

Breaking the vacuum: Children's books from Newfoundland

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Résumé: *Betty M. Brett brosse un tableau des différents genres de la littérature pour la jeunesse produite à Terre-Neuve et ce, tout en tenant compte de l'âge et du niveau auxquels les oeuvres les plus marquantes s'adressent.*

Writing almost four decades ago, Lillian Smith in *The unreluctant years* (1953) affirmed unequivocally the importance of fine children's books as a part of universal literature. Children's books, she maintained, "do not exist in a vacuum, unrelated to literature as a whole" (7). It was her conviction that individuals attempting to evaluate children's books should begin with an assumption that literature for children is a literature of significance and value. "Good children's books give those who enjoy them a steadying power like a sheet anchor in a high wind," Smith claimed, "not moral at all but something to hold to." This pioneer in the criticism of children's literature insisted that children's books "must be subject to the same standards of criticism as any other form of literature" (15).

This critical philosophy deserves serious attention, I believe, particularly in the examination of the works of a geographical region. It would be easy to adopt a regional perspective and give undeserved recognition to works that are fair at best, making allowances for no better reason than that the books are published locally, are written by local authors, are illustrated by local illustrators or are on subjects of local interest. Such an approach on the part of critics would be condescending to the reader as well as to the authors and illustrators. The arts flourish most successfully when there is a sensitive and informed criticism. Children's books by Newfoundland authors and illustrators deserve to be evaluated by the standards applied to works of leading authors and illustrators in other provinces of Canada and abroad. "To tolerate the mediocre and the commonplace," Smith declares, "is to misunderstand the purpose of book selection and the significance of literature" (8).

The titles included in this article have been selected from the publications of the past fifteen years. They represent a number of literary genres and a wide range of interests from the pre-school child to the young adult. Some titles defy any simple categorization. Most if not all of the books have an appeal that is not limited by the geographical boundaries of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Younger Readers

While few books of quality have been done for the youngest readers, there are some deserving of mention. Now in its fifth printing, Al Pittman's *Down by Jim Long's stage* (1976) is a collection of verse about fish which frequent Newfoundland waters. Certainly this book has an appeal for young readers far beyond Jim Long's stage or Jim Long's province. Children everywhere respond to the timeless qualities of rhyme, rhythm, repetition, alliteration, hyperbole, and just simple nonsense. Laughter is, after all, a universal emotion, and even those children who have not had the good fortune to catch connors over the wharf or dig clams on the beach will have no difficulty appreciating the antics of Rodney Cod, Sid Squid, Sam the Sculpin or Lucy Lumpfish. Adding to the appeal of this collection are Pam Hall's illustrations of the various fish characters. Simple, colourful, and reasonably accurate, these illustrations actually succeed in endowing the fish characters with personality. Winner of the Amelia Frances Howard Gibbon illustrator's award in 1977, *Down by Jim Long's stage* was a landmark in the publication of children's books in this province.

One of the characters in the drama being played out against the backdrop of Jim Long's Stage was Roger the Razor Fish. Roger made an offer to Calvin Catfish, "I'll shave you for a fee." This offer was rejected by Calvin, who replied,

"No thanks...I like me like I be".
And with his whiskers on his face
he headed out to sea.

As evidence of the universal appeal of these verses, this particular poem became the title poem in an anthology of poetry compiled by Jill Bennett and originally published by The Bodley Head in London. It is gratifying and very fitting that Al Pittman should keep company in this anthology with such distinguished children's poets as Dorothy Aldis, John Ciardi, Myra Cohn Livingston and Shel Silverstein.

One of the less vociferous participants in the shenanigans down by Jim Long's stage is featured in the leading role in *One wonderful fine day for a Sculpin named Sam* (1983), also written by Al Pittman, and illustrated by Shawn Steffler. Shunned by all, Sam is aware that he is the ugliest fish in the sea. He discovers, however, that universal truth so powerfully communicated in Antoine de Saint Exupéry's *The Little Prince* that it is only with the heart that we see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye. When Sam meets the most beautiful fish he has ever seen, it is indeed a wonderful day for him. The tale is simple. As in *Down by Jim Long's stage*, the characters are fish; the behaviour is human. Steffler's coloured illustrations combine effectively with the text to create a fine picture book.

