Imagining Identity, Community, and Historical Memory in Canadian Picture Books

—Kerry Mallan

Azore, Barbara. *Wanda and the Wild Hair*. Illus. Georgia Graham. Toronto: Tundra, 2005. 32 pp. $22.99 hc. ISBN 0-88776-717-6.

Bregoli, Jane. *The Goat Lady*. Markham, ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2005. 32 pp. $9.95 pb. ISBN 1-55-41-942-0.

Campbell, Nicola I. *Shi-shi-etko*. Illus. Kim LaFave. Toronto: Groundwood, 2005. 32 pp. $16.95 hc. ISBN 0-88899-659-4.

Gay, Marie-Louise. *Caramba*. Toronto: Groundwood, 2003. 40 pp. $16.95 hc. ISBN 0-88899-667-5.

Hughes, Susan. *Earth to Audrey*. Illus. Stéphane Poulin. Toronto: Kids Can, 2005. 32 pp. $18.95 hc. ISBN 1-55337-843-1.

Jocelyn, Marthe. *Hannah and the Seven Dresses*. Toronto: Tundra, 2005. 32 pp. $9.99 hc. ISBN 0-88776-749-4.

Johnson, Gillian. *My Sister Gracie*. Toronto: Tundra, 2005. 32 pp. $9.99 pb. ISBN 0-88776-750-8.

Leedahl, Shelley. *The Bone Talker*. Illus. Bill Slavin. Markham, ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2005. 32 pp. $9.95 pb. ISBN 1-55-41-350-3.

Major, Kevin. *Aunt Olga's Christmas Postcards*. Illus. Bruce Roberts. Toronto: Groundwood, 2005. 40 pp. $18.95 hc. ISBN 0-88899-593-8.

Pendziwol, Jean E. *The Red Sash*. Illus. Nicolas Debon. Toronto: Groundwood, 2005. 40 pp. $16.95 hc. ISBN 0-88899-589-X.

Santamaria, Benjamin. *Tales of the Monkey King*. Illus. Brian Deines. Toronto: Tundra, 2005. 32 pp. $22.99 hc. ISBN 0-88776-684-6.

Wakeman, Daniel. *Ben's Big Dig*. Illus. Dirk van Stralen. Victoria: Orca, 2005. 32 pp. $19.95 hc. ISBN 1-800-210-5277.

Wilson, Troy. *Perfect Man*. Illus. Dean Griffiths. Victoria: Orca, 2005. 32 pp. $9.95 pb. ISBN 1-55143-435-0

Children's books, along with other cultural texts, often draw on a deep store of conventional understandings of our world—understandings which have been shaped by history, tradition, and humanistic idealism. An implicit part of these understandings is the notion of identity in its myriad forms (gender, race, class, nation, and so on) and the ways in which children progress toward a sense of "self" and "other" as part of the journey from childhood through adolescence to adulthood. This linear and developmental approach to identity formation sees identity as an end goal, which can be reached once the (immature) subject reaches maturity. Despite the universalizing logic of this account of identity formation based on lack in children and adolescents, questions of "who to be," "what to do," and "how to act," nevertheless, continue to have relevance for young people; but the contexts in which these questions can be raised are significantly different from those that shaped previous generations.

Children today are said to be growing up in what Anthony Giddens terms "post-traditional" societies (*The Consequences*). This view contends that young people are being defined less by traditional communities (families, neighbourhood) than they are by individualism and new relations of global commodity and electronic cultures (Bauman). While technology and popular cultural products have played a part in shaping the identities of children and youth for generations, the new global forces that Bauman and Giddens mention suggest a new social order: young people are increasingly expected to forge their own life trajectories and craft their own identities, at an individual level and without traditional patterns or support structures to guide them.

Over the past few decades, the pace of change has been such that childhood is now arguably the new adolescence, with many children participating in a global youth market that offers an enormous range of fashion styles, cultures, and products through which they perform meaningful identities in the social world. Furthermore, internet culture provides young people with additional avenues for playing with identity (as in the case of online games and social networking sites such as MySpace), and sources for agency and self-expression. Rather than endorse the view that the past provides an individual with a fixed identity, many cultural theorists contend that identity is a continuous project, whereby we create, maintain, and revise a set of biographical narratives that tell stories about our origins and our places in our families, communities, nations, and the world. Consequently, we constantly change our understanding of who we are as we integrate

As this sampling of recent picture books suggests, there is a palpable determination to fix identity in terms of one's allegiance to place, community, and nation, whereby "the local" continues to be imagined through history, race, gender, and intergenerational relationships.

aspects of our past into our present, and anticipate the future.

