

History Confronted

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Listen for the Singing, Jean Little, E.P. Dutton, Clarke, Irwin, 1977. 215 pp., \$8.50 clothbound.

Jean Little's *Listen for the Singing*, which won the Canada Council Children's Literature Award (English-language) for this past year, is one of the author's finest books.

It is to be hoped that this award will finally assure her the distinguished place in the field of Canadian children's literature she has so long deserved. While internationally translated and known for her ten earlier novels, Jean Little has never received the fullest recognition in her native land although her books are particularly meaningful to Canadians not only for their authentic local settings but for their persuasive social reality.

This is the sequel to *From Anna*, in which nine-year old Anna Solden, a child with acute vision problems, learned to deal with her physical disability and adjust to the family's relocation from pre-war Germany to Ontario.

Fortunately *Listen for the Singing* does not follow the usual sequel syndrome. Continuation books are often paler versions of the originals. In this warm and provocative book Jean Little does not allow herself to be caught in a repetitive time warp. While *Singing* will be welcomed by all of Anna's earlier fans the story takes place several years later and we see the Solden family from a different perspective with the roles of the characters newly defined.

The story begins in Canada in 1939 on that September day Britain declared war on Germany. It immediately presents us with a double concept: not only is Anna confronted with her personal problems as she prepares to enter her first public high school, but it is also a time of family despair as the Soldens face the complexities of being German immigrants in a land that is at war. "We're Germans too — only we're against Hitler" is how Anna phrases it early in the novel. The Soldens had fled Germany in the early thirties not because they themselves were personally persecuted but because the father, Ernst, a former professor of English literature in Frankfurt, insisted that he wanted his family to live in freedom even though it meant giving up his career and eking out a living in a small mama-papa grocery store.

What distinguishes Little's novel is her ability to weld together a story which deals with the impact of world-shaking events and the equally disturbing intricacies of her heroine's daily world.

The tale unfolds swiftly as Anna prepares to face her first day in Grade Nine of Davenport Collegiate. The youngest of the five Solven children, she has been mocked and treated as an "ugly duckling" for many years due to her impaired vision. Without her glasses the world is a "blurred, unreal place" and she has long been alienated from the mainstream and accustomed to rejection.

She is a cautious introverted child defending herself from small and large assaults by anticipating assistance only from the most sensitive people like her gentle father, her former teacher Eileen Shumacher and her school-mate, Isobel, who has unfortunately been transferred to another school. Anna is afraid of being an outsider at the new public school, preferring the safety of her "nest" at the senior sight-saving class.

The conflicts are immediate when her sister Gretchen accompanies her to school on the eventful day but must then leave Anna to fend for herself. Not only are the door signs of each classroom too small for Anna to read without leaning right against the doorways but her homeroom teacher turns out to be the notorious Mr. Lloyd, "the meanest man alive."

It is during this first class, when Mr. Lloyd makes known his hatred of people with German surnames, that Anna meets the sympathetic Maggie de Vries and the outspoken Paula Kitsch. Not only do they defend her against Mr. Lloyd, but they also offer their services to her as guide both in and out of school and eventually include her as a member of their "gang".

Miss Little has great perception and a fine ear for youthful speech in showing the development of the girls' relationship. "And their grins met like hands clasping" she writes of Anna and one of her new friends. As usual her characterizations are plausible whether she is depicting the fourth member of the gang, the unthinking Suzy, who is always saying the wrong thing about Anna's disability, or the daily life of the three sisters and two brothers of the family.

The narrative pace is fast enough to delight even the most impatient young reader as the author reveals the series of nightmares the heroine must overcome. There is the problem of Home Economics class; since Anna cannot use a sewing machine her thoughtless teacher insists "You can knit. Blind people are wonderful knitters." Anna must also tackle other questions including the games played in physical training class and the method of writing her term papers since the usual test sheets are printed too finely for her to read.

Jean Little's is a unique voice in juvenile fiction. Her own personal vision handicap enables her to deal with this subject honestly and forcefully without the sentimentality which mars the works of lesser talents when they write of comparable situations.

One of the most intriguing themes of the entire book is the relationship that gradually evolves between Anna and her oldest brother, Rudi, whom she has avoided, remembering his rudeness to her in the years before her ailment was finally diagnosed. She discovers that Rudi is capable of affection when he not only undertakes responsibility for assisting her with her dreaded algebra but also attempts to help her as she reluctantly explains her fears about attending the school dance.

"I'm awkward Anna, remember?" she finally says. There is a humorous beauty parlor sequence when Rudi determines to get rid of Anna's coronet of braids so she will look less old-fashioned and "the same as other girls." He also serves as her dance instructor in a scene which offers new insights into family relationships.

In this taut novel the author shows the irony of the family being discriminated against because of their background while on the other hand they are stunned by the fate of their friends and family still in Germany. Through an anonymous letter they learn that Auntie Tanya, who had moved in as housekeeper for her aged father-in-law, has chosen to follow him to a concentration camp when he is finally arrested for being a Jew and a liberal.

As a result of this overseas horror the outraged Rudi, 18, abandons his career in university to enlist in the Canadian navy. Little offers a realistic picture of wartime Canada and the effects of Rudi's decision on the members of the household, particularly the mother, Klara.

I refuse to destroy the impact of the story by being specific about the tragedy that befalls Rudi - it is the only element in the novel that I found almost too ironic.

The major theme and Anna's resulting credo come from an Armistice Day speech by the school principal who insists: "Faith is when you hear the bird singing before the egg is hatched." And indeed Anna is revealed as the strongest, most forceful member of the family when she attempts to save Rudi in a scene fraught with suspense.

Listen for the Singing is an important book. In these days of transitory literature, when so many novels in the juvenile field seem to be written only for their momentary shock value as sensational subjects (e.g. child abuse or homosexuality) it is refreshing to read a book which deals not only with personal dilemmas but with history itself.

Jean Little's novel defies neat classification although it will be particularly appreciated by the nine to twelve-year-olds. Not only would I recommend it for some older children but I insist that it is definitely not a "girl's book" since the problems and situations are also applicable to the brother, Rudi.

It is a family story for those who do not dwell in never-never land and one which all children will relate to not only for its great entertainment value also because it convincingly portrays an authentic world without being "preachy".

Above all, it is an invaluable book because it deals with a period in Canadian history which has been largely neglected by contemporary children. It will help make World War Two real to a generation largely unfamiliar with this era, their opinions diluted by the reruns of fatuous TV sit-coms. *Listen for the Singing* has a universal poignance and is a powerful book for children today and in the decades to come.

Myra Paperny's novel The Wooden People won the Canada Council Children's Literature Award (English) in 1976. She lives in Calgary, Alberta.