

# Voices from the edge: realistic children's fiction in British Columbia

Joan Weir

**Résumé:** *Joan Weir examine la tradition du récit réaliste en Colombie-Britannique: riche de voix et de résonances plurielles, elle influence de nombreux écrivains actuels.*

The issues explored by British Columbian writers of children's fiction cannot, for the most part, be considered unique. Rather they reflect a basic Canadian identity suggesting that we are Canadians first and British Columbians second. As a result, B.C. fiction inevitably has its roots in the uniqueness of our country: its size, its variety of landscape, its ruggedness, its bleakness and its beauty, its mixture of open spaces and overcrowded cities, of brash immaturity and cultural sophistication.

But there are, nonetheless, certain themes that do seem to receive particular attention in B.C. fiction. Because of its evolving ethnic diversity and its proximity to Pacific Rim countries, for example, this fiction has an obvious focus on racial diversity and multi-culturalism with a particular emphasis on youthful protagonists who find the usual problems of adolescence compounded by racial difference. Paul Yee and Sing Lim, for example, provide both insightful and humorous accounts of the Asian experience in Vancouver in *The curses of Third Uncle* and *West Coast Chinese boy*. Such cultural tension can also be seen in recent Native literature, such as *My name is Seepetza*, in which Shirley Sterling, a member of the interior Salish Nation of British Columbia, examines the Native experience at Indian residential schools.

Another area where the individuality of B.C. children's literature is evident is in the portrayal of the environment as not just a convenient obstacle but as a unique force, one that not only tests but teaches. Roderick Haig-Brown's *Starbuck Valley winter* and *Saltwater summer* are obvious examples of this as are many of the novels of Hubert Evans and Christie Harris.

Perhaps one final area in which B.C. literature may be seen as unique results from the province's traditional place, as Deborah Turney-Zagwyn puts it, on the edge: "on the western edge of Canada, on the edge of the Pacific Ocean, on the edge of the familiar." As a result of this, protagonists have been forced to confront the unknown with an initiative, self-possession and maturity not demanded of those who are more safely ensconced in the familiar.

I recently posed the question of B.C. literature's uniqueness to several B.C. children's writers. Their answers suggest one final quality in this province's literature: its diversity. Here are some of the responses.

**Meguido Zola:** “As someone who has lived in Africa, Asia and Europe, I find the B.C. I live in comfortable and therefore unappealing to write about. I am, as the French say, “*dépaycé*.”

**Kit Pearson:** “I feel much more like a Canadian writer than a B.C. writer.”

**Judith Saltman:** “I don’t see any [regional] difference except in the picture books which often reflect the landscape and history.”

**Elizabeth Brochmann:** “It does not mean that one’s writing cannot have a universal appeal simply because it has a regional aspect.”

**Sarah Ellis:** “Rain. When I was a kid everything was contingent upon the weather. One of the big challenges of childhood was learning to cope with disappointment. I don’t know if this is reflected in my stories.”

**Ellen Schwartz:** “Ethnic themes are very much embedded in our writing. But whether that’s more pronounced here than in other regions, I don’t know.

**Norma Charles:** “B.C. children’s literature is unique in the way it explores the relationships between people of different cultures.”

**Betty Waterton:** “There is a laid-back quality to life in B.C. which is reflected in the characters and subsequently in the themes of the stories.”

**Mary Razzell:** “The settlement of our province by people who didn’t quite ‘fit in’ lends a certain flavour of outrageousness and vigour to our stories.”

**Marion Crook:** “I think that my experience living in rural areas of B.C. where children are expected to contribute, to be independent and to be responsible has shaped my idea of independent, capable children. The experience of raising my own children on a ranch in the Cariboo where they had their own animals, their own projects, where they dealt with fearsome bulls, angry rams, attacking roosters, life-threatening cold, and were expected to work out the answers to their problems, probably gave me an admiration for the ingenuity and courage of children that I might not have discovered in the city.”

**Sonia Craddock:** “I cannot escape the power of nature, and how we are spoiling Paradise.”

**James Heneghan:** “I would like to think that Vancouver and the coast are important artistic elements in my books just as the Salinas Valley is important in the works of Steinbeck and the Yorkshire moors in the works of the Brontës—but I don’t delude myself that I achieve even one percent of the force of *their* settings. One tries, that’s all.”

**Heather Kellerhals-Stewart:** “I think there are two unique features here. One is the blend of climate and land forms. Compared, say, to the Prairies or Central Canada the landscape is overpowering, much of it only marginally influenced by people. The other is the ‘end of the line’ or ‘frontier’ quality of B.C. As a transplant from Southern Ontario, B.C. was always for me the ‘golden promise’ on the horizon.”

**Christie Harris:** “I can live anywhere, but I can only write in B.C.”

*Joan Weir is the author of 11 novels for juvenile and young adult readers, five non-fiction books and numerous short stories. She teaches Creative Writing at the University College of the Cariboo. This piece evolves from a recent discussion of B.C. realistic literature which Ms. Weir had with B.C. authors of realistic fiction.*