

Disability and Citizenship in the Life and Fiction of Jean Little

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Jean Little was one of the first children's authors to deal extensively with issues of disability. Her views towards disability were affected by her own experience of visual impairment, but also by her family's missionary work abroad and their commitment to social justice at home. While disability historians have often stressed the development of the "social model" of disability as being key to the creation of a disability rights movement, this paper suggests that disabled activism also had much to do with Canada's emerging self-definition as a place that stressed the importance of good citizenship, equality and inclusion.

Jean Little a été une des premières auteures pour enfants à traiter abondamment de questions liées aux handicaps. Ses opinions à ce sujet ont certes été influencées par sa propre déficience visuelle, mais aussi par le travail missionnaire de sa famille à l'étranger et l'engagement de celle-ci envers la justice sociale au pays. Les historiens du handicap ont souvent mis l'accent sur la conception du « modèle social » de handicap comme élément fondateur du mouvement pour les droits des personnes handicapées, or le présent article suggère que l'activisme handicapé a aussi eu beaucoup à voir avec l'émergence de la notion canadienne de pays qui défend le civisme, l'égalité et l'inclusion.

JEAN LITTLE, born in 1932, is one of Canada's most successful children's authors and the first to deal extensively with issues of disability. Her work and life provide an interesting window into the history of disability in Canada, a topic that is beginning to attract some attention from Canadian historians.¹ As Catherine Kudlick has argued, disability history has much to teach us about power, social structures,

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1 There is already some excellent scholarship including: Geoffrey Reaume, *Remembrance of Patients Past: Patient Life at the Toronto Hospital for the Insane* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2000) and *Lyndhurst: Canada's First Rehabilitation Hospital for People with Spinal Cord Injuries 1945-1998* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007); Euclid Heric, *Journey to Independence: Blindness: The Canadian Story* (Toronto: Dundurn Group, 2005); Sylvie Pelletier and Stéphane Perreault, *L'institut Raymond-Dewar et ses institutions d'origine* (Ste-Foy, QC: Septentrion, 2010); Susanne Commend, *Les Instituts Nazareth et Louis-Braille : une histoire de cœur et de vision* (Ste-Foy, QC: Septentrion, 2001); Nic Clarke, "Opening Closed Doors and Breaching High Walls," *Histoire sociale/ Social History*, vol. 39, no. 28 (2006), pp. 467-485, and "Sacred Daemons: Exploring British Columbia Society's Perceptions of 'Mentally Deficient' Children," *BC Studies*, no. 144 (2004/2005), pp. 61-89; Veronica Strong Boag, "'Children of Adversity': Disabilities and Child Welfare in Canada from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Century,"

exclusion, and difference.² Little's fiction includes Canadian classics such as *Mine for Keeps* (1962) about a girl with cerebral palsy and *From Anna* (1972) about a girl with a visual impairment. In her stories, Little argued that relatively small accommodations could secure people's full participation in society, that pity for people with disabilities was not productive for them or for anyone else, and that people with disabilities could be independent. She provided her many readers with characters whose disability had an impact on them, but was only one aspect of a life filled with friends, family, and challenges both large and small. This was an important political intervention at a time when people with disabilities were regarded as objects of pity, and were often seen only through the lens of their disability.

The views that Little expressed in her fiction were influenced by her upbringing in a missionary family that was oriented towards social justice, her own experience of visual impairment, and the cultural currents of postwar Canada. In the years after World War II, Canada was struggling with the integration of millions of new immigrants from Europe and trying to forge a new identity as a nation. English Canadians were moving away from thinking of themselves as British subjects, instead imagining themselves as an example to the entire world of how different peoples could live together in harmony, even though the reality was far from matching this ideal.³ Little's fiction often contrasted the experiences of new immigrants to Canada with the experience of disability, and she used the discourses circulating around the integration of new immigrants in the postwar period to make similar arguments for the integration of people with disabilities.

Little wrote her books in a climate of optimism, opportunity, and activism. Canadians fought hard for social justice in the years after World War II. Between 1945 and 1975, federal and provincial governments significantly expanded social programmes: they introduced family allowances, hospital insurance, and eventually Medicare, while enlarging the support available to the unemployed and the elderly. At the same time, groups called for equality for women, an end to discrimination against racial minorities, better treatment of the mentally ill, and more opportunities for youth. Citizens were also urged to get involved through their churches, local recreational organizations, and political groups.⁴ There

Journal of Family History, vol. 32, no. 4 (2007), pp. 413-432; Jessa Chupik and David Wright, "Teaching the 'Idiot' Child in Early 20th Century Ontario," *Disability and Society*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2006), pp. 77-90; Nancy Forestell, "'And I Feel Like I'm Dying from Mining for Gold': Disability, Gender and the Mining Community," *Labour: Studies in Working Class History*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2006), pp. 77-93; Robert Storey, "'Social Assistance or a Workers Right': Workmen's Compensation and the Struggle of Injured Workers in Ontario, 1975-1985," *Studies in Political Economy*, vol. 78 (2006), pp. 67-91, and "They Have All Been Faithful Workers: Injured Workers, Truth and Worker's Compensation in Ontario, 1970-2008," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 43, no. 1 (2009), pp. 154-185.

2 Catherine Kudlick, "Disability History: Why do We Need Another Other?" *American Historical Review*, vol. 108, no. 3 (June 2003), pp. 763-79.

3 Franca Iacovetta, *Gatekeepers: Reshaping Immigrant Lives in Cold War Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 2006); José Iguartua, *The Other Quiet Revolution: National Identities in English Canada, 1945-1971* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006).

4 Shirley Tillotson, *Contributing Citizens: Modern Charitable Fundraising and the Making of the Welfare State* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008); Elise Chenier, *Strangers in Our Midst: Sexual*

were also significant efforts to improve the lives and opportunities available to children with disabilities. While these efforts were usually led by people without disabilities and were often patronizing in tone, the larger fight for social justice that animated many Canadians during these years helped to provide language for Little to argue that children with disabilities were the same as other children and deserved the same opportunities.

The defining paradigm in disability studies has been the “social model” of disability, which arose in the 1970s and is said to replace the “medical model,” which located disability in individual bodies.⁵ The social model regards impairment as residing in the environmental and social structures that produce disability – inaccessible buildings, discrimination, and policies that prevent people with disabilities from full participation in the workplace. The social model has been crucial to rethinking disability: it has drawn attention to the many ways in which people with disabilities are excluded from daily life, it has highlighted the degree to which people were unjustly defined by their medical conditions, and it has provided an important springboard for disability activism. In Canada, the development of the social model coincided with a period of constitutional reform that resulted in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which, thanks to the concerted lobbying of disability activists, included disability rights.⁶

The social model also has its critics, however. Tom Shakespeare, a leading disability scholar in the United Kingdom, argues that the social model fails to take into account the lived experience of impairment and that there are better ways of achieving greater social justice for people with disabilities. From a historical perspective, the dominance of the social model has also obscured the degree to which people with disabilities fought for inclusion and independence long before its development. In 1918, a blind veteran, Edwin Baker, co-founded the Canadian National Institute for the Blind. He and other people with visual impairment played important leadership roles within the organization. People with paraplegia founded and led the Canadian Paraplegic Association beginning in 1945.⁷ Indeed, Canadian organizations appear to have a fairly long tradition of people with disabilities taking leadership positions. These organizations were

Deviancy in Postwar Ontario (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008); Dominique Clément, *Canada's Rights Revolution: Social Movements and Social Change* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008); Gerald Boychuck, *National Health Insurance in the United States and Canada: Race, Territory, and the Roots of Difference* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2008); Margaret Little, “No Car, No Radio, No Liquor Permit”: *The Moral Regulation of Single Mothers in Ontario, 1920-1997* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1998).

