

# CANADIAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

## *A Bookseller's Point of View*

*Dianne Woodman*

CAN YOU IMAGINE a Canadian bestseller NOT written by either Berton, Mowat or Laurence which has sold 125,000 copies since it was published four years ago? It's a runaway Canadian success now in its sixth printing, a book of poetry written by a serious academic with a sense of humour and a love for the sound and feel of words.

This incredibly successful book is of course *Alligator Pie*, a Canadian children's book, whose author, Dennis Lee, is becoming as familiar to Canadian children as their favourite figures on television.

They love his rhymes, his sense of the absurd and the rollicking good humour of *Alligator Pie* and his other two books for children: *Garbage Delight* and *Nicholas Knock*. Combined sales of these three titles are over 200,000 copies. Not bad by any standard.

For many years now, publishers have told us that they can't publish children's titles because they can't make any money on them and they can quote quite dismal sales figures to support their case. But then we look at the phenomenal success Lee and his publisher Macmillan of Canada have had and we realize that there *are* people out there who are willing to support Canadian children's books if they are of quality, have integrity and are not sloppily put together.

May Cutler, publisher of Tundra books, provides another example of high quality children's book publishing that has been successful commercially. *Mary of Mile 18* by Ann Blades was the first book Cutler published, and it has done extremely well, both in Canada and abroad, as have the Kurelek titles she has published. Cutler appears to be the only Canadian publisher who aggressively seeks foreign sales and is making an effort to buy the rights of acclaimed European children's books to introduce to the North American market.

The success stories of Dennis Lee and May Cutler are reflections of the scene today in children's books in Canada. There are a lot of things happening across the country and one of the most encouraging is the number of independent bookstores specializing in children's books. They stretch from one end of the country to the other. In the Toronto area alone there are four, one of them the well-known Children's Bookstore which has had a spectacular success in only four years. It wasn't the first children's bookstore in the country — that honour goes to the tiny Storybook Corner in Toronto — but it has done a lot to make Canadians aware that the children's book industry in Canada *does* exist.

Word of mouth is still what sells books best — provided the books are available in bookstores when people are talking about them. But next to that, it is the newspaper and magazine bookpage that generates sales. It's encouraging to see the *Globe and Mail* featuring more and more reviews of children's books and *Chatelaine* often featuring children's book reviews in Michele Landsberg's column. The Edmonton *Journal* now has a children's page and regularly runs book reviews written by children.

These are helpful sources for the bookseller who tries to keep up with the latest publications. So is *Canadian Books for Children* by Irma McDonough. The second edition of this excellent bibliography has just been published by the University of Toronto Press. It gives a very complete list of children's books published both in French and in English. *In Review*, edited by McDonough, is another good source of reviews of children's books along with *Quill & Quire*, the newspaper of the book industry.

In Edmonton we're fortunate to have a number of people interested in and active in the promotion of books for children. The Children's Literature Roundtable is a group who meet informally once a month to discuss their favourite (and sometimes not so favourite) children's books. The University of Alberta, like most universities across the country, now offers courses in Canadian children's literature which are always oversubscribed. Jon Stott, one of the lecturers and most popular professors in this field, issues *The World of Children's Books*, an informative quarterly distributed nationally and internationally. It features reviews of children's literature of Canada and all over the world.

The Children's Book Centre in Toronto, formed last year through funds provided mainly by the Canada Council, was created to foster public awareness of Canadian children's books. Their Children's Book Festival, promoted across the country last November, was a great success. Booksellers, librarians and teachers who participated in the promotion found both children and parents eager to read more and learn more about Canadian books.

To get adequate distribution of the 55 "Choice" Canadian children's books picked for promotion last November, the Centre had to rely on the good will and co-operation of the independent bookstores across the country, because they

appear to be the only retailers prepared to make a special effort on behalf of children's books.

The Big Three — Classic's, Coles and W. H. Smith — didn't show any interest. In fact, the chains have so far ignored the renaissance in children's books in this country. And that despite the dilemma of many people in many areas whose only access to books for sale is through a chain bookstore.

Last November chain bookstores lost a lot of money when they didn't bother to stock the children's books recommended for the Children's Book Festival. According to an Edmonton school librarian who'd planned on buying the recommended titles at a chain store, all she found was *Anne of Green Gables!*

When she came to our store, she was delighted to find an entire store fixture set aside for the display of the CBC Choices. She was able to get everything she needed at one store in one single shopping trip.

