

ON LOOKING BACK IN WONDER

A hill for looking, Martha Brooks. Illus. Beverly Dancho. Queenston House, 1982. 196 pp. \$14.95 cloth, \$7.95 paper. ISBN 0-919866-78-6, 0-919866-79-4; *Barnardo boy*, Bert Case Diltz. Initiative Publishing, 1982. 136 pp. cloth ISBN 0-88951-024-5; *The ranch people*, Frank J. Moore. Initiative Publishing, 1982. 109 pp. cloth. ISBN 0-88951-091-9; *Beyond the second mile: a novel of the Canadian west (1941)*, Frank J. Moore. Initiative Publishing, 1982. 162 pp. cloth. ISBN 0-88951-021-0; *The secret visitor*, Grace Patterson. Illus. Al Kaiser. Smithtown, New York: Exposition Press, 1982. 95 pp. \$6.00 cloth. ISBN 0-682-49860-2; *B. . . was for butter and enemy craft*, Evelyn M. Richardson. Petheric Press, 1976. 122 pp. \$4.95 paper.

The poem which inspires the title of *A hill for looking* begins: "You know that age can be / A hill for looking." This idea informs each of these books as their authors take the youthful reader back in time to wonder at our common heritage and to reflect on the wisdom which comes with age. Clearly, the esthetic expression of the historical and contemplative in a voice which will captivate today's sophisticated adolescent reader is no simple undertaking. Martha Brooks, and to a lesser extent Bert Diltz, successfully face the challenge and master the art; Grace Patterson's *The secret visitor* provides a useful historical comment, especially in light of contemporary Canadian dialogue on the reality of the Holocaust, but the book lacks the polish characteristic of esthetic accomplishment; Evelyn Richardson's *B. . . was for butter and enemy craft* is a biographical text with local color, historical significance, and, unfortunately, potentially limited readership; finally, Frank Moore's *The ranch people* and *Beyond the second mile* seldom meet one's minimal literary expectations, though *Beyond the second mile* is clearly the better of the two books. Moore shows not only a lack of esthetic sensibility — of the rhythm of prose and the beauty of language — but reveals a real inability to use grammatically-correct English. Moore's pronouns are often confusing, his dialogue frequently stilted, and his characters hagiographic caricatures of good or evil; Moore suggests romantically that everyone is born good and argues that all that is needed for the conversion of his stereotypical "no-good rotter" is the proper wholesome environment. The hero of *Beyond the second mile* is taunted for being "That goodie, goodie sissy (p. 72)"; but Moore repeatedly insists that being virtuous is nothing shameful.

There is a humorless Christian fundamentalist tone to these books — a ponderous didacticism — which preaches *ad nauseam* the evil of alcohol and which even permits a none-too-flattering comment about Judaism (*The ranch people*, p. 22). (It is a tone which Diltz attacks repeatedly in *Barnardo boy* wherein questions of traditionalist rural religion arise naturally and unobtrusively.) Moore also fails to capture the specific flavour of either the turn-of-the-

century North-West Territories (*The ranch people*) or the Prairies of the forties (*Beyond the second mile*). Except for bits of trivia, historical reflection is unconvincing and this reader is left wondering at the handsome binding which Initiative Publishing has squandered on these two books.

Evelyn Richardson's *B . . . was for butter*, though not without occasional grammatical, linguistic, and structural lapses, is a much better book. As an adult, I am fascinated by Richardson's detailed recounting of the impact World War II had on selected maritime communities in southern Nova Scotia. I also appreciate her obvious love of the sea, of Nova Scotia, of her family, and even of Britain. I appreciate, too, her display of little-known wartime Canadiana such as the summer 1943 torpedoing of the government ferry Caribou as it transported 137 civilians from Sydney to Port Aux Basques. Still, Richardson's recollections, most of which derive ostensibly from notations in her diary, are generally so personal and so colored by local history — of Seal Island for instance — that they are not likely to hold the attention of a youthful audience, especially one outside the maritimes. This is perhaps not surprising given the historical interests of Petheric Press and of Richardson herself. In fact, Richardson records a light-hearted reservation which is at once both telling and overly modest: "I had filled more than one scribbler and, although neither of us could really believe our lives were the stuff of books, Morrill was encouraging me, 'anyway, your account will be grand for the children to have (p. 108).'"