5 Tom Shakespeare, *Disability Rights and Wrongs* (London: Routledge, 2006). Also see Tom Shakespeare and Nicholas Watson, “The Social Model: An Outdated Ideology,” *Research in Social Science and Disability*, vol. 2 (2002), pp. 9-28.

6 Yvonne Peters, “From Charity to Equality: Canadians with Disabilities Take Their Rightful Place in Canada's Constitution” in Deborah Stienstra and Aileen Wight-Felske, eds., *Making Equality: History of Advocacy and Persons with Disabilities in Canada* (Concord: Captus Press, 2003), pp. 119-136.

7 Herie, *Journey to Independence*; Mary Tremblay, “Lieutenant John Counsel and the Development of Medical Rehabilitation and Disability Policy in Canada” in David Gerber, ed., *Disabled Veterans in History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2000), pp. 322-346; Reaume, *Lyndhurst*.

also quite comfortable in cooperating with medical professionals. Perhaps this is why, as Michael Prince and others have pointed out, the disability rights movement in Canada has been less confrontational (but also more conservative) than its American counterpart.⁸ While the 1970s saw significant growth in disability activism, including the creation of a number of new groups that took a “social model” approach, the idea that the “social model” replaced the “medical model” obscures the continuities across generations of disability activists. It may be more helpful to see the emergence of disability activism as part of a constellation of social movements in postwar Canada that stressed equality and inclusion, including feminism, anti-racism, and the gay and lesbian rights movement.

Little was just one of many voices for people with disabilities in Canada. She was not an activist: she did not belong to any organization. Indeed, she was loath to associate with other blind people until she was well into her forties, out of fear that her disability would come to define her.⁹ She did, however, teach children with disabilities for many years and wrote about them extensively. She provided generations of Canadian children and parents with a way to talk about disability through stories. As her fan letters show, regardless of whether or not they had disabilities, children empathized with her characters and began thinking about disability in new ways. She thus played an important role in shaping attitudes towards disability in Canada.

Surprisingly, Little has received little attention from scholars of Canadian children’s literature. In her early decades as a fiction writer, Little was often dismissed as a writer of “problem fiction” – didactic books that wore their morals on their sleeves and failed to provide children with sufficient imaginative scope. Sheila Egoff, the author of the first survey of children’s literature in Canada, *The Republic of Childhood*, and the leading player in the field, condemned Little’s books for their “contrived situations, quick and easy solutions and the intimation that problems of magnitude could be solved completely.”¹⁰ Of course, she also described the whole of Canadian children’s literature as “distinctly second-rate.”¹¹

Girls’ and Boys’ House, the children’s wing of the Toronto Public Library, initially refused to stock Little’s books.¹² This has changed: Elizabeth Waterston, best known for her work on L. M. Montgomery and the author of *Children’s Literature in Canada*, praises Little’s work for its realistic portrayal of social and interpersonal problems.¹³ Recently, Little received attention for being one

8 Michael Prince, *Disability Politics and Policy in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), p. 184. Sally Chivers and Aldred Neufeld agree that the Canadian disability movement has sought to achieve change through negotiation and consensus. See Sally Chivers, “Barrier by Barrier: The Canadian Disability Rights Movement and the Fight for Equal Rights” in Miriam Smith, ed., *Group Politics and Social Movements in Canada* (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2008), pp. 307-328; Aldred H. Neufeldt, “Growth and Evolution of Disability Activism in Canada” in Stienstra and Wight-Felske eds., *Making Equality*, pp. 11-32.

9 Jean Little, *Stars Come Out Within* (Toronto: Puffin Books, 1992), p. 131.

10 Sheila Egoff, *The Republic of Childhood* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 186-187.

11 Gail Edwards and Judith Saltman, *Picturing Canada: A History of Canadian Children’s Illustrated Books and Publishing* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), p. 65.

12 University of Guelph Archives, Jean Little Collection [hereafter JLC], File XR1, MS A1715038.

13 Elizabeth Waterston, *Children’s Literature in Canada* (New York: Twayne, 1992).

of the first to write about multicultural Canada.¹⁴ Her books have won numerous awards, including the Governor General's Literary Award for Children's Fiction (*Listen for the Singing*, 1977), and she received the prestigious Vicky Metcalf award in 1974 for an inspirational body of work. Girls' and Boys' House now displays the wastepaper basket that Little, like her character Anna, made during her first year of Sight Saving classes in Toronto. Part of the problem may be that her books reached an international audience and have not been perceived as particularly Canadian. Many of her early novels, including *Mine for Keeps*, did not indicate that they took place in Canada. Also, her first novels were published well before Canadian children's literature exploded in popularity in the early 1970s, meaning that she fits uneasily into narratives that stress how the "new nationalism" of the 1970s and the concurrent growth of small presses produced, for the first time, a worthwhile body of children's literature in Canada.¹⁵ Finally, Canadian children's literature is not a large field of study, and this may be the primary reason why Little has not received greater attention.

Jean Little: Love, Medicine, and Missionaries

Little was born in 1932, the second of four children. Her parents were both missionary doctors in Taiwan. While everyone is shaped by his or her parents, Little was perhaps more influenced than most – her father infused her with the confidence to be a writer, and her mother provided her closest emotional bond; they shared a home until her mother's death in 1991. Her father, Llewellyn, was born in Guelph in 1898, served in the First World War, and then completed medical school at the University of Toronto in 1926, after spending some time training for the ministry.¹⁶ Her mother, Flora Little, was born in Taiwan in 1902 to missionary parents. Taiwanese Presbyterians today remember Flora's father, William Gauld, for working in close consultation with the Taiwanese people and for having a strong commitment to democracy. His biographer described him as empowering Taiwanese Christians to take leadership positions in the church and as pushing his fellow missionaries to consult Taiwanese Christians whenever new projects were under consideration.¹⁷ In a book about her mother's childhood, Little describes her grandfather Gauld as feeling uneasy when churchgoers in Canada described him "saving the heathens."¹⁸ Flora Gauld went to high

14 Miriam Verena Richter, *Creating the National Mosaic: Multiculturalism in Canadian Children's Literature from 1950 to 1994* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011).

15 *Ibid.*; Edwards and Saltman, *Picturing Canada*.

16 "Prominent Guelph Physician Dies Suddenly," *Guelph Mercury*, February 27, 1953, p. 1; John Llewellyn Little, "Attestation Paper," http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/ccf/001042-119.01-c.php?id_nbr=532125&PHPSESSID=votm2obhh5vmb9jti34i48ct25, retrieved December 9, 2010; "Dr. J. Llew Little," *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, vol. 68 (May 1953), p. 512.

