# How Do Students in an Australian Classroom Construct Canadian Identity from Canadian Picture Books?

—Judith Thistleton-Martin

This paper describes a small case study originally conceptualized to investigate the role of picture books as a discourse of Canadian identity, focusing specifically on the construction of what it means to be Canadian from an Australian point of view. What emerged, however, was less about Canadian identity and more about how Australian students used the text and illustrations to integrate "new" knowledge about Canada by aligning, and at times contrasting, themselves with others.

Generally speaking, personal metanarratives are established from a young age as learners theorize about themselves, their capabilities, and their relationships to others. We construct ourselves through stories that we encounter, interpret, and devise. Many of those stories cluster around an idea of self—a theory about who we are in the world. Linda K. Christian-Smith suggests that children construct their identities in relation to the cultural texts that they encounter, and ethnographic studies of readers, like those by David Barton and Mary Hamilton, and Meredith Cherland, show how the characters and contexts portrayed in literature provide templates that readers use to interpret and explain their identities, life situations, and possibilities. The construction, telling, and retelling of stories allow children to learn about their world and reflect on their knowledge. Through stories, children construct a self and communicate that self to others.

Response-based approaches to teaching and learning literature, such as those by David Bleich, Norman Holland, Wolfgang Iser, Judith Langer, and Jane Tompkins, regard readers as active meaning makers whose varied personal experiences affect their interpretations of literary works. Incorporating students' responses to a work of literature promotes linkages between the text and

the students' experiences. The Australian students in this study were encouraged to develop their own interpretations of Canadian children's books by building on their prior knowledge in order to envision a relationship with the characters, plot, and setting, as well as the connections between them.

Margaret Hagood argues that instead of emphasizing how identities are produced in texts, the focus should be on "readers as subjects" and the ways that readers construct themselves. Literature provides readers with an opportunity to inhabit the "skin" of a fictional character, enabling us to look "outwards into a culture that is familiar to the character but strange to the reader" (Mackey x). Although we are still essentially outsiders, it is possible to gain some vicarious sense of being on the inside. A "good" story enables the reader to move across borders and boundaries.

As this paper will demonstrate, however, the Australian students in this study aligned themselves with the Canadian characters depicted in the selected picture books in order to reinforce and maintain a personal identity. The reading of Canadian picture books did not really challenge the students' own senses of cultural or personal identity, but rather maintained the identities they already had. In "Negotiating a Permeable Curriculum" and *Social Worlds of Children Learning to Write in an Urban Primary School*, Anne Hass Dyson suggests that students look for ways to merge the knowledge they have of their peers, school, home, and community while creating meaning about themselves and others. It is paramount that we, as adults (and teachers), recognize that as readers strive to read and respond to texts, they look for patterns that connect and resonate with their experiences and the experiences of others. As a result, this paper probably reveals more about the processes of cognition and the maintaining of personal identity than about the ways in which Canadian picture books communicate a national identity.

**Aims of the Study**

The original underlying intent of this study was to examine how students in an Australian classroom constructed Canadian identity from a selection of Canadian picture books. I hypothesized that by exploring Canadian children's picture books and answering questions before and after their readings, the Australian children might provide a different interpretation of Canadian identity from that constructed by Canadian and Australian adults and possibly Canadian children. What the case study did, in fact, demonstrate was that while all readers draw on different domains of identity to construct meaning, these students

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drew on two in particular—their life-world[1] and their school-based world—to connect their social and cultural backgrounds, their prior knowledge, and their individual and collective identities. I also came to realize that the picture-book selection process I used provided insights into "markers of difference," adult constructions of "national" identity, and an unconscious recognition that Canadians and Australians share a "common culture" whose core is Anglo-European.

**Book Selection**

For this study, I wanted to use a diverse range of picture books that offered multiple interpretations of Canadian identity, and that included the literary genres of contemporary realistic fiction, alphabet books, historical fiction, non-fiction, and autobiographies. The selection of Canadian books was limited, however, by what was available in my personal collection (purchased by me and given as gifts by Canadian friends and colleagues) or in Australian libraries and bookshops, so this was not a random process. The work of a few contemporary Canadian children's authors such as Sarah Ellis, Tim Wynne-Jones, Marie-Louise Gay, and Robert Munsch are known and available in Australia, but, as Rosemary Ross Johnston points out, Australians still identify Anne of Green Gables as the "Canadian character of children's literature" (qtd. in Nodelman, "What's Canadian" 24). The books selected are geographically and historically specific to Canada rather than depicting a more typical middle-class urban life represented in many Canadian books published for children. What became apparent was the significance of the books selected and what this revealed about adult, rather than student, constructions of "national" identity.

