“Like Alice, I was Brave”

The Girl in the Text in Olemaun’s Residential School Narratives

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ABSTRACT

In the genre of residential school narratives for children, Not My Girl (2014) stands out for the determination, courage, and resilience of its narrator, a young girl who chooses to go to a Catholic boarding school, and then draws on both her culture and a British novel, Alice in Wonderland, about a brave girl for strength and resilience. This article traces Olemaun’s journey as she follows Alice into literacy but finds her own methods of resisting colonial oppression and asserting Indigenous agency.

KEYWORDS

Alice in Wonderland, children’s literature, decolonization, First Nations, Inuvialuit, literacy, resilience

Over the first five years of this decade, Margaret (Olemaun) Pokiak-Fenton, with her daughter-in-law, Christy Jordan-Fenton, published two sets of paired chapter books and picturebooks that narrate Pokiak-Fenton’s childhood experiences at a Catholic residential school (Fatty Legs (2010) and When I Was Eight (2013)) and the difficulties she encountered upon her return to her family and community (A Stranger at Home (2011) and Not My Girl (2014)). Set in the early 1940s, in the middle of the long period during which the Canadian government systematically removed Indigenous children from their homes and communities, these texts differ from most personal narratives about residential schools in that Olemaun chose—in deed she begged—to go to school. While these books, particularly the chapter books, make clear that Olemaun wanted to go to school because of a girl in a text—Alice in Wonderland—they also show the authors’ placement of an Indigenous girl in the text as a model of resistance (and, therefore, an agent of decolonization), and it seems no accident that they were published during the years that Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) convened.
The picturebooks were published after the chapter books; the first of them, *When I Was Eight* (2013) outlines Olemaun’s determination to become literate: she pesters her father—a former mission school student and avid reader—into sending her to the school in Aklavik and refuses to let an abusive nun get the better of her. *Not My Girl* (2014), the second picturebook, frames her return home and the difficulties she has in re-assimilating into her family and culture. As she tells the longer version of her story to older readers in *Fatty Legs* (2010) and *A Stranger at Home* (2011), which are also illustrated and which include informative notes about the schools and photographs from her scrapbooks alongside detailed explanations of customs, tools, peoples, and the natural world, Olemaun engages in a discursive and material struggle that also becomes political action. While struggling to relearn Inuvialuktun and reclaim her cultural traditions, Olemaun offers a running critique of the institutions that attempted to steal her girlhood and identity even as they afforded what she desperately wanted—the ability to read about Alice for herself. Arguing that these books focus on the girl in the text as a way of demonstrating Indigenous resiliency and resistance to colonialism to their young readers, in this article I analyze the authors’ depictions of Olemaun and the girls who matter to her.

**Girlhood and Colonization**

Since they tell these stories for young audiences, the Fentons appropriately craft the books with these audiences in mind: the language of each is at a suitable level, the more painful or graphic elements of residential school experience are veiled, and both sets of texts have beautiful illustrations. Political issues are not foregrounded, although they are present in explanatory notes and photographs in the picturebooks, and detailed in the chapter books through photographs, notes, and afterwords. In addition, the authors end the second book in each pair, *A Stranger at Home* (2011) and *Not My Girl* (2014) with acknowledgments of the TRC, dedicate the former to the TRC’s commissioner, Justice Murray Sinclair, and list the TRC as one of the ways in which Canada and First Nations are working to address the trauma and loss resulting from the residential school system in the latter.

The TRC devotes the first two volumes of its multivolume report to residential schools and their impact on Indigenous, and, therefore, Canadian, society. The TRC notes that more than 150,000 Indigenous and Métis children were removed between the early 1800s and 1996. In dedicating the
second volume to northern First Peoples, the TRC delineates differences dictated by cultures and geographies; these differences are the focus of Keavy Martin’s (2011) study of Inuit writing, storytelling, and performance as an autonomous literary tradition. Martin attends to the ways in which Inuit narratives connect language, form, and context to satisfy both aesthetic and political agendas; these connections are subtle though meaningful in the Fentons’ books. Olemaun’s unwavering resistance to colonial oppression and her will to recover from the trauma she suffers in the Catholic school in Aklavik offer young readers ways in which to think about opposing the dominant settler discourse and decolonizing their world views.

