

“How the World Burns” Adults Writing War for Children

Writing about war for children? The challenges and responsibilities of such a project raise questions that resist easy answers. First come the particular issues of audience, content, and style attached generically to writing for children. Which children to address? What kind of story to tell? Which words, images, illustrations, and tone to represent the subject matter and to engage readers? Then come the challenges specific to writing about warfare, that adult activity with such profound effects upon children. Surely the simplicity of plot, style, and character assumed to be inherent in writing for children—not to mention the pressure to produce what Dominick LaCapra refers to as “a harmonizing narrative that provide[s] the reader or viewer with an unwarranted sense of spiritual uplift” (14)—is incompatible with the tangled complexity of warfare. In the September 2000 issue of *The Lion and the Unicorn* dedicated to the topic of violence and children’s literature, this troubling paradox is articulated in the question, “Will honest representation of the human capacity for evil overwhelm the young mind in despair?” (qtd. in Goodenough vi). One answer is provided by Maurice Sendak: “It is a sad comedy: the children knowing and pretending they don’t know to protect us from knowing they know” (n.p.).

In Canada, the struggle to write children into stories of war has been represented best, for me, in three works for adults. Margaret Atwood’s poem, “You Begin,” features an adult, increasingly conflicted as she guides a young child through a simple drawing lesson that becomes surprisingly complicated for the guide if not for the child:

This is the world, which is fuller
and more difficult to learn than I have said.
You are right to smudge it that way

with the red and then
the orange: the world burns. (248)

The fiction of Timothy Findley, so attentive to the fact of war, and so pre-occupied as he himself said, with those “allowed no *voices*,” to whom “[w]e don’t *listen*,” and who “are so often . . . *excluded*” (Atwood, “Tiff and the Animals” 159), focuses often on the child caught in wartime, and no more powerfully than in the scene of a child’s desolation from *The Wars*, recorded by twelve-year-old Juliet d’Orsey in her 1916 diary:

I feel a dreadful loss. I know things now I didn’t want to know . . . Just about noon. I started to cry. . . . I don’t know why. And I sat and sat and cried. Just cried. I didn’t make a sound. [My doll] Amanda seemed to be the only friend I had and I held her very tight. I’d been so mean. I’d left her on the window sill for weeks. Her loneliness was just unbearable. Me. She was lonely for me and I’d deserted her. I don’t know why. Her hands were coming apart because I hadn’t cared enough to sew her up. But now she was warm and safe and all I had. Just me and she and that was all. I don’t know why. I don’t know why. (178-79)

Jack Hodgins’s *Broken Ground*, in its focus on World War I veterans and their families struggling to resume their lives in the Vancouver Island soldiers’ settlement of Portuguese Creek, captures the dilemma of Matthew Pearson, a teacher who believes that his classroom lessons have caused his students to enlist too quickly, to suffer unduly, and to die without dignity. In a 1919 letter to his wife Maude, Pearson records his guilt and testifies to the teacher’s block that will keep him out of the classroom upon his return from the battlefields of France:

You will already have guessed from earlier letters that I’ve little interest in returning to the classroom. At the moment it seems inconceivable that I might stand and read Tennyson to boys who would remind me daily of the lads I saw killed so recently—some of them while in my care. And to girls who would remind me of sweethearts left to spinsterhood. (210)¹

Sendak, Atwood, Findley, Hodgins: this perhaps unlikely quartet underline the challenges of writing *about* children caught in times of war. Writing *for* children about war presents its own challenges.

I first learned about war reading my Canadian history textbook in an elementary school classroom; today I teach books about war in a university course in children’s literature. From this perspective, it seems to me that history textbooks and reference books for children have struggled with limited success to present war to young audiences. The narratives these books construct are adult-centred; children do not often—if ever—see themselves in these accounts. Clearly, there is a need for fictional treatments of war in

which child characters are allowed to emerge from the margins and to demonstrate the varieties of children's experiences of and responses to war.

