

# FROM SEA AND CEDAR TO CONCRETE SIDEWALKS

## *A Review Essay*

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THIS SURVEY of recent children's literature reviews books primarily set in British Columbia. Most of the books have a strong connection to some aspect of BC life – history, setting, or theme – and most of the authors and illustrators live now or have lived in British Columbia. The publishing of what we can call BC children's literature has exploded, which makes challenging the task of narrowing down the number of books we can call British Columbian. Last year, I examined forty-three books submitted to the BC Book Prizes for consideration for the 2006 Sheila Egoff Children's Literature Prize, and that number did not include illustrated books.

In identifying what is unique to this group of books, it is useful to consider the development of writing and publishing for children in British Columbia and to place it within a national context. A number of British Columbians wrote children's books set in British Columbia before the 1970s. Most were published in London, New York, or Boston before the Canadian publishing industry for children had developed. Much of this early writing points to the themes and subjects that contemporary writers still find compelling – the

BC landscape, Aboriginal lives and legends, and natural history. Pauline Johnson's *Legends of Vancouver*, 1911, was cross-marketed for children and adults. This writing included Roderick Haig-Brown's fiction for children and adolescents, which is set in the forests and coast of British Columbia. Haig-Brown wrote outdoor adventure stories (*Starbuck Valley Winter*, 1943; *Saltwater Summer*, 1948), a wild animal biography (*Ki-Yu: A Story of Panthers*, 1934), and one of the first pieces of Aboriginal historical fiction (*The Whale People*, 1962). Christie Harris retold many volumes of First Nations legends, beginning with *Once upon a Totem* (1963), at a time when the issue of cultural appropriation was not a consideration in publishing. All of Catherine Anthony Clark's fantasies, including *The Golden Pine Cone* (1950), were set in British Columbia, and many incorporated elements of romanticized Aboriginal mythology.

But despite the global awareness of L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* from the early twentieth century, a viable Canadian children's literature is barely thirty years old. The Canadian-owned children's book publishing industry came of age in the 1970s, when nationalist baby boomer publishers,

writers, and illustrators who had grown up with textual and visual images of the United States and Britain committed themselves to creating a new kind of children's literature. This literature would be for Canadian kids and would be produced by Canadian writers and illustrators who would tell stories that explored various aspects of Canada's cultural identity. According to Patsy Aldana, publisher of Groundwood Books, "I realized that there was an incredible need and hunger for Canadian books" (personal interview, 18 June 2003). The next decade was also the period during which small regional publishers beyond central Canada emerged, from Atlantic presses to some of the first BC publishers. These publishing houses included children's books on their lists. For instance, British Columbia's Gray's Publishing issued the first Aboriginal-authored and illustrated book for children in Canada: BC resident George Clutesi's *Son of Raven, Son of Deer: Fables of the Tse-Shahb People* (1967), a breakthrough book in Aboriginal publishing.

British Columbia is home to the largest number of regional presses in Canada, many of which publish children's books. Among these are publishers (several of them national and international) that most people associate with books for adults: Sono Nis Press, the University of British Columbia Faculty of Education's Pacific Educational Press, Douglas and McIntyre, Beach Holme Publishers, Whitecap Books, Polestar Book Publishers, Raincoast Books, Harbour Publishing, Nightwood Editions, Ben-Simon Publications, and Ronsdale Press. There are also three specialist children's book publishers: Orca Book Publishers, Tradewind Books, and Simply Read Books.

Children's books of the 1970s and 1980s continued to set the themes and genres of children's writing about British Columbia, and these themes persist today. Some of the first Canadian picture books came from BC residents. Nanaimo's Betty Waterton wrote texts set in British Columbia and on the Prairies, and she had a difficult time finding a publisher until she turned to one from her own province: "I had sent out *Salmon for Simon* to nine or more publishers – all the big Canadian publishers. Finally someone said, 'Why don't you try a west-coast publisher?' I'd never even heard of Douglas and McIntyre before but I sent two manuscripts together to them" (Personal interview, 28 April 2004).

Crescent Beach's Ann Blades began her career while teaching in northern British Columbia. During the Easter break she wrote a picture book about a Mennonite girl living in Mile 18. *Mary of Mile 18* (1971) became one of the first books in Canada to present cultural diversity and Canadian regionalism for children. Vancouver's Sue Ann Alderson set historical picture books on Salt Spring Island and poetry collections at Vancouver's Jericho Pond. Upon writing *Bonnie McSmithers, You're Driving Me Dithers* (1974), she modelled the surname "McSmithers" on Smithers (a city in north-central British Columbia) because she wanted to use something recognizably British Columbian (Personal interview, 18 May 2003). Vancouver's Sing Lim wrote and illustrated *West Coast Chinese Boy* (1979), an autobiographical picture book of his childhood growing up in Vancouver's Strathcona neighbourhood during the 1920s. Including scenes of painful discrimination, *West Coast Chinese Boy* was one of the first children's books to explore historical injustices in Canada.

