Books for the New Canada

—Margaret Mackey

Aldana, Patricia, ed. *Under the Spell of the Moon: Art for Children from the World's Great Illustrators*. Trans. Stan Dragland. Toronto: Groundwood/Anansi, 2004. 80 pp. $25.00 hc. ISBN 0-88899-559-8.

Cárdenas, Teresa. *Letters to My Mother*. Trans. David Unger. Toronto: Groundwood/Anansi, 2006. 103 pp. $7.95 pb. ISBN 978-0-88899-721-0.

Clark, Joan. *Snow*. Illus. Kady MacDonald Denton. Toronto: Groundwood/Anansi, 2006. N. pag. $16.95 hc. ISBN 978-0-88899-712-8.

Délano, Poli. *When I Was a Boy Neruda Called Me Policarpo*. Illus. Manuel Monroy. Trans. Sean Higgins. Toronto: Groundwood/Anansi, 2006. 84 pp. $17.95 hc. ISBN 978-0-88899-726-5.

Ellabbad, Mohieddin. *The Illustrator's Notebook*. Trans. Sarah Quinn. Toronto: Groundwood/Anansi, 2006. 30 pp. $16.95 hc. ISBN 978-0-88899-700-5.

Gay, Marie-Louise. *What Are You Doing Sam?* Toronto: Groundwood/Anansi, 2006. N. pag. $14.95 hc. ISBN 978-0-88899-734-0.

Levert, Mireille. *Eddie Longpants*. Trans. Sarah Quinn. Toronto: Groundwood/Anansi, 2005. N. pag. $16.95 hc. ISBN 0-88899-671-3.

Luján, Jorge. *Tarde de invierno/Winter Afternoon*. Illus. Mandana Sadat. Toronto: Groundwood/Anansi, 2006. N. pag. $16.95 hc. ISBN 978-0-88899-718-0.

Montejo, Victor. *White Flower: A Maya Princess*. Illus. Rafael Yockteng. Toronto: Groundwood/Anansi, 2005. 36 pp. $16.95 hc. ISBN 0-88899-599-7.

Park, Janie Jaehyun. *The Love of Two Stars: A Korean Legend*. Toronto: Groundwood/Anansi, 2005. N. pag. $16.95 hc. ISBN 0-88899-672-1.

Ramírez, Antonio. *Napí Goes to the Mountain*. Illus. Domi. Trans. Elisa Amado. Toronto:

Groundwood/Anansi, 2006. N. pag. $18.95 hc. ISBN 978-0-88899-713-5.
Uribe, Verónica. *Little Book of Nursery Tales*. Illus. Carmen Salvador. Trans. Susan Ouriou. Toronto: Groundwood/Anansi, 2005. 103 pp. $9.95 hc. ISBN 0-88899-673-X.
Wallace, Ian, ed. and illus. *The Huron Carol*. Original version by Father Jean de Brebeuf. English lyrics by Jesse Edgar Middleton. Toronto: Groundwood/Anansi, 2006. N. pag. $16.95 hc. ISBN 978-0-88899-711-1.
Yerxa, Leo. *Ancient Thunder*. Toronto: Groundwood/Anansi, 2006. N. pag. $18.95 hc. ISBN 978-0-88899-746-9.

Groundwood Books, a groundbreaking publisher of Canadian children's literature for almost 30 years, is under new ownership. This article looks at the new face of Groundwood through the lens of a selection of recent books.

The Company

"[I]n 1977 Statistics Canada noted that only 7 per cent of the children's books bought in Canada originated in the country" (Pouliot, Saltman, and Edwards 225). In 1978, Groundwood Books began and almost immediately became a major contributor to the revolution in Canadian children's book publishing that relegated that seven per cent statistic to history. Since its inception, the company's fortunes have both reflected and directed a new sense of Canadian children's rights as readers, as publisher Patricia Aldana has consistently produced an impressive list of high-quality Canadian materials, books that are imaginative in their own right and books that also facilitate a new imagining of Canada.

