

## A VALUABLE ANTHOLOGY

**Canadian childhoods: A Tundra anthology in words and art showing children of many backgrounds growing up in many parts of Canada.** Tundra Books, 1989. 96 pp. cloth. ISBN 0-88776-208-5.

*Canadian childhoods* is an anthology of 17 selections from children's books previously published by Tundra Press. At first glance this book may seem a brightly cheerful hodge-podge of styles and talents: an attempt by the publisher to recycle previous successes. A closer study, however, reveals an innovative, thought-provoking children's book which could perhaps lead our children to a new awareness of what being a Canadian really means.

I packed off a copy quickly to a young nephew living in Europe in the hope that it will help to counteract his growing conviction that Canada is a land of Indians and Mounted Police and nothing much else (a stereotype deeply embedded in children's minds abroad, thanks to the outmoded textbooks). Many of our own children's prejudices and stereotypes could perhaps also be dispelled by a few hours spent discussing these stories with them.

The book carries a young reader on a journey through a rich variety of "Canadian" childhoods – extending across the country from Vancouver to Halifax and encompassing stories about Japanese, Jewish, White, Black, Native (to name but a few) childhood experiences. Your typical urban child won't find his or her own life reflected here, but since so much children's literature seems to concern itself exclusively with white urban childhood, this makes the collection all the more interesting. Some stories, very well written, are probably just as attractive to adults as to older children. "In a Canadian prison camp" by Shizuye Takashima captures the atmosphere of camp life with a taut immediacy that makes it hard to forget. "A Chinese boyhood on the West Coast" by Sing Lim gives a lively, cheerful, and fascinating account of yet another variation of what a Canadian childhood can be. The same can be said for "The colorful dreams of an Ojibway boy", by Arthur Shilling. Ebbitt Cutler's "Remembering the last Noble Savage" is a more serious, ambitious story about a noble deed by a noble woman, but it left an uneasy hint of condescension in an otherwise moving story.

The artistic level of the book is high throughout, with the sections on Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal, and Halifax being especially appealing with their bright colours and high-spirited interpretations of life in Canada. Some of the selections emphasize illustrations, in fact. "The prairies: filling the emptiness," by William Kurelek opens the anthology with a series of haunting pictures. A couple of young New Zealander friends couldn't tear themselves away from the very first illustration, of children digging tunnels after a big blizzard. Varying styles and techniques make the book a possible introduction to a study of art styles for a child. My own personal favourite was the concluding selec-

tion about the Yukon by Ted Harrison. The exotic, other-worldly aura of the far north and the evocative use of colours by this excellent artist made a fitting conclusion to a most interesting and varied book.

All this praise does not mean that the book was without flaws, however. One or two of the selections struck a jarring note and reminded me that this was after all a commercial rehash of previous efforts. Why was the rather boring selection on John A. MacDonald given such prominence at the beginning? And who decided to include that childish story about Jewish immigrants, or the fairly difficult and rather strange selection on Blacks in Nova Scotia? While the themes reflected in these stories suited the anthology well, the content did not really blend in with the rest of the book.

*Canadian childhoods* is a good addition to the family bookshelf, an attractive educational tool for a variety of age groups, and a possible gift item for that young relative or friend living abroad.

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## RELIGION PURVEYED

**Before I go to sleep: Bible stories and poems and prayers for children.** Selected and retold by Ann Pilling. Illus. Kady Macdonald Denton. Kids Can Press, 1990, 93 pp., \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-921103-45-X; **What is God?** Etan Boritzer. Illus. Robbie Marantz. Firefly Books, 1990. Unpag., \$5.95, paper. ISBN 0-920668-88-7.

The Bible contains many effective narratives, but few were written with children in mind. The Old Testament with Creation, Noah, baby Moses, young David, Daniel, and Jonah provides more material for children than the New Testament. There the story of Jesus's birth has the strongest appeal.

The ages at which children can appreciate these stories will vary. Interest is often enhanced by exposure to the material in various formats. Our daughter asked more often for the story of Daniel after hearing Raffi sing "Daniel in the Lion's Den." A few such simple songs might have been appropriate for the present book. On the other hand, at age three, our daughter was also asking to hear "The Lord's my Shepherd; I'll not want", and "Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee."

Some collections for small children omit the story of Jesus's death and resurrection as being rather heavy. Our four-year old found the narrative fascinating and not overwhelming. Since Pilling includes this, I would put four years as the lower end of readership for this volume. Some literary pieces, such