

Children's Literature in French-Speaking Canada

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In the province of Quebec in which 80% of the population is French speaking, children's literature was very slow in taking root. Before 1930, books given to children were impregnated with didacticism and edifying features. They were not books *for* children. Let's adopt as our own this remark by Paul Hazard: "If for centuries grown-ups did not even think of giving children appropriate clothes, how would it ever have occurred to them to provide children with suitable books?"¹

Louise Lemieux, in her book *Pleins Feux sur la littérature de Jeunesse au Canada français*, says with accuracy "Au Canada français la véritable littérature de jeunesse naît de la presse enfantine et elle prend son essor grâce à des revues et journaux pour enfants qui permettent de découvrir d'abord et de stimuler ensuite les écrivains pour la jeunesse." In French Canada genuine children's literature came from magazines for children, and it is through these magazines that it started soaring ahead. Many authors for children were discovered through that medium and their contribution was stimulating.

The beginning in 1920, in Montreal, of a new French Canadian periodical for children entitled *L'Oiseau bleu* (The Bluebird) gave to some authors the opportunity to express themselves to children and young people. Among the contributors, two names should be remembered as the authors of the best sellers of the time: Marie-Claire Daveluy with *Les Aventures de Perrine et Charlot*, a historical novel, and Maxine, pen name of Madame Taschereau-Fortier, with fiction for young children. A few other magazines were published for children during the fifties: *Activités dirigées*, *Claire*, *Francois*, and *Escholier*. Each with its own style had its readers. Since 1971 *Video-Pressé* has been published monthly. This is a documentary magazine which presents solid information, and it has a large audience of readers.

Institutions and Awards

The Canadian Association of Children's Librarians, a section of the Canadian Library Association, did a great deal to promote reading and access to libraries by children. Young Canada Book Week was organized in 1949 to attain these objectives. During the twenty-five years since 1949, Young Canada Book Week was celebrated throughout Canada

during the month of November by children's librarians, school librarians, and all those educators and parents interested in children's reading. Quebec librarians, French-speaking and English-speaking, also did their share to arouse public interest in reading, libraries and children's literature. Overall, an outstanding contribution was made by Miss Elizabeth Morton, who was during most of those years the Executive Secretary of the Canadian Library Association/Association Canadienne des Bibliothèques and the prime mover of the multiplicity of activities involved in Young Canada Book Week.

To emphasize Canadian literature for children, "annual awards—each in a form of a bronze medal—were presented to the authors of the books chosen by the members of the Canadian Association of Children's Librarians, for the outstanding children's books, one in English and one in French, published in Canada during the calendar year preceding the presentation of the medal, and each written by a Canadian citizen."² From 1954, fourteen French Canadian authors received the CLA Award: Claude Aubry for *Les îles du Roi Maha-Maha II* (1962) and *Le Loup de Noël* (1965); Monique Corriveau for *Le Wapiti* (1966); Henriette Major for *La surprise de Dame Chenille* (1971); Simon Bussières for *Le petit sapin a poussé sur une étoile* (1972); and Anne Vallières for *Ouram* (1973). Except for *Le Loup de Noël* all these titles are still available in bookstores. Since 1974 the French Award of the Canadian Library Association has been transferred to the French-speaking association of librarians in Canada.

The "Prix Littérature de Jeunesse" offered by l'Association Canadienne des Educateurs de Langue française, a French-speaking Canadian Association of teachers and educators, was given for the first time in 1958, and it gave a second renaissance to children's literature in Quebec. A five hundred dollar award was given to the author of the best manuscript chosen in one of the following categories: stories and fairy tales, adventures, non-fiction, and picture books. The jury, a select one, was composed of five members chosen among well-known educators, writers, children's librarians, and specialists in the French language. During its six years of operation, fourteen writers received this "Prix Littérature de Jeunesse ACELF." From the manuscripts which received an award and were then published, the following titles are still in print:

- 1958 *Le secret de Vanille* by Monique Corriveau
- 1959 *Les îles du Roi Maha-Maha II* by Claude Aubry
- 1961 *Le songe de Katinoi* by Maryse Coté, published under the title *Le dragon de Mycale*
- 1962 *Quatre Montréalais en l'an 3000* by Suzanne Martel, published in its second edition with a new title: *Surreal 3000*.