Postmodern work such as Thomas King's *Coyote Columbus* was balanced with more traditional stories such as Esther Sanderson's *Two Pairs of Shoes* and Peter Eyvindson's *Red Parka Mary*. Bilingual Aboriginal-language books such as Michael Arvaarluk Kusugak's *Arctic Stories* and Thomson Highway's *Caribou Song* provided valuable indigenous perspectives, while Paul Yee's

*Ghost Train* presented another aspect of Canada's cultural diversity. Many of the books, such as Michael Arvaarluk Kusugak's *Baseball Bats for Christmas*, Jim McGugan's *Josepha: A Prairie Boy's Story*, and Marilyn Reynolds's *The Magnificent Piano Recital*, were Canadian book-award winners. The distinctive natural variety found in the Canadian landscape was also a consideration: a range of settings across Canada was included. For example, Frances Wolfe's *Where I Live* is set on the coast, Georgia Graham's *The Strongest Man This Side of Cremona* recreates a tornado on the prairies, Margriet Ruurs's *A Mountain Alphabet* depicts the Rockies, and Michael Arvaarluk Kusugak's *My Arctic 1,2,3* is set in Repulse Bay.

The books chosen generally portray some visible aspect of Canadian identity and culture. For example, Mike Ulmer's *M is for Maple: A Canadian Alphabet* is, as the title clearly suggests, strictly Canadian, depicting the familiar, such as hockey; natural phenomena, such as northern lights; and place names, such as Toronto. Theresa Rogers and Anna Soter contend that "Our statements and cultural referents specify not only with what and whom we identify, but also with what and whom we do not . . ." (31). In order to differentiate Canadian identity and portray the "other," landscape, climate, and "the great outdoors" became "markers of difference." This exemplified an unconscious recognition that Canadians and Australians share similar Anglo-European histories, lifestyles, experiences, values, and beliefs—a "common culture" whose core is primarily Anglo-European. Culture informs what we see and understand, as well as what we omit and misconstrue. This in itself became a problem, as the available books, when considered, already contained a limited, possibly stereotypical representation of Canada, emphasizing a sense of geographic and regional place (the "tourist" criteria), rather than a diverse collection of Canadian children's picture books. Although it has been suggested that many Canadian (and Australian) children's books often rely on the landscape in which they are set (see Bainbridge, Bainbridge and Wolodko, Edwards and Saltman, and Nodelman, "What's Canadian"), a greater variety of books might well have changed the student responses.

**Literacy Pedagogy and Identity**

As David Barton and Mary Hamilton suggest, students in Australian classrooms are actively encouraged to develop a repertoire of resources or practices in order to effectively interact with written, spoken, visual, and multimodal texts (11–13). In order to do this, teachers seek to immerse students in meaningful practices based on students'

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own experiences. "Situated practice" builds on process, immersion, and experiential learning, and is firmly grounded in everyday experience. All readers have identities, derived from their life experiences in a variety of domains, which provide them with resources as readers. The reader may draw on these different domains of identity to make meaning. Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis identify these as "discourse worlds," suggesting that, because they draw on their life-world and their school-based world when they interpret what they read, students are likely to access the literal or implied meaning of the text by utilizing their own experiences (11), as there is "no neutral position from which a text can be read or written" (Luke and Freebody 193).

For the Australian students, interpreting the books involved more than simply identifying the written and visual meaning of the text. By utilizing Aidan Chambers's "Tell Me" questioning framework as part of the research methodology and by choosing a classroom where the dominant pedagogy regularly and explicitly applied school knowledge to real-life contexts or problems, the students were already predisposed to draw on their prior knowledge and personal identities.

