Windows on the World: Canadian Publishers Offer Global Perspectives on Childhood

—Elizabeth Galway

Ellis, Deborah. *Our Stories, Our Songs: African Children Talk About AIDS*. Markham, ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2005. 104 pp. $22.95 hc, $17.95 pb. ISBN 1-55041-913-7, 1-55041-912-9.

Jordan, Rosa. *Lost Goat Lane*. Markham, ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2005. 197 pp. $12.95 pb. ISBN 1-55041-932-3.

Machado, Ana Maria. From *Another World*. Illus. Lúcia Brandão. Trans. Luisa Baeta. Toronto: Groundwood, 2005. 136 pp. $18.95 hc, $9.95 pb. ISBN 0-88899-597-0, 0-88899-641-1.

Menchú, Rigoberta, with Dante Liano. *The Girl from Chimel*. Illus. Domi. Trans. David Unger. Toronto: Groundwood, 2005. 56 pp. $18.95 hc. ISBN 0-88899-666-7.

Mwangi, Meja. *The Mzungu Boy*. Toronto: Groundwood, 2005. 150 pp. $18.95 hc, $9.95 pb. ISBN 0-88899-653-5, 0-88899-664-0.

Nyoka, Gail. *Mella and the N'anga: An African Tale*. Toronto: Sumach, 2005. 160 pp. $10.95 pb. ISBN 1-894549-49-X.

Selvadurai, Shyam. *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*. Toronto: Tundra, 2005. 274 pp. $24.99 hc. ISBN 0-88776-735-4.

Spring, Debbie. *The Righteous Smuggler*. Toronto: Second Story, 2005. 160 pp. $8.95 pb. ISBN 1-896764-97-5.

Canada is a country of much diversity, and the negotiation of difference is a dominant theme in Canadian literature. Some writers explore questions of difference and belonging in terms of the Canadian context, but many also consider these issues in relation to the world outside Canada's borders. In 2005, several Canadian publishers produced books for children that explore the experiences of children and young adults living in different times and different places around the world and which, in the process, teach young readers the importance of respecting difference. These texts include works of historical fiction, non-fiction, personal memoirs and coming-of-age stories, and some contain elements of fantasy. Although these works belong to an assortment of genres, they share some things in common. Several are set against the backdrop of particularly turbulent times, while the one work of non-fiction reviewed here documents the difficulties faced by children dealing with the reality of AIDS in Africa. Many of the stories address issues of racism, sexism, and intolerance, while others explore the difficult period of adolescence and the process of self-discovery.

These books dwell on trauma in other times and places, opening the eyes of young Canadian readers to the diverse, and often quite negative, experiences of children living around the world.

Through their portrayal of children from a range of communities, these texts support the assertion that much contemporary literature "attempts to introduce young readers to a range of cultural experiences in the hope that knowing about other cultures will lead to tolerance" (McGillis, "'And'" 224). Together, these works offer a multiplicity of perspectives on the world, and feature child characters who struggle to overcome adversity, gain agency, and understand some of the disturbing truths about the world they live in. Some of the authors of the works reviewed here convey these positive outcomes quite convincingly and realistically, while others express more utopian and idealistic notions of childhood. Hamida Bosmajian has observed of Holocaust literature for children that writers often remove atrocity to "emphasize acts of ingenuity and kindness or accentuate heroic gestures" (Kremer 254). The same is true of several of the works discussed here which, although set against turbulent backdrops, often soften the depiction of various atrocities in order to emphasize the importance of understanding, kindness, and tolerance. These books dwell on trauma in other times and places, opening

the eyes of young Canadian readers to the diverse, and often quite negative, experiences of children living around the world. At the same time, however, many of the stories present quite similar, idealized visions of childhood as a protected space, with children universally possessing innocence, courage, and the power to effect positive change in the face of adversity. By softening some of the depictions of atrocity, and focusing on such familiar themes as childhood friendship, the desire to belong, and the longing for a feeling of empowerment in an adult world, these works create a sense of a universal, shared experience of childhood. Ultimately, these stories put forth the notion that Canadian children have much in common with and much to learn from young people from around the world, no matter how great their differences may appear to be.

In 2005, Groundwood published three works that deal, both directly and indirectly, with historical periods of trauma and upheaval. One is set in Brazil, another in Kenya, and the third in Guatemala. Groundwood, which publishes in Canada, the U.S., and Latin America, often publishes books set outside of Canada and has a special imprint, Libros Tigrillo, which publishes work by people of Latin American origin. While there are likely economic advantages for Groundwood to do this in order to sell to a larger market that includes all of North America and Latin America, the publisher cites further reasons for its interest in such works:

> Many of our books tell the stories of people whose voices are not always heard in this age of global publishing by media conglomerates. Books by the First Peoples of this hemisphere have always been a special interest, as have those of others who through circumstance have been marginalized and whose contribution to our society is not always visible. . . . We believe that by reflecting intensely individual experiences, our books are of universal interest. ("About")

Groundwood's argument that stories about intensely individual experience are of universal interest suggests that many of the books reviewed here, even though they are not about life in Canada, will be of interest to Canadian children who can sympathize with some of the emotions and feelings experienced by individual child characters.

