

Anthology, Anthology

The Meadow Mouse Treasury: Stories, Poems, Pictures from Canada's Finest Authors and Illustrators. Ed. Debora Pearson. Groundwood Books, 1995. 80 pp. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-249-1. *Letters to the Wind: Classic Stories and Poems for Children*. Selected by Celia Barker Lottridge. Key Porter Books, 1995. 272 pp. \$29.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55013-631-3.

Let's talk about anthologies. I am of two minds about them. Poetry anthologies I love, not only because a clever and inspired editor can make them into veritable treasure troves, but because most poems can be reproduced entire. I distrust excerpts. My strongest instinct favours the reading of longer books complete, for adults and children alike, if only as a mark of respect for their integrity as works of art. To take a chunk of an author's work and present it out of context often does a disservice to that work. On the other hand, many children's books are of an episodic nature that allows a chapter or a portion to be presented as a story in itself. And I can acknowledge the virtues of a work that invites children to dip into and taste the flavours of many different authors.

Two new children's anthologies, similar in format though not in scope, have been published by Groundwood Books and Key Porter Books. Both have been designed to appeal to a "family" audience, which is to say to children of various ages as well as discerning adults. One contains only American authors, the other, only Canadian. Beyond these observations, however, it is very difficult to compare the two books. They are simply of different orders altogether.

Groundwood's anthology, *The Meadow Mouse Treasury*, at 80 pages, simply does not have the range that Key Porter's *Letters to the Wind* does, at 272 pages. But there is more. Groundwood's book is a selection of only Groundwood authors, which makes it highly contemporary and highly limited right from the word go. *Letters to the Wind*, by contrast, presents a wide-ranging selection of the very best American fiction and poetry for children of the last 150 to 200 years. This is why it is so difficult to compare the two.

Because of course, there is absolutely no reason why Groundwood shouldn't produce a volume which showcases its own authors and illustrators. They do publish some of Canada's finest. But not all of them. *The Meadow Mouse Treasury* is a pleasant collection, but by no means comprehensive or even representative of the "best" of Canadian children's books. I found myself wishing there were more of it.

One of its more attractive features is that it includes works with the illustrations that originally accompanied them. And it credits its illustrators as prominently as its authors. This makes for a lively and varied visual treat for the reader. *Letters to the Wind* appears to have commissioned illustrators especially for this volume and does not credit them in the body of the text. Unfortunately also, some of the pictures in *Letters* are less than accomplished. What the book gains in consistency it sometimes loses in quality. But *Letters* is altogether more focused on text than illustration, unlike *Meadow Mouse*, which is alive with colour on every page.

But if *Meadow Mouse* proudly shows off some very fine illustrators, like Eric Beddows, Gary Clement, and John Bianchi, it has nevertheless made one major blunder. It has reproduced the entire text of several picture books, but without all the

illustrations. This effectively destroys the marvellous impact of such books as *Zoom at Sea* (surely one of our modern classics). I understand about space limitations and production costs, but a book like *Zoom at Sea*, which married text and illustration so magically when first published, has been seriously dishonoured here, as have *The Dingles* and *Very Last First Time*. These outstanding picture books cannot be sliced up this way. The pictures are half their soul. And I pity the child who reads them here for the first time and never realizes how luminous they once were.

Letters to the Wind ought to be subtitled "Classic American Stories and Poems for Children." For it is an extraordinarily American collection. There is nothing wrong with that, and Celia Barker Lottridge makes no bones about it in her introduction. But it should still be on the cover, and the title-page, in the interest of (American?) forthrightness.

That quibble aside, this is a handsome and almost "serious" anthology, which is not to say it hasn't plenty of fun in it. But one can feel the seriousness of intent behind it, the care that has been taken. It contains work by all the major American authors and poets who are read by children, from Mark Twain to Katherine Paterson, from Langston Hughes to Shel Silverstein. Lottridge has been wise and circumspect in her selection. And although I wish the excerpts from longer works had been more clearly identified as such, the excerpting itself has been carried out smoothly, with no jarring endings or visible seams.

Because of its size, *Letters* really can offer different things to different readers (or a single reader at different times), from folk-tales to contemporary realism, from comedy to haunting modern fairy-tales. It feels very much like an anthology that will last, one that honours and delights in the American literary heritage.

Someday I hope an anthology will appear that does the same for Canada.

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Waving the Loyalist Flag

Meyers' Creek. Connie Brummel Crook. Stoddart, 1995. 293 pp. \$6.99 paper. ISBN 0-7736-7436-5.

Meyers' Creek is the second novel in a series that focuses on the struggles of a real-life United Empire Loyalist family forced during the Revolutionary War to begin a new and dangerous life in a desolate land. The human interest potential is high in *Meyers' Creek* as events unfold through the eyes of a Loyalist daughter, an ancestor of the author. Yet from the derivative opening (the first lines of description feature the familiar image of the feisty, spirited girl despairing in her red hair!) to the listless conclusion, *Meyers' Creek* must be seen as a flawed successor to Crook's first novel, *Flight*.

Betraying a basic principle in novel construction, Crook packs the first quarter with action, but from there, the narrative line is weak. While Crook succeeds in involving her main character, Mary Meyers, in the early action, the focus shifts from the book's heroine, who, at best, becomes merely an indirect