

Barbara Smucker, *Jacob's Little Giant* (Markham, Ont.: Penguin Books, 1987). Hardcover, 101 pages.

Jacob's Little Giant, Barbara Smucker's eighth novel for children, represents something of a new direction for its author. From *Henry's Red Sea* (published in 1955) to *White Mist* (1985), Smucker's novels typically are set at tumultuous moments of history: Mennonite emigration from Russia after the 1917 revolution, abolitionist foment in the days preceding the American Civil War, and the armed enforcement of the U.S. Indian Removal Act have all furnished Smucker with occasions and themes for her children's novels. The sweeping brushstrokes of these novels are not to be found in *Jacob's Little Giant*. This story is, by contrast, a sketch of the domestic lives of both Jacob and the Canada goose known as the little giant.

The central character of the novel is six-year-old Jacob Snyder, the fifth child in an Ontario Mennonite family, who is impatiently waiting to grow up and stop being the youngest, smallest, and least competent person he knows. His chance comes when his father decides to register for a government program designed to preserve a nearly-extinct species of Canada goose. It is hoped that the pair of giant geese delivered to the Snyder farm will nest and raise a family. To encourage them to do so, a protected platform is set into the farm pond and a regular feeding schedule is established. The rest of the family being occupied with more important concerns, Jacob is put in charge of the geese. His care and vigilance is rewarded at the end of the novel when the Natural Resources officer Mr. McLean suggests that Jacob "did the best job of all the co-operators" and his family agrees that perhaps he should no longer be called "little Jakie."

Jacob comes to feel a special affinity for the littlest gosling. The last of the brood to hatch and the weakest of the flock, this gosling occupies the same place in its family that Jacob does in the Snyder family. By hiding the gosling from the critical eyes of the adults and by reserving corn for it from the supply he tosses into the water for the rest of the geese, Jacob gives the

“little giant” the time and space it needs to develop into a full-fledged bird. By the time the geese leave the Snyder pond to migrate south for the winter, the littlest gosling is able to fly with them.

Seen against the backdrop of calamity, growing up in the other novels often seems to be a series of crises. In *Jacob's Little Giant*, however, growing up is more a matter of time passing. The novel spans the seasons of growth, opening on a spring morning with the return of a flock of wild geese and ending on a fall morning with the flight of the Snyder flock. Jacob's development, like the geese's, is measured in increments in this novel. He wins no athletic contests; he experiences no flashes of understanding. He merely grows a little taller, becomes a better baseball player, and is allowed occasionally to help on the farm machinery.

The episodic plot Smucker uses in this novel is quite different from the adventure stories she has written previously. Much of the story of *Jacob's Little Giant* does not move the main plot of the novel forward in any way. Such incidents as a friend's birthday party, planting potatoes, fishing for the “biggest fish in history,” and sister Lydia's wedding, for example, have little or no relation to the Canada goose story. In fact, the problems of *Jacob's Little Giant* are the result of Smucker's failure to follow through on the episodic structure she has chosen. This story is not a driving linear narrative, but Smucker often fails to provide sufficient detail to entice the reader to explore the diversionary incidents. For example, we are told that Jacob is thrilled to be allowed to help on the potato planter, but the amazing equipment is described only by a rather specious image: it seems “a magic machine from outer space.” The reader with little experience of potato farming is left to wonder just what a four-row potato planter looks like and just how it works.

Even in the main plot of the story, specific detail usually is eschewed. Considering the amount of time Jacob spends in his tree observing the giant geese, we learn surprisingly little about the characteristics and habits of the species. The information that is given often seems offered apologetically, with Smucker suggesting that “Jacob had read about this with [his brother] John in the book about geese.”

Smucker's habit of generalizing about ideas rather than observing the world is nowhere more evident than when the subject of the Snyders' religious and cultural traditions is mentioned. The visit of an uncle and aunt from Pennsylvania is an obvious example. Smucker begins her account of the visit by noting the generic class to which Uncle Ephraim and Aunt Fanny belong: they are “conservative Mennonites.” She then offers two particular examples that illustrate this: the men wear suspenders and the women wear long, dark dresses. In conclusion, she cites the relevant belief that explains the examples: they believe in “plain and simple living.” I am unconvinced that any mind takes in a situation by such a rigidly-ordered series of vague abstractions, but I am convinced that the six-year-old mind to which it is attributed most certainly would not.

The recognition in *Jacob's Little Giant* that growing up can be a slow and sure, sometimes painful, but always wonderful, process earns this novel the right to a place on children's shelves. Had Smucker more often lost herself in the wonder and pain of the process, that place would be a more significant one.

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