17 Hugh MacMillan, *Builder Abroad: William Gauld of Formosa* (English and Canadian Presbyterians in Formosa, 1956).

18 "The Beauty of Taiwan Theological College and Seminary," <http://www.taitheo.org.tw/front/bin/ptdetail.phtml?Part=news001&Rcg=1>, retrieved December 10, 2010; Jean Little, *His Banner Over Me* (Toronto: Viking, 1995), p. 75.

school in Regina, where she lived with relatives while her parents served in Taiwan. She started at the University of Toronto at 16 years of age, graduating with a medical degree at the age of 21. She interned at Women's College Hospital and then returned to Taiwan. In 1927 she married Llew Little, and they practised medicine at a mission of the United Church of Canada in Matheson, Ontario, for two years before going to Taiwan together, where they served as missionaries for the Presbyterian Church of England and later for the Canadian Presbyterian Church.¹⁹ After their return to Guelph in 1940, they opened a medical practice together. Llew Little enlisted in the Canadian Navy in 1942 and eventually set up a division of Medical Intelligence for the three armed services. After the war, he became executive director of the National Cancer Institute of Canada for a short time before returning home to practise in Guelph.

Llew Little dreamt of being a writer himself and encouraged Jean in her poetry and writing. When she was 16, he arranged to have her poems bound into a book, which he then gave as a Christmas gift to their wide circle of friends.²⁰ Even when Jean's father was away during the war or working in Ottawa, he was still very much a part of their family. Indeed, he was an exceptionally warm correspondent. In letter to Jean away at camp, he wrote, "I received your lovely, long letter on Thursday. It was almost as good as having you with us yourself." In another, written during her first term away at university, he enthused: "Mail to thee, blithe spirit; bird thou never wert! No doubt you feel anything like a blithe spirit on a gray day like this but bubbling from the inner depths comes the irrepressible Jean and therein lies your loveliness. When everyone else is down – then you come along and cheer them up."²¹ Her mother also made no secret of her love. Even though she had a busy medical practice and a hectic volunteer schedule, Little remembers that the children could always knock on her office door if they needed her. They also had secret ways of expressing affection. Little recalls that, in a group of adults, she could squeeze her mother's hand four times, meaning: "Do you love me?" Her mother would squeeze back three times, "Yes, I do."²²

Jean Little was born with scarred corneas, and her vision was limited. Her parents were determined that her disability should not preclude her from the normal activities of childhood. When Jean was young and the family was still in Taiwan, her mother taught her to read, using large-print books ordered from Canada. Her parents enrolled her in gymnastics and horseback riding, and she went to a regular school. They made so little of her disability, in fact, that Little apparently did not realize that her vision was different from others until she was five years old. She opens her autobiography, *Little by Little*, with the story of another girl in the missionary compound telling Jean that Jean could not climb

19 Hamish Ion, *The Cross and the Rising Sun: The British Protestant Missionary Movement in Japan, Korea and Taiwan* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid University Press, 1993). Ion makes no mentions of the Littles, but he does describe the British and Canadian Presbyterian missions in some detail.

20 JLC, File XR1, MS A715035.

21 JLC, File XR1, MS A71503, first letter, no date; second letter November 28, 1951.

22 Interview with Jean Little, December 14, 2010.

the banyan tree because she had bad eyes. Little was outraged, but something rang true. Little recalled that that she had to hold books very close, almost to her nose, to see the pictures; when her father had tried to show them Taiwan on the globe, it had taken her much longer to see it than her siblings. She remembered that her younger brother Hugh could recognize her Aunt Gretta from far away, while she had to wait until she heard her voice or saw how she moved. Even so, she yelled back, "I do not have Bad Eyes. . . . My mother never said so and my mother is a doctor so she'd know." Eventually Jean ran home to ask her mother, who confirmed that she did have trouble seeing, but she could climb the tree.²³

The family moved back to Ontario from Taiwan in 1939, in large part because of the impending war, but also because Little's teacher had recommended that she be enrolled in a special class for the visually impaired. When they landed in Toronto, Little started Grade 2 in a "Sight Saving" class at her neighbourhood school in the Beaches and later attended a similar class in the Annex. "Sight Saving" classes were first developed in the United States in the 1910s to serve students with significant visual impairment, in order to reduce their eyestrain and maintain their existing vision, yet allow them to learn the same things as sighted students.²⁴ Similar classes began in Toronto in 1920 and slowly spread across the country.²⁵ According to her autobiography, Little loved the class. The teacher was kind, and the class enabled her to learn more effectively. The blackboard was green instead of black. The thick yellow chalk was easier to see than white chalk. There was a big-print dictionary, and the lids of the desk could be tilted upwards to allow students to keep the books closer to their faces. Best of all, her classmates had the same challenges she did. She was no longer singled out as the student who was clumsy, the student who got black smudges on her face from holding books too closely, the student who was cross-eyed.²⁶

A year later, her parents moved to Guelph, where there were no Sight Saving classes. Her eye doctor recommended that she go to the School for the Blind in Brantford, Ontario, but her teacher in Toronto thought that she should enrol in a regular Grade 4 class instead. She believed that a regular classroom would help Little adapt to living in a sighted world at a younger age. It did, but Little continued to struggle with loneliness and exclusion. She was bullied so badly her first year in Guelph that she started chewing on her tongue and her hair fell out.²⁷ She found solace in poetry and fiction, and increasingly in writing it herself. In high school, she made friends and joined the Canadian Girls in Training (CGIT), but she still felt like an outsider. (The Christian CGIT stressed mutual cooperation, unlike the more competitive Girl Guides movement.²⁸) She took an extra

23 Jean Little, *Little by Little: A Writer's Education* (Markham, ON: Penguin Books, 1987).

24 R. B. Irwin, "Sight Saving Classes in Public Schools," *Harvard Bulletin in Education*, vol. 7 (1920), pp. 1-40.

25 F. A. Aylesworth, "Definitions of Blindness and Standards for Sight-Saving Classes," *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, vol. 54 (June 1939), p. 565.

26 Little, *Little by Little*, pp. 60-61.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 91.

28 Lucille Marr, "Church Teen Clubs, Feminized Organizations: Tuxis Boys, Trail Rangers and Canadian Girls in Training," *Historical Studies in Education*, vol. 3, no. 2 (1991), pp. 249-267; Margaret Prang, "'The Girl

year to complete high school, partly because of her struggles with math, but was determined to finish and to go to university. She enrolled at Victoria College, University of Toronto. In some respects, university was easier: she studied literature, which she loved, and teachers lectured rather than writing on the board. She completed her degree in four years. She also wrote her first novel, about a family with a daughter who had a mental disability. McClelland and Stewart rejected it, but Jack McClelland, known for his enthusiastic promotion of Canadian authors, encouraged her to keep writing.²⁹

When Little graduated in 1955, she learned that the Rotary Crippled Children's Centre wanted to start a class in Guelph. She had already spent three summers working at the Woodenden Crippled Children's Camp, a camp for children with disabilities, and the Rotarians said that they would hire her as a teacher if she took a two-week course at McGill University on working with children with motor handicaps.³⁰ She took this course and continued her education that summer in Salt Lake City with Ellen Thiel, who taught the McGill course. That fall, she began teaching in Guelph. She continued her relationship with Ellen Thiel, who taught at the University of Utah, and completed her teacher training there in 1958. That summer, she finished the first draft of *Mine for Keeps* before returning home to Guelph to teach at the Beachwood Crippled Children's Centre. She spent the next two years teaching at the Beechwood School and working on revisions. Before *Mine for Keeps* was published, she spent a year teaching a demonstration class for developmentally delayed students at Florida State University. She also helped Thiel develop instructional materials for children with learning difficulties.³¹ Her education put her at the leading edge of a new movement; by the late 1950s, there was significant growth in the number of children being described as having special needs, and more classrooms were specifically devoted to their educational requirements. All this, however, was relatively new. The term "learning disability" was not even invented until 1963, by which time Little had abandoned teaching for a full-time writing career.³²

Little's ideas about disability were undoubtedly affected by her training in Salt Lake City and Tallahassee, but they were also a natural outgrowth of her family's commitment to social justice and liberal Christianity. The United Church is diverse, but the church leadership is well known for its liberal positions: it was the first major denomination in Canada to ordain women in 1936,

God Would Have Me Be': The Canadian Girls in Training, 1915-1939," *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 66, no. 2 (1985), pp. 154-184.