In 1980, the UBC Creative Writing Department established the country's first program in writing for children and hired Sue Ann Alderson as its chair. She and others who followed her in this program have shepherded many student writers towards productive careers. The Vancouver Children's Literature Roundtable, established in 1979 by Professor Ronald Jobe of UBC, holds an annual international children's literature conference that brings to Vancouver up to three hundred teachers, librarians, publishers, booksellers, writers, and illustrators from across the province. New awards, like the Sheila Egoff Children's Literature Prize, established as part of the BC Book Prizes in 1987, had a salutary effect on raising awareness of the craft of writing for children.

The numbers of published BC children's writers and illustrators grew until there was a large enough critical mass to establish the professional support group the Children's Writers and Illustrators of British Columbia (CWILL BC), with 150 members across the province. By 2006, the field of BC children's literature included the largest number of writers and illustrators outside Ontario. Many writers have chosen to set their works – whether children's fiction, children's non-fiction, picture books, or the adolescent novel – in this province.

The books under review are grouped according to subject: Aboriginal, Emily Carr, natural history, the Chinese experience in British Columbia, romantic isolation, young adult angst, and harsh urban naturalism. Founders of the first category, Roderick Haig-Brown and George Clutesi, wrote from opposite sides of the spectrum – the researcher of Aboriginal history and the Aboriginal writer retelling his own culture's story for the next generation.

Two writers, Virginia Frances Schwartz and Larry Loyie, divide along lines similar to Haig-Brown and Clutesi. Virginia Frances Schwartz's *Initiation* (2003) has received acclaim for its sensitive portrayal of fifteenth-century Kwakiutl people, its strong characterization of the twin children of the chief, and its compelling plot (which is based on a transformation myth). The content, however, suggests cultural appropriation and feels like a throwback to Roderick Haig-Brown's romanticized idealization of the proud and noble Native, courageous and in touch with spiritual powers, a saviour of his people. Although Schwartz is gifted as a stylist and has researched her subject, and while the precontact tribal conflicts and the transformation of the protagonist into a salmon spirit is dramatic, the final result is well-written romantic kitsch. The book feels false and cinematically overblown.

In sharp contrast to the fantasy of *Initiation*, two contemporary picture storybooks written by Vancouver resident Larry Loyie with Constance Brissenden are unsentimental accounts of a First Nations way of life almost lost to the recent past and the grim reality of the present. *As Long as the Rivers Flow* (2002) and *The Giving Tree* (2005) (written with a tough, factual honesty) share a core of hard emotional truth. *As Long as the Rivers Flow* is Cree playwright Loyie's autobiographical narrative of the last summer (1944) that he and his siblings spent with their extended family, living on the land in the bush near Slave Lake, Alberta. Ten-year-old Laurence spends the summer learning traditional ways, modelling his family members' skills in hunting, fishing, and oral storytelling. Each activity, from the adoption of a baby owl to hearing the tale of his grandmother's shooting of the

largest grizzly in North America, is a cultural act that binds him to his family and to his people's traditions. This connection ends abruptly when the children are taken away in a truck to residential school. In an epilogue, black-and-white photographs and flat, grim information describe these school years. In *The Giving Tree* (2005), published as a family story and an educational document by Theytus Books, a Penticton-based First Nations Press, an Aboriginal community listens to a young man who returns to tell them that he has HIV. The healing ceremony is attended by children and elders, while the tone of the narrative avoids any heavy-handed didacticism. Heather Holmlund's acrylic paintings of place and portraiture add to the emotional realism and cultural appropriateness of both books.

In 1992, British Columbia's Shirley Sterling, who died last year, penned the semi-autobiographical *My Name Is Seepetza*, the first Canadian children's novel about residential schools, in a UBC course on writing for children. Nicola Campbell also wrote her picture-book text, *Shi-shi-etko* (2006), in a UBC writing course. Campbell's book is parallel in content to Loyie's, focusing on her last experiences before residential school, but it is written for a younger audience. The partially rhyming text has an elegiac tone, celebrating the young girl's final days with her family before she, too, must leave for residential school. Shi-shi-etko collects berries, roots, flowers, and fragrant leaves to keep in her deer-hide bag. She then places the bag in the roots of a fir tree to keep her memories safe until she returns to her family in the spring. Kim LaFave's radiantly autumn-coloured computer art is stunning, emphasizing the poignancy of the text. In the narratives

of Loyie and Campbell, written as they are for children rather than for adults, the subtext of cultural loss and the emotional absence of family is somewhat balanced by the power of memory and faith in healing.

