



**Reflections on Multiculturalism in
Canadian Fiction for Young People since 1950:
A Contribution to National Identity Formation**

— Grit Alter

Richter, Miriam Verena. *Creating the National Mosaic: Multiculturalism in Canadian Children's Literature from 1950 to 1994*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011. 354 pp. €75 hc. ISBN 978-90-420-3351-1. Print. *Cross/Cultures: Readings in the Post/Colonial Literatures in English* 133.

Miriam Verena Richter's *Creating the National Mosaic*, the first book-length study of multiculturalism in Canadian children's literature, offers a comprehensive and detailed account of the development of "Canadian cultural policy with regard to children's culture and literature" (59). Richter frames her literary observations with a discussion of the larger context of Canadian national identity formation to reflect on the ways in which political, literary, and cultural developments are intertwined, especially as they pertain to multiculturalism. Proceeding on the assumption that Canadian children's literature has

driven the development of official multiculturalism in Canada, which in turn has influenced children's literature published after its official declaration, she identifies key moments or stages in the development of multiculturalism. These stages allow for an understanding of the complex roles Canadian children's literature has played in political and social developments.

Richter skilfully interweaves the historico-political development of multiculturalism and the expansion of an infrastructure for children's books in Canada. Significantly, she expresses antipathy toward discourses

that rely on a static definition of Canadian national identity while at the same time acknowledging, with Jerry Diakiw, that “an overall national Canadian identity exists” (31). In support of her argument, she draws on Diakiw’s list of commonplaces that “all Canadians, regardless of geographical or cultural origin, can recognize as Canadian characteristics” (31): Canada’s wilderness; its diverse and distinctive nature; its determination to uphold democratic values; the presence of a universal social safety net; its national commitment to equality in all respects; its status as a nation of immigrants, with English, French, and Aboriginal roots; its strong economy; its cultural traditions in the arts, sports, and popular culture; and its international reputation as a peacekeeping nation (33). Richter affirms that “[n]ot every Canadian will identify with every single constituent, but everyone will find some they can relate to” (31). Along with these commonplaces, Richter successfully brings Pierre Trudeau’s White Paper of 1971 and the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (CMA) of 1988 into conversation with a selected group of books that cover almost five decades of writing for children in Canada. Richter, a German scholar living in Germany, sees “nation” as one of the underlying categories that contribute to a person’s identity formation. One of the main interests of the Association of Canadian Studies in German-speaking countries, which includes more than 650 members, is the impact multiculturalism has had on the arts, history,

geography, and women’s and gender studies in Canada. Canadian iterations of multiculturalism are particularly striking from the perspective of those of us who live in Germany, a country that is becoming more and more multicultural itself. As is the case in Canada, the increasing multiculturalism in Germany is beginning to be reflected in its literature, including books for young people.

I am interested in multicultural young adult fiction from the perspective of the field of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) in Germany. Nowadays, TEFL puts the development of intercultural communicative competence at the forefront of its pedagogy. This entails an approach to learning about other cultures that acknowledges and is aware of their distinctiveness, in contrast to the “facts and figures” approach of a few years ago. My personal research within this field involves implementing multicultural Canadian novels for young readers in teaching English. I look specifically at representations of multicultural characters in texts that move beyond viewing them as problems or victims and that focus on the complexity of internal and external identity problems; in other words, texts that resist focusing on racism and prejudice as central aspects of the marginalized character’s identity, without neglecting issues of racism. The novels I review after my discussion of Richter’s study are chosen within this scope.

