

1930s, and most of the main concerns are introduced: the conflict between the main character, Chris Haldane and his rival, Billy Turner, over the girl, Jessie Watson; the pull of the wilderness on Chris, and his conflicting desire for the city; his obligation to tradition and to visit the mountains of the title; an effortlessly evoked sense of the camaraderie between the cowboys; and mention of the Bedaux expedition, an unsuccessful attempt (based on an actual event) to drive five modified Citroens through the Rockies and forge a trail through to the Pacific. These conflicts and concerns are naturally woven together as Chris joins the expedition and tests himself against difficulties he encounters. Whereas in *Smoke that Thunders* the people David meets are largely caricatures, in this novel David's companions on the journey are a varied and mixed lot of eccentrics, young cowboys, and sophisticated filmmakers. Like David, Chris Haldane is the main focus, but the author perhaps places too much of a burden on him. Not only is he tough and adaptable, but his sensitivity attracts Jessie Watson. His natural athleticism and courage also captures the attention of the filmmakers who are filming the expedition, and his mixed blood (his mother is from the Beaver tribe; his father a Danish immigrant) allows Shirlee Smith Matheson to introduce a spiritual dimension as Chris, it is suggested, is "a chosen one" (49). As he comes to recognize and accept his role as guardian of the land, he is also the only one to question Bedaux's motives. While the novel works well at the level of adventure, and does skilfully weave "fact and fantasy" (80), its conclusion moves towards a kind of new-age mysticism with Chris's vision of ecological degradation in the future. Nonetheless, his vision does complement the lovingly-depicted landscape and its people which the author has produced, and his ascent of the mountain where he experiences the vision is much more portentous than David's in *Smoke that Thunders*.

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An Arctic Journey

Napachee. Robert Fagan. Beach Holme, 1999. 120 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 0-88878-403-1.

Napachee, Robert Feagan's first novel, is in many respects a conventional wilderness survival story for young adults: as in Farley Mowat's *Lost in the Barrens*, two young people from different cultures find themselves alone in the northern wilderness, journeying through isolation and hardships to become reunited with family. On the journey, the traditional lore of the native youth provides the means of their survival, and the young travellers end their journey with renewed respect for the skills and endurance of the aboriginal people of the North. As in Jean George's *Julie of the Wolves*, bonding with wild animals is a central element of the journey: in *Napachee* the young people are accompanied on their journey by a polar bear cub. The journey itself is a very ambitious one — overland from Fort Providence, south of Yellowknife, to the Mackenzie River, and then by boat to Sachs Harbour on Banks Island in the Beaufort Sea.

Raised in the Northwest Territories, Feagan is sensitive to the different landscapes and groups of people who live there; he comments on dialects, and includes a glossary drawn from Inuktitut, Inuvialuktun and Slavey. The novel is told from the point of view, though not in the words, of the title character. Napachee is half Inuit and half Inuvialuit, but like most of the other young people in Sachs Harbour he prefers to speak English, and dreams of living in a city in the South. His tradition-minded father tries to teach the unwilling Napachee to become a hunter like himself; this conflict between father and son is the focus of the first half of the book, as Napachee finds a way to get to Edmonton with some white men who have captured a polar bear cub for the zoo there, but quickly discovers that city life doesn't suit him. The second half describes Napachee's journey back to Banks Island, accompanied by the bear and by a zoo official's daughter who wants to show her father that she can look after herself.

Themes characteristic of the survival story genre, such as proving oneself, mastering wilderness skills, and bonding with animals and with someone from a different background, easily lend themselves to didacticism, and in places *Napachee* is so concerned with giving information that the story suffers. Particularly, there is a problem with voice. Napachee's thoughts and feelings — his frustration with his father's attitude, his confusion in the city, and his change of heart about where he belongs — are made natural and convincing, but when he speaks, he seldom sounds like a thirteen-year-old boy. Arguing with other teenagers in Edmonton, he could be giving a formal lecture: the syntax, vocabulary and content of his speech just don't ring true. "It wasn't until the 1960s that aboriginal people in the arctic started to live in communities. Before that we were very nomadic and moved when we had to for food and shelter" (48). Most of the characters sound the same when they talk, and all but the villain have this disconcerting tendency to fall into information-giving speeches.