Much has happened since 1978. In the early days, an emerging national literary voice was supported by government funding and by a surge of independent bookstores (MacSkimming, "Canada's Writers"). It was easy to be excited and optimistic about the burgeoning fortunes of Canadian children's literature. Since those days, however, other pressures have multiplied: there has, for example, been an overpowering emphasis on commercial returns by more and more conglomerate owners of publishers. This chill on risk-taking has been compounded by a narrowing of independent outlets—partly as the result of the big-box crusade of Indigo and Chapters, and of the virtual-sales movement represented by amazon.ca. Publishers, including Groundwood, have responded by looking to the American market to enhance sales (Lodge 53), and Groundwood

has taken the unusual step of looking to both Spanish-speaking and English-speaking American consumers. In the late 1990s, Groundwood set up a Spanish-language imprint, Libros Tigrillo, which in the spring of 2007 featured 13 titles (*Groundwood Books*). The strengthening of the Canadian dollar made exports to the United States more difficult to manage (MacSkimming, "The Perilous Trade"), but Groundwood's aim at the niche market of Spanish-speaking Americans was helpful.

In 2005, the House of Anansi Press purchased Groundwood from Patricia Aldana and Douglas & McIntyre. Aldana retains control over the Groundwood list (Rowe 13), and in the wake of the new ownership arrangements, she renewed her long-standing commitment to opening up Canadian publishing to more international voices (Goldberg 13).

Aldana has long held an attractively pluralistic perspective on what it means to be Canadian and what Canadian children deserve to be able to read. This review offers a post-Anansi report on a sample of Groundwood's current list, and explores what that sample has to tell us about the current vision of a creative publisher.

The Sample

In early 2007, *CCL/LCJ* sent me a box of fourteen Groundwood books to review, with a request to consider them as a reasonably representative collection, as well as individually. My first step was to investigate how broad a sample I had acquired. In March 2007, the Groundwood website provided a complete title list of 332 books. My little boxful amounts to 4.2% of that total—not an unreasonable cross-section—and, of course, it represents a much higher percentage of the most recent offerings.

My first impression of my box of books was one of immense variety. The Canada represented by these fourteen titles is an immensely open and diverse place, as confirmed by a tally (listed alphabetically by title in Table 1, opposite) of the books' origins and languages of creation.

There are undoubtedly good business reasons for this range of translations, particularly for the impressive set of books originally written in Spanish. There is no question, however, that this list is so broad-ranging for cultural and political reasons as well. Aldana, who immigrated from Guatemala, is well-known for her insistence that Canadian publishing needs to provide a window on the world as well as a window on Canada. Her commitment is well summed up in an interview with Raquel Kaplan Goldberg in 2005:

> In addition to its Canadian-authored list,

Title	Date	Origin of Story	Translation?
Ancient Thunder	2006	Ojibway/Plains Indians	No
Eddie Longpants	2005	Quebec	Yes—from French
Huron Carol	2006	Jesuit missionary	Yes—from Huron
Illustrator's Notebook	2006	Egypt	Yes—from Arabic and French
Letters to My Mother	2006	Cuba	Yes—from Spanish
Little Book of Nursery Tales	2005	Venezuela	Yes—from Spanish
Love of Two Stars	2005	Korea	No
Napí Goes to the Mountain	2006	Mexico	Yes—from Spanish
Snow	2006	Newfoundland	No
Under the Spell of the Moon	2004	Global	Multilingual
What Are You Doing Sam?	2006	Quebec	No
When I Was a Boy Neruda Called Me Policarpo	2006	Chile	Yes—from Spanish
White Flower	2005	Mayan/Guatemala	Yes—from Spanish
Winter Afternoon	2006	Mexico	bilingual—English/Spanish

Table 1: Background of Groundwood sample

which itself includes a heavy multicultural component, Groundwood also publishes a Latino list and acquires and translates books from other countries whose cultures "aren't adequately represented [here]," says Aldana.

