

where a pickup truck might be headed as a segue into the following page, but this principle of linking the scenes is abandoned in both cases on the subsequent page. Altogether, it feels as if the books were developed without a coherent plan for continuity or linguistic approach.

I must stress this as an adult's viewpoint, though, produced by repeated readings that perhaps only the very best of young children's texts can withstand. These books have recently grabbed the attention of my two-year-old, who having found them uninteresting a few months back now insists on them over and over. Precisely because the books cater to such an obsessive market, however, they might have been written with more care. The adult reader not only utters the language of these books, but inevitably hears it echoed back by a child whose very sense of language is taking shape.

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*Susan Brown teaches English in the School of Literatures and Performance Studies in English at the University of Guelph.*

### Bringing History to Life

*A Pioneer Thanksgiving: A Story of Harvest Celebrations in 1841.* Barbara Greenwood. Illus. Heather Collins. Kids Can, 1999. 48 pp. \$14.95 cloth, \$6.95 paper. ISBN 1-55074-744-4, 1-55074-574-3. Ages 7-12. *House Calls: The True Story of A Pioneer Doctor.* Ainslie Manson. Illus. Mary Jane Gerber. Groundwood, 2001. 56 pp. \$15.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-446-X. Ages 8-12. *Pioneer Girl.* Maryanne Caswell. Illus. Lindsay Grater. Tundra, 2001. 88 pp. \$18.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-550-5. Ages 10 and up.

How can literature best be used to teach history? Three recent picture books attempt to teach readers eight and older about settler life. *A Pioneer Thanksgiving* and *House Calls: The True Story of a Pioneer Doctor* interweave fictional stories with factual information about Ontario's history. Both are illustrated with pencil sketches designed to capture the rustic atmosphere created by the texts — the illustrations in *House Calls*, in particular, have an attractive warmth and beauty.

*A Pioneer Thanksgiving* presents a series of loosely-connected anecdotes about a family's 1841 Thanksgiving celebrations, interspersed with factual vignettes and fall craft projects. The story line is marred by this discontinuity, and by the predictability of the rather melodramatic stories. Their happy endings, like the restoration of the health of an ailing grandmother in time for dinner, merely draw attention to their fictionality.

*A Pioneer Thanksgiving* is most engaging when it reveals itself as a didactic text describing a variety of harvest rituals, including the roots of the Canadian Thanksgiving festival. There are indications that, given an organized approach, the text would work well as a historical/factual resource. A story told by the neighbour seems believable, and the straightforward descriptions of pioneer life are interesting. Unfortunately, the intermittence of the anecdotal passages translates itself into an occasional carelessness in the content — nowhere is it explained that the family's neighbours are German, even when they use German words and their traditional blessing is quoted in the original (and here unidentified) language!

*House Calls: The True Story of a Pioneer Doctor* suggests that a sustained, chronologically consistent story might have provided unity to *A Pioneer Thanksgiving*. Kathleen, a fictional girl recovering from tuberculosis, introduces us to Dr. Hutchison, a real historical figure. *House Calls* succeeds in integrating the two types of information more effectively than the previous text. The narrative is complemented by small boxes of factual information about nineteenth-century medicine, including herbal remedies, childbirth, and — best of all! — leeches. The story and the factual information do sometimes seem contradictory, however, as when Kathleen describes her desire to become a doctor. The facts presented about early female doctors show this to be an unrealistic ambition, a tension which raises questions in the mind of the reader but which is never resolved.

Manson uses the connections between history and fiction constructively, but the real interest of the text lies in the story's use of real people and places. Fictional Kathleen is a credible observer, but the story seems to falter when she interferes with the plot. It is the factual, not the fictional, aspect of the text which makes it come alive; its strongest element is its connection with the Hutchison House museum. In both books, story is less interesting than history. Why not be honest with young readers and present them with a more straightforward historical narrative?

*Pioneer Girl* is a simpler and, in many ways, a more thought-provoking book. It reprints the letters written by fourteen year-old Maryanne Caswell during her family's move to a homestead near Moose Jaw in the late 1880s. It is modestly illustrated and lacks some additional background information (a glossary, a timeline, biographical information about Maryanne's family) that would aid reading. The historical aspect of the text, including references to the 1885 Rebellion, is fascinating. Most importantly, the narrator is a genuinely sympathetic figure whose hopes, dreams, mistakes, and courage shine through her letters.

Maryanne's experiences and her developing sense of connection with the land are emphatically the focus of the text. As readers, we must constantly be aware of the importance of what she does not express in words. She rarely complains, despite frequently being expected to do the work of a grown man; we recognize her weariness, for example, only through her anticipation of a single day of "sleeping in." *Pioneer Girl* is an honest work, made all the more interesting by its author's restraint.

Because it describes the everyday realities of prairie settlement so vividly, *Pioneer Girl* is well suited for classroom use. I hope that the present picture-book format will not dissuade older readers, including adults. The book's documentation of homestead life is of interest to readers of all ages; although optimistic, it shares little of the romanticizing tendency common to books about settlers. In *A Pioneer Thanksgiving* and *House Calls*, the didactic impulse is achingly obvious. The letters of Maryanne Caswell, however, teach us much more than simple historical facts — they make us feel history.

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*Janet Bertsch* teaches children's literature at the University of Lethbridge. She received her Ph.D. from the University of London in December 2000.