To explore the first stage of multiculturalism in Canadian children’s literature, a stage Richter argues



In both novels, the
immigrant child
moves through the
experience of conflict
between the values of
the original home and
the new home



takes place in the 1950s, she turns first to Lyn Cook's 1950 novel *The Bells on Finland Street*. In this story, the reader meets Elin, whose parents immigrated from Finland. Through their mutual fascination for figure skating, Elin and her grandfather learn what and where home is: for Elin, Canada becomes home, while for the grandfather, Finland remains home. In her discussion of this novel, Richter concludes that it "constitutes a prime example of Bhabha's performative function of narrative in actively shaping society" (194). What is especially significant, in Richter's view, is that Cook fosters multicultural awareness "at a time when neither the term nor the Canadian policy of multiculturalism was yet in existence" (194). In a similar sense, Cook's *The Little Magic Fiddler: The Story of Donna Grescoe*, published in 1951, the second novel Richter explores in this section, is a forerunner of Trudeau's White Paper and the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (195–216). In both novels, the immigrant child moves through the experience of conflict between the values of the original home and the new home and, as a result, begins to develop a cultural identity that balances the old and the new. Food, language, and cultural practices are sites at which such blending occurs. The child and the surrounding society become mutually aware of and interested in one another, suggesting that multiculturalism can be interpreted as increased diversity within urban spaces in Canada.

Compared to Cook's novels, Richter concludes, Jean Little's novels *From Anna* and *Listen for the Singing*, both published in the 1970s and dealing with German immigration to Toronto, "represent a retrograde step in their handling of Canadian multicultural society" (235). In a section entitled "The Beginnings of Official Multiculturalism: The 1970s," a period that marks the second stage of the development of multiculturalism in Canada, she argues

that these novels “have not contributed to Canada’s national multicultural discourse” (235) but merely reinforce a shallow awareness of the multicultural character of Canada. She points out that in contrast to Cook’s novels, “the author neither creates a strong ‘idea of place’ nor gestures at the country’s ‘collective memory’” (235). The latter is argued for, as Little only includes aspects of German history in her novel and leaves out references to Canadian history; this lack of detail leaves young readers with “superficial impressions of life in depression-stricken Canada on the level of ‘passive ideology’” (231). Richter criticizes Little for making very little use of the setting of *Listen for the Singing*. Indeed, the nationalist background as well as other historic references to German history that are mentioned in passing only might have been shown to impact the development of characters’ identity and their sense of belonging. With the exception of Anna’s high school, Davenport Collegiate, Little does not mention any landmarks and only occasionally refers to a “Canadian” way of life despite the urban, Canadian setting of the novel (232). In view of Diakiv’s inclusion of regional identities in his national “commonplaces,” this lack of social specificity weakens these novels. Richter directs additional criticism at Little’s failure to include scenes that foreground the multicultural character of Canada (219–20). Rather, instances in which immigrants assimilate to Canadian customs prevail in Little’s work (221). Cook’s novel, in contrast,

is ahead of its time as a result of its affirmative representations of an open tolerance toward others.

In her discussion of Frances Duncan’s *Kap-Sung Ferris*, published in 1977, Richter turns to another narrative that also falls within the second stage of the development of multiculturalism in Canada. Duncan’s novel revolves around fourteen-year-old Kim, who was born in Korea but adopted at the age of two by Anglo-Canadian parents. Highlighting the importance of culture, Kim’s parents often find it difficult to relate to their adopted daughter. As one of the first novels to explore an identity crisis based on the protagonist’s ethnic background, it is rightly seen as marking a change in Canadian juvenile writing—more specifically, “the final step toward the Canadian children’s ‘problem novel’” (236). This story opens with an incident in which a storekeeper mistakes Kim for an “oriental” who was in the store earlier stealing cigarettes. Another incident that makes Kim uneasy occurs when her teacher assumes that she would want to give a presentation on Japan. Neither the storekeeper nor the teacher seem to be aware of the fact (or even care, for that matter) that Kim is Korean. They merely insert her into a larger, presumably more familiar category, engendering a form of discrimination and racism that Richter calls “ethnic lumping” (237). Richter sees this book more in line with her observation about Cook’s novels insofar that they serve as exemplifications of Bhabha’s performative