Ellen Bryan Obed's *Little Snowshoe* (1984), illustrated by William Ritchie,

is an easy-to-read book with controlled vocabulary, focusing upon a theme of mother-child relationship. While it may be argued with some justification that the illustrations overpower a slight plot, there is no doubt that this book has considerable appeal for pre-school and kindergarten children. It deserves better packaging than its publisher has provided.

John Steffler's *Flights of magic* (1987), illustrated by Shawn Steffler, is a celebration of the power of the imagination. Text and illustrations create something of an extravaganza. Young Ruth's imaginary capers begin when she reads a book called *Flights of magic*. She wanders freely between the real world and the worlds she creates until, at the end, she voluntarily gives her book to "a shy lonely girl she didn't even know."

The Middle Grades

For the middle grades there is a rather rich and varied fare, including poetry, historical fiction, realistic fiction, and the literature of the oral tradition. Pam Hall is both author and illustrator of *On the edge of the Eastern Ocean* (1982), an epic poem about a young puffin who earns his reputation and his name. In a descriptive style reminiscent of traditional folk literature, this tale recounts the adventures of the puffin who flees from the rocky ledge that is his home, becomes lost on the broad expanse of the Eastern Ocean, survives the wandering in the wasteland experience, and comes ashore at last on the Vanished Isle of Funk. There, in the company of the ghosts of the Great Auk Nation and under the tutelage of their Leader Linnaeus, he learns much of the wisdom of the ages – about life and death and the fragile relationships which exist in the universe. Having grown older and wiser in the ways of birds and men, the young puffin returns home to share his wisdom with his nation. Geb, the Wind-walker, they name him, and tales are told and songs are sung in his honour. In addition to a simple narrative, this book has much to say about the balance of nature, the struggle for existence, and the survival of the strong. It has messages about ecology, man's exploitation of nature, and the need for vigilance. This picture book, with its poetic text and striking water-colour illustrations, may be of interest to many older readers as well as those in the middle grades.

Landwash days: Newfoundland folklore, sketches and verse for youngsters (1967, 1980), *A Gommil from Bumblebee Bight* (1982), *Angishore, Boo-Man and Clumper* (1983) and *Alley-Coish, Bibby and Cark* (1989) are four books by Tom Dawe which also are not limited in their appeal to middle-grade readers. While these books may be of particular interest to readers in Newfoundland and Labrador or Atlantic Canada, they offer a rewarding reading experience to any who have a special interest in the oral tradition of Canada's youngest province. *Landwash days*, a collection of 25 poems, each of which has a prose commentary and an illustration, has a gentle charm that extends beyond any regional boundaries. Readers will meet sly connors, the "long and slinky, slimy

ling," the dogfish, the flabby flounder and the poet squid with "his black, black ink." Included as well is the haddock who, according to legend, bears on its body not only the Devil's Mark but St. Peter's thumbprint as well. Dawe, who grew up along the seashore, defines the landwash as "all the area on the shoreline, especially the marvellous world around the tidemarks where all kinds of creatures lived." He explains that it was here that he and his friends formed their view of the world. Anecdotes abound in the folklore of the province, and many of those included here will be well known to some local readers. They may, however, have considerable interest for a wider audience.

In Newfoundland dialect a "gommil" is a silly individual, a "ral" is a rowdy person, a "jinker" is one who consistently brings bad luck. Such characters, along with numerous others equally colourful, are featured in Dawe's *A gommil from Bumble Bee Bight*. Readers meet a turbot from Main Tickle, a slieveen from St. Shott's, a skinny flatfish from Bareened, a mink from Ming's Bight, and a couple of cats "who fought on the flakes of Joe Batt's." This collection of fifty-one limericks, each one set in a Newfoundland community, is illustrated by Sylvia Ficken. It is as informative as it is hilarious.

