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The Making of the Cultural Mosaic / *Jonathan F. Vance*

Andrei and the Snow Walker. Larry Warwaruk. Coteau, 2002. 199 pp. $9.95 paper. ISBN 1-55050-213-1.

Scared Sarah. Mary Alice Downie. Illus. Muriel Wood. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2002. 57 pp. $10.95 paper. ISBN 1-55041-714-2.

Finding Sophie: A Search for Belonging in Postwar Britain. Irene N. Watts. Tundra, 2002. 136 pp. $9.99 paper. ISBN 0-88776-613-7.

Margit, Book One: Home Free. Our Canadian Girl. Kathy Kacer. Penguin Canada, 2003. 90 pp. $7.99 paper. ISBN 0-14-331200-6.

Rachel, Book Two: The Maybe House. Our Canadian Girl. Lynne Kositsky. Penguin Canada, 2002. 85 pp. $7.99 paper. ISBN 0-14-331208-1.

Elizabeth, Book One: Bless This House. Our Canadian Girl. Anne Laurel Carter. Penguin Canada, 2002. 87 pp. $7.99 paper. ISBN 0-14-100251-4.

The Word for Home. Joan Clark. Penguin Canada, 2002. 286 pp. $22.99 cloth. ISBN 0-670-91121-6.

Criss Cross, Double Cross: Sophie, Alias Star Girl, to the Rescue. Norma Charles. Beach Holme, 2002. 122 pp. $9.95 paper. ISBN 0-88878-431-7.

When the War is Over. Martha Attema. Orca, 2002. 247 pp. $9.95 paper. ISBN 1-55143-240-4.

Marie-Claire, Book Two: A Season of Sorrows. Our Canadian Girl. Kathy Stinson. Penguin Canada, 2002. 89 pp. $7.99 paper. ISBN 0-14-331209-X.

Lisa, Book One: Overland to Cariboo. Our Canadian Girl. Priscilla Galloway. Penguin Canada, 2003. 90 pp. $7.99 paper. ISBN 0-14-100327-8.

Angelique, Book One: Buffalo Hunt. Our Canadian Girl. Cora Taylor. Penguin Canada, 2002. 85 pp. $7.99 paper. ISBN 0-14-100271-9.

Strange School, Secret Wish. Bernice Gold. Beach Holme, 2001. 101 pp. $9.95 paper. ISBN 0-88878-425-2.

Emily, Book Two: Disaster at the Bridge. Our Canadian Girl. Julie Lawson. Penguin Canada, 2002. 96 pp. $7.99 paper. ISBN 0-14-331206-5.

Ellen, Book One: Hobo Jungle. Our Canadian Girl. Dorothy Joan Harris. Penguin Canada, 2002. 70 pp. $7.99 paper. ISBN 0-14-100270-0.

Search of the Moon King's Daughter. Linda Holeman. Tundra, 2002. 309 pp. $22.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-592-0.

Penelope, Book Two: The Glass Castle. Our Canadian Girl. Sharon E. McKay. Penguin Canada, 2002. 93 pp. $7.99 paper. ISBN 0-14-331207-3.

Irish Chain. Barbara Haworth-Attard. HarperCollins, 2002. 213 pp. $15.99 paper. ISBN 0-00-639-215-6.

Public opinion surveys consistently reveal that one of the defining features of Canadian identity is the cultural mosaic. This characterization, which sees a nation of immigrants who retain significant elements of their own cultural heritage in becoming Canadians, has had a long shelf life, underpinning everything from the Trudeau policy of official multiculturalism to government funding for heritage language instruction. It also underpins a sizeable body of historical fiction, imparting a thematic unity to a body of work that spans a remarkably broad range of subject matter.

