

Pictorial and Narrative Realism

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Mary of Mile 18, Ann Blades, Tundra, 1971. Unpaged (32 pp) cloth.
A Boy of Taché, Ann Blades. Tundra, 1973. Unpaged (40 pp) \$5.95 cloth.

Children fortunate enough to have been given Ann Blades' *Mary of Mile 18* and *A Boy of Taché* have acquired gifts that will both give pleasure and increase in value: I have little doubt that first editions of these two books will be valuable collector's items someday. Both of them, milestones in the production of quality Canadian children's literature, herald what I hope will be a unique contribution by Canada to the international body of children's literature--the contemporary realistic ethnic story. But more about that later. The best news is that Ann Blades, whose youthful work *Mary of Mile 18* received much attention as winner of the Book of the Year Award, has increased her reputation as a truly gifted author and primitive artist in *A Boy of Taché*, and the public can only hope that she will give us more books of the same calibre.

Most librarians, teachers, and people interested in Canadian children's books know *Mary of Mile 18* and the story of its genesis: how its author created the plainly spoken, beautifully illustrated record of her experience with the children and scenery in that small Mennonite farming community in northern British Columbia so that her students would have a story about themselves. The plot is simple: little Mary Fehr, one of the several children of a kind but unsentimental homesteader, finds a puppy; her father voices the practical pioneer attitude that "our animals must work for us or give us food." Her acceptance of her father's austerity makes highly poignant the pup's proving himself useful and Mary's subsequent joy when her father permits her to keep him.

Mary of Mile 18 is much more than plot, however. The text conveys extremely well the detail and quality of Mary's life through descriptive phrase and understatement. We are presented with details of living in cramped, primitive quarters where one goes into sub-zero weather to the outhouse and where one brings in snow to melt for water; we also see that the warmth of the woodburning stove and the smell of baking bread offset these hardships. We are given insight into that paradoxical loneliness and isolation which a sensitive child in a large family often experiences. And we find ourselves being led to feel compassion for a gruff, inarticulate father once Mary's mother explains to her, "Your father gives you everything he can. When you ask for more, it hurts him to refuse. That is why he gets angry."

The story's major artistic tension is symbolized by the cold, unfriendly, flashing Northern lights of the first page which serve as contrast to the warmth within a loving and lonely child's heart as she finally snuggles into bed with her new pet at the end of the story. Each symbol is beautifully illustrated by Blade's full page paintings of Mary, her family, the community, and the natural scenery.

A Boy of Taché, written about Ann Blades' experiences teaching the following year in the Indian reserve of Taché in northern British Columbia, has received less attention to date. This is unfortunate, I think, because it is as good--if not better--as an artistic production.

The book's design is similar to *Mary of Mile 18*: large multicolor primitive paintings accompany each page of her text. However, an elementary school librarian has pointed out one possible difficulty caused by the format: because it uses the picture book format like *Mary of Mile 18*, it will normally be shelved in the picture book section, yet the story--which is printed in much smaller type, incidentally--is more appropriate for intermediate level children because of its level of complexity. The teacher-librarian should be aware of this potential problem so that she will call the book to the attention of the older students who will enjoy it.

Children do not readily notice those literary techniques which give a work depth and power, but they are quite susceptible to their effects. The story of *A Boy of Taché* communicates with the reader on many verbal levels, both literal and symbolic, as well as visually through the illustrations whose rich colours present the seasonal cycles which figure so prominently in the work. The story itself is built on the simple, classic theme of a young boy achieving maturity, but the action is set within cycles of seasons and climatic forces which orchestrate human activity. When the story begins on a spring morning, Charlie, a young Indian boy of Taché, excitedly watches the past winter's ice break up. As it does, he and his grandparents, Za and Virginia, go through the spring ritual of preparing boats and supplies for the journey to northern trapping grounds. Once they begin the trip north, Blades skillfully begins to foreshadow themes which are later developed: passing one settlement, Charlie remembers that an old man of Tache was taken ill suddenly last year and died before a plane could come to take him to a hospital. We watch Charlie and his grandparents pass a construction camp of men who are clearing a track for a railroad; we hear Charlie reflect upon his father's occupation, that of being a guide to the hunters and fishermen who come here in spring, summer, and fall; finally, we see Charlie and Za watch a beautiful, powerful eagle circling in freedom overhead. "Not many left now," says Za. "Long ago he was all over. Now we see one, maybe two." Yes, there is an ironic undercurrent: as railroads and civilization encroach, nature and a way of life will die. But these reflections are subtly understated by Miss Blades; the focus of the story is on Charlie's growth into a man. With frightening speed, Charlie's grandfather Za catches a "cold-sick" which develops into pneumonia. Rushing against time, but mature enough to realize that haste may result in incapacitating his motor boat in the river, Charlie goes to get help for the rapidly weakening Za. Supporting the text, the last illustration shows two people, Charlie and an older man, watching the rescue plane carrying Za to a hospital; the airplane is flying West, into a glorious sunset. The white-haired friend reassures Charlie, "Za will get better...He never gives up. But this will be his last trip. You will hunt and trap for Za and Virginia now." Though Za will recover from this illness, the story contains his metaphorical death: the winter-spring cycle is complete, and Charlie, through his involvement in the cycle, has been born into manhood.

We feel relief that the grandfather will recover, yet joy that Charlie has grown to replace him. Likewise, we are strangely suspended between relief that the white man's hospitals are there and regret that progress is encroaching upon the natural world to which these Indians are so well attuned and which has so much meaning to them. (If we have missed the point, the editor's postscript tells us that the 1600 Indians in Taché in the 1880's have dwindled to a mere 300 in 1969.) Truly Charlie has grown to manhood, and we see that the Indian way is passing into the sunset along with Charlie's grandfather. The story is remarkable because, while it operates on so many levels, it is at the same time so simple. I loved it, and so did my six and nine-year-old children, both girls, when I read it to them.

Each of these Ann Blades' books is representative of what I hope will become one of Canada's strengths: the contemporary realistic ethnic story. Canada, because of her mosaic-like composition, is in a remarkable position to create a vital and distinctive children's literature of this type--stories which give a perceptive insider's presentation of the quality of human life within one of the specific cultural traditions of contemporary Canada.

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