



The Idea of North in Canadian Children's Literature Today

— Björn Sundmark

Bastedo, Jamie. *Sila's Revenge*. Toronto: Red Deer, 2010. 320 pp. \$14.95 pb. ISBN 978-0889954229. Print.

Bastedo, Jamie. *On Thin Ice*. Toronto: Red Deer, 2006. 176 pp. \$14.95 pb. ISBN 978-0889953376. Print.

Bedesky, Baron. *Peary and Henson: The Race to the North Pole*. St. Catharines: Crabtree, 2006. 32 pp. \$10.95 pb. ISBN 978-0778724629. Print.

Bell, Joanne. *Juggling Fire*. Victoria: Orca, 2009. 171 pp. \$12.95 pb. ISBN 978-1554690947. Print.

Chartier, Daniel. *Nordur*. Illus. Ólöf Gerour Sigfúsdóttir. Montreal: P de l'U du Québec, 2009. 48 pp. \$15.00 pb. ISBN 978-2760523968. Print.

Crawford, Laura. *In Arctic Waters*. Illus. Ben Hodson. Mount Pleasant: Sylvan Dell, 2007. 36 pp. \$15.95 hc. ISBN 978-1934359341. Print.

Guiberson, Brenda Z. *Life in the Boreal Forest*. Illus. Gennady Spirin. Toronto: Groundwood, 2009. 32 pp. \$18.95 format hc. ISBN 978-0805077186. Print.

Harrison, Ted. *A Northern Alphabet*. Toronto: Tundra, 2009. 32 pp. \$9.99 pb. ISBN 978-0887769603. Print.

Hodge, Deborah. *Who Lives Here? Polar Animals*. Illus. Pat Stephens. Toronto: Kids Can, 2008. 24 pp. \$14.95 hc. ISBN 978-1554530441. Print.

Jocelyn, Marthe. *Ready for Winter*. Toronto: Tundra, 2008. 16 pp. \$8.99 hc. ISBN 978-0887768484. Print.

Kusugak, Michael. *The Littlest Sled Dog*. Illus. Vladyana Krykorka. Victoria: Orca, 2008. 32 pp. \$19.95 hc. ISBN 978-1554691746. Print.

Pasquet, Jacques. *Mon île bénédicte*. Illus. Marion Arbona. Montreal: Isatis, 2009. 32 pp. \$13.95 pb. ISBN 978-2923234540. Print.

Polak, Monique. *The Middle of Everywhere*. Victoria: Orca, 2009. 204 pp. \$12.95 pb. ISBN 978-1554690909. Print.

Rivera, Raquel. *Tuk and the Whale*. Toronto:

Groundwood, 2008. 88 pp. \$15.95 hc, \$8.95 pb.
ISBN 978-0888996893, 978-0888998910. Print.
Service, Robert. *The Cremation of Sam McGee*. Illus.
Ted Harrison. Toronto: Kids Can, 2006. 32 pp. \$19.95
hc. ISBN 978-1554530922. Print.
Teevee, Ningeokuluk. *Alego*. Toronto: Groundwood,
2009. 28 pp. \$17.95 hc. ISBN 978-0888999436.

Print.
Wallace, Mary. *I is for Inuksuk: An Arctic Celebration*.
Toronto: Maple Tree, 2009. 32 pp. \$19.95 hc. ISBN
978-1897349571. Print.
Zeman-Spaleny, Linda. *Lord of the Sky*. Illus. Ludmila
Zeman. Toronto: Tundra, 2009. 28 pp. \$21.99 hc.
ISBN 978-0887768965. Print.

“What on earth is the point of a bear in a story?”—Monique Polak (35)

Because Canada and Sweden are both northern countries, it is no coincidence that the art, literature, culture, and self-perceptions of both countries are to some extent coloured by notions of what it means to live in a northern country. The Canadian national anthem, for instance, invokes a “True North strong and free” in its English version; correspondingly, the Swedish national anthem uses “the north” as a metonym for Sweden in phrases like “I want to live and die in the North.” This use of the north in both national anthems is evocative of manliness, rugged nature, strength, individualism, and freedom—qualities that presumably are meant to stand in sharp contrast to the feminized, over-civilized, and weak tyranny of “the south.” The idea of north and its manifestations are of course much more varied and complex, however, than

can be gathered from lyrics such as “O Canada” and “Thou Ancient, Thou Free.” They can represent life-defeating barrenness and cold, can be feminine and evil like Hans Christian Andersen’s “Snow Queen” or C. S. Lewis’s white witch of Narnia, and can also— from the perspective of the majority—denote the Other: the Inuit and the Sami.