Groundwood also expresses a desire to enable the voices of those who have been marginalized (in part by the economic realities of the publishing business) to be heard. One example of this from Groundwood is a novel set against a backdrop of turbulent times in Brazil. *From Another World*, by Ana Maria Machado (translated by Luisa Baeta and illustrated by Lúcia Brandão), is a ghost story set in contemporary Brazil. The narrator is the young boy

Mariano, who is uncomfortable with his new role as a writer, telling the reader, "I'm only writing—or trying to write—because I made a promise. Not an easy promise, a very solemn one" (9). Mariano's promise is made after he and his friends Leo, Elisa, and Teresa encounter the ghost of a young black girl named Rosario while staying at a farm outside São Paulo. During a series of encounters with Rosario, the children learn that the farm was once a large and powerful coffee plantation run by the cruel Sinho Peçanha, who, when ordered by law in 1888 to set his slaves free, decided instead to burn them alive, including the young girl Rosario.

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After sharing her story, Rosario makes the children promise that they will keep the memory of it alive "so that there will never be slavery again" (112). Mariano promises to record the story in writing, but struggles with the weight of this responsibility:

> Maybe one of the hardest things about this was that it wasn't just about slavery—an economic thing, an inhuman and immoral way to treat people and get free labor. The slaves weren't white. And the owners weren't black. So it was about skin color and race, too. It was really complicated. It was about an injustice so great that you couldn't get rid of it by just passing a law. (113–14)

Rosario assigns this task to Mariano directly, and the friends, who come from different backgrounds, conclude that it is because he does not have any black ancestors. Elisa explains it as follows: "[F]or a black person or . . . someone from mixed blood like Leo and I—being against slavery is the most natural thing in the world. Our ancestors were the ones who were slaves. We can never forget it. But you were the ones who enslaved us, and your job is to remember all the time" (109). Leo adds, "when a black person talks about slavery, people don't pay much attention. . . . But if the person who fights for this issue has fairer skin, maybe people will listen more. They might be more effective or at least get more attention" (109–10). While the novel clearly aims to instill a message of racial tolerance in young readers, Elisa and Leo's comments seem to suggest a continuing racist ideology in Brazil that privileges the white man's narrative. Apparently, Mariano's words have a greater power to effect change than those of

his friends with black ancestry.

While the assumption that Mariano has the most power to shape and disseminate the story of slavery appears in itself to be inherently racist, it also suggests lingering imperial guilt, with the descendants of European colonizers in Brazil considering it their duty to remember the wrongs of the past. Quoting Edward Said, Clare Bradford argues that "interpretations of the present frequently involve the rereading of the past in an attempt to discover 'whether the past really is the past, over and concluded, or whether it continues, albeit in different forms'" (198). Said's observations are particularly relevant here, as the novel does raise questions about whether the history of racism in Brazil is "over and concluded" or whether it continues in different forms, including the appointing of Mariano as narrator because of his white ancestry. As Mariano himself observes, the novel is not just about the history of slavery, it is also about issues of race and colour in contemporary Brazil. The children's rereading of their nation's history through Rosario's account of slavery leads to a new awareness on their part of some of the ongoing conflicts in Brazilian society.

Machado's novel is an example of a postcolonial children's text in which the colonial past "is variously rehearsed, reinscribed, and contested . . . , and . . . is increasingly a site of tension, producing different and conflicting significances" (Bradford 198). Mariano realizes this when he notes the "complicated" nature of Rosario's story. Leo's comments, meanwhile, show that this exploration of the past leads to a consideration of the ongoing influence of racial difference, suggesting that those who are white may still have a greater influence in Brazil than those who are not. In addition, the novel suggests that the legacy of slavery continues to have an impact on society. Bradford gives two reasons for the exploration of the past in postcolonial texts: "[F]irst, the influence of subaltern writing, which seeks to recover the voices of colonized people and tell their stories; and, second, the fact that strategies of silence and forgetting merely repress colonial memories, the recovery of which is frequently painful and confrontational" (198). Rosario cannot tell her own story, ostensibly because she is a ghost, but also, Machado suggests, because those who most need to hear her tale will not listen seriously to a young, black girl. Instead, she assigns this task to Mariano so that the horrors of slavery and the sinister side of Brazil's past will not be silenced. While learning about Rosario, the children must also confront their own ancestry. For some this means the painful fact that their ancestors were slaves, while for others it means acknowledging their ancestors' role in perpetuating slavery. Machado attempts to present history, specifically disturbing episodes of colonial history, to young readers in a meaningful way, by drawing explicit connections between events

of the past and lingering problems in contemporary society.

By learning about the past, the children learn that they all have a role to play in eliminating prejudice. Machado's story shows readers that they share this responsibility and that they have the ability to effect change, a message that transcends the specific Brazilian context of the novel. There are several ways in which this might be of potential relevance and interest to young Canadian readers. On one hand, the story may help to celebrate the diversity and perceived tolerance of contemporary Canadian society, which does not have the same tradition of slavery, in contrast to the lingering racism portrayed as part of Brazilian life. On the other hand, the story has the potential to prompt young readers to question such assumptions about Canadian superiority and explore some of the troubling realities of Canada's own past. With its discussion of young children learning to negotiate questions of racial difference in a postcolonial society, *From Another World* teaches young Canadian readers the importance of respecting difference in a multicultural society, a lesson they can apply to their own lives.

