

Canadian Children's Regional Literature: Fictions First

• Neil Besner •

Résumé: Les conceptions traditionnelles de l'identité canadienne qui président à notre lecture des textes littéraires influent également sur notre perception des particularismes de la littérature pour la jeunesse dite régionale. À partir de six albums illustrés, dont trois proviennent des Prairies et trois du Québec, l'auteur s'attache à démontrer que les appellations "canadienne" et "régionale" sont des catégories importantes mais secondaires dans l'appréciation de ces ouvrages. La critique canadienne a tendance à surévaluer ces caractéristiques secondaires au détriment des qualités explicitement et spécifiquement littéraires de ces textes.

Summary: The traditional conceptions, recently contested, of Canadian identity that affect the ways we read literary texts in general also affect our reading of Canadian children's regional literature. This article considers six picture books, three by Prairie writers and three from Quebec, in order to make the point that both "Canadian" and "regional" categories should be understood as helpful markers that are secondary to the primary qualities of the six books as fictions (although "regional" might be a more useful term in postcolonial discussions than it was when it was simply opposed to "nation"). Prairie writing and writing from Quebec can indeed be distinguished by secondary characteristics, but in Canadian criticism we have tended to overvalue these kinds of secondary characteristics and either undervalue, or pay less attention to, the more explicitly and specifically literary qualities of these and other texts.

I: Some Disclaimers and A Polemic

In the spring of 1996, my colleague Perry Nodelman, knowing that I was teaching a course in Canadian Regional Literature, asked whether I'd be interested in contributing an essay on a related subject for a special issue of *Canadian Children's Literature*. In the course I was teaching, we were attempting a contrast of Prairie writing and writing from Quebec; Perry asked whether I'd consider looking at several children's books from the same regions, asking the same questions about them, and gave me six books (three from each region) to think about.

I told Perry that I had no expertise in children's literature. I am a Canadianist who has written principally on Mavis Gallant, Alice Munro, the short story in Canada, and nineteenth- and twentieth-century Canadian criticism, fiction, and poetry. He replied that this was what might make my response interesting: it would be a view from an "outsider specialist." On those grounds,

I rashly accepted Perry's invitation.

The outsider specialist in me retreated further and more especially outside after my experience teaching the regional course, which made me increasingly aware of my growing unease with the ways in which a category like "region" might now be understood in Canadian writing, after postcolonial theory had interrogated the old oppositions between empire and colony, region and centre. Tempted, however, by the six beautifully produced exotics, to my untrained eye, sitting before me, I rushed onwards. I knew that I knew nothing about children's literature. And I knew that my view of the development of Canadian criticism over the last twenty-five years — say, since Atwood's *Survival* was published in 1972 — is that we have been writing an increasingly splintered discourse that is struggling to come to terms with the work of our most important critic, Northrop Frye, and to establish a viable framework for studying this postcolonial culture's fractured dialogue with its past. Our success has been limited in both of these related ventures, and my amateur reading of "Canadian" "Children's" "Regional" ("Literature") was bound to reflect my perception of these limits, as will become quickly apparent.

To ask "What's Canadian about Canadian *Children's Literature*?" only compounds the alleged problem *Canadian* literature has had with its own alleged identity crisis for as long as Canada and its literatures have been studied. This is, among other things, a problem with the ways in which we are accustomed to read in this culture. Since at least as early as the appearance of those quintessentially "Canadian" writers, Catharine Parr Traill and Susanna Moodie — those British sisters whose works seemed to capture at once the twinned spirits of dislocation and the urgent call, therefore, to name and map a new place (and whose names and books have so variously and powerfully haunted the imaginations of later Canadian writers) — one recurrent element in Canadian literature's vocation has seen it alternately inspired and disturbed, animated and flattened, by our calls for it to tell us, as explicitly as possible, who we are and where we stand, and to do so without getting fancy (i.e. literary) about it. Hence what has long been identified as one of our literature's insistent callings: its "documentary impulse" in all genres. Hence, too, our literature's seemingly wild departures — to the eye and ear trained to read in these documentary schools — from these strictures into the surreal, the fabulist, the mythological.