Writing War for Children during Wartime

In his study of the history of British children's literature, Peter Hunt has observed that, during the two world wars of the twentieth century, children received bits of war news not through "mainstream children's literature" (*Children's* 197) but rather through comic books and the popular press. "'[R]espectable' writers for children were silent," he writes, "and only several generations later was the subject treated—and then only peripherally" (*Introduction* 104). Observers of the history of Canadian children's literature seem to find the silence more pervasive in the face of the chronic French-English conflict than in the matter of the world wars. But in a discussion of Canada's historical fiction, Sheila Egoff and Judith Saltman affirm that "youthful protagonists of much recent Canadian fiction are caught briefly in the net of history, become entangled in the mesh of the adult world, and like their counterparts in modern realistic fiction, cut themselves free to begin their lives anew" (119).

Historians of education who have turned their attention to the experiences of Canada's children during times of war suggest that Canadian children received their information not through books so much as through scattered images, sounds, and events. They describe classrooms decorated with symbols of British patriotism; they note children's involvement in tending Victory Gardens, saving war stamps, singing patriotic songs, dropping and covering for air raid drills. Adults recalling their childhood days in World War II remember watching newsreels and listening to CBC Radio broadcasts "convey[ing] a message that war [was] exciting, dramatic, and only for the courageous" (Montgomery, "War" 162); those living on the West Coast in the 1940s still remember RCMP officers coming into their classrooms to usher their Japanese Canadian classmates to their eventual internment. During both world wars, Emilie Montgomery observes, "[c]hildren tried to comprehend adults' fear, and pains[;] they tried to understand a world of killing and chaos. The war infiltrated their daily lives in ways we may consider small and insignificant, but those changes would alter their childhoods" (174).

Non-fiction for Children and Accounts of War

Children who have not lived through war at home or abroad but who are working to understand the adult propensity for warfare might, we expect,

seek help from writers of non-fiction—from the writers of their history textbooks and from reference books for children. And here they would encounter a heritage of reluctance to teach history to children younger than age eleven. In *The Educated Mind: How Cognitive Tools Shape Our Understanding*, Kieran Egan observes that

[h]istory has been emptied out of the early curriculum in response to the progressivist doctrine that we must begin exploring the world with what the child already knows and experiences, and we must expand understanding gradually from their everyday environments. (41)

The result, Egan concludes, is that “young children [are] largely ignorant of history, because it is assumed that they cannot understand it on the one hand and on the other that their attention and activity should be engaged in dealing with and expanding from their everyday experience” (41). If, as Jerry Diakiw argues, “our identities, our attitude to people of different races, our sense of self and therefore probably our sense of a national identity or lack of it [are] largely fixed by the end of elementary school” (44), then the reluctance to teach history to the very young may have had the most profound of unintended consequences.

And then, even when the study of history is introduced to children in the middle years of their public schooling, it is seen to be conveyed unevenly and ineffectively. In *Who Killed Canadian History?*—the title suggests its author’s chagrin at the state of writing about Canada’s past—Jack Granatstein argues that “the young should get history as story; the older students should begin to analyse what happened and why. Without such aims, our history becomes all but meaningless” (49).

Historically, one problem with leaving the writing of war—one of “the big stories of Canada” (Diakiw 41)—to the authors of textbooks for children was that they tended to rush past it or to leave it out altogether. Such was my own experience in the 1960s with *My First History of Canada*. Published in 1958 and used in English-language elementary schools in several provinces in the 1960s, it characterized the country’s history as “an adventure story” and said not a word about war in its “Foreword for Girls and Boys.” Instead, author Donald Dickie made only oblique references to the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, the Loyalist flight from the American Revolution, and the Riel Rebellions in chapter headings, and wrote tersely of them and of the nation-building world wars of 1914 and 1939. *My First History of Canada* seems aimed at producing an upbeat and therefore sanitized story, written down to its audience:²

