The secret self/Le moi secret

Jan Andrews

One of the things that makes Canadian children's literature so exciting at this time is that it is full of "firsts". *The secret self/Le moi secret* – an exploration of Canadian children's literature/Une exploration de la littérature de jeunesse canadienne, the exhibition that ran at the National Library in Ottawa from October 25, 1988, to April 23, 1989, was no exception to the trend. This is not to suggest, of course, that it was the first exhibition focusing on children's literature the National Library has presented. There were major exhibitions in 1973 and 1979: the first entitled *Notable Canadian children's books/Un choix de livres canadiens pour la jeunesse* and the second *Pictures to share/Images pour tous*.[1]

The secret self was, however, the first children's literature exhibition at the National Library setting out to work through a story line. Previous exhibitions functioned mainly as showcase – following a historical perspective, highlighting achievements. This one sought to involve the visitor in a journey of exploration. The new approach may be seen as a step in our continuing process of maturation in that it indicated a confidence in the depth of material available and employed that material to make a statement about the function of children's literature, not just in Canada, but as a whole.

That is one "first" then. The other is equally important. It lies in the fact that *The secret self* represented, almost without doubt, the first occasion when children in numbers came in through the exhibition doors and made a beeline for the cases as if they were heading for a wondrous meeting with old friends. Adults (beyond the ranks of teachers) gazed in amazement proclaiming, "I had no idea there were so many good books available." Children's comments tended more towards: "I know this one and this and this one;" "I loved that and that and THAT!"

As a concept, *The secret self* was born from a desire to engage visitors in a consideration of the places where books may carry them and, beyond that, of the places where books grow. Its form took seed from a conversation in which Janet Lunn expressed her concern about "where her books went to," finished by saying "I keep thinking of *The secret garden* and what it's meant to me." Confirmation of its purpose was given when Lunn responded to a question from exhibition researchers concerning the power of books in her life in a letter containing the words:

The secret garden, how I loved that book! How I love it still! Nothing I had read before, nothing I have read since has been more truly mine. Even now, fifty years after I first read Mary Lennox's journey towards joy, I read it almost once a year. Because of Mary and Colin and Dickon I have always felt that, however difficult or painful life may become, there is always that garden waiting to be brought to life. What could possibly be more important?

The visitor was welcomed into *The secret self* exhibition by a large mounted blow-up from Warabé Aska's *Who goes to the park?* of the poem and picture of an old oak full of birds. Standing at the back of the exhibition hall, it offered an invitation to step directly into the book's pages. At the centre, as focus, stood a showcase full of puppets from different times and places lent by the Puppet Centre of the Ontario Puppetry Association. Both clearly suggested the world of the imagination being dealt with.

Throughout *The secret self*, works in French and English were placed side by side as manifestations of a whole. The exploration of the theme proceeded through three distinct but mutually enhancing sections, each introduced by a short poem standing as signpost to guide the way. The first section offered an evocation of every book's ability to transport the reader back into the past or forward into the future, down the street or into different realms; and not only to transport but to let the reader be hero or saviour or bringer of disaster, good friend or bad friend – not only to transport but to transform.

Some of the books would spark the memories of adults. Included were school readers (the only books once available for many in small villages and more impoverished situations); works by adventure writer G.A. Henty – not Canadian but still recalled as "must" reading for boys of their generation by figures such as John Diefenbaker and Lester B. Pearson; the historical novels of Marie-Claire Daveluy – stories of two young orphans, Perrine and Charlot, who stood as *the* French-Canadian heroines for so long; the original Hardy Boys books – because many were written by Canadian Leslie MacFarlane and because for many a reluctant reader even now the Hardy Boys still represent the place of entering in; an adventure in the series of Henri Vernes' stories about Bob Morane – ace pilot and hero against whose exploits the current generation of French-Canadian children's writers measured their youthful achievements; "annuals" from the days of "school stories" and Empire; and, of course, an edition of *Anne of Green Gables*. This latter was offered with some trepidation and a fear of appearing hackneyed, but copies in Polish and Japanese showed just how universal Anne's appeal is (and in this context it is not easy to see how she could legitimately have been left out).

Juxtaposed with the "old" books were those that form the fabric of current hours of reading, with original illustrations by Lazlo Gal and Airdrie Amtmann hanging above them. As the eye travelled through all the worlds of Welwyn Katz and Roger Paré and Lois Simmie and Denis Coté and Jan Truss and Robert Soulières and Eric Wilson; from Brian Doyle's *Angel Square* to

Marianne Brandis's *Quarter-pie window*; from Henriette Major's *François D'assise* to Roch Carrier's *Le chandail de hockey*; from Marie-Louise Gay's *Voyage au clair de lune* to O.R. Mellings *Druid's tune* – in the meanwhile catching glimpses of a wealth of other regions for the living – a clear and definite statement emerged about how our literature has changed and grown.