**The Study: Setting and Context**

The Australian students are from a year-four class, with an average age of 9 years, and attend a State primary (elementary) school, located in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney. Coolibah School is situated in a relatively middle-class socio-economic area, where the majority of families have at least one adult in full-time employment. The school has an enrolment of approximately 400 students from a diverse range of familial structures. They are of mixed reading ability, but can all read and write. There are twenty-eight students in the class. The students are from predominantly Anglo-Australian backgrounds, and all speak English as their first language. The classroom teacher, Ms Kaye, has been to Canada, and occasionally refers to Canada in her teaching, but not in any depth.

In order not to influence the students' readings of the texts, we did not actively engage

in "teaching" the books. Instead, the study incorporates the principles of Aidan Chambers's reader-response model of a "critical blueprint," where a number of questions are asked to prompt student responses and help clarify "the nature of the book and the way we should mediate it with children" (Chambers, *Introducing Books* 174). Ms Kaye uses the "Tell Me Reader Response" as a framework to scaffold student responses to fiction in both teacher-guided and independent reading situations. The "Tell Me" format consists of four groups of questions that are intended to make responses to books open-ended: "Basic Questions" that focus on children's personal reactions to what they have read; "General Questions" that further explore children's related experiences and personal responses in terms of the book they have read; "Special Questions" that explore the story in more depth; and "Connections and Patterns," involving questions that encourage the exploration of significant connections between one element in a text and another.

Questions based on some of the early sections of Aidan Chambers's "Tell Me" framework encourage children to share opinions. Teachers are able to initiate responses to the text through a "Tell Me" invitation rather than the common "why" question. The framework provides a template for children to continue making meaning when reading in independent situations. I adapted four of Chambers's seven questions in order to analyze the children's responses to the Canadian picture books they read, as well as to clarify the nature of the books. All four questions encourage children to compare their immediate personal reactions to the text. The more general questions that make up the remainder of the framework can provoke answers without more text-specific framing. The two processes are, of course, inseparable, but in order to understand the nature of the responses it is also necessary to focus on how the books are constructed, both textually and visually.

As Richard Beach reports, reader-response theories, although diverse in several ways, have signalled an important role for readers as active agents in the reading process (9). Literary texts and illustrations evoke a variety of reader responses that fuse text, illustration, and the reader's personality and experience to create meaning (Karolides 19). The lack of explicit teaching and application to the Canadian context and the use of Chambers's questioning framework emphasized a child-centred approach, where students' own background knowledge and experience (from their life-world and school-based world) became the focus of meaning making. Shared meanings can also develop when a group of people read common texts and talk with one another about

their reading experiences and become part of an interpretive community. Children perceive an individual identity as a child and a collective identity through childlike activity and experience.

**The Process**

Thirty-nine Canadian picture books written in English were taken into the classroom. The books were predominantly fiction, although, as previously mentioned, there was a range of other genres, including factual texts, alphabet books, and autobiographies. Over a two-week period, the children were given free access to the collection of Canadian picture books when they had silent reading time, as well as throughout the teaching day.

The children completed a survey sheet with the same two questions on two different occasions: Part A was given out before the children had access to the picture books, to establish the students' prior knowledge about Canada and Canadian identity. Part B was given out two weeks later, after the students had read the books. The responses were collected by the classroom teacher. The two questions were: "Write down at least three things you know about Canada," and "What do you think Canadians like best about being Canadian?" The questions were included as a direct link to the students' prior experiences in order to minimize confusion about what was being asked. The classroom teacher had used these question structures, among others, in a variety of different units, so that the students were familiar with the style of question, but not the content. Although the second question does imply a value judgement, there is no underlying assumption that Canadian identity relates only to what Canadians like best about themselves.

Although we did not interfere with the established research process—the students were not told that the survey would be given again at the end of the two-week period—the survey questions did alert students indirectly to the purpose of their reading, creating an expectation of what might be required. The classroom teacher read a selection of the Canadian picture books, randomly selected from the collection, aloud to the class, and answered questions and encouraged discussion. Ms Kaye did not, however, offer interpretations of the books. This prevented her judgment from becoming the privileged point of view by highlighting certain aspects of the books for discussion. Therefore, the situated-practice pedagogy allowed the focus of the learning to come from the students, where the learning was child-centred and built on the students' experiences. There were seven of these sessions during the two-week time frame, each lasting

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for about ten to fifteen minutes. The books read aloud were Irene Morck's *Tiger's New Cowboy Boots*, Kevin Major's A *Canadian AbeCedarium: Eh? To Zed*, Julie Lawson's *The Dragon's Pearl*, Frances Wolfe's *Where I Live*, Marilyn Reynolds's *The Prairie Fire*, David Bouchard's *The Elders Are Watching*, William Roy Brownridge's *The Moccasin Goalie*, Mike Ulmer's *M is For Maple*, and Margriet Ruurs's *When We Go Camping*. The books were read in the order listed.