Against this context of changing social relations and identity formation, many writers of children's books appear to be offering young readers a reassurance that there are some presumed fixed certainties and conventional wisdoms that can be drawn upon as one develops and grows toward maturity. This approach may simply be part of the liberal humanist ethos that pervades children's literature, or a manifestation of adult writers' nostalgic desire for a return to the past. As this sampling of recent picture books suggests, there is a palpable determination to fix identity in terms of one's allegiance to place, community, and nation, whereby "the local" continues to be imagined through history, race, gender, and intergenerational relationships. There are also, however, perceptible instances whereby features of post-traditional communities contribute to a character's ongoing quest for identity and belonging.

In the recent Canadian picture books reviewed below, "place," either as a geographically depicted location (in Canada) or as a more globalized (not geographically specific) space, functions as an important part of the symbolic and imaginary dimensions of identity, both individual and collective. In particular, this diverse and random selection of picture books could be seen as providing readers with ways of thinking about the nature of identity and how it is shaped by history, family, community, and nation; and how language and illustration produce an aesthetic through which ideas and sensory or affective aspects come together to offer ways of thinking and "feeling" about identity, belonging, and self-other relations.

In keeping with a developmental approach to identity formation, the main character in picture books is often a child who approximates the age of the implied reader, both of whom are still coming to understand their place in the family, school, and community. When the main character is an animal, "the child within" is often represented as one who has concerns similar to those of real

children. Usually, the character develops a sense of self and a growing awareness of others in its immediate world. In *Caramba*, by Marie-Louise Gay, the eponymous cat worries that, although he looks like any other cat ("fat and furry"), he is different from the others in that he can't fly. The story's endorsement of flying cats as a normal state of affairs serves to heighten the notion of what is acceptable as "normal" for both the reading subject and the characters. In the end, Caramba's sense of being different from the norm is celebrated when, after a series of failed attempts to fly, he falls into the sea and discovers that he can swim! When he is told by his cousins that "Cats can't swim! Everyone knows that!" the now self-confident Caramba replies, "Well, I can." While the story seems to suggest that difference brings its own rewards, there is nevertheless an underlying sense that bodies carry different social weights that meet with both censure and approval by self and others: an ideological position that endorses what is a societal "truth." In the story's conclusion, however, Caramba encourages his friend Portia the pig to try swimming. Rather than accept that this would not be possible, Portia leaves open the possibility: "Who knows? Maybe pigs can swim, too." This final note of openness and unknowingness implies a certain contestation of the limits that often restrict individuals in their actions, but also speaks to the individualism that characterizes children living in post-traditional societies.

Gay brings a light touch to the subject and details an exuberant sense of movement as cats fly, swoop, and dive, and are tossed about by wild breezes, as they hover high above changing landscapes. The soft watercolours and pastels in summer hues contribute to the warmth and gentle humour that document Caramba's attempts to fly. In the final illustration, Caramba and Portia row on the open seas into the sunset. In humanist terms, this picture of companionship confirms that true friendship transcends difference; yet, paradoxically, in terms of the conditions of the social world that marks their difference as not "normal," that world also enables the "different" creatures to embark on a course of self-determination.

Just as the anthropomorphized Caramba attempts to find his own identity that is recognizably different from, but accepted by, the other animals, the female characters that are the focal subjects in *Hannah and the Seven Dresses*, by Marthe Jocelyn; *Wanda and the Wild Hair*, by Barbara Azore and Georgia Graham; and *Earth to Audrey*, by Susan Hughes and Stéphane Poulin, similarly attempt to attain an individuality by celebrating difference, but with differing degrees of success: *Hannah and the Seven Dresses* ultimately undercuts its celebration of individuality in its final

illustration; *Wanda and the Wild Hair* has a more ambivalent position toward the rewards of being different; and *Earth to Audrey* achieves a degree of success through a quirky individualism.