The goal is to provide the English-speaking world with content that portrays foreign cultures and societies as they are experienced by locals. "In any book, what I'm interested in is how authentic it feels to me," Aldana says. "I'm not interested in books about Africa or Latin America by people who have never been there and don't know what it's really like." Although Aldana wants to increase the quantity of authentic multicultural literary content, quality remains a non-negotiable (Goldberg 13).

Authenticity and quality are good standards to

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use in assessing these books, but before I move on to the individual titles, I want to take a further look at the list itself. This set of fourteen titles involves four continents and eight countries, plus one title that is multilingual and completely international. The material of Canadian origin, amounting to five books, includes representations from Aboriginal culture, French (Quebec) and English (Newfoundland) Canada, and a title arising out of the conflicted colonial history of the French and the Aboriginals.

Before I even open the books, this list charms and delights me. The idea that Canadian children's publishing has the self-confidence to open its arms to stories from many cultures rather than being ground down into a kind of "CanCon" introspection is something I find very appealing. Many Canadian child readers actually come from different countries and cultures; all Canadian child readers live in a country where this plurality is part of the landscape. English-speaking countries are notorious for their unwillingness to read material translated from other languages, and a list where eight of the fourteen titles are translations, a ninth is bilingual, and a tenth involves a variety of languages, strikes me as the best kind of pioneering.

The proof in the pudding, however, lies not in the appeal of a table of titles. It is through the quality of the individual books that Groundwood's project will succeed or fail. In the remainder of this article, I look at these books more closely, in alphabetical order by title. The random associations thus engendered reflect the charm of this disparate set of stories.

The Books

In 1993, Groundwood published Leo Yerxa's *Last Leaf First Snowflake to Fall*. It was an example of a rare phenomenon: the lyric picture book,

describing a single moment as a lyric poet might do. In my view, it was close to being something even rarer: a *perfect* lyric picture book. I admired it greatly and gave it as a gift to friends and family of all ages.

So the prospect of a new book by Yerxa filled me with anticipation. The first thing to say about *Ancient Thunder* is that the book is different from its predecessor in many ways, though its lyric propensities are still significant. *Last Leaf* is a book about a moment of stillness; *Ancient Thunder* is a book about movement. The wild horses who are the heroes of this book are constantly on the move.

Paradoxically, Yerxa has immobilized many of his horses by fixing them onto leather shirts and dresses. More mobile horses gallop in the background, but at the centre of each opening, the horses are transformed not simply into images but explicitly into clothing. As his final lines attest, these horses are "Carrying man/On hooves of ancient thunder," and the subservience of the horses to men's wishes is symbolized in the pictures as well as in the words.

The result is a complicated, even disturbing story about the horses and their role in human life, much more than a simple paean to the glories of wildness—or even, as the Governor General's jury described it when awarding the 2006 prize for illustration, to "the mystical connection between horse and humanity" ("Winners"). The moral ambiguity of this book is subtly achieved in both words and pictures.

The title page of Mireille Levert's *Eddie Longpants* contains a warning: "This book may give you a stiff neck." This page also demonstrates that the book is going to play games with your assumptions about reading, as the whole story is told sideways. Eddie Longpants is far too tall to fit into a single page but he fits onto the vertical affordance of a double-page spread, even though all the other children in the story occupy only a single page at a time.

Eddie's friends in school do not appreciate his amazing height and jeer at him as a giraffe, an ostrich, and a flagpole. Miss Snowpea, the teacher, however, is sympathetic enough to climb onto the roof to talk to Eddie's equally tall mother on report-card day. It is Miss Snowpea who comes to Eddie's rescue the next day when the children start to tease him about his mother, in a denouement that also features Mr. Longpants, the fireman.