Along with the books and illustrations appeared a three-dimensional model created by a young reader in response to Monica Hughes' *Crisis on conshelf ten*. There were also comments made by children –

"I like the sadness in me that it brought out"[2]
"The ideas flew together"[3]
"Every sentence put my nose furthering in,"[4]

for instance – taken from the pages of various editions of *Children's choices of Canadian books*. These were added to underline the focus on the "secret self" of the reader and the part played by what he or she brings to (and ultimately bears from) the books' worlds.

Concern with the reader was expanded still further in the catalogue. There, recognition is given to the knowledge that the ways of books are tempting; that, to the adult, the child with his or her nose buried in a story may be seen simply as escaping from the world. The point is made that the "escape" offers opportunities for re-creation; that as the children live others' lives for a while through the book's pages, they will be both finding out about personal responses and experimenting with other ways of doing and so will emerge broadened in experience and confirmed in their own strength.

The second section of the exhibition looked at society's awareness of the children's book as thing of power and therefore potentially as shaping force. This section dealt with that very adult concern for the book as transmitter of messages and looked therefore at the societal changes that go into forming the books' own "secret" lives. Brief attention was paid to the "old" moralizing with its models for patriotism, virtue, uprightness. *A Figures Angeliques* is included, a book by Nellie McClung entitled *Sowing seeds in Danny*, and a copy of *The snowdrop* – a nineteenth century magazine, replete with titles like "Heedless Helen," "The Mourner," "An example of Christian charity," and never *ever* a story told simply for a story's sake.

The real centre of interest was, however, the messages we want to give now. Perhaps the most important difference between the two is that while the old messages tended to support the status quo, the new ones mainly seem to grow from an awareness of change. This was demonstrated clearly in a showcase featuring the books inspired at least to some extent by perceptions awakened by the woman's movement. Included were articles chronicling the damage that can be done by portrayals of endless streams of mothers who never leave the kitchen, and of little girls who are too helpless (hopeless?) to be included in any real activities, who watch while brothers work. Then, there were the re-

sponses: Claire MacKay's *One proud summer*, Cécile Gagnon's *Martine-aux-oiseaux*, Ginette Anfousse's *La varicelle* – books that say to female readers "Hey, you're fun, interesting, adventurous, capable, indomitable (sometimes, anyway!)" The point was further underlined as the visitor moved on to the books that have grown out of a conviction that children must be able to see themselves portrayed within the changing realities of our environment: to find baby sitters and one parent families living in the pages of their reading on teenagers with problems in and outside the home.

Once more, the catalogue sheds further light, adding a small caveat about the discrepancy between what adults seek to tell and what children may choose to learn through a story. One six-year-old claimed what she had found out from a particular book was how to "hide brussel sprouts in your dress to flush in the toilet later."[5] The catalogue notes the contribution of the small presses and directs attention to the way we are recognizing the need to have our position as a multicultural nation interwoven into all our books. Featured especially in this respect are books by Paul Yee, Barbara Smucker and Maria Cambell (set in the Chinese, Black and Native communities respectively) and the *Where we live* series developed by James Lorimer for classroom use.

In this second section of the exhibition, watercolours created by Clare Bice for *Jory's Cove* and *Across* Canada and pencil sketches by Richard Pelham for Joan Finnigan's Ottawa Valley tall tale *Look! The land is growing giants* were displayed. These served as reminders that in books both past and present, our writers have been motivated by a pressure to speak to children of their Canadianness. Attention was drawn to the fact that this was an issue from the beginning. It influenced our very first English language children's novel – a work by Catherine Parr Traill, entitled *Canadian crusoes: A tale of the Rice Lake Plains*, published in 1852 with the expressed aim of telling young immigrants enough about their new land to enable them to survive in the bush. It provided impetus for all the books – like L'abbé Casgrain's work of 1898, *Champlain: Sa vie et son caractère* – which for so long formed the pantheon of "school prizes" throughout Quebec. It was a crucial element in how Dennis Lee's *Alligator pie* came to be written. It has had some unexpected manifestations, especially in stories of cross-Canada journeys – by two small rabbits in *Bob and Bill see Canada: A travel story in rhyme for boys and girls* c1919 and by a cat in Louise Darios' *Le chat Alexandre: D'un Canada à l'autre* c1980. It has become less overt (and certainly less didactic) as our sense of our literature has strengthened. Complaints by readers registered as recently as 1979 about overdoses of "the north," "Indians," "the wilderness" and "history" are recorded in the catalogue. Glances over the shoulder and around the exhibition room revealed that though these elements remain important they have come to find a more appropriate place in our writing. Still, the concern that there should be "Canadianness" is part of how we have come to be where now we are standing. Whatever the stories we choose to be telling, it will always have its in-

fluence.

