Space, Machinery, and Engineering in Contemporary Fiction for Young Canadians

—J.N. Nodelman

Anderson, Scoular. *Space Pirates: A Map-Reading Adventure*. Toronto: Annick, 2004. N pag. $10.95 pb. ISBN 1-55037-880-5.

Bourgeois, Paulette, and Kim LaFave. *Garbage Collectors*. 1991. Toronto: Kids Can, 2004. 32pp. $5.95 pb. ISBN 1-55337-739-7.

---. *Police Officers*. 1992. Toronto: Kids Can, 2004. 32pp. $5.95 pb. ISBN 1-55337-743-5.

Carrier, Roch, and Sheldon Cohen. *La Chasse-galerie*. Toronto: Tundra, 2004. N. pag. $22.99 hc. ISBN 0-88776-635-8.

---. *The Flying Canoe*. Trans. Sheila Fischman. Toronto: Tundra, 2004. N. pag. $22.99 hc. ISBN 0-88776-636-6.

Fantastic Feats and Failures. Toronto: Kids Can, 2004. 52pp. $9.95 pb. ISBN 1-55337-634-X.

Guest, Jacqueline. *Racing Fear*. Toronto: James Lorimer, 2004. 158pp. $6.95 pb. ISBN 1-55028-838-5.

Holdcroft, Tina. *Hidden Depths: Amazing Underwater Discoveries*. Toronto: Annick, 2004. 32pp. $9.95 pb. ISBN 1-55037-862-7.

Hutchins, Hazel, and Ruth Ohi. *Beneath the Bridge*. Toronto: Annick, 2004. N. pag. $8.95 pb. ISBN 1-55037-858-9

Kilby, Don. *Wheels at Work in the City*. Toronto: Kids Can, 2004. N. pag. $16.95 hc. ISBN 1-55337-471-1.

---. *Wheels at Work in the Country*. Toronto: Kids Can, 2004. N. pag. $16.95 hc. ISBN 1-55337-472-X.

Kyi, Tanya Lloyd. *Fires!* Toronto: Annick, 2004. 104pp. $9.95 pb. ISBN 1-55037-876-7.

Owens, Ann-Maureen, Jane Yealland, and John Mantha. *The Kids Book of Canadian Exploration*. Toronto: Kids Can, 2004. 56pp. $19.95 hc. ISBN 1-55337-353-7.

Parkinson, Curtis. *Sea Chase*. Toronto: Tundra, 2004. 185pp. $12.99 pb. ISBN 0-88776-682-X.

Reynolds, Marilynn, and Renné Benoit. *Goodbye to Griffith Street*. Victoria: Orca, 2004. N. pag. $19.95 hc. ISBN 1-55143-285-4.

Once, in the gear-and-girder era[1] of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the world of machines and feats of engineering was depicted for young readers as one chock full of adventure and excitement. A great many publications, furthermore, assumed that the use of mechanical acumen to capitalize on natural resources was highly commendable. In Victor Appleton's *Tom Swift and His Motor-Cycle* (1910), for instance, Tom justifies his purchase of a used motorbike to his inventor father on the basis that he has "an idea for a new kind of transmission, and perhaps I can work it out on this machine" (34); moreover, in H. Irving Hancock's *The Young Engineers in Nevada* (1913), a character is asked to "Look out upon the great mountains of this range": "Think of the rugged bits of Nature in any part of the world, waiting for the conquering hand and the constructive brain of the engineer. Harry, don't you long to do some of the big things that are done by engineers?" (163). Become mechanically proficient, young people of the era were led to believe, and space at large would be yours to exploit.

