

## THE BLUE JAR

Anne Konrad. Winnipeg: Queenston House Publishing, 1985.

## UNDER THE HOUSE

Leslie Hall Pinder. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1986.

### *Eleanor Dudar*

"You should write a book about it, Anne!" How many times, I wonder, did someone listening to Anne Konrad tell stories of growing up in a Mennonite community in northern Alberta in the '30s and '40s urge her to turn them into literature? *The Blue Jar* does just this, through a series of vignettes which give us a glimpse into a world quite unlike our own. This world is seen mostly through the eyes of little Annchen, the seventh in a family of ten. Anne's passage from early childhood to young adolescence is a recognizable enough journey from innocence to experience, except that many of the central events — *kinderfest* and *tauffest*, the *verbolung* and *nochast* — are those of a foreign culture.

And most of these events happen to other people. In Konrad's book the impulse of the cultural anthropologist is at least as strong as that of the autobiographer. Anne observes far more of these episodes than she experiences, and what she observes often leads her to question the ways of her parents' world. What we experience, through Anne's observation, are the countless barriers erected for this Mennonite child against the larger world — certainly against the "Englische" and the kindly "Norwegers," and even against Mennonite families that go to "the Kirchliche," who, unlike the Klassens, are allowed to smoke and drink and even (a sin to Anne) to dance at weddings. Crossing, or attempting to cross, some of these barriers, big and small, becomes a central issue in the book. The colour and complexity and beauty of the larger world beyond the right-and-wrong, black-and-white world of the Klassens fascinates Anne, who seeks to understand it through eavesdropping and through the perusal of literary sources as diverse as *Black Beauty* and *Bambi*, the forbidden *Saturday Evening Post* and the permitted *Family Herald*.

The child's point of view is an especially astute choice; Konrad's naive narrator poses many honest questions about strict Mennonite practices without having the authority — or even, necessarily, the desire — to judge them. In this way the

book refrains from alienating the Mennonite reader, while offering a critical vantage point to the outsider. Only with the impending *ausgeschlossen* of Henry Wiebe in the penultimate chapter do we perhaps sense judgement, though even here the telling is delicately done.

While there are some happy times, notably the holidays with their special foods and the visits with favourite relatives, it is mostly a sad, hard world. Death is a constant presence. The death of the Klassens' eldest child Helen opens the novel, the death of Anne's best friend's mother closes it, and there is a liberal sprinkling of deaths — including a whole chapter on funerals — along the way. How much of this may be ascribed to the harshness and natural isolation of life on the barely fertile northern plain, and how much to the harshness and chosen isolation of the Mennonite culture is hard to assess. The few jolly people of Anne's acquaintance either move away or are punished, sometimes because they have crossed one of the barriers or sometimes, it almost seems, simply because they are jolly.

Konrad's writing displays the spare economy of the short story. The prose is flat and unadorned. For this reader, the flatness of the writing signals not only the hard, colourless Mennonite existence, but also the apparent lack of emotion, of affectionate connection to the living world with its many snares. Feeling is there, of course, but it is very much underground. Anne overhears her father talking to a bereaved husband: "coaxing, tender, just like he talked to mother at night when she told him she couldn't take it." That sentence, occurring like a slip of the tongue two pages before the novel's end, speaks volumes about the omissions in this story of pioneer Mennonite life. I am left with a haunted feeling about what is never told of the experience of "Mother" Klassen (we never learn her name), or of these two unfortunate women, new brides at the liberal Kirchliche:

*Later on, instead of dancing, the bride reluctantly went into the house to change from her white wedding dress with the green myrtle sprigs sewn on here and there, into her everyday old clothes so she could go out and milk the cow. In their Sunday clothes, her brothers stood by and watched and laughed.*

*There weren't many presents because everybody knew that the old groom already had a whole house full of belongings and even grown-up children. So they got a few cups and saucers and*

*glass tumblers which you can always use for visitors and then the groom held aloft a new broom. Everyone laughed as he handed it over to his new wife with a "That's what I needed." The rest of the afternoon she carried the broom and followed him around as he wandered from group to group standing in visiting knots on the churchyard. Finally she just sat down alone in the sparsely trimmed church with her broom and waited.*

Anne's sister Tina fares better than this, marrying a prosperous young farmer and breaking with several old traditions in preparing for and celebrating her wedding. The times they are a-changing, and Anne's fate is likely to be more like her sister's, but the story ends before she reaches this fateful period in a young woman's life.

Leslie Hall Pinder's *Under the House* is the story of the Rathbones, a prosperous Saskatchewan farming family trapped by a family secret so deeply buried that its powerful, life-long working cannot be acknowledged. The entrance of an outsider, Evelyn, whose young life at different times parallels that of each of the Rathbone daughters, serves as the catalyst to events which split the family in two and finally unearth the dreadful secret. Along the way we move in and out of several points of view, and the view from inside is almost always cold and lonely and horribly distorted.