Angishore, Boo-Man and Clumper (1985) and *Alley-Coosh, Bibby and Cark* (1987) are unusual folk alphabet books, also both informative and delightful. Illustrated by Ficken, both offer a wealth of folklore and a rich linguistic experience through the exploration of dialect and idiom. All four of these books by Dawe deserve to be enjoyed by local audiences and shared with all who may be interested in becoming better acquainted with a part of Canada that is still not generally well known. Unfortunately, their inferior packaging provides no indication of the quality of the content of these books. This is particularly true of *Landwash days: Newfoundland folklore, sketches and verse for youngsters*.

A quite different book by Tom Dawe is his *Winter of the black weasel* (1988), illustrated by Anne McLeod. This gripping picture book is an excellent recounting of a legend of the Newfoundland Micmacs. In this version, which is based on a "told tale," powerful text and striking illustrations work in harmony to produce a picture book of distinction which is a valuable contribution to the literature of the oral tradition. The tale, set long ago before the whitemen came, is no more regional than the tales of Charles Perrault or the Brothers Grimm. The plot centres upon the appearance of a black weasel in winter, an unusual occurrence and one considered by the Red Indians to be a sign of evil. The killing of the weasel by the young Micmac lad who appears to be driven by some power he is helpless to control is the beginning of quarrelling, fighting, and "merciless war." The Red Indians were defeated and forced to retreat up a frozen river into the wild interior. It was years later that the white men and the Micmacs sent raiding parties into the interior to pursue the Red Indians, who were doomed because there was no means of escape. A tragic consequence was that "one day, like figures sketched on a fog, they disappeared forever from the misty island of Newfoundland." McLeod's illustrations dramatically depict

the beauty of the natural setting and the ugliness of the destructive forces of evil.

Winter of the black weasel is one of very few stories for children on the subject of Newfoundland's indigenous people, the Beothucks. Donald Gale's *Sooshevan: Child of the Beothucks* (1981) is another book which contains some interesting information about the life style of a race now extinct. Shawn Stefler's illustrations combine with the text to communicate something of the spirit and flavour of a people, a culture and a tragic phase of Newfoundland history.

The tribe's winter supply of caribou meat and fish is gone, leaving nothing but powdered eggs to fill empty stomachs. Sooshevan's father has gone hunting, promising to bring back meat enough for all. When her dying grandmother warns Sooshevan that her father is far to the north by the sea, helpless and in danger, the young girl begs her uncle to go to his rescue. Dismayed that no one takes her concern seriously, Sooshevan sets off alone. She finds her father, who is injured and suffering from fever. In saving his life Sooshevan earns for herself the coveted name *woas-sut*, woman. She is a child no longer. That the information about the Beothuks is woven as successfully as it is into a simple plot in which a child plays the leading role adds to the universal appeal of this book. This work of fiction provides an interesting companion to Ingeborg Marshall's *The Red Ochre People: How Newfoundland's Beothuk Indians lived* (1977). Marshall's *The Beothuk of Newfoundland: A vanished people* (1989), dealing with the same subject, is more appropriate for older readers. Both books, meticulously researched, bring together in great detail all available information about a lost people.

Something of the fantasy and much of the intrigue and human interest of folk tale and myth are present in Ellen Bryan Obed's *Borrowed black* (1977, 1988), a picture book rich in imaginative stimulation. An air of mystery surrounds *Borrowed Black*, a legendary character of Labrador who "borrows" everything he needs - "borrows" without any thought of repaying. He himself is a conglomeration of items which he has borrowed, all held together by the wind. For example, "he borrowed his hands from the claws of a bear/a patch of brown seaweed he borrowed for hair." His eyes were a wolf's; his ears were two empty sea shells; his nose, a gull's beak; his feet, seal flippers. Greedy and arrogant, this supercilious creature overestimated the forbearance of the Labrador fishermen and sowed the seeds of his own destruction when he stole the moon, broke it in pieces and buried it "deep off the Labrador." Upon this dastardly deed all of nature protested:

Now the night had nothing of silver to hold;
The winds were crying; the rocks were cold.
The air was thick and dark and chill
and no one could tell where the sea met the hill.