It follows that our definitions of "region," similarly, have too often been narrowly literalist in their leanings, valuing documentary notions of place (or even province) more than the literary forms, styles, and genres that imaginative *and* experiential engagement with place — on the prairie and elsewhere — might create. Inquiries into region in Canadian children's literature might share this problem. "Region" in a postcolonial culture can no longer mean simply "local," if it ever did mean anything that simple. The best regional writing in Canada has always evoked the local and the particular without forced reference to the general or national. Sinclair Ross's "regional" sense of prairie, for example, is more acute and, in the best sense, local, than Hugh MacLennan's brief excursus into this unknown territory in *Two Solitudes*. "Region" imagines setting without forcing it into a subservient relation with nation — can imagine "prairie," for example, without numbing reference to its relation to the "East" (usually understood in

Western Canada, alas, to mean Ontario, not the Maritimes). A similar sense of region animates Faulkner, Hardy, Margaret Laurence, Guy Vanderhaeghe, or Alice Munro. None of these writers would bridle at being praised as a regional writer (but all of them, I'd suspect, would see the designation as secondary). The same is true of Roch Carrier, or Yves Beauchemin, in Quebec; and to the extent that they are strong regional writers, their work cuts cleanly through the clumsy mesh of nationalist rhetoric. "Region" in a postcolonial culture, in other words, can be thought of without reference to centre; and that conception might also have the salutary effect of drawing our attention first to (regional) fictions as fictions, and second, to their qualities as regional (fictions), because "region" in this conception does not bear the old burden of carrying the allegedly suppressed or embattled aspirations of local place into combat against the imagined hegemony of the centre.

When I think about the significance of region in Canadian literature, I am often drawn to a much-quoted remark of Frye's in his "Conclusion" to the *Literary History of Canada*. Frye remarked that "Canadian sensibility has been profoundly disturbed, not so much by our famous problem of identity, important as that is, as by a series of paradoxes in what confronts that identity. It is less perplexed by the question 'Who am I?' than by some such riddle as 'Where is here?'" Although Frye is writing about Canadian culture in broad terms, "Where is here," I think, is an apt formulation for theories of regionalism that explore its constructions of place, and what I read as Frye's gentle irony above ("not so much by our famous problem of identity") attests to his sense that questions about "here" in Canada might be more pressing than questions about "who." It has always seemed revealing to me that the ("famous") question of a national identity should be so closely associated with the vocation of a national literature in Canada. Frye's half turn away from the traditional framing of the question opens out into the possibility of understanding regionalism, not in opposition against a national literature, and not as a more narrow literature, but as a literature that imagines location as "identity."

Another way of putting this would be that regional writing in Canada, following Frye, is less concerned with ontology and essences than with revealing the sense of place and identity that a writer like Margaret Laurence, for example, evokes via Al Purdy's lines in her epigraph to *The Diviners* — "For they had their being once/ and left a place to stand on." (Laurence also remarked that she would not have been able to write had it not been for Ross before her. In other words, Ross had his being/and left a place for her to stand on. For Laurence, a writer imagining prairie before her might be as important for her fiction as her having lived in Neepawa.) In Purdy's formulation, a sense of being creates a sense of place, and therefore "who am I," although it might necessarily precede "where is here," is only a beginning.

What does such a formulation of region have to do with Canadian books for children that are set on the prairies or in Quebec? First, it might move us away from conceiving of region simply as place, and towards a conception of region as a ground for identity. When we are thinking about prairie books, for children or for adults, perhaps it is the acts of imagination taking place on the prairie — in all of their forms — that should ground our conceptions of region, and not the other

way around. Prairie writing as we know it today is above all plural and various. It is sophisticated in its experiments with language and form, sensitive to place, to prairie and city and small town, to ethnic and racial and linguistic particularity: think of Grove, Ostenso, Ross, Kroetsch, Laurence, Roy; the Wiebes Rudy and Armin, the Hunters Maureen and Catherine, the Mitchells Ken and W.O.; Margie Sweatman, Wiseman, Waddington, Shields, Thomas King, Dennis Cooley, Dave Arnason, Carol Matas, Di Brandt, Sheldon Oberman, Margaret Buffie, Linda Holeman, Méira Cook, Beatrice Culleton, Robert Budde, Lawrence Hill.