29 James King, *Jack: A Life with Writers: The Story of Jack McClelland* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 1999).

30 Camp Woodeden, near London, Ontario, opened in 1946 and was funded by the Easter Seals Campaign. It was the first residential treatment for children with cerebral palsy in Canada (Easter Seals website, "About Us: History," <http://www.easterseals.org/about/?load=history>, retrieved December 2, 2010).

31 Little, *Little by Little*, pp. 221-233; JLC, File XR1, MS A1715038, "Children's Book Award Winner is Summer Consultant at FSU," *Tallahassee Democrat*, August 8, 1962.

32 Robert L. Osgood, *The History of Special Education: A Struggle for Equality in American Public Schools* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008); Margaret A. Winzer, *The History of Special Education: From Isolation to Integration* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 1993).

and in 1988 it began ordaining gay men and women.³³ The United Church also played an important role in the fight for human rights in Canada in the 1940s and 1950s; it protested the relocation of the Japanese in British Columbia during World War II and helped many Japanese resettle in Ontario when they were banned from returning to British Columbia.³⁴ Chalmers United Church, which Little and her family attended, strongly supported missionary activities abroad and social service work at home. The United Church also stressed the importance of family and community. Little's parents were committed to service, both within the church and to the larger community. Flora Little spent two years as chair of the Wellington County School Board; she also served on the board of the nursing school and the Elliot (a not-for-profit old-age home in Guelph) and as an elder in the United Church. She was active in the Children's Aid Society and the Pastoral Visitations Board.³⁵ She won an award as Guelph's volunteer of the year in 1949 and was later honoured by the Ontario Medical Association for her extensive community service.³⁶ Llew Little served as an alderman and was president of the Rotary Club. He also led a Sunday School group and was involved in the liberal and civically oriented Student Christian Movement at the Ontario Agricultural College.³⁷

Like many former missionaries, her parents were particularly interested in the problems of so-called "new Canadians." When they moved to a large home in Guelph after the war, a number of recent immigrants lived on their third floor and worked for their family for a short period of time before moving on to better employment. This was undoubtedly convenient for a busy family who had enough money to employ household help, but Little remembers it as part of her parents' commitment to helping new Canadians. Some may have genuinely appreciated the assistance. When her father passed away, a "Harry Hnatuik" wrote the *Guelph Mercury* to say, "So many of my friends and I are sorry that such a good man as Dr. Little is gone. He treated so many families of

33 That said, few women were ordained before the 1960s. See Valerie Korinek, "No Women Need Apply: The Ordination of Women in the United Church, 1918-1965," *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 74, no. 4 (December 1993), pp. 473-510.

34 Ross Lambertson, *Repression and Resistance: Canadian Human Rights Activists, 1930-1960* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005); Stephanie Bangarth, "Religious Organizations and the 'Relocation' of Persons of Japanese Ancestry in North America," *American Review of Canadian Studies*, vol. 85, no. 2 (2004), pp. 511-540; David Dowe, "The Protestant Churches and the Resettlement of Japanese Canadians in Ontario," *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, vol. 39, no. 1-2 (2007), pp. 193-230.

35 "Dr. Little Honoured at Party," *Guelph Mercury*, June 25, 1973, p.3; "Friends Pay Honor to Dr. Little as She Retires from Medicine," *Guelph Mercury*, July 18, 1973, p.8; Don Sutton, "Dr Flora Little Spent Her Life Helping Others," *Guelph Mercury*, July 16, 1991, p. 2. See also Helen Lai, "Remembering Margaret Mellis Gauld, a Missionary to Taiwan," <http://www.laijohn.com/works/english-wu.pdf>, retrieved December 6, 2010; "Prominent Guelph Physician Dies Suddenly," *Guelph Mercury*, February 27, 1953, p. 1.

36 JLC, File XRI, MS A715137, "City Doctor Recipient of Award," *Guelph Mercury*, n.d.

37 JLC, File XRI, MS A715137, Funeral Program for Llew Little in "Miscellaneous Family Related Items." For more on the Student Christian Movement, see Catherine Gidney, *A Long Eclipse: The Liberal Protestant Establishment and the Canadian University, 1920-1970* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004).

new Canadians and was always so kind and generous.”³⁸ Although they were not “new Canadians,” one of the first families to stay with the Littles was a Japanese family being “resettled” in Ontario when the war ended. Little recalls that, in her house, certain words like “Jap” or “DP” were not allowed. “It was drilled into us,” she said, “that these were people deserving our respect.”³⁹

Historians have deservedly criticized the missionary enterprise for racism, cultural insensitivity, and its close relationship with colonialism. However, many missionaries also had a deep commitment to social justice, including the eradication of racism.⁴⁰ Llew and Flora Little’s left-leaning politics and their desire to improve conditions for new Canadians were a fairly common path for their generation of missionaries. The Littles both attended the University of Toronto, where they were likely influenced by the new biblical criticism popular on campus at the time. Another important force on campus was the Student Christian Movement, which was uneasy about missionary work, seeing the links between capitalist/colonialist exploitation and the missionary enterprise. Alwyn Austin, who has written the most comprehensive examination of Canadian missionaries to China, argues that many medical missionaries of the interwar years were far more interested in providing medical care than they were in obtaining converts.⁴¹

Little has not been as active in community service as her parents or as her sister Pat De Vries, who has continued the family commitment to social justice through her work at the Chalmers Community Service Centre in Guelph. Even so, she ran a CGIT group for girls at the church and organized a CGIT summer camp.⁴² She developed course materials, put on plays, and wrote poems for her CGIT girls and fellow leaders. She also looked after aging relatives who lived with the Little family, including her Aunt Gretta and her Great-Aunt Jen. Little also cared for her mother when she was dying of leukemia.⁴³ In her seventies, Little co-parented Pat’s two grandchildren.⁴⁴ Within the extended Little family, there appears to have been little shame about needing help and a great willingness to give it. While Little stressed that people with disabilities should be independent, she saw no shame in families or friends depending on each other. Little disdained pity, but she did not see loving assistance as interfering with her independence. Her books portray families and friends helping each other; the plots make clear that those who give obtain just as much joy and pleasure as those who receive.