function of narrative (253). Duncan turns Kim's search for identity into an active performance of finding a place and a sense of belonging. People are not objects who simply reflect the influences of the past, but rather, they are subjects who actively shape their own future and that of the surrounding society. As Trudeau's White Paper had only been issued six years prior to the publication of *Kap-Sung Ferris*, Richter speculates that "Kim's search for personal identity . . . represent[s] Canada's negotiation of national identity at a time when the new national anthem and the repatriation of the Constitution were being discussed" (253). While Richter's interpretation of this scene certainly holds validity, Kim's crisis could also be understood as a result of her being isolated in her experience of being racialized, since neither her adoptive family members nor her friends share her experiences of being non-white. In this sense, it can be added that multiculturalism can also be regarded as a system that both "others" and includes Kim, while it is the ideology of her surroundings that causes severe uneasiness. While Kim is a member of a social group in which she is accepted for who she is, underlying assumptions about power relations continuously objectify her outward appearance.

The third stage of the development of multiculturalism in Canada takes place in the 1980s. In a section entitled "Steering Towards the Canadian Multiculturalism Act," Richter explores

Monica Hughes's *My Name is Paula Popowich!*, published in 1983. Here, Canadian multiculturalism is personified by the protagonist herself, who is of German and Ukrainian heritage and has friends of Italian, Ukrainian, Scottish, and German backgrounds. Paula's identity crisis is triggered by the discovery of photos and documents belonging to her father, whom she never knew. It is her father's mother who helps her to identify her background and discover pride in who she is, namely Paula Popowich. For this analysis Richter makes use of concepts such as collective memory, relates the novel to the CMA, and again refers to Diakiv's commonplaces; additionally, she connects this title to the novels previously discussed. Richter explains that during the 1980s few new elements were added to multiculturalism in Canadian children's literature, but that existing ones were drawn together. According to Richter, Hughes's narrative stands out as it dwells longer on aspects such as alienation from the parent generation and the role of friendship while also "anticipat[ing] a number of the aspects the CMA calls for, such as an ethnically diverse population, interaction between the different groups and their contribution to Canada as well as the preservation of cultural heritage" (273–74). Compared to the novels discussed earlier, some aspects that were already included in *Kap-Sung Ferris* have moved from what Peter Hollindale calls a "'surface ideology' to the level of 'passive ideology'" (qtd. in Richter 274), a shift

that can be seen as another advance toward the firm establishment of multiculturalism as part of a Canadian national identity. *My Name is Paula Popowich!* clearly promotes taking advantage of Canada as a multicultural home. This is exemplified by Paula and her friends trying and liking a range of foods at their respective homes and at an Italian restaurant. Hughes's novel encourages the perception of cultural heritage as beneficial and necessary in constructing hybridized Canadian identities. As in *The Bells on Finland Street*, multiculturalism is seen as a multitude of diverse cultural identities.

Paul Yee's *Breakaway*, published in 1994, is taken as an example of "Consolidating Multiculturalism in Multicultural Canadian Children's Literature: The 1990s," the title of the last stage in Richter's study. Richter considers Yee's book as part of her discussion of whether or not the CMA of 1988 has "caused changes in the treatment of immigrants in Canadian children's literature" (159). According to her, Bhabha's "culture-in-between" becomes visible in this novel, whose protagonist Kwok experiences a severe identity crisis when he initially rejects his Chinese name and background (277–78, 285). Kwok's rejection of his Chinese heritage and identity is reflected in the fact that he is geographically removed from Chinatown, whose inhabitants he refers to as "those people" who are "so . . . Chinese" (qtd. in Richter 285). While Richter identifies the importance of names and acts

of naming in the other novels she discusses, it is in *Breakaway* that naming seems to be a crucial part of the identity crisis. This is manifest in a scene in which Kwok asks his teacher to call him Clark: "I am a Canadian. I was born here. I speak English. I'm really not Chinese. So I should have a Canadian name" (qtd. in Richter 285). Richter interprets this scene as an example of Kwok's "striving to be like his Anglo-Canadian classmates, another example of his negating his background" (285). One further reason for his crisis is his wish to go to university, a wish that contradicts his father's expectations of him taking over his farm (275). Additionally, Kwok continuously witnesses verbal discrimination and physical attacks directed at him and other Chinese Canadians. Despite his rejection and uneasiness, Kwok decides to join the Chinatown soccer team in a game against a group of white Canadians. Richter interprets Kwok's decision as an expression of a hybridized identity that enables him to embrace his Chinese heritage. *Breakaway* here serves as a prime example of Diakiv's commonplace that Canada is a nation of "rich tradition in the arts, sports and popular culture" (qtd. in Richter 33). When the Chinatown team members not only win the game but also "cause[] a traffic jam with their triumphant parade after the match" (283), Richter understands this as a demonstration of the empowerment of the team members in the face of unfair treatment; significantly, in this novel the Chinese Canadians are not depicted