How this complex situation was resolved after seventeen seasons of moonless nights is made clear in Obed's poetic fantasy. Good is rewarded, evil is appropriately punished and the natural order is restored.

The two illustrated versions of this book are quite different in style, each with its own particular appeal. Some readers will choose the original illustrations by Hope Yandell, while others will prefer Jan Mogensen's interpretation. Unfortunately, in the original edition the unified whole which characterizes the picture book of distinction is marred by the use of an artistic script, inappropriate in books for children. This has been improved somewhat but not entirely in the second edition. A French translation with illustrations by Mogensen is also available.

Three books of historical fiction deserve mention: *Sawtooth Harbour boy* (1973) and *Fanny for change* (1987), both by Jean Hayes Feather, and *That fine summer* (1980), by Ella Manuel. In an introductory note to *Sawtooth Harbour boy* the author explains that she has tried to make Sawtooth Harbour typical of Newfoundland outports in the 1920s. In this she succeeds. The details of setting are true, the descriptions of life styles are realistic, the dialect is accurate, the idioms correct. There was indeed in the small isolated communities "the close knit neighbourliness" which Feather depicts. As a record of a way of life in a particular period *Sawtooth Harbour boy* is authentic. In truth, the book is more successful in presenting the way it was than in developing a credible story. The story covers five years (1919-1924) in the life of Billy Hardy, who in spite of his humble roots manages to get enough money together to allow him to proceed to Dalhousie medical school in Nova Scotia. The simple plot into which the details are woven is lacking in life and colour, and the events happen too conveniently to be convincing. The characters are composites of the people of the time and place rather than strong individuals.

Sawtooth Harbour boy does, however, make interesting and accurate comments upon the hardship and uncertainty of the fishery, the credit system, the schools and the educational programmes, and the work of the Grenfell Mission along the Labrador coast. Particularly effective is the depiction of the gulf that separated the poor people of the outports from the folks who lived in big houses in St. John's, where "they just turn on a tap and the water flows out." It is interesting that the author considers it necessary to include a glossary of unusual words that are peculiar to Newfoundland fisherman. Included are *caplin*, *flake*, *yaffle* and *janneys*.

Like Billy Hardy of Sawtooth Harbour, Fanny Grace in *Fanny for change* (1987) lives in a small Newfoundland fishing community in the 1920s. Like Billy, Fanny has her dreams, and she is reluctant to accept things the way they are just because they have always been so. Nor is she willing to be forced into a stereotypic female role. Fanny learns from her grandmother one of life's valuable lessons - that one has to accept things the way they are or set about changing them. No useful purpose is served by complaining. Her efforts to change

the name of her community from Famish Gut to Fairy Glen end in failure, but Fanny discovers that not all changes are desirable.

Ella Manuel's *That fine summer*, set in Fox Harbour, Newfoundland, in the early 1930s, deserves more recognition than it has received. "That was one fine summer," Mahala Jackson told her grandfather. "That was one fine summer – for me too," her grandfather agreed. Both are referring to the summer which they had spent together while Mahala's parents are in St. John's, where her father, a teacher, is attending summer school. Mahala begs to stay behind, but it is really her grandfather who persuades his daughter to leave the eleven-year-old girl with him. He needs his granddaughter, he explains, but he also wants her to understand and appreciate a way of life that is important to him. Later he shares with his granddaughter the arguments he presented:

How can the world go on if youngsters don't know how the forebears lived and what they did? How in the world would children know where they had sprung from and what made them like they are, if nobody told them? I said I had to tell you about how it was when I was a boy and how my grandfather and father made a living and what they thought about. (91-92)

During that eventful summer Mahala learns much about her grandfather and about fishing, but about other things as well. Her grandfather encourages her in her consuming ambition to one day get her skipper's ticket and command her own fishing boat. Her strength of character, so convincingly developed as the plot unfolds, leads the reader to believe that Mahala may indeed achieve her goal. She is ahead of her time – a bold forerunner of the fisherwomen of the present.

