

modern award winners like Doyle, Lunn, and Wynne-Jones. The selections have an impressive range, featuring male, female and animal protagonists drawn from different backgrounds so that a wide variety of classes, races, geographical, and historical perspectives represent the mosaic of Canada past and present. The stories vary from about ten to twenty-five pages in length. Of twenty-two selections, only eight are self-contained stories (three are the texts of picture books); the others are drawn from novels (which Pearson hopes readers will peruse in their entirety [xi]). The success of this excerpting is uneven. The snippet of *Owls in the Family*, for example, stands alone as a hilarious short story, but the excerpt from *White Jade Tiger* left me rather confused — though I did want to read the complete novel. Still, the high number of excerpts in the anthology probably makes it more attractive to schools and libraries than to general readers who may be slightly annoyed by confronting so many unfinished stories after spending twenty-five dollars.

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Face-to-Face with Ourselves

Gifts to Last: Christmas Stories from the Maritimes and Newfoundland. Selected and introduced by Walter Learning. Fredericton, NB: Goose Lane Editions, 1996. 212 pp. ISBN 0-86492-206-X .

I had — perversely I admit — expected to experience something distinctive, different, perhaps unique. For somehow the words “Maritime” and “Newfoundland” have about them a promise of peculiarity; and the word “Christmas” conjured up memories of what I thought were experiences unlike those enjoyed and endured by any other children anywhere else in the world. But I was wrong; I admit it and I should have known it. For what this book of twenty Christmas stories illustrate is that the Christmas “spirit” — real or dissembled — is universal: as Walter Learning suggests, we turn the pages, step into different towns with different cultures, experience poverty and plenty, meet all kinds of people we have never known, yet recognize in it all our own Christmas pleasures and pains, “come face to face with ourselves” as children and adults.

This is, of course, what good stories should do, and we are rarely disappointed in this instance; knowing, as we do, the abilities of the many fine writers included here to recreate universality by particularizing its hopes, fears, loves in the lives and relationships of “real” people. It might be Alastair MacLeod’s “To Everything There is a Season,” with its poignant portrayal of that moment when belief in Santa Claus is (happily, in this case) naturally

replaced by an understanding of the real significance of Christmas: "The boxes are filled with gifts neatly wrapped and bearing tags. The ones for my younger brothers say 'from Santa Claus' but mine are not among them any more, as I know with certainty they never will be again. Yet I am not so much surprised as touched by a pang of loss at being here on the adult side of the world. It is as if I have suddenly moved into another room and heard a door click lastingly behind me. I am jabbed by my own small wound. But then I look at those before me. I look at my parents drawn together before the Christmas tree. My mother has her hand upon my father's shoulder and he is holding his ever-present handkerchief. I look at my sisters who have crossed this threshold ahead of me and now each day journey farther from the lives they knew as girls. I look at my magic older brother who has come to us this Christmas from half a continent away, bringing everything he has and is. All of them are captured in the tableau of their care. 'Everything moves on,' says father quietly, and I think he speaks of Santa Claus, 'but there is no need to grieve. He leaves good things behind.'" There are few writers who have captured that universal moment any better than MacLeod.

Or it might be Clive Doucet's humorous story of Christmas in St. Joseph de la Mer where Father Aucoin's hopeful decoration of the church altar is based on a handwritten scrawl from his Bishop to the effect that he will be "sending the Bishop's candlesticks" for Christmas, only to discover, rather late, that the Bishop does not underline the titles of books. "The priest held the book in his hands as if it was a small and very heavy weight. 'Very thoughtful of the Bishop,' he said. 'Very thoughtful.'" But, the joy in Christmas, is not thereby diminished in the least. For "the sun was coming up. Like another storm at sea, another Christmas had been weathered. The priest felt rather fine, as if he had said enough prayers, as if God were pleased."

Or, to cite one of my favourite writers, it might be M.T. Dohaney's "Mr. Eaton's — Only What I Ordered Please," with its subtle blend of humour and pathos, in which Hilda O'Connor Pike MacCarthy, flushed by the news that her son is coming home for Christmas and bringing his "mainland" girlfriend, decides she must have a new chesterfield to replace the old wooden settle. Mistakenly, however, she orders from the Eaton's catalogue (at \$45.99) a slipcover only, an embarrassment somewhat eased by the unexpected kindness of seemingly uncharitable neighbours. "In the days leading up to Christmas, Hilda cleaned and scrubbed her house, washed curtains and painted walls.... When she was finished, she surveyed the room, allowing herself one brief moment to envision the Eaton's chesterfield instead of the old wooden settle sitting between the windows." And, as she is singing the carols at Midnight Mass, the bits of Latin ("I hopes they never does away with it") punctuate her thoughts: "*Venite adoremus* ... oh my, but I'd be some happy now if only I had that chesterfield sitting home in me parlour.... *Venite adoremus, Dominum*. Hell's flames with the parlour. I still have me son. All this worrying about a bloody couch.... *Cantet nunc io Announcements* still, it would have been nice." The dilemmas of Christmas have rarely been so touchingly vivified.

And so we could continue. From the creative imaginations of twenty good writers —well-known and lesser-known— such as L.M. Montgomery, Alden Nowlan, Lawrence O'Toole, Helen Porter, Ray Guy, David Adams Richards, Ellison Robertson and Herb Curtis, we share in the Christmas spirit, celebrated in its manifest guises, both sad and happy. There is a Christmas feast here that should be shared, as all Christmas feasts are meant to be, with others. And if it is, and if (as I must still admit I am) we are a little disappointed that our own personal Christmas experiences —the mummers, the Christmas concerts, the religious awe— are not represented in this collection of stories, then we must remedy that deficiency by resurrecting another old Christmas tradition: we must tell them to our children at the foot of the tinsel-covered tree on Christmas Eve.

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