

'Hmm,' he said as his scissors went  
snip, snip, snip and his needle flew in  
and out and in and out, 'There's just  
enough material here to make ...'

\* \* \*

But as Joseph grew older, his  
wonderful jacket [vest, tie, etc.]  
grew older too.

Gilman originally heard this as an oral tale about Joseph the Tailor. It was her genius to transform it into the story of a little boy, thus enlarging its scope to a three-generational family and, symbolically, to a people. It is impossible to look at the faces of Joseph's family at the Sabbath table—Grandmother's arms encircling the candles for the blessing, Joseph's mother cradling the baby in her arms, Grandfather tenderly embracing Joseph, Father's face radiant with Sabbath peace—without being reminded that this world was wiped out barely fifty years ago.

Perhaps the title Gilman gave her story refers less to Joseph's blanket than to the Jewish people who, with a spiritual, rather than a material, focus, have survived through the millennia as "something from nothing, a wonderful story."

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## PRAIRIE PASTICHE

**Coyote winter.** Jacqueline White. Illus. author. Lester Publishing Ltd., 1991. Unpag., \$18.95 cloth. ISBN 1-895555-14-0; **A prairie alphabet.** Jo Bannatyne-Cugnet. Illus. Yvette Moore. Tundra Books, 1992. Unpag., \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-292-1.



In the book *Coyote winter* the author-illustrator re-tells the story of a mid-winter experience on a Hutterite colony in northern Alberta, one which involves the colony teacher, her Hutterite students and a coyote. Notwithstanding occasional luxurious phrasing, the storyteller's voice conveys the pristine beauty of this adventure. This story, written at the request of the author's dying teacher-sister, is an animal story with classic potential.

A gifted artist, the author engages the reader with the vibrancy of her evocative representational illustrations: the great white expanse of a northern Alberta winter landscape; the swirling chaos of a sudden white-out; the nostalgia of the one-room prairie schoolhouse; the cohesive bonding of a human rescue chain. Other illustrations verge on romanticising the austerity of the doctrine-based culture: little girls' dresses appear stylishly voluminous and balloon-like; some wear red mitts; a little girl standing in the fork of a tree implies having climbed there. What *is* captured through the artist's dynamic sense of movement and playfulness is the joy, freedom and security Hutterite children enjoy within their protected environment.

Keen children will be quick to check the accuracy of the suggestive animal tracks across the enticing teal endpapers. Others may wonder about the coyote reminiscent of a friendly puppy rather than the angular wildness of the North-American prairie-wolf. The bright red chicken feather near the coyote may raise questions about what kind of rare breed served as the trapper's bait and how they had access to such in their locale. Even more startling may be the domination of the last page by a tiny girl engulfed in the teacher's ample red hat and scarf, an illustration accompanying text about thoughtful, sombre children. The visual sub-text is one of abrogation of the child's cultural dress.

While appropriation of voice has received much attention in other contexts, this work indicates how innocently cultural authenticity may be distorted. Since children's books presenting the Hutterite culture are rare in the first instance, and many Hutterites themselves may never verify them if picture books are not allowed or encouraged in their colonies, those not familiar with Hutterite values could easily make false assumptions about their cultural truth. If the child audience is truly the priority intent of this work, an epilogue discussing how cultural values are expressed in lifestyle might help establish this purpose more strongly.

*A prairie alphabet* encapsulates a multiplicity of signs and symbols synonymous with prairie culture. Colourful, full-page, realistic paintings invite the viewer into the endless vastness of the prairie flatlands, emphasize the infinity of the level horizon and display the magnificence of the variegated dome-like skies. Often the magnitude of the prairie dwarfs its creatures and in so doing becomes an omniscient presence akin to Hardy's heath. Distinctive traits like peace, stillness, beauty, silence and omnipresence imbue the sometimes primitive style of these prairie landscapes. Cultural authenticity resonates from each canvas.

Prairie people, however, appear posed and lifeless, as if transfixed forever in the world of the colour snapshot. Nowhere is this more visible than in the stampede painting where the Native Canadian looks like a statue superimposed on the background action. Auxiliary jacket and endnote text also seems to trivialize the harvest meals in the field giving them a picnic connotation rather than relaying the usual time/weather urgencies and inherent hard work.



Conceptually, this alphabet book is developmentally appropriate for literate children and adults to use as a read-to book. Captions explaining each picture sometimes simultaneously combine diagraphs, silent letters and/or two different sounds of the same letter. Alliterative in the Oxford meaning of that word, not in the more common usage and

Webster definition of “same letter, same sound,” these captions may be confusing for children still in the auditory mode who have not yet developed visual memory. Such children should not be expected to learn sight/sound correlations from this work. Its inconsistent sound/letter correspondences, sound component variations, unfamiliar concepts and strange vocabulary require careful, informed guidance.

Many readers will expand their understanding of familiar prairie hallmarks like agribition, quonset, stone boat and grill gate. For the curious, endnotes describing each illustration elaborate on the twenty-six Canadian prairie views. Adult and child alike hunting for other objects representing the designated letter in each challenging picture puzzle will appreciate the thoughtful enclosure of an index of possible answers. Extended discussions of rural Canadian prairie culture and critical thinking in relation to both visual and linguistic literacy may also emerge from interactions with this work. Only its child readers can determine its eventual place in their literary canon.

And, if our American neighbours can successfully litigate against Canadian spellings for not fostering the American heritage and succeed in having such offensive Canadianisms removed from subsequent printings, then, on the same grounds, we Canadians should most surely protest the use of American spellings in a Canadian publication. Encouraging prairie writers and illustrators as well as prairie stories is a worthy cause but insightful editorial scrutiny of detail is crucial to achieving the highest Canadian calibre.

**Joyce A. Wilkinson**, an Arts Education professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, draws on prairie roots, Hutterite connections and children’s literature background for this review. She recently published *The symbolic dramatic play—literacy connection: Whole brain, whole body, whole learning* (Ginn).