Not only do the national anthems draw on the assumed qualities of the north, but also the attributes of patriotism and good citizenship that are invoked by their nationalist context are associated with the idea of northernness. By implication, activities that are typical for a northern clime can become “nationalized.” The Norwegian anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen has noted, for instance, that “the activity of skiing [in school] makes the children more Norwegian,” whereas

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skiing in Italy does not make you more Italian (109). In Sweden, too, the long-distance skiing event *Vasaloppet* is seen by many as a Swedish ritual of manhood. In other Northern countries, other sports (and representations of sports) may serve similar purposes; as I have argued elsewhere, hockey and its representations serve that function in Canada.

Another complicating factor is that “north” is always relative. It escapes definition, for, like the horizon, north is always beyond our grasp, ever receding. “Northernness” is not a quality that can be securely assigned to any piece of land. Seattle is a northern American town from an American perspective, whereas Vancouver (north of Seattle) would hardly be considered a northern city in a Canadian context. In the central European imagination, Copenhagen, Denmark’s capital city, is the gateway to the north. Its central train station is the terminus for the North express, which begins in the “Gare du Nord” in Paris. Moreover, in Copenhagen you can shop in the classic department store *Magasin du Nord* before travelling on even farther north to Greenland or to Svalbard. From my Swedish perspective, however, Copenhagen is an emblem of the decadent south, and its coquettish attitude to all things Nordic appears slightly ridiculous. While my own home country, Sweden, is a northern country in Europe, those who live in the province of Skåne (as I do) are southerners by Swedish standards, and even northernmost Sweden is far south of Nova Zembla or Greenland or Baffin Island.

This evasiveness of the north is captured in *Norður*, a co-publishing venture between Québec and Iceland with text by Daniel Chartier and images of the north made by Icelandic schoolchildren. It cannot be denied that Iceland is a northern country, so we might assume that the instinct of these children about the north should be

right, but what do these schoolchildren do when they are asked to depict the north? Mostly they draw polar bears and igloos and sled dogs (or reindeer), none of which is very plentiful in Iceland. Two or three of the pictures actually represent some kind of Icelandic north: a child and a father whose hats are blown off by the wind, a bleak landscape with horses, some fishermen. Most of the pictures, however, situate north somewhere else.

Since the north cannot be bolted down to any precise location, it seems more productive to think of north as a culturally embedded sense of direction or movement. The “West” is such a culturally coded direction in the psyche of the USA, often connected to the idea of the frontier. The direction may not even be “correct” in geographical terms. As Peter Davidson has noted, Alaska may lie to the north but it is subsumed in the mythos of the west and the frontier, which can be anywhere (10). Similarly, religious or political centres regularly serve as cultural compasses. Mecca is the point of reference for millions of Muslims. Moreover, like the West in the American imagination or like Mecca to Muslims, the north can feature strongly in people’s imagination and identity formation. There is a sense among northerners that the north is what has made them, that it is the place from which they have come and where they are heading back, or, at the very least, a place to which they must always relate. In such cases it is little wonder that there will be artwork,

books, films about this elusive “place.” Moreover, it comes as no surprise to find that much of this discourse is directed at children in order to socialize them into becoming proper northerners.

What, then, does the north look like in recent Canadian books for children and young adults? Sherrill Grace’s recent study *Canada and the Idea of North* is a useful starting point. In it she evokes the “formulaic north” as a “discursive terrain.” Within the category of popular fiction Grace includes children’s literature, “both the lavishly illustrated books for youngsters and the adventure novels for teens, primarily boys” (181). Grace acknowledges that the categories are blurred, and that adventure novels and popular fiction for adults, for instance, “share a common interest in wilderness romance that relies upon a quest plot” (181). In the adventure novels, she notes, the north often becomes a “testing ground in which isolation, hunger, physical danger from racing rivers, savage beasts, and foul weather, together with overwhelming beauty, provide both the threat and the reward” (181). Traditionally, these are narratives where girls and women are absent or play an insignificant role. First Nations people and “half-breeds” also play subservient roles or are represented as “cunning primitives or dangerous opponents” (183). It is also noteworthy that quite a few of the stories are (semi)biographical or based to some extent on historical accounts.