Many Canadian children's books have been written about historical injustices – to Aboriginal peoples and minority groups – from stories of the Japanese-Canadian internment to riots against Chinese immigrants. One of the first of this type of writing was John Lim's *West Coast Chinese Boy*, which provides scenes of fear, anxiety, and anger as well as a detailed account of life inside the early twentieth-century Vancouver Chinatown community. Paul Yee's *Bone Collector's Son* (2003) is similar in content to Lim's book, which was published twenty-seven years earlier. An archivist and historian, Yee's novels, picture books, and non-fiction are almost all set in British Columbia and document the experiences of the Chinese immigrant community in Canada. In Yee's words, "I don't write because I want to be a generic writer; I write because I happen to be Chinese-Canadian. I am interested in ... issues around identity, history, nationalism, all of those things influence, even motivate me, to write" (Personal interview, 20 June 2003). Driven by anger and sadness as well as a sense of historical purpose to document the painful lives of the men (and some women) who lived and worked in Gold Mountain, Yee's writing, which flows as fiction, is accurately grounded in the details and facts of British Columbia's history. *The Bone Collector's Son*, set in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Vancouver, is both historical fiction and ghost story. A detailed endpaper map identifies the neighbourhoods that feature in the story, and the plot recognizably moves through Strathcona's Chinatown,

False Creek, Fairview, and the Mount Pleasant graveyard. The characters are diverse, from the group of hard-working Chinese men and boys and the privileged families of False Creek to the militaristic men who attacked the Strathcona community in the infamous anti-Asian riot of 1907. A compelling element of the story involves the work with the dead, as fourteen-year-old Bing-wing Chan's father collects the bones of dead Chinese men from the cemetery to return them to China for proper burial. Ghost stories, which are part of Chinese folk tradition, are present in most of Yee's work and, as interspersed oral tales, are here woven into the fabric of the story. The theme of the dead, their regrets and concerns, is expressed as the boy meets several real ghosts that help him to reach an understanding of his life and to gain respect for his father.

The figure of Emily Carr has been the subject of at least seventeen Canadian children's books since 1950, including, of course, her own *Book of Small* (1942), a narrative of her childhood that, over the years, has been read by many children. Three recent books – a picture book, a biography, and a graphic novel – treat her life. The subject of Susan Vande Griek's *The Art Room* (2002) is the "Drawing & Painting classes with Miss M. Emily Carr," flamboyant art classes for children that, for a short period, Carr held in Vancouver. The excitement in the classes as the children learn to see like an artist is conveyed through the voice of Carr's students. Pascal Milelli's expressionistic oil paintings directly refer to Granville Street and Stanley Park. More conventional, comprehensive, and informative than the preceding emotionally charged texts is Jo Ellen Bogart's *Emily Carr: At the Edge of the World* (2003), a formal, gracefully written biography that is

illustrated with reproductions and with Maxwell Newhouse's black-and-white folk art sketches.

By contrast, Nicolas Debon's graphic novel, *Four Pictures by Emily Carr* (2003), is a fragmented, atmospheric biography. Debon organizes Carr's life into four time periods (shown in expressively designed comic strip panels), each symbolized by one of her iconic paintings: (1) her youthful discovery of the coast and Aboriginal culture in 1898; (2) her exposure to the art world of Paris in 1910 and her mental and physical breakdown; (3) her life in Victoria, during which time the Group of Seven display an interest in her work; and (4) her final period of creativity and mature art. The use of strips and panels, balloon dialogue, and even the rounded, sculpted figures owe some of their style to the *Tintin* comics that influenced Debon in his youth, while the gouache-and-ink illustrations incorporate the lower northwest coast forests and the power of Carr's paintings.

The natural history of the Pacific Northwest – the ecology of the coast and rain forest – are the subjects of two picture books that explore the intersection of the Pacific salmon's ecosystem with the forest, waters, and wild animals of British Columbia. Roderick Haig-Brown, one of the great writers on fishing, also wrote a salmon biography for young people, but his was an Atlantic salmon. Here we have two differently shaped but similar stories of Pacific salmon and their habitat. David Suzuki and Sarah Ellis collaborate on *Salmon Forest* (2003), with the former providing the science and the latter providing the story. The information on a salmon's lifecycle and its links to the forest ecosystem is presented within the context of a father-daughter expedition of discovery. Sheena Lott's

illustrations are exquisite: light-filled watercolour washes that capture the greens and blues of the forests and waters as well as the drama of spawning fish and of bears scooping salmon from the river.