The story is set in a kind of anytime and anyplace. Old-fashioned braces hold up Eddie's eponymous trousers. The playground is minimally equipped with the trees and birds that are essential to the story. The story could be set any time since the development of fire engines fuelled by an internal combustion engine; the ladder of

the specimen pictured here is the only element necessary to the plot.

At one level, this timeless book simply offers another didactic little story about difference and bullying. Its charm lies in the guileless storytelling voice and in the illustrations that play games with the bookishness of the book. Words and pictures work together to convey the attractiveness of Eddie and his tall parents. Text and images are equally economical and approachable.

In *The Huron Carol*, illustrator Ian Wallace wades boldly into a complicated chapter of Canadian history. Jean de Brebeuf, a Jesuit missionary, wrote "Jesous Ahatonhia" in Huron or Ouendat in the early 1640s, setting his words to a French folk melody in order to convey the nativity story to the Aboriginal population among which he was working. de Brebeuf was subsequently martyred by the Iroquois and canonized by the Catholic church. The lyrics were later translated into French, and in 1926, Jesse Edgar Middleton wrote an English version, which appears in this book.

Much colonial history is thus embodied in this hymn, including some white mythology about the peaceful Indians and the violent Indians who helped or hindered the settlers and the missionaries. Today, the hymn is widely loved, in part for its plangent melody and in part for the image of ideological harmony it conveys.

I am not always interested to know the ethnic background of an illustrator, but in this case I think it is important to observe that Ian Wallace is white. In illustrating this compound text, he must take account of both Aboriginal and Christian sensibilities, a task he achieves well to my outsider eye.

Words appear on a version of a birchbark scroll and, at the back of the book, we are given the music and the words in all three languages: one verse of Huron, one of French, and the four English verses familiar to most Anglo-Canadians.

The book is austerely disciplined, which makes its forays into the romantic sublime all the more impressive. Wallace's palate is strictly managed. Early pictures involve brown, black, a greyed blue, and a silvery yellow (the story is mostly set in night-time). The angel choirs, on their first appearance, are Aboriginal in appearance, and their feathered wings reflect Aboriginal designs. When the angel chorus echoes to a landscape of birds and animals and one solitary human being, it is depicted as a sweep of northern lights with angel shapes pricked out in stars. As the story progresses, a bit of red begins to appear on some pages, until by the lines "the holy child of earth and heaven/is born today for you," we see the colourful rise of an eagle sun, shining down on a landscape of vibrant

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yellow, orange, and purple.

A postscript outlines the circumstances of the carol's creation and says, "Despite the many tragic aspects of how it came to be, this song has come to represent a respectful, loving tribute to the Ouendat people." This book is clearly created as a similarly framed tribute, and within these limits it succeeds impressively.

Mohieddin Ellabbad's *The Illustrator's Notebook*, translated from Arabic into French and thence into English, has been preserved in its original formatting and thus reads from right to left, opening from what readers in the West would call the back. Each opening consists of the original "notebook" pages—photos, paintings, drawings, collaged with notations in Arabic—presented with an English translation down the narrow white borders. The font of the English words is small, but that seems a small price to pay for the effective preservation of the original design of these highly-crafted pages (though I wish the submission to American spelling of these English words had stopped short of using "heros" instead of "heroes" [19]).

The Notebook is addressed to child readers and draws their attention to the diverse wonders of being alive—both in general and also in ways that relate to the specific culture in which Ellabbad grew up. He encourages these readers to look hard, to experience intently, and to record imaginatively and personally. Talking about drawing a wolf, he says there are many ways to go about it. "Some artists remember the wolves that they've seen. . . . Others might think about what they were told about wolves when they were little. . . . Other artists go even deeper into a memory, hidden within themselves, of when people were cave people who lived among wolves and had

to fight them" (16). The best artists draw on all these kinds of memory, as well as observation, to produce their own true wolf.

