

# Annuals—An Enduring Tradition Despite TV

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*Canadian Children's Annual*, ed. Robert F. Nielsen. Potlatch Publications, Hamilton, 1977. 178 pp. \$4.95 paper.

*Superbook*, Children's Writers & Illustrators Workshop, ed. Terry & Mary Fletcher. Castell Publications (distributed by Clarke, Irwin & Co.), 1977. 128 pp. \$5.95 paper.

Despite their name, children's *annuals* deserve the term *perennial*: stories change, subject matter strives hard to be current, but the formulas remain the same. The very similarities in the two texts noted above go a long way to demonstrate that the appeal of books of this type is similar to a youngster's version of *Reader's Digest*. Each is a predictable blend of short informational articles, adventure fiction, puzzles, cartoons, biographies and "how-to-do-it" items, all of which alternates every few pages to emphasize variety rather than depth. Both have more appeal for a dentist's waiting room or a fifteen-minute detention than for the basis of considered work on any topic. Although there are many similarities between the two books, they do differ in quality.

*Superbook* costs a dollar more than the *Canadian Children's Annual*, is fifty pages shorter and is deficient in almost all of the categories of design, content, subject matter and organization. Its lack of originality is most obvious in the comparisons of puzzles and games, though the presentation and construction of stories and articles shows the writers' lack of ability as well. I have the strong impression that the eleven members of the "Children's Writers & Illustrators Workshop" named on page two have reached a limit in exploring the Sesame Street theme without accruing any benefits from the use of a format familiar to children. There is no evident series of symbols linking the poor illustrations to the poor photographs by the poor verbal expression. Type faces are closer to commercial production convenience than to the bolder, sanserif types familiar to young readers. Detail in an article like "Real-life Giants" is almost unreadable; layout has been done as photowork at a level unacceptable to standards in general publishing. It may be possible that the editors sought a format suggesting that the design was done by an age group the same as the potential readers, but

there is no consistency throughout the work. Some drawings are obviously by children, some by poor adult illustrators, a few are cribs of TV personalities. All suffer, whatever their own limitations, from bad photography—the pictures on page fifty-five are almost indecipherable although the subject is “Make your own animated movie”! Garish blues and reds attempt to pass for colour throughout. The result is a kind of mixed effect as though several aging comic book artists replaced each other in the preparation of a low-budget production with no theme and little direction. The overall production suggests that the authors had unimaginative editorial direction and severe budget restrictions.

There is little content which raises the book above its form. The articles are written to formula, are seldom informative or interesting, and at every turn the reader senses an urge for the current and the sensational: “C.B.” and “Scifi” dominate in articles like “The Music-Eater” and “Hey there, Good Buddy”. In humour the answer to “What did the Jewish rabbi say to the Pope in the sauna bath?” turns out to be “Shalom. Ma schlomcha”. Even in the context of how to say “Hello” in several languages this still doesn’t make much sense. The book supposedly aims at “internationalism”. Is there enough “Canadian content” in “What did the Japanese camera say to the CN Tower?” or in Professor Baloney’s search for the Sasquatch? Will Québécois be pleased with the caricature of “Pierre” whose dialogue matches his morals: *i.e.* he decides to cheat when he fails to win the lottery and he says: “Oh non! I ’ave lost again! ’Ow will I ever make ze money to buy zis land from ze bank?” As the sign says: “Somezing Abominable”.

Although there are biographies of females, heroes predominate, from the shooting of wolves to the rescuing of scantily furred Diane from the halitosis of the space monster. Jules Verne, the race for the South Pole, the first comic olympics, cave drawings and the recipe for rock stardom—all show that the male *does* and the female *suffers in silence*.

The publicity release says that *Superbook* has “filled the gap in contemporary books for readers from ages 8 to 15 and the concept of a co-operative production such as this is both entertaining and original”. I find it difficult to believe that the majority of topics in this anthology could have much appeal to youngsters in their mid-teens. The CW&I Workshop is trading here on the good effects achieved by publishers and child-interest groups whose consistent work has revolutionized our ways of looking at, teaching and writing for the young. This text is an unimaginative approach to publishing for children; the only gap I can envisage it filling is as a kind of written substitute for the television

programming which has done much to produce a generation of non-readers by giving them material which provokes neither response nor reflection.