We learn first about Maude, haunted as a small child by the thought of rotting apples in the basement, by ideas about the dead older sister after whom she is named, and by the intangible family secret that somehow defines her existence. "Maudie, Maudie, she's an oddie," chant the children at school, and the grown-up Maude remains odd, and strangely without foundation. The family portrait is drawn early in the novel at a gathering convened by "S.D.," the family patriarch, to decide what to inscribe on the family cairn. Only Isabelle, the even more elusive daughter, is missing. Twelve years later the family, again except for Isabelle, reconvenes; this time the occasion is S.D.'s funeral.

Between times, Evelyn enters the family and the story when her mother marries Stanley, the eldest son and heir-apparent to the family fortune. Like his father, Stanley is a bully and a tyrant, obsessed with the desire to control and to possess, to maintain a tight circle around the family which excludes all "interlopers." But though Stanley tries, through bribes and through physical intimidation, to impose

ownership on Evelyn, he cannot. She eventually breaks out, finding guidance from two other outsiders who help her to know herself in the midst of this life-denying world.

Upon returning for S.D.'s funeral, Evelyn meets Maude, her step-father's sister, for the first time. In the face of Stanley's challenge, they are forced to make common cause. Evelyn flees to the coast with her aunt, returning only to appear in court when her step-father charges Maude with kidnapping. The scandalous trial scene is followed by a final family gathering, and the novel closes with a brave and stunning alternate version of this family's life in a letter from Isabelle, whose presence throughout most of the story has been her absence.

This novel demands to be read a second time. As with any novel that has a mystery at its core, the symmetries and ironies that are but dimly glimpsed on a first reading come into sharp focus once the Rathbone family secret is out. But much more is at stake here than the kind of equivocal evi-

dence that obscures the identity of the culprit in a thriller. The nature of the secret in *Under the House* has affected the very identity of everyone in the family; it's hard not to feel that everyone would have been better off knowing the truth from the start.

This first novel displays an impressive range of Pinder's abilities as a writer. There are fresh glimpses of characters who remain minor but escape the merely stereotypical — most notably for me, Kathryn, wife of S.D., a woman seemingly without any identity or role except that of servant, who yet in a time of crisis acts with courage. It is a poignant reminder for me of a truth about such women, who always call up ambivalent feelings, that they possess their own kind of strength, which comes out of a willingness to accept and to love without condition or reward.

The style of *Under the House* is lavish almost to the point of ostentation. Pinder's images are abundant, almost always clever, but at times strained or too

self-consciously wrought, drawing attention away from the narrative itself. But the novel survives her cleverness as an image-maker. It is the rare and precious and movingly realized moments of genuine connection between people that provide the real gold of this novel, where extreme alienation from self and from others is the norm.

On the surface these books about young girls growing up in prairie families could hardly be more unlike. *The Blue Jar* stays close to the actuality of immediate experience, gaining authenticity from its anecdotal portrayal of a specific community. *Under the House* reaches for the evocative power of symbolic fable. What they have in common, and what draws them into a wider thematic current of much prairie, and indeed Canadian, literature, is the depiction of lives painfully dominated by the effort of repression and denial. In *Under the House* the truth is what may set you free; in *The Blue Jar* it is moving to British Columbia.

# (f.)Lip

a newsletter of feminist innovative writing

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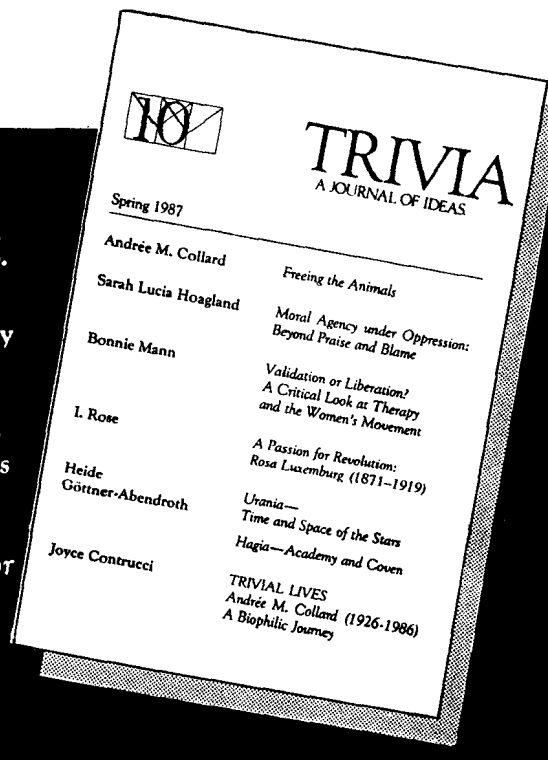
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