On the evidence of the three prairie books for children at hand, it is more interesting to read them in relation, first, to other prairie books, second, as books for children. And the sense of region that they evoke is not Canadian, or for children, first; it is for better or for worse, *literary* first. That means that it is indirect rather than documentary, despite the constant and very Canadian call for the latter, or for total departures from the latter. (We are insistently intolerant of ambiguity when we read in Canada, mistaking departures from realism either as unmistakable genius or as lies, and I think this is particularly true in Western Canada, as we veer from, say, Kroetsch to Roy.)

It is appropriate and necessary for a national literature to be defined by certain shared characteristics and their corollaries, certain dispositions in reading. It is less appropriate and necessary to let those shared dispositions — in Canada, what sometimes seems to be a near obsession with what is extra-literary in a text, be it the text's themes; its confirmation, modification, or rejection of a Canadian identity; or its conformation to or departure from a straitjacketed notion of realism, to name a few — to become our *primary* concerns when discussing a text. Yes, these qualities are important; yes, they are useful and helpful. But in Canadian criticism they sometimes threaten to almost wilfully scant the salient truth that a fiction, for example, is *first* a creation: a story, a tale, with a language, shape, style, and form that are primarily imaginative in their disposition.

That rush to judgment has often been true of Canadian criticism, I would argue, and has also informed its own recent counter-movement: some of our recent flights into abstrusely appropriated theory, which have opened up what cynical observers might see as a gulf between esoteric specialists and commonsensical readers. But this is unhealthy and hasty attitudinizing. More to the point: as I will try to argue here, the six books I have been given would be best read by delaying for a bit the question of whether they are "Canadian" or "regional," relegating it to the back seat. That they are understood to be Canadian because the author is Canadian, or the publisher, or the setting, is relevant, but secondary. I'd like to see more attention paid to these books as fictions first.

II: A Naif Reads Six Books

The six books that Perry has given me are set in the two "regions" (I remain uncomfortable with thinking about Quebec as a region) that I chose to contrast when I taught, in 1995-96, Regional Canadian Literature, an upper level course at the University of Winnipeg. The prairies are represented by/in Margaret Laurence's *The Olden Days Coat*, Rudy Wiebe's *Chinook Christmas*, and Jim

McGugan's *Joseph: A Prairie Boy's Story*. The books set in Quebec are Stephane Poulin's *My Mother's Loves: Stories and Lies from My Childhood*, and Roch Carrier's *A Happy New Year's Day* and *The Hockey Sweater*.

On the evidence of these books, this (very small) cross-section of Canadian children's literature does not conform to or depart from our traditional theories of regionalism, does not seem markedly or rebelliously Canadian or un-Canadian, and does not provide much more than a faint point of departure for formulating a theory of children's literature. Rather, these stories please or annoy, engage or distract, instruct, delight, or irritate me in quite distinct and particular ways that have more to do with the ways in which I understand them to be operating as fictions. Region, like genre and nationality, is a category that operates, to be sure, but does so at a remove.

I read Laurence's *The Olden Days Coat* primarily through the lens that Laurence has taught me to put on through her other fiction. Of course I can't say that a child reading this text would see the same things. I do suspect that a child of ten, say (the age of Sal, the book's protagonist) would enjoy the book, but perhaps not for quite the same reasons. I believe that every fiction teaches us how to read it, issues us an invitation that we learn to take up or to resist — that this is one of the delights and challenges of reading fiction. In Laurence's case, the invitation is often one that turns on Laurence's recurring explorations, evocations, and invocations of time, memory, and the work of the imagination, most famously in *The Stone Angel* and in *The Diviners*. (For the most instructive contrast to date between these two novels' uses of memory, see Leona Gom's essay on the subject in *Canadian Literature*.)

In this sense, I understand Laurence to be working to fine effect in a central literary tradition, one that has engaged writers of fiction beyond our borders from the modern birth of the form onwards. That she is a Canadian writer, and one who set her Manawaka novels on the prairies, is a matter of local pride, but—as the success of her fiction in translation and worldwide might attest — might more properly be a secondary matter. It might inspire more visitors local and foreign to Neepawa; it might enrich our appreciation of Manitoba; it might make us justifiably proud at the University of Winnipeg to know that Laurence studied here. All of this is well and good. More rewarding and intriguing, however, is to read, again and for the first time, Laurence's understanding of what fiction is, what the imagination is, how fiction assembles, reshapes, or works and plays over the past; and those typical Laurence signatures are everywhere in evidence, and to fine effect, in *The Olden Days Coat*.