**The Survey Questions: Interpretation and Discussion**

Not surprisingly, the construction of the questions had a significant impact on student responses. The students made decisions about their responses based on the questions they were asked. It must also be acknowledged that their written responses may be incomplete due to the participants' editing of what they wrote, or possible limitations in their recall or expressive abilities. The questions fall into two distinct categories: the first question ("Write down at least three things you know about Canada") is a convergent or closed question, where the children are asked to demonstrate their knowledge, mainly from memory, and to pursue at least a "best" answer; the second question ("What do you think Canadians like best about being Canadian?") is divergent or open-ended, as it requests an opinion that requires higher-level thinking (such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) and encourages a range of possibilities and responses. Divergent questions help learners develop inferential meaning that is implied, not stated; evaluative meaning, which involves making judgements; and creative meaning, where students are able to make links to their own lives. Open questioning is most effective for structuring learners' deeper understanding, as well as providing a challenge for all students. Charlotte S. Huck et al. argue that "divergent questions elicit better, more complex responses . . . ," as well as developing an open-mindedness and tolerance of difference (640).

The types of questions asked by teachers and children about texts will be influenced by the type of text. For example, if a class is talking about a narrative, then there may be quite a few questions that focus on personal response, description of events and characters, and evaluating actions in the story. A recount, on the other hand, may focus talk more on sequence and description of events. Factual texts such as information books will likely evoke questions that involve generalizing, classifying, and recalling information. For example: Do all forests have the same features? How are ice-hockey games similar? What happened to dolls made at harvest time from the last stalks of wheat? Follow-up questions stimulate and facilitate children's insights into texts and hone their emerging interpretations. Because this case study was focused upon examining how students in an Australian classroom constructed Canadian identity from a selection of Canadian picture books, there was no overt instruction. The use of Aidan Chambers's questioning sequence, as opposed to the more specific questioning techniques described above, allowed the students to volunteer their own thoughts and ideas as they arose. Research by Pauline Harris and Jillian Trezise, and Celia Oyler and Anne Barry shows that children can reach greater levels of meaning when freed from the constraints of always having to answer questions that someone else asks. By spontaneously making their own comments and asking their own questions during the actual reading process, the students in this study were able to draw on their own background knowledge and experiences to construct meaning. The effect that the "before-and-after" format of the questions had on the written responses, however, was not anticipated.

The questions were asked before and after the reading of the picture books in order to see the impact of the reading from two different perspectives. What has emerged, however, is an unexpected influence that the questions themselves probably had on the responses. The questions were not designed to encourage generalizations that all Canadians like the same things about Canada. Although the questions did not specifically ask the students what the books were telling them about what Canadians like best about being Canadian, the intent was implied, at least in the "after" response. Perhaps the "before" questions should have been as they were, but the "after" questions could have included a "what-the-books-tell-us" component.

Although the structure of the questions could have been improved, we can observe that the student responses did change after reading the books. For example, before reading the books, the students provided twenty-five different responses to

the question about what they knew about Canada, ranging from "it snows" (eighteen responses) to "it's icey" (one response). After reading the books, the number of different responses grew to fifty-seven, and, although there was still a focus on the cold climate, the responses ranged from "they play ice hockey a lot" (thirteen responses) to "they invented IMAX" (eight responses). Similarly, after reading the books, the number of different responses to the question about what "Canadians like best about being Canadian" increased from seventeen to thirty-two. Although "playing ice hockey" (eleven responses) was still popular, the other responses became more diverse and included "they are proud of their country" (seven responses) and "inventions" (five responses).

