-720-7. Ages 5-8. ***A Present for Mrs. Kazinski.*** Marilynn Reynolds. Illus. Lynn Smith-Ary. Orca, 2001. Unpag. $19.95 cloth, $8.95 paper. ISBN 1-55143-196-3, 1-55143-198-X. Ages 4-8.

The factors influencing relationships between members of different generations, especially seniors and youth, have changed dramatically over the course of the past 50 years or so. On one hand, contemporary Canada is an increasingly aging society: according to Statistics Canada, people aged 65 or over make up more than twelve per cent of the country's population, double the proportion in the early part of the twentieth century. On the other hand, gone are the days when a single dwelling might be home to an extended family of relatives at various stages of their lives: living arrangements are now more likely to consist of parents and children in neighbourhoods of young families, with older relatives in communities of their own, sometimes in places specifically reserved for senior living. Consequently, some observers worry that, although contemporary society comprises more and more old people, the young have less and less contact with them. In response to this perceived segregation, intergenerational associations have been established across the country to encourage cross-generational interaction. These movements formalize relationships between seniors and youth in planned activities that serve to show that the interests of different generations need not be at cross-purposes.

There are a variety of reasons why intergenerational relationships are important and mutually beneficial. The extra years of living experience may afford seniors extra insight, skills, or just really good yarns to tell. Youth, for their part, may have aspirations for the future and energy that they can use in constructive ways. Studies show that sharing these qualities has a positive effect on the self-esteem of both parties. More than that, researchers Harry R. Moody and Robert Disch suggest that participating in cross-generational activities actually helps participants become better citizens of the world because they learn to appreciate their roles in communities that stretch out in both space and time: "Both young and old are . . . members of an enduring historical community, existing before their birth and remaining after their departure. . . ." (qtd. in Shipman). Seen in this way, the interaction between young and old thus represents an extraordinary, life-affirming, and universally important meeting of the past and the future.

This is quite a lot of consequence to assume from a trip to Grandma's house. But it is not overstating the case to say that grandparents and grandchildren do contribute to each other's sense of self and community. I specifically say grandparents because they are present and important in the lives of many children. Indeed, analysis of broad social trends aside, families are not quite as age-segregated as many people fear. Although most seniors do not live with young relations, the Ottawa-based Vanier Institute of the Family reports that most Canadian grandpar-

ents do indeed have regular, dynamic, and meaningful contact with their grandchildren. If older people reside apart from their adult children, it is not necessarily because they have been relegated to the realm of the frail and useless, but often because they have active and purposeful lives away from the family sphere. Grandchildren who get to know their grandparents are lucky enough to become acquainted with just a few members of a heterogeneous group with diverse interests.

Of six recent picture books that explore young children's relationships with older people, five of the texts portray children's relationships with their grandparents, while the other tells of a child's companionship with an elderly friend. Whether the seniors in the stories are slow or fast, quiet or loud, dainty or feisty, all of these stories celebrate some of the ways that young and old forge identities in relation to each other as well as with regard to the world at large.

Like grandparents, some books are spirited, while others are rather more dainty and refined. Maureen Hull's *Wild Cameron Women* definitely falls into the former category. The relationship that provides the framework for the story, that between young Kate and her Nana Cameron, is vibrant and realistic. Over the course of the narrative, which involves Kate's fear of the bears that materialize in her room at night and Nana's strategy to rid her of this nighttime terror, the rhythmical, back-and-forth interaction between two generations of Cameron women is the thread that stitches this tale together. As the elder Cameron narrates a story about the fearlessness of a Scottish ancestor, Kate interrupts to ask questions and make comments, giving us a sense of grandmother, granddaughter, and story as lively and flexible spirits that act together. Judith Christine Mills's bold illustrations of the flaming-haired, rosy-cheeked Cameron kin adds to the energy of the book, although it is a pity that the contemporary Cameron women's interaction during the course of the ancestral story is not represented in a picture or two, reinforcing the link to the present in all aspects of the book.

Unfortunately, even with the Nana-Kate discourse woven throughout, Hull's book is so bustling with stretchy stories that it is in danger of coming apart. The plot that sets the book in motion — Kate's fear of bruins in her bedroom — is almost forgotten during Nana's short but sprawling tale about their Cameron ancestors. In this story-within-a-story, we learn about the reasons for the Camerons' migration to Canada from Scotland, about their struggles to transform Canadian forest into a home, and, finally, about seven-greats grandmother Kate's triumph over a hostile and dangerous bear. Along the way, we are even taught a little Gaelic before we return to present-day Kate's crisis. Unlike the intergenerational relationship that is depicted, the story is just not tight-knit enough to hold. In the end, then, *Wild Cameron Women* does not adequately deal with children's fears or with ancestral concerns. In spite of that, though, the book still works on the level that Nana's story does: in managing to convey the spunky and strong identity that is part of this particular matrilineal heritage.

