

Belonging: new identities for Canadian immigrant children

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Northrop Frye once remarked, the "story of the loss and regaining of identity is, I think, the framework of all literature."¹ To know who we are, to discover that essential *me* as different from the rest of mankind, "unique in all the world,"² is certainly a landmark in anyone's development, and is especially important to a child's maturation process.

Children's literature abounds with instances of critical loss and regaining of identity. Alice, with her multiple changes in shape and her inability to remember what she has learned aboveground, finally wonders whether she is Ada or Mabel.³ Wilbur, in *Charlotte's Web*, thinks he can perform what spiders do and ends up sadly disillusioned.⁴ Anne of Green Gables, with her attempted escape into the identity of Cordelia, offers another variation on the theme.⁵

When we consider the terrifying experience of many immigrant children coming to a strange land, the problem of identity takes on special significance. No longer is the story simply that of a child relating to her guardians in rural Prince Edward Island, for example. The experience cuts deeply into the child's past, his cultural heritage, and his willingness to cope with the unknown. In many cases, the immigrant child's plight is similar to that of the more familiar figures in children's literature. We remember that Alice's identity crisis is followed immediately by a bout of loneliness.⁶ Loneliness in the midst of an unfamiliar world is just one characteristic of the little immigrant's experience as well. Others include fear, self-consciousness, embarrassment, ineptitude; and all lead to self-questioning and the ultimate decisions: to belong or not to belong. How does all this fit into recent Canadian children's literature?

It is easy to envision that, structurally, a story of immigration might be divided into three sections, roughly labelled: "old country"; "getting here"; "Canada." Rarely, however — especially in stories of contemporary new Canadians — are the three sections equally balanced. Barbara Smucker's *Days of Terror*, for example, spends over three-quarters of its 152 pages carefully building up details of Mennonite life and culture in Czarist Russia and during the first days of the Revolution.⁷ In this novel, the memories of the old country and its rich harvests, warm family celebrations, and love of working close to the rhythm of the seasons all shore up the ruins of the family's possessions upon arrival in Canada: a Kroeger clock, Aunt Lizzie's samovar, Grandfather Penner's en-

cyclopedias and Father's old German Bible.⁸ Each of these acts as a symbolic defiance against a terrifying and unknown future in Manitoba.⁹ The sense of belonging in Smucker's book is uniquely stated. In Russia, the Mennonites had lived apart and kept their own cultural and religious heritage; in Canada, however, they are warned by Grandfather Penner that "we will live among other Canadians. We must not withdraw from the native people as we have done in Russia."¹⁰ As a group, the Mennonites will integrate — and belong. We hear nothing of Peter's individual experience in this regard, as the novel ends with celebration and thanksgiving among family in Manitoba and hope for a future reunion with the long-lost brother Otto.¹¹

Belonging is also at the heart of three other historical novels, all of which provide interesting solutions to the problem of identity.

Set in the American Revolution, *Honor Bound*, by Mary Alice and John Downie, opens with a family reunion broken almost immediately by a midnight escape from Philadelphia toward Albany, where the family plans to meet Honor, the eldest daughter.¹² The adventures leading to arrival in Canada are amply exciting, but the true test of everyone's stamina comes when they must proceed to "Grimble's Plot," a no-man's land in the wilds to the west of Cataragui (Kingston). Upon setting out, the son, exhausted and disillusioned, experiences an unusual sensation: "Despite the bustling activity around him, Miles felt alone."¹³ The harshness of the Canadian winter and the difficulties of pioneering are matched by the tenacity of the Avery Family and the help from their neighbours, the Tricks. It is, in fact, young Sam Trick who introduces Miles to a crucial encounter with Indian culture. This culture ultimately gives him his new name-identity "Pikonekwe" ("Little frog"), and the prophecy which will resolve the family's plight of poverty and lead them to the missing sister, Honor. Throughout the novel, the only alternative to staying in Canada is to return to England. By the end, Miles's encounter with the Indians, his various friendships with drummer-boy Alf, Sam Trick, and the unlikely Malachai Grimble, and his own love of adventure, give him and his newly-found sister the courage to cope and the pride of belonging.