Indeed, two of these books emerge from series that are explicitly intended to explore the experience of cultural diversity: Coteau's In the Same Boat, the seventh volume of which is Larry Warwaruk's *Andrei and the Snow Walker*, and Fitzhenry & Whiteside's New Beginnings, a new series inaugurated by Mary Alice Downie's *Scared Sarah*. Both books deal with the same experience, albeit at different points in

Canadian history: *Andrei and the Snow Walker* tells of a Ukrainian family that comes to homestead in Saskatchewan in 1900, while the sumptuously illustrated *Scared Sarah*, intended for younger readers, reaches back into the previous century, to a family of settlers in Upper Canada in the 1830s and the Aboriginal peoples who help them survive.

But homesteaders weren't the only kind of immigrants to enrich the Canadian mosaic. Irene N. Watts's *Finding Sophie: A Search for Belonging in Postwar Britain* and Kathy Kacer's *Margit, Book One: Home Free* address the issue of wartime refugees: both Sophie and Margit escape the Nazi persecution of Jews to find new homes in Britain and in Canada. Rachel, in Lynne Kositsky's *Rachel, Book Two: The Maybe House*, is also a refugee of war, a black Loyalist whose family is trying to make a new beginning in 1780s Nova Scotia despite the resistance of the local populace. Anne Laurel Carter's *Elizabeth, Book One: Bless This House* provides a different glimpse of the same dynamic: Elizabeth, the daughter of a Planter family that moves to Nova Scotia in the 1760s, comes face to face with the Acadians whom they have displaced and must reconcile the excitement of starting anew with the knowledge that others have suffered to make that possible.

The experiences of immigrants of another sort are explored in Joan Clark's *The Word for Home*. Set in 1926, this fine novel centres on two young sisters from Ontario whose father lodges them in a boarding house in St. John's, Newfoundland while he embarks on a quest for gold. Sadie and Flora do not necessarily see themselves as outsiders, but their schoolmistress certainly does, and she constantly reminds them that they have been educated in the woefully inadequate Canadian school system rather than in the superior British system in Newfoundland. "It is the sorry state of Canadian educational standards that is found wanting . . . in Newfoundland we do things the British way," she declares grandly (13). In Norma Charles's *Criss Cross, Double Cross: Sophie, Alias Star Girl, to the Rescue*, the sequel to the award-winning *Sophie Sea to Sea: Star Girl's Cross Canada Adventure* (1999), the irrepressible Sophie LaGrange is also a kind of domestic immigrant. She is still trying to get used to moving from Montreal to the more modest charms of Maillardville, British Columbia, and is coping with the challenges of being a francophone in a predominantly anglophone community.

What is most interesting is how these novels, with very different settings and characters, deal with common themes in the immigrant experience. Perhaps the most prominent of these is the tension between the urge to preserve the old ways and a desire to fit into the new society, something that Warwaruk adeptly highlights in *Andrei and the Snow Walker*. Immediately after arriving in Saskatchewan, Andrei's sister Marusia makes every effort to rid herself of her old identity, adopting the name Marie and showing greater interest in the younger Métis hunter Gabriel than in Mr. Kuzyk who, according to her mother, would be a much better match. Andrei's father accepts Marie's new identity with equanimity, much to her mother's dismay, but Andrei is ambivalent, for he has a deep connection to his family's heritage that manifests itself in a series of mystical episodes. Those scenes are the weakest elements in a novel with strong characters and a well-developed narrative. Not only are the visions themselves a little confusing, with past and present jumbling together haphazardly, but it also not clear what they represent: are they products of dreams, fever, or Andrei's overactive imagination?

