

All three books concern children grappling with primary emotions: Kelly expresses her individuality through her insistence on wearing red, Matthew in *Big or little?* wrestles with the contrasts between two feelings, while Tobo struggles to accept being “purple.” We all know how sensitive children are to feelings but what about thoughts? Children think as well as feel and, of course, all three children, here, think about red, big or little, and purple as well as feel about them. Couldn’t the authors, therefore, develop simple themes or fables that would help children to interpret their environment as well as feel it? Surely artists, whether writing and illustrating for children, adults, or both, have a responsibility to help us interpret and understand our world as well as to express our feelings. This is simply to say that while all three books are good, they could all be better, more complete in their treatments of human experience. **John Ferns** teaches Victorian and Canadian literature at McMaster University where he is Associate Professor of English and Associate Dean of Humanities (Studies). He has published a book on A.J.M. Smith.

CONVENTIONS AND DISTORTIONS IN HISTORICAL FICTION

The king’s daughter, Suzanne Martel. Translated by David Toby Homel and Margaret Rose. Illus. by Debi Perna. Douglas and McIntyre, Vancouver, 1980. 211 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-006-5.

In the chapter on historical fiction in her important study of Canadian children’s literature, Sheila Egoff pinpoints the weaknesses of our historical fiction for young people:

These books do recount an aspect of the past but they seldom recreate it. In paraphrasing Canada’s history, our writers fill their pages with irrelevancies and snippets of lore. They decide to parcel out so much history and so much narrative, and in doing so they usually weigh the parcel in favour of history. And how they love to teach it! Gratuitous dates and place-names abound, along with “how-to-do-it” information.¹

Suzanne Martel’s *The king’s daughter*, translated from the French *Jeanne, fille du roy*², avoids this particular pitfall. Concentrating on a footnote of history — the attempt by Louis XIV to populate New France in the 1670s by sending numbers of his wards, “the King’s daughters,” out as wives for the *habitants* — Martel has hit upon a theme with novelistic potential: How would a young French girl adapt to this harsh, new world, and to a husband more suited to this rustic environment than to the civilized one she had left behind?

In developing this theme, Martel gives her readers a feel for the society of New France, from its Indians to its “urban” nobility, for the way of life of the voyageur and the trapper, and for the joys and hardships of cabin life in the forest, with a minimum of historical facts or woodlore. Unfortunately, as

a novelist, her reach is beyond her grasp. Marred by implausibilities, anachronisms, and deficiencies in style and characterization, *The king's daughter* is a disappointing work.

The central character, Jeanne Chatel, is a French orphan raised first in an unorthodox manner by her poacher grandfather, and later by nuns who do their best to tame the wild creature, with only partial success. Jeanne's robust nature prepares her well for her life as a King's daughter in New France, a position demanding courage, resilience, resourcefulness, and physical stamina. There, she willingly allows her brusque, domineering husband, Simon de Rouville, to usurp the place of the hero of her adolescent fantasies, a young nobleman she had met twice as a child. But she also forces Simon to respect her independence, and ultimately resolves her suspicion that Simon sees her only as the shadow of his first wife, Aimée, killed in an Iroquois raid.

The latter conflict is unconvincingly presented. Why, when Simon's affection is clearly expressed (he murmurs, "Jeanne, Jeanne," into her hair upon his return from his first long trip), does the heroine persist in thinking, "It's Aimée he's coming back for" (p. 138). And why hadn't the misunderstanding been resolved even earlier, at Sorel, when Jeanne's outburst — "Go away. I hate you. I'm not Aimée and I never will be!" (p. 86) — inexplicably met with no response from Simon?

The theme of Jeanne's battle for independence is no more convincing. Although it is currently fashionable to apply a feminist veneer to the past, it is difficult to trust the period setting of a novel whose heroine spouts 1970s jargon like "the image of the weak, resourceless woman" (p. 142), "play the role" (pp. 125, 135, 169), and "typically masculine attitude" (pp. 78, 169). At times, Jeanne sounds like the subject of a *Ms.* feature:

Jeanne was surprised to see how unmarried women like Marguerite Bourgeoys [a nun and founder of the Congregation] and Jeanne Mance [founder of the first hospital in Ville-Marie] had succeeded in asserting themselves through their personal value, whereas married women seemed eternally destined to live in the shadow of their worthy husbands. She would have liked to know Simon's opinion on that subject. How would he accept his young wife's new spirit of emancipation?

He'll just have to get used to it, Jeanne decided resolutely. She wasn't playing any more roles. (pp. 168-169)

It may well be true, as we hear so often, that young readers need to encounter more models of independent women in their books, but it is less than honest to distort the past for propaganda purposes.