The personal histories of the twenty-six student respondents are, of course, all different. It is difficult to predict exactly what will be "culturally relevant" to any individual child or group of children (Sipe & Bauer 331). Some generalizations can be made, however, about the difference between the experiences offered by the books and the same experiences known personally to the readers. While some of the Australian students have seen snow—the occasional local fall in the mountains—none has experienced many of the winter activities, such as ice fishing and ice hockey, that are depicted in most of the books. Most of the students have never had a snowball fight or built a snowman. None of the students has travelled to Canada, and, as the "before" responses indicate, most knew very little about Canada before reading the picture books, as the most common response to the question "Write as least three things you know about Canada?" was "it's cold" (nineteen responses).

The students have little in their own histories against which to measure the books focusing on a snow-filled winter climate. In fact, their experiences have been quite opposite: Sydney is hot and humid for at least nine months of the year, and the Canadian fall would be equivalent to a Sydney winter. Not surprisingly, therefore, the Australian students had no difficulty in differentiating between their world and the world of the Canadian picture books they chose to read. After reading the picture books, sixteen students responded to the question "What do you think Canadians like best about being Canadian?," with some providing more than one response. Many of the sixteen focused on snow and ice (seven responses), and child-centred activities associated with an extremely cold winter, for example "playing ice hockey" (eleven responses), "ice fishing" (six responses), and "snow fights" (four responses).

The prevalence of ice hockey in the students'

responses is interesting because there is not a great deal of text or illustration that focuses on ice hockey in the selection of Canadian picture books. Of the thirty-nine books, only four—*M is For Maple*, *A Prairie Boy's Winter*, *Eh? To Zed*, and *Snow Day*—mention hockey and only one—*The Moccasin Goalie*—has ice hockey as its narrative focus. Although hockey is played in Australia at indoor ice rinks, it receives no publicity, as it is regarded as a minor sport. None of the students had ever seen a game. In contrast, ice hockey appears to be regarded internationally as one of the most distinctive aspects of Canadian culture, uniting Canadians and helping to define a national identity. This seems to indicate that the children were drawing predominantly on assumptions that they had before reading the books. Once again, perhaps questions that focused on the books rather than on Canadians might have been more revealing. For example, "What do the books show about being Canadian?" might have led to less emphasis on ice hockey.

Aidan Chambers believes that in one sense, much of our reading is dependent on "what we have read before," as stories have an interrelatedness—a book's "family tree" (*Introducing Books to Children* 180). Intertextuality need not be deliberately created by the author: someone who has read widely will have a large literary repertoire to draw on and a good chance of having the requisite background knowledge and understanding a particular book demands. But "history as a reader" should not be defined by books alone. Television programs, movies, computer programs, the Internet, and stories told by parents, grandparents, and teachers are all narratives that readers bring to enrich or confuse their readings of a particular text. For example, two students wrote that "the movie *Cool Runnings* was made in Canada." Although *Cool Runnings* was not actually made in Canada, the film is based on the first Jamaican bobsled team, which competed in the Winter Olympics in Calgary in 1988. Both respondents had seen the film on video and remembered the connection to Canada. Their response was influenced by their prior knowledge and experience. The response "playing soccer" (four responses) is another connection with direct experience. Soccer is a specific focus in *Northern Lights: The Soccer Trails*, where it has a spiritual significance for the Inuit people of the Arctic. Junior soccer is very popular in Australia.

Other responses that were recorded more than once and did not mention climate were "maple trees" (three responses) and "maple syrup" (four responses), "going to the Rocky Mountains" (two responses), and "going home for lunch" (three responses). Although maple trees do grow

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in Australia and the American fast food chain McDonald's has introduced many Australian children to a generic brand of maple syrup, the students still identify maple syrup as Canadian. This response draws directly on the students' personal experiences, as the four respondents who mentioned maple syrup have all had it on their "hotcakes," and the Canadian context created by the books allowed them to connect with that experience. For example, the title *M is for Maple* immediately foregrounds a Canadian association with the word "maple" and an indirect connection to "maple syrup." "Going home for lunch" is a popular response: it appears in the students' responses to both survey questions, before and after the books were read. Since the original source of the information was the classroom teacher (based on her personal experiences), this response cannot be attributed to the books; but it highlights the personal nature of the responses overall and the appeal of a practice that is not a part of the Australian school day (or necessarily part of the Canadian school day), but one which the children deem to be desirable. Similarly, the response "going to the Rocky Mountains" (two responses) draws not only on the Canadian setting, but also on the experiences of the children, who live in a mountainous area of Australia. For example, *When We Go Camping, A Mountain Alphabet*, and *Whatever You Do Don't Go Near That Canoe* are all set in the Canadian Rocky Mountains, and depict activities, such as camping and canoeing, that are also a part of life for the Australian students.

