

Georgia Hinterleitner

## Small Stones to Fill Big Pictures

A Look at Contemporary Ethnocultural and Regional  
Canadian Children's Picturebooks,  
Their Figures and Themes

Reflections

Literatures in English  
outside Britain and the USA

Albert-Reiner Glaap (Ed.)

Band 22

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E-Mail: [wvt@wvttrier.de](mailto:wvt@wvttrier.de)

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## 1. Introduction

"You have to write the book that wants to be written. And if the book will be too difficult for grown-ups, then you write it for children,"<sup>1</sup> Madeleine L'Engle says, in what is perhaps a slightly tongue-in-cheek jab at the status of children's literature in the Western world of today. Almost four hundred years have passed since the first writings for an audience of children began to emerge, and nearly forty years since academics and criticism slowly started to turn their attention to children's books as a subject of study. From its tentative beginnings, children's literature has blossomed into a verdant jungle, whose many branches bring forth an even greater number of different fruits. And yet, its status remains an ambivalent one, simultaneously dismissed because of its primary target audience, and closely watched for the same reasons. No other field of literature, no other kind of writer, is faced with so many challenges and concerns — is the book helpful? Is the book harmful? Too complex? Too frightening? Or too dismissive of values? Many of these questions, and the judgments that follow in their wake, are spurred by the image of childhood which resides in the adult mind, a representation of a state — for it tends to be perceived as a state — that remains only partially accessible through scattered memories. Some look back on it with nostalgic fondness, some with anger, some with fascination, still others scarcely look back on it at all, and yet it is all these different attitudes and subsequent conceptions that play a role when it comes to writing for children. The author, the publisher, the critic, and the adult who eventually decides to buy or not buy a certain book all draw on their own notions of what constitutes childhood and all the weight attached to it — propriety, education, and entertainment. Canada is a country that has managed to achieve a high level of quality and variety in the production and promotion of children's books in a much shorter amount of time than most other Western nations. Slow to emerge from the shadow of colonialism, its literature has come to reflect a distinct sense of nationality while at the same time developing to try and reflect the many voices, stories, and concerns of its citizens, whose roots can be found in many different places in the world. Naturally, children's books have not remained unaffected by this phenome-

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1 Madeleine L'Engle, qtd. in Denney.

non. Especially picturebooks, with their unique combination of text and image, provide a wealth of insight into the themes that preoccupy Canada as a nation and communicate these themes to Canadian children. This thesis will discuss these new Canadian children's picturebooks which have come to portray regional or ethnocultural aspects in their narratives, the problems and developments they focus on, and also the many representations of childhood they offer. By tracing the argument from the general to the specific, starting with the constructedness of childhood and its effect on children's books in general, before moving on to the forces and developments that have shaped Canadian children's literature into what it is today (or perhaps, what it is *at the moment*, for no aspect of literature is a process to a definite end), it will pave the way for an analysis of a select number of contemporary Canadian children's picturebooks with a regional or ethnocultural focus, and the themes to be found therein.