

## BOOK REVIEWS

Jones, Elsie: *The Story of the Falling Star*. Canberra, Australia: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1989, ISBN 0-85575-199-1, Illus., Maps, Photos., Appendices, v + 86 pp.

This children's book is a retelling and recreation of the Paakantji people of the Darling River in New South Wales, in south eastern Australia. One hundred and sixty people and many organizations were involved in the eight-year project, which celebrates land and heritage in this colourful volume. There is a dedication to five members, including two children, who helped with the book before their deaths.

Without any introduction, large coloured photographs, touched up with balloons of comic-book style dialogue, start the story. Frank Johnson tells his grandchildren about a falling star in the 1950's. The modern happening reminds the elderly Elsie Jones of a very old Paakantji story of the foretelling of disaster by Malkarra, a rogue and "miikika" or doctor. A big ball of fire fell from the sky trapping many people. Floods and a migration followed. Today goannas (lizards) are considered the spirits of people killed and injured when the star fell.

The story's interest lies in its illustrations and reliving of events by Paakantji families and school children. Old photographs from libraries and drawings by Doug Jones are superimposed on present-day photos of the places in the story and collages of the faces of the participants. Elsie Jones appears in sixty-three photos narrating the story to groups of children and adults who ask balloon questions, such as: "Was Malkarra lieing to them?" Paakantji words are common in the dialogue. Photographs show the modern people in a recreated old-time camp, marvelling at the cave paintings, and finally celebrating deliverance in a recreated community corroboree with the children painted up.

Throughout the book one finds clear, decorated scale maps of the places the Paakantji Wiiimpatja walked to in the story and modern equivalents, drawn by a fourteen-year old. The back of the book provides extensive notes on Paakantji language sounds, spellings and meanings. Acknowledgements explain how the project is the result of the contributions of so many people, including school children who went on trips to sites of the story, and contributions from the Aboriginal Arts Board, The Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies and twenty-six Roman Catholic missionary bodies. A title contest was held and Aboriginal people of the region commented on the book. The layout was developed in response to the community's preference in book design.

Readers with an interest in Aboriginal matters will find the book of value and enjoy the colourful artwork, interesting photographs and wealth of information.

The book also aggravates. The cartoon balloons are annoying and the page layout is often just too confusing. The book has been labelled "juvenile literature" in Australia. For Canadian children it is usually not successful, being considered too different and too confusing to keep their attention. The pages packed with collages lack a focal point, soliciting such comments from young and teenage Canadian readers as "My eyes jump around" and "It's too hard to tell what they're saying."

*The Story of the Falling Star* is a labour of love for the Paakantji people of Australia.

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Maracle, Lee: *I Am Woman*. Vancouver: Write-On Press, 1988, ISBN 0-921576-00-5, Illus., Photos., xi + 189 p.p., paper \$11.45.

It is part-memoir, part manifesto; Karl Marx has provided some of its shape, but so has a grandmother teaching life-lessons at the stoveside. The result of this pooling of book-knowledge and experience is a book no one can read without wincing of self-recognition, in a complex portrait of the "sad world" Maracle believes has been brought about by "CanAmerican colonialism."

The targets for her scorn and anger? Bureaucrats, educators, bigoted service-people are among them — but so are Indian Movement members, Women's Movement members, fathers and sons and mothers and daughters. Maracle's target audience, on the other hand, has fairly strict limits: she is prolific with examples of people she does not believe will reach the end of *I Am Woman*.

The daily lives of her foes have as much in them that must be warred against as do the foes' collective public movements. It is against the falsehood of the quotidian that Maracle raises her strongest weapons: what people let themselves get away with is the source of much prejudice and insensitivity, according to this author.

All of the book is personal; however, the stories of Maracle's own struggles — as Native daughter/granddaughter, wife, friend, mother — are the hinges on the lynch-pins of which the political philosophy is swung. Maracle's address is so direct that she has taken the precaution of avoiding mainstream presses — possibly because they might have demanded compromise, a solution against which she is

vehemently outspoken.

When white people don't have to give up anything and we are expected to compromise, it is called injustice. If we go along with it, it is called sell-out. Who is going to pay for this? Our families. (p.168)

Because Dennis Maracle is her publisher, the author can be as honest as she needs to be. The book is compelling in its honest simplicity — simple manila cover with a two-colour myth-woman in front, “journey” description and challenging author-photograph in back. Inside, the look is equally open, to the extent of appearing raw at a few points. It has the earnest stamp of the home-press about it, with an odd merging of calligraphy for poems, sketches and photos for life-histories. The freedom from ordinary rules of spelling, grammar and diction may put off a reader at first — we learn in Maracle's idiom on the first page of the first chapter that the leaves were “typed twixt the demands of young children — they made their way to the printer.” (p.1) Soon, the bent rules of expression start to stand for the wider rebellion of the author against all readers' expectations.