There are, as Renate Eigenbrod has noted, many ways to narrate the traumas caused by the residential school system, including silences, and indirect forms of expression. Reading various texts about childhood in residential schools, Eigenbrod argues that narratives seemingly about victimization evoke, instead, “survival, resistance, and continuance of cultures against colonial policies aimed at their annihilation” (2012: 278). In terms of literature for children, narratives such as those by Shirley Sterling (Interior Salish), Ruby Slipperjack (Anishinaabe), and Nicola Campbell (Interior Salish), generally offer similar outlines: children forcibly removed from their homes to boarding schools where they face cruel members of religious orders; policies meant to negate their histories, traditions, and cultures; inadequate food and poor education; and violence and suffering. In each narrative, the author counters these colonial oppressions with the child protagonist’s methods of resistance. Sterling’s personal narrative, My Name is Seepeetza (1998), shows how summers and holidays at home strengthen and culturally renew Seepeetza. In Slipperjack’s novel, These Are My Words: The Residential School Diary of Violet Pesheens (2016), the eponymous protagonist keeps a journal that helps her retain her language and traditions. Campbell’s picturebooks, Shi-shi-etko (2005) and Shin-chi’s Canoe (2008) feature a young girl and her little brother using mementos and memories from home to help them retain their culture and customs. The texts illustrate the resilience of Indigenous children as being limited only by their imaginations.

In the case of Olemaun, the Fentons’ texts tacitly suggest that focusing on girls might be an important means of enacting decolonization; they are replete with girls: Alice, who captures, Olemaun’s imagination; Olemaun as a compelling narrative center; her best friend Agnes, another residential school inmate; her mother, as one of the women who rejects the outsiders and their ways (although she, too, hungers to read and write); and her little sisters who will follow her to school. Male characters are fewer in number.
and mostly undeveloped: Olemaun’s father, another residential school survivor, plays an important role, but all other male characters—Olemaun’s little brother; a frightening monk; and a shadowy trapper of African descent—make the briefest of appearances. The plethora of girls in these texts insists that they have something profound to say about the realities of Indigenous childhood.

In a study of Aboriginal girls in Australian boarding schools, Christine Cheater points out that girls were targeted in far greater numbers than boys because of “anxieties about the girls’ sexual behavior and demands for cheap domestic servants” (2010: 251). These schools taught only basic skills, she notes, and no “practical information on how to survive in white society” (263). However, Cheater also delineates the ways in which girls resisted by “forming bonds with one another and taking advantage of opportunities to be themselves” (251) and creating support networks that enabled them to “reestablish contact with Aboriginal communities” (264). In another qualitative study of Aboriginal girls, Pamela Downie looks at Canada’s persistent colonial ideology that sees these girls as exploitable and dispensable, but she also sees the ways in which they resist. As she notes, the lived history of these girls “is also characterized by an intergenerational strength that is too often overlooked in depictions of gender- and culture-based violation and abuse.” In her focus on gender and indigeneity, Downie juxtaposes stories about “the suffering and hardships faced by Aboriginal girls and women through the years” with “the equally powerful stories of survival and determination that are also told” (2006: 3). Similarly, in the Fentons’ hands, Inuvialuit girlhood is not constituted exclusively by displacement and oppression but also by determination, innovation, and cultural survival.

As the focal point of these books, Olemaun is notable for her courage and intelligence but she is not the only girl who resists governmental and religious institutions that would rob her of her community, traditions, and cultural practices. Every girl in these books claims her agency in some way, from the fictional Alice who does as she pleases to the autobiographical Olemaun and her sisters and friends who counter colonization with strategies that range from talking back to engaging in subversive actions to running away. The Fentons’ choice to identify her as Olemaun—even though she uses the name Margaret, given her by the nuns, as an adult—makes clear this girl’s grounding in her culture even as her willingness to be Margaret demonstrates her ability to thrive in settler society. Contending that Aboriginal people have been reclaiming their cultures steadily as a means of unifying and healing their communities, the Fentons end both books with notes
that outline the horrific experiences of Indigenous children in Canada’s residential schools, and discuss efforts to reclaim traditional languages, foodways, oral traditions, and cultural practices. Their endnote to *Fatty Legs* (2010) points out that these schools were meant to strip generations of First Peoples of their culture and skills even as they prepared them for menial jobs while neglecting to teach them how to thrive in a colonized world. They conclude their endnote in *A Stranger at Home* by tying their work closely to that of the TRC: “The feelings of shame that have kept so many survivors on the outside of their own communities are being lifted through Truth and Reconciliation Commission national events, where experiences can be shared in a supportive setting, and through the work of brave survivors … who have told their stories in all forms of art and media—including books like this one” (2011: 109). Decolonization through writing for girls seems an appropriate method, one that speaks to adults as well as children, and Olemaun Pokiak stands as an especially brave survivor.