The *Canadian Children's Annual* has been developed on many of the same premises as *Superbook*; both aim at a mass audience and seek wide distribution. Both are composed of short articles on a wide range of subjects of contemporary interest; both presume that the young reader will seldom seek extensive additional information—that is, will use the subject matter for much more than entertainment. Both rely heavily on photographs, cartoons and illustrations to break the pages of print and to act as supplements to the narrative. Neither has an “informing theme” or recurring motifs to link the various subjects. Here, however, the obvious similarities end. *CCA* provides almost half again as much material for five-sixths of the cost and comes close to being a book bargain. It is amply illustrated with very good photography and reproduction; pictures of the Concorde match good commentary about the plane's development and performance to convey a real sense of its place in aviation history. Ken Danby's “Guelph Carousel” as cover is both topical and fascinating and the wall-poster included in the back makes an excellent reminder of the book. “Emily Carr: The Valiant Rebel” is probably the best example of the blending of text and illustrations. The reproductions of “Big Raven”, “Reforestation” and “Haida Village” give a sense of her work and the biography relates them to the development of her art. It's hard to imagine a subject with greater teacher appeal—a justly renowned female Canadian artist with an interesting background in the wilds of British Columbia! When one compares this with the pallid “Dawn of the Mohawks” of *Superbook*, the contrast is only too obvious.

*CCA* makes few concessions to children's alleged dependence on television. Rather, it deals from publisher's strengths; illustrations like “La Belle Et La Laide” aren't as good as the Tenniels they may be seeking to imitate, but they require the search for detail and lingering consideration which are anathema to the electric eye. The text makes no concessions for the “Ya know, like . . .” reader, while the author, in crediting her sources, shows interested youngsters where to find more of the same should they wish it. “The Outsiders” and “The Mirror of Angelus” are illustrated “Flash Gordon” comics, but the latter at least has a sophisticated moral and motive behind the decisions of its hero. Several of the stories seem designed to prepare readers for the wiles of *Cosmopolitan* or the *Ladies' Home Journal* but these revered institutions will have to change their stock in trade slightly to allow for increased expectations, even in the areas of sentiment and nostalgia; the *CCA* heroines don't wander the prairie aimlessly; in fact, “Sweet Babby's” subject is a seventy-year-old harridan who speaks alternately

in words of seventeen and four letters. One can see why she'd be appealing to long-suffering nieces in their early teens.

Motifs of companionship, the out-of-doors, the wonders of science, and the problems of having parents mark the "annual" formula. Puzzle-games like "Cities and Towns of Canada" and "Canadian Firsts: Do You Know Them?" show that nationalism can be imaginative and fun; and "Homophonic Syllables" and "Ladder Words" are designed for the same intellect as much of the advanced vocabulary in the stories. "How Archaeologists Write History" has as its setting Grimsby, Ontario, and the local details illustrate an interesting subject as naturally as references to better-known Stonehenge would. On a more universal theme, four ways of looking at tongues combine as physiology, (complete with the anatomical names for muscles), poetry, anthropology and language consider how tongues work, how they have been seen in various cultures, how our language has developed figures of speech about tongues, and how they differ. Are you one in ten who has the inherited trait of being able to make yours curl into a funnel? Say "Toy boat" six times rapidly.

The "trendiness" of this kind of book is apparent in subject titles; "Do you read me? Over!" is the same kind of C.B. article as in *Superbook*, but here the theory and development of the technology is explained and the various regulating agencies governing its use in Canada are outlined. The *CCA* article avoids the rather questionable terminology of *Superbook* and the differences of layout and design are particularly obvious here. "The Painted Caves of Altamira" and "King-sized People" compare so closely with *Superbook's* "The Stain" and "Real-life Giants" that the possibility that *CCA* had a preview of the competition and then decided to research the material and write it well entered my mind.

In conclusion, the *Canadian Children's Annual* is a good example of writing for young teens which makes no concessions to the poor or sloppy reader and no apologies for not being a television set. It is well researched, well illustrated and well written; it has a decidedly Canadian bias, as its title indicates; it is balanced in its portrayals of both sexes and has a wide range of current, informative articles, poetry, short fiction and project-games. Its only demand is that the reader respect the subject. Well constructed, and occasionally lavish in its layout, it would seem to provide an excellent source for browsing, and for situations where short topics and variety are benefits. Its price is moderate for the wealth of material it provides and, if we can believe its publisher, it is now selling more than fifty thousand copies a year—That's a lot of delighted nieces and nephews of Canadian aunts and uncles!

Scholastic-Tab has been responsible for some of the introductory

marketing of the *Annual*, as well as for the new "Magook" series, now on display in better supermarkets everywhere. In so far as co-operative sales techniques have assisted these productions, good for the publishers; in so far as the *Annuals* are fine children's books in their own right, good for the books themselves! Books of this kind are part of a tradition because the formulas they use, the subjects they consider, and the lengths and ways they employ to present their material, appeal to a wide range of readers. I would suspect that a book's successes lie more in a knowledge of what readers have enjoyed over a long time than in any "new or original" configurations derived from television or anywhere else.

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