

## 2011 AATF BOOK CLUB: *LES ENFANTS DU BONHOMME DANS LA LUNE*

The first installment of the AATF Book Club concerns Roch Carrier's 1978 short story collection entitled *Les Enfants du bonhomme dans la lune*.<sup>1</sup> Set during the 1940s, during the *Grande Noirceur* of the Maurice Duplessis premiership (1939-1959), the book includes twenty short stories that average eight pages in length. While some of the characters carry over from one segment to the next, each story is self contained and can be studied on its own. Because the collection centers around the activities of ten-year-old boys, it often has the feel of a black-and-white family-oriented sitcom from the 1950s or early 1960s. These children can be a little naughty, so the behavior and its consequences provide much of the extensive humor in the collection.

Even though the feel of the collection may be that of a sitcom, the political and cultural undercurrents related to the Duplessis era provide the texture and nuance that make this collection more than just a series of humorous vignettes. Timeless themes such as the role of family, the definition of heroism, and nascent sexual curiosity intertwine with more immediate contemporary events such as the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Additionally, fissures that were developing in *Québécois* society, ultimately leading to

the *Révolution tranquille* of the 1960s, expose themselves in a variety of ways throughout the collection.

Probably the most famous story in the collection is entitled "Une abominable feuille d'érable sur la glace" (known in English as "The Hockey Sweater"). From a cultural standpoint, the story focuses on hockey. The narrator outgrows his Maurice "Rocket" Richard Montreal *Canadiens* jersey, so his mother orders a replacement from the Eaton Department Store catalogue. Much to the boy's horror, a Toronto Maple Leafs jersey arrives in the mail. However, his mother does not wish to return it for fear of insulting M. Eaton, *un Anglais* (80). The mother's response reveals the structural asymmetry of the English-French relationship of the period.

Another cultural fissure exposed in the collection is that between the Catholic Church and the laity. Nuns and priests appear throughout the stories, showing the centrality of the religious institutions in 1940s Quebec. One story, in particular, shows the first cracks beginning to develop between Church and flock. In "Le Jour où je devins un apostat," the narrator and his friend Lapin decide that they want to visit Rome. To them, the obvious solution is to hold onto the ropes attached to their church's bells on Good Fri-

day. At three o'clock, when the bells fly off to Rome, the boys will be pulled along for the ride. The result is predictably similar to the discovery of the truth about Santa Claus, except that the narrator sees it as an indictment of Catholicism in general (43).

The Carrier collection touches on a host of other cultural and political topics in a similar manner in almost every story. Each story can be used to teach a facet of traditional *Québécois* culture, but it can also serve as a springboard to deeper discussions of Quebec's history, politics, and religion.

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<sup>1</sup>Carrier, Roch. *Les Enfants du bonhomme dans la lune*. Montréal: Stanké, 1978. (Paperback version currently available on-line: Montréal: 10 Sur 10, 2007, ISBN 9782760410558)

The AATF published, with Roch Carrier's permission, "Une abominable feuille d'érable sur la glace" in the April 1998 *National Bulletin*. You can find the issue here: [www.frenchteachers.org/bulletin/archives/1990s/1998-23.4Apr.pdf].