

WINDOWS ON THE PAST

When Heaven Smiled on Our World. Tamara Thibaux. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1992. 32 pp. \$15.95 cloth. ISBN 1-88902-515-0. **The White Stone in the Castle Wall.** Sheldon Oberman. Illus. Les Tait. Tundra Books, 1995. Unpag. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-333-2. **Just Like New.** Ainslie Manson. Illus. Karen Reczuch. Groundwood Books, 1995. Unpag. \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-228-9. **The Stonehook Schooner.** Judith Christine Mills. Illus. author. Key Porter Books, 1995. Unpag. \$14.95 cloth, ISBN 1-55013-653-4. **Selina and the Bear Paw Quilt.** Barbara Smucker. Illus. Janet Wilson. Lester Publishing, 1995. Unpag. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 1-895555-70-1. **The Killick: A Newfoundland Story.** Geoff Butler. Tundra Books, 1995. 32 pp. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-336-7. **The Dust Bowl.** David Booth. Illus. Karen Reczuch. Kids Can Press, 1996. Unpag. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55074-295-7.

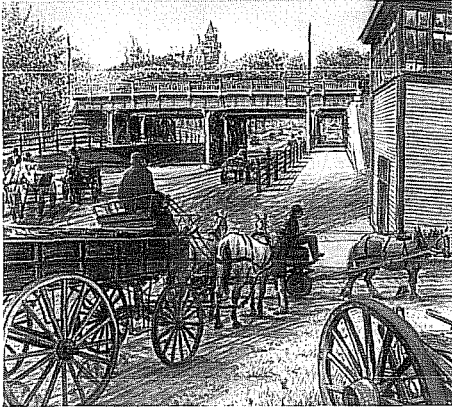
In the most general sense, historical literature for children seems to fall into three varieties. One genre, which might be called the *historical souvenir*, consists of books that attempt to convey a sense of the past by describing the modes of life experienced by previous generations. They recount the day-to-day lives of our ancestors, their work and play, and the countless minor triumphs and tragedies which punctuated their lives. In a sense, such books are akin to museum exhibits, because they treat the past as being strictly demarcated from the present; it becomes an object to be observed and studied, rather than experienced directly.

This is the route taken by *When Heaven Smiled on Our World*. Adapted from a memoir by Corinne Rocheleau Rouleau, it is not so much a story as a straightforward account of Christmas in a *habitant* home in the early part of the century. Cataloguers will consider it a work of literature, but it would be equally at home on the non-fiction shelves as a sort of social history for children. Diet, living conditions, religious observances, and even the gendered division of labour are described from the perspective of a Laurentian child, and the charming illustrations, somewhat reminiscent of Breughel, enhance the narrative of the joys (although not the hardships) of *habitant* life.

This simple but engaging book leaves the reader with a warm glow, but

unfortunately those feelings are spoiled by Virginia Davis's Afterword, which comes across as an unnecessary attempt to transform the book into the focus of a discussion group. Readers surely do not need the leading questions provided in the Afterword, for there is more than enough food for the cu-





rious mind in Tamara Thibeaux's text and illustrations.

The White Stone in the Castle Wall is as much of an historical souvenir as *When Heaven Smiled on Our World*, although in a slightly different way. If Thibeaux's book is a text of habitant life, Oberman's falls into the realm of *speculative history*. It imagines the story of a Toronto curiosity, a single white stone in the wall of Sir Henry Pellatt's mansion, Casa Loma.

Oberman's explanation is entirely plausible, and his lilting text gives a pleasing musical quality to the description of John Tommy Fiddich's trek to Casa Loma with his stone. People who know Toronto have an additional reason to enjoy the book, for they will recognize many familiar buildings in Les Tait's paintings (not to mention his lovely endpapers).

