

# CARTOON CAPERS: The Adventures of Canadian Animators

Canadian film gets short shrift in the publishing game. On my bookshelf at home are eight volumes on American film noir and six texts on the mechanics of screenplay writing. An academic has no problem writing a learned disquisition on the semiotics of cinema and a journalist can have a show-biz bio published in a matter of months. But Canadian cinema? You can't find a more obscure subject.

That's why Karen Mazurkewich's current book on Canadian animation, *Cartoon Capers: The Adventures of Canadian Animators*, is so extraordinary. Here's a tale that surely deserves many volumes and yet nothing beyond magazine articles has been published until now. Intensive research was undertaken in order to put this book together. Mazurkewich had to go to the original sources, the animators, in order to tell the often convoluted story of how this art form became so pervasive in Canada. Of the 217 sources cited in *Cartoon Capers*, over 100 bear the notice "interview with the author."

This will come as no surprise to anyone who has met Karen Mazurkewich. Like many members of the animation community, I know her and am impressed by her drive, enthusiasm and straightforward approach to her subjects. Visiting her years ago, I was shown artwork by many animators as well as transcripts from some of the interviews Mazurkewich had already conducted for this project. In addition to stills from dozens of animated films, readers of *Cartoon Capers* will be rewarded with such unique products of Mazurkewich's research as an original drawing by NFB legend Kaj Pindal, a page from a 1960s underground comic by Oscar-winner John Weldon and a Christmas card that John Kricfalusi, of "Ren and Stimpy" fame, designed for Bob "Beany and Cecil" Clampett.

Most Canadians know that this country is acclaimed for its animation work. Animators from Norman McLaren to Wendy Tilby have spoken from podiums around the world accepting awards for works created here. Over 30 animated films from Canada have been nominated for Academy Awards. Yet few Canadians can tell you how Canada became synonymous with animation for cultural enthusiasts worldwide.

The story begins with McLaren, who founded the animation unit at the NFB during the Second World War. The group achieved immediate success by producing excellent wartime propaganda shorts as well as film titles and graphics for documentaries. His key discovery, Colin Low, went on to head the unit throughout the 1950s and helped to foster a generation of new animated talents. It was no coincidence that McLaren's *Neighbours* was an Academy Award winner and Low's *Romance*



of *Transportation* in Canada won nine international awards and was an Oscar nominee. Both men were extremely gifted and they surrounded themselves with similarly talented individuals: George Dunning, Jim MacKay, Arthur Lipsett, René Jodoin, Derek Lamb and Gerry Potterton worked at the Board during those initial 20 years. Each made considerable contributions to the animated art form. When Dunning and MacKay left the Board in the late 1940s, they formed Graphic Associates, Toronto's first commercial animation house. Among their employees was Michael Snow, one of Canada's most important avant-garde artists. Lipsett, himself, carved a niche for experimental filmmaking at the Board and beyond with his brilliant films, including

the Oscar-nominated *Very Nice, Very Nice*. Jodoin ran the French animation department when it was formed in the 1960s, encouraging the talents of such animators as Paul Driessen, Co Hoedeman, Caroline Leaf and Jacques Drouin while also producing the first computer-animated film in the world, *La Faim* (*Hunger*). Lamb helmed the English unit during its peak period of productivity in the late 1970s when it won back-to-back Oscars (Hoedeman's *The Sand Castle*, John Weldon's and Eunice Macauley's *Special Delivery*). And, as directors, Dunning's *Yellow Submarine* and Potterton's *Heavy Metal* remain two of the most important animated features ever made.

Mazurkewich covers the NFB's contribution to animation worldwide very well. She also untangles the knotty tale of Canada's animated commercial advertising houses and charts the growth of such TV-oriented producers as Toronto's Nelvana and Montreal's Cinar Productions. *Cartoon Capers* covers the new growth in animation as digital artists—mostly Canadian—have taken over the special-effects departments of every major film produced in Hollywood. She looks at the Canadian diaspora as Canadians ranging from digital guru Stephen Williams (*Jurassic Park*, *The Mask*) to Duncan Marjoribanks, the character animator who drew Abu, the monkey in *Aladdin*, have left Canada for the big numbers down south.

Animation may well be a touchstone for Canada's cultural industries. Here's a genre that was nurtured through government support and has managed to make itself a player on a global scale. Thanks to film schools like Sheridan College, young Canadians are still receiving a superior education in animation. Upon graduation, the best can go to Hollywood or stay here to produce work for television or commercials. Karen Mazurkewich has given what every educator or aficionado of Canadian animation has long needed; a thoroughly researched, well-considered history of the art form in this country. She deserves kudos for her effort.