Today, we would no longer find it desirable to depict the natural world as stocked with boundless revenue-generating commodities to be extracted. Although for some readers the sheer sense of possibility in those century-old boys' novels remains rather infectious, currently influential approaches in the humanities hold that the spaces we inhabit are not open territories waiting to be conquered and plundered, but complex geographies comprising sedimented layers of cultural and historical practice. This article reviews a number of recently published books (all were released in 2004) that can be read as contributions toward developing the techniques by which people inhabit such fields. These titles all place particular emphasis on public spaces, imposing works of engineering, and powerful machines, rather than on settings like the home or school; a review of their investments and achievements offers entry into a wide range of issues raised by current scholarly approaches to space. The books perform varied cultural work: too many indulge their readers in a fantasy reminiscent of Appleton's or Hancock's, whereby the world outside is revealed as an endlessly welcoming, benign, and uncontested place. Only a few allow productively destabilizing connections to unfold in their narration of space.

I propose to use two central theoretical arguments for addressing these matters. First, imaginative representations of physical spaces do not merely add to these spaces but play a crucial role in constituting them. This proposition corresponds closely with those of such currently influential Marxist theorists of space as Henri Lefebvre and Edward W. Soja. Lefebvre, for instance, writes in *The Production of Space* that

> (Social) space . . . is the outcome of a sequence

> and set of operations, and thus cannot be reduced to the rank of a simple object. At the same time there is nothing imagined, unreal or 'ideal' about it as compared, for example, with science, representations, ideas or dreams. (73)

While I agree that space involves both physical forms and cultural practices, I part company with these thinkers on the issue of the readability of space. Lefebvre is adamant that "codes worked up from literary texts" (7) would never suffice for examining the production of any given space; more recently, in *For Space*, the geographer Doreen Massey criticizes scholars for "the longstanding tendency to tame the spatial into the textual" (54). By attempting to "read" spaces as texts, the argument goes, we treat them as discrete, continuous, complete works open to the gaze of the removed academic observer. In doing so, we avoid accounting more deeply for the ways in which underlying conditions determine spatial architectonics, or, for Massey, for the coeval unfolding of different cultural trajectories in the same locales. The error in this kind of thinking, I suggest, lies not in its characterization of space but in its characterization of textuality and readability. To a contemporary English Studies scholar, it seems strange to think that any text operates as a stable, horizontal surface, that it is not produced at the intersection of various discourses and cultural practices, or that reading is an exercise that decodes uniform messages instead of actively contributing to the production of meaning.

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For these reasons, I more closely follow Umberto Eco's ideas regarding space in "Function and Sign: Semiotics of Architecture." For Eco, every physical form communicates an abstract concept, so far as it relays a "*possibility of function*" (57) to users. A staircase, for example, works in part because it tells us that, if we place our feet on succeeding steps, we will be able to move diagonally upward (60). However, Eco continues, such objects communicate both "primary" and "secondary" functions. The primary, or "denotative," function of a chair is to tell that one "can sit down on it." "But if the seat is a throne," he goes on, "it serves to seat one with a certain dignity" (64). In Eco's estimation, since this secondary, "connotative"

function frequently becomes more important than the primary one, we must reject any easy conclusion that the determining physical forms and basic functions of space remain solid while only their supplementary cultural connotations change throughout the years. Instead, as people use built spaces and objects over time the messages these spaces and objects relay change fundamentally, so that "both primary and secondary functions might be found undergoing losses, recoveries, and substitutions of various kinds" (69). There is, in other words, a level of abstract codification inherent to the space's most basic aspects, such that it is not possible to speak of any stable "real" physical world outside of the specific messages it conveys to people in particular times and places.

That said, Eco's ideas, unlike those of Lefebvre, Soja, or Massey, initially seem to have little to say about space as a politically contested field organized to police access and agency in order to consolidate political regimes. And yet, in Eco's model, as in those of the Marxists, people are implicated in the construction of space at all times. Eco's formulation implies that, whether we are aware of it or not, our everyday activities contribute to the ongoing codification of space. From any position we partake in the production of dynamic spatial practice.