In this book you will read that the people at the beginning of our history had never heard of our country, and did not know where it was. You will read how those people found Canada. You will read how other people journeyed from Canada's east coast all the way to her west coast. Later, you will find out how Canadians learned to govern themselves and how they have learned and are still learning to use Canada's many riches, such as her farm land, her forests, and her minerals. (Dickie v)

Or, consider the 1952 textbook, *My Country's Story: An Elementary Canadian History*, and its representation for somewhat older child readers of the Battle of the Plains of Abraham through a "great man" focus on Generals Montcalm and Wolfe. Co-authors Donald Dickie, Helen Palk, and E.C. Woodley present the Marquis de Montcalm not only as an exemplary military man, but also as a loving father of ten children. He, it seems, would have been able to save the colony of New France from British conquest had he not had to contend with the resistance of Governor Vaudreuil, whom the co-authors, in a startling *ad hominem* moment, describe as "stupid" (178). The defeat of the French side is seen exclusively in terms of the mortal wounding of Montcalm. Readers learn not at all about the causes of the war, the casualties suffered by regular troops, or the effects experienced by civilians.

Wolfe is introduced anglocentrically as "the youngest of *our* great generals" (Dickie 177, emphasis added). Young readers learn of his love for his mother, his height, his rheumatism, his red hair, his "receding chin" (177). The authors spend considerable time describing his uniform. Wolfe's death, memorialized in Benjamin West's famous painting,³ is represented in this text with pathos:

Wolfe, like his great enemy Montcalm, fell that day. Two soldiers carried him to the rear of the lines.

'They run! They run! Egad, they give way every where!' shouted an officer near. 'Who run?' asked Wolfe, rousing himself.

'The French, sir!' replied the officer, straining his eyes across the plain.

'Then I die content!' said Wolfe, and almost as he spoke, he died. (180)

That things have changed in the writing of war history for the current generation of children is evident in the widely read 2000 edition of *The Story of Canada*, co-authored by Janet Lunn and Christopher Moore, and richly illustrated not only with archival images but also with the drawings of Alan Daniel. The book's opening note—"We hope you find something of yourself in the tales we have told—and go on to discover more stories of Canada for yourself" (n.p.)—constructs active young readers looking to

history as a reflection of their own heritage and as a beginning point for research of their own.

In this history for the new millennium, the Seven Years' War is not treated as the clash of the two titans, Montcalm and Wolfe, nor is it telescoped into an account of the Battle of the Plains of Abraham. Instead, it is contextualized in a chapter entitled "Habitants and Voyageurs," and juxtaposed with a discussion of the British deportation of the Acadians. It steers away from the preoccupation with so-called great men to consider the effects of the war on non-commissioned soldiers and on the women and children left to bring in the harvests. Wolfe is described as "send[ing] his soldiers out to burn and plunder along the [St. Lawrence] river" (74). The deaths of Wolfe and Montcalm are treated in a single sentence at the end of a fourteen-paragraph entry. West's painting of Wolfe's death is nowhere to be found, while the image of an unnamed artist's rendition of the battlefield death of Montcalm is undercut with an ironic caption: "General Montcalm, the defender of Quebec, actually died in bed the day after the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, but the artist has created a more dramatic scene" (75).

Chapter 9 of Lunn and Moore's book, entitled "Stormy Times," provides extended and amply illustrated accounts of Canada's involvement in the world wars of the twentieth century, conflicts treated only briefly in the Canadian history books published in the 1950s. In the mid-century books, the wars are presented as stepping stones in Canada's progress towards constitutional independence from Britain. Lunn and Moore's narrative of World War I, in contrast, focuses on trench warfare, the experience of the Newfoundland Regiment at Beaumont-Hamel, the role of women in maintaining the nation's wartime economy, the Halifax explosion, and the divisiveness of the Conscription Crisis. The requisite reference to Dr. John McCrae and the writing of "In Flanders Fields" emphasizes (perhaps in response to the criticisms of it by writers such as Paul Fussell) how the poem has come to represent "millions of deaths" rather than "the glory of victory" (225) for the current generation of its readers.