Because they live on the frontier, Andrei's family has fewer external pressures to adopt the culture of their new land. Those pressures are much more intense

when the characters are thrust into the educational institutions of the host society. In *Criss Cross, Double Cross*, Sophie's desire to be like everyone else crashes up against her parents' wish that she transfer from an English to a French school; her elders value the survival of their culture (the scene in which Monsieur le Curé comes to "recruit" Sophie for the École Notre Dame de Fatima is a marvelous vignette that gets to the heart of the cultural complexities of Canada in 1949), but she is much happier to be assimilated with the rest of the kids in her neighbourhood and fears being taunted as a "Frenchie pea soup" (49). For the protagonist in Watts's semi-autobiographical *Finding Sophie*, the tension between old and new leads to unexpected consequences. Watts's Sophie tries so hard to become a typical English schoolgirl that, over time, she loses her own ethnicity; when faced with a difficult choice at the novel's end, Sophie Mandel realizes that she simply can't go back to being the German girl she once was. Further complicating matters is Sophie's age, and Watts does a wonderful job of describing her occasional slides into teenage irrationality as raging hormones take over. Margit, in Kathy Kacer's *Home Free*, faces the same dilemma. During the first few days in her new Kensington Market neighbourhood in Toronto, she is determined to keep her Czech name, but soon changes her mind and attempts to erase every vestige of her past; she is horrified when the teacher asks her to tell the class about her experiences in Czechoslovakia and shocked when everyone applauds enthusiastically.

Everyone, that is, except Ellen, the class anti-Semite who represents a second theme in this literature: the intolerance faced by newcomers. This relationship provides the bulk of the conflict in these novels, for many of the protagonists encounter the same prejudice, albeit embodied in different people. For Rachel, it is the discharged soldiers who despise the black Loyalists as much for their colour as for their willingness to work for lower wages. For Sophie Mandel, it is the boorish Stanley, who refers to her as "the enemy" (57) and makes snide comments about fraternization that only deepen her determination to fit into her new homeland. But most often it is another girl who emerges as the tormentor, like Elizabeth, whose carefully contrived airs and studied ignorance of French-Canadian culture infuriate Sophie LaGrange and cause her to waver between a burning desire to fit in and a wish that she could simply disappear. For all of the dramatic potential inherent in this kind of conflict, however, those scenes are surprisingly flat. This is perhaps the most disappointing element of these books, especially given that bullying is one of the biggest challenges faced by the children who will be reading them. In fact, none of the writers is able to present the bully as anything more than a one-dimensional stereotype. Even Joan Clark, whose novel is full of finely-rendered characters like the tragic shrew Mrs. Hatch and the hard-edged but ultimately noble Wanda, does nothing more with the ghastly Eunice than present her in terms of conventional nastiness.

Even if the portrayal of the bullies is lacking in depth, the best of these novels do admit that, because of the depth of prejudice, the coming together of different cultures did not always have a happy ending. Anne Laurel Carter gives Elizabeth's story a *Little House on the Prairie*-ish ending that doesn't quite ring true, but Martha Attema takes the bull by the horns in *When the War is Over*. Janke Visser, a sixteen-year-old courier for the Dutch resistance during the Second World War, falls in love with a sensitive and kind German soldier only to learn to her peril that not all cultures can mix at all times. The plot twists are entirely predictable, but Attema does not shy away from a dénouement that, for reasons of historical accuracy, could

not have been any different. This frank conclusion more than makes up for the stilted dialogue and unengaging characters of what could have been a rather unsatisfying book. Kathy Stinson's *Marie-Claire, Book Two: A Season of Sorrows* also refuses to take the easy route in exploring the divide that can result when cultures come together. In one of the best books in the *Our Canadian Girl* series, Stinson tackles a little-known tragedy, the Montreal smallpox epidemic of 1885, and its impact on Marie-Claire's family. History tells us that the odds of surviving the epidemic depended less on class than on ethnicity and religion, and Stinson is particularly good at conveying the anguish of Marie-Claire's mother as she wonders whether her religious faith has been partly responsible for the decimation of her family. For the Laroches, as it was for so many families in French Montreal, there was no easy answer to that question.

