

Guiding Canadian Readers of Canadian Children's Books / Roderick McGillis

A Guide to Canadian Children's Books in English. Deirdre Baker and Ken Setterington. Illus. Kady MacDonald Denton. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2003.

In 1817, two slim volumes titled *The Juvenile Review; or, Moral and Critical Observations on Children's Books; Intended as a Guide to Parents and Teachers, in Their Choice of Books of Instruction and Amusement* set out to guide parents and teachers to the best books for young readers. The introduction to the first volume explains that the "aim" of these volumes is "to assist parents and teachers in the choice of books" (ii) for children from two to twelve years of age. A full 168 years later, we have *A Guide to Canadian Children's Books in English*, a volume that sets out to assist parents, teachers, and children's librarians "to find the perfect book for a child" (2), in this instance the child being any age from two to twelve and up. The full title of *The Juvenile Review* refers to "Moral and Critical Observations" as well as books of "Instruction and Amusement." Deirdre Baker and Ken Setterington, compilers of *A Guide to Canadian Children's Books in English*, express their concern for children's learning, noting that "What children learn determines the future" (1). And so they offer a guide to books that contain "understanding, information, and wisdom" (1). In other words, we have not come a long way from *The Juvenile Review* and its intention to identify books of instruction and amusement. The early guide to children's books has its nationalistic interest in Great Britain and its empire (see for example its review of Priscilla Wakefield's *A Family Tour Through the British Empire* in the second volume), while the current volume emphasizes its interest in "uniquely Canadian perspectives, in uniquely Canadian voices" (1-2). Herein lie both the strengths and the weaknesses of the *Guide*.

We can pass over the book's strengths quickly. As an up-to-date compendium of books in English that we can label "Canadian," this guide has its uses. It lists under several useful categories a great number of books for the young, with each listing including a brief description as well as an evaluation of the book in question. Sheila Egoff's *Republic of Childhood* (1967), Michelle Landsberg's *Guide to Children's Books* (1985), Judith Saltman's *Modern Canadian Children's Books* (1987), Egoff and Saltman's *The New Republic of Childhood* (1990), and Raymond E. Jones and Jon C. Stott's *Canadian Children's Books: A Critical Guide to Authors and Illustrators* (2000) either take a different focus from the *Guide* or drift into obsolescence for those who wish to keep current. Baker and Setterington's *Guide* focuses on books published in

the past ten or twelve years and contains few references to books published before 1980. Consequently, absent from the lists are such mainstays of earlier Canadian literature for children such as Charles G.D. Roberts, Ernest Thompson Seton, Morley Callaghan, Catherine Anthony Clark, Bill Freeman, Ruth Nichols, and even Mordecai Richler. True, Baker and Settingington point out that they include "only works that are now, or were recently, available" (3), but most of the authors I list above either are or were recently still in print. The point is that this *Guide* emphasizes the current crop of writers for children and includes only a select few earlier writers and illustrators; L.M. Montgomery, Roderick Haig-Brown, Sheila Burnford, Lyn Cook, and Farley Mowat represent earlier writers. Aside from Montgomery, no writer between Confederation and 1944 finds a place in this *Guide*. Only 29 titles listed appear prior to 1980, representing 3.5 per cent of the full list. What the books listed indicate is that Canada now has a thriving publishing industry of books for young readers and that the books that get published are by and large by living writers.

The authors categorize the books usefully under twelve headings, including Board Books, Concept Books, Traditional Tales, Series Books, and Non-Fiction. They move from books for pre-readers to novels for readers aged twelve and up. End matter is also useful; here, they provide indexes of titles, of authors and illustrators, and of subjects. Another list sets out the books by their Canadian settings, from cities to regions to provinces. A list of themes provides a convenient compendium of possible topics, from First Nations stories to World Issues and Writing. One list gives the locations of authors, editors, and illustrators. Finally, they provide a list of "Highly Recommended Books." And so I summarize: the book's strength is its emphasis on contemporary or nearly contemporary books by Canadians and about Canada. This is a book for those who require assistance in selecting recent books for young readers. The question is: what assistance does this book actually offer? An answer to this question will, it seems to me, reveal the weaknesses of the *Guide*.

