

## No Bargain at a Dollar a Poem

*Voices from the Wild: An Animal Sensagoria.* David Bouchard. Illus. Ron Parker. Raincoast, 1997. 65 pp. \$23.95. ISBN 1-55192-040-9.

Flaunting a rusty cougar on its shiny cover, this visually impressive volume seems full of promise, but on the inside it is full of disappointment.

Each section of the book explores one of the five senses; sight, smell, touch, hearing and taste, and consists of five poems explaining how that sense is used by five different species. Each section concludes with a sixth poem in which the author wonders "what has happened" to that sense in humans (is there any evolutionary basis for this assumption?). Each species is described in further detail in a series of supplementary notes entitled "About the Animals."

I kept wanting to like this book a lot better than I did. The exploration of the senses is an appealing concept, and few would not share the author's concern for the preservation of wildlife. There's some fascinating information here, and Ron Parker's twenty-five paintings are undeniably gorgeous. So why isn't this a better book?

For one reason, the author has written for "young people" without deciding how young. Visually the book seems designed for school-aged children; how else to explain the excessively realistic illustrations (I believe that the very young might be served better by more imaginative art) and the encyclopaedia format of the notes? Within this context, the literary device of using the animals' voices to speak to the artist, is too fanciful: it might be delightful in a book for small children, but for an older readership, it sounds didactic and feels awkward.

The poetic structure is even more problematic. The poems are written mostly in a sing-song rhythm that recalls Longfellow's "Hiawatha." With almost no use of rhyme, this device works only if used continuously: when it is varied by lines that break the rhythm, or that maintain it only with laborious constraint, it's like an engine stalling, and the reader wonders if he is looking at an early draft. It doesn't take a particularly gifted editor to change "over down beyond the dark path" to "down beyond the darkened path." It is ironic that the author has written a book about the senses without awakening any of them. There is no magic in *Voices from the Wild*: these poems sound remarkably like prose — mundane prose at that.

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## All Work, No Play: The Realities of Child Labour around the World

*Listen to Us: The World's Working Children.* Jane Springer. Groundwood/Douglas & McIntyre, 1997. 96 pp. \$16.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-307-2, \$24.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-291-2.

This is not your typical adventure story written for the North American adolescent population ages 12-15. On one level it is tragic that a book like this

needs to be written for children about children. On another level, it is gratifying to realize that a growing number of children of this generation, truly citizens of a cyber-linked global village, care deeply about the plight of their counterparts around the world. This book should be in every school library, and is a great addition to school curriculum in any number of areas: social studies, history, geography, home economics/family studies....

Jane Springer's words, facts, statistics, and profiles of individual boys and girls from around the world (including many from Canada) are graphic, interesting, and balanced. She doesn't fall prey to the bleeding heart sentiments of so many well-to-do Westerners, who condemn child labour outright. Springer is able to put the issue into cultural and historical context, particularly with her inclusion of examples of child labour in our own backyards. Some forms, like child prostitution, are clearly to be condemned. But what about the countless youths who contribute their paid and unpaid labour to the family farm, or fast food restaurants? Where do we draw the line between exploitation of children and the gradual integration into adult life through day-to-day contributions to the welfare of families and communities?

The division seems to be around choice and levels of poverty. To what extent is children's welfare, health, education, and social and emotional development taken into account in decisions relating to the work they do? What are the rights of the child, how much say do they have, and what are the circumstances of their work?

Springer's stories and research identify the need for greater protection of child workers — they are often too young to fit minimum wage requirements or to belong to a union. How much do we teach children in this country about the rights of workers, about labour relations, and about becoming educated consumers? This book raises these questions and more, including a well integrated discussion about the correlation between gender and types of work done by girls and boys. One feature of child labour which seems to be shared across cultures is the disproportionate time spent by girls on (unpaid) domestic labour as they are called upon to care for younger siblings and engage in the full range of household work from a very young age.

The book is a call to action. North American youth can participate in this social justice issue in a variety of ways — beginning with an analysis of who does what in their own homes, to involving themselves in the types of international campaigns initiated by twelve-year-old Canadian, Craig Kielburger. Sheltered and comfortable Canadian children will be shocked by some of what they read here — the poignant photographs, included throughout the book reinforce the message in a powerful way.

While there is likely to be ongoing debate about the place of child labour in global economics, and about the imposition of Western values on other cultures, children talking to other children about their lives and working conditions is a good place to start.

The book provides resources for further reading and research, a glossary of terms, and a variety of features which provides for multi-faceted

perspectives on these complex issues. While some of the lay-out features cause a break in the regular text which is sometimes difficult to follow, the book will grab the attention of young readers with the mini-biographies, tables, and most of all the vivid photographs of the youngest workers in the world. Their faces say more than hundreds of pages of text could possibly convey.

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### Making the Past Present-able

*The Kids Book of Canada.* Barbara Greenwood. Illus. Jock MacRae. Kids Can, 1997. 56 pp. \$18.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55074-315-5. *Shaping a Nation: A History of Canada's Constitution.* Desmond Morton. Umbrella, 1996. 96 pp. \$9.95 cloth. ISBN 1-895642-10-8.

Canada is plagued by a recurring collective nightmare: yet another survey reveals an appalling ignorance among the nation's young people about their own history. Politicians, historians, and educators embark upon a painful process of self-searching, and there is much gnashing of teeth and tearing of hair as they puzzle over the proper course of action. In the end, nothing is done, and eventually another survey is published and the process is repeated.

Both Barbara Greenwood and Desmond Morton have directed their energies towards breaking this frustrating cycle. Greenwood's is a bold, brightly coloured volume aimed at the eight- to fourteen-year-old and written, not as a complete national history, but rather as a way to foster a child's interest in Canada's past. Each province and territory is covered in four pages, with a time line showing significant historical events and thumbnail sketches of interesting facts and personalities. It is always difficult making arbitrary decisions about what deserves inclusion, and doubtless the author will be criticized for leaving out this or that event. But in fact she has done an admirable job of including both the essential (the Rebellions of 1837-38) and the esoteric (the giant Ukrainian Easter egg in Vegreville, Alberta), and doing it all without getting bogged down in extraneous detail. The book's one weakness is its lack of a reading list. Since Greenwood's intention was to provide a first look at Canada, she would have done well to include a bibliography so that interested readers would know where to turn for more in-depth information.

Morton has a tougher task, for there are few subjects about which Canadians are as shockingly ill-informed as the Constitution. Indeed, I would venture to suggest that more Canadians understand particle physics than understand the vagaries of the Constitution Act of 1982 and all of its legislative offspring. This is why Desmond Morton has done such a service with his *Shaping a Nation*. Written in lucid and engaging prose and complemented with excellent illustrations, it provides a primer on the evolution of the Constitution from the early nineteenth century to the 1995 Quebec referendum. Particularly