One of the unusual and memorable offerings of the book is a chapter dedicated to a dead friend: “Rusty.” Maracle records the terrible trials of a young woman realizing that her passionate lover is also a brutal wife-beater. Maracle enters into a dialogue with Rusty, and we suspect that it is either a recalled series of conversations between the two women, or — more likely — a reconstruction, in hindsight, of all that ought to have been said.

Like Rusty, many of the people whose faces stare from these pages are imprisoned by society's chains; prejudice, bigotry, gender discrimination are all traps discussed by Lee Maracle. Even worse, she suggests, are the “tender traps” of paid jobs that effectively silence rebels with urgent causes.

Of her own undeterred mission, she declares,

I cannot sit on my ass in fat, second-hand leather chairs still warm from the cheeks of some departing white bureaucrat's butt (p.132).

Worse even than yielding to the supposedly political but secretly hushed-up positions for Aboriginals in government, is turning one's hatred against Native brothers and sisters. This in-fighting is exposed by Maracle as a perfect way to the white males' satisfaction over Native issues: to make them non-issues.

The leaders of the Women's Movement are no better at helping Aboriginal women in CanAmerica (after a while, this political signifier becomes the most natural political description of the continent, if we are following Maracle's line of thought). Maracle points out, at the core of her fury over the non-persons she and her Native sisters have been treated as, that the term in newspapers commonly denoting these women is “female Native”: in the hierarchy of our society, says

Maracle, this designation strips away both personhood and womanhood. An issue of this sort would never be addressed, she insists, by the “white women’s movement.”

Yet her observations have been made in a similar way by the more egalitarian of the women’s rights advocates. Like her, others have drawn parallels between the status of black American women and Native women — notable in this context are articles by Catharine Stimpson and Jessie Bernard, both of whom recognize the racist elements in a patriarchal society, linking them to the sexist ones. A fascinating part of Maracle’s assertions is the fellow-feeling she shows for black South African women. The elusive Cj, one of the shadowy contributors to the book as a whole, has made this comment, and Maracle has quoted her: “Until those black people in South Africa can stand up, we’re never going to get anywhere” (p.163).

Like Maria Campbell, Lee Maracle traces her enlightenment to her Indian grandmother. Akin to Campbell’s Cheechum, Maracle’s grandmother transmits the messages of spirituality through stories and through actions. The recounted tale, “Black Robes,” which reads like a choppy short story, contains the division from the precepts of the Catholic faith that most Native Canadians would have indicated through interpreters, as the granny’s father did: “You say my daughter will learn to be a good Christian wife, to do a thing called read from deadwood leaves. What need has she to be a woman different from herself...?” (p.82).

From her grandmother, Maracle gleans the faith to imagine the weight of her own soul as it departs her body; she learns an intuition about people’s intentions; and she learns, especially, to look inward, and not to shield herself from the inner person. The sometimes awkward, sometimes heartwrenching view of the author herself is what keeps a reader empathetic to the often-searing social criticism. Here is the section of her essay, “The Rebel,” that creates the most frank picture of the woman behind the words: Lee Maracle has “confessed” to being an intellectual, because she wants the reader to take in exactly what position she writes from — and to doubt her word, as one would doubt all others, before the test of personal experience.

There is nothing worse than being a woman who is dark, brilliant and declassé. Darkness is the absence of natural (normal?) class polish. Admit this, all of you. I laugh too loud, can’t hold my brownie properly in polite company, and am apt to call shit, `shit’ (p.131.).

The individual element most consistently revealed through the book is Maracle’s poetic vision. Her poetry is as likely to appear in the midst of someone else’s story as it is at the center of a chapter full of political definition. The poem “Striving,” for instance, punctuates a discourse on the nature of feminism in the view of Native women:

I drank heartily of the settler's wine  
learned his language well;  
gazed with awe at his success

no pretty woman was I, nor  
clever wit did possess

Not striving went to naught  
it was the trying  
that shames me now (p.16).

When we read such internalized self-exploring, we recognize that Lee Maracle's journey is as much through the dark corners of her own consciousness as it is through the political corridors of CanAmerica. If we value an unfettered individual's perceptions, we will take to heart the stormy insights of this author.

Maracle's parting vision is of "Flowers," those beauties of nature overlooked or thoughtlessly destroyed by the modern North American. In her poem, "Perseverance," it is the dandelion that embodies the struggle of the Aboriginal to survive, and be noticed. The image, like many in the book, is apt, realistic, and unforgettable.

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