**Following Alice**

In an essay on the legacy of residential schools and decolonization, Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux (Chippewa) argues that First Nations people must resist the marginalization of their communities by moving “into the structured world of formal mainstream schooling” in order to “direct the transition and ultimate transformation of our families and communities” (2009: 28). Long before Wesley-Esquimaux contended that Indigenous participation in settler educational systems was one way to reinvent colonialism and change it into a forum where Indigenous people could thrive, a little Inuvialuit girl embraced that very idea. Early in *Fatty Legs* Olemaun emphasizes her fascination with the nuns she sees when she accompanies her father to Aklavik, because they “held the key to the greatest of the outsiders’ mysteries—reading” (2010: 4). While Olemaun’s older half-sister Ayouniq/Rosie refuses to discuss the school, she does read to Olemaun from the beautifully illustrated books their father had given her, particularly *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. “The stories were precious treasures to be enjoyed in the well-lit, toasty warmth of our smoke-scented tent, as the darkness of winter was constant, and the temperatures outside cold enough to freeze bare skin in seconds,” Olemaun notes, but the “books were written in English, so I understood very little of them. I was always left with unanswered questions” (2010: 4). Rosie explains that Alice’s Rabbit is “like a hare,” to which Olemaun replies,
“Why did Alice follow it down the hole? To hunt it?” We read that Rosie gave her “a funny look” and replied. “No, Olemaun. She followed it because she was curious” (2010: 5). Olemaun quickly matches Alice’s curiosity with her own as she questions Rosie about the school. The older girl refuses to discuss what must be painful memories; she exclaims that “[t]hey want all of your time for chores and for kneeling on your knees to ask forgiveness. … . They take everything” (6). Aside from Olemaun’s equation of Alice’s rabbit with an Inuvialuit source of fur and food, the girls illustrate the tensions being faced by Indigenous families as increasing numbers of settlers entered their homelands, bringing with them their churches and schools, different technologies and materials, much of which these families find compelling and attractive. While the Inuvialuit, like other First Peoples, are willing to welcome and work with the settlers, to incorporate their innovations into traditional lifeways, they were and are not interested in giving up their own culture and traditions. Rosie, like her father before her, has learned the costs that come with acquiring the things the settlers can offer.

As Olemaun approaches her eighth birthday, she spends a good deal of time trying to convince her father to let her go to the school, pondering the book, and pouring over John Tenniel’s illustrations: “I still did not know what happened to her at the end of the burrow. Did she catch the hare?” (2010: 10). The images of Alice’s adventures—bodily changes, encounters with strange creatures, conflicts with enemies—inspire her to badger her father to send her to the Catholic residential school in Aklavik, where he spent many years although he refused to speak “of the school and would never tell me of the wonderful things I could learn there. He was a smart man who loved to read, but he put little value in the outsider’s learning compared to the things that our people knew” (8). When she asks again, he responds that the outsiders will not teach her necessary survival skills and that they will exploit her skills for their profit. “They feed you cabbage soup and porridge. They do not teach you how to make parkas and kamik. … . They make you wear their scratchy outsiders’ clothes, which keep out neither mosquitoes nor the cold. They teach you their songs and dances instead of your own. And they tell you that the spirit inside of you is bad and needs their forgiveness.” Her response is confident: she already knows about hunting and trapping and curing foods; she will need to learn to sew anyway and she thinks the music she had heard resonating from the church in Tuktoyaktuk is beautiful. She confidently claims that “[t]hey would see that my spirit was good” (11). Just as her sister told her that the school would take everything, Olemaun’s father explains that the school will wear her down
the way the ocean wears a rock down into a small, smooth pebble. Her desire for literacy remains strong: she responds that the stone is still inside the pebble, and he agrees to send her. Her tenacity certainly does not wear away; her traditions and culture form the rock-solid foundation that allows Olemaun to layer settler education over the knowledge given her by her family and community.