The Mzungu Boy by Meja Mwangi is the second work from Groundwood that will be of interest to those concerned with the ways in which children's literature documents turbulent historical periods as a means of addressing issues of race, child empowerment, and the importance of tolerance. *The Mzungu Boy* takes place in Kenya during the 1950s, at the start of the Mau Mau Rebellion. While its Kenyan setting provides an element of exotic intrigue for Canadian readers, the story will also appeal to Canadian children through its central and familiar theme of friendship. Narrated by the twelve-year-old Kenyan boy Kariuki, Mwangi's novel tells the story of the growing friendship between the protagonist and Nigel, a white boy from England. Nigel is the grandson of the formidable Bwana Ruin, the white man who controls the land that the villagers farm. Kariuki's father is Bwana Ruin's cook, and, like the other villagers, his livelihood depends on the whim of his temperamental employer. Kariuki feels misunderstood by his father, observing, "[e]verything my father said to me was an order. I could not remember ever having a friendly conversation with him" (41). There are many things about the adult world that Kariuki does not understand, and he feels a lack of power in a society that follows a strict hierarchy:

> Everything in our village ran according to a hierarchy. Above everyone were Bwana Ruin, Mamsab Ruin and any white person who happened to come along. Then came the village men. Then came the women and girls. And then came the rest of us. The boys and village dogs were at

> the bottom of the ladder, below the goats, the sheep and the chickens. We boys had no rights whatsoever. Not at home, not in the village and not at school. (49)

Much like the rebels, Kariuki feels frustrated by the lack of respect and the lack of control he has over his own life, a familiar theme explored in children's literature.

Kariuki's sense of isolation results from the tension in the relationship he has with his father and from his increasing distance from his older brother, Hari. When Kariuki meets Nigel, their friendship lessens this isolation. He writes, "I knew I was going to like Nigel, this white boy who knew so little about everything. I had a great deal to teach him. But first he had to teach me to swim" (51). With his ability to teach Nigel about his Kenyan surroundings, Kariuki no longer feels insignificant or "at the bottom of the ladder." Nigel also has something to offer, teaching his new friend how to swim, and telling him stories about England and a world very different from the village.

Mwangi's portrayal of two boys, free from the prejudices that dominate the society around them, is a traditional image of idealized childhood innocence. Somehow, in their feelings toward one another, the boys have escaped the influence of a pervasive, racist ideology, which has otherwise shaped every aspect of their lives.

Unlike most of the adults they know, the boys are free of prejudice. Theirs is a simple and heartfelt friendship. Mwangi's portrayal of two boys, free from the prejudices that dominate the society around them, is a traditional image of idealized childhood innocence. Somehow, in their feelings toward one another, the boys have escaped the influence of a pervasive, racist ideology, which has otherwise shaped every aspect of their lives. In spite of such apparent utopian longings, Mwangi deals directly with the realities of racial intolerance and social injustice in his novel. The boys' friendship forms against the backdrop of the Mau Mau Rebellion, in which many, including Kariuki's brother Hari, are killed. *The Mzungu Boy* is a poignant coming-of-age story, set at a critical time in Kenyan history. It does not ignore the harsh and ugly realities of this historical period as the two young lead characters come face to face with the dangers and prejudices of the time. Their friendship, however, which thrives

in the face of such turmoil, provides a message of hope for a world still struggling with issues of racial inequality and intolerance.

Mwangi's portrayal of friendship as a protected space, unspoiled by the failings of adult society, is not uncommon in children's literature. In this novel, childhood friendship triumphs over cynicism and adult disapproval to achieve a transformative power. For Canadian child readers, far removed from the spectacle of the Mau-Mau rebellion, the important message of the novel lies in its portrayal of friendship between two boys whose ability to see one another as individuals is one small step toward achieving a wider sense of equality and tolerance. Nigel and Hariuki form a friendship not simply in spite of their differences, but because of them, with each boy being able to teach the other something new and enlightening. Ultimately, through this appreciation of their differences comes recognition of their similarities and common humanity. Along with other works set in turbulent times and locales, *The Mzungu Boy* may appeal to Canadian readers in part because it offers a sharp contrast to the stability of contemporary Canadian society. This allows young readers to feel a sense of security in their own peaceful society, while at the same time leading them to recognize that prejudice, racism, and intolerance are destabilizing forces that they need to counter in order to preserve this peace and prosperity.

Another work that addresses questions of prejudice and hatred is Canadian writer Debbie Spring's *The Righteous Smuggler*, published by Second Story Press. A work of historical fiction, this novel, like Mwangi's, has a young male protagonist who tells his own story. At the novel's opening, Hendrik, the son of a fisherman in Amsterdam, turns twelve on the same day that the Germans invade Holland during the Second World War. He witnesses the changes that unfold around him after the occupation, including seeing his Jewish friends prevented from going to school, having their families' businesses taken away, and eventually disappearing altogether. Hendrik's father, an important figure in his son's life, teaches him always to help those who are in need. Father and son put this lesson into practice as they use their fishing boat to smuggle Jewish families out of Amsterdam. Exploring themes of freedom, compassion, and sacrifice, *The Righteous Smuggler* traces the development of its adolescent protagonist, who gains some control over the horrific events around him by doing what he can to help those in need.