In 1963, the Government of the Province of Quebec took over the Prix ACELF but largely modified its terms of reference. It is obvious that for the last twenty years literary awards contributed significantly to the survival of literature in French and gave some fine authors to the young readers of Quebec and French-speaking Canada.

A Sample of Authors and Books

Historical fiction, folk stories and fairy tales, science-fiction, adventure stories, and a few biographies are the literary forms most frequently used by our writers. Between the years 1925 and 1940, hundreds and hundreds of young readers had many hours of enjoyment and enrichment reading a six-volume historical novel entitled *Les Aventures de Perrine et Charlot* by Marie-Claire Daveluy.

This author was outstanding in other fields, for she was a professional librarian and co-founder of the first French-speaking Library School which became affiliated with the University of Montreal. She was an historian and very active in social and cultural activities. In her series of historical novels, the author relates the adventurous life of two orphans, the young girl Perrine and her brother Charlot, who lived in that part of New France which is now the province of Quebec between 1636 and 1661. The plot is based on historical events. The two heroes are fictional characters. But the other characters, adult and children, really existed and were involved in real historical events.

At the same period, Maxine (the pen name of Madame Taschereau-Fortier) wrote about twenty novels, most of which were very popular among young readers. The plot always related the worries and distress of a French boy kidnapped by Indians, who, after months or years of living among the Indians, escaped and found his way back to the French settlement. The best titles from the series are *Le petit page de Frontenac*, *Miche un petit gars de Coutances*, *Le saut de gouffre*, and *Le vendeur de paniers*. This plot was also used by Monique Corriveau in her book *Le Wapiti*, where the young boy, Mathieu, is kidnapped by the Indians. Mathieu, however, is adopted by the chief of the Seskano tribe. Careful research about Indian tribes and French pioneers of the early sixteenth century, and lively descriptions of the wilderness of the country, gave this novel almost everything needed to become a classic.

Two short stories by Claude Aubry bring the young readers in contact with the Indians. *Les îles de Roi Maha-Maha II* is the story of a king who is very lonesome because he has nothing to do, and he tries very hard to interest himself in something. This amusing and charming tale is presented in an attractive picture book. In *Agouhanna*, the only son of a brave Indian warrior Black Eagle is expected to succeed his father as chief of the tribe. But the young boy is very unhappy because he dislikes war games, and he is afraid of darkness and bloodshed. He resents very much the deep humiliation facing his father and the attitude of the adults of the tribe about such weaknesses. The boy's anguishes and the hard life of the Indian tribe are revealed with a profound tenderness by the author. After years and years of reading French children's books, I really think these two stories--*Agouhanna* and *Les îles du Roi Maha-Maha II*--together with *Le Wapiti* are the most authentic and exciting stories concerning the Indians of Canada.

The novel of Suzanne Martel, *Jeanne fille du Roy*, relates the adventures and the struggles of a girl who came to Canada in the late seventeenth century to take a husband and settle with her family on a new farm land. The vigorous and alert narrative is sparkling with

humour and health. Monique Corriveau's *Les saisons de la mer* describes the life a year around of the McGuire family, on a small island off the coast of Newfoundland at the beginning of the century. Monique Corriveau relates with warmth and humour the struggles, the worries and the joys of the islanders.

Félix Leclerc is better known in Canada and abroad as a great folk singer. But for young people in the nineteen-forties and fifties, he was idolized as a "great guy" who gave them enjoyment with his three books of poems, tales and fables: *Andante*, *Adagio* and *Allegro*. His prose sparkles with the magic of words, a fresh atmosphere and poetical dynamism. The young people of those times enjoyed the stories of Félix Leclerc, and the young people of today also enjoy them.