At the school, the children spend far more hours working than learning, and Olemaun observes, “My stomach ached with hunger and my mind ached for knowledge” (2010: 41). In When I was Eight, she responds to every incident of cruelty by clinging to the “beautiful book my sister read me about a girl named Alice. I hugged it to my chest and tried to be brave like the girl in the story” (2013: n.p.). Olemaun learns quickly, however, repeatedly describing in Fatty Legs the means she found to practice reading and writing even as she followed the nuns’ orders, noting that while “my schoolmates played cards and made dolls during recreation, I chose to read” (2010: 52). While working long hours in the hospital during an epidemic, she notes, “I could only find a moment’s peace to read very late in the evening” (56). One nun in particular—whom Olemaun calls the Raven, in contrast to a kind nun she characterizes as the Swan while the children are wrens, small and clever—treats her with continual and extreme cruelty. As she gains literacy, Olemaun gains confidence, and after an especially miserable incident with the Raven, she notes, “I wasn’t sure what she meant to teach me, but I had something to teach her about the spirit of us Inuvialuit” (49).

Throughout, Olemaun responds to every incident of cruelty with a reference to reading, specifically reading about Alice. Immediately after a terrible encounter with one of the monks (she has been told to call them brothers, but notes that they are not family) who frightens her into soiling herself, she notes, “I had read Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland four times. Rosie had been telling the truth: Alice had not been hunting the rabbit at all. I would have brought its pelt back for my father” (60). While she clearly gains comfort from her favorite book, Olemaun’s comment demonstrates resistance: British Alice may just follow a rabbit to see where it takes her but Inuvialuit Olemaun will track and trap a hare, and make use of both its meat and its pelt. She offers young readers strategies of decolonization as she comes to understand the benefits and dangers of following a rabbit down its hole. She pays dearly for her literacy, but never loses the cultural autonomy that enables her to skin the hare.

The picturebook, When I Was Eight (2013), also offers scenes of cruelty, though these are even more circumscribed for a younger audience. After a
series of incidents in which she defies the nuns, the Raven locks her in the cellar. “I descended each step deliberately, hiding my fear. My hands quickly found a cabbage in the shadows and I scurried up the stairs. But she slammed the door, shutting out all the light. I pulled the handle. It was locked. A scream build in my chest, but I held it in. I closed my eyes, pulled up my stockings, and breathed deeply. ... I spelled my Inuit name. ... I spelled many things from home and was starting on the title of my book—A—L—I—when the door opened” (2013: n.p.). In *Fatty Legs*, Olemaun continually comforts herself with the book, aligning herself with Alice and the nuns with the villains. “I pulled my favorite book from underneath my pillow and imagined the Raven in the role of the Queen of Hearts” (2010: 67). In both picturebook, *When I Was Eight* (2013) and novel, *Fatty Legs* (2010), she follows the story of the red stockings by noting that she feels just “like Alice after a bite of magic cake—as large as the entire room” (2013: n.p.). The narrative ties every victory to Alice, and when Olemaun triumphantly reads out loud in class to end *When I Was Eight*, she says, “I was Olemaun, conqueror of evil, reader of books. I was a girl who traveled to a strange and faraway land to stand against a tyrant, like Alice. And like Alice, I was brave, clever, and as unyielding as the strong stone that sharpens an ulu” (2013: n.p.). *Fatty Legs* ends with reference to Alice as well. When she finally goes home after two years at the school, Olemaun reads from Alice to her family and we read, “She crawled under the warm hides, gazed at the glow of the embers from my father’s pipe, and drifted off to sleep. My curiosity had led me far away, and now here I was, after two years, satisfied that I now knew what happened to girls who went down rabbit holes” (2010: 82). Throughout, she responds to colonization as an agent, making her voice matter as she negotiates the most patriarchal of social institutions.