Maintaining the centrality of culture as opposed to, say, ethnicity, multicultural children's literature in Canada may be said to anticipate . . . yet another stage in which creating a national mosaic entails a balanced appreciation of cultural heritage.



as victims, but rather, in the face of discrimination, “make the best of it by developing strategies to be successful despite their underprivileged initial position” (283). Richter supports her argument with references to interviews with Paul Yee and to his essays, in which he expresses a particular interest in exploring “the other side of racism—i.e. how people who were the target of this racism reacted to it and dealt with it” (284). While the existence of a Chinese-heritage-only soccer team, combined with Kwok’s decision to forgo university to work on his father’s farm, could also be understood as a process of separating one racial group from another, Richter interprets both elements as “plead[ing] for the acceptance of one’s heritage in combination with Canadianness: i.e. a hyphenated Chinese-Canadian identity, which corresponds to another of the maxims of Canadian multiculturalism” (287). Although the time in which the novel was published needs to be acknowledged, the mutual inability of Kwok and his surrounding society to accept and respect each other as cultural Others also focuses on the difficulty of implementing multiculturalism in a society of majorities and visible minorities. The soccer players do not manage to mix their teams and simply enjoy sports together, nor is Kwok enabled to work at his father’s farm and at the same time go to university. When both aspects indicate that the ethnic groups remain separate, the consolidation of multiculturalism only works for the visible minority who accepts his own heritage within Canadian society, not as an active member of this society. While feeling and being Canadian, Kwok is, from the outside, continuously identified as Other.

Since the 1990s, multicultural children’s literature has undergone important developments: mainstream publishers are increasingly willing to publish multicultural works and authors represent children of diverse cultural backgrounds as members of Canadian society. Maintaining

the centrality of culture as opposed to, say, ethnicity, multicultural children's literature in Canada may be said to anticipate, following Richter, yet another stage in which creating a national mosaic entails a balanced appreciation of cultural heritage.

The In the Same Boat series published by Coteau Books aims to do just that. As the preface to each book in the series indicates, the series was "motivated by the desire . . . to do something about" the lack of children's books featuring children with whom all children in Canada, irrespective of cultural background, could identify (Lunn ii). The aim of this series is to provide stories in which young readers can recognize themselves while also offering insights into the diverse cultures of Canada. Accordingly, the protagonists of the books in this series tend to be depicted as heroes of fantastic, outdoor, or historic adventures rather than as anxious young people struggling to overcome crises of cultural identity. Hiromi Goto's *The Water of Possibility* and Cheryl Foggo's *I Have Been in Danger*, both published as a part of this series in 2001, exemplify this aim. In *The Water of Possibility*, for example, the reader meets twelve-year-old Sayuri, the Japanese Canadian protagonist of the story who becomes the heroine of the day by saving her seven-year-old brother Keiji and the magical Living Earth, a parallel dimension in which Japanese mythology has come to life. She faces her own insecurity and overcomes her lack of self-esteem in the process. The children discover Living Earth by