Despite the harshness of life in England in 1887 for Polly Dipple and her brother, Jack, *The tin-lined trunk* describes unrelieved misery both on the steamship voyage (getting here was NOT half the fun!) and upon their arrival at farms near Stratford where they are taken as Bernardo children. Fortunately, through the kindness of Mr. Sommers, Polly is encouraged in her desire to help about the farm and to be accepted by Mrs. Sommers. The two symbols of belonging, the trunk itself, which Polly is afraid to unpack lest she be sent back to England, and the desire to be like "our Maggie," the Sommers' married daughter, converge on the final page. Polly, after submitting to a rigorous apprenticeship, in which her well-meaning mistakes and her diminutive stature as well as her Cockney accent are all roundly rebuked, is asked to remain to look after the ailing Mrs. Sommers. "I don't want Maggie. . . . *Our Polly* will

do just fine."¹⁴ Dr. Bernardo's work ethic is at the heart of the book and it is certainly the children's early recognition of this that allows for a successful integration with the stern Methodist farmers of southwestern Ontario. And both Polly and Jack do belong in the end.¹⁵

The theme of belonging in contemporary, realistic novels of growing up focuses mainly on racial identity and, in most cases, the child must undergo an uneasy period of testing and feelings of uncertain self-worth before the security of happy identity, both personal and natural, can emerge.

As an example for early readers, *The sandwich*, by Ian Wallace and Angela Wood makes ideal material. Young Vincenzo Ferrante is sent to school with his favourite mortadella and provolone sandwich and becomes the butt of lunchroom ridicule as the other children pull out predictable peanut-butter and jam. Through the patience and wisdom of a sympathetic father, Vincenzo learns to laugh with the others and to excite the curiosity of his schoolmates — and even their acceptance. Vincenzo's pride in his Italian heritage becomes shared and enjoyed by his Canadian friends. As his father says, "Good, Vincenzo. Always remember, you are who you are and you have nothing to be ashamed of."¹⁶ "Who Vincenzo is" changes drastically during the course of the story, but he certainly belongs in the end!

Where we live, a series of realistic children's stories under the distinguished consulting editorship of Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence, has produced some fine material dealing with the immigrant child's search for identity. Bill Freeman's *Cedric and the north end kids* introduces us to a dramatic gang situation in Hamilton, ruled by notorious and loud-mouthed Bobby. Cedrick, newly arrived from Jamaica, is the outcast:

As the gang finished making their plans, Cedric felt uneasy. With Bobby and the others he still was not accepted. Maybe it was his accent. Maybe it was because he was black, or maybe they just didn't like him. Whatever the reason, he was still an outsider.¹⁷

In three stories, each dealing with the same characters, Cedric manages to maintain his dignity as well as call upon his wits and some of his Jamaican heritage to win the admiration of Bobby and the rest of the gang.

Another in the series, *Marco and Michela*, presents the activities of an Italian immigrant family in Toronto. The last chapter is a beautifully told story on the theme of immigration, narrated this time from the point of view of Canadian Italians anticipating the arrival of a young cousin from Italy. The preparations — and concerns — of Michela Severino for Luisa are all made realistically explicit: "She imagined introducing Luisa to her friends at school. Luisa wouldn't know how to talk to them in English, and some of the kids might think she was stupid."¹⁸ All problems seem temporarily solved when the very proper and somewhat distant Luisa offers Michela a present of a pair of blue jeans, surely a symbol of belonging in the 1980s!

Frances Duncan's sensitively written study in identity, *Kap-Sung Ferris*,

places a young Korean girl adopted by a Vancouver family in a quandary almost from the first page. Although very much loved and accepted by her family and respected for her skating ability by the awkward friend who narrates the story, Kim Ferris finds herself apart first of all, because "All us orientals look alike!"¹⁹ Torn between going back to Korea to find her real mother and competing in advanced figure skating championships, she manages to lose her sense of identity before regaining it once again in a warm family scene in which both family and national "belonging" are brought squarely home.

And now, what do the children themselves say? Judy McClard and Naomi Wall have co-ordinated a collection of children's statements about their past and present lives in Canada. The fears and uncertainties of fictional youngsters are borne out by these candid, real-life comments. The inability to communicate had the same result with Alice as with this child from Guyana: "I had a hard time at school. I was so lonely in class. That year I failed."²⁰ Language difficulties are the basis for much insecurity:

When I went to school,
I was so many kids
that I never
had seen
before.
I felt like a mouse
being surrounded by cats.
Now that I know
a little English,
I don't feel
like that
no more.²¹

There are also positive comments on the diversity of friendships that are being made: "There are many different kinds of people that live in my neighbourhood. There are Black, English, Chinese, Pakistani, Italian and many more. . . . We all get along very nice, most of us do. I think my neighbourhood is beautiful and I love it, especially the people."²²

From all of this some definite patterns do emerge. If the theme of the misfit is an archetypal one in children's literature all the way from Wilbur, Ping, Mole, Mary Lennox, Huck Finn, and the ugly duckling to Cinderella, then the child-immigrant motif offers variations on significant material. Many of the same emotions are experienced and the frustration of non-communication leads in most cases to loneliness. Being accepted by a peer group becomes a complex, agonizing process. As Huck Finn says, "Human beings *can* be awful cruel to one another."²³ Historical fiction seems to offer child-heroes who are more adventurous and more directly physical, while literature about contemporary children is more sensitively psychological in its presentation of the need for acceptance. Finally, the identity crisis can be solved at a number of levels at

once: family, peer, racial and national. In each of these, the effect is a monumental affirmation of belonging.