Adventures in Picture-Books

The publishing of picture-books, good picture-books, is a very expensive venture for a publisher. And, before 1970, very few of them accepted the challenge. But what is a good picture book? Heiri Steiner said: "A good picture-book stimulates the imagination, it gives the child courage to make his own pictures. It helps him create his own image of life and to find his own place in the image."³ Do we know what kind of images captivates a child's interest? Steiner writes "Why is it that a child likes one book and leaves another lying around or un-looked-at? Is it the story it tells? Is it the colours, the drawings, the nice shape or design? Is there perhaps even a secret here? We illustrators know that there is, at any rate, no means of knowing. There is no recipe for making a successful children's book, no rules that you can feel safe in sticking to."⁴

Fifteen years ago, a Montreal publishing house ventured to print picture-books, about ten, in a series entitled "Le Canoë d'argent". *Koumic* by Lucile Durand and *Le Loup de Noël* by Claude Aubry were good picture books. *Les îles du Roi Maha-Maha II*, published in Quebec city by les Editions du Pélican, was also a very attractive book. Since 1972, the publisher Leméac, in Montreal, also ventured into printing picture-books, and he did well. *Pitaton et le printemps*, *Pitaton et la Gaspésie*, and *Pitaton et les pommiers*, three books written and illustrated by Louise Pomminville, are very attractive. Pitaton is a fanciful little bird who likes to enjoy himself in the woods or fields with other birds. Short poems accompany full-page illustrations which could be livelier. The three last picture books published by Leméac, entitled *Ouam*, *La Poulette grise*, and *Comptines du Canada français*, are remarkable, charming books.

Before ending these comments on a choice of very few titles, I would like to mention one more picture-book: *Le petit sapin qui a poussé sur une étoile* (*The Little Fir that Grew on a Star*) authored by Simone Bussières and illustrated by Cécile Chabot. I shall use a quotation from the periodical *Bookbird*: "It is easy to see that Simone Bussières loves children and is fascinated by their world and fantasies. . . . Her fresh outlook, her simple unsophisticated style make her book most accessible to all small ones." One of the notable features is "the gentle mobility of those pretty illustrations drawn by Cécile Chabot."⁵ This Christmas tale is a fascinating and inspiring picture-book.

Consequently, if we ask the question—"Do we have artists to illustrate children's books?"—I will venture to answer "yes, and very promising ones". There remains the need to give them time to refine their art and their brushes.

Our Children's Literature Today and Tomorrow

At the present time the government of the province of Quebec offers grants to authors and other special grants to the publishers of children's books. One hundred and twelve public libraries serve adults and children. (But the libraries are scattered over a thinly populated territory extending about a thousand miles from east to west, mostly in the St. Lawrence valley.) Most of our secondary schools are equipped with fairly adequate libraries, as are many of our elementary schools. The French-speaking library association has a permanent committee of children's librarians whose aims are research in children's literature, the editing of booklists and other materials about children's literature, and the promotion of French-speaking Canadian literature for children. Communication-Jeunesse, a group of authors, librarians, publishers and editors, is working hard for the promotion of French-speaking children's literature and audio-visual material.

And, because there will always be children who ask for stories that "make them believe", we have a great need for new authors. We need authors who have something to say. We need authors who will write books capable of enchanting the universe of children and young people.

NOTES

- ¹ Paul Hazard, *Books, Children and Men*, Horn Book.
- ² In the *Canadian Library Association Bulletin* (November 1950), pp. 83-84.
- ³ Heiri Steiner in *Graphis* (No. 155), p. 196.
- ⁴ Heiri Steiner in *Graphis* (No. 155), p. 196.
- ⁵ *Bookbird*, (XI, 3, 1973), p. 38.

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