

# A New Tradition

SARAH REID

*Canadian Children's Annual*, Robert Nielsen. Hamilton: Potlatch Publications, 1974. 176 pp. \$6.95 paper.

The Christmas Annuals of my youth were something that brightened the long hours after Christmas lunch, when all the adults had fallen noisily asleep on convenient couches. That was a quiet time when I could go through the annuals I had received, working out the puzzles and enjoying the stories. The stories were good - fantasy, folklore, and of course the ever-present adventure stories invariably centred either around a private boarding school or the 'hols' from that school.

I don't like to think that age has gilded my memories of those annuals because I know that they had no pretensions to great literary quality, but Bob Nielsen's *Canadian Children's Annual* didn't quite come up to my remembrance of those other annuals. I was left with a feeling of general disappointment about the book.

The cover is great - eye-catching, cheerful, and well-designed. I'd been looking forward to the Canadian Monster Map, so I pulled it out immediately. Alas, not one of the monsters was a truly Canadian monster, and it didn't even look like a good map. The monsters are all either Hollywood monsters (King Kong, Creature from the Blue Lagoon, Frankenstein, and an ape from Planet of the Apes), or they are continental monsters (Quasimodo). Where's Sasquatch? And aren't there any genuine Canadian sea-monsters living off the coast of the Maritimes?

The quality of the stories is uneven. It ranges from good through mediocre to dull, and finally at one point reaches excruciatingly bad. The good stories include "Bus Stop at Zero Village", in which a boy visiting relatives comes to terms with country values as opposed to city values; and "Buffalo Jump" which also has the distinction of being one of the few stories which gives any concession to feminism, as it has an Indian girl, discontented with her life of being expected to "just sit" disguising herself as a boy in order to get in on the buffalo hunt. The ending, although perhaps a bit implausible has the tribe's unusually enlightened head-man decreeing that henceforth the young braves would learn a "little" about preparing food and the girls would learn a "little" about hunting. It is unfortunate that so little attention is paid to girls in the adventure stories in this annual. At least all those boarding-school adventure stories had girls leading exciting lives. Only two or three of these stories spotlight girls. It's something to bear in mind for future issues.

Many of the stories are dull. One in particular, "Hotdog Dog" is so pedestrian that I can't imagine any child taking the time to read it beyond the first paragraph. A common fault that I noticed was that the

endings tend to be abrupt and anti-climactic. They bear the unmistakable stamp of a short story writer whose short story has run away with him and he has no idea how to end it. For example, "Hotdog Dog" ends this way: "Everyone claps and cheers. Gary and Jane go home happily with their prize dog. Mickey goes home with the prize, which is hotdogs." I think of it as the "Everybody was run over by a truck" method of ending stories.

The worst story of all is so bad that it is almost camp. "Sailing into Terror" is not only melodramatic, unbelievable, and inaccurate, it introduces into the youthful vocabulary such terms as "the crepuscular shadows of the engulfing torrents of rain", and "with his broken arm grating and pendulating painfully". Luckily there are enough generally good or acceptable stories that this really bad one stands out from the rest of the book, and maybe what they say about one rotten apple is not true.

The stories are the weakest part of the work. The strongest part is the "things-to-do" section. Most of the activities made me want to go and try them out immediately. The Loom Knitter sounds exciting and would probably appeal to both boys and girls. The build-it-yourself computer is a novel idea that sounds like a lot of fun to build and use. Unfortunately there is a mistake in the accompanying article regarding the binary number for 10 which, with new math around, I think many kids will notice. As for the recipes, I was disappointed that they found it necessary to make it clear that cooking is "not for girls only." I would have thought it would have been better to stress the positive and simply show boys cooking in the illustrations. Further, I think the directions are not complete enough. Saying "you can tell when the meat is done" just isn't accurate enough when you are dealing with children.

The informative articles are quite well done. They are for the most part breezy in style and put the information across painlessly. I wonder why there is a long article on Stonehenge, complete with photographs, however, when it would have been much more relevant to have an illustrated article on a visit to a Haida village, or to the Serpent Mounds in Ontario. At the risk of sounding depressingly chauvinist about this being a *Canadian* children's annual, I think many more Canadian children are likely to visit these monuments in the coming year than are likely to visit Stonehenge. But the articles, as I say, are generally well done. The physics article, "Introducing Mr. Bernoulli", for example, gives experiments to try and simple explanations of why an airplane stays up, or why a wind storm might pull off a barn roof. This is where the book is best.

The puzzles I found a bit hard for me to do in less than about 20-30 minutes, but that is probably not such a bad thing. Children will still try them and at least there are answers in the back of the book.

As for the physical aspects of the book, they are not too good. My copy is falling apart. The spine is broken and I am going to lose several pages at any minute. The cellucoating on the cover was peeling off when I got the book and that is a temptation too good to pass up. If Little Golden Books has found a way to avoid cellucoating peeling, why can't Potlatch Publications?

The drawings, with few exceptions, are either boring or confusing or just unpleasant. In one case a good story, "The Real Genius", is hampered by its illustrations. They completely fail to capture the spirit of the story or its characters. The glowing exception amongst the illustrators is somebody called Adrian Vanderlugt. His illustrations are beautiful and truly enhance any of the stories they are put with. The muskoxen on page 163 are practically worth the price of the book. The illustrations are in many cases badly placed on the page, as they draw the reader's eye off the page and away from the writing. Aside from the Monster Map, I think that the illustrations were my greatest disappointment. Let me just say that they leave a lot of room for improvement next year.

And I do think that there should be a next year. The *Canadian Children's Annual* has a lot of deficiencies, but none of them are insurmountable. It is a noble effort, and a tradition such as this is something that is needed. Generally I found the book disappointing, but not disappointing enough to hope that it doesn't become a regular thing. I hope we will see it again next year, but I also hope that we will see it much improved, both graphically and in the calibre of the writing. Canadian children need something to fill in those hours after Christmas lunch when all the grown-ups are asleep.

*Sarah Reid works for Macmillan of Canada, and also writes articles for Canada and the World, a history and social science magazine for junior and senior high schools.*