38 JLC, File XR1, MS A715137, Obituary for Llew Little.

39 Interview with Jean Little, December 14, 2010.

40 A good overview of the Canadian historiography can be found in Alwyn Austin and Jamic S. Scott, *Canadian Missionaries, Indigenous Peoples: Representing Religion at Home and Abroad* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

41 Alwyn Austin, *Saving China: Canadian Missionaries in the Middle Kingdom, 1888-1959* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986).

42 JLC, File XR1, MSA715046, “Guelph Girl Born Blind; Today, a Renowned Author,” *Guelph Mercury*, April 10, 1965, and Bonnie Greenc, “The Ring of Truth,” *The Observer*, August 1979.

43 Jean Little, *I Gave My Mom a Castle* (Victoria: Orca Book Publishers, 2003), p. 6.

44 Pat’s daughter, Sarah de Vries, was one of the many women killed by Robert Picton in Vancouver. Her sister has written a thoughtful account of Sarah’s adoption, her place in the family, and her struggles with drug abuse. See Maggie de Vries, *Missing Sarah: A Vancouver Woman Remembers Her Missing Sister* (Toronto: Penguin, 2003).

Most of Jean Little's books are not about disability. Two of her most successful, *Look Through My Window* and *Kate*, focus on a half-Jewish protagonist who is trying to figure out her identity. Another award-winning book, *Mama's Going to Buy You a Mockingbird*, features a boy coping with the death of his father. Above all, Little portrays characters who feel like outsiders. In some respects, to read Jean Little entirely through the lens of disability seems to perpetuate the injustice of seeing disability as a person's defining characteristic. The books that do deal with disability are important, however, as they ushered in a new approach to disability in children's fiction.⁴⁵ There was, of course, a long tradition of children's fiction, from *My Secret Garden* to *Heidi*, that included characters with disabilities, but often the characters miraculously recovered from their illnesses. Alternatively, disability was used in a didactic fashion to teach children that they should be patient and cheerful and should think of others more than themselves.⁴⁶ By the late 1960s and early 1970s, more writers were beginning to take a more realistic, less didactic approach. Even so, quality books dealing with the subject were rare.

Little's own life and her experiences with her pupils during her time teaching at the Crippled Children's Centre in the 1950s and early 1960s informed her desire to create new narratives that featured more realistic and compassionate depictions of childhood disability. As Little wrote in her autobiography:

My students loved Anne Shirley of *Green Gables*, Pooh and Piglet, Henry Hugging of *Klickitat Street*, Heidi, and Dorothy and Toto of *Oz*. Yet I felt strongly that somewhere among this throng of beloved heroes and heroines there should be at least one thoroughly real child who had to use crutches or was in a wheelchair like my kids. I had found a few disabled fictional children: Jimmy Bean in *Pollyanna*, Clara in *Heidi*, Prince Dolor in *The Little Lame Prince*, invalidish Carol Bird in *The Bird's Christmas Carol*. But my class and I had discovered that in almost every case, boys and girls who started out crippled invariably ended up dying like Beth in *Little Women* or being cured miraculously like Colin Craven in *The Secret Garden*. The kids were puzzled by these outcomes. I thought them insulting. Why couldn't any of these authors imagine a happy ending that was honest? Did they, deep down, believe that you could not remain disabled and have a full, joyful life? If that was it, they were crazy. *Mine for Keeps*, with Sally still on crutches at the finish, was my answer to their lack of imagination.⁴⁷

45 Interview with Jean Little, December 14, 2010. She said that her best-selling books have been *From Anna*, *Mine for Keeps*, and *Mama's Going to Buy You a Mockingbird*.

46 Lois Keith, *Take Up Thy Bed and Walk* (New York: Routledge, 2001). The number of books that portrayed a child with a disability increased rapidly in the late 1960s and early 1970s. See Barbara H. Basin and Karen H. Harris, *Notes from a Different Drummer: A Guide to Juvenile Fiction Portraying the Handicapped* (New York and London: R. R. Bowker Company, 1977), pp. 73-74. Scholars of children's literature today continue to complain that children with disabilities are often stereotyped or absent. See Emiliano Ayala, "'Poor Little Things and 'Brave Little Souls': The Portrayal of Individuals with Disabilities in Children's Literature," *Reading Research and Instruction*, vol. 39, no. 1 (1999), pp. 103-117.

47 Little, *Stars Come Out Within*, pp. 8-9.

Demeaning portrayals of people with disabilities were not just an element of children's fiction. In the years after World War II, fundraising groups like the March of Dimes and the Rotary's Easter Seals launched campaigns that sought to improve facilities for people with polio and cerebral palsy. Every year, a representative "Timmy" or "Tammy" would be chosen to appear on television and in public events to pull the heartstrings of the Canadian public.⁴⁸ These groups portrayed disability as a personal or familial tragedy to be overcome with courage and resilience. There was little emphasis on the rights of people with disabilities, on community integration, on the social and environmental conditions that often created disability, or on the prejudice faced by people with disabilities. By contrast, Little emphasized that children with disabilities could live normal lives, that they could make friends with both disabled and non-disabled peers, and that they could make valuable contributions to their friends and families. Her books provided an important vision of what was possible for people with disabilities and how a more equitable society could function.

Mine for Keeps

Little was still a young teacher when she submitted *Mine for Keeps* for the Little, Brown and Company's Children's Book Award. This prestigious award included cash and publication; it was only awarded six times in the 24 years it was offered.⁴⁹ Winning this award allowed Little to give up teaching for a full-time writing career. *Mine for Keeps* was chosen as Notable Children's Book of 1962 by the Children's Services Division of the American Library Association, and it was also published in England, Japan, Denmark, and the Netherlands. Thomas Nelson and Sons included an excerpt from it for the Sixth Reader in the Young Canada Readers Series, while Houghton Mifflin included an excerpt in its 6th grade text.⁵⁰ It is still in print today; in the late 1980s and early 1990s when it was distributed by Scholastic Canada, it sold almost 40,000 copies.⁵¹

Mine for Keeps tells the story of Sally Copeland, a young girl with cerebral palsy. Sally is returning home to stay permanently with her family after spending five years in the Allendale School for Crippled Children. The book focuses on her struggle to make friends and achieve independence. Nearly all of Jean Little's books tell the story of lonely little girls who want to make friends, regardless of whether or not they have disabilities. Sally's quest to make friends and to establish a place for herself within her family is far more central to this story than her disability. Even so, disability plays an important role. Sally's first challenge when she returns home is to dress herself. At school, there were helpers to deal with difficult buttons and zippers, but, on her first morning home, her mother leaves her to dress all alone. Lonely and unsure of herself, Sally begins to cry. When

48 Neufeldt, "Growth and Evolution," pp. 11-32.

49 Little, Brown Children's Book Award, http://www.bookcentre.ca/awards/little_brown_childrens_book_award, retrieved October 2, 2011.

50 JLC, File XR1, MS A1715038.

51 JLC, File XR1, MS A715175.

her mother comes in, she wails: "Don't you know I can't do it all by myself."⁵² Her mother asks her to look at the clothes. Sally finds that the skirt has an elastic waist; the top has a nice wide neck and no buttons. Even the underwear has extra large holes for her legs, making it possible for her to dress herself.

