Editorial: Introduction, Eh?

In the first chapter of my children's novel, *The Same Place But Different*, the main character puts his toque on before he goes out into the cold of a Winnipeg winter. But only in Canada — in the American edition of the novel, the toque has been replaced by a generic "hat." The reason for the change is simple: the American editor did not know what a toque was, and was convinced that American children would have no idea about what a toque was. The toque had to go. It went.

When I tell this story to Canadians, they almost always become very angry. After all, they say, the book is set in Canada, isn't it? And in Canada we call a spade a spade, and a toque a toque. Demanding that I ditch the toque is a distortion, a misrepresentation, a typically American act of imperialistic arrogance. Nevertheless, the very same people who get mad about the missing toque tend to be absolutely convinced that, no matter what he wears on his head, American children will have no more trouble in identifying with or being interested in my character and his adventures than will children in Canada. On the one hand, the distinctive headgear of Canadian children is symbolic of an important difference, a distinct or even unique identity. On the other hand, Canadian and American children are really, despite their variant tastes in headgear, basically the same.

This intriguing double-think sums up the reasons for the existence of these two special issues. As Canadians, we tend to want to believe that we are a distinct people — different, especially, from the Americans whose culture dominates our continent. But because we also and at the same time seem to be convinced that we have a lot — indeed, almost everything—in common with Americans, we are never quite sure about exactly how we are distinct. We treasure apparently insignificant little things like toques (and back bacon and French on cereal boxes and sentences that end with "eh?") as symbols of a deep and important difference, even though we are usually quite unclear about what the difference is or even why it is so important. For us, a toque is not just a toque — it represents something. Something Very Important. And also, very mysterious.

For us, then, identity is a question. Canadians will not be surprised by the fact that the topic of these issues announces itself as a question; beyond the presence of the occasional toque or "céréale de grains de riz grillés au four," we are quite genuinely unclear about what's Canadian about Canadian children's literature. It's almost impossible to imagine Americans even asking the equivalent question about American children's literature, let alone being the least bit uncertain about the answer to it if someone did happen to raise it. Americans know exactly who they are as Americans. Canadians know for sure only that they are not American. Being "not American" might well turn out to be the Canadian identity, and the answer to the question about "what's Canadian" might well be the fact that Canadians are a people who keep on asking the question and keep

on questioning the answers.

The contents of these two issues reinforce and celebrate the identity of questioning and uncertainty. There are no dogmatic answers here, and not even all that many agreements amongst the various contributors. In other words, there is much to think about and to be productively uncertain about. This is a very Canadian issue. Or maybe it isn't. I'm not sure. I'm a Canadian.

The issues begin with two views from the outside, on the theory that others might perceive important truths about us that we are ourselves blissfully unaware of. Maria Nikolajeva of Stockholm University in Sweden is a specialist in children's literature but is not Canadian: Neil Besner, a Canadian and a specialist in Canadian literature for adults, claims little expertise in the area of children's literature. Both provide fresh and provocative insights as they describe their responses to some Canadian children's books. Besner asserts his resistance to readings of texts that focus on identifying certain fixed characteristics as distinctly Canadian; intriguingly, then, both Cornelia Hoogland's and Sue Easun's contributions describe how some specific texts might represent a distinctly Canadian identity merely in being shifty and multi-focussed and uncertain. The theme of uncertainty continues in the brief and delightfully assorted answers to the question about what's Canadian in Canadian children's literature provided by more than forty different writers, editors, scholars, and others in a section that shares the title of the issue as a whole. Finally, Jerry Diakiw makes a passionate plea for the place of literature and literary education in helping young Canadians to develop a sense of all the complicated things it might mean to be Canadian. In doing so, he offers a slightly different answer to the central question: what's Canadian about Canadian children's literature is the richly complex (and decidedly uncertain) subjectivity it works to construct in the Canadian children who read it — with or without their toques on. In addition, we are pleased to include Sheila Egoff's appreciation of Irene Aubrey who has made such an immense contribution to Canadian children's literature through her work in the Children's Literature Service / Service de littérature de jeunesse at the National Library in Ottawa.

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