

B books for a Growing Audience

Canadian children's books have come of age, both at home and abroad. Still relatively small in terms of revenue and size, the "Kid Lit" picture book publishing industry is booming. Compared to the situation that existed a dozen years ago, remarkable progress has been made.

What helped change events was the establishment of the Canadian Children's Book Centre in 1976 — a national non-profit organization designed to promote the reading and writing of indigenous children's literature. Kathy Lowinger, executive director of the Book Centre, says that in 1976 in Canada "there were a mere 38 English-language children's books published." Few publishers appeared to be interested in the market. Happily, this has changed and now more than 300 authors are published — both in English and French — with many selling in the 50 or more bookstores specializing in kids' titles that have sprung up across Canada in the past decade.

As for the quality of these publications, Hamish Cameron — associate editor of *Quill & Quire*, the monthly tabloid of the Canadian book trade — says "the best of what is being published here is as good as anything done elsewhere in the world." Indeed, Canadian children's book publishers are now receiving more international recognition than ever. At the 1987 Bologna Children's Book Fair, the largest annual event of its kind, the 29 Canadian publishing houses represented reaped over \$1 million

through co-publishing and translation rights with foreign publishers.

Many factors are responsible for this boom. But undoubtedly, the single most important one is the emergence of a number of small, independent publishers, including Tundra, Annick Press, Groundwood Books and Kids Can Press. These houses have developed increasingly sophisticated skills both in marketing and in the arrangement of cost-sharing deals with companies abroad.

Hussey of Toronto's Kids Can Press: "Like almost everyone involved in children's literature in the 1970s, we had to learn quickly. We knew that to survive we had to change public attitudes and come out with quality products that were competitively priced." (Kids Can Press sales have gone from a meagre \$20 000 in 1978 to over \$1 million in 1987.)

Creating top-notch books was a task that necessitated the emergence not only of new children's writers but also of

and illustrators across Canada who devote all or part of their time to bringing children's books alive and who are establishing their reputations not only at home but around the world.

Robert Munsch

Robert Munsch, for one, didn't set out to become Canada's number one selling author of children's books. It just happened that way.

After graduating from high school in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, he entered a Jesuit



Canadian children's books have come of age.

Owing to the success of the smaller publishers, many of the large, well-established Canadian firms have placed a much heavier emphasis on their own children's book divisions. Says Valerie

illustrators; children's books, after all, have to be visually appealing to the critical eye of a child. Bright attractive colours and interesting story lines that capture and hold the young reader's attention are essential.

In both fields the task has been admirably met. Today there are scores of writers

order and studied to become a priest and an anthropological missionary. On weekends he worked in an orphanage where he fell in love with "have-not" kids. After seven years of study, Munsch came to the realization that the priesthood was not for him — his weekend work was far more enjoyable.