The second novel, *A Stranger at Home* (2011) and picturebook, *Not My Girl* (2014) involve Alice less, though Olemaun finds refuge in the English novel when things go badly, which they often do as she works to relearn her language and cultural practices. She continually retreats “into a corner of the tent [to hide] in [her] favorite book” (2014: n.p.). Moreover, on her first night home, after her mother fails to recognize her and she cannot eat her food, the family gathers around while Olemaun reads to them about Alice, her little brother sitting on her lap looking at Tenniel’s pictures. *A Stranger at Home* demonstrates the whole family’s pride in and fascination with Olemaun’s accomplishment, but even so, she notes that while she has lost her language, her friend Agnes can still speak Inuvialuktun; because of Alice, she says, “I had been so eager to learn the new ways, I had not thought to
hold on to the old ones” (2011: 53). She finally reflects on the differences between western culture and her own, considering both literacy and religion: “I understood from the elders that they had their own stories to give them guidance, stories that were handed down instead of being written” (83). Olemaun may have begun this rumination in concern for her family’s souls, as the nuns have taught her is necessary, but she comes to understand the power of the traditional stories of the Inuvialuit because of the ways in which Alice has inspired, strengthened, and comforted her. In part, the power of Alice’s story enables Olemaun to relearn the power of the oral traditions of her people and see how Catholic dogma provides an irrelevant substitute.

Finding Agnes

Olemaun’s friend, Agnes, also inhabits these texts, moving in and out of them, teaching Olemaun important lessons, but not all the lessons she needs to learn. Although they were best friends on Banks Island, because of her mother’s illness, Agnes’s family relocates to Tuktoyaktuk and, because she is two years older than Olemaun, Agnes enters the school in Aklavik a few years before Olemaun does. Therefore, when Olemaun’s mother warns her, in Fatty Legs (2010) that the strangers “will not be kind to you. They are not your family, and they are not like us,” Olemaun declares, “I will have Agnes. I will be fine” (19). However, Agnes is not there when Olemaun expects her to be as she enters the school, although she shows up when the girls are having their hair cut and being given new clothes, and she helps Olemaun put on her uniform. Through the course of the chapter books, Agnes often whispers helpful translations in Inuvialuktun of the nuns’ orders, demonstrates acceptable behavior to Olemaun, and explains the school’s rhythms. For example, she tells Olemaun that she will get used to the food, and that classes will not begin until fall, so they will spend the summer doing chores and gardening. Even so, Agnes cannot rescue Olemaun during her most traumatic experiences at the school that include having the cruel nun, The Raven, make her work long hours in the hospital without a break, and then punish her for soiling herself after the frightening (and possibly veiled) encounter with a monk, as mentioned above, locking her in a dark cellar and making her do extra chores, and giving her ugly red stockings while all the other girls get lovely black or grey ones. When Olemaun is teased by the other girls about the red stockings, Agnes is bullied too, called “Skinny Legs” to Olemaun’s “Fatty Legs,” and Agnes does not help her. “For the very first
time, Agnes did not pick me first to be on her team at recreation time” (2010: 69). While she makes clear that her feelings are hurt, Olemaun refuses to blame or condemn Agnes. Rather, she takes matters into her own hands and waits for an opportunity (while doing extra work in the laundry) to burn the hated stockings to ashes.

Adding Agnes to these texts allows the Fentons to model for children some of the various methods First Nations people employed to negotiate colonialism. Very much like the stone (after which she is named) that Inu-ivialuit women use to sharpen their ulus (stone blades), Olemaun deals with injustice in a straightforward manner while Agnes offers a model of passive endurance and resistance. A Stranger at Home (2011) begins with the girls’ journey home to Tuktoyaktuk, where Olemaun’s family now lives, since her father has been recognized for his skills and offered steady government employment. Because of a short summer, Olemaun has not seen her family for two years, and her anticipation almost overwhelms her. Agnes, however, remembers how difficult the transition from school to home can be. When they arrive, as her mother declares that she is “not my girl” over and over, Olemaun finally understands Agnes’s stoic demeanor. Now that both girls live in the same community again, Olemaun, faced with her mother’s anguish at the changes in her daughter, and unable to eat the food or speak her language, is cheered at the “thought of seeing [Agnes] every day” (29). However, Agnes’s mother hisses “no English” every time she sees Olemaun, and she then forbids Agnes to play with Olemaun, because Olemaun has forgotten how to be part of her community and culture. Agnes again explains things to Olemaun in whispers during a chance encounter at the Hudson’s Bay Company store. “My mother and father say I am an outsider now. … . They do not want me playing with children like you—children from the school. They don’t want me speaking English, or praying, or doing anything like a white person” (53). While Agnes is absent from When I Was Eight (2013) the Fentons repeat this scene almost verbatim in the picturebook Not My Girl (2014) thereby emphasizing Agnes’s acquiescence and Olemaun’s near complete isolation and her ostracization from her community.