Spring's story is a somewhat conventional story of a child on the brink of adulthood, who learns to take on responsibility and become something of a hero. Unlike Machado and Mwangi's tales, throughout which the young male narrators remain children, Spring ends her story with an epilogue in which

Hendrik is no longer a teenager, but suddenly a grown man, more than fifty years after the end of the war. This abrupt transition weakens somewhat the sense of immediacy of the story and its portrayal of the events of the Holocaust, and disrupts the narrative, making Hendrik a less convincing and consistent child-narrator. In spite of these problems, Spring's exploration of anti-Semitism in the novel will be of interest to those who study Holocaust fiction for young readers. S. Lillian Kremer argues that writers of such literature often "conceal the attractiveness Nazism held for German youth or . . . shield young readers from the atrocities of the Holocaust experience" (252). Instead, Kremer argues, "writers privilege the life-affirming values common to children's literature" (253). Kremer cites Bosmajian's study of Holocaust literature for children, noting that writers often soften their depictions of violence to accentuate kindness and heroic gestures (254). Spring's novel provides a worthwhile subject for study in the context of such observations. Spring acknowledges that some children were complicit in the horrors perpetuated by the adults around them, which is a move away from an idealized notion of children as innocent and free from prejudice and intolerance.

While Spring suggests that children may have the ability and the will to do harm, she also portrays Hendrik as having some power to make a positive difference. It is a classic story of a young, seemingly weak child gaining agency and struggling against the strong, opposing forces of evil. Spring's story avoids presenting an entirely idealized or naive vision of children and the power they might wield, however, by Hendrik's failure to help some of those who are closest to him, and by his realization that some of his classmates do not recognize the injustice of the treatment of their Jewish peers and their families. This serves to emphasize Hendrik's heroism in working to oppose the racism and violence surrounding him, and teaches children a message about the importance of following the strength of their own convictions and standing up for their sense of what is right.

Ending with an epilogue set in Israel in 2000 that features a ceremony thanking him for his efforts to save Jews during the war, Hendrik's story does contain the "life-affirming values" that Kremer cites as familiar to children's fiction. The story of Hendrik's part in the Dutch resistance also supports what Bosmajian views as a tendency to emphasize kindness and heroic gestures. The novel does not, however, entirely ignore the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis or spare the reader from some of the painful realities of the war. Hendrik discovers the body of his beloved father under the rubble after he is killed during an air raid; he witnesses his beautiful friend Malka, his first love, loaded onto a cattle train to be sent to the concentration camps; and Hendrik and his father hear three gunshots that tell them that a Jewish

woman and her two daughters, who tried to escape Amsterdam in a small rowboat, have been captured by the German patrol and killed. By including such incidents, Spring's novel serves as a useful tool for considering the recent trend in Holocaust literature for children outlined by Michael Martin:

> As opposed to continuing the suggestion that the Holocaust remains an unsuitable topic or ineffable event, recent texts attempt to move within and beyond this ineffability through disallowing readers a protected space outside of the text. While this new space may be attempted, rarely do such authors successfully complete the task; instead, the reader is typically drawn back to a safe and hopeful narrative space where the text re-subscribes to traditional notions of children's literature. (316)

The treatment of the atrocities of the Holocaust in children's literature is an important area of study, and *The Righteous Smuggler* raises important questions about the possible sanitization of such historical realities, an issue that applies to many of the other books reviewed here. Together, many of these works suggest that stories set against turbulent backgrounds open the eyes of Canadian readers to some of the more disturbing realities of the world around them, yet also aim to protect them from experiencing the full horror of these realities. Rather than focusing on the gruesome details of the atrocities themselves, works like *The Righteous Smuggler* use traumatic circumstances as a means of emphasizing a message of tolerance, kindness, and understanding.

Gail Nyoka's *Mella and the N'anga: An African Tale*, which was shortlisted in 2005 for the Governor General's award, is another work that deals with the past, and another work set outside of Canada's own borders. It is perhaps the multicultural nature of Canadian society that leads publishers to see a market for stories that explore cultures and experiences that go beyond a strictly Canadian context. Another potential appeal of Nyoka's novel for Canadian readers is its position as a work of fantasy, a genre popular among young readers. Born in Trinidad and raised in the U.K., Nyoka now lives in Ontario. Her novel, set in a mythic time in Zimbabwe, is the story of a young girl, Mella, whose father, the king, is gravely ill, and whose town is in the grip of a terrible drought.

A central theme in the novel is the importance of knowing and honouring the traditions of one's ancestors. Mella is told that the drought and her father's illness result from the fact that "there are certain traditions that have been lost" in the kingdom (11). In particular, the tradition of the "Daughters of the Hunt" is one that the tribe must revive in order to survive. This group of young women was at one

time highly regarded by the ruler of the community, but was disbanded because the people "thought that they were uncontrollable and that they were a bad example for the girls of the tribe. After that, it was forbidden for girls to play the special drum and to learn the arts of the hunt" (36). The story of how this tradition came to an end calls attention to the novel's central theme of female equality and empowerment. At the same time, the tale of the loss of female traditions and rights mirrors the wider loss of African traditions and a break in the connection to the ancestral past. Nyoka's exploration of Zimbabwe's past places her novel in the realm of postcolonial fiction, as it emphasizes the importance of African history, culture, and identity independent from the influence of imperialism. By recalling a mythical time in Africa's past that predates colonialism—or escapes it altogether—Nyoka explores a culture whose value is not dependent on colonial history. Yet this is not simply an example of utopian wish-fulfillment, as the mythical society presented in the novel does have some connection to contemporary reality. Through the representation of Mella's journey toward understanding her society's past, rediscovering tradition, and securing stability for her community's future, themes of the aftermath of colonial repression and the disruption and loss of tradition are implicit in Nyoka's novel.