On her first day of school, Sally meets Libby, a skinny, freckled girl with a wide smile and kind heart. Libby introduces her to recent Dutch immigrant Elsje Jameson, her "best friend." That morning, Sally's teacher, Mr. Mackenzie, gives an oral math test. Because of her shaky hands, it takes Sally too long to write down the answers. She is frustrated and fearful that she is terribly behind in math, even though she knows the answers. Her teacher has the students mark their own work. Embarrassed by the fact that she had answered very few of the questions, Sally writes down the answers and marks them as correct. Elsje is sitting close by and sees what is happening. When class is dismissed, Elsje announces, "You can play with her if you want to, but I will not. I am not going to be friends with her, she lies!"⁵³

Sally is devastated, but her teacher takes her aside after school and explains that he should have realized that the math test would be difficult for her. He promises that, in future, she will be able to number her page ahead of time, so that all she needs to do is write the answers. He also explains that Elsje had been even more frightened than Sally on her first day of school. She had only been in Canada for six weeks, and her brother, Pieter, had become very ill soon after their arrival to Canada, which meant that her parents were more focused on him than on her. Fortunately, Libby, the kind-hearted redhead, had made the transition easier. Still uncertain, Elsje knew that Libby would reach out to anyone in need and feared that Sally's arrival would jeopardize her own status as Libby's best friend.

Her teacher's words help Sally to understand Elsje's reaction, but she continues to feel very alone. She thinks a lot about Pieter, Elsje's brother, who has just begun school again. He is despised and teased by his classmates, including Sally's brother, Kent. Sally's world begins to change on Halloween, when Libby and Elsje ring her doorbell. Sally is at home giving out candy because, unlike her brother and sister, she has no one with whom to go trick-or-treating. It is Elsje's first time trick-or-treating; she had stayed home her first year in Canada. She softens towards Sally and invites her to come with them.

Elsje is described as being more grown up than the other girls. She is also more rigid and more disciplined. While this betrays a certain amount of stereotyping about Germanic peoples, Little does not regard this negatively. It comes up most strongly when the girls deal with the training of their dogs. Sally was given a dog upon her return home, but the dog, Susie, is young and a little mischievous. By contrast, Elsje's dog, Willem, comes when he is called, stays put when he is told, and does not beg for food. Sally explains that she needs to chase Susie when she wants to brush her or give her vitamin drops. Elsje pronounces, "That

52 Jean Little, *Mine for Keeps* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1962), p. 18.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

is very bad. You must not do that – chase her. Make her come to you.”⁵⁴ Sally realizes that improving Susie’s behaviour would be better for her, too. Susie is her dog, and Sally wants to take care of her, but her parents, despite encouraging her independence in most things, decide that Sally’s older sister Melinda should walk Susie so that Sally does not trip and fall. Sally learns from Elsje that, if she trained Susie better, than she could be the one who took Susie for walks. Elsje establishes a “Pooch Academy” to help Sally and some of the other children in their neighbourhood train their dogs.

It is no accident that Elsje is a recent immigrant to Canada. To construct her lessons on how people with disabilities should be treated and how they should behave, Little draws on the models of citizenship that were circulating in postwar Canada. Immigrants were pouring into the country in the years after World War II. As Franca Iacovetta shows in *Gatekeepers*, government bureaucrats, social workers, and volunteers were concerned to ensure that only the most desirable gained entry and that, once in Canada, people adjusted quickly to so-called Canadian values. (As a side note, part of the gatekeeping involved keeping out immigrants with disabilities.) The models of citizenship promoted by many gatekeepers also asked established Canadians to welcome these new Canadians and to help them adjust. They also asked established Canadians to learn something from the new Canadians, even if this was often trivialized and folkloric such as sharing different foodways.

In *Mine for Keeps*, Elsje and Sal are portrayed as facing similar challenges. They are lonely, and both stand out as different, but they also have much to offer their classmates and their families. Elsje teaches Sal how to train her dog. In turn, Sal shows Elsje’s brother Pieter, who has been ill with rheumatic fever and is having trouble adjusting to the fact that he can no longer run or play football, that there is still so much he can do. As it turns out, Pieter, not Elsje, is actually the expert dog-trainer. Sick, isolated, and lonely, he has given up on everything, including looking after his dog. Elsje believes that, if Sal trains Susie, she will show Pieter that he could return to training animals and fulfil his dream of becoming a veterinarian or circus trainer. At the end of the book, Elsje gets measles and, to make her feel better, the members of the “Pooch Academy” decide to honour her with a St. Nicholas Day Feast. This decision is indicative of Little’s view of citizenship as well. The children find out what Elsje’s family would have done in Holland and try to replicate it for them here; it is an important lesson in cultural sensitivity. At the celebration, their teacher asks if Elsje can get Willem to do tricks. There is silence. Willem is really Pieter’s dog, and Pieter is the one who trained him. Sally finally speaks up and explains the situation, and Pieter agrees to show them some tricks. In short, Sally ultimately brings Pieter out of his shell, thereby showing her importance in the community. Similarly, Elsje, with her stricter Dutch ways, teaches all of the students how to train their dogs. In both cases the lesson is clear: new immigrants and people with disabilities will face challenges, but they can also make important contributions. Sally has

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

cerebral palsy; she will always have cerebral palsy, but she can do more than she thinks she can do, from dressing herself to making friends, training dogs, and giving to others.

Shockingly, the initial translation of the Japanese edition was entitled “Goodbye, My Crutch” and has Sal recover from her cerebral palsy. Appalled, Little complained to the translator. The translator apologized, saying that she did not know that children rarely recovered from cerebral palsy and agreed to change the ending in subsequent versions of the books.⁵⁵ As a result of this conflict, Little, Brown and Company ended its relationship with this Japanese publisher, although the publisher retained its rights to *Mine for Keeps*.⁵⁶ The second Japanese edition returned to the original ending, but kept the title “Goodbye, My Crutch,” claiming that *Mine for Keeps* was too difficult to translate into Japanese. The translator added an explanation to the forward saying, “Though the original title of this book is ‘Mine for Keeps’ I have changed it to ‘Goodbye, My crutch’ in the hope that, while in fact she will not be able to depart from her crutch, the heroine will be able to stand independently in her heart.”⁵⁷ The conflict suggests how groundbreaking Little’s book was in the world of children’s fiction: the idea of a happy ending without recovery seemed inconceivable to readers in other countries, although apparently acceptable in a Canada that was priding itself on toleration and inclusion.

From Anna

Little followed *Mine for Keeps* with *Home From Far* (1965) about a family that adopts two foster children after the death of one of their other children in a car accident. *Spring Begins in March* (1966) revisits the Copeland family from *Mine for Keeps* and focuses on Sal’s younger sister, Meg, who is struggling in school. *Take Wing* (1968) deals with developmental delays, while *One to Grow On* (1969) is about a child who tells lies. *When the Pie Was Opened* (1968) is poetry, while *Kate* (1970), as previously mentioned, is about a girl struggling with her identity.⁵⁸ Then, in 1972, Little published *From Anna*. The original manuscript was received less than enthusiastically by Little’s long-time publisher, Little, Brown and Company, and prompted her move to Harper and Row. The most explicitly autobiographical of all of Little’s novels, it tells the story of nine-year old Anna Solden and her adjustment to living in Canada. Incidentally, Little reports that it is her favourite novel, not because it is autobiographical, but because she sees it as a retelling of one of her most beloved books, *The Secret Garden*.⁵⁹ The novel begins in Germany, where Anna, the youngest of five children, is physically

55 JLC, File XR1, MS A715039, Letter from Shigeru Shiraki to Jean Little, March 15, 1965.

56 JLC, File XR1, MS A715039, Letter from Helen Jones to Jean Little, February 16, 1965.

57 JLC, File XR1, MS A715039, Letter from Toshio Ishimori to Jean Little, May 19, 1965.

58 Jean Little, *Home from Far* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1965); *Spring Begins in March* (Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1966); *Take Wing* (Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1968); *One to Grow On* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1969); *When the Pie Was Opened* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1968); *Look Through My Window* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1970).