NOTES

¹Northrop Frye, *The educated imagination* (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1963), p. 21.

²Antoine de Saint Exupery, *The little prince* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1943), p. 80.

³Lewis Carroll, *Alice in wonderland*, ed. Donald J. Gray (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1971), p. 16. She is subsequently accused of being, among other things, the White Rabbit's maid, a serpent and, in *Through the looking-glass*, a monster.

⁴E.B. White, *Charlotte's web* (New York: Dell Publishing Co. Inc., 1952), pp. 63-73.

⁵Lucy M. Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Co. of Canada Ltd., 1968), p. 27.

⁶Carroll, p. 17. There is a similar passage close to the beginning of Huckleberry Finn, just before Huck loses his identity in escaping from the Widow Douglas: "Then I set down in a chair by the window and tried to think of something cheerful, but it warn't no use. I felt so lonesome I most wished I was dead" (Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, ed. Sculley Bradley [New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1962], p. 8).

⁷On the other hand, *Death over Montreal*, by Geoffrey Bilson, begins: "The roar of the anchor cable woke Jamie Douglas. 'We've arrived at last,' he thought. 'Six weeks from Glasgow to Canada'" (Toronto: Kids Can Press, 1982), p. 7. The competently written story then proceeds to involve Jamie in the terror of the cholera epidemic in Montreal.

⁸Barbara Claassen Smucker, *Days of terror* (Markham: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 150.

⁹Previously, young Peter Neufeld had hurled his Russian cap overboard the ocean steamer: "'We're going to a new country. I'll get another cap in Canada'" (Smucker, p. 140).

¹⁰Smucker, p. 118. the Mennonites' problem of belonging is thoroughly discussed in Cory Bieman Davies, "Remembrance and Celebration: Barbara Smucker's *Days of terror*, CCL, No. 25 (1982), pp. 18-25. 11Mention should also be made of another minority-group story, *Grandmother came from Dworitz*, by Ethel Vineberg. Montreal: Tundra Books, 1978. Although not excitingly told, the story traces three generations of a Jewish family who sail for New York and finally settle in Springhill, Nova Scotia. While there is some celebration of freedom upon arrival in Canada — and the writer is, indeed, the Canadian grand-daughter — there is little evidence of belonging to a greater national identity as with the Mennonites in Smucker's book. Indeed, the great-grandfather, Hirsch Mishkofsky and grandfather, Mordche Zisel end their lives in Palestine, where they feel real belonging and fulfillment in their Jewish identity.

¹²A further similarity to the separated family motif in *Days of terror* is the clock which Mrs. Avery insists upon bringing, but there are few references to the culture in Philadelphia which is left behind. See Mary Alice and John Downie, *Honor bound* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 18.

¹³Downie, p. 72.

¹⁴Mary Hamilton, *the tin-lined trunk* (Toronto: Kids Can Press, 1980), p. 60. Reviewed in CCL, No. 23/24 (1981), pp. 115-116.

¹⁵The sense of belonging comes much more easily for young Timothy Parsons in *A proper Acadian*, by Mary Alice Downie and George Rawlyk. Dissatisfied with his own austere Puritan background in Boston, he welcomes the voyage to Minas with his colourful uncle Ebenezer and he soon distinguishes himself as a singer among the Aca-

dians. Like Miles Avery in *Honor bound*, he earns himself a new name: "Bato" (Toronto: Kids Can Press, 1980), p. 39.

¹⁶Ian Wallace and Angela Wood, *The sandwich* (Toronto: Kids Can Press, 1975), n.p.

¹⁷Bill Freeman, *Cedrick and the north end kids* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Co., 1978), p. 20.

¹⁸Satu Repo, *Marco and Michela* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Co., 1978), p. 52.

¹⁹Frances Duncan, *Kap-Sung Ferrie* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1977), p. 21.

²⁰Judy McClard and Naomi Wall, coordinators, *Come with us: children speak for themselves* (Toronto: Women's Educational Press, 1978), p. 9.

²¹McClard, p. 60. Notice also, the following ironical comment on a child's mother tongue: "As far as language is concerned, I'm pretty good at speaking Macedonian for a kid that talks English the whole day" (p. 43).

²²McClard, p. 49.

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