Though a child might not use my vocabulary to describe these qualities (for the child's sake, I'd hope not), I expect that the delight I imagine a child taking in this story might be related in large part to these same qualities. I'm heartened, as well, to learn that, although we did not want to take Laurence seriously when she advised that *The Diviners* would probably be her last novel (just as many Canadian readers and critics still do not want to attend to the possibility that *The Diviners*, among its other evident riches, is an elegy, a beautiful meditation on the dying of an imagination's powers), *The Olden Days Coat* illustrates how fine a writer Laurence remains, five years after the publication of her last "adult" novel.

The Olden Days Coat is the story of a city girl, Sal, forced to spend her first Christmas away from home because her grandfather has died recently and her grandmother does not want to come to Sal's house this time. Sal, looking in wonderment at old family photographs in her grandmother's shed, puts on an "olden days coat" and is transported into an alternate world, a past in which she meets a young girl, Sarah, who turns out at story's end to have been an early incarnation of her grandmother, and who opens an Early Christmas present that turns out to be the one that Sarah now passes on to her namesake, her granddaughter Sal.

Paraphrase, as Cleanth Brooks once remarked, is a heresy; but you can see how such a plot, with its transports between past and present, its focus on imagination as wonderment inspired by memory and its portents — portents like the photographs Sal marvels over — would be rich Laurence territory, and so it is.

It is in these ways that I find the story to be so typical of Laurence's fiction: the structured gaze of Hagar Shipley in *The Stone Angel*, "rampant with memory," over her ninety years of life, the more daring interplay among Morag Gunn's memories, texts, photographs, and fictions in *The Diviners*: all three fictions invoke the imagination and its powers to teach, transform, instruct, and delight. Many children would be intrigued by this story, I presume. I think I would have been.

Unlike Laurence, who dares to write simply in her story, Rudy Wiebe in *Chinook Christmas* appears to write with a different audience in mind. Compare Laurence's and Wiebe's opening paragraphs:

The snow outside Gran's house was fine and powdery, and it shone in the late afternoon sun as though there were a million miniature Christmas lights within it. The bare branches of the maples cast blue shadows across the white expanse of the lawn. Sal thought briefly of lying down in the fresh snow and sweeping her arms to and fro to make a snow angel, but the snow looked so good as it was, with not even a footprint in it, she decided to leave it that way.

The winter I turned nine was our first in southern Alberta, and the snowy scars of irrigation ditches circling lower and lower into the long, shallow hollow of our town seemed to me then like the trenches of some besieging army. The grey, wrinkled snow lay driven there off the tilted fields, long, long welts of it carved in parallels below the square top of Big Chief Mountain sixty miles away where the implacable General of the Winds stood forever roaring at his troops:
Advance!

I accept that Laurence and Wiebe are using a different style, syntax, idiom, and point of view for different effect. But one of the strengths of Wiebe's fiction for adults — the near magisterial, annunciative, declamatory sweep of syntax, the near melodramatic heft of his cumulative sentences — is less suited here to the retrospective point of view of his adult narrator looking back on his nine-year-old self. Laurence, as critics have shown, is capable of writing strikingly complex prose for artistically sound reasons and effect (see, for example, Bill New's essay on language in *The Stone Angel*). But when she chooses her style here, she succeeds in conveying an equally effective simplicity that serves her purpose admirably, without condescension, without artificiality (as distinct from artifice).

Not so Wiebe. I admire the eloquence of Wiebe's language, here as in all his fiction, and *Chinook Christmas* is a beautifully produced and beautifully illustrated book. But the story often threatens to collapse under the weight of Wiebe's language. It is as if the narrator cannot quite bend his knees. There is much history, much sociology, much experience of the prairie and the townspeople, and in this sense this book is educational to read. But as a *story* it is weak. Perversely, one might argue that as an exemplar of Canadian regional children's literature, this is a very good book. That's my point.