The section on World War II, entitled "War Again," foregrounds the disaster at Dieppe and "dangerous memories . . . of suffering inflicted" (qtd. in Diakiw 47): the internment and relocation of Japanese Canadians, the bombings of the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the Holocaust. It notes that Jewish refugees seeking safe haven in Canada from the Nazis were turned away in the years before the war; it acknowledges (although

briefly) one of the effects of this war on children in a photograph and caption representing the many British children who came to stay in Canada during the Blitz.

A book like Lunn and Moore's signals a sea change in one kind of historical narrative for children. It suggests that the days and attitudes revealed in that scene in *Anne of Green Gables* in which Miss Stacy chastises Anne for her sneak-reading of the chariot races in *Ben-Hur*—when she should be studying her Canadian history—are perhaps gone.

Children's Fiction about War

But what of other children's books about war—those destined less for use in the classroom or in the social studies research project and more for the child's own private reading time and space? Such books reflect several trends, generic and historical. The generic trend has to do with the steady growth over several decades in the categories of children's literature. A visit to the children's division of any public library or bookstore—or indeed to one of the bookshops devoted exclusively to children's books—reveals that the field is filled with classes and sub-classes: non-fiction and reference books, picture books, novels, short stories, poetry collections, folk and fairy tales, animal stories, fantasies, young adult narratives, biographies, geographies, the old classics, the series, the new releases, and so on.

The historical trends have to do with changing perceptions and practices of warfare. The world wars of the twentieth century made civilians and their communities targets in unprecedented ways. Barbara Ehrenreich observes that civilian fatalities of the first war were 15 percent of the total; by the end of the second war just three decades later, they had escalated to 65 percent of the total (qtd. in Norris 17). She goes on to comment that “[o]ne feature of the ‘transformed’ war of the nuclear age is that it is less likely to be the exclusive province of males or even of adults” (qtd. in Norris 17-18). Graça Machel's *The Impact of War on Children: A Review of Progress since the 1996 United Nations Report on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children* catalogues the ways in which contemporary adult wars have made millions of children their targets. The report deals with child soldiers, child refugees, children killed and mutilated by landmines; it suggests the ways in which war denies children the right to education and to psychological and physical health. Machel's preface quotes a Nicaraguan child as observing, “[a]dults go to war, but they don't realise what damage they are doing to children” (ix).

Contemporary writers for children have not ignored this damage. As Kate

Agnew and Geoff Fox observe in their book, *Children at War: From the First World War to the Gulf*:

in recent novels and picture books, . . . young readers are invariably urged to examine the nature of violence and suffering, persecution and endurance, hatred and loyalty, selfishness and sacrifice. They are asked to share the writers' condemnation of war and the repugnant beliefs which lead to conflict, and to feel compassion for the anguish imposed upon the innocent many by the powerful few. (53)

In teaching children's literature to young adults and in asking them to examine assumptions about the ways in which child readers receive ideas about war, I have found myself turning to several contemporary Canadian novels—each one representing a different Canadian war, but all of them child-centred and featuring “protagonists . . . presented with complex choices, difficult decisions which test their moral strength and loyalty to the limit” (Agnew 135). First among these works are two novels dealing with the experiences of child soldiers: *George Johnson's War* and *Charlie Wilcox*.

