



Elizabeth walked right over the dragon and opened the door to the cave.

There was Prince Ronald.

He looked at her and said, "Elizabeth, you are a mess! You smell like ashes, your hair is all tangled and you are wearing a dirty old paper bag. Come back when you are dressed like a real princess."

"Ronald," said Elizabeth, "your clothes are really pretty and your hair is very neat. You look like a real prince, but you are a bum."

They didn't get married after all.

The Paper Bag Princess by Robert Munsch, art by Michael Martchenko (Annick Press, 1980).

Older and Wiser Children's Publishing Grows Up

As the Canadian children's publishing industry comes of age, the content of the books it produces is evolving to reflect today's diverse, changing society.

by Valerie Applebee

"Children's books play a major role in the literature of culturally mature countries. In these countries, the creation of children's books is seen as one of the most important and challenging areas of publishing." This is the opening sentence of a report from the Association of Canadian Publishers in 1978. For Canada, the 1970s represent the birth of a "kids-lit" industry. Following a human-like cycle, children's publishing came of age and blossomed in the 1980s.

And now, in 1994, settling into its twenty-somethings, it has been forced to take a serious look at economic realities, and plot its course for the future. The chosen path of children's authors today seems to have branched out to include a growing, healthy respect for children from all

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different kinds of backgrounds. This path seeks to understand today's children better, while preparing them for the realities of an increasingly diverse society.

1970-1989: From the sublime to the ridiculous

*When Egg and I sit down to tea
He never eats as much as me.
And so, to help him out I take
A double share of chocolate cake.*

"The Friends," *Alligator Pie*
(Macmillan Canada, 1974)

Dennis Lee, art by Frank Newfeld

Before the 1970s, Canadian booksellers relied mostly on children's books produced in the United States or in Britain. Then came a new breed of publishing houses that dealt exclusively in "kids-lit": Annick, Greenwood, Kids Can, and Tundra. The doors were opening for authors and illustrators forging ahead in this rapidly expanding literary genre. Government grants specifically for children's publishing became available for the first time, and children's book centers and stores began to spring up everywhere.

Dennis Lee's collection of poems, *Alligator Pie*, was the first children's book to receive widespread media attention and make it into the book review pages. It established the Canadian children's book as an industry of its own, rather than just a subsidiary of adult publishing.

In 1975 less than 50 kids' books were being published in Canada. By the mid-1980s that figure was up to 300. By 1989 the market was in danger of being swamped. And with the recession settling in, there was concern that children's publishing would be destroyed by its own success. In 1989 *Quill and Quire*—Canada's Magazine of Book News and Reviews—warned that the wave of children's publishing that had started in the 1970s was now "threatening to become a deluge." By 1993, they declared that the bloom was off the boom.

Surviving in the kids' book business

Although the weather report had called for a calm day, the wind was out in force. Leon hadn't taken three steps,

when a really nasty gust of air blew his hat off. That really bothered him.

Follow That Hat, (Annick Press)
Pierre Pratt

Publishing often becomes a game preoccupied with crunching numbers. A new children's book with a retail price of \$12.95 will probably have cost the publisher about \$14.50 to produce. Assuming that every copy actually sold, a print run of 4,000 would leave the publisher with a "profit" of negative \$6,200! The trick is to create a book which will have demand for a second print run (and hopefully a third, fourth, etc.). Then, with production costs down, publishers can actually start turning loss into gain.

Children's books in particular depend on slow but steady sales. A lot of the books published decades ago are still being printed and sold today. This is where publishers in the 1990s started to run into problems, as new titles were competing with backlisted ones. Essentially the market reached a saturation point. The American industry fell about 12 percent. But in Canada, with its significantly smaller market, the number of books printed only dipped slightly.

Expanding horizons: multiculturalism and the changing family unit

The sun shone. Later the rain came and the corn grew tall. The beans wound around their stalks to reach the sun. The chili bushes flowered.