59 Interview with Jean Little, December 14, 2010.

awkward and ill at ease; even her wispy brown hair will not stay in braids. She is having trouble learning to read; despite her mother's many efforts to teach her, her sewing is terrible. She cannot catch a ball, she cannot skip, and she often trips on bumps in the pavement. Her one solace is her doting father, who also loves poetry.⁶⁰

The family decides to leave Germany after the Jewish father of one of their classmates disappears. Upon their arrival in Toronto, all of the children need to undergo medical examinations in preparation for school. The kind Dr. Franz Schumacher realizes that Anna does not see very well. She is fitted for glasses, but even with the glasses, he says, she will never have normal vision and will have to attend a special Sight Saving class. The class opens a new world for Anna – for the first time she is praised for what she can do, instead of being scolded for what she cannot. The classroom is specially equipped for her needs: the pencils are large, the desks lift upwards, and the chalkboards are green, much like Little's classroom in Toronto. Her classmates have the same struggles as she has, and they are kind and understanding. On the second day, Anna gets lost looking for her classroom in the morning. Her teacher, Miss Williams, sends out another student, Isabel, to find her. While directing her to the classroom, Isabel explains that she had gotten lost six times her first week. When they arrive, the rest of the students commiserate, telling her stories of how they had also gotten lost. Anna concludes that, in Canada, "maybe it is all right to make mistakes."⁶¹ Over the next few months, Anna blossoms at school, deepens her friendships with the other pupils, and becomes more confident in English. She is unable to come out of her shell at home, however, and her siblings continue to regard her as awkward and prickly.

The family is struggling financially in their new home, and Anna and her siblings realize that it will be difficult for her family to have a Christmas like the ones that they enjoyed in Germany. Instead of asking their parents for money to buy presents, which is what they had done in the past, the children decide that they will either make their parents presents or earn the money themselves. Her older siblings agree that this will be impossible for Anna, since she is no good at making things, but that it does not matter because she is only nine. Anna is angry and heartbroken. At school, her fellow pupils and Miss Williams pick up on her despair. When she finally confesses her trouble, they all sympathize: one student complains about trying to knit but failing; another had tried a paper route, but could not see the numbers on the houses and so had to give it up. Miss Williams comes up with a plan: they will all make baskets. Basket weaving, of course, had long been seen as an acceptable occupational activity for the blind.

When the materials arrive, Anna takes great pains to make her basket as perfect as possible. When completed, it is sent to the School for the Blind, where it is painted green with small gold stripes. Anna is thrilled that she has made such a beautiful gift and stores it at school, safely away from the prying eyes of her

60 Jean Little, *From Anna* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 50.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 107.

siblings. Finally, on Christmas Eve, she presents it to her surprised parents. Her mother, choking back tears, confesses: "I was the blind one all this time. Dr. Schumacker should have given me the glasses." Her father agrees: "It has not been only you, Klara. We have all failed to see."⁶² Her siblings retort that Anna could not have made the basket herself. Her parents, angry, challenge them, saying that they could not have made or purchased their gifts without help either. The novel concludes with Anna singing *Silent Night* in English, showing all that she has been able to accomplish since their arrival in Canada. The moral is clear: through giving to others, Anna is finally able to reveal her true self to her family.

Usually, the parents in Jean Little novels are kind and understanding, but Klara Solden, Anna's mother, is impatient with Anna and harsh in her criticism. Anna's siblings, especially her eldest brother Rudi, border on cruel. It is difficult to believe that this otherwise happy family would treat their youngest so badly. Also, as several reviewers of the novel noted, it seems unbelievable that the family did not recognize that Anna needed glasses.⁶³ In short, it is less realistic than most of Little's early novels. Yet this probably made the book appealing to many elementary school readers. What child has not felt, at least occasionally, that her parents were cruel? That her siblings always pick on them? That her parents loved the other children in the family more? Or that their difficulties were not recognized and acknowledged? Anna's loneliness and her sense of injustice likely spoke to many of Little's readers.

The book portrays Canada as a haven for the Solden family. The Soldens are not Jewish, but they are angry about the anti-semitism they see in their homeland. There is no mention in the book of Canada's dismal record of accepting Jewish refugees or of the anti-semitism that pervaded Canada during those years.⁶⁴ Instead, Canada is a place where everyone can be accepted. As Anna puts it, it is okay to make mistakes in Canada. In Canada, people are willing to teach you, although this must be matched by effort on your part. At first Anna is afraid of the oldest boy in her class, who she fears will tease her like her older brother Rudi. In their first face-to-face encounter, he teaches her how to say "hi" like a Canadian. She expects a trick, but realizes by the end of the lesson that he just wanted to make her feel welcome. The German education system is portrayed as more rigid and less creative than Canadian schools. When Anna draws a picture in Canada, she can draw whatever she wants; in Germany she had to copy a picture of a tulip. In Canada, people are accepting of difference and eager to learn more about other places and cultures. Her teacher is keen to see the family's German Christmas tree, all lit up with candles, and she eventually marries Dr. Schumacher, who is also a recent German transplant. On Anna's first day of class, she plays Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* and makes a point of telling the class that

62 *Ibid.*, p. 188.

63 JLC, File XR1, MS A715046, *Bulletin of the Centre for Children's Books*, January 1973; Dianne L. Monson, *The Journal of Reading*, April 1973, p. 572.

64 Irving Abella and Harold Troper, *None is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe, 1933-1948* (Toronto: Lester Publishing, 1991); Lita-Rose Betcherman, *The Swastika and the Maple Leaf: Fascist Movements in Canada in the Thirties* (Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1975).

Beethoven was German, like Anna. That said, the Solden family occasionally encounters insensitivity. When Anna's uncle's lawyer meets them in Toronto, he explains that the previous tenants were "foreigners" and that the place might not be clean. Realizing what he has said, he turns red and stops. Anna's father makes light of the matter: "We speak that way in Germany also."⁶⁵ On another occasion Anna's mother is trying to explain that the eggs are fresh, but accidentally says that the eggs are raw. The customer sharply retorts that she did not expect to buy them cooked.⁶⁶ The novel suggests that her family's new challenges in Canada make them more understanding of Anna's disability.

Anna and the Soldens make great efforts to integrate and this is seen as the right thing to do. The family begins practising English even before they leave Germany, and, for a while after their arrival in Canada, they continue to speak English. This does not mean abandoning their past. Once their English is fluent, they go back to speaking German at home to ensure that they do not lose it. They integrate in other ways as well. The older children quickly realize that Canadians skate in the winter and begin saving money to buy their own skates. Anna too must learn to integrate. Like her siblings, she must learn to speak English, but she also needs to come out of her shell and become a fully participating member of her family. Fortunately, in this very rosy picture of Canada, Canadians give her the extra tools she needs to do so.