There's a certain mystique about children's books that seems to scare booksellers off and perhaps we should be making an effort to help them to demystify children's books. My dream is to see a team of two or three knowledgeable people travelling across the country giving short workshops on children's books for bookstore personnel. It's a field that demands a lot of knowledge and the standards of children's bookselling in chain operations could be raised considerably if managers, buyers, and people working on the floor could attend these seminars. Perhaps the Canada Council is listening?

In the meantime, the Canadian children's book market is getting stronger and publishers are beginning to realize it. Picture books and fiction for older children are steadily improving but it's in the area of nonfiction publishing that Canadian books are most lacking. There's virtually nothing for preschoolers and very little for children aged 6 to 9 years except for a few titles on our native people and some sport books.

The age 9 to 12 nonfiction books are more numerous but they are mainly books that have been produced for the educational market and have had a spill-over onto the trade side. Fitzhenry & Whiteside is doing more than most in this dual field but it still isn't enough.

The Alberta government has just announced an \$8.5 million publishing program to produce books with Canadian content for use in Alberta schools and one can only hope that some of the titles will be suitable and available for distribution to the general public through bookstores.

McClelland & Stewart is a publisher that has consistently produced quality children's books. It recently reinstated the Little Brown Canadian Children's Book Award which over and above a cash prize guarantees publication in both Canada and the United States. The juvenile paperback series "Canadian Favourites" has kept in print a number of Canadian children's classics including several of the L. M. Montgomery titles.

The past fall season, McClelland & Stewart published twelve new hardcover books of children's fiction and launched the ambitious but ultimately unsuccessful *Magook* series.

What went wrong with *Magook*? Despite two years of "market research," it seems the marketing aspect didn't come off too well. The format of the *Magooks* is awkward. Neither a magazine nor a book, their size is an in-between defying display on conventional magazine shelves or regular paperback racks so the mass-market distribution M&S counted on just didn't happen.

From a bookseller's point of view we did quite well with them and utilized the dump bins provided. We weren't happy with the fact that we had to compete not only with supermarkets but also with Scholastic for the market. Their price offered through the schools was lower than we could sell them for and that seemed unfair.

The *Magooks* look attractive, are slick and have lots of appealing colour for kids, although they are bound in such a way that they are difficult for a child to hold and read easily. It was an ambitious undertaking and it's unfortunate that the marketing got off track. Booksellers did their part to get behind the project and so did school and public librarians.

A lot of people *want* to buy Canadian books for their children and go into bookstores specifically looking for them. Although we feel that Canadian children's books shouldn't be put in a separate "Canadiana" section, for the convenience of our customers we put small red maple leaf stickers on the spines so they can be easily seen on the shelf. Some of the most popular books at the Village Bookshop are Canadian titles, such as *Hug Me*, *Jacob Two Two Meets the Hooded Fang*, *Little Badger and the Fire Spirit*, and, of course, the Dennis Lee books.

Selling children's books in Canada means an equal measure of satisfaction and frustration. It's frustrating to be unable to find a good source of bilingual books as well as other foreign language editions of the classics. We have a number of schools in Edmonton that have instituted a bilingual Ukrainian-English program (as well as French-English) and so far we have found only one title for the beleaguered school librarians — *Kyrylo, The Tanner* — published last fall by Kids Can Press.

We'd like to carry more books by French-Canadian writers and would like to know the availability of English-Canadian books in French. There's a French edition of *Anne of Green Gables* listed in *Canadian Books for Children*. The publisher is Hachette but we've been unable to find a source for Hachette books. We're hampered in Western Canada by lack of access to wholesalers who distribute this type of book. A letter we wrote to a wholesaler in Montreal a few months ago remains unanswered and will have to be rewritten in rusty high school French, it seems.

It's frustrating to open Hurtig's *Canadian ABC Book* for the first time. Any attempt to be original, funny or "Canadian" is negated by racial and sexual stereotypes that make the book objectionable to adults and less than educational to Canadian children. It's another example of the urgent need for professional editors who care about quality and integrity in Canadian books for Canadian children.

