conditions of difference are often shown to nourish and strengthen imaginative processes) animate young children's capacity for self-expression and expand the potential for socially resonant forms of creative endeavour.

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Weathering the Psychological "Prairies"

If You're Not from the Prairie.... David Bouchard. Illus. Henry Ripplinger. Raincoast Books & SummerWild Productions, 1993. 32 pp. $19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-9696097-4-4. ***A Prairie Year.*** Jo Bannatyne-Cugnet. Illus. Yvette Moore. Tundra Books, 1994. 32 pp. $17.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-334-0.

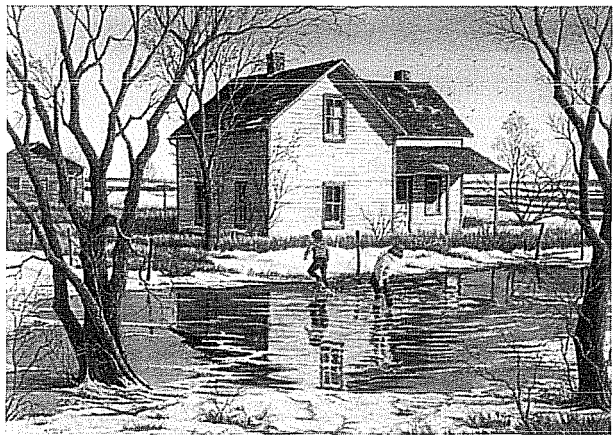
Pull on your balaclavas and squall jackets: we're in for some blustery, prairie weather. Henry Ripplinger takes us on a nostalgic, visual tour which includes spring skies reminiscent of Hurley (11). Sky predominates the prairie as it does the pages of this book. Layout artist Dean Allen has artfully accentuated the dream-like quality and extended the metaphorical theme of both images and story. His placement of the text evokes cumulous word-clouds in stanzas cleverly flanked by hazy-edged, delightfully narrative vignettes (8). The text is rhythmical, the form comfortably repetitive but not particularly poetic. Its insistence, which cumulates in a point, finally, on page 22 that,

> If you're not from the prairie,
> You don't know me.
> You just can't know ME.

becomes somewhat disconcerting if not annoying. Perhaps the writer has taken his point too far. Prairie writers have found the device of inner landscape somewhat irresistible (if not inevitable). In the capable hands of Sinclair Ross and W.O. Mitchell, extended metaphors (even the personification) of weather and landscape work — undeniably. In his famous disclaimer "The Weather in this Book," Mark Twain recognized that "weather is a literary specialty, and no untrained hand can turn out a good article of it." Twain's solution was to append "such weather as is necessary" to human narrative, instructing the reader that "[t]his weather will be found over in the back part of the book, out of the way." The "reader" was to "turn over and help himself from time to time as he goes along." A tempting strategy.

Like Twain's readership, Bouchard and Ripplinger's prairie seems to be populated solely by lone men and boys. I could, of course, be misassigning gender to the somewhat androgynous (long-haired) children which people Ripplinger's paintings. Certainly several of his grassier scenes evoke Wyeth's "Christina's World."

Nevertheless, the text remains petulant, motherless. How does one small "ME" (even heart and soul) *ever* become upper-case enough to withstand the prairie's vastness? Bouchard's somewhat enigmatic answer might be that one *becomes* the prairie, becomes sky, sun, wind, snow, flat, cold. In this case, it would



appear that the reflective little boy of "Time Out" (24) has weathered the prairie in such a way that he has grown mysterious if not impenetrable.

Other writers — Sharon Butala, W.O Mitchell, Farley Mowat — have literarily and literally roamed the prairie which (even in 1995) circumscribes our Saskatchewan cities, our Saskatchewan lives. Each of them *knows* frozen toes, sports "hair [that's] mostly wind," would perhaps admit to "hear[ing] grass" maybe even answering back. Yet for all their roving, the most wildlife that Bouchard and Ripplinger seem to stir up are some stylized crows on page nine. *If You're Not from the Prairie ...* is an imagined journey through a prairie which exists, like these men's childhoods, mainly in memory. This is not a Sunday walk across the "south eighty." It's not the experience of accidentally flushing a hawk from her summerfallow nest of gawky, oddly-sized young, of freezing at the sound of a doe conversing with her well-camouflaged fawns, of chirping back at some belligerent magpie or of being mesmerized by the gait of a coyote crossing the gridroad a stone's throw away. This "prairie" is anachronistic, archival. It leaves us with a haunting sense of loss, of abandonment. It convinces us of the need for reflection.

Ballantyne-Cugnet and Moore's *A Prairie Year* welcomes us to come in, roll up our sleeves and get right to work. There are chores to be done and there's "not ... much time to daydream." Moore's paintings are narrative. Reading them is a familiar, intimate, deeply confirming experience like flipping through a well-worn family photo album. Her best work is fluid, well-composed, textured and delightfully detailed (April, page 13). It brings Rockwell to mind. She provides detail painstakingly, richly, evocatively: like Cicansky. Reading this art with its complementary text invites story-sharing. It is a pleasure to the senses, a challenge to memory and imagination.

At first glance, the text appears somewhat ponderous. It is *dense* with information. Like the paintings, however, the text reveals a world of characters whom we feel we've met or perhaps known all our lives. It reminds us that the language of the prairie overflows with words which we will not always find in a dictionary but that we use as if by heart. Bannatyne-Cugnet's glossary illustrates the

creative, even poetic nature of prairie language. Here we discover "farrow," "windrow," "gilt." Other word meanings are explained contextually: "winter doldrums," "next-year country," "big White Combine," "cow-pie two-step."

There are wonderful, little textual surprises which send the reader back to the paintings (or back to personal experience) for a closer look. On second glance we see that the hockey team in which Matthew is about to play is a girl's team; that Leah is going to have a lot of hoeing to do in her carelessly planted bean patch; that Jayme and Michael, the proud midwives of twelve newborn piglets, have put that black, rubber water pail to creative use; that Santa drives a red truck, and Frankenstein often chauffeurs the pickup on Halloween night. Hard work and humour prevail. This adds the element of play to the text and saves it from becoming pedantic.

The farm prairie is a place where life is an act of faith governed by the seasons. We are gently reminded of the unexplainable, potential savagery of nature. We are cautioned about endangered riverside habitats (to cottonwood poplars) but not, curiously, about endangered bird and animal species. In relation to this point, there is an interesting encounter between two children (on skidoos) and three mule deer. Underlying the magic of this mutually startling moment is a kind of tension which, it is hoped, lays the groundwork necessary for further discussion and reflection.

After all, the prairie has been depopulated before. Bouchard's lone, central character reminds us, in retrospect, of the hoodoos of the Aboriginal myth recalled in Bannatyne-Cugnet (18). Like them we may be creatures "sculpted ... by wind [and rain]." The prairie forms us. Who is to say how we "stubble-jumpers" will be eroded by the weather. In the end it may just be a question of who or what erodes whom?

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