
Victor Watson. *The Cambridge Guide to Children's Books in English*.
Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. i-xi, 814 pp.

This *Cambridge Guide* is a major achievement and so if I cavil along the way here, I do so because it is the reviewer's responsibility to cavil. No reference work can cover everything, and this guide certainly has gaps and failings. But it does a commendable job of capturing the field of children's literature at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In 1996, Maria Nikolajeva published a study of children's literature titled, *Children's Literature Comes of Age*, and this title well articulates the impression the *Cambridge Guide* gives. Its 800 and more pages of double columns contain a survey of authors from around the English-speaking world, themes, significant books, terminology for picture-book art, types of story, series books, historical figures, and so on. This volume presents the state of the profession and of the art at its time of publication. The two hundred and fifty-three contributors come from Canada, the U.S., the U. K., Australia, New Zealand, Ghana, South Africa, Nigeria, India, Japan, Singapore, Kenya, and Mexico. Among the contributors are librarians, writers and illustrators of prominence, well-known scholars, independent researchers, editors, and teachers. In short, contributors mirror the varied practitioners in children's literature studies. I daresay a comparable volume for modern poetry or for any other area of mainstream literary studies would not draw upon such an eclectic group of people to write the entries.

And herein lies a moral: no one can now grasp the full range of this subject. Children's literature comprises a great list of topics and it does so on an international scale. Not only does the *Guide* offer information about literature in Africa and South Asia, as well as in Australia, Canada, the Caribbean, the U.K and the U.S., but it also has entries on writers from Sweden and Finland, an illustrator from Switzerland, and artists from Japan. Children's literature is truly an international genre, as well as a multi-faceted one. No one volume can cover everything, although the *Cambridge Guide* sets out to cover as much of its subject as possible within the limits of its space. A "note to the reader" informs us that the book contains "four kinds of entry: *author entries*, *title entries*, some longer *topic entries* [...] and a few, mostly short, entries covering *technical terms*" (ix). Another note points out some of the "less obvious" entries such as "bias," "books for blind readers," "neglected au-

thors," "nudity in children's books," and "soap operas." These entries, as well as the entries on "Critical approaches to children's literature" and "publishers and publishing" set this book apart from a reference work such as Carpenter and Pritchard's *Oxford Companion to Children's Literature* (1984) and align it with Peter Hunt's *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* (1997).

The author entries cover a great number of writers and illustrators from the U.K., the U.S., Africa, Australia, Canada, India, Ireland, and New Zealand. In addition to authors and illustrators, a few educators, editors, librarians, and critics have single entries. Inevitably, certain regions are under represented and names are absent. For example, such important Victorian writers as Augusta Webster, Lucy Clifford, Mary DeMorgan, and Dianah Mulock do not have entries. Writers from the Caribbean and from Canada are under represented. Michael Anthony, Therese Mills, Anson Gonzalez, Lillian Allen, Julie Johnston, Julie Lawson, Paul Yee, Tololwa Mollel, are some of the absentees. A few others such as Merle Hodge, Erroll Lloyd, and Samuel Selvon appear tucked away in regional topic entries. Other notable missing names include Donna Jo Napoli, Sonia Levitin, Sybil Rosen, and Livia Bitton-Jackson. These writers have each written Holocaust stories or memoirs, and I might note here that the *Guide* does not contain an entry on Holocaust books. Also absent are entries on the Animorphs series and the more recent ReGeneration series. These series, along with the Captain Underpants series and any others that might be missing, could have appeared in a general article on series books.

