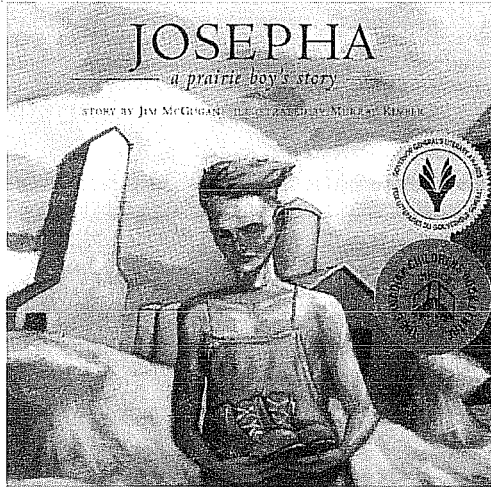


## PRAIRIE SPRITES AND ENCHANTMENTS OF PLACE

**Josepha: A Prairie Boy's Story.** Jim McGugan. Illus. Murray Kimber. Red Deer College Press. 1994. Unpag., \$ 8.95 paper. ISBN 0-88995-142-X. **Tess.** Hazel Hutchins. Illus. Ruth Ohi. Annick Press. 1995. Unpag., \$ 5.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-394-3.



Cree traditional teacher Pauline Shirt founded Canada's original First Nations school in Toronto in 1976. Called Wandering Spirit Survival School to commemorate her grandfather who was slain in the Riel rebellion, her curriculum focused around traditional stories of the Great Plains and woodland Great Lakes. When we last talked I asked her how long it takes settler culture to feel the spirit of Turtle Island (North America). She said, "... it usually takes between four or five generations," but, "children were quite able to see through the cultural hedgerows that blind most adults to the spiritual presence of the land."

Her answer guides an understanding of how story can conjure resonance with the land. These books attempt to capture those elusive but powerful moments of a child's profound sense of oneness with prairie spirit. Thus, stories can be a medium for expressing the spirit of the land. Yet, within any spiritual realm there are spaces urging us to forget the land and the children and go about fulfilling adult agendas. Adults in *Tess* alternate between virtuous farmers and a stytic villain who reveals a soft heart. In *Josepha*, adults appear as kindly one room school teachers or larger-than-life harvest hands.

In *Josepha*, McGugan's text spins a harvest yarn beneath Kimber's azure skies and sour dough biscuit clouds. Chronicling a vignette of cultural and educational pain in the wheatland shadows of grain elevators, Josepha is a country boy whose intelligence thrives in a world of jackknives and grain sacks but whose speaking only expresses the cadence and verse of harvest work songs.

Attuned to autumnal rhythms and rattling buckboards, Josepha knows the place for his abilities. They are meant for the coulee and the wet prairie beneath his feet. To him, the classroom is a tangle of words. Neither romantic about nor sour toward Josepha's exceptionality, McGugan and Kimber spin rapture around pastoral memories of Josepha's short but influential presence in the life of another farmboy. Hints of Boo Radley (*To Kill A Mockingbird*) embellish Josepha's portrayal but these curiosities occupy a place of realism in the book. We want to know how Josepha hears the spirit of the land when others do not, but Josepha has no words and we are left instead to admire his engagement with the land. Rich imagery of Josepha's connectedness swallows the reader like the very prairie itself and we are left knowing that the book is very much about Josepha but it also illustrates the permanence of our memories of the places of childhood. *Josepha* passes Pauline's test. And it won a Governor General's Award.

*Tess* is triumphant. Resonant with animals, this is a story of a prairie sprite awash in the intricacies of cowponies, coyotes and a Sheltie pup. The book narrates prairie wonders, from the movements of snowy coyotes to the camouflage of burrowing owls, and gets us there with a grittiness that recalls summertime odours when cow patties were burned for prairie fuel. Tess ropes and rides through her story of horse and buggy prairie life. Hutchins is to be commended on the accuracy of her depictions of rural poverty, coyotes' deserved reputation for dog-gnawing craftiness, and the splendours of prairie flora and fauna. Hutchins' lesson to the reader about a farmgirl's childhood is an overdue correction to long-standing assumptions about the burdens and boredom of yesteryear's prairie life. Ohi's illustrations are subtle, unassuming and cast a spell of delicate softness. These airy illustrations befit Tess's ethic of care for the natural world. *Tess* passes Pauline's test, too.

Some modern readers may be turned-off by a young girl's gathering of cow patties or at a barefoot truant. So be it, that's how it was. The Plains Indians and Ernest Thompson-Seton well understood in earlier times what these books are about — understanding connection and caring as elemental to the childhood experience of place.

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