There's a lot of satisfaction in reading at our weekly story hour Maria Campbell's newly published *Little Badger and the Fire Spirit*, and having the children respond so positively to the warm and loving text and illustrations that they ask for the book to be read to them again and again.

There's the satisfaction of *Hug Me*, written by Patti Stren, a young Canadian woman who studied with Maurice Sendak and who has produced a small gentle book whose text and illustrations are what picture books are all about. Neither would be complete without the other. There's satisfaction in seeing children respond to the honesty of the story and pictures.

I find it encouraging that we sell more preschool books than books in any other age category. More young parents are trying to introduce their children to books than ever before. Although we haven't detected any sales resistance to the expensive hardcover picture book, the paperback picture book is becoming increasingly popular. There aren't enough Canadian books done in this format. Elizabeth Cleaver's *How Summer Came to Canada* went out of print recently in cloth and will be reprinted this summer in paperback. That's good news and one hopes other publishers will follow suit with their out of print books.

We now have a public most eager to know more about Canadian children's books; we have reviewers in the media willing to do their part; we have committed and knowledgeable booksellers all across the country (albeit not enough) — now all we need are Canadian publishers who will overcome their reticence, hire good children's editors and designers and make an aggressive aim at the market.

Patsy Aldana, the new president of the ACP and the head of Greenwood Books, a new publishing company specializing in children's books, was quoted recently as saying that Canadian publishers in 1977 produced only 60 children's books and made a plea for government assistance to increase this number substantially.

Greater quantity, unfortunately, doesn't mean better quality. May I make a final plea for professionalism? May publishers be inspired to hire competent children's editors from wherever they can find them. We need editors who have a knowledge not only of the Canadian scene but also the international world of children's literature. They should have an awareness of racism and sexism at the very youngest age levels, an eye for illustration as well as content, and the honesty to produce books that will be loved by children and adults everywhere.

CHILDREN'S BOOKSTORES

NOVA SCOTIA

The Book Room  
1664-1666 Granville Street, Halifax, B3J 2N7  
A Pair of Trindles Bookshoppe, Old Red Store  
Historic Properties, Halifax, B3L 1W5  
Readmore Books  
Bayers Rd. Shopping Centre, Halifax, B3L 2C2

QUÉBEC

Books and Things  
Box 214, Morin Heights, P.Q. J0R 1H0

ONTARIO

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691 Ouellette Avenue, Windsor, N9A 4J4  
A Different Drummer  
513 Locust Street, Burlington, L7S 1V3  
The Albion Bookshop  
376 Old Kingston Rd., Highland Creek  
Green Gables Books  
40 Main Street North, Markham, L3P 1X5  
Glengarry Bookstore  
45 Main St. S., P.O. Box 819, Alexandria,  
K0C 1A0  
The Children's Book Store  
108A Avenue Rd., Toronto, M5R 2H3  
The Gallery Shop, The Art Gallery of Ontario  
317 Dundas St. W., Toronto, M5T 1G4  
Longhouse Bookshop  
630 Yonge Street, Toronto, M4Y 1Z8  
SCM Book Room  
333 Bloor St. W., Toronto, M5S 1W7

Storybook Corner  
3 Bedford Park Avenue, Toronto, M5M 1H8  
Books and More Books  
41 Brock Street, Kingston, K7L 1R7  
The Bookery of Ottawa  
463 Sussex Drive, Ottawa, K1N 6Z4

MANITوبا

Child's Play: Toys for Children, Ltd.  
100 Osborne Street, Winnipeg, R3L 1Y5  
Growing Minds Ltd.  
441 Portage Avenue, Winnipeg, R3B 2C9  
Toad Hall Toys  
250 McDermot Avenue, Winnipeg, R3B 0S5

SASKATCHEWAN

The Bookworm's Den  
Grosvenor Park Shopping Centre, Saskatoon

ALBERTA

Aspen Books  
#1-10808 Whyte Avenue, Edmonton, T6E 2B3  
The Village Bookshop  
10212 - 140 Street, Edmonton, T5N 2L4

BRITISH COLUMBIA

The Cat & The Fiddle Bookshop  
4529 West 10th Avenue, Vancouver, V6R 2J2  
Duthie's Books for Children  
915 Robson Street, Vancouver, V6Z 1A5  
Hager Books  
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