The first and final lists at the end of the *Guide* are a useful place for us to begin. The list of authors', editors', and illustrators' locations points out in rather dramatic fashion just how dominant central Canada is. For example, 46 names appear under British Columbia, whereas 168 names appear under Ontario. Of these 168 names, 101 of them are located in Toronto. Vancouver, on the other hand, boasts 24 names. Other locations have fewer names by far. In other words, recent Canadian children's literature appears to be largely a product of Ontario and more specifically of Toronto. This may be true, but I suspect more regional writers might have found a place in this *Guide*. Names that come to mind include Myra Paperny, Marilyn Halvorson, Perry Nodelman, George Bowering, Ann Walsh, Shirlee Smith Matheson, Hazel Hutchins, and William Pasnak. Having said this, I hasten to add that this emphasis on Ontario writers and illustrators troubles me less than the implications of the first of these lists at the end of the book — the list of highly recommended books. This list clearly announces value — that some books are better than others. The question of evaluation is, of course, vexed. Here, value appears to privilege books that fit into mainstream Anglophone Canada. Only five of the 68 highly recommended books are by writers or illustrators who are discernibly from cultural minorities. One might take these books to represent Canada's multicultural reality, but none of these five books are troubling to the vision of Canada as a tolerant and inclusive country. Take the description of Paul Yee's *Tales from Gold Mountain: Stories of the Chinese in the New World* (1989), for example. Baker and Settingington ac-

knowledge that the book deals with the harsh realities of the dominant society's treatment of citizens of Chinese ancestry in Canada's past, but in the same sentence, they offer a qualification that defuses the criticism of this dominant society:

Readers learn the facts and scandal of Canadian policies toward the Chinese; at the same time, these powerful stories take on an almost mystical dimension in showing the human response to unmanageable feeling, to the uncontrollable nature of life. (212)

The semi-colon marks a turn to mystification. What are we to make of the assertion that the stories show a "mystical dimension" in their treatment of "unmanageable feeling"? What are these unmanageable feelings? And what does it mean that life is "uncontrollable" — uncontrollable for whom? Presumably the Chinese people find life uncontrollable partly because forces in the dominant society in which they find themselves control their lives. These specific people of dominant groups are undoubtedly in control of their lives, at least to an extent not enjoyed by the Chinese people. But the sentence that follows clarifies the thrust of the commentary: "Must we forever follow the old ways?" one daughter asks plaintively, a question that will connect with immigrant experience everywhere" (212). Choosing this sentence to highlight is tantamount to saying that "old ways" — that is, ways that differ from those practiced by the dominant culture in the New World — are best left behind. The reader of the *Guide* can safely assume that this book will fulfill the multicultural mandate that assures Canadians that we are a tolerant and attractive society. Nevertheless, the book implies that immigrants and minorities are different from "white" society, but their difference can blend in, can turn away from "old ways."

I am approaching a sensitive topic here, and I ought to point out that the *Guide* does contain books that deal with racism. The list of subjects in the end matter cites ten books that deal with racism, and of these ten books, five deal with the Holocaust, one with anti-Semitism after the Second World War, one with African-American experience, and one with African-Canadian experience. None of these books has a person of a visible minority as author. Subject entries we might relate to matters of race, ethnicity, and cultural diversity include Chinese Canadians, Aboriginal/First Nations stories, Japanese Canadians, Ghana, Caribbean, Divali, and Immigrant experience. Once again, the authors of the *Guide* attempt to illustrate just how multicultural and pluralistic a society Canada is. In their introduction, they inform us that they put the book together partly to highlight Canadian "voices," voices that, "among other things, reflect Canada's historic 'mosaic' approach to multiculturalism, its concern for the common good, or its preservation of its British literary roots" (2). What could sound more expansive and inclusive? Indeed, this expansiveness and inclusiveness is the very problem. The three parts to the authors' assertion contain a tension between a) the familiar metaphor of the Canadian "mosaic" that seems to communicate b) the liberal notion of a common or universal good that turns out to be c) a "preservation of British literary roots." And British roots generally, I suspect. The implication, in other words, is that the books included in this *Guide* are valuable for what the authors a little later call their "complexity" of characters. This complexity emanates from the fact that the characters in these books are, for the most part, "truly human" (3).