searching for the light switch in the root cellar of their new home in Granola. With this plot, Goto not only takes up the mysterious image that provides the title of Janet Lunn's 1981 novel *The Root Cellar*, but she also echoes its storyline in her presentation of a protagonist who moves from Calgary to "eternal boredom and prairie isolation" (2), a move that means leaving behind friends and a sense of belonging in the swim club. Yet it is in her new home that Sayuri embarks on an adventurous journey toward the discovery of a positive identity. Sayuri follows an adventure similar to that of Lunn's protagonist, the twelve-year-old Rose, but while Rose encounters historic events such as the American Civil War, Sayuri discovers moments of her ethnic background, personified by Japanese mythological figures that she has, until now, known only through her parents' storytelling. It is especially Yamanba, the giant mountain woman, who helps Sayuri gain enough self-confidence to save her brother and bring together the powers in Living Earth to secure a safe living environment. At the same time, Sayuri learns to know and to recognize herself. Goto manages to present the Japanese Canadian girl not as the Other, but rather as a person who finds a way to bring together seemingly disparate histories toward self-integration and empowerment. Through her use of the genre of fantasy, Goto refrains from establishing power structures reminiscent of majority-minority discourses or, as is typical in multicultural children's

books, the more familiar discourse of *gaining voice*. This story transcends narratives of identity formation that characterize the Other in relation to a white mainstream society and allows young readers in Canada to identify with a girl whose rediscovery of her Japanese roots enables her to become a heroine in her own right.

A similar interpretation applies to Foggo's novel, which tells the story of ten-year-old Sidney and of her older sister Jackie, who becomes lost in the forest during a heavy thunderstorm. Sidney turns out to be key to the survival of both young girls when she finds Jackie. The story is alternately told from Jackie's and Sidney's perspectives, as well as flashbacks to the sisters' earlier life and childhood. Through these narrative layers, the reader learns that Jackie ended up in this emotionally and physically threatening situation because she found herself in the middle of a fight between her best childhood friend, Chris, and a group of the most popular sixth-graders. As Jackie grows older, she distances herself from both her little sister and her friend Chris in an attempt to fit in with the popular girls, who command a fascinating power over everyone else. Shifting points of view and the skilful intertwining of different narrative layers make for considerable suspense and ambiguity, leaving readers to decide for themselves who the protagonist is. The salient issues with which this novel grapples include friendship and shifting relations between siblings, the

challenge of making correct decisions, and wanting to fit in with others without losing sight of which battles are worth fighting. Sidney's and Jackie's African Canadian background is hinted at only in three or four situations, such as when Jackie expresses her special relationship to her grandfather, who "was very dark, too" (41). Jackie's discontent with her skin colour, compared to her sister's fairer complexion, plays a minor role in the story, indicating that race does not function as a primary cause for crisis and conflict. Rather, young readers are encouraged to discover common grounds with the protagonists. In the case of Foggo's novel, readers are invited to identify with the sisters' inner struggles and their determination to stay true to themselves and to find a place in a world striated by class, familial, and societal conflicts.

Both novels acknowledge but refuse to focus on problems related to race and ethnicity, even though race and ethnicity have a profound impact on people's experiences in a multicultural society. That said, neither Goto nor Foggo reinforce conceptions of multiculturalism as a harmonious co-existence of multiple cultures. Rather, they offer different reading experiences all the more enjoyable for the excitement they evoke and the commonalities of experience they offer to a diverse readership. Although many books that include characters of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds have been published throughout the last decade, balanced representations featuring

minority characters whose experience is not limited to negotiating tense relations with a dominant, white mainstream are much rarer.

While both texts strongly focus on the development of their protagonists' personality and explore the challenges associated with crossing cultures, they also allow for an interpretation that puts stronger emphasis on their ethnic backgrounds. In this sense, it could be argued that Sayuri's self-discovery in Goto's novel is prompted by her encounters with the figures of Japanese mythology that enable her to grow beyond her shy and self-critical self. Returning home through the root cellar after saving her brother and Living Earth itself, and saying goodbye to her mythological friends, she is not the same girl who fearfully looked for the light switch at the beginning of her journey. Likewise, Foggo's story highlights Jackie's inner conflict with respect to perceivable differences in her and her sister's skin colour. Goto's and Foggo's works nevertheless meet the objective of Coteau Books of representing protagonists of the multicultural mosaic of Canada whose success in growing as a person does not solely depend on overcoming conflict situations predominantly characterized by racial and/or ethnic disputes. *The Water of Possibility* and *I Have Been in Danger* create space for stories in which characters are represented for their own sake and not merely as topical markers of identity crisis.