The design of this book both creates and reflects its impact as a window into a very different world. The narrow band at the side of each page, containing a serviceable English translation in a modest sans serif font, does little to draw the eye from the elaborate combinations of different images and ornate calligraphy. In contrast to the heavily worked design of the pages, however, the tone of the words is accessible and friendly, and the theme of how vital it is to notice and appreciate your own life in all its detail may surely be described as universal.

Like *The Illustrator's Notebook*, Teresa Cárdenas's *Letters to My Mother* speaks out to its Canadian readers from inside the conventions of a very different society, this time Cuba. This brief young adult novel (103 small pages with a great deal of white space) tells the story of a nameless young woman between the ages of 10 and 15. Her mother is dead, her aunt and grandmother do not appear to love her, and her cousins make fun of her as a *bembona* (a pejorative reference to black people with thick lips). Explicit issues of race preoccupy her classmates, but the narrator thinks they make too much of skin colour and ancestry.

Yoruba words and rites dot the story and are very much taken for granted by the characters. When context is not enough to explain these concepts, a short glossary at the end of the book provides some assistance for readers outside of Cuba (where Yoruba was the language most frequently spoken by slaves).

A great deal of plot and character development is packed into a short text in this book, and the white space also works hard, as much occurs between the lines. The narrator misunderstands much of what goes on around her and, as the story is told exclusively in her letters to her dead mother, there is no authorial help elsewhere to aid readers in figuring out the larger picture; they must work on first principles. I found I enjoyed the sense of having to follow the narrator in trying to make sense of a culture that in many ways seemed utterly opaque to me, though there were times when I could see scope for a more subtle and nuanced perspective than this narrator could offer.

The social world that this narrator attempts to understand is harsh. Fathers are absent or treacherous. Other children are racist. Aunts and grandmothers are callous and cruel. Places of refuge are hard-won.

As the narrator grows older and more sophisticated, subsequent letters often clarify events that were mystifying at the time they occurred, so bewilderment is not a permanent

feature of the book. In fact, the penultimate letter probably wraps up a few too many loose ends; letting the ends tie up in a more leisurely and organic way would improve this story. But in its achievement of bringing us into another world, in terms of both its articulated values and its silences, this book has much to offer.

A small book (something close to the dimensions of a Beatrix Potter book), *Little Book of Nursery Tales* offers seven stories and five rhymes, of varying familiarity. Verónica Uribe's retellings begin with four stories that are exceedingly well-known in the Western nursery canon: "The Little Red Hen," "Goldilocks," "The Seven Little Kids," and "The Three Little Pigs." The stories are told in largely conventional phraseology: the wolf huffs and puffs, the three bears go through their discoveries in ritualistic order, and so forth—though I did miss the refrain of "'Very well then,' said the Little Red Hen. 'I will,' and she did."

The next story, "Half-a-Chick," is a Basque account of the weathervane's origins. Its specific details were new to me but the fairy-tale components of callousness to the needs of others being recorded and wilfulness being punished were entirely recognizable.

The final two stories tell of the romance of cockroach Cucaracha Martínez and her sweetheart, the mouse Ratón Pérez. Spanish in origin, these stories have evolved further in Latin America and the Caribbean. The second story, in an elaborate cumulative process, undoes the sad ending of the first in a very satisfactory, though ridiculous, way.

The five little poems that conclude the book are all previously unknown to me, and although Uribe provides annotations for the stories, she gives no information about the poems' provenance. They all qualify for the label of nursery rhyme in their essential preposterousness and their rollicking rhythms.

The stories in this little book are decorated with full-page illustrations by Carmen Salvador, in vivid colours, formally framed with white margins. Many of these pictures are long shots, and, because of the scale of the book, the detail is small and lively, though always confined to the limits of the rectangular border. Smaller images scamper round the pages of the poems so they are visually quite different from the stories.

I liked this book, but found it less strikingly distinctive than some others in this set. It seemed to me to be rather less of an essential addition to my bookshelf than some other titles reviewed here.