Prejudice and intolerance certainly characterized the immigrant experience, but so too did the cooperative spirit, a third theme that underlies many of these novels. It is clear that Andrei's family would not have prospered without the help of the local Métis and the other immigrants who came before them, and Scared Sarah's family comes to rely on the Ojibway of their district for survival tricks. In Priscilla Galloway's *Lisa, Book One: Overland to Cariboo*, based on the true story of a family that took part on a trek from Manitoba to find gold in British Columbia, cooperation between the ethnically diverse people on the trek is essential to their success, just as it is for the Métis people who band together for the annual food-gathering expedition in Cora Taylor's *Angelique, Book One: Buffalo Hunt*. But in none of these books is the spirit of cooperation between cultures depicted so subtly as in Bernice Gold's *Strange School, Secret Wish*, a charming story of a thirteen-year-old girl who lives in a railway school that travels back and forth across northern Ontario to educate the children of isolated communities. The main story concerns Jenny Merrill's campaign to acquire a violin from the Eaton's catalogue (a plot that might read like an extended advertisement if the store were still in existence), but the real interest is in the supporting cast. The diverse mix of characters who pass through the railway carriage-cum-school could have been found in any resource town in the 1920s, when the novel is set, but Gold never resorts to the kind of stereotyping to be found in earlier fictional accounts of northern Ontario, like Britton Cooke's 1923 play *The Translation of John Snaith*. Instead, they are rendered with great dignity and restraint, and the way they come together to help Jenny realize her dream parallels the spirit of cooperation that characterized the mosaic at the best of times.

The migrant experience was all about realizing dreams of a better life, and that quest for betterment represents a fourth theme in this literature. Whether it be Hing, the Chinese cook in Julie Lawson's *Emily, Book Two: Disaster at the Bridge* who has come to Canada to build a more prosperous future for his family, or Will, the young transient who teaches Ellen a lesson about contentment in *Ellen, Book One: Hobo Jungle*, many of these characters seek a more stable life, in economic, social, or personal terms. This search is at the heart of *Search of the Moon King's Daughter*, Linda Holeman's powerful account of a teenager's struggle to survive a string of tragedies in industrial England. It is a dark and sometimes depressing novel with a plot and a cast of characters that is positively Dickensian. The death of Emmaline Roke's beloved father destroys their stable world and sends the family on a downward spiral through alcoholism, domestic abuse, poverty, drug addiction, and white slavery. In her odyssey to reunite the family, Emmaline comes into contact with a haughty and manipulative aunt (whose husband's name inexplicably changes from Nathan

to Nigel and back again), a tyrannical and unstable wastrel, a kind and gentle employer, and a rough-hewn but sensitive manservant. None of this would be out of place in *Hard Times* or *Nicholas Nickleby* (indeed, a few of the characters, like Brandy Jack, the master of the chimney sweeps, approach the kind of caricatures that Dickens drew so well), but under Holeman's deft hand it doesn't seem derivative. On the contrary, her harsh and uncompromising portrait of a girl forced to be an adult before her time has a freshness about it that makes for compelling reading.

The authenticity of Holeman's novel is noteworthy in a genre that makes much of its ability to use fiction as a way to teach history. For example, the *Our Canadian Girl* series is explicitly marketed as a way "to feed history to the reluctant connoisseur," and the books certainly achieve what they set out to do in that regard. The best of them are fast-paced and engaging, with endearing characters and a solid grasp of the history detail, but in some cases the literary qualities have been subordinated to the format of the series. This is a shame — the contributors to the series include some of Canada's finest children's authors, but I found myself wondering what they could do with these stories if they had free rein.

