

pathy; the moralist sacrifices story to moral; the writer of fiction tells a story which is a way of sharing experience. Mr. Brown finds a metaphor which makes experience accessible, and he rides it for everything it's worth. In *Superbike!* he, like his hero Neil Hackett, runs a very fine first race. *Qu' il continue!*

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Memories and Pictures of Pioneer Life

GWYNETH EVANS

Grandfather Symons' Homestead Book, R.D. Symons. Illus. Western Producer Prairie Books, 1981. 80 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 0-88833-082-0.

Kitimat My Valley, Elizabeth Anderson Varley. Northern Times Press, 1981. 228 pp. \$12.95 paper. ISBN 0-920390-03-X.

Grandfather Symons' Homestead Book is a recent addition to what seems to be becoming a distinctive and distinguished Canadian genre — the social history picture book. Evoking the experiences of childhood in a rugged, rural environment, books of such artists as Kurelek, Ann Blades and now R.D. Symons use both illustrations and descriptive text to give the reader vivid impressions of another way of life. The combination of paintings and text makes these books widely appealing; although Symons deliberately addresses himself to the generation of his grandchildren, the three dozen pictures and the information about prairie homesteading will interest readers of any age. Like Kurelek's *A Prairie Boy's Winter and Summer*, the *Homestead Book* depicts seasonal chores and fun on a prairie farm in the early years of this century. Symons' painting style is very different from that of Kurelek, but the format of the book is similar; a painting of a rural scene or activity is accompanied by a descriptive text on the page facing. Symons gives us three pictures and two anecdotes for each month of the year, then invites the reader to participate by providing an enticingly blank page

at the end of each section, with a few questions and suggestions as to what might be done on it.

This technique of drawing in the reader, by direct references to "you", is reminiscent of the school workbook, and there are a few uncomfortably didactic moments. (The jacket blurb is particularly heavy-handed: "Nothing is boring with Grandfather Symons around. If only learning were always this much fun!") The tolerant, friendly tone of the narrator, however, generally succeeds in creating the sense of an indulgent grandfather entertaining the young with descriptions of the olden days, and inviting their responses. "Have you ever seen bread made? What does it smell like? You could draw a picture of a supermarket if you like. What is a false-fronted building, do you suppose?" The narrator also gives a double perspective: while describing the old ways, he indicates an awareness that the modern child reader's life is probably very different, and he unobtrusively gives good, brief explanations of such processes as the workings of a grain elevator and how firewood was loaded onto a sleigh.

Unlike Kurelek and Ann Blades, Symons puts no particular emphasis on child-life on the homestead. Most of the tasks he describes are performed by adults or older teenagers. Like Blades' *A Boy of Taché*, however, the *Homestead Book*, stresses the bond between grandparents and grandchildren: older people are shown as active in the working life of the rural communities, and the reader is encouraged to find out more about his own grandparents' experiences and skills. The women's contribution is shown as important too, although a clear demarcation is made between men's work and women's work.

Writing about homesteads in the three prairie provinces, Symons chooses a different family in a different location for each of his anecdotes. We hear about the MacDonalds of Last Mountain Lake, the Smetaniuks of Kamsack, and the Michauds of Lesser Slave Lake, among many others, at least some of whom seem to have been real people. Because he is writing about many different families Symons loses the building interest and sympathy which come from concentrating on the experiences of a single family — Mary of Mile 18's hard-working Mennonite household, or the vicissitudes and joys of the young Kurelek. Symons' constant use of the titles "Grandfather" and "Grandmother," applied to a variety of different people, and single references to their offspring "Harry," "Annie," etc., are apt to confuse the young reader; ancestry and heritage are made important here, but figuring out kinship can be confusing at the best of times. A rather laborious introduction, better skipped, spells out what is more naturally and engagingly presented by the text itself: Western Canada was settled by people of several races and from many countries, among them, perhaps, your own great-grandparents.

