

past makes it no less real. Increasingly, I am brought up short by the arrogance of the present, the assumption that the most relevant and therefore important stories, are happening now. Halldor Laxness's words are important because they imply an open approach to history. They encourage us to think about the relationship between imagination and time. They visualize a continuum that is vertical and horizontal. They validate seeing history through fiction.

Joan Clark's novel, *The Dream Carvers*, her seventh children's book, received the *Geoffrey Bilson Award for Historical Fiction for Children*, and *Mr. Christie's Book Award*. She lives in St. John's, Newfoundland, and her books are available through Penguin and Stoddart.

ILLUSTRATING HISTORY

Heather Collins

Résumé: L'auteur décrit le travail de documentation historique auquel elle a dû se livrer afin d'illustrer l'ouvrage intitulé *A Pioneer Story*.



Heather Collins

When I was asked by Kids Can Press if I'd be interested in illustrating a book on pioneer life in Canada, my initial response was, "Why me? I'm not known as an historical illustrator."

I enjoy both picture-book work and non-fiction work, which is unusual, since illustrators usually fall into one camp or the other. As it turned out, *A Pioneer Story* required an illustrator who could do both narrative illustration for the fictional story chapters and explanatory illustration for the non-fiction sections. And because I'd already illustrated another Kids Can title, *Writing, A Fact and Fun Book*, which included a few historical images for which I'd had to hunt down references, they were convinced that what I didn't know, I could find out.

So the job was mine! My first chore was to estimate my time so that the production schedule could be drawn up — no easy task, as I'd never worked on a book of such length — 240 pages! I felt shaky, but estimated five months, and told Kids Can six. Little did I know!

My task was eased immeasurably by working with Barbara Greenwood, an extraordinary writer, with the same passion for detail and accuracy that I have. We were well-matched and developed a relationship of mutual respect. As Barbara did her own research into the period, she did something which proved invaluable to me, and which helped make the book both accurate and the award-

winner it became. As she discovered visual material, she photocopied it and subsequently compiled it by chapter and subject. The material included many old photographs, drawings and engravings — some by C.W. Jeffries and many by two American sources who wrote and illustrated extensively in the period. They were illustrators primarily, and the drawings they did of the period were acts of historical preservation: ink drawings of everyday scenes and objects, such as barn-raising bees, stoneboats, fences, tools and door latches, were there for me to refer to when needed. Barbara presented all of this to me in two huge binders, along with detailed descriptions of the main characters, farm and environs as she saw them.

Then it was my turn. Beyond the historical, I needed pictures of farm animals, chickens, geese, trees, bees, flowers, etc. I purchased a number of books, but as usual, found most of my reference material at the local children's library. (I usually stagger out carrying far more than the allowable quota of three books per subject.) Two binders soon became three.

The portrayal of the Robertson family was next — and key to everything else. I wanted them to have distinctive personalities, feel genuine and be consistent. I'm really bothered when the characters in period books look like twentieth-century people in old clothes, or look too attractive. These people had to look care-worn as life was very hard. For a book of this length, I needed models and I found them by studying my photo albums, my neighbours, and my friends. My friend Sally became Ma, and her son and Daughter, Willy and Sarah. Another friend became Pa, and his daughter, Meg, and so on. I own a set of professional photography lights and used them to heighten the drama in the hundreds of photos I took.

My mind, after all these years of drawing, is like a filing cabinet of images. Once I have drawn something a few times it gets permanently filed, and I find I can then draw it from memory. However, women moving around, kneeling and bending in long skirts and aprons — for these images I turned up empty file cards. So I also went to Gibson House in North York and hired two of the staff to pose for me doing chores in and around the kitchen. I also went to Black Creek Pioneer Village to see the old log house and the wood frame house which Barbara had used as models for the Robertsons' first home and subsequent new house. There I took several rolls of film of the furniture, architectural details, the interiors and the exteriors. This research was not all done at once but in total probably took me no more than two weeks because I had such a wealth of material in the binders.

Despite all of this research, as I started to work on the rough illustrations, I was confronted with the need for historical accuracy in the myriad details that make up each composition.

“Would Sarah have to wear her bonnet all the time?”

“What kind of pipe would Pa have smoked?”

“Would the kids wear those heavy boots in the heat of summer?”

I'm sure Barbara must have been a pioneer in an earlier incarnation because, fortunately for me, she always knew the answer.

One of my concerns was having to rely on so much illustrated reference

which, of course, was copyrighted material. But as I worked through the roughs, the problem simply went away. I developed new angles when looking at a scene or object and basically used the reference to understand how things were constructed, or to absorb a sense of atmosphere.

The designer for *A Pioneer Story* was my husband Blair Kerrigan. (Kids Can Press had put us together again after the success of *The Kids Cottage Book*.) Over the years, we've developed a very compatible way of working together. Blair designs with my drawing style in mind, often making suggestions as to what should be illustrated. He provides a lot of the thinking behind my work. Because our studios are just two floors apart, if I hit a snag or prefer, for instance, a vertical space to the supplied horizontal, Blair can provide me with a modified layout in minutes. The look, rhythm and accessibility of *A Pioneer Story* is his contribution and a huge part of its success.

After finishing half the roughs, I submitted them to Kids Can. Everyone was enthusiastic with my decision to introduce the fictional characters to the non-fiction sections, both to give these sections a more narrative feeling and to make the book more cohesive. I was, however, way behind schedule, and the decision was made to postpone the publication date by six months, much to my relief.

I ended up needing the full year as the number of drawings grew to approximately four hundred. It was a year of feeling like I was living in times gone by, and I dragged my family back with me. I could be found sitting at my desk in an 1840s bonnet (supplied by Barbara), staring at myself in my studio mirror to see how it looked. My son Max posed wrapped in a (blanket) shawl pretending to feed chickens; Blair in a (dish towel) loincloth pretending to tickle trout. Periodically, I could be found stretched out on my bed, every bit as exhausted as the hard-working pioneers must have been. It was all very intense, absorbing and ultimately satisfying but I was relieved to have my life back when I finally finished.

Since the publication of *A Pioneer Story*, Kids Can has continued to offer me new challenges and stretch me in new directions. *The Kids Nature Series* and *My First Look Series* (Spring, 1997) moved me into nature illustration. Although I hadn't considered myself a nature illustrator any more than I had seen myself as an historical illustrator, I was surprised how much I enjoyed drawing bugs, birds, trees and weeds and my work has grown and improved as a result.

Next year will see Barbara and me working together on another historical book, and I can only hope she is busy photocopying and compiling wonderful binders for me again.

Heather Collins lives in Toronto with her husband and two teenage children and has been illustrating childrens' books for over twenty years. The numerous titles to her credit have garnered her a well-earned reputation for introducing believable and lively characters to children through her art. Some of her titles are *The Bare Naked Book*, *Heather Hits Her First Home Run*, *Come Sit By Me*, *The Kids Cottage Book*, *Hiding*, and, of course, *The Kids Cottage Book*.