Grace Patterson's *The secret visitor* contains the suspense and intrigue of a captivating historical yarn spun with the light-heartedness and innocent fun of boy-girl camaraderie so that her story is certain to entertain youthful readers of both sexes. The setting is World War II Holland and the plot unravels the efforts of a group of youngsters to help a downed R.A.F. pilot. As historical fiction, therefore, *The secret visitor* recounts the heroism and the agony of Nazi occupation.

Structurally and stylistically, however, *The secret visitor* reveals more the story-teller than the artist. A large segment of the plot, for example, centres on a stolen trunk and an evil farm-hand. All of this has precious little to do with the downed airman except by implication. The design is more to heighten mystery than to unify plot. Indeed, history and intrigue are Patterson's chief objectives; many of her chapters end with questionably-written melodramatic flourishes: "But would they catch fish as planned or were other adventures awaiting them?"; "Little did she know then what role she was to play in his narrow escape from their feared enemy"; "But was that confidence about to be shattered?" Finally, Patterson's stylistic insensitivity is clear in sentences like "While they worked feverishly to clean up the place, many ideas came to their minds to spruce up the place."

The end-product is a story likely to please a youngster, but one told in a manner equally likely to exasperate those hoping to direct youthful readers to the well-told and well-written tale.

A hill for looking and *Barnardo boy* go as far as most books are likely to in satisfying the demands of both style and story. *A hill for looking* is a thoughtfully-written fictional reflection of childhood days spent in the fifties at a Manitoba T.B. Sanatorium. The setting seems tailor-made for airy romanticising or dreary moralizing; yet there is none of this. There is, however, an evident love of nature and of the goodness of life, and there is also a clear appreciation of the sanctity of human relationships. Points are tastefully made so that both the story and its telling provide a breath of fresh air. Even the composition of this book with its exemplary sense of language and its individually-inserted, beautifully artistic lino-cut color prints reveals a labour of love and a genuine concern for the esthetic.

Brooks' dialogue is natural and the predicaments her characters face realistic. The interaction between characters makes for pleasant and wholesome reading. *A hill for looking* is a comparative literary gem from virtually every perspective. My only reservation is Brooks' stereotypical depiction of the sexes. In real-life situations it's not just boys who are bullies nor just girls who are sensitive. Brooks' tone and characterizations give us a book more likely to be read, and read with pleasure, by girls than by boys. The opposite is likely to be the case with Diltz' *Barnardo boy*.

Though he does not write with the consistent grace and verbal control evident in the art of Martha Brooks, Diltz does display in *Barnardo boy* an enviable mastery of language as well as a talent for realistic depiction and natural description. In addition, his pilgrimage is into an historical and geographical turn-of-the-century past which is captivating especially to those familiar with the Hamilton area, though his dependence upon a local audience is nothing like Richardson's. The fictional genre permits Diltz' reader to assimilate national and social history by indirection rather than by exposition; note, for example, the discussion of Wilfrid Laurier's knighthood (p. 68) or the art of butchering pigs (pp. 64-7) or the social nature of the quilting bee (p. 94) and contrast it with Richardson's recounting of the history of Seal Island.

In *Barnardo boy* there is a glorification of the rural past, but it is a realistic rather than an idyllic reincarnation. There is also a Christian moral tone which recognizes the closeness to nature and God typical of traditional rural life, though there is a concomitant sense of the need for change and an impatience with the nay-saying of religious bigotry. Finally, Diltz' honest and realistic depiction of rural Ontario includes a description of the naturalness of sexuality which some adult readers will likely find objectionable.

Though occasionally flawed, especially in its dialogue, *Barnardo boy* is a book well worth the reading, and one likely to be read, particularly by boys. There is here sufficient action and suspense to hold a youthful audience; there is also sufficient genuine affection for our historical past to prompt that audience to look back in wonder.

D.R. Letson is Associate Professor of English in St. Jerome's College at the University of Waterloo.