Reading the authors' reasons for choosing the books they include in the *Guide*, I am reminded of the literary commentary of such latter-day luminaries as E.M.

Forster, F.R. Leavis, and Matthew Arnold. In the field of children's literature commentary, I might have chosen any number of writers of textbooks for schools or a critic such as Rebecca Lukens. What distinguishes books chosen for the *Guide*, the authors tell us, is "High literary quality," which is distinguishable in four areas: "style, character, plot, and setting" (3). I mention in the previous paragraph what makes characters examples of high literary in this book quality. Style is "high" when a writer's language is "vigorous" and "innovative," and we know that the style fits these descriptors when words are used "in such a way that they make our scalps tickle, our hearts jump with new perception or satisfying recognition" (3). So much depends on what we feel along the blood. The difficulty here is that some people's scalps tickle when they read Eric Wilson and some people's do not. We may wish to argue for strengths and weaknesses of style in an array of writers, and we may even make a solid case for Brian Doyle being a stronger stylist than Gordon Korman, but this does not mean that either of these writers offers the perfect book that has high literary quality for a child whom we might wish to place in contact with a book. In other words, the question of style is not clear-cut, with no set definition of style in place that everyone can agree on. But, more importantly, to suggest that high literary quality deserves our special attention is to forward an agenda, to prepare the way for a canon of best books.

Similarly, assertions that plots should be "surprising" and settings should present "precise, sensual, and accurate evocation of atmosphere, region, and time" (4) are a prelude to a listing of books that the authors of the volume believe fit these demands. In short, the choosing of books, especially the choosing of books for the reasons set out in the introduction, is tantamount to creating a canon of best books. Granted, the creation of a canon of Canadian children's books is not necessarily a bad thing. But we have already seen how this particular canon privileges contemporary books. A reader of this *Guide* must come away thinking that the best Canadian books for Canadian kids are of recent vintage, and that there is not a rich literary history of books for the young in this country. Ironically, a reader of this *Guide* will also come away thinking that most good books in Canada are by white people and that those that are not are nevertheless bracingly salutary. In other words, the reader must come away from this *Guide* thinking that Canadian children's books deal with many subjects and that they deal with these many subjects in ways that do not threaten our sense of this country as tolerant, vibrant, innocent, and homogenous even in its variety.

Let me take one example, Thomas King and William Kent Monkman's picture book for young readers, *A Coyote Columbus Story* (1992). Baker and Settrington begin their description of this book with a one-sentence paragraph: "The traditional First Nations trickster, Coyote, stars in this bittersweet fable of how the Europeans came to exploit North America" (51). First, we ought to know that Coyote is not "the" traditional First Nations trickster. He (or she, if we are to believe this picture book) is one of several trickster characters, each of whom will have particular meaning for particular tribes or bands. Second, characterization of the story as "bittersweet" is a trifle odd. This is a humorous story that carries within its humour an anger that manages to be humane even as it is bitter. And finally, the exploitation taking place in this book takes place in what is now Canada, not "North America." In other words, this opening sentence participates in the softening of historical injustice and brutality that multiculturalism in Canada evokes.

The rest of the commentary continues in this tone. For example, the authors

describe the book's illustrations this way: "Monkman's outlandish woodcut-like illustrations, predominantly in hot pink, underscore the mad lunacy of both Coyote and the explorers" (52). Here Coyote and Columbus and his followers (including Jacques Cartier and representatives of the Catholic church) are equal in their "lunacy." This might be pleasant and amusing to contemplate, but surely Columbus's trade in human contraband is not of the same order of lunacy as Coyote's desire to play ball. *A Coyote Columbus Story* rewrites and perhaps in rewriting redresses the history many of us were taught, but Baker and Setterington downplay this aspect of the book. If I may, I'll explain in more detail.