My second central theoretical argument is that no space is a static form, for every "location" is in fact a sequential process of disclosure. The Marxist thinkers cited here are cautious about crediting the specific sequences of impressions by which people experience spaces as significant; they prefer to characterize such unfolding as repeatable processes that underlying modes of production make possible. As Soja writes of his conceptualization of Los Angeles, "This tour cannot be done on foot" (19).[2] In this view, unlike Michel de Certeau's widely cited formulation, one cannot fully appreciate the political and cultural forces that have formed a space by walking through it, for these forces have already determined the walk itself—its route, the views it offers, whether walkers of different genders, ethnicities, or physical abilities are made to feel comfortable or unwelcome. For thinkers with an interest in narrative theory, on the other hand, it seems more obvious that the temporal series of impressions by which any object or space is experienced is constitutive of those phenomena. The Canadian philosopher David Carr puts it this way in *Time, Narrative, and History*:

> I can explore with my eyes or hands an object (say a statue) which we would designate not an event but a thing. But my visual or tactile observation of it is itself an event with its own duration, its own beginning, middle, or end. (48)

Only by deepening our understanding of this

fundamentally narrative aspect of our spatial practice, I contend, can we fully assess how our actions may either support or undermine the ideologies inherent to our spaces. Doreen Massey, though pointedly avoiding reading space as text, therefore makes a most persuasive point in calling us to interpret space as "the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist" and to "imagine space as a simultaneity of stories-so-far" (9). Structuralist and semiotic approaches to the study of space such as Eco's are effective in part because they provide sophisticated and engaged tools for assessing precisely such crucial narrative aspects of space. The codes Eco identifies are not fixed ideas or images but sequential processes: in the most basic sense, one enacts a chair's basic denotative function by sitting down. In its more sophisticated forms, such codification both reworks the meaning of older spatial forms and allows new forms to appear; for instance, Eco writes that, if a person of another century were magically transported to the present, he or she could not use an elevator, for this apparently self-explanatory technology in fact requires users already to comprehend "the push buttons, the graphic arrows indicating whether the elevator is about to go up or down, and the emphatic floor-level indicators" (62-63).

I read the stories children's authors tell about transformations, whether fictional or non-fictional, as a reworking of readers' impressions of space. They are pedagogically invested projects, promoting certain kinds of spatial literacy[3] by asking readers to reformulate the pattern of impressions they experience while using space. Such reformulation is not inherently progressive. Many of these authors produce fictions in which landscapes are transparently and unresistingly legible. Such depictions are de-narrativizing: they counter any understanding that spaces are always evolving and may be contested. Some of these titles, however, provide more unsettling narrative connective tissue in their engagements with space: they show readers that space is not simply a congenial field existing for pleasurable inhabitation and that spatial modifications are the product of decision between alternatives. In other words, some of these titles acknowledge that those who use space make vital contributions to its ongoing formation.

Many of these books for young readers seek to provide access to an otherwise unreachable world. Tina Holdcroft's *Hidden Depths: Amazing Underwater Discoveries*, for instance, uses fictional techniques to make knowable the inaccessible landscapes "hiding under the wet stuff that covers over two-thirds of the planet" (5). At one point, Holdcroft illustrates the ruins of the Pharos lighthouse lying underwater off Alexandria's coast with some fidelity to what divers might actually find at the site: a grey-greenish jumble of archaeological fragments only half-emerging out of the murky depths. Other views in the book,

however, are those available only to the imagination. The sunken Jamaican city of Port Royal, for instance, appears as a fully functioning municipal precinct of people and businesses, just as it was before its catastrophic immersion in a 1692 earthquake. While this makes for pleasurable reading, it obscures the workings of the imaginative processes by which such lost spaces are elucidated. The world's undersea spaces in general, of course, are not nearly as vibrant as those depicted here: interesting shipwrecks and sunken cities are comparatively few and far between, it's hard for divers to move and see in the murk, and we can only view the exotic life-forms subsisting around deep-sea underwater volcanoes depicted in this book by means of remotely deployed instruments. Sometimes, however, Holdcroft does give her readers some revealing insight into the fictionality of the supposedly non-fictional world she describes; at one such point, she illustrates the sunken Swedish warship Vasa in split view, one half as a drab underwater wreck and the other as a colourful floating vessel (12-13). Our understandings of these spaces, this image insinuates, must be assembled from incomplete impressions. They can be approached only through fictional means.