Hannah's problem (in *Hannah and the Seven Dresses*) is one that is stereotypically attributed to a female identity driven by the consumer imperatives of whim and choice. While Hannah's mother is responsible for her "closet full of beautiful clothes" because "she liked to sew," Hannah is the one wracked by indecision: which dress should she wear? The decision is one that has a physiological reaction: " . . . her face got hot. She shivered all over. Her knees went jiggly and her toes curled under." Her solution of assigning a dress for each day of the week is thrown into disarray when she can't decide what dress to wear to her birthday party (which is on a Tuesday, and the Tuesday dress simply won't do). The final solution is that Hannah learns that it is best to wear black pants: "And from that minute until now, Hannah has never worn a dress again." This slight story is given an aesthetic appeal through Jocelyn's cloth collages that form the illustrations. (The fact that Marthe Jocelyn is also a children's clothing and toy designer is apparent in the illustrations, which feature beautifully designed and patterned dresses.) The implicit suggestion that girls are better off wearing (the) pants is undermined, however, by the end papers, which are illustrated in a patchwork pattern of the fabric that comprises Hannah's dresses. Further reinforcement of the conventionally fashioned feminine body occurs in both the title and on the cover illustration, where Hannah appears (semi-clothed), surrounded by her seven dresses. These colourful, patterned, and pretty dresses appear far more enticing than the monochromatic black pants that the narrative explains are her preferred future attire. Hence, there is an interesting tension between the narrative closure that Hannah (unrealistically) "has never worn a dress again," and the illustrations on the cover and end papers that detail desirable dresses and their colourful fabrics. The final illustration—of a joyful, heel-kicking Hannah—depicts a more active child with a wide smile, as opposed to the passive, demure, controlled Hannah on the cover. Yet, the cover blurb ("Choosing which dress to wear is just too difficult, but Hannah has the answer!") works against the overt meaning of resistant femininity, especially if Hannah's motivation for wearing pants is simply that the excess of dresses makes decision-making difficult.

As the title of *Wanda and the Wild Hair* suggests, Wanda's wild hair is the source of her difference. Wanda loves her hair, but no one else does: her mother threatens to get it cut, her father

suggests she go to the poodle parlour for a trim, and her teacher complains about her fiddling with her hair. It is only after a bizarre incident when her mother's earring gets caught in Wanda's hair and Wanda is the target of a mêlée between a magpie, a cat, and an Old English sheep dog that she agrees to go to the hairdresser. After her hair is cut and straightened, the now unrecognizable and horrified Wanda speaks to her mirror image and says defiantly: "It will soon grow again." While hair has traditionally been associated with feminine beauty (a woman's crowning glory), here it serves as a main narrative and visual device in constructing the character of Wanda. Wanda is the visual object of the story, and in the mirror scene she is both the object of the reader's gaze and of her own gaze. This double visioning in the final scene, when Wanda speaks to her reflection, provides a point of feminine autonomy and defiance. While, visually, Wanda is depicted throughout the book according to traditional notions of femininity (she wears hyperfeminized clothing with lace, bows, socks, and shiny red Mary Jane shoes), her determination to keep her hair wild, unwashed, and uncut destabilizes this conventional feminine subjectivity ascribed by her sartorial style. The hair-cutting scene recalls other moments in children's literature when a female character's hair is cut (for example, Jo in *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott). Wanda has no choice but to concede to the haircut ("But just this once") because her hair has become wildly out-of-control. The final cut does not make her more boyish (as was the case for Jo) but it does depict a more conventional, controlled feminine image: one that erases the Wanda of the "wild hair." Her resolve to let it grow provides a space for feminine agency and difference despite the limits and censures that are imposed on her to look "normal."

Audrey (in *Earth to Audrey*) appears different from other girls in that her plaits are like wayward antennae, she trains grasshoppers, and she has an affinity with nature. The illustrations suggest that her unconventional lifestyle has shaped her sense of identity. For example, Audrey's father's home (where she is staying for the holidays) is filled with exotic artifacts and the walls are painted with bright sunflowers, and his yellow-panel van is vividly decorated with colourful patterns. For Ray, the narrator and Audrey's friend and admirer, her difference is explained in terms of her being an alien. After first sighting Audrey, who is training grasshoppers, Ray confides in the reader: "I began to wonder. Was she from another planet? Was she an alien?" Ray's inability to see the unconventional Audrey in terms other than as an alien speaks to wider societal issues, where difference is often explained in exotic terms so that

Ray's inability to see the unconventional Audrey in terms other than as an alien speaks to wider societal issues, where difference is often explained in exotic terms so that the perceived threat of the "other" is diminished.

the perceived threat of the "other" is diminished. In describing Audrey as "alien," however, the text implicitly raises the question: who qualifies as recognizably human and who does not? The blurring of definitions of "human" and "alien" in this text is achieved both linguistically (as focalized through Ray) and pictorially (in the idiosyncratic clothing and physical appearance of Audrey). The story also blurs reality and fantasy through its (at times) surrealistic illustrations, which nevertheless give a sense of verisimilitude to Ray and Audrey's imaginings about flying through space or spinning on the surface of the globe (the two are depicted in miniature, standing on the surface of a basketball, which spins on Audrey's brother's fingertip).