The title, *A Coyote Columbus Story*, cues the colonial/postcolonial theme. In the history lessons I received as a youngster, Columbus "discovered" North America in 1492, beginning half a millennium of exploration, conquest, and colonization; in this book, Columbus is the creation of a restless Coyote who is looking for someone to play ball with her. Coyote is a trickster figure, a "creator, teacher, and keeper of magic" (Andrews 260), of the people who live on the North American plains. The book's title brings these two names into conjunction: this is a story about Columbus and about Coyote. But perhaps this is a story about a dual character, a Coyote who is also a Columbus. In other words, the title raises the possibility of hybridity, grafting Coyote onto Columbus (or vice versa), even as it signals two cultures, one European and the other Native or Aboriginal. This story tells of myth (Coyote) and history (Columbus). We also have several binaries — animal/human, human/nature, old world/new world — and once we begin to read the story, we will realize other binaries such as play/work and male (Columbus)/female (Coyote). And finally, it is worth noting the word "story." For King to use this word in his title is for him to state the obvious. We expect a story in a picture book like this, but the foregrounding of the word indicates the importance of story itself. We read here a "story," that is a fiction, a narrative construction of word and image combined that has its roots in both written and oral creation. The title confronts us with the collision of the white European world with the Native North American world. That this confrontation takes the form of a fiction should be apparent in the location of Columbus considerably north of the region of the western hemisphere on which he actually landed. And so right from the beginning, the reader faces a trick, a joke. Coyote and Columbus form an unlikely pair to share a story.

In both the text and the illustrations of this story, the reader encounters a re-writing of history, or perhaps a "writing back" (see Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin). On a simple level, the story tells of the coming of Columbus to what we now know as Canada. He lands in Canada by accident on his way to India. Frustrated in his search for India and for things to sell, Columbus decides that he has found India and that the people he meets are Indians. What is more, "these Indians" will be useful commodities back in Europe, and so "Christopher Columbus grabs a big bunch of men and women and children and locks them up in his ships" (n.pag.). These ships sail away. The story ends with the arrival of Jacques Cartier who is also looking for India. As soon as he arrives, the people along with beavers, moose, and turtles "catch the first train to Penticton" (n.pag.). Their flight, we know, is futile.

Monkman's illustrations reinforce the unpleasant implications of the Europeans' arrival in North America. He pictures one of Cartier's followers with a mitre, signifying Episcopal hierarchy and the coming of the Catholic church to North America. In other words, the story is a reminder of the beginnings of colonial North America and the injustices that form the history of colonial activity on this conti-

ment. The presence of both Columbus and Cartier remind the reader that colonial activity took place throughout the "New World."

But King's story is wry. It knows more than simply the history of dislocation and injustice. If we go back to the beginning of the story, we find Coyote the creator. King describes creation as "fixing up the world" (n.pag.). And it is Coyote who did the fixing: "She made rainbows and flowers and clouds and rivers. And she made prune juice and afternoon naps and toe-nail polish and television commercials" (n.pag.). The illustration to this part of the book shows First Nations people driving about in pick-up trucks and a turtle using suntan lotion called "Sun Block 15" (n.pag.). The turtle watches television with a frog and a fish. The anachronistic details are absurd, but they are also an indication that the world we inhabit in the here and now does not differ greatly from the world of the past. In fact, we learn that Coyote made all these things, but that she really only wanted to play ball. Throughout the book, Coyote attempts to find others who will play ball with her. As the book ends, she asks hopefully if Jacques Cartier and his men would like to play ball. Surely the joke here is that what North Americans now like to think is the American pastime — America here denoting the America developed from European colonial activity — is actually the invention of Coyote. At the very least, this detail asks the reader to think about origins, in this case the origin of baseball; it also asks the reader to think about difference and sameness. Columbus and Cartier may be greedy insensitive spoilers of land and culture, but the original people also have their faults. In fact, Coyote has her faults. Things seem to have gone wrong from the beginning. With creation comes imbalance.

