

'THE MAGIC OF ANOTHER DAY'

The root cellar, Janet Lunn. Lester & Orpen Dennys Ltd., 1981. 247 pp. \$14.95, \$7.95 cloth & paper. ISBN 0-919630-30-8, 0-919630-78-2.

Rose Larkin, the protagonist in Janet Lunn's *The root cellar*, is the best kind of heroine. She is old enough to think and feel, grieve, rejoice and grow, but she has not begun to do any of these before the story opens. She has never been encouraged or even allowed to explore the world of human relationships. She is as untouched by life as a fairytale princess shut up in a tower. Thus, when she is catapulted into the real world at the beginning of the story, the reader can be part of her awakening, share her false starts and grow with her as she becomes a person with all the vulnerability, pain, joy and wonder which come with being fully human. This is one of the oldest themes in children's literature, met with over and over again from *Pinocchio* to *The secret garden*. The latter is, appropriately, Rose's favourite book. It is a theme to which all of us respond with deep recognition since the journey, from the self-centred and limited realm of childhood toward the wider, more frightening and hurtful but infinitely richer world of approaching maturity, is one we are all required to make. One of the chief uses children make of the books they read is to study what routes are open to them, which signposts can be trusted, what dangers and delights lie in wait and whether or not the trip is, in fact, worth taking. Although all such stories have a built-in appeal, few prove as rewarding as *The root cellar*.

This issue of *CCL* focusses on immigrant literature, stories of or by children who move, or are moved, from a familiar environment to a strange new one and who must learn how to find a sense of belonging there. Although one would not immediately place *The root cellar* in this body of stories, it does fit in there for several reasons. Looked at from this viewpoint, it is a veritable *Pilgrim's progress*. Rose is a child who has never had a home. Her aloof and busy grandmother travels widely because of her work and the orphaned Rose is taken along, willy nilly, never staying anywhere long enough to put down roots. When her grandmother dies suddenly, the child is left to find her way into the world of real people, a world of which she is almost unaware. She is handicapped not only by ignorance but also by her own instinctive distrust of the unfamiliar and by her two responses, resentment and withdrawal.

Nobody really wants Rose and she knows it. Here is another well-known situation experienced by children in books with which readers can readily identify. Children so often fall short of what is expected of them, so seldom manage to act out their fantasies and play the hero's part, that they frequently see themselves as unlovable and, therefore, unloved. Rose's predicament has an added charm in that she manages to be both the lonely only child and the unap-

preciated member of a large family.

Rose is taken in by her father's sister, who has a husband and four sons, is untidy and volatile and prepared to do her best for her niece. Fastidious Rose, who has never seen outbursts of anger or been part of any family, behaves badly, knows herself unwelcome, has no idea of how to remedy this and solves things in the way children have used since time immemorial. She runs away. And in so doing, she eventually finds her way home.

Rose has technically immigrated to Hawthorne Bay in Prince Edward County, Ontario, emigrating from Nowhere Special. Her second move comes before she has discovered anything positive in her new environment. She feels alien and hard-done-by and misunderstood and so leaves for "the magic of another day." Her location on the map doesn't change but everything else does. She finds she can go through the root cellar of her aunt's house and emerge in 1865. There everything is simpler. To Susan and Will, with whom she begins to be friendly, she is an interesting stranger, not a threatening, sulky cousin. Nothing is expected of her so she can be comfortable observing and need only enter into the action when she can offer a strength. For the first time in her life she basks in a sense of belonging.

She is wrong, of course. She doesn't belong there either because it is not her relations who are causing her not to fit in but her own ungraciousness and insensitivity. Luckily for her, these attributes are not immediately apparent to Susan and Will. Wrapped up in their own troubles, they are touched by her sympathy and intrigued by the mystery surrounding her. When Will goes to the States and joins the Union army and Susan fails to hear from him and fears he has been killed, Rose, with her one positive legacy from her grandmother's casual approach to travel, sweeps Susan off on a quest to find him. Then the inevitable day dawns when Rose's daring plans do not allow for human frailty and Susan mucks things up. Rose's sympathy, easily won in the glamour of beginning, is not founded on real understanding of Susan's pain and bewilderment. Furious at the older girl for ruining everything, Rose takes the last bit of money they have, money which, in point of fact, belongs to Susan, and spends it on food for herself. When Susan discovers this betrayal, her shock and disappointment reveal Rose to herself. Earlier in the story, her behaviour had roused the wrath of her relations and she had even dimly glimpsed her own culpability but she had not learned to love them the way she now cares for Susan. She knows the other girl has respected her independence, admired her daring, been in awe of her ability to plan and given her gratitude and even affection. Only now, when she realizes she may have forfeited all of these gifts, does Rose understand how much they matter to her. In similar moments with Aunt Nan's family, Rose has justified her own actions and made no effort to redeem herself. But this time, she knows what she'll be giving up, if she runs, and the price is finally too high. She has no choice but to go to work to win back Susan's

trust and liking. The test she meets is gruelling, leaving the reader as well as Rose exhausted, but she does endure to the end and proves herself worthy of friendship. She also, of course, gradually and credibly, becomes a much nicer Rose Larkin.

As she and Susan resume their search for Will, the reader begins to want this new Rose to go home to today. She herself finds New York, the one place on earth which came closest to being her home in the past, an alien and frightening place in 1865. Will, Rose's double in his search for where he belongs, is found at last in moving scenes of the Civil War's devastation, but he, like Rose and the reader, longs to return to Canada. Tension builds as the united three make their way back. They arrive literally in "the nick of time" for as Rose goes through the root cellar, it is destroyed behind her and she loses forever her gateway to the past.

Rose's reunion with her family is appropriately anticlimactic. Understandably, they fail instantly to perceive that she is now a real and perceptive person with much to offer. She has to live down her own bad reputation. She has to contend with their suspicion and also with her loneliness for Susan whom she has learned to love. She does win through however and, in her hour of homecoming, Susan visits the present to help her. This is less credible than Rose's time travel but children will be enchanted by what happens and, in a symbolic sense, an immigrant child comes "home" most satisfyingly when her or his past world fuses with the new one into the magic of today.

Janet Lunn, in earlier books, has written history, mystery, fantasy and fairytales. In *The root cellar*, she has combined her previous genres and discovered an even more exciting writing experience. Those children who travel with Rose from today to yesterday and back again are grateful. It is a wonderfully rich reading experience, too.

Jean Little published her eleventh novel — Mama's going to buy you a mockingbird — this fall. Issue 34 of CCL carried an interview with and an article by Miss Little.