While the previous books focus on a feminine identity (and, in Hannah and her Dresses, the links between feminine desires and consuming fashions), Troy Wilson's *Perfect Man* signals, beginning with its title, a concern with ideal masculine identity, with the associations with superheroes (for example, *Superman*). We are told from the beginning that Michael Maxwell McAllum is different: he is "the smallest boy in his class." Michael is a fan of the real-life superhero, Perfect Man. The illustrations depict his bedroom walls covered with Perfect Man posters, and show Michael reading Perfect Man comics, playing Perfect Man video games, eating Perfect Man cereal, and wearing Perfect Man T-shirts. These embedded elements of the boy's life are subtle referents that allude to the extratextual world where consumerism actively shapes children's desires and identities. The inclusion of these fictional products provides a telling reminder of the way in which children are the target (and willing consumers) of a marketing strategy and a fashion aesthetic that drives a particular commodity culture. Fantasy is transformed into reality in this story, however, in that Perfect Man is not a comic construction, but a real-live superhero. This intertextual play between superhero and his alter ego is further developed when Perfect Man retires into obscurity, and Michael becomes convinced

that his new teacher, Mr Clark (who functions similarly to Superman's alter ego Clark Kent), is Perfect Man. When confronted by his theory, Mr Clark advises Michael to use his "super power" as a writer and to live life and write. Michael follows this advice, with the result that in his adult years he becomes a best-selling author. This story captures the point made at the beginning of this paper that writers of children's fiction often see children as having an identity in the making, one that will be complete when the child reaches adulthood. In this example, the child with the vivid imagination becomes a best-selling author. The story also has connections with other picture books reviewed so far in that Michael discovers the power within (his "super power") that distinguishes him from others and helps to define who he is or who he is to become. This story covers familiar territory, as the superhero continues to provide a global image of power and masculine heroics across a wide range of consumer products (from breakfast cereal to toys) and popular cultural texts (film, comics, computer games). While this book, like the previous ones, attempts to focus on the individual realizing a sense of identity and individualism, it also engages superficially with a marketing ethos that constructs children as willing consumers, ready to buy into a retro identity politics. Consequently, the conventional story frame reinforces traditional, rather than post-traditional, understandings about gender, family, and community.

As the above-mentioned picture books engage with notions of choice, individuality, belonging, and acceptance, they can be seen as "ideal" components of identity formation and social relations. This interest in, and support of, the individual is integral to liberal humanism as the "official" ideology of post-traditional societies. In the picture books that follow, we can detect a subtle shift from a focus on the individual to a focus on national citizenship and intercultural relations. This shift overtly expresses Canada's current policy on multiculturalism and the general resurgence of national citizenship, which asserts itself in the national imaginary as the link to "Canadian identity." This totalizing view of one Canadian identity is of course an impossibility, as there is no one version of Canadian identity (or of any other national identity).

The modern/colonial world provides the context for *Shi-shi-etko*, by Nicola Campbell and Kim LaFave, and *The Red Sash*, by Jean Pendziwol and Nicolas Debon. Cultural differences and colonization emerge as twin issues in both books. While cultural differences can be easily dismissed as different customs, beliefs, objects, and actions, such cultural relativism masks the way power has

been produced and maintained by colonizers, since the beginning of colonization. In *Shi-shi-etko*, the cultural differences between Native peoples of Canada (and by extension the United States, Australia, and New Zealand) and European people are brought into sharp contrast by subtle inference and absence rather than as contrasting presences. This sense of cultural difference is developed in the days leading up to young Shi-shi-etko's departure from her family to live in the government-run Indian Residential School. As the Author's Note explains, residential schools were part of the Canadian government's policy until 1984.

Day-to-day family life is narrated through a third-person prosaic accounting ("In the morning . . ."; "Afterwards in the late-night silence . . .") focalized through the eyes of Shi-shi-etko. These everyday experiences are accompanied by richly textured illustrations that convey a sense of belonging and close proximity between humans, and between humans and the environment: family members hug, play, and walk together; and the humans interact closely with the surrounding lake, animals, insects, sand, and trees. The pending separation and the length of time before the family will be reunited are expressed in a poetic style measuring the length of time apart according to the seasons: "My girl, we will not see each other / until the wild roses bloom in the spring / and the salmon have returned to our river." The autumnal colours imbue the illustrations with further significance as they suggest both the onset of winter and the departure for school: the departure/arrival also carries the weight of leaving behind a familiar way of life for an unfamiliar one.