Also note that Coyote, the creator, is female. Coyote's gender is King's joke. Trouble always seems to begin with a woman, in this case a woman who plays what is mostly thought of as a man's game: creation or baseball. The joke about gender folds into a joke about race and culture. Finally, Coyote is not responsible for the indolence or the greed of others. She just wants to play ball, and we begin to see the important platitude tucked inside this desire. Coyote wants people to play baseball, but she also wants the people she encounters to "play ball." To "play ball" is another way of saying to get along with: to play ball with the law, to play ball with others. The book is typically a children's book because it calls to everyone to play ball, that is, to get along together. Coyote represents a female way of being as opposed to the aggressive, gun-toting way of Columbus and the men who follow him. Getting along is perhaps easier for females than it is for males. In Coyote's place, men and women get along with moose and turtles and beavers and so on. In other words, the lesson in this book is that men and specifically those men who originally came from Europe do not know how to play ball.

King's foregrounding of Coyote, a First Nations trickster figure, displaces the Christian vision that comes to North America with explorers such as Cartier. The point that Native myths of creation and Native conceptions of divinity predate those of Christianity is also central to King's adult novel, *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993), and we are reminded of the validity of such myths. King suggests a whole history of displacement and attempted assimilation; at the same time, he enacts a reappropriation of European history and myth. When he has Columbus capture Native people and take them to Europe to sell, he reminds us of slavery and injustice and callousness on the part of those Europeans who claimed this continent as their own. He reminds us that they stole the continent and its peoples. By folding into this history contemporary consumerism with the mention of television, Carib-

bean cruises, shopping, and so on, King indicates just how pervasive western capitalism is. Monkman's illustrations show among Columbus's and Cartier's teams an Elvis Presley, a Pilgrim, and a Bishop. King and Monkman together show a world in which playing ball has turned into making money from baseball and other equally ignoble enterprises. For the Eurocentric male, making money is the prime directive. As the human beings in Coyote's world say, "you better watch out or this world is going to get bent." Well, it is too late. The world is bent. But Coyote remains ever the optimist, and her last words, the final words of the book, are: "Maybe you want to play ball." In raising issues of exploitation, conquest, and colonizing through cultural and market practices, King and Monkman ensure their book has a political motive. The retreat of the Native peoples along with "beavers and moose and turtles" to Penticton is a reminder of the marginalization of so-called minority peoples. And, of course, we can add an ecological note: colonization began as Europe took an interest in the animals North America had to offer, and a few hundred years later many of those animals are in danger of disappearing.

As a Native writer working in a non-Native environment, King feels safe creating a narrative critical of the dominant group in that environment. The narrator of *A Coyote Columbus Story* refers to Columbus and his companions and also Cartier and his companions as "funny-looking people" who wear "funny-looking clothes" (n.pag.). In this story, "otherness" is an attribute of European people. Monkman's illustrations emphasize the point by having the Native people dressed in clothes we are used to seeing on the people around us in the late twentieth or early twenty-first centuries and the Europeans dressed in outlandish clothes that combine historical costume with contemporary performance outfits. In addition, the Europeans' clothes show evidence of overuse, patched and stitched as they are to cover wear and tear. We might speculate that the patches signify just how worn out European styles of dress and behaviour are. The Europeans may have the wherewithal to travel the globe and to take people into captivity, but their threadbare clothes indicate just how poor they really are.

Now Baker and Setterington cannot give any book in their *Guide* as full a reading as I have given *A Coyote Columbus Story*. Their job is to guide readers to books. My point is twofold: either they offer reviews that smooth over content that might direct attention to multicultural innocence, or they simply do not include books in their *Guide* that directly challenge this innocence. A book such as Welwyn Wilton Katz's *False Face* receives praise for "giving the reader some understanding of Native lore" (165), but the reader receives no warning that the "lore" she or he learns from this book is mostly made up and not accurate of the people from whom Katz claims to derive it (see McGillis). Where are writers such as Marlene Nourbese Philip, Himani Bannerji, Afua Cooper, Lillian Allen, Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, or Dionne Brand? Even with writers well represented, such as Robert Munsch, why don't we have mention of *Good Families Don't* (1990) or *Giant or Waiting for the Thursday Boat* (1989)? The answer to this last question is most likely that these books contain material potentially offensive to some readers. The same is true of books written by the writers I list who are absent from the *Guide*.

