

# *Review articles & reviews / Critiques et comptes rendus*

## PASSIONATE AND PRACTICAL

**Michele Landsberg's guide to children's books**, Michele Landsberg. Penguin, 1985. 272 pp. \$12.95 paper. ISBN 0-14-007136-9.

A determined enemy of didacticism and mediocrity in children's literature, Michele Landsberg has written a passionate endorsement of the transforming powers of the active imagination. Her *Guide* is a practical handbook to the delights of reading not only for children, but also for parents who, Landsberg insists, must "read and enthusiastically enjoy a sprinkling of the most highly recommended children's books" in order to provide a "vital example" for their young ones. Although Landsberg directs her commentary primarily at parents, this is not the only audience who will find her handbook helpful. With its detailed discussions of the why, what, and how of children's reading, Landsberg's *Guide* could also be used as a primer by the aspiring writer or illustrator of children's books.

The main body of the *Guide* (194 pages) consists of a critical study of a wide range of children's literature. Landsberg's approach in this section is primarily thematic and genre-based. She considers works under such headings as "First novels", "Liberating laughter", "The quest for identity", "Adventure", "Fantasy" and "Travelling in time". Her categories are quite broad and incorporate many mini-themes or genres. The quest for identity, for example, includes stories of friendship, identity with place, the "lonely vigil" or survival theme, family stories, moral dilemmas and comical searches for identity such as Gene Zion's *Harry the dirty dog* and Frank Stockton's *The bee-man of Orn*. Although Landsberg does discuss works in terms of the approximate age groups to which they would appeal (the identity crisis of Jenny Wagner's *Bunyip*, for example, would arouse "a sympathetic rush of fellow-feeling" in the kindergarten child), she is careful to avoid rigid categorization by age. Landsberg is more concerned with appropriate reading skills as a criterion for matching children with book.

The mix of books Landsberg examines is deliberately varied, although she emphasizes fairly contemporary literature. She chooses works from

throughout the English-speaking world, being careful to include a good selection of Canadian books and a balance between male and female protagonists. No handbook to children's literature could possibly be all-inclusive, of course, and so Landsberg has had to omit certain types of materials, including folk and fairy tales, poetry and more complex books by authors like William Mayne. She has also limited her discussion of picture books to those she feels are especially valuable in helping children learn to read.

Landsberg's main focus is on good, exemplary works but she discusses bad and mediocre ones as well. She is particularly scornful of mass-produced "commodity books" (such as those featuring the Care bears and Cabbage Patch kids) and she pulls no punches in her condemnation of the work of authors like Raymond Briggs, Roald Dahl, Robert Cormier or Judy Blume. Not even the so-called "classics" escape Landsberg's sharp eye and pen. She tells us in great and convincing detail why, for example, she loathes *Mary Poppins*, with its "beady-eyed, peremptory, hard-hearted" protagonist.

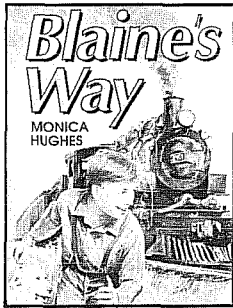
Landsberg has very definite and strong opinions on the works she examines, but her criticism is based on solid literary criteria, not mere whimsy. She outlines these criteria briefly in her opening chapter and then elaborates more fully in her detailed commentaries. Landsberg believes that every parent can and should become a critical reader of children's literature. Her *Guide* is an excellent example of how to go about this task.

The second major section of Landsberg's *Guide* is the "Treasury of children's books", an annotated bibliography of more than 350 "great" works sub-divided by age group. Included is a small selection of books about children's literature. There is also an index but, unfortunately, it refers only to the treasury, not to the main body of the *Guide*.

As the title of the volume suggests, this is a subjective guide strongly marked by the personality of the author. Far from being a dull academic critique of children's literature, Landsberg's *Guide* is a lively study that reveals almost as much about the author as it does about the literary works. Landsberg illustrates many of her points with delightful or, sometimes, unsettling anecdotes drawn from her own childhood or from the experiences of her three children. We learn, for example, the role literature played in the development of the feminist and political awareness of the young girl who was eventually to grow into the outspoken activist, Michele Landsberg. The personal element is never an intrusion, however, for Landsberg keeps her central concern, children's reading, firmly in focus at all times. Her writing style is clear and pleasant and her book as a whole makes a "good read". With the possible exception of the books that she totally dislikes, in her commentaries Landsberg includes just enough detail to intrigue her readers without giving the plot away completely. One of her goals is to entice adults to read children's books themselves.

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## THERE AND BACK AGAIN



**Blaine's way**, Monica Hughes. Irwin Publishers. 1986, 215 pp. \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-7725-1564-6.

*Blaine's way* is a visit to southwestern Ontario as it was during the Great Depression and World War II. Monica Hughes' award-winning ability to evoke the ambiance of a bygone era plants the reader firmly in narrator Blaine Williams' shoes to experience being both victim and beneficiary of these great historical events. This is not the kind of historical novel in which the author fictionalizes the life of a prominent political decisionmaker or creates a fictional character who lives within earshot of the great. It is, rather, social history at its best, demonstrating the effects of historical events on the daily lives of those who suffer them, far from the corridors of power.

The central theme of the story, supported by the recurring image of the passing train, is the desire for escape from the oppressive poverty, back-breaking labour, and claustrophobic parochialism. Freedom is realized only ironically in the horrors of Dieppe and in the hero's willing and permanent return to his roots. At this level, *Blaine's way* is the story of a generation of young rural Canadians who grew up during the Depression, saw the war as a means of escape, and, if they survived, returned to take up their old lives, albeit in a new world.

At age six, when the story begins, Blaine has already been indoctrinated with the notion of escape by his dreaming mother, who is caught between grinding poverty exacerbated by her husband's ineptitude and romantic dreams of a better life in the big cities to which one might escape on the great New York Central trains that daily pass the profitless farm. The first third of the novel is punctuated by the quarrelling of Blaine's parents as his mother progresses from dreams of escape to threats and retractions — "It's all right, Blaine. I didn't mean it. I won't ever leave you" — to the day when she makes good the choric threats and trudges off alone, not to the great train, but to a bus that carries her off to Toronto, never to be