

# Profile: The Historical Fiction of Barbara Greenwood

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**Résumé:** Cet article consacré aux récits historiques de Barbara Greenwood est fondé sur une entrevue accordée par l'auteur et une lecture de son oeuvre.

**Summary:** This article about the historical fiction of children's author Barbara Greenwood, is based on an interview with Barbara Greenwood and a reading of her work.



It has always been a function of society to impart a knowledge of its past to its young. Apparently, since the dawn of time people have scratched pictures on rocks and told tales of derring-do around the fire. In the Victorian era, children were given great books full of historical facts, many of which they were required to memorize. The lengthy descriptive passages of the real life hero's adventures supposedly made these books interesting. By today's standards, these non-fiction accounts are very dry indeed. Fortunately for modern children, fiction is no longer frowned upon as a teaching tool. Furthermore, many people believe, as Barbara Smucker writes, that history should be "lived, not just studied" (89). Smucker adds that historical fiction provides a way for young readers to "become participants in the historical event. They take part in the invasions, the escapes, and come face to face with both villains and heroes." Countless children in the United States and Canada have been able to partake in such exciting fictional historical adventures through the pen of well-known children's author Barbara Greenwood. She has introduced young adults to the Mackenzie Rebellion of 1837, and to the Fenian Raids on the eve of Confederation through her novels, *A Question of Loyalty* and *A Spy in the Shadows*. Her enormously successful *A Pioneer Story: The Daily Life of a Canadian Family in 1840* (known as *A Pioneer Sampler* in the States) has done much to familiarize youth with that time period.

The Toronto-based author developed her career through a number of different children's books. Her best known include a biography of Jean Little, one of Klondike nurse Rachel Hannah and a guide to creative writing for young children written with Pat Hancock. She has worked as an elementary school teacher and currently teaches creative writing at Ryerson. Greenwood has

served as president of CANSCAIP (The Canadian Society of Children's Authors, Illustrators and Performers). While editor of the CANSCAIP newsletter she was instrumental in bringing out *Presenting Children's Authors, Illustrators and Performers*, a book of interviews with CANSCAIP members. Certainly, Greenwood has earned a respected place in the world of Canadian children's literature, capped, perhaps, by winning The Mr. Christie Children's Book Award, The Ruth Schwartz Award and The Children's Literature Roundtables of Canada Information Award for *Pioneer Story*.

In 1994 *Pioneer Story* became an instant hit with middle readers, parents, teachers and critics.<sup>1</sup> Its across-the-board success is due, in part, to Kids Can's four point approach: a combination of pictures, crafts, non-fiction sections and fictional stories. *Pioneer Story* happily exemplifies how publishers can successfully bring history to a demanding child audience whose world is increasingly hands-on and visually driven. In the book, ample and engaging pencil drawings by Heather Collins make the past real for young readers. Sometimes art even erases the boundaries of time altogether, as when Collins has a pioneer girl looking in awe at a contemporary boy blowing a huge bubble from chewing gum! This particular illustration accompanies a section that encourages children to try chewing grains of wheat as the European settlers did. From making cheese to shadow puppets, activities provide another way for kids to get involved with the past. Greenwood explained that although she was at first hesitant to try her hand at writing "how-to," Kids Can's philosophy is to publish interactive books with projects which can be accomplished without adult supervision by any urban child living in an apartment. Often Greenwood's scientifically-minded husband, Bob, came to her aid, coming up with ways to make simple scales and the like. She found she enjoyed this kind of writing. Moreover, her readers enjoyed the crafts, as attested by one boy who assured her that they worked; he had tried them *all*. Greenwood had so much material left over that Kids Can plans to release a craft book soon.