In *George Johnson's War*, Maureen Garvie and Mary Beaty have written “an imagined story about . . . real people” (237). With their twenty-first century sensibilities, Garvie and Beaty go back to the time of the American Revolution to examine the contributions of the two sons of Molly Brant—Peter and George—to the Loyalist cause. They trace Molly's wartime journeys with her children and her negotiations on behalf of the Iroquois with their British allies, but they foreground the experience of the child soldier and first-person narrator, George. At first, George represents the view that war is a powerful and sometimes irresistible attraction. Psychologist Lawrence LeShan has described this attraction:

[U]nder almost every form of economic and political organization, regardless of different family structures, different child-rearing practices and other social norms, people fight wars on a fairly regular basis. . . . War sharpens experience, heightens perception, and makes one more and more aware of one's own existence. At the same time, war allows us to become part of something larger and more intense. *The Way of the One and the Way of the Many* intensify each other. (53, 55)

George's war fever begins when he is a small boy determined to follow his older brother Peter into a life of adventure and battle for the Loyalist cause. He chafes under his mother's and sisters' protection. At age ten, he tells his sister that he is old enough to join up to “carry a drum or be a fifer” (144). Sent away by his mother at age eleven to carry on his education (for “[w]ithout learning,” as she says, “you're at the mercy of those who take our

land and our cornfields and leave only promises" [141]), he is miserable. And one day, as he sits in a Montreal classroom enduring his schoolmaster's recitation of platitudes from *Rider's Almanack*, he thinks, "I'm old enough now. Last week I turned thirteen. . . . These days, they take what they can get, I hear—young, old, deaf, wall-eyed, and peg-legged. But unless I do something, the war'll be over before I get my chance" (153). And then, in petitioning Captain Tice, commander of the Native forces at Fort Niagara to persuade his mother to allow him to enlist, George makes this pledge: "Take me on. I'm ready to go, sir. I'm ready to fight until I die" (183). These fragments of dialogue offer to young readers some answer to the inevitable question: Why in the world would anyone *volunteer* to fight and perhaps to die in war? George's answer is plain: for the chance to fight in the family tradition, for the opportunity to prove wrong those who call him "half-breed," for the possibility of routing the enemies who have stolen his people's land and driven them into an itinerant existence.

But *George Johnson's War* interrogates more than it validates the idea of war as "an emphasis on military glory, as well as male kinship and tutelage" (MacGillivray and Lynes 11). It is more than a narrative of war fever; it is also a study of the child soldier's traumatic passage from innocent exuberance to bitter experience. From disappointment over his drab uniform, to disgust over the food, to utter exhaustion resulting from the endless marching, to horror at the sight of a burned-out Onandaga village, war is not what George Johnson dreamed it would be. The authors create for George a scene in which he is called upon to rethink altogether the meaning of the word "enemy"—a scene standard in anti-war narratives. When he first fires his gun against what he believes is a blue-coated rebel enemy, he "look[s] only once. He's dead, his throat torn away by [the] shot" (211). And then, moments later, he looks into the face of his antagonist and says to himself, "I've shot an Indian in a blue coat" (211). Margot Norris maintains that "all wars are ironic" (80), and in scenes such as this one, *George Johnson's War* offers child readers irony in abundance. There is irony, too, in George's discovery late in his military service that his brother Peter has long been dead and that no one has informed him; in George's attempt to embrace a Mohawk warrior identity and in his near-desertion of the King's army for the Indian Trail; and in his ultimate reconciliation with the mother he believes has deceived him.

But the final scene of this novel is not quite the harmonized closing with that "sense of spiritual uplift" described by LaCapra. Haunted by visions of

his dead brother and a dead friend, and tormented by the wish that he could tell his mother what he knows about the disappearance of her people and her way of life from the Mohawk Valley, George ends his narrative with these subdued words:

It's us who have to find a way to get on, with the dancing, with the war, with our lives. It's us who have to let them [the dead] go. Let them rest easy, under the snow. (232)

Like *George Johnson's War*, Sharon McKay's *Charlie Wilcox*, published in 2000, focuses on the child soldier and follows his movement from innocence to experience as a result of immersion in the crucible of bloody battle. McKay describes the story as one in which "fact and fiction are companions" (215), for while Charlie Wilcox was a real-life figure, he never went to war. The third-person narrator is more conventional and more adult than is George Johnson; the war story told is of the bitter experiences of the Newfoundland Regiment at Beaumont-Hamel in the July 1916 Battle of the Somme.