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In providing fictionally unimpeded access to space, several of these texts set out to teach readers skills to orient themselves geographically, unquestioningly reproducing ideologies of spatial mastery. A case in point is the Scottish writer Scoular Anderson's *Space Pirates: A Map-Reading Adventure*, which encourages readers to help a ragtag crew of intergalactic brigands hunt for treasure through a number of fantastic landscapes. Anderson draws these scenes from an elevated viewpoint, a forty-five degree angle. Readers must navigate the landscapes by following increasingly sophisticated instructions. The idea, according to the back cover, is to "teach basic mapping skills such as compass reading, using a map key, and following a grid reference." We are told, for example, to search among a village of oddly shaped three-dimensional buildings for an inn whose floor plan is a large box with two smaller boxes on each side. It is a lot of fun to linger over Anderson's intricately geographies; more disquieting is the unconsciousness of the dwellers to the gaze of the pirates (and readers) who wish to plunder chests of gold cached in their

territory. Abstracted two-dimensional representation here serves as a justification for entry, one which goes happily unchallenged by any character other than the competing pirate One Hand Hulke. *Space Pirates* thus promotes a sort of tacit acceptance of the right and the pleasure of surveillance, abetting readers in developing the concepts needed in making and reading maps but omitting the fact that people sometimes resist having themselves and their geographies viewed in this way.

This tendency to narrate space as the achievement of mastery over landscape is more pronounced in Jacqueline Guest's *Racing Fear*, a young-adult novel about Southern Alberta teenagers involved in rally racing. The story's central conceptual anxiety, in fact, is that of control. The narrative opens with the nightmare of the main character, Adam, in which the car he is racing is "heading straight for the cliff and he can't stop it!" (9). His friend Trent takes Ritalin for his Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: the drug, he relates, "slows me down, makes me more manageable, just the way dear old dad likes it" (21). The boys' pastime brings the challenge of staying in command to the fore, for rally driving is "like a force of nature. No matter what you did, some things were beyond your control" (44). The two friends lock horns with a third young man, who blackmails Trent into giving him his medication so he can sell it to others. Tension builds to a thrilling climax involving a high-speed car chase down a gravel road, during which Adam wonders "how hard he could push the car before he was over the line, before the car was driving him instead of the other way around" (138). Despite almost driving off a cliff, exactly as foretold in Adam's dream, the protagonists triumph and all is set right. At the end, Adam realizes that he has "beaten his racing fear": "nothing was going to hold him back from his dreams. From now on, his future was going to be lived at full throttle" (158). In Guest's implied view, doubt must be banished from the racer's dynamic experience of space, as any hesitation can cause one to go careening dangerously off track. The space of the roadway is possibility; mastery of it is the ability to exercise absolute control over that possibility. Once mastered, it contains no secrets and can be effectively dismissed.

While I criticize *Racing Fear*'s eagerness to resolve its characters' anxieties of control, I credit it for doing so openly and unabashedly. I am more concerned about the proclivity of several of these books to reify ideologies not by stating a position but by quietly omitting the connective tissue between events, impressions, and concepts that might lead to destabilizing understandings of readers' experiences of space. Two non-fictional titles, *Fantastic Feats and Failures* and Tanya Lloyd Kyi's *Fires*, for example, rehearse significant moments in the histories of engineering and of devastating conflagrations. These

books contrast rather dramatically with earlier non-fictional volumes about such topics for younger readers such as David B. Steinman's *Bridges and Their Builders* and *Famous Bridges of the World*. Steinman, a celebrated twentieth-century bridge engineer himself, strung the stories of the construction of famous bridges spanning over 4,000 years into a grand narrative of Western civilization—"civilization" being for him the state in which the individual builder's consciousness becomes free to function outside of political meddling, religious authority, and slavish adherence to received wisdom.