The rocks, tall grass, mosquitoes, bumble bees, crayfish, minnows, paddle song, wild roses, and the other trees and bushes are part of the world Shi-shi-etko knows and loves. Afraid that Shi-shi-etko might forget her culture and home, her grandmother gives her a memory bag to store items, but Shi-shi-etko decides to bury her bag of memories under the big fir tree. As she is taken away to the school in the back of a pick-up truck, she looks at her disappearing environment and tries to memorize every detail. This gesture is both a poignant reminder of the significance of place to identity and of the need for cultural memory. This story is focalized through Shi-shi-etko, and as the words and images reveal her thoughts and the details of her world, the "other" world that she will be moving to is an absent presence: it is present in the child's daily thoughts ("There are only one, two, three more sleeps until I go to school"), but absent in what is not said about it. The attention to the sensual and organic world of the present (the touch of the grasses, the sand beneath the feet, the streams of light) that Shi-shi-etko knows positions

Shi-shi-etko reminds us that we are all historical beings, whose language, repository of images, and social practices constitute both conscious and unconscious dimensions of our cultural heritages

the reader to accept that the "other" world will be its opposite.

Shi-shi-etko reminds us that we are all historical beings, whose language, repository of images, and social practices constitute both conscious and unconscious dimensions of our cultural heritages. Shi-shi-etko and her family harbour the fear that she might forget her cultural heritage: a fear that is a very real possibility as she moves into the dominant culture. As Clare Bradford notes, "complexity and hybridity are foregrounded in works dealing with identities formed between and among indigenous and non-indigenous peoples" (219). Children who have lost their cultural heritage through processes of migration might find themselves without the traditional supports that I first mentioned at the beginning of this essay. Like the post-traditional characters in all of the other texts, Shi-shi-etko draws on a wide repertoire of cultural, symbolic, and linguistic systems of meaning for identity formation. The artifacts that *Shi-shi-etko* collects will provide her with prompts for the biographical narratives that will enable her to integrate past, present, and future.

The Red Sash opens in a similar manner to *Shi-shi-etko*, at the dawn of a new day. The story is set in the early 1800s, when British North America relied on the trade in furs as a key economic feature of its colonial powers. The unnamed young Métis boy who serves as narrator takes the reader through the activities that occur over one day and night. It is the time of the *rendezvous*, when the voyageurs return from their hunting and trading throughout the winter in the North American wilderness to the trading post of Fort William, at the head of the Great Lakes. It will be a night of dancing, storytelling, and feasting, as families will be reunited and the representatives of the North West Company in Montreal will be bringing fresh trading supplies for the voyageurs to take on their next journey. The reader is given a tour of the fort through a series of visual and narrative vignettes and becomes witness to the daily work

of the people who live there. The middle-distant illustrations are controlled images that capture a frozen moment of activity (hammering at the anvil, chopping a log, drawing water from a well), and as such become overwhelmed by the double-page spreads that follow, showing the vastness of the river and great sea. It is here in the sea that "real" action occurs, and heroic masculinity is given space to flex its muscles. As the voyageurs battle high, storm-infused waves, the close-up illustrations give a sense of the fear, determination, and strength displayed in the faces and bodies of the men. The illustrations contrast the mundaneness of life at the fort with the dangerous and exciting adventures that a voyageur's life offers.

The boy, his mother, and sister live on the Native encampment across the river and need to paddle their canoe to reach the fort. The boy's father is "a guide in a canot du nord." It is not clear from the text or illustration if the father is Métis or European, but, like many voyageurs and North West Company partners, he has married a Native woman. The young boy aspires to be a voyageur just like his father and wear the coveted red sash of the voyageur. The boy's sense of the kind of man he will become is clearly mapped through his aspirations. The boy's destiny comes early, however, when his father gives him the coveted red sash as a reward for his heroic actions in saving one of the canoes during the storm. The final scene shows the young boy, with the red sash tied to his waist, "dancing" within the open space of the fort. This picture provides an interesting contrast to the opening illustration, where the boy awakes inside his wigwam/lodge, surrounded by women—mother, grandmother, sister, and baby. In the final illustration, depicting exterior (masculine) space, the boy becomes the man.

