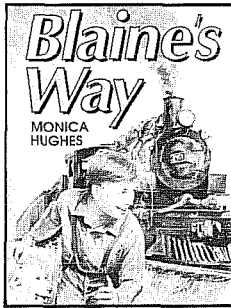


**Mary G. Hamilton**, *associate professor of English and Humanities at Athabasca University in Alberta, develops and delivers home study courses for adults, including Canadian and children's literature.*

## 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

heard from again.

If all this sounds depressing, it is, from the crumpled frame of a cheap Christmas sled to the boarding of the windows of the farmhouse on 'Auction Saturday' and Blaine's recognition that "the trains would never stop for the likes of us, for life's failures." Throughout the farm days, the family lives so near the edge of disaster that every event seems to contain the seed of ultimate defeat or death. Even when the potentiality is comic, as when Blaine collapses on the first day of school because his circulation has been cut off by overly-tight garters, the event becomes traumatic, partly because the doctor's fee exhausts the family finances, but also because the debilitating power of the Depression leaves little of such resources as humour.

The final straw for Blaine's mother, the move to Tillsonburg to live once more dependent upon her parents, brings distinct improvements for Blaine. The extended family revolves around his gentle, generous grandmother (one of the most evocative scenes is her kindness to the vacuum-cleaner salesman) and his tough, realistic grandfather. From this point on, we see Blaine growing through the tribulations of school, the difficulty of assessing his moral responsibility in the death of a friend, the drifting away of his father, and the loss of his dog, to the determination that "I'm going to live, even if it hurts."

In the tobacco fields that have brought new prosperity to the region, Blaine slaves to save the money to get away. Yet, at the same time, he is unwittingly strengthening the ties that will bring him back, relinquishing some of his hard-earned money to help rebuild the barn after a fire, building a solid relationship with his friend Nancy, even seeing the train that carries the Royal Tour of 1937 as "travelling across Ontario, stitching together all the little communities into a single patchwork." His triumphant "I've made it. I'm on the train" as he goes off to war is negated, finally, in the recognition that his escape from home is really an affirmation of it. The "right train", then, is the train that brings him back, wounded but wiser, to where he belongs.

There is a residual sadness in the story. The wound Blaine carries is emotional as well as physical, so while he progresses throughout the novel in understanding his father, his mother remains forever identified with the dream of escape, which for the present-day Blaine has shrunk to a single word — "greed".

**Mary Pritchard** teaches children's literature at the University of Western Ontario. Her interests include the use of specific geographical settings and the treatment of historical events in literature for children.