Today, of course, most critics would—with considerable justification—dismiss this type of history as reductively male and Eurocentric, but I'm not sure that rendering dramatic events while avoiding larger conclusions about their cultural and political importance is any better. *Fantastic Feats and Failures*, after describing in no apparent historical or conceptual order a variety of things ranging from the construction of the Sydney Opera House to the failure of Pennsylvania's South Fork Dam in 1889, concludes with a short section entitled "Murphy's Law" that draws from the preceding stories only the moral that engineers must "test, retest and test again": "imagine every possible disaster and whatever you do, have a back-up plan or two. Oh yeah, and learn from past feats and failures" (50). Despite this manifest emphasis on historical awareness, the anonymous authors have little to say about the historical development of cultural and economic forces underlying engineering ethics. In this vein, the main insight they suggest engineers should take from the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center is merely that "building against terrorist attacks is a never-ending battle": "No matter how big or strong the structure, someone may find a way to turn a feat into a failure" (49). Likewise, *Fires!* records events such as the Chernobyl disaster and London's Great Fire of 1666 without any historical or conceptual order. It does, however, offer a thoughtful introduction that discusses the political dimensions of the choices people have made during particular disasters, suggesting that the point of reading about these events is not merely to gasp in awe at combustion's destructive power but to be prompted to ask oneself ethical questions. "As you read these stories," writes Kyi, "stop to imagine the blinding flames, the choking smoke, and the waves of heat. What if you had been there? What would you have done?" (8).

While the relative lack of historical context in these two books is irritating, such lack becomes more actively insidious in Paulette Bourgeois and Kim LaFave's newly republished 1992 titles *Garbage Collectors* and *Police Officers* and Ann-Maureen Owens, Jane Yealland, and John Mantha's *The Kids Book of Canadian Exploration*. *Police Officers* at no point attempts to explain the law as

a series of collective decisions to control people's desires for the sake of an agreed-upon greater good. Instead, Bourgeois and Lafave suggest that the constabulary exists primarily to fight property crime perpetuated by outsiders. "Outsiders" is, in fact, a spatial metaphor, and the book consistently portrays police work as a matter of patrolling access to space. It begins with young Natalie, a member of the "Best family" (5), waking her parents in the middle of the night to call the police, since she has heard noises outside and "Someone has been stealing bicycles on her street" (4). Nothing turns out to be amiss, but the next day Natalie sees "a big blue van parked behind an empty building," which she duly reports to the school principal. Empty urban spaces, one takes it, are not places where the imagination can revel in possibility, but rather places of moral degeneracy; sure enough, the police arrive to tail the van and catch its occupants stealing bicycles. Later, readers see some officers at work who "control the crowds at concerts and sports events" (23); the accompanying illustration shows two clearly drawn police officers standing in front of a barricade which holds back a crowd represented only by indeterminate splotches of colour. To be milling around in a place one does not own, apparently, is inherently threatening (unrepresentably so) and thus requires supervision. Accordingly, the book suggests its readers might best avoid criminal activity by taking "the same route for going to and from school, playgrounds and friends' homes" and making sure "your parents know the routes you take" (30). *Garbage Collectors* approves of recycling initiatives and hazardous waste depots, but steers clear of making a connection between the way people consume products and the bags of refuse that appear on the curb in front of their houses. A slight hint of debate does emerge at one single point: "In some places, garbage is burned. Some people think that burning garbage hurts plants and air and water" (24). Otherwise, things just happen at the intersection of the public and private spheres of these two books—and government representatives are always there happily to dispatch any problems.

The Kids Book of Canadian Exploration, for its part, takes on a more politically fraught subject and navigates such rough waters by an even greater tendency to isolate pieces of information which, if linked, would generate troubling conclusions. On one two-page spread, this book states that "Like today's astronauts, explorers risked their lives to be the first to discover [no quotation marks] new places" (4), and then, suddenly mindful of the sensitivities of First Nations people, suggests that "[w]ith the help of the Native people who already lived here, explorers 'discovered' a wild and vast country that became Canada" (5). One section of the

book magnanimously terms First Nations peoples "Canada's First Explorers," but rather astonishingly provides a colour-coded map of the distribution of six general First Nations cultural groupings as if they were demarcated from U.S. territory by present-day Canadian borders. Elsewhere, the exploitive horrors of the new-world gold trade under Spanish imperialism are simply brushed over with the sentence, "The new lands that Columbus claimed for Spain did provide gold and silver a few years later, but Columbus died a disappointed man in 1507" (10). At other points the book duly notes First Nations grievances, but only in "Did You Know" boxes set off from the main narrative text. The box accompanying the story of John Cabot, for example, states this:

> European rulers did not recognize the rights of Native people and felt they could claim any land and seize all property. Today Native groups are still trying to reclaim their ancestors' land and their rights to hunt and fish. (12)

In most ways, then, *The Kids Book of Canadian Exploration* leaves intact the traditional narrative of Canadian geography as something inherently needing to be explored and understood, while isolating modern-day objections to this exploration in sidebars. Modern exploration, at the book's ending, carries on in the form of "scientists who want to understand the Earth's ecosystems and try to preserve nature's wonders for future generations" (51). It is always noble to seek here, despite any protests to this search some may mount along the way.

A few titles in this group, however, narrate their geographies in ways which account more candidly for the mysterious and distressing aspects of people's personal and cultural engagements with contested spaces. A case in point is Curtis Parkinson's young-adult novel, *Sea Chase*, in which a young Canadian man's efforts to rescue his father from a Colombian drug cartel go hand in hand with his struggle to locate himself in a strange landscape, unfamiliar both in terms of geographic and psychic coordinates. The sailboat on which Brodie travels has no electronic guidance system, because "his father had been waiting to buy one cheaply in Panama" (15), and a wayward goat eats his navigation charts. Brodie's dislocation is not only literal but emblematic of an abstract state of being. It contrasts directly with the world view of an American tourist who confidently presents him with a markedly welcoming Colombian geography:

> "Just look at it—Cartagena and the Caribbean back there," he gestured to the west, "the Sierra Nevadas up there (gesture ahead), the Guajira desert over there (gesture to the north), the Magdalena, the Andes, the jungle, Bogotá (sweeping gesture to the south)." (139)

Brodie, however, cannot share in this sense of belonging:

> He pictured the places he'd lived in his short life. Ottawa, Florida with his mother, on the boat with his father. The only one of those that had felt at all like home was Ottawa. But there was nothing for his there now. *So where is home? Everyone has some place that feels like home, don't they?* (158)

After arranging for his father's escape, Brodie decides to stay in Colombia to go to university with a dedicated young woman who has helped him along. In this novel's evocation of space, one cannot avoid the unsettling political situations inscribed into the landscape, for those considerations are the very basis on which passage is either made possible or prohibited. The man who has kidnapped Brodie's father tells him that the ransom he asks "is our way of taxing the wealthy for the good of our country," a proposition Brodie glumly reflects is "probably right" (147). On the other hand, Parkinson does in some ways evoke the complex Colombian situation as a backdrop against which his young white Canadian main character can experience thrilling adventures that eventually allow him to come of age. Although Brodie forms a vague plan to join his young friend at a Colombian university near the end of the novel, the closing words are actually uttered on his father's reclaimed sailboat: as the older man offers to retake the wheel, his son's response is "No, I can handle it, Dad. . . . You just relax" (185). At this final, cheerfully positive moment, the main character has mastered control over his and others' trajectory and Colombia's problems recede into the distance.

Another title which narrates a young man's coming of age in his journey through an unmapped geography, Roch Carrier's *La Chasse-galerie*, succeeds precisely because it does not allow a contested space to become a mere backdrop. Carrier's book, simultaneously published in French and in an English translation by Sheila Fischman, retells an old legend in which a group of lumberjacks working in a remote location become homesick for their families on New Year's Eve. Taking the young boy Baptiste along, they steal out of the boss's view, climb into a canoe, and cast a magic spell that allows them to fly home through the winter sky. The book does not suggest that these men have mastered the landscape above which they speed; instead, the ultimately mysterious nature of the frozen Québec night, glowing with stars and distant scattered dwellings, animates their mythical journey. Illustrator Sheldon Cohen shows us a fragment of a map of Québec early on lying on the drunken camp boss's desk, but, significantly, the book's travellers never use that chart to navigate. Readers are given only brief aerial glimpses of Québec locations as