Troon Harrison's *The Memory Horse* is a quieter book that also presents one narrative wrapped in another, though these are more quaint and gentle stories than those in *Wild Cameron Women*. While Hull depicts Cameron women who are, well, *wild*, Harrison puts the emphasis on a kindly, creative grandfather and on a grandmother who was on the surface "real ordinary" but who distinguished herself through helping others. As in *Wild Cameron Women*, we learn about a maternal figure through someone else's description. In this case, it is Grandma's husband who tells of his late wife's acts and accomplishments; as Grandpa restores a wooden

carousel horse that was Grandma's favourite, he decorates it with images that represent different aspects of her life. The nameless young narrator, whose idea it is to paint the horse with symbolism, is delighted to watch her grandfather at work and learn more about her beloved grandmother. *The Memory Horse*, then, layers the intergenerational narrator/grandmother relationship over the intergenerational narrator/grandfather bond. Perhaps because of this mediation, the link between grandchild and grandmother is a little fuzzy: it is unclear how long it has been since Grandma passed away, and we get no glimpse of the girl's own memories of the woman. With its rural, mid-century setting and old-fashioned illustrations, the story may already seem distant to some readers.

The narrator's eagerness to learn more about her grandmother and to create a memory horse in her honour, though, suggests a desire to make concrete connections. And we must not forget the very concrete link between the girl and her grandfather: he helps her to remember so that she can cope with the future, and she helps him to remember so that he can cope with the past. The grandmother-grandfather-narrator connection is beautifully depicted at the end of the book, when the narrator, riding on the carousel, proudly links her own identity to that of her grandmother's: "[Grandpa] said that I looked just like Grandma had, riding at the country fair when she was young."

There is definitely a real connection between narrator and grandmother in Nan Gregory's *Wild Girl and Gran*, which also deals with remembering a loved one and which brings us back to wild women as well. The story of a boisterous and imaginative young girl's relationship with and loss of her equally dynamic Gran is excellent, particularly in the poetic exchanges between the two at the beginning of the book. The various fantasy identities that Wild Girl tries on are entertained and enjoyed by Gran, who is a solid and attractive tattooed knitting queen and nature lover.

When Wild Girl must deal with Gran's death, the focus turns to Wild Girl's relationship with her mother (a relationship which is, of course, based on another intergenerational bond, one that is pretty much inseparable from the concept of self-identity — much as we might try to forget it). We have already been introduced to Mom as a seemingly humourless figure in the background, frowning upon the antics of Wild Girl and Gran. Immediately following Gran's passing away, Wild Girl resists her mother's attempts to connect with her grief. As winter turns to spring and new life blossoms, though, mother and daughter unite in scattering Gran's ashes in the woods, and Wild Girl comes to the realization that she is not the only one whose sense of self has been unsettled by Gran's death.

A strong connection to nature in Gregory's book wonderfully echoes elements of the story: not only do seasons reflect the cycle of events in the plot, but Gran's own return "[b]ack to the bosom of the earth" is foreshadowed by the death and burial of a baby robin the previous spring. These natural connections help readers perceive with Wild Girl a system larger than any of us. The book is not seamless, though: for example, there is no illustration to go with the description of the baby robin's funeral, and the advent of Gran's illness is rather abrupt. Moreover, while the illustrations are generally vibrant, attractive, and evocative, the last few pages of the book, done entirely in yellows, seem to have lost their colour and verve.

Even in stories in which nature does not function quite so symbolically, the beauty and order of the natural world can play an important part in the depiction of cross-generational relationships. In both Denise Gillard's *Music from the Sky* and

Margaret Carney's *The Biggest Fish in the Lake*, young female narrators learn from their grandfathers' familiarity with the natural world. Now, in *Music from the Sky*, a book for younger children, the connection to nature is no more than the grandfather's ability to find the perfect tree branch from which to carve a flute. Still, the grandfather's knowledge of how to get music out of a branch is a remarkable feat in his granddaughter's eyes. After all, music has a magical quality for the narrator, because she has had the opportunity to try to blow a sound out of a flute (therefore knowing how difficult it is to create music) and because she associates flute music with an other-worldly "music from the sky." This story is simple, but on the most basic level it does work: the narrator's initial disbelief makes us interested in following along to see whether her grandfather can indeed hold good on his promise and whether music will result.