Little makes it clear that, while prejudice and discrimination are wrong, they will happen, and individuals need to learn to cope. Thus Anna finds love and safety in her new classroom, but she still faces hostility outside it. There are children who taunt and throw snowballs at the Sight Saving students, and Anna's friends need to figure out how to defend themselves. Eventually, they successfully chase the bullies away. Similarly, in *Mine for Keeps*, Sally must advocate on her own behalf and find her own solutions to her day-to-day problems. Pieter's self-pity is regarded as understandable, but unacceptable over the long term. Thus, in many ways, Little argues that people with disabilities need to take the lead in adjusting to society, rather than vice-versa.

This idea that people with disabilities need to help themselves is not in keeping with the idealism of the social model, which stresses that external conditions create disability and thus need to be fixed. In this sense, Little's fiction harkens back to earlier "self-help" models of disability promoted by groups such as the Canadian National Institute of the Blind and the Canadian Paraplegic Association. However, it is also pragmatic. While people with disabilities should not have to fight against bullying or for inclusion in their own families, the reality is that most will experience adversity and hardship. Little's fiction provides children with instructions on how to fight back, on how to build friendships with sympathetic peers, and on how to become part of their communities through giving.

Another significant way in which Little departs from the social model is in her treatment of medical professionals and the helping professions. Sally's parents

65 Little, *From Anna*, p. 56.

66 *Ibid.*, p. 125.

explain that they had sent her to a special school for many years because the school had provided her with more help and training than they could at home, and this is presented as the right choice. A doctor discovers Anna's vision problems and makes arrangements for her to be placed in the special Sight Saving class. The doctor maintains an interest in her and provides funds for the equipment the children need to make the baskets. In another novel, *Take Wing*, the situation finally improves for the family of a boy with a mental disability after he is properly diagnosed. In short, medical professionals and even institutions are seen as helpful rather than oppressive, a departure from the social model. While medicine has perpetrated many injustices on people with disabilities, doctors can also ease the pain sometimes associated with disability and occasionally have the ability to cure. While cure is seen as highly problematic in some circles, other people with disabilities are eager to find cures. In short, there is little dogmatism here. Instead, Little attempts to create a world that is kinder and more thoughtful.

Conclusion

Over the years, thousands of children and adults have been moved by Jean Little's oeuvre, especially *From Anna* and *Mine for Keeps*. What they seem to remember most is not the children's disabilities, but their characters and emotions. One reviewer remembered that her mother had bought her *Mine for Keeps* in 1962, when she was recovering from six months in bed; her mother thought that she would be able to identify with Sal. Later in life, "she remembered Sal's adventures" but "I had forgotten exactly what her physical problems were. That is a strong testimony to Jean Little's creative powers. She succeeded in conveying Sal's humanities more than her conditions."⁶⁷ Children's writer Stephanie Tolan wrote, "It's what I loved in those books about Sally and Anna – they never invited one to feel sorry for those children from one's lofty position of health and good eyes, or to go all sentimental at the nobility they showed. The kids were just kids, coping as best they could with lives that weren't the way they would have them be . . . any child can identify with Sally because inside every child is a person on crutches, not quite certain she can cope with the obstacles life puts up."⁶⁸ Children were less articulate in their responses, but they also emphasized that all children can relate to Little's characters, whether they have disabilities or not. In the 1990s, a Grade 6 class in St. Mary's, Ontario, read *From Anna* in class and then all wrote letters to Little. The letters have much in common, indicating that the students may have been more influenced by their teacher than by the book. Most reported that they identified with Anna – they had been teased by their friends or siblings, or they also had poor vision. One frank correspondent wrote, "When I used to look at crosseyed and blind people, I used to think 'Ew, that's gross' but now I know how it must feel to be them, having everyone call them names." Another reported liking the ending because Anna did not miraculously

67 JLC, File XR1, MS A715046, Part 8, Elizabeth MacCallum, "Vintage Little for the Small Fry," *Globe and Mail*, May 27, 1995.

68 JLC, File XR1, MS A715053, Letter from Stephanie Tolan to Jean Little, February 17, 1992.

get better; “instead, Anna learned how to ‘blend into’ the group.” Another said, “I learned that people with disabilities aren’t helpless and all we have to do for them is adjust.”⁶⁹ Another reader, Erica Young, who wrote Little directly, said that one of her favourite books was *From Anna* “because she could relate to a lot of things that happened in the story, like the way people treat each other at school.”⁷⁰

Little has provided generations of children and their parents with meaningful stories about facing difficulty, the joys of giving, the importance of kindness, and appreciation of difference. As Little put it, in a defence of “problem books”: “Children deserve to know that life is difficult and sad and trying and confusing – and exciting and fun and surprising and wonderful.”⁷¹ Little’s moving stories attracted a wide international readership, but her books are shaped by the social and political context of Canada in the years after World War II. The liberal Christianity of the United Church, the early discourses around multiculturalism, and new ideas about citizenship in postwar Canada were important influences in Little’s life and work. While Canadians have always had diverse views of what it meant to be a citizen, many in postwar Canada believed that everyone had an obligation to give regardless of means; that it was important to participate in one’s community through local activism; that difference should be valued, but that newcomers needed to become fully participating members of Canadian society; that families were the centre of a functioning society; and that the newly created welfare state did not erase the obligation to support oneself and one’s family. *Mine for Keeps*, *From Anna*, and Little’s other stories confirmed this view of how Canadian society should function: her children learn that it is better to give than to receive, that they need to stand up for themselves, and that a just society makes the necessary accommodations to allow all of its members to succeed. Here, she was drawing especially on the discourses of multiculturalism and the integration of new immigrants, which began to assume an important role in Canada well before the adoption of the policy of official multiculturalism in 1971.

Catherine Kudlick has said that the history of disability forces us to ask new questions about difference and justice. Jean Little’s fiction, which draws on her own experience of disability, her work with children with disabilities, and her family’s commitment to creating a more equal society, argues that relatively small accommodations could ensure disabled people’s full participation in society. In other ways, however, she departs significantly from the ideals of the disabled rights movement (which, of course, is by no means a unitary movement): she believes that there is a place for both segregated and integrated environments, she argues that children with disabilities must assert themselves, and she believes that “experts” have much to contribute. Over the past 30 years, the language of rights has been useful to disability activists and has helped to achieve significant

69 JLC, XR1, MS A715039, “Correspondences, Various Letters.”

70 JLC, File XRI, MS A715033, Letter to Jean Little from Erica Young, January 17, 1996.

71 JLC, File: XR1, MS A715046, Jean Little, “A Child’s Right to Laugh and Grieve,” *Children’s Book World*, date obscured, probably early 1970s.

breakthroughs in accessible transport, in employment law, and in education, although we still have very far to go. On the other hand, the language of rights may not be enough to ensure justice for all people with disabilities or to provide the acceptance and loving attention that we all require, regardless of our abilities or disabilities. Jean Little's emphasis on giving provides a vision of a kinder and more loving society, which may be as necessary as equality rights to achieving a more just society for people with disabilities.