**What did the selected picture books ask of the readers?**

Essentially, the Canadian picture books selected for the study encouraged the readers to identify with Canadian children as they play, do chores, go to school, and play sport throughout the changing seasons, and to immerse themselves in Canadian culture and social customs. The books are not primarily focused on their own Canadianness, but explore aspects of childhood, where being Canadian is taken for granted as part of the

background. Canadian identity only arises as a central theme of the books in the context of this study, where aspects of Canadian life (for example, playing ice hockey in *The Moccasin Goalie*, the prevalence of ice and snow in titles such as Werner Zimmerman's *Snow Day* and Marie-Louise Gay's *Stella Queen of the Snow*, and playing baseball in the Arctic in *Baseball Bats for Christmas*) are regarded by an Australian child reader as unusual and unexpected.

The illustrations also stimulate an inner imaginative process, where diverse depictions of similar child-centred activities encourage the viewer to become part of the action. As Gordon Winch et al. assert, "literature is a kind of virtual reality" where "creative negotiation" between the reader and the words and images of the book takes place (312). As Australian students read and view Canadian picture books, some form of a "merged world is created" (312)—one that is uniquely their own.

The picture-book selection includes a variety of literary genres, for example, alphabet books such as Mike Ulmer's *M is For Maple*, Jo Bannatyne-Cugnet's *A Prairie Alphabet*, and Kevin Major's *Eh? To Zed*; books such as Barbara Greenwood's *A Pioneer Thanksgiving*, which combine narrative text with factual information; and books with an autobiographical focus, such as George Littlechild's *This Land is My Land*, Morningstar Mercredi's *Fort Chipewyan Homecoming*, and Nancy Hundal's *Prairie Summer*, where authors recreate their childhood. Other books, such as Thomson Highway's *Caribou Song*, are bilingual; some, such as Richard Van Camp's *A Man Called Raven* and Elizabeth Cleaver's *The Enchanted Caribou*, retell traditional stories; and yet others, such as Michael Arvaarluk Kusugak's *My Arctic 1,2,3*, are concept books. Different genres require different reading and viewing skills. Factual texts are browsed, scanned for specific information, or read for knowledge and pleasure. The majority of factual texts for elementary students today involve a combination of written text and images. The visual material and the written text often compliment each other by providing different or additional information.

Interestingly, there is no specific reference to the Aboriginal people of Canada in any of the students' written responses. This was surprising, considering seventeen of the thirty-nine books are written from an Aboriginal perspective. Two of these, *The Elders Are Watching* and *Northern Lights The Soccer Trails*, were the most frequently borrowed books. In New South Wales, Australian Aboriginal Studies is a mandatory part of the curriculum, so the children did not find anything unusual in books with Aboriginal Canadian content. The attention of the readers was on the activities of the depicted

children, rather than on their cultural heritage. There was one notable exception, however, when a student presented the teacher with Paul Yee and Harvey Chan's *Ghost Train*, and said that it was in the "wrong box." When asked why he thought the book was in the wrong place, the student replied, "because it's Chinese, not Canadian." "Real" Canadians, it seemed to this student, are not Chinese, perhaps reflecting the attitudes of some in the predominantly Anglo-Australian area in which he lives.

The most intriguing responses were those that made a connection between what Canadians liked best about being Canadian and national pride—"They are proud of their country" (seven responses), "it's their country" (two responses), and "they like their country" (one response). The only book which overtly conveys a sense of national pride is Mike Ulmer's *M is for Maple*, particularly the poem printed on both the dedication page and the back of the dust jacket:

> From Atlantic to Pacific, from St. John's to B.C,
> there's a place that's like no other, that's Canada to me.
>
> We are new maples growing tall, our roots cross time and seas,
> To countries all the world around, that's Canada to me.

The book is also written in the first person. *M is for Maple* is not the only book written in first person, but it is the only one where the first person ("we") is specifically identified as the Canadian people. The alphabet books present a national identity, while many of the other books present a regional one. The Australian students in the study generally responded to the national focus generated by the questions they were asked, rather than focusing on the regional.