In some ways, though, the pared-down story could benefit from a few details. Most obviously, one wonders why Gillard makes no attempt to imitate the flute's sounds — the title's "music from the sky" — in the text, while she does choose to include the onomatopoeic "[c]reak, creak, creak" of stairs and "[s]quish, squish, squish" of mud. Secondly, while the story stands alone as a description of the special bond between a girl and her grandfather, it is curious that the book jacket blurb makes a point of mentioning that the story is "[s]et in Nova Scotia in one of Canada's oldest black communities," but that this fact does not feature in the story. When the girl visits her grandfather, it is not clear how his connection to a larger Black Canadian community is significant to her.

The Biggest Fish in the Lake does share with *Music from the Sky* an expedition into nature, but it is a slightly more multifaceted story. For one thing, the natural world that this girl and grandfather venture into is the ecosystem of a secluded lake. From the start, it is obvious that this is territory with which the author is familiar: we are supplied with lovely details, such as the list of birds that the girl and Grandpa see (ospreys, loons, blue herons, and kingfishers). The plot of Carney's *The Biggest Fish*, perfectly complemented by the subtle nuances of Janet Wilson's meticulous illustrations, is also more complex than that of Gillard's *Music from the Sky*. The search here, for a catch from the lake, is not a straightforward matter. Determined to prove her fishing skills after a day of fishing without luck, the narrator goes out to the dock by herself early in the morning. The book's ending, in which the girl relies on all her strength and skills in order to reel in a huge muskie, only to let it go, is exciting and thoughtful. It is also satisfying, in that while readers recognize that the girl is becoming a talented fisher and an independent individual, we also note that Grandpa will watch out for her without stepping on her autonomy. Here, as in Gillard's book, the intergenerational interaction does not seem to be immediately related to a larger community. This is a story of growth that is specifically personal, but that is no less important for that.

Finally, we come to *A Present for Mrs. Kazinski*. There are many aspects of this story, about young Frank's quest to find the perfect gift for his friend's 80th birthday, that we can admire. Best of all, perhaps, are Lynn Smith-Ary's playfully inspired illustrations, which are full of texture and deep colour. Their genius is in the detail, in the special care taken to make the pictures not just an accompaniment to the story but an intrinsic part of it. (Pay attention to the cat!) Smith-Ary conveys characters' personalities not only through their appearance but also through the décor of their individual rooms. This is a perfect match for Marilynn Reynolds's humorous yet sympathetic description of the characteristics and quirks of the fel-

low tenants of Frank's rooming house.

It is too bad, then, that the book should fall short in its representation of the intergenerational relationship at its core. Quite simply, the friendship between Frank and Mrs. Kazinsky is not introduced in an entirely believable manner. When we first meet Mrs. Kazinsky, she is an old lady who sits the in the attic "all day long and every day" and who smells of "lavender sachets and old books." Nothing wrong with that, other than it is an impersonal introduction to a person who is named three pages later as Frank's best friend. Further, even though we are told that Frank and Mrs. Kazinski spend time looking through the old woman's photo album and going to the movies together, we don't really get a sense of their enjoyment of each other. The relationship seems forced and unnatural when it should be mutually beneficial and, perhaps most important of all, fun.

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Nadine d'Entremont, a librarian in southern Ontario, has learned much from her grandparents in Nova Scotia.

Ice and Water

The Stars from Mars. Slapshots 1. Gordon Korman. Scholastic, 1999. 143 pp. $5.99 paper. ISBN 0-590-70619-5. ***Shipwreck. Island*** 1. Gordon Korman. Scholastic, 2001. 129 pp. $5.50 paper. ISBN 0-439-16456-7.

When I was twelve, I couldn't get enough of Gordon Korman's "Bruno and Boots" books. *Go Jump in the Pool!* (1979), *Beware the Fish!* (1980), *The War with Mr. Wizzle* (1983) — the adventures of a pair of troublemakers and their pals at boarding school made for endless rereadings throughout adolescence. Besides the comedy and the fast-paced plots, what I and countless readers have found irresistible about these books are the young characters themselves. Bruno and Boots weren't rebels; their relationship with Headmaster Sturgeon — better known as "The Fish" — was based less on disruption of authority than on negotiation and compromise. These books have proven enormously popular with middle-school readers for the past 25 years, especially the very first book, *This Can't Be Happening at Macdonald Hall!* (1978), which Korman wrote at the tender age of 12.

But the Bruno and Boots books are only a small part of an ever-expanding