

Montreal Gazette

For Kids: A Testament to Resilience

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One of the more frustrating aspects of childhood is that you're at the mercy of adults. And rarely do those adults consult you when making huge life changes.

So if your father, say, is helping to build a dam across the North Saskatchewan River and that dam is almost complete and he's about to move you and the rest of the family out of the bush and clear across the country to Toronto, well, no one is going to ask if that's okay with you. They're just going to assume you're coming along.

That's the situation facing the central character of *I Know Here*. And I, for one, know just how she feels. Five decades later, I can still remember what it was like to be told that I would no longer be living in Jakarta, the place of my birth, and that my family would, instead, be boarding a huge ship and heading to Holland. It sounded exciting, until the truck taking us to the pier pulled out of the yard and I was waving goodbye to people I'd known my whole life - and would never see again.

I wish I'd done what the girl in this book did - created a picture of the things I grew up with, learned to love, and wanted to remember.

True, my picture would have been different than hers. She drew the wolves of the forest, the moose she'd seen "standing still in the water, looking straight at me." I never saw a single moose in Indonesia. Nor did I know "the feel of my heart beating fast as I swooped over my road in a five-seater airplane," or what it was like to attend school in a trailer with eight other kids - and be the only one in Grade 3.

But I know what the girl in this book means when she tells us the forested area of northeast Saskatchewan - with its Emily Carr-esque pines waving in the breeze - is home to her; that "I don't know Toronto. I know here." And when her teacher suggests she draw a picture of something she wants to remember, I admire the spirit with which she tackles this assignment. Her hair blowing, she leads readers down the road and through the bush, showing us the things she knows. Like the "squishy spot by the beaver dam where my little sister, Kathie, catches frogs and puts them in a bucket."

In the end, she knows she will draw these things - "the trailers and the forest and the hill and the creek and the beaver dam" - and then she'll fold her drawing up "small, put it safe in my pocket and I will take my road with me. To Toronto. As soon as summer comes.

"This is what I know. Here."

This little book is not only a poignant treatment of home and stability making way for the unknown, it's a testament to the resilience of children. Laurel Croza, in her text, gives us a worthy protagonist as well as a glimpse of Canadiana most city kids will never experience. And Matt James, with his painterly illustrations, perfectly captures a rustic, transient northern lifestyle from a child's point of view. His images, created with acrylics and India ink, have a wildness to them that befits their setting but they're balanced by a solid, simple illustrative style: one that borders on the naïf - or would, if it not for a sophisticated use of colour. The publisher, wisely, accorded this book a quality paper that allows those colours to shine.

All in all, it's a book worth buying. And sharing.

Bernie Goedhar