The peritexts of both *Shi-shi-etko* and *The Red Sash* give readers an historical context for the stories and as such serve as chronological markers of the changing Canadian national imaginary, particularly with respect to what constitutes "Canadian identity." In *Shi-shi-etko*, the Métis author explains how the story is grounded in historical fact, as many native children were removed from their families and placed in Indian Residential Schools, where they were forced to speak English, and were not able to see their parents "for many months or even years." In *The Red Sash*, the author's ethnic background is not supplied but we are told that she "wrote this book because of her involvement at the historic site of Fort William" (book jacket blurb). As fictions, they call on the imaginary to bring life to a story, yet both have a basis in the real. While both texts use Native-child focalizers, cultural difference

and implied colonial power in *Shi-shi-etko* are conveyed through Aboriginal eyes, whereas, in *The Red Sash*, the Métis boy's words convey a strong desire for, and unquestioning service to, colonial power; for example, the boy aspires to be a voyageur and does not question the impact of trading and hunting on Native peoples or the segregation of housing between the fort dwellers and the Native peoples. Was life in the trading post really so harmonious? If so, then how were human rights negotiated across the structures of colonial power that formed this mini-society, controlled by protocapitalism and a racially-grounded colonial difference? While such questions are not necessarily ones that the picture book needs to engage with, they are questions that adults can raise as they mediate texts like these with children. Not to raise them could be seen as perpetuating silences surrounding a significant time in Canadian history, when the nation was enjoying extensive trading links and consolidating its national identity. The illustrations of fort life in *The Red Sash* do not show characters' faces in close-up, or with clearly expressive features. Rather, bodies appear as doll-like museum pieces, and, in this sense, will be familiar to many children who have visited similar forts across Canada, with their historical re-enactments and working exhibits. The illustrations do not betray the particularities of place, as the physical geography is uncompromisingly Canada, and the inclusion of topographical maps on the endpapers reinforces location and underscores the local, national identity.

The mediating presence of adults is most apparent in another picture book, *Tales of the Monkey King*, retold by Benjamin Santamaria and illustrated by Brian Deines. The introductory second-person address, presumably by the author, frames the story:

> In my city—as perhaps in yours—many sad and abandoned children exist. . . . It was once my privilege to share some time with *los chavos de la calle*, the street children of Mexico City.

The story proceeds in a first-person address as the adult narrator relates his first encounter with a group of street children living in a noisy, crowded shelter in Mexico City. As a way of "freeing such children from suffering," he relates the tales of the Monkey King: a series of short stories that tell of the Monkey King's bravery and determination to survive and cheat the King of Death. At the book's close, the narrator affirms his belief that the Monkey King would serve these children as an example of one who never succumbs to defeat and self-doubt. When a child asks, "Did the Monkey King really conquer Death?" the narrator replies,

Tales of the Monkey King invites readers to think about homelessness as a doubly negative concept that speaks of no-place and no-belonging, a visible and an invisible aspect of urban spaces across many cultures.

"Oh, yes, he did," and "He knew life was precious and he fought to stay alive against all odds. He was very much like you." This implicit belief in the power of story to empower and inspire brings to the fore the large and essential component of human life that is imaginary. Through its intercultural mixing—a story originally from China is retold to children living on the streets in Mexico—the narrative is framed by the peritext of the dust jacket, which takes on an almost New Age inflexion in stating that the story speaks "to the hero in everyone" (*Mr Perfect* embodies a similar urging). Deines's dynamic oil paintings support this message by portraying the Monkey King in a series of climactic and sensational scenes befitting an heroic romance, with screaming, teeth-baring demons; sword battles; and fiery, wild-eyed Judges of Death.

Tales of the Monkey King attempts to create an awareness of the dislocated lives of some children who are without a family and who must learn to survive through individual or collective strength and resourcefulness. Interestingly, children appear only in the penultimate illustration, when, through the gap of an open window, the reader is given a glimpse of some children lying on beds in a room, with an adult male standing among them as they settle for sleep. *Tales of the Monkey King* invites readers to think about homelessness as a doubly negative concept that speaks of no-place and no-belonging, a visible and an invisible aspect of urban spaces across many cultures. It also draws attention to homelessness as including children. For many readers, whether from Canada or elsewhere, this multiply-laden concept might encourage reflection on their own senses of place, identity, and belonging. The image of the partially-opened window provides readers with a glimpse into an internal sleeping space where the children who are the narrator's audience settle for sleep. The interiority and communality of this scene has paradoxical effects. On one hand, it encourages a global intersubjectivity as the presumably "homeless" children are homed and

are represented as a community. On the other, it confirms the outsider status of homeless children as not having the assumed comforts and familial bonds that might be attributed to the implied audience of mainstream readers.