The cover illustration by Julia Bell depicts Charlie not as an adolescent but as a freckle-faced, blue-eyed boy. He is, in other words, a child. The product of a sheltered life in the port town of Brigus, he is startled to see, on a 1915 visit to St. John's, the newspaper headline, "War Escalates in Europe" (36). "Never you mind. It has nothing to do with us" (36), says his mother, who at that moment is intent on seeking medical treatment for her son's club foot and who, like Molly Brant, is determined to see her son educated and empowered in a way that she and the Newfoundlanders of her generation have not been. She plans to keep her child from giving his life to the sea, and the idea that he would go to war at age fourteen is something that never occurs to her until it happens.

Where George Johnson's involvement in the American Revolution is intentional and involves a challenge to his mother's authority over his future, Charlie's in World War I is accidental. He runs away from an aunt with whom he has been sent to stay while continuing his education; he stows away on a ship he thinks is destined for the ice fields and the seal hunt, but it is actually carrying Newfoundlanders to the Front. Still, whether Charlie's enlistment is accidental or not, McKay, like Garvie and Beaty, characterizes the boy at war as one struggling to use the experience to fix his identity.

George is a thirteen-year-old scout who kills a blue-coated Indian; Charlie becomes a stretcher bearer who comes to recognize the naïveté of soldiers certain they are part of a "little adventure" (125) and looking forward

to “the thrill of events to come” (128). He experiences the miseries of life in the trenches, familiar to most adult readers but news to many younger ones. He is also a witness to the disaster that was Beaumont-Hamel, and through him, McKay is able to show child readers the significance of what has come to be known in the iconography of Newfoundland as the Danger Tree:

a beleaguered, bald, and dead collection of sticks that hung by its roots over a shell hole. It refused, or had forgotten, to fall down. It was the only marking left in an otherwise barren landscape. The Brits, the Irish, and the Newfoundlanders would use it to get their bearings. There they would collect, and there the Germans would mow them down. (183)⁴

Charlie sees eight hundred Newfoundland soldiers with targets on their backs go over the top on the first of July 1916; he learns by the second of July that only sixty-eight of the regiment have survived physically unscathed.

Like George Johnson, Charlie Wilcox survives; like George, he returns home transformed. He does not kill, but he is not entirely successful in saving lives, as is evident in a poignant scene in which he comes upon the body of his friend Michael. Looking into his dead face, Charlie “[falls] to his knees and wrap[s] his arms around him, like Michael’s own mother might have” (193). The battlefield and triage scenes in the novel are graphic and even unsparing; the end is more gentle—more harmonized, as LaCapra might say—for McKay allows Charlie, in the moment of his return to Newfoundland, a smile and a sense of peace that Garvie and Beaty don’t allow George Johnson:

Charlie smiled . . . and gazed around. He felt the rock-hard ground [of Brigus] beneath his feet. He looked into the faces of those he’d known all his life. He was home. (213)

Books such as *George Johnson’s War* and *Charlie Wilcox* begin conventionally by exploring war as an opportunity for a boy’s (and by extension a country’s) coming of age. They demonstrate to today’s young readers something they must often wonder about, and that is why anyone so close to them in age would seek out the fighting life. And then, in their refusal to turn away from the scenes of misery and carnage or to sanitize the proceedings, both novels interrogate the enterprise of war in ways calculated to give young readers pause.