There are strong similarities in *Sawtooth Harbour boy*, *Fanny for change* and *That fine summer*. While neither of the three may be considered great historical fiction, all are noteworthy for their accurate depiction of a time and place and a proud and simple lifestyle which has all but disappeared. *That fine summer* certainly deserves to be brought back into print, this time with different illustrations.

A book which vividly and accurately captures the flavour and atmosphere of Newfoundland just before Confederation is Tom Moore's *Good-bye momma* (1976), a first-person account of a young boy growing up in a small rural community. Felix Ryan's mother died of tuberculosis when he was a child, so his memories of her are scanty. "From what little I can remember of her she was beautiful enough...I wish I had known her better", he reminisces. Later, the boy recalls her death wistfully but without sentimentality: "When she died, she went out softly like a light. The next thing I knew she was no longer around." When his father, whom he describes as "a stranger from Canada," remarries, Felix feels betrayed – not only by his father but also by his grandparents, who allow his father to take him away from the only home he knows.

Moore carefully develops his plot in simple, sparse prose in which not a

single word is wasted. The painful growing-up theme is handled with sympathy but without maudlin sentimentality. The main characters are clearly and sharply drawn, and complex human relationships are explored with great sensitivity. While the book is about childhood and coming of age, the tale is that of a child now grown up and reflecting upon the vicissitudes of human experience. It may be argued, therefore, that this is no more a children's book than is Cassie Brown's *Death on the ice* (1972) or Jessie Mifflin's "*Be you the library missionary, Miss?*" (1981). It is, however, a well-written story for the mature reader, one that deserves to be reprinted and shared.

Fine fantasy takes the reader into other worlds where natural laws may not apply. The newly created world is, nevertheless, an orderly, law-governed one. Once the writer of fantasy determines the nature of the world in which the narrative will develop, even the writer becomes a subject of that world, bound by the conditions which have been imposed. Readers must be able and willing to suspend their disbelief, moving easily into the world of the fantasy and returning to their own world at the end of the story, with fresh insights and clearer vision. The best fantasy will have a high moral tone without being moralistic. Such fantasy is difficult to write well.

The Amanda Greenleaf series, by Ed Kavanagh, and *Below the barrens*, by Alice Story, are books of fantasy which do take the reader into other worlds. While no one would argue that these books are memorable fantasy in the sense that White's *Charlotte's web*, Babbitt's *Tuck everlasting*, Lewis's *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe* or Ruth Nichols's *A walk out of the world* and *The marrow of the world* are memorable, they do deserve some mention. In the Amanda Greenleaf series there are moments when it is too difficult to believe, and there are too many unanswered questions. There are flaws in the fantasy world which Kavanagh has created. Much description and some inconsistencies at times prevent the reader from becoming totally absorbed in an engrossing narrative. This notwithstanding, all three books have more than a little appeal for many middle-grade readers. The senselessness of war, the efficacy of love and kindness to dispel evil, the power of music to lift the heart and spirit are all universal themes developed in gentle stories. *Amanda Greenleaf visits a distant star* (1986), the first book in the series, is the best. *Amanda Greenleaf and the spell of the water witch* (1987) and *Amanda Greenleaf and the boy magician* (1991) are the other titles. The illustrations by Janice Udell in the second and third book of the series work better than do those of Tish Holland in the first one.

Story's *Beneath the barrens* takes the reader into a subterranean world which Kate and her cat Frazer enter quite by accident when they fall through what appears to be just an ordinary pond in the middle of the barrens. In this strange underwater world they discover a mysterious civilization where the gentle Ralans and the fierce Gornbats are constantly at war and where a community of artists, the Effersneezles, have spent the last four hundred and