The writer I know least about among these three is Jim McGugan, whose *Joseph: a prairie boy's story* is in some ways the most exciting of the prairie books. Unlike Wiebe's story, which attempts to be explicit about ethnic life, custom, and language — but sometimes comes close, unintentionally, to fetishizing it — McGugan finds a way to convey, more indirectly, implicitly, more *fictionally* (and therefore more effectively), the muted pain and power of Joseph, a fourteen-year-old boy who can't speak very much English, as seen from the vantage point of a younger boy and admirer, a narrator whose language *does* seem to emerge from his own ethos and fully imagined character. The story traces Joseph's struggles in school, in "primary row," his defense of the younger children against bullies, his decision to bag grain for a dollar a day instead of remaining in school. The raw sense of "prairie," of land, language, deprivation, is everywhere: but it is everywhere *integrated* with McGugan's primary sense of his story, which is about the connections between the narrator and Joseph. Character — that staple of fiction so much under attack in recent anti-essentialist critiques of identities real or fictional — carries forward the story for McGugan as for Laurence, and language — still the least studied feature of Canadian writing, although by now we should know much better — serves both writers beautifully.

These three stories, all set on the prairie, all telling "prairie stories" of one kind or another, are good "regional," "prairie," "Canadian" "children's literature." They are intriguing, delightful, effective. They give pleasure. They are educational. But above all, and first — and without this quality, the others will not sustain discussion — these are fictions, stories. When the story carries us away — through language, through character, through plot, and, although my limited vocabulary doesn't allow me to name this satisfactorily, or explain how, through the illustrations — it is more than enough. What I know of prairie realities through these stories, as through any fiction, has become as close to intuitive as language can approximate. Creating that intuitive understanding of place might be one of the powers of regional writing, for children and adults alike. "Where is here?" is not *only* a riddle.

Having contested most attempts to define prairie fiction above, it would seem contradictory at best to turn around and insist that Quebec fiction has recognizable characteristics which should be taken more seriously. I do believe there are *some* grounds for a contrast, but they are points of departure only, and that holds for children's literature as well as far as I can determine. The three fictions here, like much Quebec fiction I know, take up themes, predictably, more important to Quebec culture than to other regions: the divisions between French and English, for example, are fertile territory for Carrier in most of his fiction, and the French incarnation, in Quebec, of the Catholic Church is equally fertile ground

for Carrier and others.

Arguably, Quebec fiction in general — particularly, fiction written in French — is less preoccupied with the realism/anti-realism dialectic than prairie writing. Arguably it is less earnest, less dour, less preoccupied with documenting cultural history, and more extravagant, funnier, darker and more explicit in its depictions of sexuality, perversion, of incestuous families. Arguably it has less to show or say about landscape, about isolation, solitude (about Prairie Puritanism). Predictably, the large and impoverished family, often featuring a powerful mother or grandmother, is a prominent feature in Quebec fiction. But these are, again, secondary features. They are easy to pick out, just as it is easy to suggest that Neepawa is Laurence's model for her Manawaka, or that small-town life on the prairies animates Wiebe's story, or that McGugan is rendering the prairie farming ethos.

More interesting, to begin with Stéphane Poulin's wonderful story, *My Mother's Loves: Stories and Lies from My Childhood*, are this fiction's exuberant proclamation and enactment of the artful, necessary, delightful, fundamental marriage of lies, stories, and childhood that animate it *as fiction*. The story is as bare as Laurence's is simple: a narrator recalls that his family was large and poor and fatherless (although, significantly, that last fact is never mentioned, is learned only by inference); that they didn't have enough room in their house, in the country amidst cabbage patches, for their belongings; that it often rained; that one day an elephant named Tuba came to live with them after some very bad rains; that Tuba was returned to the zoo; that a garbage collector came to take away their belongings, thinking they were trash, but ended up marrying their mother; that they all lived happily ever after. The end. As with my feeble summary of Laurence, this is largely inadequate. Poulin's story delights because of the exuberance of its own imagining, because it does not matter which is the lie, which is the story, what is the truth, because it is a story at once artful and artless — because it celebrates invention. What matters is the narrator's delight, and the ways in which we participate in it. The simple line of the story, its light and flagrant inconsequence, is mirrored in the tiny boxes of text on each page, where they are generously swamped, subsumed in the luxuriant spread of the illustrations. What the fiction proclaims is itself — not tautologically, but as an invitation. It is a simple revel. And like Laurence's simplicity, I expect that it is very difficult to pull off.