But this game of what's missing is easy to play and a bit beside the point. The *Guide* impresses with the number of writers it does cover from South Africa, Nigeria, India, and other postcolonial countries. But something strange does appear in the coverage of the three most noticed postcolonial countries: Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. A quick calculation of the number of entries that present authors, titles, or discussion of topics (e.g. historical novels, picturebooks) reveals that Australia has or appears in two hundred and six entries, New Zealand sixty-nine, and Canada sixty-seven. The disparity strikes me as odd; one can only conclude that Australia has produced far more writers and works that "have made a significant impact on young readers anywhere in the world" (vi) than have Canada and New Zealand. And given the difference in population between Canada and New Zealand, we might conclude that New Zealand too produces more quality work per capita than does Canada. This may be the caviling of a Canadian reviewer, but I notice that whenever a specific title or series from Australia or New Zealand receives mention, the country of origin always appears. Such is

not the case with entries on Canadian works. For example, Caroline Jones's article on L. M. Montgomery's "Emily" series makes no mention of Canada or Prince Edward Island. The uncredited entry on Sheila Burnford's *The Incredible Journey* mentions that the story is set in Northern Ontario, but a book such as Margaret Mahy's *The Haunting* receives an entry that begins, "New Zealand novel [...]" and *The Silver Brumby* entry begins, "First title of a series of ten novels by Australian writer[...]."

Do I protest too much? Consider a few other observations. The four-paragraph entry on "libraries" contains a paragraph each on libraries in the U.S., England and Wales, New Zealand, and Australia. No mention of Canada. The long entry on "historical fiction" contains reference to Australian, but not to Canadian fiction despite the fact that the historical novel is an important component of children's literature in Canada. Or take the column on "Native Americans in children's books." This entry is similar to entries on "Aboriginal culture in children's books" (concerns Australia) and "Maori writing for children," except that it assumes homogeneity between Native Americans and First Nations people. The article mixes writing and illustration by native and non-native people and by people living both above and below the US./Canada border. A similar loose treatment of a Canadian native subject is apparent in the entry on Markoosie, author of *Harpoon of the Hunter* (1971). The writer of this entry, Bruce Henderson (from the United States), refers to this book as "the first novel to be published in Eskimo." Actually, the story first appeared in an Inuit language in the periodical *Inuttittuut* (not *Inuttittut*, as the *Guide* prints the title). Henderson's entry goes on to say that the book, "like much modern fiction [...] enters into the inner lives of its characters." The remarkable feature of *Harpoon of the Hunter* is how unlike all modern fiction by anglo-European writers it is. The story concerns one character, not many characters, and this character's inner life is deeply and distinctly a part of a culture that is dying. The entry in the *Guide* shows no sensitivity to the origins of this story or its author. I might add here a sentence to point out that despite nods in the direction of aboriginal and native writing in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, the *Guide* misses opportunities to provide information on efforts of native peoples to speak for themselves. In the long article on "publishing and publishers," for example, no mention is made of native publishing houses in either Australia or Canada.

Another observation: the Australian journal *Papers: Explorations into Children's Literature* has an entry of 100 words, whereas the journal *Canadian Children's Literature* appears listed without an entry. Or take the long article on "picturebooks." Here we learn that picturebook publication in Australia began in earnest after the appearance of A. B. Paterson's *Waltzing Matilda* in

1970. The information on the New Zealand picturebook implies the same with only one title cited prior to 1973 (*Richard Bird in the Bush* 1944). Information on Canada tells us that “picturebooks are a recent phenomenon” just before the news that “the first true Canadian picturebook was created in 1859.” The paragraphs on Canada conclude with the assertion that Canada had a “relatively late start” in the production of picturebooks. Or again, take the long article on “illustration in children’s books.” Here we have two long paragraphs dealing with illustration in Australian picturebooks, but no mention of either New Zealand or Canada. The BBC production, *Grange Hill*, receives an entry of some 1000 words, but the Canadian television series and book series, *Degrassi High*, does not appear anywhere. Or finally take the short entry on Mordecai Richler which informs us that he was “born and educated in Montreal, Canada, though he eventually settled in England.” Richler lived in England from 1954 until 1972 when he returned to Canada where he lived in Montreal until his death in 2001. The impression the *Guide* gives is that he “settled” (i.e. remained from that time) in England.