Agnes eventually informs Olemaun in A Stranger at Home (2011) that when she was at school, she practiced “conversations in her head in [their] native language. Because of this she had not forgotten how to speak [their] language” (53). Agnes’s quiet resistance serves her well when, because of her mother’s illness, she is to be sent back to the school. Instead, she disappears, later telling Olemaun that she ran hard for a full day and then took two days to walk back home. By that time, the ship had sailed and she was left
alone, a trick Agnes repeats a year later when Olemaun returns to the school to protect her little sisters. The narrative offers a telling scene when Olemaun, mourning the loss of her friend and feeling betrayed, has a terrible nightmare, one she had had when she was at school. “I dreamed that I was back at the outsiders’ school, locked inside the skirt of one of the nuns’ habits. The nun told me that she would let me out if I could remember my name and if my mother could recognize me. … . Agnes knew where the key was to free me, but in the distance I could see her aboard the North Star, sailing away to Banks Island without me” (57–58). If Olemaun refused to blame Agnes for not supporting or saving her at the school, she clearly feels abandoned by her friend as she faces the difficulties of re-assimilating into Inuvialuit culture. At the same time, her dream links Agnes and the key to freedom that Olemaun will need to use in the future. When she returns to the school in order to take care of her sisters, who now are being forced to go, she will teach them Agnes’s methods for maintaining their language. Wesley-Esquimaux emphasizes the need for education “in the more remote areas of central and northern Canada,” as a necessary support for social action, and she argues that First Nations girls and women need to work together and prioritize all educational experiences, inside and outside of the classroom to help “stem the tide of dropping out of school and life” (2009: 29). The relationships Olemaun builds with Agnes and her sisters, before and through their schooling, strengthen them and enable them to make their communities resilient. The books emphasize their closeness as girls and now as elderly women.

**Leading her Sisters**

The Fentons end both novels, *Fatty Legs* (2010) and *A Stranger at Home* (2011), with scenes explaining that Olemaun will return to the school in order to protect her sisters. *Fatty Legs* concludes with a chapter titled “After the Story,” in which Olemaun notes that the year following her return home was one of the happiest of her life, but “my three younger sisters grew curious. After they pestered my father non-stop, and the government made school attendance a condition for receiving child benefits, he gave in” (83–84). *A Stranger at Home* offers more detail. Her father asks her to return to Aklavik with her sisters, and he begins his request by foregrounding the necessity for the Inuvialuit to become educated in the outsiders’ language and culture. He notes, on the one hand, that the government is making edu-
cation mandatory and, on the other that “[m]ore of them will be coming. Without learning their language and how to read and write it, we won’t survive” (95). In so doing, he shows that he fully understands what Olemaun has faced and must face again at the school, and that she will need to be even stronger in order to protect her sisters.

Julia Emberley examines the impact of colonial cultural practices on the everyday lives of Indigenous women, youth, and children, and the ways in which Indigenous writers confound these practices by deploying Aborignality as a complex and enabling sign of social, cultural, and political transformation. Both Not My Girl (2014) and A Stranger at Home (2011) detail a scene that explains Olemaun’s experiences as a sister. On the one hand, in Not My Girl, on Christmas morning, there are dolls for the little girls and a train for Olemaun’s brother. Although these dolls look nothing like Inuvialuit girls, Olemaun cries in disappointment at not being given one. On the other hand, the gift she does receive makes up for the lack of a doll and comes directly from Inuvialuit traditions: her father gives her her own dogsled and team. The picturebook ends with Olemaun speeding past Agnes, who waves and cheers, and her mother, who proudly shouts, “My girl” (2014: n.p.). The novel offers more detail, but like the picturebook describes the scene in which Olemaun’s father teases her for crying by asking if she is not “too grown up for dolls” (2011: 87; 2014: n.p.). Before the scene moves to her being given the dog team and sled, Olemaun explains that the “dolls we had made out of scraps at the outsider’s school were clumsy, with lopsided or missing faces” (87). Like many little girls, she wants a beautiful doll, but like any child who has faced attempts to steal her childhood, she also wants to reclaim what girlhood she can. At the same time, both texts dim the shine of those settler-society dolls as they feature the girl-sized dogsled and team.

