

## Review articles & reviews / Critiques et comptes rendus

### NORTHERN EXPOSURE: A SURVEY OF CANADIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

**Children's literature in Canada.** Elizabeth Waterston. New York: Twayne Publishers. 1992. 212 pp., \$29.95. ISBN 0-8057-8264-8.

Elizabeth Waterston's study of Canadian children's literature for the Twayne's World Authors Series is a sweeping view of the subject from many perspectives. Not only does Waterston provide the reader with a breakdown of chapters based on various kinds of children's books, such as Traditional Stories, Animal Studies, Problem Novels, and Historical Fiction, to name a few, but she also gives some insights into what materials are suitable for which age group and for which gender.

Waterston makes a special point of considering certain things quintessentially Canadian. Among these are the realistic animal story as immortalized by Ernest Thompson Seton and Charles G.D. Roberts. She also includes a considerable amount of material dealing with the works of Lucy Maud Montgomery. Equally significant is her appraisal of some children's works by those usually known as writers for adult readers, such as Margaret Laurence and W.O. Mitchell (whose work she praises as powerfully therapeutic). Although for the most part, Waterston seems to see herself as the moderator of a large discussion about Canadian children's literature that spans the years, she does make the point that the children's books written in this country often have didactic features and what she calls "extraliterary intentions." This quiet acceptance of the importance of didacticism to the history of Canadian children's books is in keeping with Waterston's overall attempt to see the contribution of our literature within developmental and educational perspectives.

Waterston's book seems itself to reflect Canadian trends and currents, discussing literature as it does from an archetypal point of view reminiscent of Northrop Frye. Waterston's treatment of the trickster figure, for example, or of the particular appeal of certain books to boys or to girls is overtly psychological and sophisticated. Whether she is analyzing Stéphane Poulin's "Josephine" books or Jean Little's *From Anna*, she shows her talents as a sensitive literary critic. Also in step with the times is Waterston's discussion of multiculturalism and its effect on our view of what has been written and is now being written.

Only two things troubled me about the book. One was the rather cursory treatment of children's theatre in Canada—one brief paragraph—with little to

locate the reader in terms of place or time. The other was what seemed an over-reliance on the theories of Piaget as markers of childhood development, though perhaps that is quibbling given the wide acceptance Piagetian stages have in the popular mind. Despite these flaws, the work offers the reader a comprehensive, straightforward appraisal of masses of material from past to present and a perceptive look at Canadian identity.

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#### CLAIRE MOWAT: ALIENATION-BY-THE-NUMBERS

**The girl from away.** Claire Mowat. Illus. Malcolm Cullen. Key Porter, 1992. 92 pp. \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55013-428-0.

Claire Mowat's *The girl from away* is well-intentioned, completely positive fiction: it is also conventional, predictable, and dull.

One problem is that thirteen-year-old Andrea Baxter, despite repeated complaints that her life is irrevocably ruined because her widowed mother is remarrying, seems a painted-by-the-numbers alienated teenager. Another problem is that the two strands of the plot, both of which involve Andrea's coming to a satisfactory sense of identity, are completely predictable and unconvincing thematic contrivances. In the first, Andrea's mother sends her to spend Christmas with relatives in Newfoundland while she honeymoones in Florida. This, and the fact that her uncle is away at sea, intensifies Andrea's oft-stated bitterness. Mowat probably intends the cheerful acceptance of vicissitudes that Andrea's hosts display to contrast with Andrea's self-absorption, but the cousins never come alive and the fleshy Aunt Pearl remains a stereotypically jolly fat woman.

The other plot strand depends on set pieces to show Andrea's feelings of exclusion and then her awareness that she belongs. In the first of these, an anemic piece of local colour lifted from Mowat's fictionalized account of her own stay in Newfoundland, *Outport people* (1983), Andrea discovers the quaint Christmas custom of mummering, donning a disguise to fool neighbours. Although its thematic connection to the identity theme is obvious, this scene is static, developing insight into neither Newfoundlanders nor Andrea. In the second scene, a more positive version of the central episode of Farley Mowat's *A whale for the killing* (1972), Andrea joins in the rescue of a beached whale. Despite an attempt to increase tension by temporarily lapsing into the anthropomorphism of presenting a dog's feelings, this episode lacks drama, and Andrea's sudden overcoming of her unaccountable fear of boats defies belief. Furthermore, the overt parallels between the whale, which is out of its element, and Andrea, who decides to help the whale go "home," are mechanical and ineffective. In fact, Andrea's role is negligible, and her personality transformation during the rescue