

Secret does not become cluttered with undeveloped minor characters and didactic historical detail, and succeeds better on an emotional level and as a novel as a result.

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CONNECTING WITH THE CHILDREN OF WAR

Catch Me Once, Catch Me Twice. Janet McNaughton. Creative Publishers/Tuckamore Books, 1994. 169 pp. \$11.95 paper. ISBN 1-895387-38-8. **The Lights Go On Again.** Kit Pearson. Penguin Books, 1994. 201 pp. \$5.99 paper. ISBN 0-14-036412-9.

In a country relatively untouched directly by war, Canadian children are exposed daily to the stories of war, violence, and terror that fill the electronic and print media. Lacking the sophistication of those adults whose perusal of the most recent *Maclean's* or recollection of a brief segment on *The National* enables them to pronounce confidently on current affairs, our children turn to literature to make sense of the senseless in their world.

While talking heads either bicker or pontificate about the tragedy of war and ethnic brutality in the former Yugoslavia, at least a dozen children I know turned to *Zlata's Diary: a Child's Life in Sarajevo* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1994), a moving, authentic personal testament, to find a voice that they could understand describe events that beggar the imagination. Similarly, the success of a number of superb novels of the Holocaust, notably Lois Lowry's *Number the Stars* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989) seems to be attributable not only to skilled and sensitive writing but also to a need of our children to connect with the children of war, dislocation, separation, and uncertainty.

A widespread interest in the experience of children in wartime may win some readers for two fine novels of domestic life in Canada during the Second World War. In both the books under review, young people struggle with timeless problems of growing up, but in an atmosphere of insecurity and foreboding, one not so different as we might think from that which we have made for but often seek to conceal from our children.

Janet McNaughton's *Catch Me Once, Catch Me Twice* is set in St John's, Newfoundland, in 1942, the mid-point of the war. Evelyn McCallum, a twelve-year-old tomboy from an outpost in Trinity Bay, is forced by her father's overseas service to move with her mother, who is ill and experiencing a difficult pregnancy, to the capital. They are taken in by her father's parents, a distinguished physician and his reserved but very caste-conscious wife.

From her arrival, Evelyn feels alone and out of place, conscious of her grandmother's disapproval of her rough edges as well as that of the "townies" in her school. She is befriended by Peter Tilley, who is two years her senior but in the same class, having lost two years of school to a serious infection which has

left him with an awkward limp. Peter lives in the poor Battery area of St John's with his grandmother, an experienced midwife, who has only ever lost one patient in childbirth, Peter's mother. He faces the uncertainty of a future in which fishing, the only work he had ever thought to do, was ruled out by his handicap.

The two children begin to spend time with Chesley Barnett, a boat-builder and local sage, who tells them stories of the fairies who were thought to inhabit the barrens. One evening, Evelyn encounters one of these little men, who, if you "catch them twice" will give you "your heart's desire." Later, when Evelyn's father is reported missing in action and her mother remains helpless and dispirited, she is determined to seek the magic of the fairies to save him. She asks Peter's help, and he must struggle with his own fears in order to support his friend and express his true feelings toward her.

Kit Pearson's *The Lights Go on Again* is the third part of her trilogy dealing with the lives of "war guests" Norah and Gavin Stoakes, sent to escape the war by their parents in England to the Toronto home of the wealthy Mrs Florence Ogilvie and her adult daughter, Mary. While the first two volumes of the trilogy, *The Sky is Falling* (Toronto: Viking Kestrel, 1989) and *Looking at the Moon* (Toronto: Viking, 1991), focus primarily on Norah, *The Lights Go on Again* examines the efforts of ten-year-old Gavin to find a personal and cultural identity in an atmosphere of crisis.

Having come to Canada at the age of five, Gavin has had his whole school experience in Toronto; he only vaguely remembered his parents, much less the other people in his extended family and community. With the prospect of the war's end in 1945 and his return to England, the young man struggles with his fear — mirrored in an encounter with the school bully — of the unknown.

Gavin has made friends, grown attached to the Ogilvies and their family, and come to feel comfortable and safe in their large, well-appointed home and summer cottage. He has been given responsibility for a dog and even developed a minor crush on a girl in his class. Canada, he believes, has become his home. At the same time, his sister, who never fully warmed to the Ogilvies and whose relationship with them is tried by their different perspectives on the appropriate behaviour and degree of independence for a fifteen-year-old girl, grows ever more eager to return to what she regards as her real home in England.

Gavin's dilemma is further complicated by the arrival of a telegram announcing the death of both his parents in a German rocket attack. Shortly thereafter, his hosts, who have come to think of him as their own child, announce their wish to adopt him formally. Gavin is thrilled with the proposal, his joy marred only by his sister's bitter and sullen opposition to the idea. With the end of the war, the children's grandfather arrives unexpectedly in Toronto in June to bring them home, but when Gavin protests, his grandfather announces that if he still wishes to remain by the time their ship is to sail in July, he will consent to it. Over the next month, Gavin is forced to consider what is truly important to him, knowing that any decision he takes will hurt deeply people he loves and that whichever life he chooses will leave him longing for the one he has abandoned.

It is this clear-eyed recognition of the pain, remorse, yet necessity of choices that children face which, along with Pearson's story-telling skills, have made the trilogy so popular among young readers. McNaughton's tale, while concerned as well with children facing the dilemmas of responsible choice, goes perhaps too far in tying together the loose ends in Evelyn McCallum's life and clutters the central theme with Evelyn's encounter with the fairies and an unintegrated side-drama of the housemaid's bad relationship with a menacing, violent soldier (who, of course, has to be an American).

Both books are well researched and are sensitive to the social life of wartime Canada and Newfoundland as well as to period detail. Both authors communicate a convincing picture of the sharpness of class divisions in society, which are still with us but are not expressed forthrightly as they were by Mrs Ogilvie or Evelyn McCallum's grandmother. Perhaps the major historical flaw shared by both books, however, is the inadequate representation of the characters' religious lives and sensibilities. There is a brief memorial service for Gavin Stoakes's parents, but the pervasiveness of religion in Canadian and Newfoundland social life and discourse is strangely absent.

McNaughton has produced a thoughtful and readable first novel that exhibits and supports sound personal values. Pearson's book, however, is the stronger and worthy of its critical and commercial success. It is highly recommended, and although it can be understood and enjoyed on its own, it serves especially as a crown to the other volumes in the trilogy.

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INTO BATTLE

No Man's Land. Kevin Major. Doubleday Canada, 1995. 251 pp. \$22.95 cloth. ISBN 0-385-25503-9.

In a considerable change of pace from his earlier work, Newfoundland author Kevin Major has turned his pen to one of the tragedies of his province's history, the near destruction of the Newfoundland Regiment on the Somme in 1916. In *No Man's Land*, he allows us to watch the men of the battalion over the course of a day as they prepare to go over the top.

In confining his attentions to a single day, Major has set himself a challenge, but, in fact, the pacing is one of the book's strongest suits. At times, he lingers over trivial details to convey the struggle of the doomed soldiers to make every minute last an hour. In other passages, Major nicely captures the impatience of the troops, who just want to get on with the job and get it over with. The story moves in fits and starts, briskly here and slowly there, much in the same way that the infantryman's pre-battle hours must have moved.

The other striking aspect of the book is its apparently conscious determination to gather together most of the iconography of First World War literature. We