

History and Connections to the Present

Last Summer in Louisburg. Claire Mowat. Key Porter, 1998. 152 pp. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55013-941-X.

This is the third of the Mowat novels that concern the doings of Andrea Baxter. As in the other two, Andrea finds herself away from home for the summer, this time working in historic Louisburg, her prize for having won an essay writing contest at school. At Louisburg, Andrea's job is to dress in eighteenth-century costume, and with others, to carry on the daily activities such as they would have been at the time that the mighty fortress guarded access to the St. Lawrence for the French overseas empire.

More than this, Andrea, to her delight, is given the opportunity to act a minor role in a movie being shot at the fortress. In addition to such friends as Justine, her roommate, and Jacqueline, "Jackie," her boss, Andrea develops a friendship with Calvin and Deborah, who play the lead roles in the costume drama that the movie is. Each of the three Andrea novels has at least one moment of suspense and mild terror, and the one for *Last Summer in Louisburg* involves Andrea's being lost in a canoe in a thick harbour fog after having lost her paddle during the shooting of a scene for the movie. Even more dangerously, Andrea's canoe is headed out to sea on the outgoing tide. But Mowat's concern here is not to try to tackle the mystery or adventure writers on their own ground. Rather, this novel, like the others, explores the issue of connection. The connection is not just that of family connections as in *The Girl From Away* and *The French Isles*, although that is a part of the fabric of the novel. The emphasis here is on the connection of history, the role of the past as it impinges on the present. The result, as the book makes clear, is that the past influences and shapes our present. It is never just costume drama like a movie to be forgotten when the credits are run, or an artefact abstracted from life. Behind the costumes and the make-up are real people, with real feelings, living real lives.

Mowat makes her points about history on two levels.

First, as Andrea goes about her daily work schedule, it occurs to her that the eighteenth-century games that the children have been taught to play for the benefit of the tourists, and that she and Justine supervise, are not just re-creations of something dead and gone. With all the twentieth-century distractions and electronic games banished to the world outside the fortress, these are exactly the kinds of games kids could, and would, play if this were their only world, and these were their only implements. In these and the other activities, eighteenth-century Louisburg lives again.

Second, history comes alive in a very personal way for both Andrea and her mother, Doris, in the discovery of their relationship to Jackie Cormier. So conscious is Doris of history's impact that she is initially reluctant to allow Andrea to go to Louisburg when she hears of Andrea's winning of the prize. As she later admits, her concern was focused on a repetition of what

had happened to her a generation before happening again, to Andrea, now, in the present.

The fact that Andrea's romantic attachments, such as they are, with Calvin, the gaffer, and Marc, Justine's brother, are much more innocent than Doris's with Jackie's long gone father, Pierre Belanger, is testament to Mowat's light-handed and engaging treatment of the life of a fifteen-year-old. Here is none of the grittiness of the S.E. Hinton school of teenage angst, of the later Judy Blume, or the earlier Kevin Major. There's no need for that in a book that captures well the elements of the life of a typical mid-teen who is gradually learning about life and herself, and which wants to make its points about history and its impact on the present, and about connectedness at the personal and the national levels.

Through the course of the Andrea books, Andrea has been getting older. We follow her progress as we follow the progress of Marianne Brandis's Emma in the Emma trilogy. Will there be another book chronicling the further adventures of Andrea Baxter? I, for one, hope so, and look forward to it.

S.R. MacGillivray's teaching interests at Lakehead University are the eighteenth and nineteenth-century British novel, Canadian literature and children's literature.

Writing Historical Fiction

The Brideship. Joan Weir. Stoddart Kids, 1988. 218 pp. \$6.99. ISBN 0-7736-74748. *The Accidental Orphan*. Constance Horne. Sandcastle Books, 1998. 135 pp. \$8.95. ISBN 1-888-551-6655.

Perhaps the greatest challenge in children's literature is how to write historical fiction for a young audience. How can an author bring another time to life and make it relevant to an audience reared on the Spice Girls? The author has a responsibility to the audience to make history lively, and a responsibility to history to be accurate.

Both *The Brideship* by Joan Weir and *The Accidental Orphan* by Constance Horne illustrate unusual aspects of Canadian history. They tell young audiences what their history teachers will not: that a significant number of emigrants to Canada did not particularly want to leave home. In *The Brideship*, Sarah is one of many British orphans chosen to be brides for miners in British Columbia; the girls do not know of their fate until they are on the boat. In *The Accidental Orphan*, Ellen runs onto a docked ship when she is accused of theft, and the ship takes off for Canada. She is placed on a