

Kanata: A Community of Writings

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Kanata: An Anthology of Canadian Children's Literature, edited by Mary Rubio and Glenys Stow. Illus. by Methuen Publications, 1976. 244 pp. \$6.95 paper, \$10.95 cloth. Teacher's Manual also available.

The compilers, associate editors of *CCL* and English teachers at the University of Guelph, created this anthology to introduce Canadian literature to children. *Kanata* (Canada) is an Iroquois word noted by Jacques Cartier in 1535. It means a lodge, a village, and here it is used for a community of writings. Many entries are not written specifically for children but are nevertheless choices suitable for readers aged nine to thirteen. The collection is divided into three sections of half-dozen or more stories interspersed with as many poems or songs. Selections are from the folklore of indigenous peoples and from the literature of the founding nations.

Indian and Eskimo tales are "In the Beginning", a section which appropriately starts with a creation myth and continues through a thoughtful balance of myth, verse, fable or story featuring young people. Boys not interested in mythology will be intrigued by the wit of the Indian lad who stole fire or by the heroism of Akavak, the Eskimo boy who makes a perilous journey with his grandfather.

Other sections are less rigorously defined as to inclusions and fall under the headings of "Voices in the Wilderness" or "Mosaic". The Voices tell tall tales or speak of pioneer difficulties while the Mosaic is composed of twentieth century memoirs or realistic stories about childhood or animals. All the stories about animals will please the audience. As it is generally agreed that Canadian writers have made a unique contribution to the animal story, it is satisfying to find the genre well displayed. In fact, the audience will probably prefer the animal stories since many of the entries are in a serious vein. There is not overmuch humour or adventure in this collection. Predominant themes are introspection, loneliness or struggle: themes which lead to discussion or analysis rather than to simple enjoyment.

There are some rollicking songs, but more verses with drama or whimsy would not be amiss and might encourage more interest in poetry among children. Raymond Souster's "The Child's Umbrella" is a difficult poem for the young, and so too is the almost ingenuous closing poem "Drums of my Father" by Shirley Daniels. Aesthetically this verse is a fitting conclusion bringing the collection full circle to the Indian voice, but children need help to appreciate this and other poems.

The conclusion thus arises that an unstated purpose of this anthology is to create the opportunity for teaching poetry or prose.¹ *Kanata* is intended for classroom use and is not just a coercion into reading Canadian literature. Many

items invite interpretation and may not have been chosen for their appeal to children's reading preferences at all. Few selections can maintain or exceed the standard of "Jean Labadie's Big Black Dog" which combines wisdom and humour. Percival Way's "A Shipwreck" or Ernest Buckler's "A Man" are borderline contributions except in a classroom.

Fifty years ago it was said of Canadian literature that life was "earnest and strenuous and still pretty much in the clearings" — an observation pertinent to this collection.² Settings are not always important to the story, but few, if any, are emphatically urban. The editors apparently realize this pervasion of the rural image but state that truths from former days are still valid. The truths presented are those of self-knowledge and of human development.

This anthology is a suitable length and is ambitious in conception. Most, but not all, of the better known authors appear. There is a small space for today's fledgling poets or students beside the nineteenth and twentieth century material.

The anthology is not, as the book promoters say, action-packed. There is not a single explorer or Mountie and no adventures of history or geography. "Riel's Farewell" is included as a voice from the wilderness of isolation or defeat, and the reference highlights the lack of any other major historical figure or event. True, there is one other notable hiding among the legends. He is named, but the exaggeration of a lumberman's tall tale creates a fiction of Main John. Teachers should certainly use the story to introduce the colourful real life of Senator John B. Glasier (1809—1894) and his equally impressive Irish cook, Paddy McGarrity.

To criticize the anthology for excluding narratives from territorial expansion or political history is unfair and denies the strong coherence of theme in the collection. The anthology may be broadly categorized as an exploration of the Canadian psyche from the past to the present. Personal experience shaped by circumstance is the thrust of this collection, and the organization and choices are appropriate for the classroom. The selections are unaccompanied by suggested exercises, and the format and type and illustration is pleasing, so that the possibility of casual, recreational reading is present. However, *Kanata* should be appreciated from the elementary school teacher's viewpoint as a highly commendable excursion in the Canadian literary heritage.

NOTES

¹ A two-part loose leaf teacher's manual is available for KANATA. The authors, Jean R. Stevens and Isla E. Key, developed the materials during classroom use. Aimed at Grade 5-7 level, each part has approximately 95 pages. Part 1 *Resource Guide to Kanata* (\$5.25) consists of detailed lesson plans for teaching each story/poem in KANATA as well as a cross-referenced index to themes (friends, pioneers, values, etc.), and a glossary of literary terms. Many of the lesson plans include suggestions for extra activities and for relating the literary materials in KANATA to concomitant social studies projects. Part 2 *Student Worksheets for KANATA* (\$5.25) is a set of stencils which serve as lesson plan aids for the *Guide*.

²Lorne Pierce, *An Outline of Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1927), p. 239.

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