A Handful of Seeds,
(Lester Publishing, 1993)
Monica Hughes, art by Luis Garay

As social ideals and practices evolve, so does the content of the books a society produces. Conversely, as the message and ideals of books change, so too will society. Children's books today reflect the way North American society has progressed—ideally, anyway—to embrace all cultures of the world as they come together in a rich cultural mosaic. Shopping around at children's book stores I saw a proliferation of fabulous stories, all of which involve children with different cultural heritages living in Canada.

In *Marisol and the Yellow Messenger* (Emilie Smith-Ayala, art by Sami Suoma-

lainen, Annick Press 1994), a little girl from Central America moves to Canada after the death of her father and is forced to adjust to the strangeness of a new climate and culture. She does not end up "converting" to Canadianism—but rather, brings the two cultures together, validating the richness of living in a multicultural society.

Every publisher I spoke to warned emphatically against books driven by a cause. The only way to encourage kids to be life-long readers is by feeding them good books. And stories motivated by a moral, rather than by inspiration, are often transparent and not very interesting. Children's fiction should be measured by the quality of the writing, the appeal of



"She imagined herself back in her grandparents house."
[*Marisol* by Emilie Smith-Ayala, art by Sami Suomalainen]

the story. And sometimes a great story will come along in spite of the issue. *Marisol* weaves a beautiful tale around vibrant illustrations without ever telling children what to think: it remains a captivating story that depicts immigrants without ever writing about them.

In other books, illustrations often depict characters from a variety of cultural and racial backgrounds regardless of whether or not this has anything to do with the story. For example, in Robert Munsch's *Show and Tell* (Annick Press, 1991) the drawings by Michael Martchenko depict an Asian boy, a black teacher, and a woman doctor. These portrayals are not in themselves central to the story, which is about a boy who brings his

baby sister to school for Show and Tell. Children absorb the pictures on a sub-conscious level, accepting different cultures without having to "learn" to accept them.

Another change in modern children's books is the redefinition of the family unit. From more obvious books about divorced parents to very subtle references in other stories, the nuclear family has lost its exclusivity. I noticed one reference while reading Kathy Stinson's *Teddy Rabbit* (art by Stéphane Poulin, Annick Press, 1988). I had read this story close to a million times (holding tightly to my teddy-piglet) before I noticed the line: "On Saturday, Tony's dad came to take him to Centre Island." Tony's father, I realized for the first time, does not live at home. And again it was not important to the story: it was simply an accepted fact about the protagonist that his parents did not live together.

One book which stands out more in its depiction of changing realities is *Tiger Flowers* (Patricia Quinn, art by Janet Wilson, Lester Publishing 1994). It is about a boy learning to cope with the death of his uncle. The uncle was homosexual and has died of AIDS. This tragedy, however, is not the central issue of the story. The story is about love and loss, and the uncle's acceptance in the family is never even questioned.

Happily ever after?

The Princes soon became tiring to everyone. They were always rescuing damsels in distress, even when the damsels weren't in distress.

Frogs, (Harper Collins, 1993)
Andrea Wayne-von Königslöw,
art by Michael Martchenko

A new category of books is showing up on the bookstore shelves: the anti-fairy tale. What better way to update traditional stories preoccupied with helpless, passive women, evil step-parents and the white-washed world of marital bliss than by turning them on their heads? Traditional fairy tales in their timeless beauty are not attacked by this new genre, yet books today are offering up alternatives which call into question some of the rigid values the classics seem to enshrine.

Recall, for example, *The Frog Prince*. The classic story features a princess who is crying because she dropped her ball in

the well. A frog comes to her rescue on the condition that she kiss him and take him into her home. Reluctantly she does it and—poof—the frog becomes a prince who rescues the princess from her tragic, lonely, princeless life.

In *The Frog Prince Continued* by Jon Scieszka (Viking, 1991) the royal couple do not live happily ever after. But in their quarreling they learn to accept each other—warts and all. They also achieve a certain freedom in their misery: the princess doesn't have to embrace the saccharin bliss of the typical fairy tale, and the prince no longer has to embody the "perfect man." He retains the freedom to be a bit of a toad.