A hint of an answer can be gleaned by comparing two books on the Halifax Explosion of December 1917. In Sharon McKay's *Penelope, Book Two: The Glass Castle*, Penny is separated from her sisters when their widowed father sends them away from the shattered city of Halifax to the safety of Montreal. The story that follows is static to the point of uninteresting: a girl is thrown into a society she doesn't understand and must come to terms with an apparently cold and distant grandmother. But what could a gifted writer like McKay done with the subject were she freed from the parameters of formula fiction? Perhaps the result might have been something like *Irish Chain*, Barbara Haworth-Attard's moving novel of Rose Dunlea, a thirteen-year-old Haligonian during the First World War. Happy at home but tormented at school by dyslexia, she would like nothing better than to spend her days learning the domestic skills of her mother. But everything changes when her family is decimated by the explosion, and Rose's slowly dawning realization that everything which had anchored her world has been swept away is both painful and touching to read. At the same time, Haworth-Attard's picture of the devastated city is grimly evocative and conveys better than most accounts the scope of the disaster:

> I felt like I'd walked into a giant's game of Pick-Up Sticks: trees uprooted, telephone and electric poles snapped off, all tossed together haphazardly. Few buildings stood, and the ones that remained had windows that stared at us emptily and rooms that were sheared off with a bed or an enamel bathtub exposed. . . . I squinted up at the sky to see a yellow ball through a thick grey haze — the moon, I thought at first, then I realized it was the sun. A million hours seemed to have passed since I got up that morning, although it had been only a few. (113-14)

What sustains Rose is the Irish Chain, a quilt pattern that allows her to connect her family's past to her own present in the happy days before the explosion. The blast marks a fundamental rupture in Rose's life — nothing afterwards will ever be the same as it used to be for her — but the quilt provides one constant. Rose envisions making a new quilt from the remnants of the old, a process that symbolizes her realization that, with the help of others whose lives have also been shattered by

the explosion, she can rebuild her world. With this, she comes to the same realization that struck Rachel, Margit, Sophie Mandel, and Emmaline Roke: that it is possible to start over. The Irish Chain has another meaning that makes it a fitting symbol for this genre as a whole. For Rose, it represents how a range of personal experiences come together into a family's history. The quilt is, in itself, a kind of mosaic, and the cultural mosaic that these books describe is, like the quilt, more than the sum of its parts.

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Giggling Helplessly in the Middle Years / *Margaret Steffler*

Stinky. The Kids from Monkey Mountain 6. Ted Staunton. Red Deer, 2002. 63 pp. $6.95 paper. ISBN 0-88995-263-9.

Trouble With Girls. The Kids from Monkey Mountain 7. Ted Staunton. Red Deer, 2002. 71 pp. $6.95 paper. ISBN 0-88995-264-7.

Dog Days. Becky Citra. Orca, 2003. 93 pp. $7.95 paper. ISBN 1-55143-256-0.

The Not-Quite World Famous Scientist. Susan Hughes. Illus. Stephen Taylor. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2002. 93 pp. $6.95 paper. ISBN 1-55041-696-0.

Alice and the Birthday Giant. John Green. Illus. Maryann Kovalski. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2000. 38 pp. $5.95 paper. ISBN 1-55041-540-9.

Ellen's Terrible TV Troubles. Rachna Gilmore. Illus. John Mardon. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1999. 38 pp. $5.95 paper. ISBN 1-55041-527-1.

Emma's Emu. Kenneth Oppel. Illus. Kim LaFave. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1999. 54 pp. $5.95 paper. ISBN 1-55041-524-7.

Marilou Cries Wolf. Raymond Plante. Trans. Sarah Cummins. Illus. Marie-Claude Favreau. Formac, 2002. 62 pp. $5.95 paper. ISBN 0-88780-580-9.

Maddie's Millionaire Dreams. Louise Leblanc. Trans. Sarah Cummins. Illus. Marie-Louise Gay. Formac, 2002. 63 pp. $5.95 paper. ISBN 0-88780-578-7.

Fred's Halloween Adventure. Marie-Danielle Croteau. Trans. Sarah Cummins. Illus. Bruno St-Aubin. Formac, 2002. 62 pp. $5.95 paper. ISBN 0-88780-576-0.

Dear Old Dumpling. Gilles Gauthier. Trans. Sarah Cummins. Illus. Pierre-André Derome. Formac, 2002. 61 pp. $5.95 paper. ISBN 0-88780-574-4.