The response "inventions," with 5 recorded responses, also reflected the impact of *M is for Maple*, as this is the only book where Canadian inventions are specifically mentioned. *Eh to Zed* includes the word "zipper," and does explain the significance of each entry at the back of the book in small print, but Canadian inventions are not as well profiled as they are in *M is for Maple*. Upon the request of the students, selections from *M is for Maple* were also read aloud by the classroom teacher, and class discussion followed (the teacher read the pages which dealt with the letters A, B, F, H, J, M, and N). Although most of the reading done by the students was individual, it was also communal and cooperative, as each student participated by listening informally to what others had to say and taking into account other points of view concerning the texts. Students' written responses reflected individual variations

in ideas and experiences, but also demonstrated commonalities as well as reflecting the impact of the classroom teacher.

**The illustrations**

There is no direct evidence in the students' written responses to indicate that the illustrations had a greater impact than the text. This highlights the need, particularly in this study, to include interviews as part of the data-collection process, in order to ascertain why the readers responded as they did, rather than relying on their written responses alone. As Stephens suggests, the "relationship between text and pictures is one between differently constructed discourses giving different kinds of information, if not different messages" (164). In picture books, where the written text and illustrative text work together, the relationship is interdependent, so that the narrative is constructed to produce meaning through a unique combination of text and illustration. There is a minimal number of responses, however, where the students have used the illustrations specifically to extend and reflect the meaning conveyed by the words. For example, the responses, "the lovely outback" and "the pretty countryside," to the question "What do you think Canadians like best about being Canadian?" (after reading the picture books) indicate personal judgment based on the visual images of the Canadian landscape in the illustrations. Nowhere in the books do the words "lovely outback" or "pretty countryside" appear. The multi-layering of visual and written texts allows the students to examine and construct different meanings based on their prior experience and socio-cultural background.

The response "the lovely outback" shows how one student was able to translate what she was viewing to reinforce her own sense of place. "The outback" is a very Australian expression that is used to describe the dry, desolate centre of the Australian continent. When the teacher asked the student what Canadian book reminded her of the Australian outback, her response was "the one about the prairies." Although the prairies and the Australian outback resemble each other only in that they both have vast areas of flat land, the student, who had not visited either place, was still able to make a tenuous connection.

Looking at the illustrations in the books, it seems that the landscape has contributed to the construction of Canadian identity, where illustrators provide visual representations of its development, past and present, affirming traditional realism or representational art, offering realistic images of characters, settings, and the look of everyday things. Of the thirty-two recorded response items for the question, "What do you think Canadians

like best about being Canadian?" (with some repetition of the same answers), eighteen were concerned with being "outside"—either playing sport, such as "ice skating on the ice outside," playing games, and "snow fights"—or involved aspects of the landscape—"different wild life," "lakes, prairies and forest," and "going to the Rocky Mountains." This is not surprising, since thirty-three of the thirty-nine books were set primarily outside (no more than two pages of a book depicted inside), highlighting the over-representation of outdoor settings in the selection of books. Nine of the thirty-three were set in winter, and nine response items (with some repetition of the same answers) mention ice and snow. For the Australian students, the visual impact of the landscape is one dominated by ice and snow.

**What qualities did the most popular books display in relation to the needs of the readers?**

The most influential books in terms of written responses were William Roy Brownridge's *The Moccasin Goalie* and Mike Ulmer's *M is for Maple: A Canadian Alphabet*. The most popular books in terms of individual student reading choice were *The Moccasin Goalie*, Michael Arvaarluk Kusugak's *Northern Lights The Soccer Trails*, David Bouchard's *The Elders Are Watching*, and Marilyn Reynolds's *The Prairie Fire*. There was always someone who was waiting to read and re-read each of these titles. *The Elders Are Watching* was the most-sought-after book of them all. The children pored over the illustrations at every opportunity, fascinated by the way the "Elders' spirits seem to be there" and how the "colours were so bright but the book felt peaceful." There seems to be a distinction between what the students read for enjoyment, what appealed to them individually and as a group, and what they perceived was required of them in answering the questions. *The Moccasin Goalie* was the only book that was both a popular choice and an influential selection in terms of the students' written responses.