When looking at some of the recent Canadian

adventure novels about the north, we can see some interesting continuities with Grace's analysis as well as differences from it. The north is still a dangerous place. In *Juggling Fire*, by Joanne Bell, the teenaged protagonist, Rachel, undertakes a difficult, dangerous, and long hike through the Yukon wilderness with her dog. She has to cope with loneliness, cold, a lack of food, and wild animals. Twice she confronts a bear. In *The Middle of Everywhere*, by Monique Polak, fifteen-year-old Noah from Montreal spends the school term in George River, an Inuit village where Noah's father is working as a teacher. Again, the severity of the environment—the cold and the wild animals—is described. Just like Rachel, moreover, Noah at one point has a facedown with a grizzly bear (Grace writes about the “inevitable Grizzly” [181]). In *Sila's Revenge* by Jamie Bastedo, the north is still dangerous, but now because of the global warming that is turning the permafrost into mud, melting the ice, and changing the habits and habitats of the wild animals. All three books are quests in some respect: in *Juggling Fire*, Rachel is looking for her lost father, which is why she has to return to the old home in the wilderness. In *The Middle of Everywhere*, Noah's quest is as much about reconnecting with his father as with finding himself and adapting to another culture and to other people. In *Sila's Revenge*, the quest is for the environment: Ashley's warm-up act in the opening pages is as an “eco-warrior,” when she torches an Empire Oil Trailer

on the Canadian Arctic Coast. Later, she and her band, the Dream Drummers, are invited to go to New York to perform and to talk about what global warming is doing to their community. They are then coerced to bring their act to Australia by the environmentalist Jack Masters, who is as rich as he is mad. Jack's scheme to save the world is to bring civilization back to a pre-industrial stage during (and with the help of) a concert in the middle of the Australian desert. Interestingly, the quest goes from extreme north to emblematic south. In that respect, the first book about Ashley Anowiak, *On Thin Ice*, conforms more closely to genre expectations in that it relates encounters with both grizzly bears and blizzards. In both books by Bastedo, the threat comes from human beings themselves through global warming. Ultimately in *Sila's Revenge*, however, the ruin of civilization is not what Ashley wants, even if it would drastically cut down on the emission of fossil fuels. As the chosen one, she is able to foil Jack's mad plan and speak for moderation. “Jack's style was to think globally, act globally,” she notes, but she now prefers to “think globally, act locally” (302).

It is clear, then, that some basic elements such as “the dangers of the north” and the quest motif are still very much in evidence in these books. In other ways, however, the genre has been transformed. The predominantly white, masculine world of the early Canadian adventure novel is now open to girls and to indigenous people. Rachel is every bit

as resourceful and able as any boy hero in a Robert Ballantyne adventure book. Ashley Anowiak is both a girl and (part) Inuit. *Sila's Revenge* partly succeeds in challenging stereotypes by presenting Ashley and her band members as apparently typical teenagers, with typical teenage aspirations and ways of interacting. Moreover, *Sila's Revenge* inverts the expected trajectory by taking the protagonist and her friends from the margin, the village of Nunartalik on the Arctic coast, to the centre, New York, and then on to Australia. These teenagers are *of* the north and do not have to go north to prove anything, so they go south. Yet I remain skeptical of other aspects of the book. Ashley is not, in fact, a common teenager. She is, impressively, an “eco-warrior” as well as the leader of a successful band. She is also a visionary with special abilities to connect to other Aboriginal people as well as to animals, whether the animal is a New York falcon or a kangaroo. One cannot help but think that somehow, because she is Aboriginal, she carries this ability “in her blood.” In other words, the clichéd idea that Aboriginal people have a privileged connection with animals and the earth itself is reinforced. The fact that her psychic link is also with other Aboriginal people equates Aboriginal people with “nature” and animals in a problematic way. Ashley is still placed in the position of Other, and thus she comes to represent a north that metonymically stands for the wild, the primitive, and the spiritual. I am not sure

that this is such a huge advance on more stereotypical descriptions of the Inuit by non-Aboriginals.

In fact, a book like *Tuk and the Whale* by Raquel Rivera appears to be more modern in many ways, despite the fact that it is a historical adventure story whose events take place in the 1660s. Rivera's novel tells the story of a first encounter between a traditional Inuit community on Baffin Island and the European or North American sailors of a whaling ship. Despite the historical setting and the description of the traditional ways of the Inuit in this narrative, the Inuit are shown as ordinary people, not as exotic Others.