The quotations in this section came not just from children but from adults as well, giving further proof of the fact that there has been a shift in focus. That led the visitor on into the exhibition's third and final section where the "secret" stories of the authors were revealed. Here there were fewer books and more manuscripts, photos, sketches, outlines, letters. While the catalogue discusses the special qualities that go into the making of both children's writer and children's book, the display cases were designed to show these qualities.

This part of the exhibition caught and held visitors the longest, for the insights and surprises. There was the newspaper clipping about the "boy in the bubble" that led Monica Hughes' into the Isis trilogy, for instance; there was the pencil sketch that shows Stéphane Poulin had to *learn* how little girls sit (with their trousers round their knees) when they go to the washroom; there were the photos and illustrations that confirmed Suzanne Duranceau's assertion that since she started drawing seriously at the age of six she has dealt always with the same little girl – "parfois blonde, parfois brunette," her daughter and herself. The long, long process of creation was revealed through letters from editors, rewritings and redoings by Ann Blades and Jean Little; the vividness of the story's world for its creator by the pictures Daniel Sernine made for *Ludovic* – not as illustrations, but for himself. The scrapbook containing the photo of the house Janet Lunn lives in and used as the setting for *The Root Cellar*, because her husband saw a ghost there, was included. The novels of Suzanne Martel were set against the backdrop of her childhood when with her sister, Monique Corriveau, she spent all the time she had available creating and expanding and living the adventures of "the family in the wall."

If the focus was on the author, still the reader was not forgotten. The copy of Gordon Korman's famous grade seven assignment was accompanied by a fish made by a student; Robert Munsch's storytelling abilities were evoked through a quilt completed by a class in Salt Springs, Nova Scotia, and depicting all his tales. This consistent touching of bases with all the participants continued throughout the exhibition's "added features." These included a blow-up of an illustration for Gilles Vigneault's *Les gens de mon pays* by Miyuke Tanobe with doors and windows to open, revealing the quotations that led the authors to have their say:

> Si on trouve idiot (ou une perte de temps) de passer une heure à plat ventre par terre à observer des fournis qui besognent alors il est inutile d'essayer d'écrire pour les enfants.
>
> Cécile Gagnon[6]

> My books are meant to reach out to children and tell them, "You are not the only one, after all. Here is someone else just as small and scared and mixed-up as you are, and yet he or she is loved as you are, and loving, as you also are."
>
> Jean Little[7]

Pour moi, chaque livre, qu'il soit pour adulte ou pour enfant, est une nouvelle aventure. C'est comme si j'ouvrais une porte dans ma tête pour entre dans un autre pays.

Suzanne Martel[8]

Not far away there was a notebook where visitors of all ages could list their favourite titles. Then, there was the corner with books for reading and the quiz (complete with clues) that offered the chance to guess the identity of over forty photos of children's writers (Christie Harris, dressed as a flapper girl at her eightieth birthday party, for example; Claire Mackay from her days as a waitress; Joan Clarke pulling her "ape face"). Finally, there were the "special events" that had been organized to complement the exhibition's presence. These began when Ted Harrison opened the exhibition and gave a workshop for young artists. They continued with a series of readings and workshops that drew school children to meet Cora Taylor, Suzanne Martel, James Houston and Darcia Labrosse; with evenings for adults – storytelling by Alice Kane, a lecture by Rupert Scheider, a session on book-choosing by Kathy Lowinger and Michéle Provost. No doubt it seems at this point that everything that could possibly be mentioned about *The secret self* has in fact been so. There was, however, one last element and that was the background music – a selection of quiet pieces leaving the visitor free to wander at will through all the vistas and spaces the exhibition offered, standing as yet another kind of invitation to go where "secret selves" may best be found.