Annette Le Box's *Salmon Creek* (2002) is similar to *Salmon Forest* but without the human observers. It is a hybrid, combining the style of a free verse poem and an information book on salmon. It takes, as did Haig-Brown's narrative, the point of view of the fish, an unusual, old-fashioned anthropomorphized style of writing. The personified Sumi, a coho salmon, is followed from her birth to her death on the spawning grounds. At times LeBox stumbles, and some of the language is hampered by bathos, but the rhythmic language is evocative and Karen Reczuch's art is radiant, constantly rippling with movement as the salmon makes her life journey.

Children's literature critic Perry Nodelman has commented that a common theme in Canadian picture books is the pastoral idyll, a bland belief in the salvation offered by the wilderness or small town. And rural life does in fact predominate in many of the texts. A great majority of BC children's books are about landscape as much as they are about character or plot, and they are set in small towns and rural areas, despite the fact that most BC children live in cities. Three books of fiction under review fall into this category: one is literally deadly serious in its treatment of the wilderness as a false refuge from urban life, and it shows the negative, destructive underside of the quest for the pastoral idyll; two are affectionate parodies of life in the small towns of British Columbia.

Iain Lawrence's *The Lightkeeper's Daughter* (2002) is a unique and startlingly sophisticated young adult tragedy,

which, in an earlier generation, would probably have been published as a piece of adult fiction. Two siblings grow up in isolation on their lighthouse island, Lizzie Island, a place of great natural beauty on the coast of northern British Columbia. Their father obsessively keeps them from other people, killing his brilliant son's spirit and, eventually, his sanity in his attempt to emotionally chain him to the island. The intense intimacy between a brother and sister growing up without friends, playing in their private Eden, becomes strained with sexual tension. The sister becomes pregnant at thirteen, the brother commits suicide, and the family self-destructs. The text is written as a mystery, and it slowly unfolds as the daughter and her mother return to the island and remember various periods of their family's life. Lyrically written, imagistic in the evocation of the island's harsh beauty and danger, *The Lightkeeper's Daughter* is an elegiac and poignant story.

Two works of quirky humorous fiction are set in BC towns and feel distinctly Canadian in their tall-tale and tongue-in-cheek spirit. Susan Juby's *Alice* trilogy (*Alice, I Think*, 2000; *Miss Smithers*, 2004; and *Alice MacLeod, Realist at Last*, 2005), now a television series, is a parody of the teenage angst novel, very much in the style of British writer Sue Townsend's 1980s *Adrian Mole* series, which also had a malapropistic misfit as the protagonist. Through Juby's use of character and setting, the glib and facile wit of the adolescent, growing awkwardly into selfhood and finding fault with the adult world and general social order, is transformed into something memorable. The setting is not the anonymous North American city typical of the adolescent novel but, rather, the small town of Smithers, British Columbia, made mock-heroic

in this tender and hilarious parody. In a subtle blend of gentle humour and sharp satire, Juby mocks small-town hypocrisy and stereotypes (think of an updated L.M. Montgomery, whose true gift was surely her satire of small-town Canadian life), the limited rites of passage in the town, and the pains of living with hippie parents. Alice's misadventures cover several years of growth. She is home-schooled (driven home from public school on her first day, when she appeared dressed as a Hobbit and was forever labelled as a freak), supports her insecure psychotherapist, represents the Rod and Gun Club in the Smithers beauty pageant, and is interrupted in her first attempt at sex by a charging moose (how Canadian)!

In a slightly magic realist narrative set in Coal Harbour on Vancouver Island, preadolescent Primrose lives a life outside the social norm. Polly Horvath's *Everything on a Waffle* (2001) is absurdist fiction – an original, odd, and, at times, dark-humoured homage to small-town life. The tale shares a bit of the exaggerated sensibility of Jack Hodgins's stories. When Primrose loses her parents, who disappear in a storm at sea, she refuses to believe they are dead. She lives her life full of hope as she bounces from caretaking family to caretaking family and loses more than her parents: parts of her body disappear, from a toe to a finger. Each chapter includes a recipe, inspired by the spirited restaurant chef who cooks every meal on a waffle – from fish and chips to pasta – and who believes in Primrose's tenacious spirit.