eighty years "creating the sculpture and grottoes in this land." By some amazing process of mental telepathy Kate and Frazer are able to communicate with each other and with the inhabitants. Like Amanda in *Amanda Greenleaf and the boy magician*, Kate is successful in bringing understanding, reconciliation and peace where there have long been conflict, hatred and violence. After a series of incredible adventures the girl and cat return to their own world to discover that Kate's parents have been seeking them through the night. The bump on her head and the small disc of pink, plastic-like substance in her pocket are Kate's only reminders of a strange sojourn beneath the barrens. The story is not regional in any sense. In fact, the description of Frazer, the Cat, as "Sir Frazer, Champion Rat Destroyer of Newfoundland" (6); the location of the Gornbats' underwater city as "four miles out to sea off a treacherous and rocky section of the Newfoundland coast (43); and such indirect references to Newfoundland as "the Atlantic swell" (35) and "Water Street" (47) all appear to be artificial links to a geographical location, serving no useful purpose. It is noteworthy that this book is more attractively designed than are most of those published locally. Angela King-Harris's colourful cover design, along with the small black and white decorations at the beginning of each of the fifteen chapters, invites the reader to explore this fantasy.

Poetry, perhaps more than any other literary form, is difficult to categorize according to a particular age or interest group. Tom Dawe's poetry, for example, has been discussed in the preceding section, but its subject matter may make it equally or even more appealing for middle graders. Indeed, Dawe's folk verse may have universal appeal. Ellen Bryan Obed's *Wind in my pocket* (1990) is a collection of poems dedicated to "the children of Newfoundland, Labrador and the Quebec North Shore" but its appeal is certainly not limited by those geographical boundaries, nor to children:

With wind in my pocket up from the sea
and a cloud from the sky to wear,
With a bundle of sun tucked under my arm
and a ribbon of rain in my hair,
I walked to a bend in the afternoon
for a friend who was waiting there.

The poems in this collection provide the reader with a fresh new way of seeing, as poetry so often does. The images are as clear and fresh as the wind that blows through so many of the poems. These are seasonal poems of nature and the out-of-doors, speaking of "ribbons of sunlight", "ribbons of seaweed" and "ribbons of cloud." They sing of the grass wet with morning dew, rhubarb and strawberries, snowbirds, and the arctic fox in the winter blizzard when "the night is so wild with snow." Steffler's visual images evoke a simple beauty and the spirit of the north which pervades so many of the poems.

Another collection of poetry which will have appeal for many middle-grade

children, perhaps even more for older readers, is Tammey Palmer's *You're the bumble in my bee* (1986). This collection of fifty-eight poems was inspired, according to the teenage author, by "the beauty and awe of nature, the actions and feelings of others, even moments created in my imagination." Writing generally in blank verse, Palmer uses vivid images and symbols to reflect upon the beauty to be found in the natural world and in the lives of people. While some of the images are rather forced and the emotion sometimes bespeaks the romanticism and extravagance of youth, there can be no doubt that this writer brings to her work a keen sensitivity and an appreciation for language.

Young Adult Readers

Kevin Major is one of Canada's leading writers for young adults. Author of six novels, Major has received both national and international recognition. He has been the recipient of a number of prestigious awards and citations, and his work has been translated into French, German, Danish, Spanish and Hebrew. A talented and versatile writer, Major crafts his novels with extreme care, using a different stylistic approach in each one to date. *Holdfast* (1978), *Far from shore* (1980) and *Thirty-six exposures* (1984) are all set in rural Newfoundland, and the social and economic circumstances of that setting are authentically captured in well-developed plots that differ markedly in technique, *Thirty-six exposures* being the most experimental. In *Dear Bruce Springsteen* (1987), which has no particular geographical setting, Major adopts rather effectively a technique also used successfully by American author Beverly Cleary in her award-winning *Dear Mr. Henshaw* (1983). The book consists of fifty-one letters written by fourteen-year-old Terry Blanchard to his favourite Rock Star, Bruce Springsteen. *Blood Red Ochre* (1989) is a rather complex combination of realistic fiction, historical fiction and fantasy. The story is one of an unusual friendship across the barriers of time involving David, a contemporary teenager, Dauoodaset, a young male Beothuk, and Nancy – or Shanawdithit, the last of her race. The parallel stories of David and Dauoodaset are revealed in alternating chapters, as sharply different in style as they are in substance. Nancy, or Shanawdithit, appears in both stories, the connecting link across the years. The time travel technique, which has been used with considerable success by award-winning Canadian authors Janet Lunn in *Root cellar* (1981), Kit Pearson in *A handful of time* (1987), Cora Taylor in *The doll* (1987) and Margaret Buffie in *Who is Frances Rain?* (1987), is a challenge to any author. *Blood Red Ochre* is not without some problems. Major's most recent work, *Eating between the lines* (1991), is a quite successful blending of realistic fiction and fantasy into a delightful comedy.