Norah McClintock's *Down*, published in 2007,

likewise uses a multitude of themes, perspectives, and textual strategies that work toward the cultivation of commonalities between characters and readers. *Down* follows the protagonist's experiences after he returns home from a nine-month stay in juvenile detention. Remy was sent there for severely beating up another boy who insulted his girlfriend, Asia, who is of African descent. Remy and Asia endure much hostility and discrimination because of their interracial relationship, not only from strangers but also from Remy's family and the police. While McClintock decides to let racist speech acts pass unpunished, and even constructs them as "normal" when performed by the police, physical violence is met with strict consequences. One nevertheless cannot ignore the ways in which Remy and Asia are subjected to discrimination, and readers may be tempted to see Remy as a victim despite the violence he inflicts on another person. Even this temptation is checked, however, by ensuing events that result in Asia's new boyfriend Marcus being shot by the police because of Remy's misjudgment. The insights into Remy's thoughts and feelings provided by the narrative in the form of inner monologues invite the reader to empathize with him as he goes through his various crises, which are caused by a number of factors. From the way Remy behaves, it becomes obvious that he feels guilty for beating up another boy. Additionally, he loses the affection of Asia and the love and respect of both his mother and sister, who begin

to view him as a criminal. Having to face his family's rejection and to acknowledge that Asia has moved past their relationship leads Remy to return to old friends who involve him in the gang fights he wanted to leave behind.

McClintock frames Asia's, Marcus's and Remy's decisions as forms of angst related to being alone after losing the acceptance and approval of family and friends, suggesting that it is their inability to belong that drives these young people to commit acts of violence. These acts destroy their social surroundings as well as themselves, since feelings of guilt and remorse do not vanish. Their inner struggles are narrated within a fascinating and tragic story in which no decision seems to be the correct one and no easy solutions can be found. The three characters all seem to look out only for themselves and are hurting too much to assist individuals in escaping the emotional traps they create. Compared to Goto's and Foggo's novels, the ending of *Down* is ambiguous; it remains questionable with which protagonist young readers are likely to identify. This is one of the aspects of this short novel that carries high potential and is a great source of food for thought for young readers.

As the brief analyses of these novels suggest, recently published multicultural literature for young readers in Canada is, as Richter suggests in her study, moving toward a more balanced appreciation of cultural heritage. *Creating the National Mosaic*

functions therefore as valuable background reading for understanding and evaluating such literature. The book establishes itself as a useful tool for comprehending not only the development of multicultural policy in Canada but also how far decisions regarding funding and publication, as well as the efforts of librarians, have influenced and contributed to the body of multicultural titles available in Canada today. It is all the more remarkable for how it presents the development of national identity formation in a nation that is increasingly diverse in so many different respects. Richter's book could serve as a model to investigate further the development of multicultural Canada as reflected in more recently published texts for young people in which the experiences of all Canadians provide important nodes of identification for a reading public that is as diverse as the nation itself. While Goto's *The Water of Possibility* and Foggo's *I Have Been in Danger* are exemplary of this, McClintock's *Down* provides yet another perspective from which racialized and non-racialized violence can be viewed. This and other multicultural novels for young people imply that violence of any kind is harmful to all, regardless of the cultural affiliations of its perpetrators. As the starting point for a new stage toward a balanced appreciation of cultural heritage, one can only hope that texts featuring young people as problem solvers and not as problems will soon become the norm rather than the exception on the Canadian children's literature scene.

Works Cited

Foggo, Cheryl. *I Have Been in Danger*. Regina: Coteau, 2001. Print.
Goto, Hiromi. *The Water of Possibility*. Regina: Coteau, 2001. Print.

Lunn, Janet. Preface. Goto i-ii.
McClintock, Norah. *Down*. Victoria: Orca, 2007. Print.

Grit Alter is a research assistant at the English Department of Muenster University in Germany. Her research interests focus on Canadian literature in teaching English as an additional language and its implementation for intercultural and transcultural learning.