

LIBRARY LAND

Lands of pleasure: Essays on Lillian H. Smith and the development of children's libraries. Adele M. Fasick, Margaret Johnston and Ruth Osler. The Scarecrow Press, 1990. 176 pp., cloth. ISBN 0-8108-2266-0.

There was once a late Victorian child living in London, Ontario, who climbed onto the roof of her house with a book and became so absorbed in the story that she tumbled off. That child was Lillian H. Smith and she became a pioneer of children's librarianship, not just in Canada but all over the world. As Margaret Johnson says in *Lands of pleasure*, "Seldom has the wisdom and conviction of one quiet woman become a force that would affect the cultural life of children on five continents." In the fields of children's librarianship, criticism, and storytelling, Smith's influence began a chain of excellence. The names of some of the contributors to this book exemplify the chain. Here are assembled several generations of children's librarians, teachers of children's literature and librarianship, critics, and storytellers, all of them directly following in Smith's footsteps. This fascinating and inspiring collection should bring more attention to an extraordinary woman – who isn't even included in the *Canadian Encyclopedia*!

In two opening chapters, Margaret Johnston sets forth Smith's dedicated career and many accomplishments in Canada and abroad. One is left with little sense of the woman herself; I suspect, however, that Smith would have wanted her private life left unrevealed. In the equally compelling chapters on storytelling by Alice Kane, and on Lillian Smith as a critic by Sheila Egoff, the immense changes since Smith became the first children's librarian in the British Empire are painfully apparent. Descriptions of working in the Toronto Public Library Boys and Girls' House before the Second World War fill this former children's librarian with envy for what appears to have been a golden age: budgets bought multiple copies of the best books; older children, not just preschoolers, swarmed into the library to choose books and to listen to stories; and, most enviable, children's librarians were granted the time to devote themselves entirely to bringing children and books together. Says Alice Kane of her first job in the thirties, "I suddenly found myself with all the books I could read and, basically, all I had to do was pass on my enthusiasm to children as hungry for books as I was."

Since Lillian Smith was one of the first persons to promote the purchase and reviewing of Canadian books for children, it is appropriate that essays by two of our best writers, Tim Wynne-Jones and Monica Hughes, are included. Another children's writer, Sarah Ellis, wears her critic's hat in an elegant analysis of innocence and experience in three young adult novels. (These three essays read as if they had first been presented elsewhere, but there is no citation of original source.)

Deborah Pearson's comprehensive Lillian H. Smith bibliography, and Margaret Maloney's description of the outstanding collections of early and modern children's books in Toronto Public Library (the most famous being the Osborne Collection which Smith helped to start) lead to Ruth Osler's final discussion of the evolution of Smith's vision.

It was fortunate that Lillian Smith laid as strong a foundation as she did, for soon her ideal library world began to crumble. The greatest strength of *Lands of pleasure* is that it goes far beyond a nostalgic look at how wonderful this world used to be. Adele Fasick ably outlines such influences as the changing family and the influence of media. Marilyn Kaye, author of the "Sweet Valley High" romances, presents a case for having "Twinkies" – books of no apparent value – included in the children's collection (an argument that would no doubt have met strong opposition from Smith). Irma McDonough Milnes sets forth the increasingly complex problems of intellectual freedom, and Margaret Bush emphasizes the needs of special groups of children such as immigrants, the disabled, and those with learning disabilities.

Having once struggled with all these problems myself – problems often conflicting with the inspiring ideals of Smith, as passed on to me through the equally-inspiring teaching of Sheila Egoff – reading these sections of *Lands of pleasure* made me sigh with despair. In our modern and complex age, many librarians now suffer from quick "burnout". To address even a tiny portion of the needs of children in libraries today, as well as finding time to read the books, learn stories, and perform puppet shows, seems impossible.

That is why the essay by Mary Beaty by itself makes *Lands of pleasure* a necessary read. Beaty brilliantly demonstrates the way the two seemingly disparate messages that leap out of this collection – the power and importance of good children's literature and the equally powerful ways in which today's society lures hurried children away from reading – may be reconciled. She doesn't settle for despair but lists an astounding array of practical and workable ideas that will help any children's librarian combat the spectre of dusty, unread books: linking up with other community agencies, creating celebrations that go beyond traditional holidays, demystifying the library, trying to "interweave the print warehouse with all the contact points in the child's world." Referring to the title of Lillian Smith's classic, *The unreluctant years*, Beaty concludes, "Grubby hands and unreluctant minds are waiting . . . We may have to be devious as well as inventive. . . .but the reward will be the enrichment of our common future." Being a children's librarian at the end of the century isn't going to be easy; but the lasting message of this book is that it has never been so important.

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