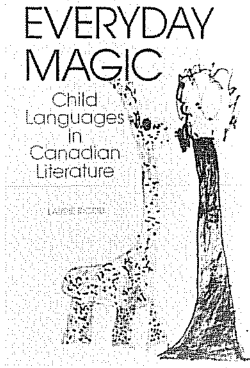

Everyday magic: child languages in Canadian literature. Laurie Ricou. The University of British Columbia Press, 1987. 158 pp. $22.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7748-0277-4.

"Child language is hardly a subject whose appeal is limited to theorists, Ph.D's, and researchers behind one-way mirrors," writes Laurie Ricou. This is an appropriate way to introduce an energetic and inquiring study like *Everyday magic,* for it appeals not only to critics and readers of Canadian poetry, prose and drama or to researchers and parents concerned with child development and language acquisition, but to the children we all once were. The study blends the teachings of psychology, linguistics and literary theory with carefully-detailed readings of several Canadian texts, in an effort to survey the strategies by which Canadian writers have tried to incorporate, recreate or comment upon child language.

But Ricou himself pointedly uses the term "child languages," and this choice speaks tellingly of his critical orientation and method. The plural form, he explains, "suggest[s] the multiple answers" to the question, "Where, and to what extent, do the distinctive features of child language described by psycholinguists intersect with the written language which the writer uses to suggest not only child *language,* but also the way a child sees and organizes an understanding of the world?" (x). The "multiple answers" which Ricou hears in the literature of modern and contemporary Canada are impressively reflected in the selection and range of the texts which form the basis of his study. There, we find the work of six female and six male authors, in the genres of short story, novel, poem (from lyric to collage poetry) and drama, arranged so as to highlight the very multiplicity of approach of which Ricou writes. His decision to open the study with an extended comparison of Margaret Laurence's *A bird in the house* and Alice Munro's *Lives of girls and women* is a clever one; recalling these two collections of interconnected short stories about the growth of a young girl, published only a year apart, one would normally tend to think in terms of similarity rather than contrast. But Ricou, focussing on the *ways* in which child languages appear in each text, uncovers some key distinctions--whereas Laurence reproduces child usage without comment, preserving its integrity, Munro's more "writerly" adult narrator "reports on her memory of her reaction as a child" (15). For Munro, child languages are narratives of "accumulation" (29), stories about stories. In an appropriate echo of Laurence's Hagar Shipley from *The stone angel* ("I am rampant with memory"), Ricou ob-

serves that "Story is rampant" in the fictions of Alice Munro (29).

Ricou's study elsewhere reproduces his interest in multiplicity, in fascinating possibilities--he ranges from the obsession with multiple "beginnings" in the stories of Clark Blaise, to Ernest Buckler's sensuous linguistic multiplicity in *The mountain and the valley,* the "playing-with-child's-play" drama of James Reaney, the encouragement of childlike creativity in Dennis Lee's *Alligator pie,* to the anti-rational chants of bill bissett. Rarely does material of such diversity find a home in Canadian criticism; Ricou breaks down the barriers which the critical community sometimes erects in order to preserve the hierarchies: "serious" adult literature versus "light" children's literature; mainstream "classics" (*The mountain and the valley,* the works of Laurence and Munro) versus the "experimental" (bissett) or the often-ignored, difficult-to-classify (Emily Carr's *The house of Small*).

There are only occasional organizational problems; for instance, we are told in Chapter 2 that "Laurence does not attempt a technique like Emily Carr's, which moves the reader totally into the 'here-and-now' of the child's world" (16). The fuller treatment of Carr does not appear until Chapter 6, however, and, in spite of the general description of Carr's approach which Ricou provides here, it seems awkward to be presented with the comparison at this time. A similar problem occurs in the last chapter on Lee and bissett, where Ricou mentions bissett's "apparent overuse of the definite article" (133). This technique has already been discussed at some length in the Introduction, as Ricou goes on to point out, and so we have once again the sense of an argument divided, appearing in a couple of places in the text.

Such perplexities seem minor indeed, however, when one ponders the strengths of this study. The chapter on Buckler's *The mountain and the valley* is, in my view, the most persuasive of the collection and a valuable contribution to the criticism of that novel, probably because Buckler's fictional strategies, his careful attention to *every* single word, the sequences of words and impressions, are in harmony with Ricou's own critical method--a detailed inquiry into word, tone, verbal formulation. However, the chapter on W. O Mitchell's *Who has seen the wind,* which sees the development of language skills in Piagetian terms, leaves me with the lingering doubt: what differentiates Brian O'Connal's childlike idiom ("room-a-ticks" for rheumatism) from what Theodore Roethke has christened, and Ricou lists as, the danger of transcribing child language: the prospect of writing a "suite in goo-goo"? Where does the line between reproduction and sentimentality lie?

Laurie Ricou's *Everyday magic* both asks and provokes such tough and fascinating questions. And the serious yet celebratory manner in which it does so brings to mind Ricou's own description of the fictional world of Ernest Buckler: "Buckler's. . .is a style of watching. He lingers over the tiniest detail and savours its expression" (69).

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ESCAPE FROM NEW JERSEY

A semester in the life of a garbage bag. Gordon Korman. Scholastic, 1987. 257 pp. $16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-590-40694-9.

The garbage bag of the title is one Raymond Jardine, a spectacularly unlucky eleventh grader, whose sole obsession in life is gaining one of the coveted six spots on a high school trip to the Greek island of Theamelpos. (The alternative is spending the summer working in his uncle's fish-gutting plant in New Jersey.) For reasons far too involved to explain, success in a poetry project for his English class becomes the key to getting there, and Jardine's partner, the hitherto perfectly normal Sean Delancey, gradually finds his life being taken over by the other's obsession--which results (among other things) in Sean's eighty-eight year old grandfather impersonating the obscure (and deceased) Canadian poet on whom they have decided to work. Other characters include Ashley Bach, the stunningly beautiful health food fanatic for whom Sean hopelessly yearns; Steve "Cementhead" Semenski, the moronic muscleman who is the object of Ashley's affections; and a younger sister whom Sean refers to as "Genghis Khan in training". The real villain of the piece, however, is SAGGEN: DeWitt High School's experimental power-plant--thirty-three million dollars' worth of state-of-the-art technology, whose only minor drawback is that is doesn't work.

With his last three titles, Korman has moved from being a writer of children's books into Young Adult territory, and while his lunatic comic inventiveness remains much in evidence, it is accompanied by a perceptive eye for the quirks of adolescent behaviour. Paradoxically, however, the very accuracy of this portrayal of teenage jealousies, antagonisms, image-consciousness creates certain problems. Korman's earlier books depend for much of their effect on his use of a closed environment--school, in the MacDonald Hall books, summer camp in *I want to go home*--which serves to isolate the characters from a larger social context, while allowing Korman's distinctive brand of comedy to develop its own logic and momentum. Here, however, while the main focus is on the life of DeWitt High School, the social context is broader, embracing family life and events beyond the institution. There is a greater realism, too, in some of the characterization: Sean's pangs of jealousy are convincingly rendered, as are some of the antagonisms between characters--to the extent that it sometimes makes Korman's comic invention seem *too* contrived. In the less