

A place to go to: international fiction for children

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Five year old Anna of Jean Little's *From Anna* (Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside Ltd., 1972) knows that to her German mother "Canada was faraway and foreign," a "geography lesson," rather than a "place to go to." And so when her father decides to emigrant, "overnight, Anna's sometimes happy, often unhappy, but always familiar world turned upside down" (p.26). Thus, like many other fictional immigrant children, Anna, through no choice of her own, became a bird of passage, flown under parental wings to a foreign land.

In the broadest definition of the term, immigrant experience involves the act of taking up residence in a country not of one's birth. Thus immigrant children in fiction, like their living counterparts, appear generally in one of three possible categories, as descendents of expatriates or emigrants returning to an ancient homeland, as children of exiles (refugees, deportees, or escapees) in transit to a foreign destination, or most commonly, as children of new settlers in a country, seeking economic opportunities or social and political freedom, as with Anna's parents.

Place, in children's fiction depicting the immigrant experience, whether ancient homeland, foreign destination, or new land, becomes thus a crucial part of the plot. The setting of foreign place, with its unfamiliar customs, language, and life patterns, to which the character must adapt in order to survive, has more importance than the usual backdrop for a story. Setting here often reveals contrasts in characters of two divergent cultures, each assuming the attitudes, enacting the behaviors, and speaking the language of their country and each having been influenced by the time and place in which they have lived. And setting often gives rise to conflicts among these characters that arise from contrasts in national traits and lead to immigrant children adapting to new settings in at least three principal ways.

The first way and the most usual is that of the melting pot pattern of *assimilation*. The child learns what are the distinctive features of the foreign culture and then takes them on as his or her own (becomes the "opposite"). Anna can be heard singing "O Canada, my home and native land," and as the first book ends, she speaks English so well her mother declares sadly, "I have no German child left" (p. 199).

At least two additional patterns of adjustment to foreign setting can be seen in children's books of immigrant experience. *Extension* occurs when the child

offers the values, customs, behavior, language, or patterns of living of his or her own culture to those in the other land. In the process he or she reveals for others or discovers a national or cultural identity. (Instead of melting into the foreign "pot", the pot is changed significantly because the child or his cultural ingredients have been added).

In Leo Politi's picture book, *Little Leo* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), when Leo's Italian immigrant parents decide to return to Italy to live, Leo journeys from California to New York, then on to Italy wearing his Indian suit. And he manages a virtual Americanization of San Matteo with his exciting stories and games of the West and his ideas that old cloth and chicken feathers can provide Indian costumes for all the children of the village. In fact, Leo finally comes to define America and the American culture for the "quaint and sleepy village" that had no movie theater and whose residents had never seen an Indian.

A third pattern of adjustment, that of *recognition*, occurs when a child returns, in memory, dream, or reality, to a long lost land of his or her heritage and discovers who he is as a result of this encounter with the past. It differs from the second pattern in that the emphasis is upon the child receiving knowledge about a lost part of his or her heritage rather than providing information about the present culture to natives of a foreign land.

In the second of Jean Little's books about the Solden family, *Listen to the singing* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1977), Anna returns in memory to the land of her birth as a letter from her German Aunt Tania reveals the courage and resistance of those who stayed behind when the terrors of Nazism began to emerge. And this knowledge about her heritage prepares Anna to combat the prejudice against German immigrants that begins to develop when Hitler declares war against England and Canadian troops are mobilized. The pattern of extension also occurs in this book when Anna begins to confront (to extend the knowledge of) those who make hasty generalizations about all Germans.

In the picture book *Africa dream* (New York: John Day, 1977) by Eloise Greenfield (illustrations by Carol Byard), a young black girl returns in a dream to "Long-Ago Africa", where she shops in the marketplace for pearls and perfume, reads strange words in old books, and rides through crowds on a donkey's back. Then "I went to the village", she says, "and stood lonesome-still/ Till my long ago granddaddy. . . Stretched out his arms/ And welcomed me home".

Greenfield's book is one of the few children's books that reflects a child's conscious desire (perhaps a sub-conscious urge, since the narrative is a dream fantasy) to seek information about herself, to search for her personal or cultural identity in another country. Thus the book approaches in them a genre of adult literature prominent in America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century international experience.

In these novels Americans traveled to Europe to gain a personal and cultural sense of the past when their own nation was too young, too geographically

diverse to provide this identity; thus they became involved in what Christ of Wegelin has called "the American quest for self definition"¹, the search for a cultural past. And whereas immigrant children of all lands have been in situations similar to that of the black child's ancestors, buffeted by chance or fate and taken to places they never chose to go, the Afro-American child, whose ancestors were torn abruptly from their own cultural past, may be descended symbolically from those earlier white Anglo-Saxon Americans who felt they had no roots. In either case, stories of immigrant experience can be compared to international novels, for in both the character's ability to adjust to foreign setting is crucial. The international novel, says Oscar Cargill, who has provided the classic definition of the genre, is one in which

a character, usually guided in his actions by the mores of one environment, is set down in another, where his learned reflexes are of no use to him, where he must employ all his individual resources to meet successive situations, and where he must intelligently accommodate himself to the new mores, or, in one way or another, be destroyed. It is the novelists' laboratory for studying the behavior of an organism, only here it is a device for the revelation of character.²