As is the case with Laurence, I've read and admired too much Carrier not to read these two stories of his against and alongside his other work, and, as with Laurence, this seems at least as appropriate an entrance as any other. And as with Laurence and prairie writing, to read Carrier in this way is also to move towards a hazy topography of Quebec writing — later. Yes, it is interesting, important, significant to consider Carrier's fictional representations of Quebec, in all of his work (and when I first reviewed Carrier's collection of stories, *The Hockey Sweater*, for *Canadian Literature* some twenty years ago, I admit that's some of what I did). But what might be more important is to convey how it is *his fiction* that does these good things. Like Laurence, and, perhaps, like all good writers of fiction, Carrier is charmed, beguiled, in wonderment at the sheer miracle of being — in *A Happy New Year's Day*, the narrator's sheer wonderment at remembering when he first

realized himself in the world — and this is, among other things, a *literary* experience, bound up in the intuition of self, the birth of an imagination, the emergence of a world, the annunciation of presence. Here is the story's opening:

May I tell you about New Year's Day, 1941? Why this particular one? Because it's the first one I can remember. Before that day, to me, the world did not really exist. On that day, everything started to be. So here is the story of the beginning of my world.

This narrator's vocation is one of the chief vocations of fiction, be it Proust's young Marcel, Laurence's Hagar Shipley, Dickens' Pip, Munro's Del Jordan: to say and show how it feels to begin to come into being, to enter time (this is the same moment, more darkly imagined, that animates one of Elizabeth Bishop's most famous poems, "In The Waiting Room," and in a slightly different guise, one of Atwood's less known poems, "There Is Only One of Everything"). The teeming accumulation of detail that makes up the story of this four-year-old's New Year's Day, 1941, gains its impish exuberance and energy from just that sense of wonderment that the writer conveys through his narrator's wide eyes, his young voice. Yes, French Canadian village life emerges in all its quirky particularity here, as it does in many other Carrier fictions; yes, we can itemize those particulars, draw up a catalogue of them, note their variations small and large from book to book and throughout many Quebec fictions, for children and adults alike. And yes, some of those categories might be assembled into a template, "Quebec children's fiction (a taxonomy?)" But let us not lose sight of Carrier's wonderment. It is real magic for children and grown ups. Without it, no fiction, no world, no presence (and no critics).

One of the sources that consistently animates Carrier's energetic, comic invention is his moral indignation at French/English relations, and that is what undergirds "The Hockey Sweater." But this story's chief pleasure, its magical transport, is to gather up this sociocultural critique and give it a local habitation and name. For readers unfamiliar with the story, I vow that this will be my final murder via plot summary: the narrator, an avid Canadiens fan, like all village boys in their right minds, outgrows his hockey sweater. His mother orders him another Canadiens sweater from the Eaton's catalogue, that staple of Anglo culture. Eaton's (did the store misunderstand the mother's letter in English, addressed to Monsieur Eaton in her "fine schoolteacher's hand"?) sends a Maple Leaf sweater. Doom, opprobrium, shame, and hell — even ridicule and ostracization — for the narrator, whose prayer closes the story: "I asked God to send me right away, a hundred million moths that would eat up my Toronto Maple Leafs sweater." No more need be said. Read or watch the story, either in this incarnation, or the film, or in the adult version.

III: Canadian Regional Children's Literature, Second; Fictions First

Six books and some five thousand words later, I have arrived at no satisfactory definition of Canadian Children's Regional Literature. I have Carrier, Laurence, Poulin, McGugan to warm me, Wiebe to admire, cautiously. Would it have been better to think of the construction of the child in these fictions than to inquire

about region, nation? (Yes, he said, chastised.) Would it have been more interesting to consider the texts more carefully alongside the illustrations? (Yes, he said, mortified.) The illustrations in these six books deserve a paper in their own right, but it would not be one about the topic at hand. The production of these books also deserves a full essay, a piece discussing publishing and editing values in children's books. These, and more. But reading these six books has extended and modified my general beliefs about how and why we read fiction. As we discuss the identity, viability, provenance, or constitution of *Canadian Children's Regional Literature*, let's remember that these books are exemplars of these things, yes; but they are fictions first.

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