

## A Winnipeg Childhood

A Winnipeg Childhood. Dorothy Livesay. Winnipeg: Peguis Publishers, 1973. Pp. 105.

. . . heart planted then  
and never transplanted.  
"Roots"

Reading A Winnipeg Childhood by Dorothy Livesay is disappointing. There seems to be a clearer exposition of childhood life in Winnipeg in the author's early "Poems of Childhood," published in Poems for People in 1947, than almost anywhere in the fictional narrative. It may be that Ms. Livesay is too far now from her childhood experience to convey the clarity necessary to such a narrative as this. The child, Elizabeth Longstaffe, of A Winnipeg Childhood is a long way from the earlier child of "Page One:"

She was a moving miracle of wing  
and sound

No one home hers, but all homes  
to be found.

And when Elizabeth finally leaves the city of her childhood, the image of Winnipeg which she takes with her:

. . . and saw, high overhead,  
scudding along amongst  
soft spring clouds, the deep  
V-wedge of the geese.

She could not hear them, but  
she knew their song.

does not have the immediacy of:

. . . her heart heard

The sky's hallooing honking word  
Here . . . .

It is almost as if those "homes to be found" have not been found by Elizabeth. She is still searching. Behind A Winnipeg Childhood there seems to be the image of a city, but it is a blurred

image which the reader can never wholly perceive. To mention names, including races, is not sufficient. The names and races of Winnipeg are but a superficial indication of the mixed and puzzling culture that exists now, and must surely have existed in the years from 1909-1919, years which were historical ones for Winnipeg, with the change from frontier outpost to modern city. Almost nothing of this is evident from the book. Elizabeth seems to have missed it all, and it is perhaps symptomatic of this deeper lack that she is almost ironically prevented from experiencing the two major historical events of these years, the ending of the First World War and the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919.

What emerges from A Winnipeg Childhood is the isolation of a certain social class. The disturbing element of the book is the underlying feeling of class superiority and racism which is often described but never commented on. The child Elizabeth is uneasy when her parents act in a particularly obvious class or racist manner, but she is herself infected by the family feeling of superiority, as indeed she is bound to be. Where the reader is uneasy is in the failure of the author either to develop some thesis concerning the part played by race and social class in Winnipeg society or to come to any conclusion about the effect of these factors on the character of Elizabeth and her relationships both with her parents and with her city. It is not enough

merely to describe. The only effect of that is to make the reader cringe. As they are written, the anecdotes about Matt, Mrs. Spy and Polish Anna and her Indian, are at best trivial; at worst they are examples of the author's own lack of concern with some of the more insidious effects of racial discrimination. One does not doubt that a Polish maid called Anna would have been known to the English-Canadian middle-class household for which she worked as Polish Anna; nor does one doubt the possibility that such a maid would have preferred living with an Indian in a tent at Lake of the Woods to working for the rather horrible household which the writer portrays in the book. But one still wishes that the author had been able to expand the anecdote to include some examination of the questions about society, Winnipeg life and personal relationships which the anecdote raises. Why should the reader have to make this examination herself? What is the point of recounting an experience, even a painful one, if it is not to be examined and no conclusion may be drawn from it?

The intense feeling of some of Ms. Livesay's poetry about Winnipeg seems present only in the third part of the first chapter, which was printed with the title "A Prairie Sampler" in the same issue of Mosaic as "Roots viii" in 1970. It seems a pity that this promise of intense life is not borne out in A Winnipeg Childhood. The mother and father of the fictional narrative are

flat and shadowy even beside the figures of "Roots:"

. . . and retain  
in the scent of the sweet-pea  
my mother's scissors, snipping  
in the musk of nasturtium  
my father's thumbs, pressing  
. . . .

It is not that they are different figures; it is just that the promise is never developed. Perhaps Ms. Livesay should have heeded Jack Ludwig, writing in the same issue of Mosaic:

You go home again to check out the appearances of things against the forms the imagination knows are authentic. My spiritus mundi, if it has a location in space, feels most at home in Winnipeg--even now. What I write tries to do literary justice to the images stored deep down inside.

One does not question the authenticity of Ms. Livesay's experience. One wonders to what extent the forms known to the imagination have been checked against fact, to what extent the images have been realized. The answer to the problem may be merely that the craft of the poet is not easily transformed to that of the writer of fiction. It may be that the form itself, the fictionalized autobiography, and the disjointed manner of composition, have produced a barrier to the reader's comprehension which the writer did not intend. Whatever the answer is, reading A Winnipeg Childhood remains an unsatisfactory experience.

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