The last two books are the only ones located in actual cities, where most BC children and teenagers live. They are set in the Lower Mainland, one in Abbotsford and the other in Vancouver. These are gritty city-scapes; whether we are in the suburbs or the inner city,

the world is made of concrete rather than of sea and cedar. Both books owe much to the naturalistic fiction of urban poverty, bullying, and violence that is common in North American writing for adolescents, yet both stand outside the genre in their freshness of approach and voice. Carrie Mac is the youngest of this group of writers. In *The Beckoners*, the transgressive world of tattooed, working-class girls high on alcohol, bullying, and cynicism is strongly reminiscent of Reena Virk's story of victimization and murder. Zoe, a young adolescent from Prince George who moves to Abbotsford, finds herself caught in a high school web of fear and conformity when she joins a gang of girls led by a psychopathic teen. As their actions escalate in cruelty and viciousness, she tries to break away. Tightly written, with sharp, credible dialogue and attitude, the writing only stumbles near the book's ending, which moves inexorably towards a girl's murder but pulls up at the last minute. Perhaps that is the difference between young adult fiction and reality.

Nan Gregory's *I'll Sing You One-O* (2006) is the story of Gemma, a twelve-year-old, and is told in the first person present tense. Gemma's voice is one of displacement, grief, and fierce determination to shape her destiny. Her addicted mother disappeared from a Downtown Eastside hotel, leaving Gemma, just a toddler at the time, locked alone in a room for many days. Since then, Gemma has lived with a hippie-ish and loving foster family on a BC farm. When the foster family has to give her up, an event that Gemma experiences as a second abandonment, she is taken in by her newly discovered uncle's family, which includes her twin brother. Gemma, who knows how to persevere, is nightmare-ridden, stubborn, and

given to magical thought. She cannot accept her situation and, after reading a book of saints, she comes to believe that, through suffering and goodness, she, like the saints, will be able to earn an angel who will restore her former home. Her quest for goodness leads her to steal and to give money and clothing to a homeless woman who is in the control of a sociopath. The girl's life spirals out of control, veering towards tragedy. Much of the text looks unflinchingly at the harsh lives of Vancouver's drug-addicted and homeless residents. The Vancouver settings are accurately described, from Commercial Drive to the Britannia Branch Library to the hotels on East Hastings. The final scenes in the Downtown Eastside unfold like a revelation as Gemma's memories of her mother's disappearance flood back. Gregory creates characters who have unique, memorable voices. Gemma, as frustrating and difficult as she is, has a pure, brave soul and eventually finds a different kind of salvation than the one she had sought. This is a book about angels, the talismans of faith, but angels of human courage and compassion rather than of religion.

*I'll Sing You One-O* is the only book in the group that originated with an American publisher. Gregory told me that Clarion Books would not let her identify Vancouver as the city in which the story took place but did allow her to keep the street names. According to her, "I had to take out all Canadianisms: loonies, sneakers, [and] Grade 4 became money, running shoes, [and] fourth grade. And I had to take out the name Vancouver. I was asked if the place names of streets ... were real, and I said they were and that I'd very much like them to

stay so that at least people who know Vancouver would know where it was set. The matter wasn't mentioned again" (personal interview, 2 June 2006). This is in keeping with what happens with most Canadian children's books that are published in the United States: Canadian cultural identity is stripped away from both text and art.

Gregory, Horvath, Jubj, Lawrence, and Mac – whether their novels are comic or tragic in tone, whether set in small towns or cities – have created adult characters that are fully realized figures. This is in contrast to much North American contemporary realistic writing for children and teens, in which the adults are often flat and one-dimensional parodies.

Looking at both earlier children's books written about British Columbia and recent ones, the persistence of many similarities – in content, subject, theme, and approach – is striking. Except for the few works that deal with current urban sociocultural psychodramas, all books deal with themes that have been written about in the past. Concern with identity, justice, community, and belonging are visited again and again. Finally, in many of these books, British Columbia is almost a character as well as setting. The new writers, like the earlier ones, are working in a tradition that is deeply rooted in a sense of place, whether that place is made of sea and cedar or of concrete sidewalks.

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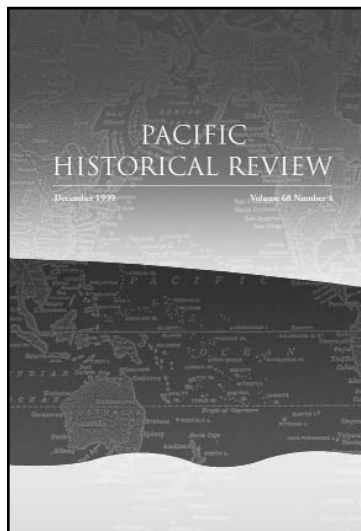
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