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Mella and the N'anga tells the tale of Mella, who, under the leadership of the strange and powerful senior woman the N'anga, revives the tradition of the Daughters of the Hunt with her friends. In their new roles, the girls gain respect and influence, and Mella demonstrates great ability and bravery when she saves the dying King by making a perilous journey to the Python Healer. The N'anga chooses Mella and her friends, Revai and Shamiso, to revive tradition because "[s]he saw within them the capability, the desire and the courage to do what is necessary to search beyond the surfaces of things and to find their inner secrets and inner resources. She saw that they questioned

and looked for truth" (107). Aided by her fellow Daughters of the Hunt, Mella conquers her fears and is able to save her father and her community from drought and starvation. In addition to celebrating ancestral tradition, this novel, with its strong female protagonist, is a story of women's strength. Brave and honest Mella accomplishes what her older and less honourable brother Dikita cannot. In the process of preserving her community from destruction, Mella also enables the women in the community to gain respect and regain some of the power they had in the past.

Nyoka uses the setting of a mythical past to tell a story of young women overcoming oppression and adversity. For those interested in the role children's literature plays in socializing young readers and shaping gender roles, *Mella and the N'anga* offers an example of the ways in which the past, whether mythical or historical, can be used to promote a message of female strength and equality for contemporary readers. Although this novel is set in a mythical time in Africa, Nyoka makes the work relevant to contemporary Canadian readers by creating a strong female protagonist, whose feelings and aspirations are akin to those of young Canadian girls. Mella believes in equality for women and wants the same opportunity that her brother has to prove her love for their father and her loyalty to the community. Although she is from another time and place, young Canadian readers can identify with Mella, because her desire to have some control over her own life and to feel that she has some purpose are feelings which young Canadians, both male and female, may share.

While Nyoka's novel traces the development of its young female protagonist, a publication from Tundra books offers a poignant look at a boy's coming of age. *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*, by Shyam Selvadurai, was shortlisted for the Governor General's award for its sensitive examination of adolescence and sexual awakening. Set in Sri Lanka in 1980, the novel tells the story of fourteen-year-old Amrith, a boy with a tragic family history. Although somewhat shy, Amrith has a passion for acting, having won a prize for his portrayal of Juliet in a play put on by his Catholic boys' school. The image of Amrith stepping into a woman's role is symbolic of his larger struggle with traditional notions of masculinity, and establishes the novel's exploration of gender roles and sexual identity. It also underscores the novel's theme of "acting" or adopting false identities and its consideration of gender and sexuality as roles that society requires one to assume, rather than real, fixed categories. Amrith's own negotiation of strict notions of masculinity and femininity is symbolized by his auditioning for the role of Desdemona, a character that echoes his own mother's tragic fate and underscores the theme of sexual jealousy

developed in the novel. Amrith's parents are both dead and he lives with his Aunty Bundle, Uncle Lucky, and their daughters, Mala and Selvi. These are not blood relatives, but friends of his late mother, and Amrith is delighted when he discovers that he has a male Canadian cousin, Niresh, who is visiting Sri Lanka for the summer. Impressed by Niresh's adventuresome and confident spirit, Amrith guards his new friendship jealously. This jealousy turns dangerous, and even violent, when Amrith becomes angry over the attention Niresh pays to Mala, leading to his eventual realization that he has fallen in love with his cousin.

Swimming in the Monsoon Sea offers critics the opportunity to explore the question of how writers for young adults address the topic of same-sex relationships and the degree to which publishers are keen to promote literature for young people that offers an honest exploration of this theme. James McGavran has argued that "some well-known and often-taught books for teenage boys let them down because the writers, probably affected by societal homophobia themselves, fail to explore same-sex relationships thoroughly and honestly" (79). The reasons for this failure may go beyond those McGavran provides to include a broader reluctance to address explicit themes of sexuality in literature for children, and publishers' concerns about what is either "appropriate" for young readers or what will appeal to a broad market. Selvadurai's novel is noteworthy for the degree to which it does offer a detailed picture of one boy's sexual awakening. Both Amrith's emotional and physical development are described, including his response to first seeing his cousin naked, which includes both sexual excitement and a feeling of embarrassment:

> His cousin was bigger than he was, tight curls clustering around his heavy penis and testicles. Unlike him, Niresh was circumcised, a dark purple ring where the shaft ended, the head curiously vulnerable and exposed. . . . Niresh had begun to pull on his underwear, facing away from Amrith.
>
> "I need . . . I need to use the toilet." Amrith hurried into the bathroom. Once there, he shut the door and leaned against it, his eyes closed. After a moment, he placed his clothes over a rail and pulled down his trunks. His penis sprang up. He looked at it in dismay. (163–64)

While Selvadurai explores this theme from the perspective of unrequited love (Niresh is clearly interested romantically in the girl Mala and gives no indication that he recognizes the feelings his cousin has for him), the novel does explore in depth Amrith's journey of self-realization. In an honest and at times explicit way, it details Amrith's sexual awakening

and self-discovery, which coincide with his growing awareness of the true meaning of family and his acceptance of his turbulent past.