In *The Love of Two Stars: A Korean Legend*, retold and illustrated by Janie Jaehyun Park, Kyonu the prudent farmer and Jingnyo the skilful weaver supply their community with excellent

products—until they fall in love and neglect their work. The king of the starry realm becomes angry as his people suffer, and banishes the two lovers to the furthest ends of the sky. As a gesture, he allows them to meet once a year, in the Milky Way, on the seventh day of the seventh moon month. When this day finally arrives, the lovers discover that they cannot cross the river of stars, and their weeping threatens to drown the earth. Finally, the magpies and crows fly up to form a living bridge so the lovers can reunite for their single day, and at their subsequent parting, their tears are gentler and water the crops instead.

This ancient Korean fable explains the rain in the seventh month and also explains why magpies and crows go bald at that time of the year. In this version, the words are as simple as the pictures are lush. Kyonu and Jingnyo meet and part in a world decorated by lavish flowers, and in a sky studded with stars. The effect is lavish and appealing.

Although the story is universal in its main qualities, the illustrations are specifically Korean in many of their details. Such a combination is a useful reminder that there are diverse ways of being multicultural, that our eyes, just as much as our story-processing understanding of words, work on the basis of conventional expectations, and that different readers will bring different expectations to a book.

In *Napí Goes to the Mountain*, Antonio Ramírez sets up a complex plot that ends rather abruptly. This Mexican story is illustrated with gorgeously primitive watercolours in technicolor and sepia by Domi. Napí awakes one morning to discover that her father has not come home and that her mother and the other villagers fear he has been captured by those who object to poor farmers fighting for their land. This scenario is very compactly established, and in only a few pages we are into the main storyline. Napí and her brother Niclé take a raft to search for their father. As swiftly as the realistic plot was initially set up, a magic realism thread takes over the story as the raft is carried upstream by three turtles. At Playa Shcua, the beach of herons, the children are transformed into deer, and they continue their quest by quizzing the animals they meet. Finally, an armadillo tells them that the family is together again. They retrace their steps, returning to human form, and when they get home they find their father already there.

The story is excellently told up to this point, and the large images, with their fluorescent rainbow colours, are magnificent, but the ending is very abrupt:

> When we reached our village we tied up our raft and ran home. Our father was happily

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drinking pozol with his friends.

It was so good to see him that I forgot to worry about where he had been.

Their mother asks if they have been to school and they tell her no, "Because even though I love to dream, I never tell lies." And that is the end of the story.

There may well be some psychological truth to this ending, in that the protagonists want only to feel safe and together, and are unworried about further details. Those readers who are perturbed by the opening scenario, however, may well want to know more about the father's fate and it is arguable that truncating his story in this way devalues the children's search for him. Nevertheless, the social and natural worlds opened up by this book are intriguing.

Normally, I would expect to bring a professional perspective to a review, rather than dwelling on the personal circumstances in which I write. I think, however, that most Canadians will appreciate the significance of my observing that I am reading Joan Clark's *Snow* during a late spring after a long winter. There has been snow on the ground in Edmonton for six unbroken months and it has not entirely vanished, even as I write at the end of April. If I can be pleased by this little book in these circumstances, then its appeal is substantial.

In a way, this book is at the opposite pole from that lyric picture book about snow, *Last Leaf First Snowflake to Fall* (Yerxa), with which I began this review. Although much of the story occurs in Sammy's imagination, it is still possible to think of this title as a kind of Action Book of Snow. In part,

this effect is a result of Kady MacDonald Denton's lively pictures, which bounce with stored-up energy. The world that Sammy imagines beneath the crust of the deep, deep snow seethes with activity. And by the end of the story, as Sammy stands on the last remnants of the last drift (just as dirty as the shady snowbank I passed this afternoon) and starts to imagine grass, readers may assume that his green springtime vision contains a plethora of busy worms and insects.