The remaining picture books script a different world from the one that *Tales of the Monkey King* foregrounds. Here, we encounter imaginative stories about predominantly white, mainstream children, families, and communities, who come to understand the importance of kindness and friendship. Collectively, they can be seen as working toward a humanitarian imaginary that envisions a world of harmonious human co-existence. In particular, by showing the human potential for affecting and being affected by each other, they blur the real/imaginary distinction.

The use of a possessive pronoun in the title of *My Sister Gracie*, by Gillian Johnson, suggests both ownership and belonging in a sibling relationship, but this statement and realization come at the end of the story. Fabio is depicted as a pampered poodle who lives in a nuclear family, yet despite having it all—"A bone to chew, a rubber ball / A teddy bear, a leafy tree, / A furry rug, a family"—he is miserable. The family decides that he needs "a brother." An excited Fabio brags to all the neighbourhood dogs that he is getting a brother. The excitement is short-lived, however, because the family brings home Gracie—an overweight and extremely unattractive female dog from the pound. To make matters worse, Gracie is not only a big lump of a dog but one who prefers a sedentary lifestyle, and so shatters Fabio's dreams of having a dog to play with. Fabio's epiphany comes after he has told Gracie to go back to the pound and the neighbourhood dogs engage in a name-calling spree, making the good-natured Gracie cry. Fabio jumps to her defence and defiantly tells the other dogs, "She may not chew / My bone or ball, / But she's my sister / After all." Despite the unfortunate gender stereotyping that establishes a traditional false binary between active masculinity and passive femininity, the sparse but expressive line drawings with a pastel colour wash give a lighthearted appeal to this amusing but instructive tale about individuals being accepted for who they are (no matter how unattractive they may be; yet, reinforcing ideas about what is unattractive), and about the notion that "family" does not necessarily need blood ties to create bonds between its members.

A similar sense of learning to accept those who do not measure up to one's sense of an ideal family is taken up in *Ben's Big Dig*, by Daniel Wakeman and Dirk van Stralen. This picture book, designed like a graphic novel without words, tells, through a series of digitally-enhanced, colourful

images, a story of a young boy who is taken by (presumably) his mother to spend time with his grandmother in the country. It is clear from the beginning that the boy is not keen on this idea. Pictorially, the grandmother is stereotyped as an aged, bespectacled, grey haired, homely woman, who is also an expert pie maker, albeit a compulsive one. Pies literally pile up around the kitchen. When the boy heads off to bed, with a slice of pie in hand, he notices in the bedroom an old black-and-white photograph of a young man (possibly his father or grandfather), another old photograph of a group of miners, and a globe. These objects inspire him to embark on a nighttime adventure. Tunnelling his way underground and underwater, he emerges atop a volcanic burst of water, outside his grandmother's house. The quick-thinking grandmother hurls her many pies in an attempt to soak up the water and bring her grandson back to the ground. The boring holiday has turned into a bizarre adventure, complete with a small backyard pond filled with various sea creatures. The final image is a black-and-white photograph of the boy, the grandmother, and a miner-hatted octopus sharing slices of the last remaining pie. The photograph is held by an adult hand and perhaps serves as a memento of an amazing family incident. The few black-and-white photographs scattered throughout the interior domestic scenes serve as realistic counterpoints to an otherwise bizarre and colourful adventure, and draw attention to a family's untold history. In this sense, one can draw a connection with Shi-shi-etko's bag of memories, as the illustrations of old family photographs appear to chronicle significant events/people in the grandmother's life: her wedding day, her husband, her child, and the adult miner. The cryptic nature of the story, through its counterpointing of realistic and surrealistic images, invites speculation on the part of the reader about this family's past and future. Despite the book's contemporary, computerized format, its visual story confirms the importance of family and belonging, and the significance of traditional modes of intergenerational support for children. On the dust-jacket blurb, the illustrator (van Stralen) exhorts the implied child readers to "tell the story to their parents, in addition to the other way round." Thus, by expressing this desire for the reading of this picture book as a family activity, the book's theme of the importance of family and intergenerational sharing is reinforced.

