

# On Reviewing An Annual Offering

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There comes a time in every reviewer's career when the book that arrives in the mail turns out to be part of an established series. To some it is a reprieve from heaven, for when a publisher puts out new volumes on a regular basis, few reviewers are courageous enough to approach them in a truly critical spirit. Of course the contents must still be addressed and eventually assessed as a good or bad purchase; but the need to vindicate the book's right to a continued existence has been neatly removed.

To others, this heavenly reprieve is more like a poor joke in need of a punch line. What on earth can be said that won't seem redundant the second, the third, the fourth time around? What new insights can be added that will make the review (not to mention the reviewer) stand out? Worse, what assumptions have been established already that ought not be challenged in ignorance?

It is the reviewer's responsibility then to quicken his critical faculties and to subtly rephrase the usual questions so as to demand that a first impression be made anew. Imagine then that we have before us a copy of the *1982 Canadian Children's Annual*, and have agreed to view it afresh. The cover, whether cloth-bound or paper, carries a multicoloured whirl of children's faces, and the artist Arthur Shilling has included on the back a few words about his painting. We may wonder who Arthur Shilling is, but we take care not to wonder out loud. We begin to turn pages, are introduced to the editor and the art director, and smile fondly at the picture of Terry Fox, to whom this is dedicated. A table of contents comes next. Then . . . a story? Might we have missed a preface somewhere? More page turning ensues, but there is no preface, and there aren't even any appended biographical notes. Apprehension mounts. For all intents and purposes, we may be facing a collection of classroom assignments, and indeed that is how we might read a number of the stories.

But being a reviewer brings with it certain privileges, more specifically a number of xeroxed pages, prepared by the editor of the annual, which include a fact sheet and some guidelines for future writers. These explain that the annual is a "yearly collection of short stories, articles, poems and activities . . . [designed to] motivate children [ages 10-13]

to read and increase their knowledge and understanding". There have been seven previous editions, selling 300,000 plus and "making it one of Canada's all-time best-selling books". Accordingly, would-be writers are encouraged to develop short stories "with strong characterizations and vivid settings, and which explore relevant themes" and articles which have been "painstakingly researched, and which are written with precision and flair"; they are also "strongly advised to study at least one previous edition of the annual to ascertain our requirements".

Writers are counselled to keep up the standards of the past, reviewers are urged to remember those standards have been in effect for eight best-selling years, and all are left a little bewildered not knowing exactly what those standards were to begin with. We are not off to a good start.

In the lead story we meet a girl named Peggy who loses her ear to Old Emma when she forgets to keep her toque on; she graciously accepts one of Emma's in return. In a story we see Andrea destroying toys in a desperate bid for attention; her aunt and uncle finally quit giving her toys. Then along with Cathy we overhear her mother saying to her aunt, "She doesn't have to know she's adopted"; we may not see why Cathy immediately assumes herself to be the person in question.

These three young ladies are neither the best nor the worst of the characters that come our way. What is unsettling, though, is how completely devoid they are of some saving grace. Why, a ten-year-old might ask, should I care about Cathy, even if I too tend to jump to conclusions sometimes? And why, the thirteen-year-old will ask, should I identify with Andrea, when she breaks things as a way to gain mature status, even if I involve myself in similar displays of temper?

This even happens in "The Day the Town 'Almost' Stood Still", a mini-novel with plenty of room for development of sympathy. A good absorbing plot is at work here, but when we are told that "Frances Monroe was the thinker of the group, she [Susan] the feeler, Mike the athlete", then shown thereafter in every instance possible that type-casting continues, our concern for their welfare wanes considerably. Instead of drawing the child towards a new experience or revelation, all that is demonstrated is that as parameters are set, anticipation is dulled proportionately. At best, we could be wryly amused that this publication chooses by example to reinforce the inflated issues, overstated causes, and pre-confessed heroics of the "you just gotta understand" pre-adolescent, rather than to guide the child to other cathartic outlets.

We make a quick decision not to evaluate the illustrations, though it must be said they surely do break up the monotony of print. We pass

a number of poems and like one in particular, (about a retired witch who casts aside her spells yet whose reputation continues to haunt her.) We spend an absorbing 54 pages in the fact section learning about sunken treasure, the alphabet, Grey Owl and sand castle competitions, realizing that this miscellany of lore is perfect for the pick up/put down nature of the annual. Christie Harris' "The Ravens At the Tower of London" is a delight, and it is likely here that more of us begin to wonder why it could not have been reworked somehow into that faltering fiction section. Might this not be the prelude to our missing standard? Perhaps the time has come to leave off with probing relevance, and concentrate instead upon narrative quality.

There follow the inevitable comics and activities, just to show 'twas all in fun, and a large poster of a sasquatch. We've been entertained in a variety of formats. Perhaps this is what best satisfies a noncommittal public.

We emerge from our book, less impressed with the product than with the idea behind it. The sales in 1982 by now are guaranteed, and this edition is apt to enjoy a long and healthy shelf life; but has it earned that right? No doubt 1983 is already-in the works; in view of these shortcomings should we still plan to buy ahead and hope for the best?

We should always think twice before sending in an automatic order. But we cannot leave off without acknowledging that a wielded pen not only signs the purchase order, but also must in all fairness carry the weight of constructive criticism. And we can look forward to reviewing another annual next year, improved by having followed the criticism we here offer.

*Sue Easun is currently employed as buyer for the National Book Centre.*