

Fleeing a Canadian upbringing

BY PETER O'BRIEN
For The Financial Post

The phrase "huffing and puffing" appears twice in this book: once in the first sentence of the foreword as Bruce McCall absolves himself of misunderstandings readers may have of the forthcoming pages, and once within a page of the end to describe his work history prior to forsaking Canada for the "cultural combustion" of the big, brash U.S. At least the reader can't say there was no warning.

This is certainly a book of much huffing and puffing. McCall, prolific illustrator and writer for such magazines as *The New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair*, grew up in the wilds of Toronto, and Simcoe and Windsor, Ont., in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. To hear him describe it, his world could not have been a more unwelcoming place. He was a "pencil-wristed, narrow-chested runt with all the intimidating physical presence of a hamster." His father was "a selfish husband, a tyrannical father, an unsolved riddle of a man," his mother an alcoholic who withered under the "drudgery and boredom and loneliness" of married life.

A special circle of hell is carved out for the country itself. Canada's moral righteousness, irredeemable architecture, lack of nationalistic spirit and the "pathetic" way Canadians tack on "eh?" to their sentences was just too much for the brooding McCall.

Thin Ice does not claim to be a work of historical or geographical verisimilitude, but its endless, self-referential whining does tax the reader's attention and sympathies. McCall slugs the place at every turn.

Thin Ice: Coming of Age in Canada

By Bruce McCall

Random House, 249 pp., \$29.95

But the book is not really about Canada and its multitudinous faults. It is much more about one specific family and, to hear McCall tell it, one very disturbed father. Despite being the deputy minister of the Ontario Department of Travel & Publicity, and later the public relations manager of Chrysler Corp. in Windsor, McCall's father, T.C. McCall, lived in a world of emotional turmoil. His father, we are told, strangled the life and enthusiasms out of his wife and six children.

Although Canada in the middle years of this century may not have had the big lights and bravado of the U.S., and despite what McCall may think, this book could just as easily been written by someone growing up in Boston, Cleveland or San Diego. For most of us, it's family more than country that forms the person.

In McCall's developing sense of gloom and self-pity he manages to escape into a private, self-preservational world of reading, drawing and writing. He first discovered *The New Yorker* at age nine and later would retreat for hours on end to his bedroom to draw and write himself out of his oppressive surroundings.

This book, a vendetta of sorts, has obviously been festering within McCall for many years. He writes to purge the memory of his father and to better understand his stilted but forgiving affection for his mother,

As an exercise in self-therapy, it is insightful. He spends five pages describing the minutia of how he and a friend produced a stillborn magazine, *The Canadian Driver*, and goes on at great length about his fascination with sports cars. His first experience of sex, however, is described as "indescribable" and the pleasures of his first girlfriend, Jane, gets a few cursory paragraphs. Venom, resentment and anger come more easily to his pen than affection or humor. It's a strange offering from one of the most celebrated humorists of the day.

This desperate desire to make sense of one's upbringing and to expurgate private childhood demons has a rich tradition. Writers either flee from the tumult or spend the rest of their days trying to write it out, thereby hoping to understand it better. The crucible of McCall's family fashioned a talented but resentful person. This melodramatic book may not win a new audience for McCall, but it does help to explain the familial and personal disruptions that formed his character.

At the very least, McCall recognizes the harsh truth that, in his family, his own character "came as close as anyone's" to matching that of his father's. Perhaps the acorn has not fallen far from the tree.

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