Polak's *The Middle of Everywhere* is also an advance on the generic northern adventure story. Although Noah is tested in the prescribed fashion, bear and all, the main challenge facing him is to overcome cultural differences and start seeing George River as the norm, the “middle of everywhere” of the title rather than as the middle of nowhere. The book is full of good intentions—perhaps too full of them to be entirely successful. Not only does Noah develop an understanding for the strange ways of his classmates—“Who knew body language was contagious? Next thing I know I'll be covering my mouth when I laugh” (164)—but he also gets a dose of Canadian state repression: the RCMP officers who kill Inuit sled dogs and the horrors of residential schools. Feeling sorry for others is easier, however, if you are in a privileged position like Noah and like the book's



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assumed readership; *The Middle of Everywhere* struggles with this built-in problem.

The northern adventure story often blurs the line between fictional and biographical accounts. *Peary and Henson: The Race to the North Pole* by Baron Bedesky belongs loosely in this category—loosely because it is not written as a straight narrative but fragmented into different themes and topics like “On Top of the World,” “Surviving the Pole,” and “The People of the North.” Each topic is given two to four pages. In each spread, text and pictures (photographs, illustrations, maps) interact and are of equal importance. A fur-clad and moustached Peary on snowshoes is accompanied by the following text: “Peary was an expert skier and snowshoer, even after the loss of several toes made it difficult to walk and keep his balance” (20). Again we are faced with a discourse of dangers and hardships on a man with a quest: to arrive at the North Pole first. Although the book attempts somewhat to redress the one-man-against-the-elements myth by also focusing on Peary's African American assistant, Matthew Henson, the four Inuit who reached the North Pole at the same time as Peary remain nameless. Moreover, the fact that both Peary and Henson had Inuit wives and children during their stay in the Arctic is explained as a quaint detail. One wonders what happened to Peary's wife, Aleqasina, and her children after the explorers left—a northern *Madame Butterfly*, I cannot help thinking. Perhaps, though, her plight was better than those Inuit who were brought to the US by Peary as ethnographic specimens.

Another genre of northern books mentioned by Grace is the “lavishly illustrated books for youngsters” (181). *Life in the Boreal Forest* by Brenda Z. Guiberson and illustrated by Gennady Spirin certainly belongs in that category, with its incredible paintings of

deer, wolves, and other northern animals. Or does it? As so often with illustrated books, I wonder whether these artful products are not really addressed to aesthetically minded adults rather than to children. The genre seems by default to be seen as children's literature, but these books are pricey products and overly sophisticated—more for the coffee table than for the nursery. The same might be said about the splendid twentieth-anniversary edition of *The Cremation of Sam McGee* by Robert Service and illustrated by Ted Harrison. I am sure Harrison's strong colours and bold lines—so surprising yet just right when it comes to depicting a seemingly monochrome winter landscape—are assumed to be attractive to children. The long-verse story, however, is directed primarily to an adult readership, I would think, and such paratextual features as the introduction also signal that the book is an adult commodity. *Lord of the Sky* by Linda Zeman-Spaleny and illustrated by Ludmila Zeman, a retelling of the myth of the Great Raven who brought the sun to the earth, is also exquisitely illustrated but is more clearly child-oriented.

If we turn to picture books that are more obviously for younger readers through their didactic approach, like *Who Lives Here? Polar Animals* by Deborah Hodge and illustrated by Pat Stephens and *In Arctic Waters* by Laura Crawford and illustrated by Ben Hodson, the aesthetic aims are less overtly adult-oriented. Just as in *Life in the Boreal Forest*, these books promote

the idea that north equals northern animals—a problematic simplification, especially if the indigenous population is somehow made part of the fauna, as in *In Arctic Waters*. In the latter book a range of northern animals—all slightly anthropomorphized—are paraded until they meet “the man that hunts the animals that live on the ice,” namely the generic, fur-clad Eskimo (and I am using that appellation consciously here). Then the cuddly belugas, narwhals, and polar bears flee from the only animal represented as a predator: man. *I is for Inuksuk: An Arctic Celebration* by May Wallace is another picture book that I find problematic. It represents Inuit culture as a timeless artifact. The preface states that “the Inuit no longer live as nomads,” but then the book goes on to represent them as leading precisely that kind of life.