Certainly *Pioneer Story's* crafts and pictures help engage children. They may find the non-fiction sections interesting, too. Written in a breezy style, these mini-historical notes follow the stories and give more details about related topics. For example, a section on stinging insects and beelore follows the story of the Robertson children's discovery of a honey tree. These nonfiction sections undoubtedly give weight to the book in the hands of the adult buyer. The authority conveyed by non-fiction is probably what prompted many critics to call this book a "must have" for the classroom, more so than if it had contained only pictures, crafts and fictional stories.<sup>2</sup> In fact, in reviews and bestseller lists, *Pioneer Story* is often categorized as a work of non-fiction.<sup>3</sup>

In the stories, Greenwood's ability to create easily believable characters undoubtedly attracts the young readers. Through a series of vignettes, the reader follows the Robertsons, a family of Scottish descent living in Eastern Canada, through a year of their lives. Out of the family of nine, Greenwood chooses delightful ten-year-old Sarah and nine-year-old Willy as the main guides into yesteryear. Members of the loveable Robertson clan have been compared to the

Wilder family of *Little House on the Prairie* fame.<sup>4</sup> It appears, however, that giving up stiff-jointed characters in historical fiction means that their creative substitutes sometimes move a little too freely. Such actions occur, for example, at a corn-husking bee, after a Robertson girl pushes a boy into a pile of corn while on-lookers cry “You’ve wrecked it, you dummy” (174). Similar happenings and comments are perhaps not totally accurate historically, but create lively depictions which aptly serve the purpose of making the past interesting and accessible.

Greenwood’s skill at characterization has been praised in her works for older children. As a child, Greenwood remembers, “I wanted to read about people who were like me.”<sup>5</sup> She believes children today relate in the same way to their literary heroes. To create her character, Greenwood tries to imagine who she would have been in the past. “I wouldn’t have been Queen Elizabeth,” she laughs. Importantly, Greenwood and other authors, such as Marianne Brandis, choose to represent everyday characters, apprentices and farm girls, rather than the leaders of the country.<sup>6</sup> The Emma Trilogy published by Porcupine’s Quill consists of *The Tinderbox*, *Quarter-Pie Window*, and *The Sign of the Scales*. *Fireship*, reviewed in CCL vol. 79, 1995, and her recently released *Rebellion* are also not to be missed.<sup>7</sup> These authors reflect trends in historiography and literature of depicting the traditionally unempowered people in order to repair an unbalanced picture created by the overemphasis historians formerly gave to “great men and great events.”<sup>8</sup> “Our country was built by those people much more so than by big names in history,” Greenwood says. “Those are the people whose stories don’t get told.” Today’s youth now have the opportunity to read in historical fiction the stories of members of various ethnic groups and women from all across Canada. Of course, contemporary writers are still blinkered by social tastes and requirements. Greenwood agreed that Rebecca in *Spy in the Shadows* and Deborah in *A Question of Loyalty* might seem a little too “peppy” for women of the 1800s. However, writing historical fiction permitted her to try to balance this by creating an atmosphere in which Deborah might have grown up in this fashion and also by contrasting her life with that of the sheltered Isabella.

Writing about the lives of fictional women and others, Greenwood felt freer than when writing her non-fiction work about the life of a nurse in the Klondike, Rachel Hannah. In non-fiction, she had to stick to the facts. In historical fiction, she can imagine beyond them to create a fuller picture for her readers. Part of the realism she creates comes from the details she includes. Her work at the historic Gibson house gave her a sensual perception of life in the last century. In preparation for writing, Greenwood states her goal is to gather enough information so that she can imagine the “typical day” of her characters. She then selects only a few “telling details” to give her created world an authentic feel. *Toronto Star* writer Sharon McKay found *A Spy in the Shadows* refreshingly free of the “lengthy descriptive blather that often bores children,” yet still realistic.<sup>9</sup>

Another way Greenwood achieves a seemingly realistic depiction of Upper Canadians in both *A Question of Loyalty* and *A Spy in the Shadows* is through

her excellent dialogue. She sometimes reports the speech of the German, British, Scottish and Irish settlers in the Niagara Peninsula in a humorous way that delights young readers.<sup>10</sup> Greenwood credits this talent to her “musical ear,” which helps her listen to the cadence of people’s speech. Representing so many ethnic groups also permits her to show young readers different sides of the same conflict and it is the conflict which Greenwood feels is the “heart” of her story.<sup>11</sup>