The eccentricity of Ben's pie-making grandmother is a characteristic ascribed to other older women who are the subject of interest in Bregoli's *The Goat Lady; The Bone Talker*, by Shelley A. Leedahl and Bill Slavin; and *Aunt Olga's Christmas Postcards*, by Kevin Major

This story valorizes the importance of ordinary people who together comprise a community, and, by extension, a nation. While, individually, they may appear unremarkable, it is when their generous story mementoes are stitched together that the parts metaphorically form the landscape, providing Canadian readers, at least, with a familiar motif of the Canadian mosaic.

and Bruce Roberts. Collectively, these women are portrayed as kind, eccentric, and ultimately other-regarding individuals. The goat lady, a proud Canadian citizen, introduces herself to the young narrator: "I am Noelie Lemire Houle, French Canadian, born in 1899." This story, which has its basis in fact, tells of how the goat lady cares for numerous goats on her small property, much to the annoyance of neighbours. She lives a simple life with old technologies—a radio, an old-fashioned washing machine—and entertains the young narrator and her brother with stories of her past. She also gives goats to an international aid organization. When the narrator's mother paints a series of portraits of the goat lady, which are subsequently exhibited in the local gallery, a renewed sense of community spirit and affection for the old lady is engendered, as the portraits are testimony to this woman and her life's work. The photorealist portraitures add an authenticity to the subject, and her difference (eccentricity) is both erased and legitimated in this exhibition of the portrait in the public gallery.

The old lady who is "the bone talker" (because of her unusual habit of talking to her old creaking bones) has lost the desire to live. After many failed attempts by concerned neighbours and her husband to cheer her up, a young girl gives her a piece of cloth, which sparks her into action, stitching a patchwork cloth. People from near and far contribute pieces of cloth, each with its own memory, and the old lady continues to sew until her cloth is so vast that she is able to spread it across the land, with the result that " . . . if you fly through the prairie sky on a clear blue day and look way, way down, you'll see the old

woman's work stretch right across the land." The heavily textured illustrations by Bill Slavin produce an affinity between the homely, good-natured subjects and the cultivated "patchwork" landscape through the use of similar rich earth colours. Both representations of the topography and the idyllic community suggest enduring order and value. This story valorizes the importance of ordinary people who together comprise a community, and, by extension, a nation. While, individually, they may appear unremarkable, it is when their generous story mementoes are stitched together that the parts metaphorically form the landscape, providing Canadian readers, at least, with a familiar motif of the Canadian mosaic. Ultimately, it is a cultivated landscape that clearly speaks of the people who transformed its surface, signifying a relationship between identity and territory.

In the final picture book, Aunt Olga shares her collection of old Christmas postcards and the memories associated with them with her young niece. By the end of a day full of poetry writing, postcard viewing, and stories of times past, Aunt Olga bequeaths her collection to the young niece as part of the legacy of this family's history. The whimsical line drawings of Aunt Olga and niece complement the ornate and detailed watercolours of the historical postcards from the author's personal collection. Together, they appear to celebrate both an idealized, picturesque forgotten past and the vibrant energy and informality of the present.

These three picture books are fitting ones with which to conclude, as each draws attention to the importance of home, community, and intergenerational friendships. As many of the preceding picture books have suggested, modern environments and experiences cut across geographical and ethnic boundaries; yet, even in those books that appear to be most global in their narrative reach, there is a sense of a search for ontological security, for the confidence in securing or maintaining a self-identity and a constancy of place. This approach seems at odds with the features that have contributed to post-traditional societies, namely, the processes of globalization, proliferation of information and communication technologies, and mass human migration. As Zygmunt Bauman and Anthony Giddens have argued, these features continue to erase or weaken geographical and cultural boundaries, as the notion of "identity" begins to give way to more global, fluid, and hybrid formations. Perhaps because of the uncertainty and flux of our changing times, the picture books in this selection attempt to offer young readers some security through narratives that imagine traditional notions of identity, community, and historical

memory as enduring and fixed components of childhood. Alternatively, these texts might simply suggest something that Anthony Giddens also reminds us of, and that is that every generation must necessarily reinvent tradition for itself (*The Consequences*).

Works Cited

Bauman, Zygmunt. "Zygmunt Bauman: Liquid Sociality." *The Future of Social Theory*. Ed. Nicholas Gane. London: Continuum, 2004. 17–46.

Bradford, Clare. *Reading Race*. Carlton South, Vic.: Melbourne UP, 2001.

Giddens, Anthony. *The Consequences of Modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1990.

Giddens, Anthony. *Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping our Lives*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

Kerry Mallan is a Professor in the School of Cultural and Language Studies, Queensland University of Technology, Australia. She has published widely in children's literature and youth studies. Her most recent publication (with Clare Bradford, John Stephens, and Robyn McCallum) is *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature* (Palgrave, 2008).