

# Childhood Experiences in Canada

CARLA NEWBOULD

*Paul of Porcupine*, Carl L. Hortie. Borealis Press, 1980. 135 pp. \$12.95 paper. ISBN 0-88887-085X.

*A Young Explorer from Brittany*, Gwendoline C. Oswald. Initiative Publishing House, Inc., 1978. 56 pp. \$7.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-88951-010-5.

The theme of adolescence provides a traditional feature of Canadian literature. So, too, does the theme of the vast North. Both feature prominently in two recent children's novels: Gwendoline Oswald's *A Young Explorer from Brittany* with these images in a historical context, and Carl Hortie's *Paul of Porcupine* in a more contemporary setting. The protagonist in each novel is a 14-year-old boy, with a 'young lad's love of life'. Both are optimistic and cheerful. Both are forced to face the rugged reality of Canadian life during harsh times.

In the course of *Paul of Porcupine*, a fictionalized account of Hortie's own youth during the 1930s northern Ontario mining community of Porcupine, the sensitive son of the local doctor undergoes a number of traumatic events: he is falsely accused of theft by the town's mean shopkeeper; he is unintentionally entangled in the activities of thieving gold miners with Montreal underworld connections; and finally, he must suffer through the deaths of his consumptive father and father-substitute, a loyal old French-Canadian hermit. Hortie tells his story with a sympathetic ear for teenage feelings. Paul's awkwardness, universal in the teenager, arouses sympathy and a vicarious sort of nostalgic understanding as, dressed quite unlike his peers in plus fours and heavy boots, he arrives alone at his first party:

All eyes on him, it was like a nightmare he once had where no matter how hard he tried, he was rooted to the spot and the locomotive was thundering down, the headlight eye pinning him to the centre of the railroad track.

Hortie's familiarity with the nature and landscape of his youth is evident throughout the story. The bond between Paul and his mentor, Mr. Paradise, is cemented by their mutual love of the Porcupine River and the Canadian Shield. Their meetings are celebrated by the keenness of Hortie's senses.

The sound of water flowing was everywhere; the muted deep bass of the river, the baritone of the creeks and the soprano of the

rivulets wove a symphony of music. The fecund smell of the skunk cabbage was sharp on the air, their spiky tips a flash of colour in the dark bogs.

His descriptions follow in the tradition of regional realism common in Canadian children's literature. Porcupine is another Cavendish harbouring a rich collection of characters. Yet the meticulous descriptions of marginal characters border on cliché. The reformed town floozy is not without cigarettes and red varnish. Villains, typically Irish, Polish or Italian, have a tendency to stilted, staccato "tough guy" outbursts. The dialogue, punctuated erratically, is too often forced and uncomfortable.

Although Hortie is a compelling storyteller, his plots lack smoothness. Today's young reader, reared on the "meanwhile back at the ranch" technique of television, might have little difficulty bridging the gap between the meeting of the scheming villains and a pair of beavers deftly fashioning a dam. I, on occasion, did. The unevenness in *Paul of Porcupine* is balanced, however, by the author's sincerity and his encouraging view of growing up.

The protagonist of *Young Explorer from Brittany* shares Paul's optimism. Luc is a 14-year-old from St. Malo whose father disappeared in New France. By way of tutelage from Father Jean-Joseph, a friend of Jacques Cartier, Luc is invited to accompany the explorer on his voyage to the new world. An uneventful crossing brings them to land near Ile d'Orléans where a trading post is established. Four months after arriving in New France, where he learned of his father's fate, Luc returns to St. Malo, resolving to study medicine in order to help scurvy-stricken sailors.

Oswald's goal is to engender in the study of Canadian history the excitement usually reserved for the exploits of current space explorers. It is not clear that she will succeed. *Young Explorer from Brittany* lacks spark. Luc is a sensitive, well-adjusted and well-liked individual given to musing about the marvels of Canadian nature, but the author fails to make him a real flesh and blood character. She does not succeed, for example, in making the reader appreciate the greatness of Cartier's achievement. The story lacks detail of the rigours of a voyage on a sixteenth century sailing ship. Setting out with only rudimentary maps and charts and a "long tube with specially ground lenses", Cartier's voyage was uncertain and dangerous. Much more could have been made of this. Instead, the sailors are "good natured men who did not mind having a boy on board". Storm at sea is encountered, but young readers should find more excitement than they get — a lacklustre account of the sailor's relief at its passing. In an appendix, the book includes excerpts of Cartier's own records; Oswald's own approach to the whole project is more reminiscent of Thomas McGee's trite:

In the seaport of St. Malo 'twas a smiling morn in May,  
When the Commodore Jacques Cartier to the westward sailed away.

Oswald is at her best in the descriptions of the two young Indians, Domagaya and Tiagnoagny, who accompanied Cartier back to France. Luc's observations provide a glimpse of the Indians' reactions when first confronted by the explorers. These detailed descriptions give a sense that Cartier's voyages to the great unknown were like Armstrong's "giant step for mankind". However, if the young reader wishes to know how it would have felt to have been there "in the afternoon of May 19 [when] anchors were weighed" he will not find out in *Young Explorer from Brittany*.

*Carla Newbould of Lethbridge, Alberta, taught English for seven years in high schools in Canada, England and Holland. She is currently a member of the Lethbridge Public Library Board.*

## The Mysterious East

*JETSKE SYBESMA-IRONSIDE and  
MURIEL WHITAKER*

*At Grandmother's House*, John Lim. Tundra Books, 1977. 32 pp. \$9.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-089-9.

*Merchants of the Mysterious East*, John Lim. Tundra Books, 1981. 32 pp. \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-130-5.

Born in Singapore and educated in the United States, John Lim is a Chinese artist who now lives in Toronto. His dual perspective — that of an Easterner living in the West — is apparent in two children's books for which he has provided both text and illustration. The adventures of the young Johnnie, though verbally prosaic, are depicted in an exotic manner. Stylization of form, use of flat colour, and slightly unusual treatment of pictorial space result in a refreshing illustrative style.

The texts are not so much stories as an adult's recollection of childhood acquaintances and family members who "made his boyhood such a beautiful and exciting time." *At Grandmother's House* follows