Credit for the exhibition's depth and richness must, of course, go mainly to the state of Canadian children's literature, to the writers, illustrators, publishers, producers of all the books that are out there waiting to be found, Congratulations must also be offered, however, to the National Library for the breadth of its collection and particularly to the Head of its Children's Literature Services, Irene Aubrey. Known across the country as guide and supporter, she has worked steadfastly to make the Library's Collection of Books for Children and Young People a reality, in the meanwhile producing the annual lists of "Notables" and the specialized bibliographies that have done so much to assist in gaining our children's literature the recognition it has needed to flower. She was among those who kept faith when faith was needed and *The secret self/Le moi secret* is very much a tribute to her work.

In the book provided for visitors to list their favorite titles, there are the words: "I am a school librarian. When I look through these pages I know suddenly we've been doing 'something right'". Perhaps this was the assurance bestowed by the entire exhibition. That was not the whole of it, however. As well there was a feeling of excitement – an anticipation for all the next "firsts" and seconds and thirds and forevers there are to come.

Notes

1 Other centres have also mounted important exhibits, particularly the Boys and Girls House and the Osborne Collection, in Toronto, see also an account of a U.B.C. ex-

hibit reported in *Canadian Children's Literature* issue #51.

2 Eleven-year-old boy. *Children's choices of Canadian books.* Ed., M. Jane Charlton. Ottawa: Citizens' Committee on Children, 1985. 1V (2): 58.

3 Eleven-year-old girl. *Children's choices of Canadian books.* Ed., Margaret Caughey. Ottawa: Citizens' Committe on Children, 1981. 1: 79.

4 Nine-year-old girl. *Children's choices of Canadian books.* Ed., Margaret Caughey. Ottawa: Citizens' Committee on Children, 1981. 11: 20.

5 Six-year-old girl. *Children's choices of Canadian books. Ed., Margaret Caughey. Ottawa: Citizens' Committee on Children. 1985. 1V (1): 22.*

6 Back jacket, *Listen for the singing.* Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1977.

7 "Cecile Gagnon." *Communication-jeunesse.* Montreal: Editions Heritage.

8 "Suzanne Martel Repond" *In review: Canadian books for children.* 11 (Summer, 1977) 3: 6.

A selection from letters written to the organizers of *The secret self/Le moi secret.*

"I remember, when I was very young, walking around the house reading; sitting on the topmost curve of our old three-storey Edinburgh house, reading; being sent for walks because I 'I looked pale', going instead to my favourite library. When I set out on my travels, first to Africa and later to Canada, I took a large ant-proof steel trunk full of my favourite books, as well as a suitcase of clothes. Literature, that magic realm around the corner, over the bridge, just out of sight, has always been central to my life." *Monica Hughes*

"When I was a teacher my students talked a lot about the books they were discovering. I was always learning. I cherish the memory of a two-roomed school where the massive classroom windows looked over nothing but prairie and sky, where one afternoon a grade eight girl held up a slender, nondescript-looking brown book and challenged me and the class as only a proud teenager knows how; 'Well, I think this is more than a book. My greatgrandmother who was a Mohawk read it. She told my grandmother she must read it. My grandmother told my mother she had to read it. My mother told me I'd got to read it. Well, I just did. And I really like it. If I have a kid I'll tell her to read it. So I think it's literature. In fact, I think it must be a classic.' Leslie Green had rubbed souls with Emily Brontë. The book was *Wuthering Heights.*" *Jan Truss*

"In an ancient and universal art that carries the values of a culture in the magics of the imagination, today's Storyteller finds new challenges for the worthy uses of a gift. But the oldest and truest judgement is still there; the oldest and best reward is still there – there in the faces of the children." *Christie Harris*

"I love picture books. I always have. Through the dark days when I was told that I was too old for them and that I should be moving on to longer, bigger, 'more mature' books with words, my passion for them never waned. Today a good picture book can move me just as profoundly as it did thirty odd years ago. These timeless treasures can still whirl around me with their distinct magic like a sorcerer mixing a strange brew." *Ian Wallace*

"Pour moi, chaque livre, qu'il soit pour adulte ou pour enfant, est une nouvelle aven-

ture. C'est comme si j'ouvrais une porte dans ma tête pour entrer dans un autre pays.

Après avoir choisi le sujet, le site et entrevu vaguement mes héros, je les laisse vivre par eux-mêmes. Chaque nouveau chapitre est une découverte et se déroule comme du film devant mes yeux. J'aime être surprise par les réactions et les remarques de mes personnages. Ils ont une existence propre, et parfois ils m'échappent complètement et n'en font qu'à leur tête. Je les regarde agir et j'écris aussi rapidement que je pense." *Suzanne Martel*: "Suzanne Martel répond." *In Review: Canadian Books for Children*. 11 (Summer, 1977) 3: 6.