the canoe flies over them. When young Baptiste, left alone to guard the canoe while the older men drink at the Château St. Louis in Québec City, steals the canoe and crashes through the roof of his parents' small-town house, the moon shines bright in the indigo sky above the scene. On the next page, a roomful of children who have just been told this story by their grandmother sing the magic words in a giant speech bubble made of the same sky and moon. Carrier and Cohen succeed in narrating a journey that transforms space without laying bare its mysteries, allowing for poignant reflections to emerge, for great dark spaces to be invoked, in everyday environments.

For similar reasons, I commend Hazel Hutchins and Ruth Ohi's *Beneath the Bridge*. This picture-book thoughtfully constructs a narration of the human condition out of a series of snapshots of unrelated people bound together by the flow of the river around which their activities centre. At the outset of the narrative, it is morning, and a young boy drops a paper sailboat in a small stream. On the ensuing pages this tiny vessel travels under bigger and bigger bridges—from a small stick placed on two rocks on either side of the stream to a mighty steel suspension bridge—on ever-widening waterways that combine and make their way to the sea. Along the way, different people pick up the boat and set it right, so it can continue floating along, while the narrative voice repeatedly intones, "Beneath the bridge / water flows. / Where it's headed / nobody knows." By the final frame night has fallen where the river meets the sea; there appears a group of people including a young couple with a baby and young children standing next to an elderly couple. The message, one takes it, is that we have witnessed all of the rich pageant of life being played out in the space along the river. That said, the life in question is an unfailingly clean and cheerful one, comprising pleasure boaters, horseback riders, and smiling animals—a mythical leisure class captured in serene repose. Although industrial facilities and highways appear, no one apparently works, suffers, or feels despair in this world. Perhaps I point this out only because the plot of *Beneath the Bridge* so closely corresponds with that of Bill Mason's haunting short film *Paddle to the Sea*, based on Holling C. Holling's 1941 picture book, a more challenging story that depicts such unsettling real-life scenes as a jackfish devouring a frog and industrial pollution gushing into the water in Detroit. Nothing in *Beneath the Bridge* quite matches the majestic poignancy of the little wooden canoe drifting amongst the enormous Great Lakes container ships in Mason's film.

Marilynn Reynolds and Renné Benoit's *Goodbye to Griffith Street*, on the other hand, follows Mason's example in not pastoralizing industrial landscapes. It tells the touching story of a young boy's departure, after his parents' divorce, from the gritty mining town

where he has grown up. According to a biographical note, Reynolds' desire to imagine a better departure than her own from Sudbury, Ontario at the age of seven under similar circumstances inspired this tale. In her fictional version, snow falls overnight before the morning of John's departure; being the first to awake on his street, he gets dressed and goes about making snow angels and tramping out stars in the yards of all the people he has known while living there. In terms of spatial literacy, there is much to admire in this book, both for its unsentimental (well, relatively unsentimental) portrayal of childhood in a working-class locale and for its enactment of the conceptually sophisticated idea that one can at once relive and redefine a history of inhabitation by navigating the space involved. This process leads to the penultimate page, which shows the entire block from a bird's-eye view in order that readers might appreciate all at once the path John has traced through the snow. The book therefore achieves what John cannot—a perception of his community as a coherently linked cosmos. Yet this vision is not a triumphant one of unquestioned mastery, but a wistful one of fleeting connection. Already others are beginning to leave footprints of their own in the newly fallen snow, and readers can see marks in the snow where the taxi has stopped and John and his mother have gotten in. As the car makes its way down the street, its deep tire tracks bisect the comparatively faint oval of John's footsteps. However, what most subverts the story's potentially maudlin aspects is Benoit's clever title-page illustration of a dog lifting its leg in one of the stars John has imprinted in the snow; in this light, John's own act of marking territory seems considerably less solemn.