Readers with a keen sense of social justice will no doubt cringe at Fiddich's tug-the-forelock deference and Pellatt's admittedly well-intentioned paternalism, and may not want their children exposed to a book which is centred on class inequalities. In blithely accepting social and economic disparities, however, Oberman is merely being true to history. It is unlikely that either John Tommy or Sir Henry would have questioned their places in the social order, or indeed the justness of that order, and to write the characters any other way would have been profoundly ahistorical. Previous generations were rarely as enlightened as we wish they had been and, however uncomfortable the plot may make some readers feel, it offers an authentic snapshot of 1910 Toronto.

Another variety of history for children begins with a conventional story line, but places it in an historical context. It encourages children to envision what it was like to live in the past by presenting them with a situation in which they can easily see themselves. They are invited to occupy the shoes of the characters, and imagine what they would do in similar circumstances. If the first genre is akin to a museum exhibit, the second adds the dimension of *interactivity*.

Ainslie Manson's *Just Like New* succeeds wonderfully in this regard. It places the notion of sacrifice in a context that any child will appreciate: a Montreal girl named Sally who donates her favourite doll to Deborah, a toyless child in wartime London. There is nothing especially innovative about the plot, but the book is elevated above the commonplace by its magical details. Any adult will recognize incidents from their own childhood in Sally's squabble with her brother, who misses the object of the exercise by donating a book he has always hated, or when Sally writes her address as "Montreal, Quebec, Canada, The World, The Universe."



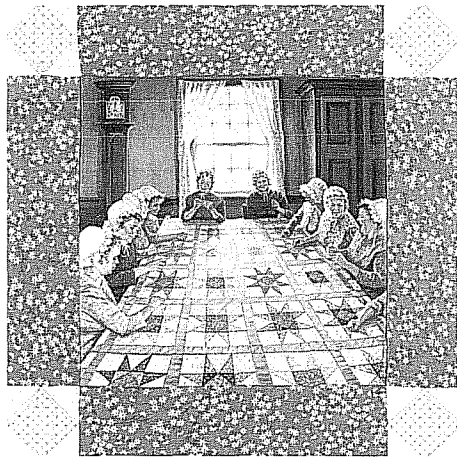
The book's other strong suit is Karen Reczuch's illustrations, which effectively contrast the relative plenty of Canada (rendered in colour) with the strictures of life in wartime Britain (in black and white). At the end of the book, after the doll has made its way across the ocean to England, the pictures of Deborah become coloured, a lovely little touch that symbolizes what Sally's sacrifice has meant to Deborah.

The Stonehook Schooner, in

contrast, seems a little flat. There is the conventional tale (a boy who proves his mettle in a struggle with the elements) told in the context of a dying trade (the ships that gleaned stones from the bottom of the Great Lakes to sell to builders), but Judith Christine Mills never rises above these conventions. The book fails to engage the reader's interest simply because the characters seem so uninterested. The disappearance of a trade offers wonderful story-telling possibilities, especially in light of current realities, but the fact that Matthew will never follow in the footsteps of his father and grandfather elicits only the barest flicker of sadness in anyone. Even in the illustrations, the faces of the plump and ungainly figures are often bereft of expression. Because they don't seem to care, it is difficult for the reader to.

Engaging the reader emotionally is a somewhat easier task for the third variety of historical literature. These books remind us of the continuity of time by confirming that the past is always with us, exerting a powerful influence on our present and future. They demonstrate that we are the products of our history, and that even events which occurred generations ago shape our outlook and values. In these books, the past is not a museum piece, but a vibrant reality to be experienced in every facet of our daily lives. In short, these books bring the past into touch with the present.

Crafting such a book requires more than simply fastening upon some timeless value, like per-



severance (as in *The White Stone in the Castle Wall*) or sacrifice (as in *Just Like New*), to affirm that we share something with our ancestors. What is needed is some tangible object, no matter how commonplace, that can symbolize the links between the past, present and future. The object can still stand for some value or principle, but more importantly it is the physical reality which bridges the generations.