While most of Major's works are either set in Newfoundland or have Newfoundland connections, the themes are not regional in any narrow sense. Even when characters speak with a distinctive dialect they are human beings. There

is a universality about their struggles and the forces which shape their lives. The truth which emerges is neither insular nor provincial. Major has succeeded in making the regional universal.

Helen Fogwell Porter's *January, February, June or July* (1988), winner of the 1987 Canadian Library Association award for Young Adult Fiction, is not really restricted in interest to young adults. Rather, the book turns the spotlight on the human condition, revealing both beauty and ugliness, monotony and misery, as well as the simple joys of a family. It is as much an adult book as it is an adolescent one.

The book tells the poignant story of 15-year-old Heather Novak, who, pregnant and alone, must make some difficult decisions. She does eventually confide in an older sister, but she is physically alone and very much alone in spirit when she arrives at the day surgery to keep her early morning appointment. But the story is not Heather's alone. *January, February, June or July* is a powerful exposé of a whole range of complex human emotions and the social forces which combine to shape the lives of individuals and families. The book explores the "inside story" of one family's struggle to survive. The reader may at times feel like an intruder, peering at human weakness and pain, cringing perhaps at some of the values which dictate behaviour, yet not being fully able to understand the circumstances which hold family members prisoners in a social situation which they appear powerless to control. The setting is St. John's, Newfoundland. The dialect, effectively and consistently handled, is definitely regional. The themes, however, are as universal as the human story. The frank language, the graphic details and the subject matter make this a book for mature readers only.

Another book of realistic fiction for mature readers set in St. John's, Newfoundland, but with a universal theme is *Ask me no questions* (1989), by Linda Phillips, Peter Ringrose and Michael Winter. Fifteen-year-old Leslie Tumney has moved to St. John's from Corner Brook, but she has brought many memories with her, some of them unpleasant. "I can never get it off my mind. But don't ask me too many questions, not yet," the young teenager pleads, revealing something of the emotional turmoil and suffering she has experienced through ten years of sexual abuse by her father. Although her life has been a nightmare, Leslie has suffered in silence, unable to share with anyone the horror that has driven her to attempt suicide. When she discovers that her father is now abusing her 13-year-old sister, Leslie is convinced that the silence must be broken. The nightmare must stop if the future is to have any beauty or hope. Questions must be asked; answers must be given; anger and hate must be confronted.

In a book on a subject as topical as sexual abuse of children there is the very real danger that the literary quality may become subordinate to the social issue and the narrative be used merely as a vehicle for a message. That this does not happen is the strength of this book. Some parts are quite clinical in nature

with meticulous identification of the steps to be followed in the reporting of abuse. Such information, which may appear unnecessarily detailed for a work of fiction, is deliberately and purposefully included. It is to be noted, however, that the subject is not sensationalized: there are no graphic details, and the authors' approach works. The reader never loses interest in the narrative, and there are some memorable lines and vivid images. St. John's shrouded in fog is described as being robbed of its colour "like an old black and white photograph". The analogy of the beautiful butterfly "injured from too much affection" is compelling. *Ask me no questions* is a significant book.