Another problem with the storytelling here is in the motivation of the characters, and the way their difficulties are resolved. The explanations the teenagers give for making their unnecessarily arduous journey into the arctic wilderness seem perfunctory — hardly sufficient reason for them to persevere once their initial pique and the glamour of the undertaking has worn off. But, improbably, the glamour never does wear off, and the journey doesn't even seem all that arduous. We are given a few scenes, of Jo battling black flies and Napachee spearing trout, to evoke a sense of how they manage, but their success seems as unlikely as their decision to try in the first place. Problem after problem is resolved fortuitously, and they are able to pass through several communities, with the polar bear alongside, and get help without anyone alerting the search parties or notifying the desperate parents.

In this almost magical way that difficulties vanish and help appears, Feagan's novel moves away from the realist conventions of the wilderness survival genre and toward a mythic approach to storytelling. Prophetic dreams, intuitive communication with animals and, toward the end, the inclusion of traditional stories about landscape link the novel with a different narrative tradition — that of Napachee's own people. There are hints that his unusual ability to communicate with animals may give him a destiny higher than that of the great hunter his father wanted him to be. Perhaps in the sequel suggested by these hints, Feagan will find a way for the

mythic and the realistic approaches to narrative to work more easily together.

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"Just like Manitoba": Didacticism, Universalism, Eurocentrism

Naomi: The Strawberry Blonde of Pippu Town. Karmel Schreyer. Great Plains Fiction, 1999. 180 pp. \$12.95 paper, ISBN 1-894283-05-8.

In the story of a twelve-year-old Manitoba girl's cultural adjustment to Japan, the author's didactic mission overwhelms what otherwise might be a moving story: the back cover promises that "Readers will learn that they too can overcome challenges, and that people have the same basic needs, no matter where they live." Not only does the book's didacticism often become so acute that it moves beyond a challenge to a major impediment, but this statement prefaces the Eurocentric strategy of universalism at work throughout the text.

The book, divided into chapters whose titles give most of the plot away, opens with Naomi waking in an "unfamiliar" room and whispering to her sleeping mother, "Why did you bring me here, mom?" (11). Within the next few pages, her mother proceeds to answer that very question, at once informing the reader and reminding Naomi that "things haven't been easy since your father and I got divorced" and that "when I got laid off" it became clear to her that they would eventually have to leave Manitoba (13). The relationship between mother and daughter — usually one of communication, negotiation, and compromise — works well throughout the book, but what emerges in this first scene is that the decision to move to Japan for a year is entirely Naomi's mother's. Naomi's fear of the unknown is made much more acute by the implicit realization that she has been placed in this unfamiliar room largely against her own will.

The general story, told by a third-person narrator who follows Naomi's perspective, is reasonably believable, and Naomi's feelings of displacement and uncertainty are entirely genuine — except, of course, when she consciously "began to really feel sorry for herself" (16, 39) or when she "wondered if she would ever feel so self-assured in this strange place" (22). Perhaps the book's generalized Eurocentrism cannot be entirely avoidable given the perspective of a Ukrainian-Canadian pre-teenager, but the third-person narrator who often interrupts the flow of the story to insert a moral or a lesson should not let Naomi take everything for granted: Naomi affirms in the narrative that *ocha* tea is not like "normal tea" (19), identifies a beautiful building as a "church" (40) and later asks her new Japanese friends if they "know the Bible" (57): no one bothers to comment on Naomi's internalized Christocentrism and, surprisingly, her friends answer in the affirmative — the Christian missionary discovers that the heathen have already been converted.