

*Teach Me To Fly, Skyfighter!* by Paul Yee. Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 1983.

Children from different cultural backgrounds for the most part encounter formal education through the images and experiences of the dominant society. The same may be said of the language environment of classrooms. New material is mostly taught with examples from non-familiar areas of experience. Very seldom does the immediate cultural environment of minorities feature as part of the body of literature to which they are exposed.

Given the plural character of Canadian society, where prevailing conceptions of childhood have tended to be ethnocentric and middle class, Paul Yee's *Teach me to Fly, Skyfighter!* addresses a definite void. Four very well conceived and imaginatively written short stories capture the lived worlds of minority children, in familiar cultural territory.

The scene is Strathcona, one of Vancouver's oldest inner city settlements, and adjacent to it, Chinatown. Successive phases of Asian and European immigrants have passed through the area and left their imprint.

Ethnicity and class are carefully intertwined in Yee's stories. There is a holistic treatment of the working class lives of Chinatown's residents. The texture of the social reality of Chinatown's east side environment comes alive. Younger children encounter older relatives and learn their history, and inter-generational differences are sensitively portrayed. The issue of cultural identity is dealt with in a multilateral way. Variations of the Chinese experiences from that of newcomer, and the rural immigrant, to the Hong Kong city slickers serve to undermine stereotyping. Details of daily nitty gritty of children's after-school lives with both parents working long shifts, riding through periods of unemployment, living in small spaces, and assisting in the family grocery store after school serve to draw out commonalities in survival.

Common human experiences of immigrants are open for sharing. Among these are being an outsider, not fitting in, having problems with a new language, fear of reading in front of groups because of one's accent, fear of non-acceptance by one's peers, wanting to be part of the group and good at sport.

Astutely, the book does not avoid stereotypes of other groups in the area, such as the common perception by the Chinese-Canadian kids of those from a neighbouring project as "problems." Instead, a situation is constructed in which the pupils discover that pinning the blame for a fire on someone who lives in the project is false. It serves to break down the

stereotype and elevates the suspect to somewhat of a humane and sensitive hero.

This is a fine example of how literary works can and must provide the point of departure between all groups of the school community, based on a deeper respect and understanding for each other.

It provides many opportunities for children to discuss and analyze. Above all, the self image of children is enhanced in that they see themselves and their neighbourhoods embodied in an otherwise alien book culture. For many working class non-English speaking children such works serve to demystify writing, by providing a bridge between their ordinary lives and the printed page.

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