The opening paragraph of *The Moccasin Goalie* immediately sets the story in the past ("a long time ago"), gives the genre as an autobiography written in the first person ("when I was a boy"), and provides a sense of place ("my family lived on the prairies in a small town called Willow," where the "winters were very cold" and "cold temperatures meant ice, and ice meant ice hockey"). The opening paragraph incorporates two of the major themes recorded in the students' responses: the cold weather (ice and snow) and ice hockey. "Moccasin Danny" is the crippled narrator, who has always played goalie wearing moccasins. Danny's ancestry is implied as First

> The numerous texts of children's literature constitute a type of map that gives us clues to who and where we are and helps us to claim our unique place and significance.

Nations by "moccasin," a cultural marker that was not identified by the Australian students. When Tony is unable to play because of injury, Danny is given special permission by the league to "play on foot." Marcel and Danny "save the game," leading their team to victory. Danny is invited to join the Wolves, but agrees only if all his friends are included. Friendship is valued over being part of a winning team, and physical disability is not seen as a disadvantage. The male "underdog" who, although experiencing some element of failure, still wins and triumphs over adversity, is the quintessential Australian hero (for example, bushranger Ned Kelly, the ANZAC soldiers from World War I, and Steven Bradbury, the Olympic speed skater), publicly acknowledged and celebrated through art, literature, and music. It is therefore not surprising that Danny appeals so strongly to the Australian child reader.

**Conclusion**

In *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*, Perry Nodelman maintains that "a picture book contains at least three stories: the one told by the words, the one implied by the pictures, and the one that results from the combination of the two" (153). The act of interpreting and making meaning from picture books necessitates the reader filling in not only the gaps that appear in the text and the illustrations, but also the gaps that lie between. As the Australian students read, viewed, and discussed the selected Canadian picture books, they not only compared (and contrasted) their own social and cultural experiences with those portrayed in the literature, but they also discovered aspects of their own interests and lifestyles depicted in the texts and illustrations. As Stuart Marriott suggests, the Australian students were able to "engage in a highly creative process" and "attempt to reconcile an inevitable tension" (4), which enabled them to differentiate Canadian identity from their own, where landscape, climate, and the "great outdoors" became markers of difference. The students constructed meaning by negotiating and interpreting the illustrations and texts together, as well as considering the

multiplicity of voices that "derive from the complexity of the cultural contexts in which the author, illustrator and reader are located" (Mallan 77).

The responses of the Australian students to the Canadian picture books are not really about the "Canadianness" of the texts and illustrations or the construction of a national identity. The engagement of the Australian students with the Canadian texts was shaped by their imagining and thinking, reflecting spaces that are in some way "part of a common story, the inhabiting of childhood by children" (Winch et al. 339). The numerous texts of children's literature constitute a type of map that gives us clues to who and where we are and helps us to claim our unique place and significance. These maps contribute to children's sense of identity, an identity that is simultaneously personal and social. As Tony Watkins asserts, some narratives shape the way children (and young people) find a "'home' in the world" (4). As Gordon Winch et al. point out, such maps inhabit a "highly subjective" space, where "points of interest to some will be meaningless to others" (339). Winch et al. see children's literature as a map of childhood diversity, which offers children the opportunity to create and traverse their own maps. Not only have the Australian children in this study created their own map of Canadian childhood, which involves playing ice hockey, having snowball fights, going home for lunch, and having maple syrup, but they have also begun, perhaps unconsciously, to map the terrain of national pride, where being proud of one's country is seen as important. This probably reveals more about them as children and the way they view the world than it does about Canadian identity. Although the written answers reflect, to some degree, the questions, the students aligned themselves with those aspects of the Canadian picture books that represented the everyday in family and community life.

It must also be acknowledged that the results could be influenced by a classroom teaching and learning philosophy that favours and reinforces the use of semantic practice over others, where the students automatically focus on prior knowledge and experience to make sense of the world. The Australian students, however, still view "Canadianness" through nine-year-old eyes. Where we, as adults, often focus on the complexities of self-identification—national, social, political, and psychological—it seems that children, at least those from year four at Coolibah Primary School, do not. As Perry Nodelman suggests in *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*, "The pleasure of picture books is not just in the stories they tell but in the game of figuring out what those stories are" (156).

## Notes

[1] Philosophers such as Jürgen Habermas discuss the idea of "life-world"—what we perceive our world to be at any given time. It is never complete, but is constantly changing.

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