

(Editor's Note) *We asked Professor P.B. Waite, author of John A. Macdonald (Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1976) (reviewed in this issue, p. 106) to comment on the problems and challenges of writing history for young readers. This is his reply:*

## Language and Lettuces

P.B. WAITE

Lettuces are soporific. So Beatrix Potter begins her story of *The Flopsy Bunnies* (ca. 1901.) That remarkable proposition she presents without a blush. There it is; we can take it or leave it. Her assumption seems to have been that the little children of 1901 – and *The Flopsy Bunnies* was and is for very little children – could learn what soporific meant, and the present was none too soon. She obligingly added, “*I have never felt sleepy after eating lettuces; but then I am not a rabbit.*”

Without some such principle of facing adulthood squarely, one might have risked a slide into Sir John Macdonald, with stories analogous to King Alfred and the burnt cakes, whisky added. With a character as diverse and salty, it might have worked; Macdonald could unbend easier than many men; it is fascinating to watch him from time to time disencumber himself of his essential greatness: but still, one did not want to make him into a conventional adolescent hero. Much better to admit one's unwillingness to write English down, and make Grade X – or whatever level it is that Fitzhenry and Whiteside are trying to reach – come instead to Macdonald.

So one assumed the major premise: that you could carry your reader with you; that somehow you could hook them with story, incident, language, humour, or all of that together. Neither you nor they know what can be done until it is tried. It is like taking a boy for a canoe trip, or a girl on a mountain climb: the challenge is there, and you put it to them in a way that makes them want to take it on. If so, they will dare anything.

Talk straight to them, as adults to potential adults. Assume they will understand you, as Beatrix Potter did. Don't be uselessly obscure, don't use big words where small ones will do better, don't write prose soggy with pedantry, devoid of rhythm and light. But and it is a mighty “but”, don't write down. Simply try to write well. If “soporific” has to be used, use it. No other word will quite do if that is needed. Don't omit complexities: unravel and explain them. It can be roundly asserted that children can rise to nearly anything.

All of this the editors at Fitzhenry and Whiteside accepted without actually saying so. They gave me virtually *carte blanche*. They altered little or nothing; they did not, as some editors might well have done, ask me to tone down the language to a level "more suitable". *World Book Encyclopaedia* tries to do just that, and the result is dreary, saltless, turbid stuff like Cream of Wheat. The new *American Academic Encyclopaedia* has hopefully reversed that awful trend of trying to write to a "Grade X" style.

For there ought to be no such thing as a Grade X style. The attempts at it are usually abominations, limp, pedestrian, slimy, with infinitives all unsplit, with sentences that never end with prepositions. For how can one learn to really understand the split infinitive without splitting them? One will find the rug pulled right out from under.

Let us, therefore, have soporific lettuces: if we can, we may be spared soporific sentences.

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