Journey home (1980), *Treasure of Kelly's Island* (1983) and *Escape* (1989), three novels by Michael McCarthy, differ from the other books mentioned in this section in that they are deliberately written for the reluctant male adolescent reader. These books, though not highly literary, have much appeal for a particular audience. All three share some common characteristics. The main character in each is a male in his mid or late teens; in each, the main character moves from Ontario to Newfoundland, where the action occurs; in all three there is a sympathetic adult in a supporting role, and in all three the "salvation" of the protagonist is assured. David, in *Journey home*, a fugitive from the law, hides in a truck which boards the gulf ferry in Nova Scotia and crosses to Newfoundland. Chuck, in *Escape*, is running away from an abusive stepfather when he comes to St. John's, ostensibly on a school exchange trip, and arranges to stay and become "lost". Kent, in *The treasure of Kelly's Island*, is spending a summer vacation at Topsail, Newfoundland, where his father, a geology professor, is digging in the fossil beds at Manuel's River. Here, along with a local boy, Kent becomes involved in a search for the legendary treasure of Kelly's Island, in the course of which he and his friend successfully break a smuggling ring. All three books are fast paced, with action, suspense and intrigue. In each there is a resolution in which good is rewarded, evil is punished, and the protagonist will live happily ever after. Things happen altogether too quickly and conveniently to be credible but, as is the case in some of the L.M. Montgomery tales of beautiful Avonlea, readers become so absorbed in the drama that they allow themselves to be swept along with the action, realizing all the while that events could not ever have happened in real life just as they did in the tale. It was, however, a good yarn.

Two more books which also may be described as books for a special audience are Juanita Smith's *Reena and the riser* (1989) and Barbara Ann Lane's *Daddy's back: A story of the supernatural* (1991). *Reena and the riser*, a tale of science fiction reminiscent of the Star Trek series, deals with space ships, interplanetary travel, sky piracy, political intrigue, corruption in high places, greed, treason, murder, and sacrifice. Human weakness and vulnerability are exposed, as are also the positive forces of love and friendship. The action is fast paced, with insights into the behaviour of some of the main characters being provided with flashback, a technique which is not completely successful. A

large and complicated cast of characters has both males and females in leading roles. All characters are adults. The treatment of complex adult emotions is, however, rather superficial, with little exploration of genuine feeling. This book will appeal to a limited audience.

Daddy's back: A story of the supernatural is a rather chilling tale for those readers who have a fascination for the supernatural and occult arts and practices. The university setting conveniently allows the main character, a first-year student, to use the resources of the library to find answers to some vexing questions which arise when she begins to dabble in matters beyond her understanding. Amanda, whose father has recently drowned, becomes involved in a bizarre chain of events surrounding her father's "return." The geographical location of St. John's is of no significance to the story.

Paul Hazard (1944) maintains that while children's books keep alive a spirit of nationality, they also keep alive a sense of humanity. While they describe their own native land lovingly, Hazard believes, "each of them is a messenger that goes beyond mountains and rivers, beyond the seas of the very ends of the world in search of new friendships" (146). All of the books discussed in this essay are by Newfoundland authors/illustrators. They may be considered regional in that most of them are set in Newfoundland, have characters who speak in rich Newfoundland dialects and have a Newfoundland colour and flavour. Thus, in a sense, they define and describe Newfoundland. Most of these books, however, are not regional in any narrow or parochial manner. With varying degrees of success, they transcend geographical boundaries to deal with themes of universal interest; increasingly they blend the regional with the universal. In so doing they may help make Canada's youngest province better known to the rest of Canada at the same time that they provide pleasurable reading experiences. They may, indeed, as Lillian Smith observes, provide "a sheet anchor in a high wind." In the sharing of books, Hazard claims, "every country gives and every country receives...and so it comes about that in our first impressionable years the universal republic of childhood is born" (146). Books from Newfoundland have much to contribute to this "universal republic."

Thirty-six (ninety percent) of the forty books included in this review have been published in the past decade, twenty-four (sixty percent) having been published in the past five years. It must be noted, however, that many of the children's books published in Newfoundland have suffered and still suffer from poor packaging. Some are poorly bound and are generally unattractive. Moreover, noteworthy books such as Moore's *Good-bye momma*, Dawe's *Land-wash days* and Manuel's *That fine summer* have been permitted to go out of print. This is unfortunate.

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