Scraps of coloured fabric serve this purpose in *Selina and the Bear Paw Quilt*, the tale of a Mennonite family which emigrates to Waterloo, Ontario, from Pennsylvania to escape the American Civil War. Barbara Smucker (a Mennonite herself) uses the quilt as the means by which Selina is able to feel the presence of the grandmother she has left behind. Ultimately, it is the quilt which allows Selina to accept her displacement with equanimity; far from where she grew up, she finds comfort in the quilt that reminds her of her heritage. To emphasize the centrality of the quilt to the story, each of Janet Wilson's illustrations is framed with a traditional quilt design.

In Geoff Butler's book it is the killick, a homemade anchor of rocks and wood, which symbolizes the link with the past. When George's grandfather chooses it to mark his own grave, he does so as a tribute to the generations of Newfoundlanders who have gone before him. Ironically, for a book which addresses the continuity of time, it is sometimes difficult to sort out the chronology of events that Butler recounts. It has a confusing narrative structure in which the story jumps uneasily between the two events on which the plot turns; a certain amount of page-flipping is required to avoid losing one's place in the story. Nevertheless, *The Killick* does capture the degree to which a sense of history permeates the social landscape of Newfoundland. It shows us that decades-old events like the Battle of Beaumont Hamel in 1916 and the resettlement of the outports remain significant factors in the outlook of Newfoundlanders born long after the events.



David Booth's *The Dust Bowl* is also rooted in the landscape, using the family farm to affirm the importance of the past in the present. When a drought threatens Matthew's farm, his grandfather is moved to recall the Dirty Thirties and the battles he and his wife fought to survive the Depression. Their persistence through adversity becomes a legacy for Matthew's father and, ultimately, for Matthew himself. It is nothing in the present that convinces Matthew's father to continue the fight against the elements; it is the knowledge that he must live up to the family's history.

Though Booth's book deals with weighty matters, it escapes the sense of gloom



that pervades *The Killick*. Butler seems to infer that the elements conspire against the people of Newfoundland, while Booth sees them as capricious but essentially neutral. Where Butler's illustrations are dark and heavy, Reczuch's are light and airy; there is an optimism about them that is lacking in *The Killick*, and it is that optimism which makes *The Dust Bowl* a rather more enjoyable read. In contrast, spending a

cold and drizzly afternoon with *The Killick* is apt to leave one feeling morose.

"The past is a foreign country," L.P. Hartley wrote. "They do things differently there." They may do things differently, but the past need not appear daunting or inaccessible as a result. And that, in the end, is the measure of books such as these. They should awaken in readers an interest in the past, and play upon a child's strong natural curiosity about what came before. They should render the larger forces of history intelligible by focusing on the individual; a child can begin to comprehend the forces of social change by seeing how they impinged upon the lives of one family. And, by offering these small windows into the past, they encourage children to situate themselves in time and space, and to consider their own place in current history.

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À QUOI RÊVENT LES DOUCES FILLETES?

Un crocodile dans la baignoire. Marie-Francine Hébert. Illustré par Philippe Germain. Montréal, les Éditions de la courte échelle Inc., 1993 (Premier roman). 61 pp. broché. ISBN 2-89021-200-9.

De toute antiquité, poètes et artistes se sont plu à évoquer la migration de notre moi dans un autre corps. Ces métamorphoses étaient la forme que revêtaient châtiments ou récompenses. Par "palimmorphoses", le sujet métamorphosé reprenait parfois, après de douloureuses épreuves, sa première apparence.

C'est le thème de la "palimmorphose" que reprend Marie-Francine Hébert dans *Un crocodile dans la baignoire*. Développé avec beaucoup d'imagination, d'humour et d'adresse, l'argument est fort simple. La jeune Méli Mélo est bousculée par une petite brute, Jelédi. Combative, pour pouvoir défendre ses prétendus droits et se