Tarde de invierno/Winter Afternoon, by Jorge Luján, is a simple story, told in both Spanish (in black type) and English (in red type), one short line in each language on every opening. A child, waiting for her mother, scratches a shape in the frosted window, through which she sees her mother coming closer. When the mother arrives home, the book concludes with a hug, perfectly framed by the frosty glass.

The basic shapes of Mandana Sadat's vividly coloured pictures are created in mixed media, scanned, and composed on computer. The marriage of word and image is harmonious in its simplicity and straightforwardness. Yet the fact that each phrase is repeated twice, in different languages, supplies a complexity that everything else in the book denies, a paradox of universality and distinctiveness that is all the more powerful because it is almost incidental to the challenge of producing a short bilingual story.

We need many more of such books, in many different languages. If the books could be simultaneously limpid and lively, as is successfully achieved in this little story, so much the better.

Edited by Patricia Aldana, *Under the Spell of the Moon: Art for Children from the World's Great Illustrators* is a potpourri of art by children's illustrators around the world. Each was asked to choose and illustrate a short text, a poem or nursery rhyme, a song or riddle or street game, or a short piece of prose. All writing not originally in English appears twice, in its original language and in translation. The book is a fundraiser for the International Board on Books for Young People, and it is also a testimonial to the importance of the work done by that Board.

The miscellaneousness of this book is very much part of its appeal. The style of the art is as varied as the nature of the selected words. Every opening offers something new and interesting. The range of languages is also stimulating, and the book's designers have done a good job of inserting the translations so that the original language retains pride of place, but the English version is accessible. The format also provides the incidental (but considerable) value of reminding us that those pages in English only are just one version of "normal."

Even young child readers of this book will see themselves being addressed as global citizens, a cliché that is often glibly thrown about but actually much harder to instantiate in a concrete example, as this book successfully achieves.

Stella and Sam have appeared in a number of previous Groundwood books, and in Marie-Louise Gay's new story, *What Are You Doing Sam?*, they are as delightful as ever. The insouciantly ridiculous is a fine art and one which Gay achieves without any visible effort. The plot is straightforward and repetitive: from time to time, older sister Stella checks in on Sam and his dog Fred. In the book's words, they are always innocently occupied, but the pictures testify to the wild chaos they are creating—borrowing Grandma's glasses so Fred can read, painting on the walls, cooking up a perfect storm in the kitchen, and so forth. The deadpan tone of the words and the economically energetic lines of the illustrations combine to make all the uproar seem perfectly normal.

A sticker on the front cover brands this story as "A Stella and Sam Book," though it is hard to imagine a "reader" old enough to appreciate the story who wouldn't instantly recognize this favourite at a single glance.

Many of the books on this list, especially those in translation, have been strikingly good at introducing new worlds on their own terms. Poli Délano's story, *When I Was a Boy Neruda Called Me Policarpo*, certainly introduces a very different way of living, but with this book, the impact is not straightforward. I see not so much of a failure of address as a failure of scaffolding English-speaking readers. Spanish-speaking readers might well be expected to be more acquainted with the name of the great poet Neruda, but the Spanish title (*Policarpo y el Tio Pablo*) does not presume on such awareness the way the English title does. In the English edition, the biography of Neruda—as well as a selection of his poetry—is at the back of the book, where many readers will not notice it at first. Readers of this version are plunged into a story where the greatness of Tio Pablo is very much taken for granted and assumed to be understood by all readers. The story itself is charming, but it turns on customs and quirks that would be quite alien to many North American readers, and there is no sense of "New readers start here" to help out.

For example, Tío Pablo and Tía Delia keep a badger. On the morning of Christmas Eve, the young Policarpo and his parents go to visit them and the badger attacks him, savaging his leg and ruining his Christmas. In most Canadian homes, that would be a sign for the badger's prompt exit, but Neruda and Delia keep the badger until

"it attacked their maid, a sweet woman named Virginia, and nearly killed her. They found him biting her neck while blood streamed out" (14). Only at this point do they decide that the badger should go to a zoo.