For a novel that rejects the conventional female role, *The king's daughter* is a prime example of conventional romance. A passage like the following could easily be mistaken for an excerpt from a Harlequin romance:

He whispered angrily, "You silly fool. Don't you even know how to walk down a flight of stairs?"

'I'm not a lady,' Jeanne protested, lowering her head.

An authoritative hand lifted her chin and domineering lips claimed her mouth. True to form, Simon kissed as impetuously as he mounted an offensive. (p. 91)

Elsewhere in *The king's daughter*, Jeanne feels herself "carried off in an iron grip" (p. 60), is "pressed against her husband's chest by imprisoning arms" (p. 89), or "trembles under his unending kiss" (p. 92).

Whatever the tone of the French original, this translation is overwritten. Sentences are overburdened with adjectives ("A conscientious teacher, she explained the mother partridge's clever trick to the fascinated children . . . and captivated them with her well-told story," p. 107), and far too frequently begin with adjectival phrases ("Pale with compassion, Jeanne helped as best she knew how," p. 33; "Happy with her success, she watched the children playing," p. 103).

Martel overwrites because she rightly mistrusts her characterization of Jeanne, who is too good to be true. We are reminded at least four times that our heroine is "energetic." There is nothing she cannot do, no skill she cannot master. Though she's never danced before, at her wedding ball

Jeanne was supple and agile and had a good sense of rhythm. She fell into step almost before she knew it . . . The new bride fairly flew in her partner's strong arms. (p. 58)

In no time flat, she becomes a peripatetic apothecary who can act as a midwife, set fractured bones, perform operations and sew up wounds.

In characterization and narration, Martel's tendency is to report rather than reveal. We are told that "the expert storyteller made mythology, ancient history and tales of chivalry live again" (p. 131), but don't see Jeanne telling stories to her children. When she dresses as a boy to renew her husband's trading permit in his absence, the account is entirely second-hand:

At Ville-Marie, the crafty boy played his role with confidence . . . he correctly answered the agent's questions concerning the quality of the fur skins, the types of traps and the demarcation of the hunting territory. (p. 168)

Martel is uneasy with her narrative powers, although when she applies them — describing Jeanne mistakenly dealing her husband a knockout blow with a frying pan, for example — her novel comes to life.

This translation is in turn inaccurate, excessively literal, or simply clumsy. Twice, "Louis XIV," which requires no translation, is given as "Louis fourteenth." When Simon credits himself with having unearthed a wife of Jeanne's calibre, her reaction — "Was there no limit to men's pretentiousness?" (p. 175)

— replaces *pretention* with its cognate, although it is of *presumptuousness* that Jeanne is complaining. Having fallen ill while observing Jeanne operate on a crushed leg, Simon explains, “But seeing you sewing with your white thread in *all that massacre* turned my stomach” (p. 142; emphasis added), an awkward rendering of “dans toute cette boucherie” (*Jeanne, fille du roy*, pp. 172-173).

Proofreading errors abound. I counted sixteen, mostly in spelling and punctuation (“Some people’s devotion is more useful that other’s,” p. 33; “it was not adverse to choking or crowding out its neighbours,” p. 107).

Many uncritical young readers, especially girls, will probably enjoy *The king’s daughter*, as they do other teenage romances. But it is not a work of literature. It is unfortunate that the dramatic potential of an inherently interesting historical situation was not better exploited for adolescent readers.

NOTES

¹ Sheila Egoff, *The republic of childhood: a critical guide to Canadian children’s literature in English*, 2nd. ed. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 98.

² Suzanne Martel, *Jeanne, fille du roy*. Collection du Goéland. (Montreal: Les Editions Fides, 1974).

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MARITIME GOTHIC

The ghost of Lunenburg Manor, Eric Wilson. Clarke, Irwin, 1981. 117 pp. \$10.95 paper. ISBN 0-7720-1323-3.

The first reaction of this hardened adult to these gothic adventures was to dismiss the book as unreviewable. A second reading revealed a considerable skill in plotting and a strong use of pastiche in the characterization. The author, a teacher from Nelson, B.C., who in earlier mysteries has taken the adventure-prone Tom Austen and his more cautious sister Liz from the Pacific to Toronto (skipping over their native Winnipeg), now sets the action in a stretch of Nova Scotia coastline rich in legends of pirates, shipwrecks, storms and apparitions. Many of these he weaves into his plot, either as spoof or as false clue. He uses Stevenson’s “Black Dog” as a misleading nickname for the “good guy” wrongly suspected of murdering Professor Zinck, descendant of an old Lunenburg family. Significantly, another suspect turns out to be a film director attempting to rent the Lunenburg Manor for shooting on location. With its genre-allusions, caricatures, tourist-film localities, and its obsequious dark-haired servant metamorphosed into a blond killer who explains his scheme in gangsterese to his boat load of victims bound for shipwreck but rescued by Black Dog in