Selvadurai underscores the challenges that Amrith faces by documenting his difficult process of learning to understand the complexities of his own character and sexuality, and by drawing a picture of the Catholic community in Sri Lanka in the early 1980s. His drama coach observes, "I have friends in the theater world who are *that* way inclined, and it's no laughing matter in this country. I don't like such things being ridiculed" (224). By the story's end, Amrith moves from "embarrassment" about his sexuality (164), to embracing this as part of who he is, but the novel does not offer any simple answers to the difficulties that lie ahead. Once he acknowledges his attraction, both sexual and emotional, to his cousin, Amrith feels a sense of freedom, and understands that this is a part of what makes him who he is. Yet he knows that many of those around him will not accept his sexuality and feels that it is a secret he cannot share: "He would have to learn to live with this knowledge of himself. He would have to teach himself to be his own best friend, his own confidant and guide. The hope he held out to himself was that, one day, there would be somebody else he could share this secret with. But for now he must remain silent" (267). Amrith's entry into adulthood is not resolved neatly, as he cannot reveal the full complexities of his character to those around him.

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This story breaks away from what Eric Tribunella sees in children's literature as "[t]he popular characterization of same-sex desire as a confusing adolescent experience at a stage that must be successfully negotiated in order to achieve a more 'adult' heterosexuality" (92). While Amrith's realization of his same-sex desire is part of his adolescent coming of age, the novel refuses to picture this "as the product of rampant hormones, inexperience, or confusion" (Tribunella 92), which must inevitably be sublimated to achieve successful entry into adulthood. Selvadurai does not dismiss the difficulties that still lie ahead for his protagonist, or try to simplify the stage of adolescence, but he does offer the message that one gains strength by knowing, accepting, and taking pride in the truth about oneself.

Another young adult novel that addresses questions of intolerance and acceptance is Rosa Jordan's

Lost Goat Lane. Jordan, who spent her childhood in south Florida but now lives in Rossland, British Columbia, sets her first novel for children in a small community in Florida. The protagonist is thirteen-year-old Kate, the middle child and only daughter in a poor, single-parent family. Kate's father has left the family, and her mother struggles to make ends meet so that they will not lose their home. Their poverty brings a sense of isolation and shame to Kate, who is self-conscious about her shabby clothes that are rapidly becoming too small for her changing, adolescent body. Often left to their own devices while their mother is at work, Kate and her brothers befriend the Wilsons, a neighbouring African American family.

Although it is not set against the same type of turbulent background as some of the other novels discussed here, Jordan's story shares a preoccupation with themes of difference, race, and tolerance, as it explores the developing friendship between these two families. The novel also contains elements of the "exotic" for Canadian readers, with the underlying fear that Kate's young brother Chip will be harmed by the alligators that lurk in the nearby canal, and its portrayal of a sleepy southern town. In addition to addressing issues of racism and poverty, *Lost Goat Lane* also offers an interesting study of the mother-child relationship and its treatment in children's literature. As Christine Wilkie-Stibbs has observed, many works of children's literature focus on the "maternal function" and "are embedded in family narratives in which the mother plays a key role" (91). In Jordan's novel, both Kate's mother and the Wilsons' grown daughter Ruby face certain stigmas as single parents. Ironically, each woman initially judges the other harshly. Kate's mother is critical of Ruby's status as a young, unwed mother, while Ruby attributes Kate's mother's poverty to laziness, although she is in fact extremely hard-working. As a young woman, Ruby is positioned somewhere between thirteen-year-old Kate and her more mature mother. The story leads one to "query the boundaries between adult and child, including that buffer zone called adolescence" in young-adult fiction (Clark 6). In her discussion of recent feminist approaches to the genre, Beverly Lyon Clark has observed that some critics "expose the politics of marginalization by extending the triumvirate of race, class, and gender to include age, exploring the confluence of these nodes of difference in texts, genres, or culture" (6). *Lost Goat Lane* is a story that explores marginalization in relation to the issues of race, class, gender, and age noted by Clark.

Jordan's novel, though very didactic at times, is an engaging story about overcoming prejudice, the power of friendship, and standing up for what is right, themes it shares with the novels set in less developed parts of the world. There is much about the issue of intolerance that Kate does not understand, and she

is unable to grasp the reasons behind the apparent hostility between her mother and Ruby: "Kate had always believed that when she got to be thirteen she'd understand grown-ups better, but it seemed that the older she got, the harder it was to figure them out" (99). Jordan depicts prejudice as a shared vice, with Ruby dismissing Kate's family as "white trash" because they are poor (28), and Kate's mother assuming that Ruby, because she is an unwed single mother, will be a bad influence on Kate.

These attitudes frustrate Kate: "Why, Kate wondered, can't you just get to know a person first and then decide if they're trustworthy, instead of prejudging?" (97). According to her mother, "[i]t takes most people a long time to learn to trust people who are different from them" (97). Both Kate's family and the Wilsons eventually learn to trust one another and find not only that they have things in common, but that they can benefit from their differences. Through her friendship with the stylish and confident Ruby, Kate learns to accept and even be proud of the physical changes taking place as she matures into a young woman. Meanwhile, Kate's friendship helps Ruby learn to trust in people, and also inspires her to persevere and follow her ambition. In its happy resolution of the conflict between the characters and their ability to overcome prejudices based on race, gender, wealth, and physical disability, *Lost Goat Lane*, like many of the other works reviewed here, presents a familiar image of the transformative power of friendship, the natural virtuousness of the young, and the power of the child to make a positive change in his or her world. Such utopian longings underscore the didactic messages in many of these novels, which aim to instill in young Canadian readers the values of respect, tolerance, and integrity, and to show that one must persist in the struggle to break down barriers and overcome difficulty.

