

probably ask me if I found a place to live yet. And I'll have to say no to that too. And I haven't started school." Slowly, Melanie comes to learn of her mother's emotional frailty, but not before she plays a few games with her anger. A visit by two social workers, prompted by accurate reports that there isn't enough food at home to feed Melanie, leads Melanie to exaggerate her mother's poverty as an act of revenge. Melanie thus earns a trip for herself back home to Kōhkom and Elk Crossing. Back in the protective arms of her grandmother, Melanie experiences something new: she misses her mother.

There are many well-crafted scenes in *Melanie Bluelake's Dream*: a sudden recognition that the Saskatchewan River (Cree for "swift flowing water") flows between Prince Albert and Elk Crossing, an attempt to save a trapped Canada Goose, a developing close friendship with another displaced Cree girl, a birthday celebration that falls flat suddenly, and a reconciliation with a classroom bully. The book ends with a consideration of home — the content of Melanie's dream — and a new recognition of complex, often contradictory emotions. Betty Dorion is to be congratulated for her easy recognition that Cree is one of the many languages spoken in this country and for her representation of some feelings that are distinct to Native Canadians.

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### Safe in the Belonging Place

*The Belonging Place.* Jean Little. Viking, 1997. 124 pp. \$19.99 cloth. ISBN 0-670-87593-7.

Jean Little's readers know that they can trust her to make things come right in the end. Her protagonists are what Sheila Egoff called safe survivors — children who, whatever their troubles, can ultimately depend on loving and wise adults to help them put the world together. But *The Belonging Place* is too comfortable. In *From Anna*, *Different Dragons*, and *Mamma's Going to Buy You a Mockingbird*, to name only three of Little's many books, the central characters struggle with real difficulties. We worry for them, suffer with them, and cheer at the satisfactory resolution of their problems. Unfortunately, Elspet, the narrator and protagonist of *The Belonging Place*, doesn't command that sort of engagement.

The story begins at the happy ending. Elspet is sixteen, living on a small farm in the wilderness of Upper Canada. She tells us that she is writing down the events of her life because she has a broken leg and Granny has given her ink and paper to keep her occupied. A novel that begins at the end may still be full of tension: although we know the final situation, how the characters got there and what the concluding circumstances mean to them

can keep us guessing. But Elspet's prologue answers most of the key questions in advance, and in the subsequent story of her young childhood in Scotland and her family's emigration to Canada her own uncertainties are unconvincing.

Elspet's mother is killed by a runaway horse in the streets of Aberdeen when she is four years old. Elspet's sailor father takes her to her uncle and aunt in Glen Buchan, where she immediately becomes absorbed as a daughter into the warm, competent, welcoming family. Her occasional fear that she doesn't really belong is obviously ungrounded. There is ample demonstration of the love that surrounds her. As a result, she seems self-absorbed and even a little whiney whenever she worries about having a belonging place. Is she really loved? Will they go to Canada? Will she never see her beloved Granny again? Will someone catch cholera when they arrive in Montreal? The questions are answered before they even arise. The only real discovery for the reader is Elspet's mother's story, which is gradually revealed and works well.

The charm of the book lies in the details of its historical setting, especially in Scotland. The Canadian half of the story is not as engaging. I kept comparing it (to its disadvantage) with two much stronger novels set in roughly the same time and place: Marianne Brandis's *The Quarter-Pie Window* and Janet Lunn's *Shadow in Hawthorn Bay*. *The Belonging Place* is no more than a pleasant story that leaves the reader with a cosy feeling.

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### **Dramatized Biography: Fact or Fiction?**

*Nellie's Quest*. Connie Brummel Crook. Stoddart, 1998. 128 pp. \$6.99 paper. ISBN 0-7736-7469-1.

*Nellie's Quest* is the second in a series of dramatized historical biographies (author's term, CCL 83:84) on Nellie McClung. Through the accessible medium of a life story, Crook presents this important Canadian activist and author to a new, young generation of readers. To recreate Nellie in 1895-6, the author draws, sometimes loosely, on McClung's autobiographical writings. Crook cites her references — thanks due to her and her publisher — thus making further reading on Nellie, by Nellie, possible.

Crook clarifies Nellie's political concerns well, explaining, for example, the connection between WCTU membership and female suffrage. Women, typically the victims of drunkenness, would vote for its ultimate solution: Prohibition. Crook's descriptions of the seasons, the Manitoba countryside,