To this pair of novels, I add two books that show young readers that war matters today—and has mattered in the past—not just to boys who have yet to shave, but also to girls. Janet Lunn, like Garvie and Beaty, takes the

American Revolution as her subject in *The Hollow Tree* (described by Raymond Jones and Jon Stott as “among the finest books written for Canadian children” [284]). She examines through the experience of Phoebe Olcott how the bitter divisions between Patriots and Loyalists irreparably split communities and divided families in the Thirteen Colonies. Fifteen-year-old Phoebe’s experience of war is not the kind of warrior’s initiation that George Johnson undergoes. She comes of age in contending with the differences between her Rebel father and her Loyalist cousin, in losing the former to death in battle and the latter to vigilantes who hang him for a spy. In a season of atrocities, she is a witness, and the scene of her hanged cousin Gideon is as graphic in its way as any one of the scenes witnessed by Charlie Wilcox:

Under the green oak tree in the centre of The Green, with its crude “Liberty Tree” label, she could see a dark mass of people in the early light. . . . A stout rope had been slung over a branch about eight feet from the ground. Gideon’s lifeless body was hanging from the rope. On his shirt a note was pinned. It read: “Death to all Traitors and Spies.” (39)

Phoebe’s story is that of the orphan refugee, and her trial consists of traveling in disguise as a Mohawk girl, assuming responsibility for children younger than herself along the way, and settling down to a married and domestic life in Upper Canada at the story’s end. In this novel, Phoebe ends her cross-border wanderings by choosing Canada, “where she ha[s] a deep sense of belonging” (260). She concludes her story with conviction in her words, “We will all be well here. There will be peace in this country” (260).

This book demonstrates what Mavis Reimer and Anne Rusnak have described as a pattern distinctive and prominent in award-winning Canadian children’s books: “in this pattern, the child characters move away from home into an ‘away’ setting, and eventually choose to make the ‘away’ home” (21). In making this choice, it is clear, the child achieves agency, for “what appears at first to be a choice to become vulnerable is represented as an opportunity to exercise power. . . . the power to shape the place . . . the young character . . . [has] chosen as home” (Reimer 23).

A novel like *The Hollow Tree*, or Lunn’s time-shift treatment of Canada during the American Civil War in *The Root Cellar*, positions the girl protagonist not as a combatant but certainly as an agent in, and an eyewitness to, war in a way that a more conventional girl character in wartime—Lucy Maud Montgomery’s Rilla Blythe, for example—is not.

Yet another angle on the experience of war—that of the young child as

displaced person—is represented in books such as Kit Pearson’s *Children of War* trilogy, and Joy Kogawa’s *Naomi’s Road*. Pearson, who has spoken passionately about children as “victims of adult war,” and who has expressed her preference for writing books in which “children are almost like a separate tribe, acting on their own, making moral decisions on their own, and not wanting to have much to do with adults” (Flick 21), recounts the experiences of those thousands of British children sent by their parents to live in Canada during the Blitz. She traces with psychological insight the feelings of anger, abandonment, misery, and eventual acceptance such children experienced.

Kogawa’s book takes the narrative risk of telling the World War II story of the internment of Japanese Canadians in the voice and the language of the very young Naomi Nakane. As in the case of *George Johnson’s War*, the first-person choice does not diminish the power of the story; it intensifies it. The predatory Old Man Gower of Kogawa’s account for adults, *Obasan*, does not appear here, nor does the story end with direct reference to the bombing of Nagasaki as *Obasan* does. Instead, the “little story . . . told by a Canadian child called Naomi Nakane” (n.p.) explains what Kogawa, in a prefatory letter addressed to “Dear Children,” calls the “hard to understand” fact “that Japanese Canadians were treated as enemies at home, even though we were good Canadians” (n.p.). The story foregrounds the unkindness of children to Naomi and her brother Stephen, and then it offers a measure of hope in allowing Naomi something she isn’t allowed in *Obasan*—a friendship across the racial divide with a white girl named Mitzi. The Naomi of this book loses her Vancouver home, her mother, her father, her sense of safety and self-worth, but the story ends with at least the cryptic hint from the family minister that something can be done by those who suffer. “The world is full of signs[,]” the minister says, “[w]e have to know how to read them” (82). Naomi thinks that the grown-ups left in her life are “going to keep talking in those riddles that adults like” (82), but she resolves in her last scene to get to work, for she says, “I have a lot of codes to work out. It’s going to take me all day” (82). There is something hopeful in her determined, purposeful tone—a hopefulness (or a toughness, perhaps) that Kogawa remembers in her own childhood experience of the internment in this way: “As I made myself do one thing after another which was harder and harder, that forced effort created calluses over my soul, calluses over the trepidation. It’s sort of like free-falling. You fall and you find you land, and lo and behold, you’re not dead, so you get up again” (Donohue 40).