Now all this chuffing about the unequal treatment given to Canada might be waste of space were it not for the deeply evaluative nature of this encyclopedia. The *Guide* provides not only information, but also evaluation. Evaluation is implied in the choice of titles chosen for separate entries, in the length of entries, in the inclusion or exclusion of material in the way I have described above. Indeed, the style of discussion throughout the *Guide* is openly evaluative. For example, Geoff Fox concludes his article on Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy with the following praise: Pullman’s “human beings have the courage, the duplicity, the wisdom, the cruelty, the electric sexuality, the ambiguities, and, finally, the complex capacity to love, which mark a great work of fiction. *His Dark Materials* will surely be valued as one of the most distinguished literary achievements of the 20th century.” Victor Watson is willing to praise the first volume of a proposed series, *The Doomspell* (2000) by Cliff McNish, for its “entirely distinctive” writing, “remarkable ... inventiveness of the plot,” and “complex psychic and physical dangers faced by its protagonists.” And Nicholas Tucker damns Robert Cormier with faint praise when he writes: “Cormier is not a great writer, but certainly an effective one.” What is worth noting here is the authority with which these writers speak. The Cambridge imprint is as deep here as F. R. Leavis, and what we have is a latter day Leavisite presentation of the world of children’s books in English. The word “guide” in the title means what it says. This volume purports to tell its reader what is important and significant and, by assertion, implication and absence, what is not; the *Guide* leads the way into the tangly territory of books for the young.

For this reason, I think the mistakes and failings of the book need attention. Some I have mentioned. Others I will briefly sketch here. In the article on “historical fiction,” Gary Crew’s *Mama’s Babies* (1998) is described as being “set during Hitler’s fascist regime,” but the novel actually takes place in the 1890s and deals with baby farmers in England, New Zealand, and Australia. The citation of the Norwegian folk tale, “East of the Sun, West of the Moon” makes no reference to Abjornsen and Moe, collectors and first anthologizers of the tale. Indeed, their collections of folk tales, translated into English several times (notably by Sir George Dasent who does receive name recognition in the *Guide*), is arguably a close second to the Grimm Brothers *Household Tales* in importance. Since I am dealing with folk material here, I may as well return to the slighting of Canada and note that June Factor receives an entry for her collections of nursery rhymes and riddles, chants, etc. in Australia (she is compared to the Opies), but Canada’s Edith Fowke does not garner a mention anywhere in the *Guide*. Another slip appears in the entry for Oodgeroo Noonuccal where one of her books cited as published in 1996 is said to have been followed by another book published in 1967. A similar glitch occurs in the entry for Gary Soto, born in 1952, one of whose books is cited as appearing in 1955. Another kind of oversight occurs in the entry for Susan Jeffers. Here we read that the picturebook, *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky* (1991) “exemplifies Jeffers’s deep love for nature; cross-hatched renderings help relate Chief Seattle’s concern for preserving the environment for future generations.” That’s it. Jane Goldstein, the writer of this entry, makes no mention of the serious controversy that surrounds this book, its mishandling of Native American history and culture, the liberties it takes with Chief Seattle’s speech supposedly delivered in 1853 or 1854, and the offense the book has given Native readers and reviewers.

I suspect a close reader will find more lapses in the *Cambridge Guide*. Certainly, a reviewer might quibble with the critical and theoretical content of some of the longer articles. For example, the interesting article “nudity in children’s books” might be stronger with some consideration of James Kincaid’s speculations on child loving. The closest the article comes to such interesting and provocative theorizing is in its assertion that “the representation of the naked female body—even in children’s FAIRY TALES—was employed to define a culture of the male.” This is fascinating, but it does not explain much about that male culture or why many of the naked figures in children’s literature are male. We might also wonder why the *Guide* contains an entry on “multicultural books,” but nowhere in the volume does the word “postcolonial” appear. This is a volume that wishes to appear authoritative and yet politically neutral, while all the time assuming the naturalness

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of a traditional liberal humanist approach to the study of literature. In this volume, Cambridge lives and its ghosts haunt the pages of this canonizing enterprise.

Roderick McGillis
University of Calgary