For my money, however, the most unsettling and thoughtful takes on machine transportation and the built world in this group of books are Don Kilby's *Wheels at Work in the Country* and *Wheels at Work in the City*. Kilby's explanatory text often borders on the inane: "Hot dogs, hamburgers and crispy french fries are served up at the **chip wagon** across the street. This restaurant on wheels is a very busy place come lunchtime!" There is, though, both grandeur and pathos to his painted illustrations, which harken back to the sense of detachment, isolation, and emotional ambiguity in the spatial evocations of some important works of Modernist art. Kilby depicts his big trucks and heavy machines realistically; they dominate the page and are rendered in much greater definition than their human users, but are not sentimentally personified as sentient beings. Instead, they stand as mute, inanimate witnesses to the quotidian human drama in which they perform their various functions.

Both books subtly locate their subjects in broader narratives: in *Wheels at Work in the Country*, readers see the functions various machines perform over the

course of a growing season; in *Wheels at Work in the City*, Kilby presents the illustrations in an order which follows a single day. On one two-page spread, for example, readers see a moving truck being loaded with a family's possessions, while across the street a courier truck stops to make a delivery. Both events seem suffused with the same amount of resignation, reflected both in the hazy sky and in the service workers' empty facial expressions. In their midst stands a little girl looking very much like an habitué of Georges-Pierre Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*—she is neither excited or scared in the midst of her unsettled state, but as emotionally alienated as the truck in whose dull grey shadow she stands. A little later, Kilby depicts a chip wagon on a downtown afternoon street; the mood at the cloudy base of the glass buildings seems very much that of Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks*, even complete with indifferent-looking customers. The page over shows a power rodder truck at work on an early-evening streetscape seemingly taken from a de Chirico painting—calm, airless, empty, yet slightly foreboding. As night falls, readers see an ambulance unloading an elderly patient at a hospital. The text is cheery: "**The ambulance** races up to the emergency room doors! Attendants rush the patient into the hospital." But the people in the illustration betray little urgency. In this telling, the simultaneous falling of daylight and onset of later-life infirmity occasion only mechanical, not emotional, responses.

Wheels at Work in the City ends with an image, perhaps the book's most soulful, of a street sweeper at work late at night among the darkened doorways of an empty avenue, impassively brushing away the detritus left behind by the human activity of the day. Overall, Kilby's books thus narrate built space as neither congenial nor forbidding. They leave room for substantial introspection into the human condition—the kind that only comes when one realizes that the space of machinery and transportation is both indifferent to human feelings and yet at the same time spiritually suffused with a promise of transcendence.

Kilby's books, in other words, display a subtle and complex engagement with the unfolding of spatial stories without equal among the books covered in this review. The theoretical model I have proposed understands the dynamic process of the disclosure of space to observers as constitutive of that space. In Kilby's works transformations are rendered as events that challenge readers to reflect on matters of belonging, location, and the ethereal nature of the human condition. Here the primary and secondary functions of machines and spaces, as Eco would define them, are located in a narrative context which subtly redefines their readability, to the end of infusing public space with fresh interpretive—and inhabitive—possibility.

Notes

[1] The term is from Cecilia Tichi's study *Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature, Culture in Modernist America*.

[2] For Lefebvre as well, everyday events in space signify mainly as evidence of the underlying conditions of their production: "Within and through space, a certain social time is produced and reproduced; but real social time is forever re-emerging complete with it own characteristics and determinants: repetitions, rhythms, cycles, activities" (340). Time does not play a role in constituting space, that is, but only emerges out of it; produced space is therefore largely prior to events occurring within it in his model.

[3] In using this term, I am not referring so much to the "spatial literacy" currently being taught to public-school students, which has to do with reading maps and accessing electronic geospatial data and such. Instead, I am thinking more along the lines the architectural critic Epifania Amoo-Adare has recently defined in "En-Gendering Spatial Literacy: Migrant Asante Women and the Politics of Urban Space": "what I call *critical spatial literacy* . . . is the ability to read codes embedded in the urban built environment in order to understand how they affect social life and to determine if there is a need for transformative spatio-political action."

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