“Those Riddles That Adults Like”

Why war happens time and again must seem to children one of the crueler riddles perpetrated by the adults who govern and teach and raise them. In *Hana's Suitcase*, Karen Levine's remarkable story of young Japanese children seeking to understand the Holocaust by reconstructing the life of a young victim of Auschwitz, Levine notes that “the children are full of questions” (3). Making available to young readers strong narratives about war will engage them in thinking critically and seriously about one of humankind's oldest and grimmest pastimes. Why this project matters is, I think, best articulated by British essayist Francis Spufford, who argues that the books we read as children are among the most important we read in all our lives:

for the words we take into ourselves help shape us. They help form the questions we think are worth asking; they shift around the boundaries of the sayable inside us, and the related borders of what's acceptable; their potent images, calling on more in us than the responses we will ourselves to have, dart new bridges into being between our conscious and unconscious minds, between what we know we know, and the knowledge we cannot examine by thinking. They build and stretch and build again the chambers of our imagination. (21-22)

The children are indeed full of questions, and they deserve the best answers we are capable of giving them.

NOTES

- 1 That Tennyson's verse celebrating empire was integrated into British Columbia classrooms is supported by a 1940 Vancouver School Board report referred to by Neil Sutherland in a study of elementary schooling in Vancouver from the 1920s to the 1940s. Sutherland records this caption to a picture of the Union Jack hung in school classrooms:
 One Life One Fleet
 One Flag One Throne
 Tennyson. (105)
- 2 The idea that adult writers are mistaken in condescending to child readers is articulated best, I think, by E.B. White:
 Anyone who writes down to children is simply wasting his time. You have to write up, not down. Children are demanding. They are the most attentive, curious, eager, observant, sensitive, quick, and generally congenial readers on earth. They accept, almost without question, anything you present them with, as long as it is presented honestly, fearlessly, and clearly. (242)
- 3 This fascination with the great generals of the Seven Years' War is referred to by Timothy Findley in *The Wars*. A photograph of Robert Ross in uniform is captioned by the anonymous narrator's reference to Benjamin West's famous painting, *The Death of General Wolfe*.

Death is romantic—got from silent images. I lived—was young—and died. . . . The Death of General Wolfe. Someone will hold my hand and I won't suffer pain because I've suffered that already and survived. In paintings—and in photographs—there's never any blood. At most, the hero sighs his way to death while linen handkerchiefs are held against his wounds. (48-49)

G.A. Henty also played a part in promoting the cult of personality surrounding General Wolfe with his 1887 adventure tale, *With Wolfe in Canada*. Findley notes Henty's influence on Canadian boys who volunteer for service in the First World War. Aboard the S.S. *Massanabie* headed from Canada to Europe, Captain Ord is described as taking to his bed in order to drink brandy from a silver cup and read the works of Henty:

"What on earth are you reading that stuff for?" Clifford [Purchas] asked him; "God—I haven't seen those books since I was twelve," he added. Ord said hoarsely that since he was going to do a boy's work he must read "the stuff of which boys are made" and smiled. (59-60)

- 4 David Macfarlane's 1991 *The Danger Tree: Memory, War, and the Search for a Family's Past* describes this tree and its significance in some detail.

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