". . .celui qui a laissé sa trace la plus indélébile, c'est Robinson Crusoé. L'île déserte, la solitude, puis l'amitié; Robinson m'a longtemps fait rêver." *Robert Soulières*: "Tribune libre." *Lurelu*. 9 (printemps-été, 1986) 1: 28.

"j'écris parce que j'ai une idée qui me plaît. Quand j'écris je me sens comme un poisson dans l'eau. C'est tout ce que je sais." *Bernadette Renaud*: cité par Danièle Simpson. "Rencontre avec Bernadette Renaud." *Lurelu*. 1 (hiver, 1978) 4: 10.

"Si on trouve idiot (ou une perte de temps) de passer une heure à plat ventre par terre à observer des fourmis qui besognent alors il est inutile d'essayer d'écrire pour les enfants." *Cécile Gagnon: Cécil Gagnon*. Montréal: Communication-Jeunesse. (printemps, 1980): [2].

"J'aime écrire. Je ne pourrais pas vous en donner toutes les raisons, je ne les connais pas toutes. Mais, je me suis rendu compte que, souvent, l'écriture agissait sur moi comme un révéllateur. . . .Quand j'écris ou je dessine, j'utilese, bien sûr, du matériel conscient. Mais il y a tout ce matériel inconscient, cette sorte de souce souterraine, qui me fascine et me révèle à moi-même." *Ginette Anfousse*: "Les livres que j'écris, comment et pourquoi." *Des livres et des jeunes*. 5 (automne, 1982) 13: 8.

"Creating books is a complete concept. You do the scenario, write the story and illustrate it. It's very amazing to think that each night, a little child, somewhere, goes to sleep with your book. Making a book is an act of love. You create it for people and share your dreams, pains and joys. The result is that children always see the book first, they don't see you. And I believe it's a kind of 'mutual trust', I mean, it's like wearing a clown's suit. . . .They believe you are a clown and you believe you are one too." *Stéphane Poulin*

"Le livre, pour moi, a toujours été un objet familier. D'aussi loin que je me souvienne, il y avait toujours une lecture en train, où que je sois, quoi que je fasse. Quelqu'un a dit: 'En tout lecteur, il y a un écrivain qui sommeille. . .'." *Ginette Anfousse*: "Les livres que j'écris, comment et pourquoi." *Des livres et des jeunes*. 5 (automne, 1982) 13: 5.

"Ma grande découverte, à neuf ans, fut Bob Morane. . . .Et moi, à 32 ans, précisément l'âge de Morane, je n'ai pas encore mis les pieds à Macao, ni à Tumbage, à Felicidad ou à Jarawak. Je songe toutefois à devenir pilote dans l'Armée de l'air française. C'est comme ça que tout a commencé pour le héros de mon enfance. . . ." *Denis Coté*: "Tribune libre." *Lurelu* 9 (printemps-été, 1986) 1: 28.

"As a young student of twelve at the Toronto Art Gallery, I never thought of writing and had not yet chosen a particular field in art. My friends and I laughed and painted and happily hit each other over the heads with rulers. Then one morning, Dr. Arthur Lismer, a great Canadian art teacher and member of the Group of Seven, who had just returned from the Congo, played African music through the galleries and danced among us, his face covered with a huge carved mask. The vision of that mask shook me to the core, and I was hooked forever on the art and lives of primitive people. I wanted to go to all the farthest corners of the earth." *James Houston*: *James Houston*. New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1983. 1-2.

"Écrire, c'est faire de la magie. Le crayon est une baguette magique, la page blanche, une plage au soleil,. Le crayon-baguette peut faire apparaître sur cette plage déserte des fées ou des monstres, des robots ou des Martiens, ou même d'extraordinaires gens ordinaires. Ces êtres d'abord sans relief, le crayon magique les fera rire ou pleurer, se battre ou s'aimer, s'unir ou se déchirer: il les fera sortir de la page, entrer dans la tête du lecteur." *Henriette Major*: "Henriette Major." *Au fond des yeux: 25 québécoises qui écrivent*. [Montréal]: Nouvelle optique, 1981. 59.

"I write books about children and the thorny problems that beset them. I write such books because I remember how it was. I remember being a failure, being different, being misunderstood, being greedy, being untruthful, being young. . . .My books are meant to reach out to children and tell them, 'You are not the only one, after all.'" *Jean Little*: *Listen for the singing*. Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1977. Back cover.

Jan Andrews *is a children's writer, author of* Very last first time. *She and Jennifer Cayley were researchers for* The secret self/Le moi secret.