

Childerhose's Literary Offences

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Hockey Fever in Goganne Falls, R.J. Childerhose, Illustrated by
Doug Tanton. Macmillan, 1973. 169pp. \$5.95 Cloth.

I thought often of Mark Twain's hilarious but pointed "review" of the Leatherstocking Series while I was reading *Hockey Fever in Goganne Falls*. Twain claimed that Cooper "has scored 114 offenses against literary art out of a possible 115;" R.J. Childerhose doesn't score quite that high in *Hockey Fever*, but he comes close.

As a publisher, I realize the importance of a competent editor spending time over a manuscript before it is printed. Sad neglect of this chore during the production of *Hockey Fever*, results in a work which is, at times, embarrassing in its ineptness.

Hockey Fever is not a dull story: although predictable, it does move along. After an opening which describes the fire which burns down the town arena, we witness the local midget hockey team--the indomitable Gophers--raising funds to build a new rink. The final chapters are reserved for The Big Game, with the usual climax of a courageous goal in sudden-death overtime. Never was a seven-goal deficit overcome with such flamboyance.

The book is competent when it deals with hockey; in addition, a boy can pick up some good pointers concerning both necessary skills and a healthy attitude towards sports. The coach of the Gophers--Whisky Joe Taggart, a former N.H.L. star turned Town Drunk--insists upon tough practices. These are vividly described in detail, with the boys frantically skating and striving to master various skills in preparation for The Big Game. The opponents are the big-city dudes from Edmonton -- Edmontonians won't like this! -- who play the kind of hockey Whisky Joe loathes. Following the first period of the Big Game, Joe voices his feelings. He speaks to a dejected bunch of players, two of whom are bleeding: one because he was crosschecked which leaves his nose "misshapen, swelling fast, and crammed hard starboard like a disabled rudder" and the other because he was speared so that he has "blood leaking from a puncture in the groin." On this page, the best in the book in spite of the gore, Joe speaks truths about hockey which many adult readers would find valid:

"I over-matched you. You're playing out of your league." Joe's hands were fists deep in the pockets of his old black coat. "These Edmonton kids are well-coached. They're big, they're fast, they play Big League. Strictly Big League."

The peculiar voice of Joe Taggart went on. "I never taught you kids that style. I never taught you because I hate it so much it makes me sick."

His voice shook. "Sixteen years old these kids are, and already they can spear and cross-check with the worst of them."

The voice rose on a note of bitterness. "And they can go out there and knock you kids around, injure you, grind you into the ice. Real Big Leaguers!"

The bitter and compelling voice dropped to normal tones. "They can hurt you all right. They're big enough, and tough enough to do that much. Gooch here with a hole in him. Young Duck with his nose spread across his face. These Edmonton yahoos are good enough to do that."

The voice paused. There was a supercharged silence as Joe looked directly at his Gophers.

"But there isn't one of them good enough to carry your skates."

The shock was almost too much. Until this moment, Joe had never complimented them.

"You may take a shellacking tonight," he went on. "But it's not hockey. This spearing, this cross-checking, this holding and tripping. That isn't hockey." Joe paused, looking at each one of them. "You kids can play *hockey*."

The way Joe said "hockey" made it seem special, and right.

If only the whole book were like this! To maintain such a level, a good editor would have cut much dubious matter: a ludicrous subplot, some ineffective comic relief, the condoning of theft and other antisocial activities, and a cast of stock characters such as the Town Drunk and the Dumb Cop, the Stern Indian (a hero at Dieppe), and the Chinese Restaurant Owner. As for the Gophers, we discover the names of only four: the others, nameless and featureless, just lurk in the background, swelling the ranks. All the action, all the speaking, all the thinking, are done by Gaston (the graffiti specialist), Jimmy (son of the Stern Indian), Ike (son of the Local Bootlegger), and Andy (the Hero).

The writing in this book is often inept. Style? Sentence fragments. Childerhose's idea of style. Like this. And the description are sometimes embarrassing. For instance, the mother of Ike the Gopher goalie is "a gentle woman, more brought along by her children than she was able to bring them up." Surprising linguistic innovations also appear: "Hank's hammer spronged a flange-plate loose"; "Then he was swarming aboard"; "The roaring cars skitter and skurch onto the highway"; "The All-Stars were zooping around the ice"; "The All-Stars were lommed onto that puck."

An editor might have restrained the author from some of his poetic excess: "It was a matchless autumn morning on the prairies. A cool breeze re-mixing the disordered heap of multi-coloured leaves. Golden sunlight. Vacation-type birds making travel plans on the telephone wire leading into the school." More descriptive excess occurs when we are

told that the family was poor, so poor that "the children ate all day from a fly-crawling can of jam and a pile of home-made bread slashed off in two-inch chunks." Or—my favorite—the slop bucket under somebody's sink: "That pail had a dignity all its own. Perhaps it was the fetid serenity of its scum-covered contents, brightened here and there with an unsinkable, over-ripe tomato."

Hockey Fever contains just three illustrations. They are amateurish and inappropriate in style and treatment. Let us be glad that there are no more.

However, *Hockey Fever* is clearly designed not for you and me, but for the adolescent boy who is crazy about the game. Is it really going to bother him if the yarn is couched in slovenly prose? Probably not, but just as you wouldn't feed a child a delicious meal in a dog's dish, you shouldn't serve him a good story in substandard prose.

If Canada is going to establish a viable publishing industry, our major publishers must adopt high standards of excellence. I wonder if Macmillan of Canada should have allowed *Hockey Fever in Goganne Falls* to reach the market in its present state.

Robert Nielson is the editor of War and Revolution [Nelson, 1970], the author of Garney Henley: A Gentleman and a Tiger [Potlatch Publications, 1972] and the editor and publisher of Canadian Children's Annual [Potlatch Publications, 1974.]