Perseverance in the face of adversity is certainly a recurring image in Deborah Ellis's work of non-fiction, *Our Stories, Our Songs: African Children Talk About AIDS*. Ellis's work is a collection of personal accounts by children from different parts of Africa, documenting their experiences with AIDS and the overwhelming impact it has had on their lives. These stories—interspersed with statistics, facts about AIDS, and photos of some of the children who share their stories—touch on some extremely disturbing subject matter, including prostitution, rape, and death. Ellis's aim is to educate young readers, and the stories in this collection are very sobering. They give an account of the cruel reality faced by young people in a straightforward manner that differs somewhat from the softened depictions found in other children's literature, but at the same time they echo the messages of hope emphasized in the other works reviewed here. The stories in Ellis' collection present children who, in spite of the suffering they have

experienced, have hopes for the future and believe that they have some power to make their wishes come true.

In her discussion of international relief efforts, Nancy Ellen Batty criticizes the ways in which the image of the suffering child in the Third World has been used to "engage us in an immediate and paternalistic relationship . . . that displaces . . . the very possibility of a future for the Third World" (18). Batty's comments are a useful way of thinking about the publication of children's stories about less developed countries, which have the potential to situate the Canadian child reader in a "paternalistic relationship" with the characters they are reading about. The works reviewed here do tend to situate the reader as an outsider, looking in on a time or place that is unfamiliar and more turbulent than contemporary Canadian society. Rather than creating a paternalistic relationship, however, in many cases these stories invite the reader to identify and empathize with the characters portrayed, in part through their use of the child's point of view or narrative voice. While Batty acknowledges that there are "a limited number of children's books depicting more positive and hopeful images of the Third World," she suggests that these can "scarcely compete" with the pervasive image of the suffering child (19). Ellis's work inevitably contains images of suffering, as the children profiled have all faced tremendous hardship, but at the same time, these children share their hopes, discuss their favourite subjects in school, and dream of growing up to be teachers, mothers, and fathers. By profiling not just the suffering of these children, but also their hope for the future, Ellis's work answers Batty's demand for "a context that allows us to respond to the man or woman inside of the child" and puts us "in a position to challenge ourselves to respond out of hope, rather than pity, out of knowledge, rather than fear and ignorance" (35).

Ellis's collection does indeed seek to educate children about AIDS and draw attention to the plights of young Africans, orphaned by the disease and forced to take on serious responsibility at a young age. Her work gives AIDS a human face, showing that the African children affected by the illness have the same hopes and fears as other children all over the world. While much of the fiction reviewed here deals with adolescence and the difficulties of entering young adulthood, *Our Stories, Our Songs* provides real-life accounts of children struggling with adult responsibilities in a world that is often cruel and unforgiving, but suggests that young readers can respond to these stories "out of hope," rather than simply out of pity.

Another work that ultimately expresses a message of hope for the future is *The Girl from Chimel*, published by Groundwood. Written by Nobel Peace Price winner Rigoberta Menchú, with Dante Liano

(translated by David Unger), *The Girl from Chimel* recalls Menchú's happy childhood in Guatemala. The book, vividly illustrated by the Mexican artist Domi, presents a series of brief sketches in which the author shares her memories of everyday life in the highland villages of the 1960s. She recalls the stories her grandfather used to tell about their Mayan ancestors, and paints a picture of a community that lived in harmony with nature. It is in many ways an idealized picture, recalling the beauty of Chimel's natural surroundings and the love shared by the author's family, but offering little comment on the relative poverty of the village. Menchú writes, "I remember it was a life of peace and harmony. We lived in tune with nature. The river bathed and entertained us. . . . The mountains protected us, and the sacred earth gave us the fruits of its womb. We lived in peace with our village neighbors" (53). This appears to be a memoir of a happy childhood, but behind this pleasant picture lurks something threatening.

Menchú's story takes place before the prolonged revolution in Guatemala, which began in the 1960s. Many Indian peasants, like the people of Chimel, participated in the uprisings against Guatemala's oppressive military regime. The army resorted to measures that included genocide, wiping out 400 villages, and killing more than 50,000 Indians (Carmack, Gasco, and Gossen 245). Menchú's own father, mother, and brother were killed for their support of the uprising and she herself was driven into exile (Carmack, Gasco, and Gossen 283). Throughout *The Girl from Chimel*, there is a sense that the past described is long gone and cannot be retrieved. The author's repeated refrain, "when I was a little girl in Chimel," furthers the sense that the book is documenting a time and a way of life that have vanished. Through her story, Menchú hopes to preserve the memory of this lost past, using literature to keep alive a culture and a people that were largely destroyed by war.

Menchú hints at the changes that came to Chimel, but does not go into detail about the war. In the chapter "The Curse of the Bees," in which the author recalls the family's practice of cultivating honey, the bees escape from the honeycombs. She recalls that her mother "burned a substance we call *pom*, which we use to ward off evil spirits. Since bees are sacred, their escape could lead to an evil curse. And that's just what happened. But I'm not going to talk about that now. Maybe later" (46). The chapter ends here, and Menchú never does talk about the "evil curse" in detail. In the subsequent chapter, however, she again hints at the atrocities that were to come. She recalls the river that ran through Chimel, in which the children could bathe and the "women would wash, laugh and talk" (47). This happy memory shifts to a more sombre tone when Menchú suggests that the tragedy of the war was great enough to alter nature

itself:

> But when hard times came, when the war began and the villagers had to hide out in the mountains, something magical and unbelievable happened. The river disappeared. It had been so scared by what it had seen in the village during the bad times that it went below the mountain and came out on the other side. And now the river doesn't flow through Chimel.
>
> . . . I would like it to come back. But since a great act of wickedness made it escape, only a great act of kindness can make it come back. Very often I ask myself, what act of kindness could do that? And who would do it? (49)

Menchú's work offers no easy answers to this question. Rather, it remains a lament; a tragic love song for a time and place that are gone forever, filled with a sense of longing for the author's childhood.