The memoir is set in the 1940s in Mexico. It is not beyond comprehension that adults in that time and place may have been more cavalier about children's safety than we would expect today, but to ask a contemporary Canadian child to read this story and chalk it all up to the delightful eccentricities of a world-famous poet entails a lapse of imagination and an error of tone.

I am very much in favour of young people reading outside their comfort zones. What bothers me about this book is that there really is room inside its address to the reader for only two stances: total submission to the idea that a great poet is allowed to be selfish and irresponsible as part of his endearing eccentricity—or outright resistance and rejection of the book. Undoubtedly, there will be readers who engage with the book on its own terms and enjoy indulging in the first stance, but I would prefer to see some structure to support readers who find this culture alienating, even if they approach it with goodwill. Whether that involves moving the biography to an earlier point in the book, including an introduction from an editor or a publisher to set the whole book up on its own terms, or providing some other form of support for the outside reader I am not sure. As it stands now, however, I find its implied reader (in English, at any rate) rather difficult to imagine.

White Flower: A Maya Princess, a long folktale told by Victor Montejo (a Guatemalan) and illustrated by Rafael Yockteng (a Colombian), tells the story of a prince who falls on hard times and must seek work. In his first foray into the forest, he meets Witz Ak'al, Lord of the Mountains and the Valleys. As is his wicked wont, Witz Ak'al offers him all the money he can spend—with a catch: "When you have finished taking pleasure in your wealth, I want you to come and serve me and do whatever I ask of you" (6). The prince, however, has been taught by his parents to earn his living honourably, through hard work, and he declines this offer, thus making an enemy of Witz Ak'al.

Naturally, by the next page, the prince arrives at the city, meets its king, and starts to fall in love with its princess. Naturally, also, the king is really Witz Ak'al, who recognizes the young man and sets him impossible tasks. The princess helps him to solve these problems and eventually they run away together, aided by the princess's own powerful magic.

The story itself is relatively generic, as prince-and-princess stories go. The more exotic details of the plot and the lavish watercolour illustrations,

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with their intricate Mayan borders, offer us a passage into a world that will be new for many readers. The combination of the familiar and the strange in this book is very appealing.

The Conclusion

This small set of books is assertively international and presents a profile of a new Canada, in which multiple cultures intermingle in positive ways. At the same time, it also offers a familiar storybook world to its young readers. There are few representations of urban life in this collection, and many of the events in these books occur in a setting of storied timelessness. The estranged lovers in the stars and the yearning lovers of the earth have become well-known to readers through other tales. The picture books that tell stories of children's lives present a recognizably fictionalized version of childhood, largely secure and loved (with the partial exception of *Napí Goes to the Mountain*, which introduces unsettling problems of poverty and injustice but still ends happily). As we might expect, the chapter books supply more troubling stories, but only *Letters to My Mother* really suggests that a child truly cannot be protected from the world's cruelties by a loving family.

Is contemporary mainstream Canadian life under-represented in this collection, and, if so, does it matter? The answer to the first question is an unqualified yes. To the degree that my set provides a balanced sample of Groundwood's offerings, the elements of contemporary and ordinary daily life that mark being Canadian for many children are not extensively represented here (though not entirely absent either).

Does it matter? It matters to the extent that it is always valuable to children to see themselves reflected in their stories. In the case of today's children, that reflection should include some acknowledgement of two kinds of international worlds, one of which is better represented by this set than the other. This collection of books certainly speaks—and speaks vividly—to the global citizens that all Canadian children are today. It has less to say about the virtual international commons to

which today's technologically connected children also belong.

Nevertheless, these books are stimulating, richly diverse, and highly attractive, both singly and as a randomly assembled set. They honour and address the true plurality of Canadian readers, and they inculcate genuinely international ways of imagining the world.

These fourteen books, collectively and separately, also offer testimony to a lively and committed publishing imagination. They are not predictable, they open windows onto different worlds, and they give us a version of Canada in which a lively variousness is deeply valued.

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