Cedric Errol of Frances Hodgson Burnett's *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (Markham, Ontario: Penguin Books Canada Ltd., 1981) was one of the earliest international novels for children. But Cedric is also by broadest definition an immigrant child. Descendant of an expatriated father, who emigrated to America when his own father disowned him, Cedric takes up residence in England as the future heir to his grandfather's estate — but not of his own volition. The title and the heritage are foisted upon him by chance, after the death of his father and his two uncles. Cedric's patterns of adjustment involve all three of the situations we have previously seen: *recognition* when he discovers who he is as a result of his inheritance ("If I have to be an earl," he tells his friend, Mr. Hobbs, "I can try to be a good one," p. 23); *assimilation*, as he attempts to conform to the regulations of his life as a nobleman at his Grandfather's lonely estate; but most significantly *extension*, as he seeks to bring his own version of democracy to the ill-treated tenants of the estate (his Americanization of English aristocracy).

Twentieth century children's literature contains many additional examples of immigrant children involving stories on international contrast. Stories of children exiled in the European purges of World War II provide such noteworthy examples as the fictional autobiography of Esther Hautzig, *The endless steppe, growing up in Siberia* (New York: Crowell, 1968). There is also the recent fictionalized autobiography of Jean Fritz, *Homesick* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1982), in which the author, born in China, where her parents were American missionaries, describes this war torn country in the 1920's and her own strong desire as a child to return to what she considered her native land, one she felt she knew from her parent's stories and her grandmother's letters.

Recently also, Virginia Hamilton, in *The magical adventure of pretty pearl* (New York: Harper, 1983), has produced a fantasy of time travel in which mythical heroes of Afro-American folklore journey from Africa to the New World, extending their powers to help liberate newly freed American slaves exiled in the forests of Georgia. Here the heroine, a young black "god-child" becomes in the end an immigrant child herself as she is given human status and left to remain on earth to adapt, to become assimilated as an Afro-American child.

Whatever genre, children's literature of immigrant experience involving international contrast provides both the fictional child and the child-reader with an awareness that a larger world exists outside the child's original homeland, a world with separate values and life patterns. In stories such as these, children gain a broader perspective of the responsibilities involved in dealing with this wider world and a sense that old and young alike must make adjustments to change, to the challenges of new and different settings.

Eudora Welty has said, "one place comprehended can make us understand other places better".³ With international fiction of the immigrant child, children see two places—the old and the new. Thus they have twice the opportunity for understanding other places and of understanding the challenge of adapting to change.

NOTES

¹"Edith Wharton and the twilight of the international novel", *The Southern Review*, V (1968), 398.

²"The First International Novel", *PMLA*, LXXLLL (September, 1958), 419.

³*Place in fiction* (New York: House of Books, 1957), 21.

SUPPLEMENTAL BIBLIOGRAPHY OF IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS OF INTERNATIONAL CONTRAST.

Allison, Rosemary. *The pillow*. Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, Ltd., 1979. Picture book of an Italian child in Canada faced with problems of assimilation, in particular, those, taking on a strange, new language.

Bawden, Nina. *On the run*. Markham, Ontario: Penguin Books Canada Ltd., 1967. Thomas, son of an exiled East African Prime Minister, finds himself in London and in need of English friends, if he is to survive.

Cohen, Barbara. *Molly's Pilgrim*. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, 1983. Picture book of a Jewish child as American immigrant and twentieth century Thanksgiving Pilgrim as well.

Coutant, Helen. *First Snow*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974. Picture book of a Vietnamese child in New England adjusting to the idea of her grandmother's approaching death when she first encounters snow and realizes that the melting of the snowflake reinforces her own Buddhist belief that life and death are two parts of the same thing — physical change.

Lasky, Kathryn. *The night journey*. New York: Frederick Warne, 1981. Thirteen year old Rachel, a third generation American child, hears her great grandmother tell the story of her escape, at age nine, from Czarist Russia in 1900.

Mays, Lucinda. *The other shore*. New York: Atheneum, 1979. In this adolescent historical novel, a young girl adjusts first to poverty in Italy after her father leaves for America and later to immigrant conditions and the process of assimilation in New York in the early 1900's.

Murray, Michele. *The crystal nights*. New York: Seabury Press, 1973. The adjustments to America of an upper class German Jewish family fleeing Nazism are seen through the eyes of an American teenager, herself the daughter of Russian-German immigrant parents.

Orgel, Doris. *A certain magic*. New York: Dial, 1976. Two stories are intertwined here, one of immigrant experience (Jenny's Aunt Trudl is a Viennese refugee in England on the eve of World War II) and one of international theme (Jenny, age eleven, as a tourist in England is drawn to the scene of Trudl's experience).

— *The devil in Vienna*. New York: Dial, 1978. Inge Dornewald's immigrant experience begins as the story ends and she and her family leave Vienna on a train to Yugoslavia. The story leading to their escape is a detailed picture of life in Germany and Austria for a Jewish family in the 1930's.

Singer, Yvonne. *Little-Miss-Yes-Miss*. Toronto: Kids Can Press, 1976. Picture book of a Jamaican child adjusting to cold weather, loneliness, and a new language in Canada.

Tanaka, Shelley. *Michi's New Year*. Toronto: Peter Martin Association, 1980. Picture book of Michi's immigration from Tokyo to Vancouver in 1912 and her adjustment to a new land, aided by Japanese residents who welcome the family. Endpapers reveal the map of Michi's journey.

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