R.D. Symons (1898-1973) was a homesteader himself, as well as an author and illustrator of books about the West. His paintings in this

book are in pleasant earth colours, with short, active lines suggesting life and movement. Although most depict some human activity — a farmer holding up his lantern to see newborn twin calves, boys skating on a frozen slough — the people and animals tend to blend in form and colour with the landscape. They lack the genius of Kurelek's work, but have considerable warmth and humour. "Supper for the threshing gang" shows the serving girl attracting the admiration of the young men: "Great-Grandfather's cousin, Ned Day, is trying to crack a joke with Lena and doesn't hear Great Grandma asking if he wants more coffee."

Grandfather Symons' Homestead Book has been handsomely produced by its publisher, Western Producer Prairie Books, which describes itself as "a unique publishing venture owned by a group of prairie farmers who are members of Saskatchewan Wheat Pool."

Elizabeth Anderson Varley's *Kitimat My Valley*, also published by a small regional press, is a very different sort of book, though like Symons' the interest of its text is complemented by a visual appeal — in this instance, many photographs of the northern British Columbia coast in the first decades of this century. Varley's parents were missionary schoolteachers in Kitimat, B.C., and among the first white people to settle in the area. Elizabeth, born in 1904, grew up on their ranch in the Kitimat Valley, and writes in this lengthy memoir about the experiences of her family as pioneers in this rugged, beautiful environment. The book was not especially intended for children, and its attention to dates and to recording the names of people who play no particular role in the memoirs would deter many young readers. But Varley writes with a clear and candid memory of her own childhood, and many of the characters and episodes she recalls from her early life are inherently fascinating.

Varley and her brother were solitary children, developing independent and adventuresome characters as well as practical skills from helping their parents with the work on their remote ranch. The events of everyday life were fraught with excitement and hazard. Varley describes how one year the family rowed for an hour across the river to Kitimat village to have Christmas dinner with friends, then rowed back again only to become marooned in the twilight on some mud flats. Their isolation on the ranch was relieved by many visitors — prospectors, surveyors, mission workers and others who would come by on their way inland to the Skeena. (A large map of the area would have been a helpful addition to the book.) The long-suffering Mrs. Anderson raised her children, managed a large garden and livestock, preserved food, did all the household washing by hand, and then went rowing for fun; when groups of ten or twenty visitors arrived unexpectedly, she promptly served them a large dinner — on a white damask tablecloth, what's more! Young Elizabeth's observation of the adult world around her was sensitive but sharp; she seems to have been very conscious of the

tensions and rivalries of the small, but rapidly growing, white community in Kitimat.

Although most of Varley's memoir is concerned with external events, and descriptions of places and people, she does give us glimpses into her inner life as a child.

As a child growing up on Kouwthpega Ranch, I never doubted in my childish mind for one second that I belonged there — that I belonged to my parents, to my family . . . And yet, I knew that the inner circle of my parents did not include everybody in the same way. There were those who fitted and those who did not fit. And those who fitted best with my parents were mostly those who were most foreign to *my* inner circle of being.

A free use of dialogue helps to give her narrative immediacy and an appeal beyond its specific interest as local history. Varley frequently interrupts or concludes her anecdotes with comments and reflections, particularly on the subject of ecology, what has happened to Kitimat since it became an industrial centre in the 1950s, and on the native people, for whom she and her parents evidently always had considerable respect. As in the Symons book, these passages are sometimes clumsy and obtrusive, particularly in the introduction. The reminiscences which are the true subject matter of both books are so compelling and well described that the reader might better be left to draw his or her own conclusions from them.

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All you Need Is Love?

JACQUIE HUNT

Mountain Rose, Patti Stren. Illus. by the author. Clarke, Irwin & Co. Ltd., 1982. 30 pp. \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 0-525-35228-7.

A theme, insistently threaded through Patti Stren's work, from the somewhat mawkish dedications to the resolutely happy endings, is the need for totally accepting, non-critical love. Certainly, this desire is one easily recognized and deeply shared by children, and the reassurance that it can be fulfilled gives Stren's books their appeal.