Greenwood would like children to think that they are embarking on an adventure rather than taking part in a dull history lesson when they open one of her books. The emotions experienced by the protagonist “cross the generations,” she feels. Even though readers may not, like “Deborah” in *A Question of Loyalty*, find a rebel hiding in their family barn, they still “find themselves,” Greenwood says, “in situations where they’ve been scared and they’ve had to make a difficult decision.” She cites the example of people resisting peer pressure and turning their backs on a drug dealer, in order to do what they know is right. Greenwood often finds her novels on reading lists for English classes when the topic of “choices” is to be discussed. Safely removed in time, historical fiction permits a discussion of issues that might be too sensitive in a present-day context. Placing sympathetic characters in situations in which they must decide which values to uphold is a technique which, when successfully employed, captivates the young adult reader. Indeed, Barbara Smucker cites a letter she received from a seventh-grader who “felt very close to the characters [and] understood every one of [the hero’s] problems ...”<sup>12</sup>

Smucker also speaks of the “unexpected reward” she received when she discovered that young readers of historical fiction find “these past events relevant for an understanding of today.”<sup>13</sup> Not only the inner conflict of the main character, but the larger conflict, or the “great event” in which the hero plays some part — these provide teen-agers with some perspective for measuring today’s world. While writing *Spy in the Shadows*, a work that takes place during the period of the Fenian raids, Greenwood was not aware that terrorism in Ireland was something “very much a part of the newspapers of the time.” Writers, she supposes, are drawn to a particular event, because in some way it has a “resonance” for them. She chose to set *A Question of Loyalty* in the period of the 1837 Rebellion because she had grown up not very far from Montgomery’s Tavern and had always been intrigued by the historical plaque. She discovered “something exciting really happened here in this place where I live.” Greenwood wanted to share that exciting thing with her audience. Children need to know that “the country that we’re living in at the moment just didn’t appear out of nothing. We’re standing on the shoulders of the people that came before us,” she declares.

My recent experience while working as a museum Education and Program Co-ordinator provided me with an occasion to witness the concern in Ontario for the future generation and the teaching of “the story of Canada.” Teachers continually complained about cut-backs affecting visits to historic sites. Debates raged as to whether or not the new “Common Curriculum” paid adequate attention to the teaching of any sort of history. It seems increasingly that

historical fiction may be one of the few avenues left in which children can be given a grounding in the past which they deserve.

## NOTES

- 1 See, for example, my review in this journal, "A Pioneer Success Story," (*CCL* 83).
- 2 For example, see reviews in *Quill and Quire*, Sept. 1994 and *Publisher's Weekly*, January 16, 1995.
- 3 "Emergency Librarian's Bestsellers," *Emergency Librarian*, Jan.-Feb., 1995. "A Pioneer Sampler: The Daily Life of a Pioneer Family in 1840," *Publisher's Weekly*, 16/01/1996, courtesy of Kids Can.
- 4 "A Pioneer Sampler: The Daily Life of a Pioneer Family in 1840," *Publisher's Weekly*, 16/01/1996, courtesy of Kids Can.
- 5 Interview with Barbara Greenwood and Iain Goodall. Aug. 22, 1996.
- 6 The excellent books of Marianne Brandis have heroes from similar walks of life as Greenwood's. Brandis's Emma, of the Emma trilogy, and Greenwood's Deborah are born into farm families. Brandis's Adam Wheeler in *Rebellion* and Greenwood's Liam O'Brien afford the reader a look at the world of the apprentice in the last century. Brandis's historical fiction for young adults is published by The Porcupine Quill's Press, Erin, Ontario.
- 7 Jeanette Lynes and S.R. MacGillivray state this in a review in *CCL*. They wrote: "For the last two decades, Canadian writers of historical fiction for young readers have been more focused on shoes, ships, sealing wax and cabbages than on kings. The emphasis has been to foreground the lives of ordinary people in an historical context rather than recount tales of the rich and famous, or infamous" (*CCL* 76).
- 9 Sharon McKay, "Simple poetry books that can live forever on your bookshelf," *The Toronto Star*, March 14, 1991, courtesy of Kids Can.
- 10 McKay, "Simple poetry books."
- 11 "Meet Barbara Greenwood," Kids Can Media Release.
- 12 Smucker, "Historical Fiction," 90.
- 13 Smucker, "Historical Fiction," 90.

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