The Girl from Chimel provides an opportunity for the study of childhood memoir, as Menchú recalls in vivid detail the stories of her grandfather, her childhood pleasures, and the sights and smells of her village. One can question, however, the author's selectivity in reporting these memories. For instance, she does not comment on the poverty of the villagers and deliberately avoids discussing the most traumatic event of her young life: the war. The horrors of this time, including the murder of her family, are the subject of Menchú's autobiography, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, published in 1983, and her decision to leave these details out of *The Girl from Chimel* provokes questions about the sanitization of traumatic history in works for children. It also raises questions about how idealized images of childhood function when placed in the historical context of war, trauma, and upheaval from which real children cannot escape. This collection of stories does not focus on the war itself, but rather recalls the very life that the war destroyed. The work employs what Andrea Wyile calls "the distant-engaging narrator" who chooses to "highlight the fact or degree of retrospection" in a story's narration (123). In the case of *The Girl from Chimel*, drawing attention to the distance between the time the events took place and the time when the narrator is relating them emphasizes the feeling that what is depicted is a life that has vanished.

For the Canadian child reader, who is unlikely to know anything about the war that so dramatically altered Menchú's life, the text offers a chance to witness a lifestyle that is very different from his or her own. At the same time, there is an implicit suggestion that the child reader should not take his or her own peaceful existence for granted. While Menchú avoids giving a graphic account of the war, she nevertheless conveys the message that every child may have to face sudden and unexpected change. Rather than

focusing on destruction, however, Menchú ultimately presents a story of her own survival, creating in the end a message of hope. *The Girl from Chimel* concludes with an expression of the author's hope for a return to the way things once were:

> I long for the days of my childhood—to have a mountain to protect me, a river to refresh me, birds to sing to me.
>
> But I would like everyone, not just me, to have these things. I want the world to be as I remember Chimel.
>
> When I was a girl in Chimel. (54)

Menchú paints a picture of a different way of life that many Canadian children may find attractive, but also implies the destruction of that way of life, fostering appreciation for the stability of life in Canada.

Menchú does not wish for the world to be as it was, but as she *remembers* Chimel. This suggests the possibility that memory and historical reality are not one and the same and that the author is re-visioning Chimel as a childhood Eden. The author uses the child's perspective to re-imagine a time before trauma, loss, and sorrow, and in doing so, expresses the hope that such a world will exist in the future.

The narrator is aware, however, that childhood is not an idyll. When she comments, "But I would like everyone, not just me, to have these things," it suggests to the young reader that there are people around the world who do not live in the kind of world Menchú hopes for. This may open the eyes of young Canadian readers to some of the troubles in the world at large. Menchú paints a picture of a different way of life that many Canadian children may find attractive, but also implies the destruction of that way of life, fostering appreciation for the stability of life in Canada. At the same time, this may inspire the child reader to share the hope that "the world" as a whole may one day achieve in reality the idyllic happiness imagined by the young "girl from Chimel." Menchú's work thus shares some of the hopefulness expressed in other works dealing with periods of upheaval and suffering, but there is a note of uncertainty in her work that prevents it from sending a simplified message to children that all will be well in the world. Menchú questions "what act of kindness" could restore the harmony she remembers and "who would do it." This implies doubt, and is not a utopian vision of the world, but it also serves as something of an invitation to young readers. It is a rhetorical question, suggesting that the reader must act with compassion and consideration in order to bring

about peace. Rather than leaving the reader with a sense of despair, the story underscores the message that people, including children, can produce positive change through acts of kindness and tolerance.

The collection of works profiled here shows that Canadian publishers are turning their attention to stories of childhood and adolescence from around the globe. Regardless of their geographical or historical setting, these stories highlight some of the struggles faced by children all over the world. As the characters overcome adversity, whether it is traumatic political events, turbulent periods in history, or negotiating the difficult period of adolescence, they gain some measure of power, agency, and self-respect, and a greater understanding of the world of which they are a part. In some works the child characters achieve these things convincingly, while in others the positive outcomes of these characters follow utopian conventions of children's fiction, picturing these changes as symbols of hope, rather than as realistic depictions of children triumphing over the atrocities around them. The diverse subject matter of these works is a reflection of the complex nature of Canadian society and a publishing industry that recognizes this diversity. In addition to being set in different communities outside of Canada, many of the works reviewed here are also examples of historical fiction. As Dieter Petzold observes, "[p]rejudices . . . do not spring up spontaneously; they are rooted in history. Dealing with them adequately means dealing with those historical factors that brought them into existence" (178). The works reviewed here all deal directly with the question of prejudice, and several explore the roots of intolerance and injustice in different parts of the world.

Whether set in the past, or discussing the present, the stories in this collection of literature open a window on the world at large. At a time when issues of foreign policy, war abroad, and cultural tensions are at the forefront, these works offer Canadian children some of the tools needed to make informed assessments of the world outside their nation's borders. Furthermore, by documenting the problems faced by individuals and societies across time and around the globe, they teach young readers that peace and stability can be fragile, and that there is a continuing need for acceptance, respect, and understanding, both at home and abroad.

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