how Åhmansson probes the Emily books, *The blue castle*, and *Rilla of Ingleside* in the proposed volume two.

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THE QUINTESSENTIAL SHAPESHIFTER

P.L. Travers. Patricia Demers. Twayne, 1991. 160 pp., $21.95 U.S. cloth. ISBN 0-8057-7005-4.

This book makes me want to reread P.L. Travers's Mary Poppins stories. That alone makes it a useful book. Moreover, it gives a particular light with which to undertake that rereading, and thus it is a valuable book. I am very grateful to Patricia Demers.

That said, let us commiserate with her for the limitations within which she has had to work. First, the "protective privacy, which often appears to be prickliness, of P.L. Travers herself" (113) and her "aversion to analysis" (2) set severe limits upon the biographical element of the book. The twelve pages of chapter one, "A Writer's Life," is all we get, though it is enough to establish the "sense of continuity and integration" (2) Demers claims for her. The childhood details and memories we are shown only make us want more, to help us connect and recognize some of the reverberant details of the books – such as the child's making of miniature city-parks. Travers insists that, like any writer of a "successful children's book" (115), she does not write for children, nor for "some image of her distant child-self" but as the adult who "still *is* that child" (111). Her assertion of the interconnectedness of child and adult experience both lived and written means that, with however ignoble a curiosity, we long for more about what Demers refers to tantalizingly as "the continuous cycle of return and restoration in Travers' own life" (112).

The second source of frustration we have to guess at: the limitations which Demers' editors seem to have imposed make for frustrating reading, as they probably made for frustrating writing and revising. There simply is insufficient room to deal any more than adequately with some of the issues she raises. For instance, Demers manages to address the charge of racism by emphasising the 1981 revision of the "Bad Tuesday" chapter in *Mary Poppins*, and glancing at the larger context. She reiterates the need to be "sensible," neither tolerating "unacceptable, however unwittingly embedded, racist bias" nor sanitizing robust literature, but calling for "genuinely liberating" and "empowering" reading (96).

Sometimes the constraints are ironically liberating. The "conundrum" of Mary Poppins herself is the subject of a whole chapter, and on first reading it seems as if Demers has been able to do little more than catalogue the various ways readers, critics, and film-makers have seen this "quintessential shape-shifter" (68). Certainly some critics, such as Michele Landsberg (not included in Demers' catalogue), have no kind words for Mary Poppins, but we look in vain for any rebuttal of such characterizations. Landsberg's is particularly harsh, though her sometimes inaccurate details cast doubt upon the validity of her generalizations; to her, Mary Poppins is "beady-eyed, peremptory, hard-hearted, extraordinarily vindictive, megalomaniac, prim, conceited and greedy, a veritable Nero at the circus" (*Michele Landsberg's guide to children's books* Penguin, 1986. 125-126). Demers' own views tiptoe through "seems," "might," and "it is curious," turn aside into a series of rhetorical questions, and limp off with the statement that "the very fact that such questions can be asked underscores both Mary Poppins' complexity and Travers' art in sustaining the attraction and unpredictability of her heroine" (78). She concludes (with a sting, it is true, in the apparent tolerance) that "It is beneficial to allow all these possibilities to coexist, since each reader discerns in this nanny one salient characteristic which itself reflects on the idiosyncracies [*sic* – one of a number of irritating typographical errors] of the reader" (83).

In insisting on the conundrum of Mary Poppins, and calling her "extraordinary" (68), "exceptional" (69), "singular" (73), "unique" (74), "unparalleled" (74), and "inexplicable" (82), Demers resists the temptation to impose her own "reflected idiosyncrasies" on Travers or on us. "True criticism," Travers declared sixty years ago, "is surely a process of inclusion, not of separation, of preoccupation with the thing for the thing's own sake and not a pronouncement of the critic's preconceived ideas about that thing" (25). Demers calls this an Arnoldian view, as anyone would who read Travers' call to "see it whole" (25), but it is worth noting that, unlike Arnold, Travers does not require the true critic or the creative artist (she maintains they are synonymous) to see either life or art *steadily* as well as whole. This omission from the Arnoldian phrase, deliberate or not, is significant, for "steadiness" is not a characteristic of the shapeshifting nanny or of the worlds she links. Wholeness, for Travers, is in movement – in the Grand Chain dance at the full moon, or in Mary Poppins' own comings and goings, whether with the wind, through chalk pictures, or swinging and spinning with the compass needle. In their concern with harmony and connectedness across time and space, the Mary Poppins stories are of a piece with Travers' other works in her writing lifetime – and this Demers shows us convincingly.

Like the nanny who never explains and is never explained, like Travers herself who admits that "Anything I write is all question" (80), Demers has written a book which sends its readers back to those other books, to confront the questions and seek the connections for themselves.

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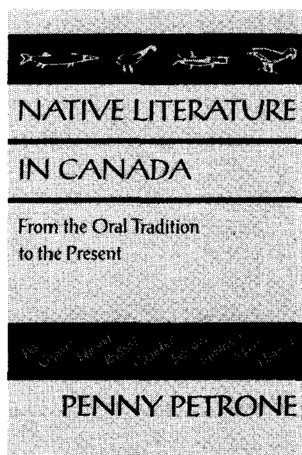
A NATIVE CONTEXT

Native literature in Canada: From the oral tradition to the present. Penny Petrone. Oxford University Press, 1990. 213 pp., $16.95 paper. ISBN 0-19-540796-2.



A foundation for the study of Canadian native literature, a growing canon of work virtually unexplored, has been laid. As Penny Petrone says in her preface, "[t]his book traces the long development of Indian and Metis literature in Canada and attempts to interpret the aesthetic dimensions of native sensibilities." Her undertaking is formidable and eminently necessary.

Examining the history of work by Canadian natives writing in the English language, the book explores and assesses (in chronological fashion) the influence of oral literature upon modern literary forms. It also attempts to provide reasons why western literary criteria are not always applicable to the study of native literature. The text would be very useful for providing a historical context in which to survey Canadian native literature.

Petrone is a Professor Emeritus at Lakehead University. Her other books include *First people, first voices* in which she edits selected native writing and speeches from the 1600s to the present and *Northern voices: Inuit writing in English*. Her new book sets a precedent as the first formal book-length study of writing by Canadian natives. In numerous examples of poems and speeches, native writers speak for themselves. The various speeches are themselves worthy of another full study.

Native literature in Canada is divided into six chapters, each covering some of the most prominent and influential social experiences of natives living in Canada. Each chapter also covers a relatively large period of time, giving a broad perspective on the manifold qualities of native writing.

Chapter one, the period of post-colonial contact, explores the fascinating realm of oral literature, central to understanding much of native literature. While focusing on narratives, song and oratory, Petrone discusses the native respect for the spoken word, suggesting that native leaders were chosen for