The day after Christmas and after her triumphant ride in her dogsled under the Northern Lights, her father takes Olemaun to the Hudson’s Bay Company where he buys her both books and a doll. The next scene is incredibly poignant and pointed. Olemaun plays with her sisters and their dolls, fashioning little beds for their “children” and pretending “they were three sisters who did everything together.” However, when the younger girls want to pretend that the dolls are going away to the outsiders’ school, Olemaun refuses to play: “I didn’t tell Mabel and Elizabeth that the nuns would chop off their dolls’ pretty ringlets and make them wear shabby clothes that didn’t fit properly. I didn’t think anyone needed to know about that” (91). She thus emphasizes her desire to protect them even before her father asks her
to accompany them to the school. When he does, they cry together as she understands and agrees to return to the school, but she notes, “I didn’t cry again after that. … . I needed to start preparing myself to go back. I had to teach myself not to cry anymore” (97). Just as Rosie tried to shield her, she attempts to shield them from the knowledge that girls’ well-being matters profoundly to the Inuvialuit but not at all to the Catholic Church. The narrative concludes with a note explaining that she knew “how the school worked and what to do to stay out of the nuns’ way, and I made sure my sisters knew as well” (105). She details the difficulties they faced—the long hours of work and the homesickness—which she counters by letting them sleep with her even though she is punished when caught. She also remembers the lesson Agnes taught her. “I would whisper stories or sing them songs in Inuvialuktun until they fell asleep” (106). Her conclusion affirms the strength of Inuvialuit culture and their ability to excel in the Euro-western milieu: “as awful as it was, my sisters remained true Pokiaks: strong-willed and determined. Mabel did so well in school that she went on to high school in Yellowknife and eventually became a nurse” (106). Olemaun’s pride in her sisters, in family and community, affirms the role of education in Inuvialuit girls’ lives. If education served as an agent of the state and a tool of colonialism, then at the same time it empowered girls to shape their own worlds, identities, and destinies.

Conclusion: Telling Her Story

As noted by Cheater and Downie above, the stories of girls’ residential school experiences—whether through academic study and interview, or fictional and personal narrative—consistently allow for the misery of the experience, the empowerment of the education, and the victory of survival. Linda Tuhiwai Smith similarly discusses Indigenous resistance to colonization, noting that the politics of the everyday life of the Indigenous person is reflected in “stories which tell of what it means, what it feels like, to be present while your history is erased before your eyes” (2012: 31). Marie Battiste (2013) documents the nature of Eurocentric models of education and their devastating impacts on Indigenous knowledge, and argues for the repositioning of Indigenous knowledge systems. One method of enacting the foregrounding of Indigenous ways of knowing is through stories for young readers, like those by the Fentons. Wesley-Esquimaux also affirms the necessity for Native storytellers to tell all the stories. “Instead of telling only the stories about
trauma and victimization and pain, let us talk about our survival and our undeniable strengths. It is essential for us to articulate the strengths that we have, not only in a way that validates our survival, but in a way that validates and ‘victorizes’ our ability to take control of our lives” (2009: 28). The Fentons offer their young readers all the aspects of the stories desired by Smith, Battiste, and Wesley-Esquimaux. Olemaun draws strength from Alice, but she receives as much inspiration from Agnes as she does from Alice; her sisters’ needs necessitate but also enable Olemaun’s return to the school, and the school in turn enables their success in the dominant culture while they determine their ability to thrive in their own communities and traditions. Wesley-Esquimaux looks for ways to show how Indigenous people can decolonize their homes: she suggests “talking to our children … telling them about historic and personal lives and about the beauty of our cultural and social truths … as the ancestors used to do, before contact and the subjugation of women, before religious guilt and patriarchy took over, before … the dominant culture took over” (2009: 30). Overall, in telling Olemaun’s story—and those of her sisters and friend, and her retelling of Alice—in texts for pre- and adolescent girls, Pokiak-Fenton and Jordan-Fenton employ the girl in the text as a means of offering young people an understanding of both colonial practices and methods of resisting them, of prioritizing their own culture and thereby decolonizing their world views.

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