In *Frogs*, a city becomes overrun with frog-princes (one of whom, with big ears and rosy cheeks, bears a suspicious resemblance to Prince Charles). But no one is impressed with the royal mob, who spend their days rescuing irritated people who do not need rescuing. As it turns out, the princes aren't too happy either. Because they have been turned from frogs to humans, they order flies in restaurants, stare longingly at lily-pads and hop sadly by the pond, until a young girl comes up with a plan to turn them back into frogs. This story proves that the heroine can rescue the prince sometimes. It may also teach kids to accept themselves for who they are: the princes, forced into the unwelcome occupation of perpetual galantry, are apparently happier being frogs.

The Robert Munsch factor

So he gave Gah-Ning one hundred balloons, two hundred balloons, three hundred balloons and Gah-Ning started to float right up into the sky. The clown said, "You'd better look out. You are going to fly all the way to Kapuskasing." "I know," said Gah-Ning, "isn't it great?"

Where is Gah-Ning?, (Annick Press, 1994)
Robert Munsch, art by H el ene Desputeaux

Some people are born storytellers. Bob Munsch is one of these. All of his stories (some 25 of them now) possess a certain spark that lifts them into a higher realm—not to mention a higher profitability.

In Canadian publishing there is something known as "the Harlequin factor." All other publishers can combine their sales figures and the projection for the industry still looks grim. Then along comes Harlequin with *their* figures, and

suddenly it appears that the industry is booming. To give an example of how severely Harlequin wrecks the curve, in 1992 their sales were \$375 million, while



Making the world safe from poodles: a nineties damsel no longer in distress.
[*Frogs* by Andrea Wayne-von K onigl ow, art by Michael Martchenko]

University of Toronto Press came in a distant second with \$45 million.

At Annick Press they affectionately refer to "the Munsch factor." The sales and profits of a Munsch book essentially have to be treated as an entirely separate entity. An average book will have a print run of 5,000. Munsch's latest *Where is Gah-Ning?* has a first print run of 362,000!

Although Munsch is arguably the best selling author in the country, three of his books have been subject to harsh criticism.

Love You Forever (art by Sheila McGraw, Firefly, 1986), is a sentimental story about the bond between a mother and her son which traces their relationship from his infancy and his mother's care, to her inevitable aging and the grown man's care of her. It was criticized by publishers and reviewers as syrupy sap. Call it what you will—it has sold 10 million copies.

Giant or Waiting for the Thursday Boat (art by Gilles Tibo, Annick Press, 1989) and *Good Families Don't* (art by Alan Daniel, Doubleday, 1990) have ventured beyond criticism and have brushed with censorship. The former was accused of depicting "violence against God." In it, a giant, angry at St. Patrick for driving the elves and giants from Ireland, threatens to pound God "till he looks like applesauce." God, it turns out, was pleased that she—yes, she—had created a perfect giant for giants are meant to be big and brutish.

Good Families Don't, originally titled *The Fart Book*, has been labelled

"vulgar." In this saga, a huge fart overtakes a household despite the parents' protests that good families do not have farts. Munsch, responding to the controversy surrounding critics' protests that the book contains material unsuitable for children, maintains that adults are out of touch with what kids find funny. Perhaps censors were seemingly assuaged by the end, in which a little girl saves the day by shoving a rose up the fart's nose.

The emancipation of the child

I am small.

But I think big.

I am Small, (Doubleday, 1994)
Sheree Fitch, art by Kim LeFave

If there is one common theme among modern children's books it is the emancipation of the child. No longer does the princess sit and let everyone from evil siblings to fairy godmothers control her destiny. The characters are active—actually creating the story and resolving the issues. Traditional authority figures, such as parents, doctors, or teachers mostly bumble around until the kid comes along and straightens them out.

On a day-to-day basis not too many kids have the chance to overpower the adult figures in their lives. By making this fantasy come to life in a storybook it encourages kids to grow up confident in their own abilities. And that is the true mark of a successful children's book. ●