What the reader who knows anything about Canadian children's books must conclude from his or her reading of the *Guide* is that the books listed, and especially those listed as Highly Recommended, must be the best books available for young readers. Where this leaves the likes of sean o'huiagan's *The Ghost Horse of the Mounties* (1983) or Ken Ward's *Twelve Kids One Cow* (1989) or Diane Dawber's *My Under-*

wear's Inside Out: The Care and Feeding of Younger Poets (1991) in poetry, or writers such as Nehiyaw (Glecia Bear), Sue Bland, David Bouchard, Jacolyn Caton, or those I list in the previous paragraph is off the canon, out of sight. Obviously a guide such as Baker and Settington's must make choices, and the tendency is to base these choices on what purports to be aesthetic and emotional value. The authors tell us their choices for the section on Series Books include "popular mystery series, whose only virtue is the information they convey about Canadian settings, and more enriching stories that will appeal to the desire for adventure and, at the same time, push the imagination that little bit farther" (214). They make it clear that they do not value series books highly, and that the main virtue of such books is that they may prove to be "a stepping stone leading readers to stories with more complex plots and characters, and with more colourful and textured language" (214). In other words, Baker and Settington, like the compiler of *The Juvenile Review* almost 200 years ago, insist on the "delight and instruct" (appeal to the imagination — whatever that really means) formula for children's books. And, again like the compiler of *The Juvenile Review*, Baker and Settington recommend books that offer little challenge to dominant ideologies, little to shake the traditional values of white Anglo-Saxon society.

Note

The work of my colleague, Louise Saldanha, has given much impetus to my thinking for this article. I refer to Louise's Ph.D. dissertation, "Colouring Outside the Lines: Children's Literature Written by Women of Colour in Canada," University of Calgary, 2004.

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Windows and Words: A Description of a Scene / E. Holly Pike

Windows and Words: A Look at Canadian Children's Literature in English. Ed. Aïda Hudson and Susan-Ann Cooper. Reappraisals: Canadian Writers 25. U of Ottawa P, 2003. 239 pp. \$22.00 paper. ISBN 0-7766-0556-9.

This collection of essays and commentaries does not make any claim to be comprehensive in scope or approach, as indicated by its subtitle. It is essentially a snapshot of a moment in the study of Canadian literature for young people. Like any snapshot, this one both reveals changes in the landscape and reinforces earlier impressions of the permanent features of the scene.

The editors' description of the book as "celebrating the wealth, the multitudinousness of our imaginative literature for the young" (1) is a fair description of some parts of the collection, since some of the essays (such as Judith Saltman's survey, Beverly Haun's article on Aboriginal voices, and Gregory Maillet's article on multiculturalism in Saskatchewan) seem to zoom in on a portion of the view, describing what exists in particular categories and bringing to our attention previously unknown works. Tim Wynne-Jones's piece on "The Difference Between Writing for Adults and Children" addresses the challenges writers face without being too dogmatic about the choices they should make. Articles by Janet Lunn and Michael Solomon focus on the elements of book production, drawing attention to the variety of expertise and talent involved in the creation of picture books rather than analyzing particular texts, thus revealing what is going on in the under-examined background of the scene.

The editors also acknowledge the immovable presence of L.M. Montgomery, since the six articles on her work in this volume "confirm the central place" she holds in the field of Canadian children's literature (2). These articles cover a wide range of topics and critical approaches — analyzing her works in relation to W.O. Mitchell and William Wordsworth, imperial motherhood and religion, through the lenses of body theory, canonicity, and history — as one would expect given the current state of Montgomery criticism. Certainly, we should not complain that Montgomery is now getting the attention she deserves. However, the effect within this "Look at Canadian Children's Literature in English" is to draw attention to the imbalance of the picture and to make us wish that other writers were getting the same level of critical attention. In fact, the editors describe the articles on Montgomery as a "model for the kind of attention subsequent writers of children's