There are also a number of picture books for young readers that do not exoticize the north to the same extent. *Alego* by Ningeokuluk Teevee is an illustrated children's book that relates how the little girl Alego, living on Baffin Island, goes to the shore with her grandmother. Here the reader meets simple everyday life and small-scale drama. No grizzly bears are present, but there is a tidal pool with starfish and sculpin. *Ready for Winter* by Marthe Jocelyn for the youngest readers is also refreshing in that it varies the conventions of “getting dressed” books by including garments such as snowsuits and mittens. It is also interesting that the depicted children are not raced as

white. In other words, *Ready for Winter* makes and takes northernness as something natural, rather than as something different and Other.

Mon île blessée by Jacques Pasquet and Marion Arbona is a superb picture book that also promotes an insider's view of the north. By contrast to *Alego* and *Ready for Winter*, *Mon île blessée* also relates to the outside world. The "wounded island" of the story is one of the islands in the Aleuts between Alaska and Siberia. The island is being eroded, probably because of global warming, but the girl protagonist Imarvaluk thinks of what is happening in mythic terms: the sea contains "un mauvais esprit" who is devouring the island. Ultimately, it seems, the entire population will have to move to Nome on the continent, leaving behind some old people like Imarvaluk's obstinate grandfather. As in *Sila's Revenge*, the ecological threats to the north are given resonance through myth, but in *Mon île blessée* the reader sees this as a human way of handling and making sense of what is happening to the environment and the impending tragedy, whereas in the similarly themed *Sila's Revenge*, the reader seems to be asked to swallow the whole exoticized New Age deal hook, line, and sinker.

Traditionally, it seems, the main difference between Scandinavian and Canadian representations of the north has been that, whereas in Sweden, Norway, and Finland, north happens to be a place where some people live (albeit poorly), for many Canadians

the north is their "West," their frontier, something to explore and make forays into, rather than a place of dwelling. The exoticizing tendency that can be seen in many contemporary texts depends on this tenacious view of the north. With such a perspective, the flora and the fauna and the fellows who live in the north must necessarily be different from the norm (the readers targeted by these books). To go there may well define us and makes us better and stronger, but it is not a place to stay. Many of these books attempt to broaden genres like the Canadian adventure story to include girls (*Juggling Fire*) and indigenous people (*On Thin Ice*), or to question white masculinity (*Middle of Everywhere*), but the basic premise that the north is different and transitory lives on. Moreover, we have seen that even in books where the perspective is inverted, such as in *Sila's Revenge*, the stereotypes live on.

In the context of these repeated constructions, it is refreshing to see books for children in which the Canadian north is represented as home. When this happens, the narrative compass points to a centre ("home") rather than away ("north"). *Alego* is such a book, and so is *Mon île blessée*. It is also interesting to note that *Tuk and the Whale*, which depicts a traditional Inuit community, succeeds in representing the north as a place to live, a dwelling place. The story is focalized through Tuk, and his home and the way of life of his community are rendered natural,

not stereotypical or exotic. Two books that I have not mentioned so far also do that, but in other ways: *A Northern Alphabet* by Ted Harrison and *The Littlest Sled Dog* by Michael Kusugak and Vladyana Krykorka. In the latter book, the story is about a terrier, Igvillu, who dreams about going north and becoming a sled dog. Eventually, she is sold to “a storyteller, way up north in Canada.” Igvillu has a wonderful time with her master but learns the hard way—the real sled dogs are too tough for her and threaten to eat her—that she is not cut out to be a sled dog. This story interestingly contrasts north and south, but the perspective is decidedly from a northern vantage point, and from a “home” position, which reveals Igvillu as a southerner who is ill-equipped to cope with the hardships of the

north. As in *The Cremation of Sam McGee*, Harrison’s evocation of the north in *A Northern Alphabet* abounds with stereotypical northern objects and situations (Northern lights, extreme cold, igloos). Still, the perspective is that of someone who actually lives there, and the humorous pile-up of northern vocabulary undercuts the threat of essentialism: “B—Brenda and Billy are being chased by a bear” or “W—The wet walrus watches the whales.” The people in the pictures are sometimes Caucasian, sometimes identifiably Inuit, but they are all shown as *residents*.

As long as we do not get too cold—like Sam McGee from Tennessee who never got used to it—it is all right, I guess, living in the north. That is what these books tell me.

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