

## CANADIAN LIFE: VIEWS FOR YOUNG CANADIANS

MARY-EILEEN McCLEAR

*Children of the Yukon*, Ted Harrison. Illus. by the author. Tundra, 1977. 22 pp. \$7.95 hardcover.

*Come with Us: Children speak for Themselves*, written and illus. by children. The Women's Educational Press, 1978. 120 pp. \$5.95 paper.

*Mommy works on Dresses*, Louise de Grosbois, et al. Translated from the French by Caroline Bayard. Illustrated. The Women's Press, 1977. 24 pages. \$2.95 paper.

The Russian storyteller, Kornei Chukovsky, says in his book *From Two to Five* (University of California Press, 1963), "our only goal is to awaken, nurture, and strengthen in the responsive soul of the child this invaluable ability to feel compassion for another's unhappiness and to share in another's happiness — without this a man is inhuman." The goal he described was that of the storyteller, but it can also apply to those producing and circulating books for children. As well, it is surely the subconscious intent of teachers and librarians who are planning special International Year of the Child programs, most of which will focus on children in other countries.

But the IYC is an ideal time to look at our own country too. We are a large and diverse nation, with a cultural and economic variety rivalling that of other countries. It is important for our children to understand how their own countrymen live, to share their happiness and pain, and so become more humane citizens. To achieve this end we hold up a mirror through such books as Ted Harrison's *Children of the Yukon*.

*Children* is a collection of briefly explicated paintings, compiled to portray, Harrison says, "not how the Yukon is the same as the rest of Canada, but how it differs." We do not see children going to school, watching T.V., or playing baseball, though they certainly do those things. Instead, we see them panning for gold, snowshoe racing, and horse racing on the smallest desert in the world. We learn that moose and caribou are hunted for food and clothing, and that moose hides are shaped into teepees for smoking. There are glimpses of Indian festivals, and even a brief look at the different face of religion in the Yukon. To all of this is added an awareness of the climatic differences which not only are responsible for -50° temperatures, but also for magnificent sunsets, northern lights, and, of course, the midnight sun.

Children will probably be attracted by Harrison's use of brilliant colour,

the simple forms, and faceless figures outlined in broad strokes. Though my impression is of a skillfully completed colouring book, the paintings do manage to portray the stark and terrible beauty of a part of our country still foreign to many of us.

The major criticism which must be made of the book is its inconsistent approach to the text. For the most part, the book consists of captioned paintings grouped very roughly according to related activities or subjects. However, three times throughout the book, a full page is devoted to informational text.

The first such page follows a painting and caption describing November's mid-afternoon darkness in Dawson City. Then, instead of some related text, the reader is confronted by Harrison's introduction to the book's intent, and his initial and subsequent reactions to the Yukon which prompted the book's creation.

The second full page of text is devoted to the gold rush, and the third to summer and the Indians. If Mr. Harrison felt it necessary to include this additional information, he should have sought a more effective way to work it into the book's format. As the layout is now, the textual pages break the continuity and may be viewed as an intrusion rather than the welcome auxiliary comments they could have been.

Moving from tantalizing glimpses of life in the Yukon, we are treated to compelling descriptions of inner city life told as it is lived in *Come with Us: Children speak for Themselves*. Focused on the experiences and perceptions of inner city immigrant children, this Women's Press publication is made up of original narratives, prose, poetry and artwork, collected first hand in inner-city schools and community centres.

It is a book which is ideal for achieving Chukovsky's goal. Anyone who reads it, regardless of age, will be caught up by the humor, pathos, and spontaneity of the works included. These are realistic, matter-of-fact portrayals of life which deal with the daily challenges of racism, job satisfaction, unemployment, and the adjustments to life in a new country. The frankness of their writing compels the reader to identify with them as the children describe why and how they came to Canada, how they have learned the hard way about credit and inflation, and what it is like to be taunted and called names because of their race.

The children speak for themselves, do so articulately, and the resulting picture they present is a moving self portrait/collage deserving of attention from adults and children alike. Most of the artwork included is full colour and well reproduced on sturdy stock. The type is large enough to encourage hesitant readers, and the book is divided into five sections: "Why we came and where we came from"; "Streets and schools"; "Racism"; "We see ourselves"; and "Work".

This last section, "Work", is of particular interest when it is compared to a Women's Press picture book, *Mommy Works on Dresses*. The latter, translated from French, attempts to introduce primary grade children to the working world of women. It does this through the description to her daughter, of a mother's assembly line job in a dress factory. The child is told the step-by-step assembling of a dress from cutting to shipping, and then is introduced to the economics of factory work. She learns about piecework, speed-ups, surplus value, and profits. The profits, of course, are all to the factory and certainly not to Caroline's mother and the others who, combined, earn only two dollars for making a dress that will sell for twenty-four.

The black and white drawings in which all the factory workers look alike, reinforce for the child reader the impersonal, dehumanizing effect of this type of job. But can a young child be expected to assimilate the economic lesson which dominated this description of one mother's work? Children of working mothers may grasp a bit more than others, but even Caroline, the daughter in the story, doesn't really understand what has been explained to her. At the end of the book, when she announces to her friends "My mother works on dresses . . ." the image in her mind is the same one she conjured at the beginning of the book: seven tiny women using ladders and scaffolding to work on a giant dress. It would appear that at this age, none of what she was told could be related to her experience, and one would suspect that the same would be true for most young readers.

However, use this story in conjunction with the "Work" section of *Come With Us*, and children will at least begin to understand the effect of work not only on their parents but also on whole families.

Listen to what these three children have to say:

My dad works at 3:00 in the morning . . . When he comes home he watches T.V. and then he eats, and then he goes to bed in the middle of the afternoon . . . When we eat my dad ain't home. He goes to work before we're up.

My mother works at an office building and she cleans offices. But she doesn't get as much as the men who work with her do. I think something should be done about it because women are humans too.

"I hate it," my mother told me.

These children, and the others who write about work, might not know the terms surplus value, piecework, or job satisfaction, but they are fully aware of the effect the reality of these terms has on their lives. Because they write from

a child's level, they can successfully evoke some glimmer of recognition and understanding from the child reader. Given this insight, the economic lesson of *Mommy Works on Dresses* then becomes more immediate and more relevant to a child's experience.

*Come With Us* stands on its own as an excellent book for school-age children, and a parent/teacher guide is available though a copy was not received for this review. *Mommy Works on Dresses* does not fully succeed as an introduction to the work force for very young children, but used in conjunction with *Come With Us*, it can present a fascinating socio-economic study for children in the upper-primary grades and above.

The three books in this review are very different, yet each can play an important role in awakening children to the country around them. Each would be used most effectively with adult guidance, but the potential for evoking the responses Chukovsky seeks is present in all three. Our children must be aware of the different lives in Canada, must be empathetic, compassionate and knowledgeable. Books like these are a beginning in introducing our children to themselves.

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