

TWELVE: L'ENVOI. THE TRAIN TO MARIPOSA

DEEPER UNDERSTANDING

“AS IF THEY WERE ALL ONE FAMILY”: KINDLINESS AND HUMOUR

Sunshine Sketches has been continuously in print since it first appeared in 1911. Suggesting its importance, University of Ottawa English professor Gerald Lynch believes that it “should be recognized as the first masterpiece of Canadian fiction”²⁵ While it is always difficult to determine exactly what makes some books classics and what leaves other books forgotten, novelist Eleanor Catton provides a clue about the nature of fiction that may help explain the lasting appeal of *Sunshine Sketches*. Catton believes that love and redemption are an important part of any book. “As a reader,” says Catton, “it is very hard to fall in love with a book that is vicious at its heart, or cowardly or mean-spirited”²⁶.

Catton’s belief in the need for kindness in fiction holds some similarities to Leacock’s views on humour. In all of Leacock’s writings about humour, he insists it must be kindly: “students of writing will do well to pause at the word *kindly* and ponder it well”²⁷. Beyond kindness, Leacock believes that humour in its best form—what he calls sublime humour—should be a mixture of laughter and pathos that provides “prolonged and sustained conception of the incongruities of life itself”²⁸. (Pathos is the quality of evoking pity or sadness.) So while there is much critique of small towns and human traits in *Sunshine Sketches*, it is difficult to say that the book is vicious, cowardly, or mean-spirited. Rather, it seems to exude a love for the Mariposas of Canada, even if Canada’s Mariposas are inherently flawed places.

1. How does L’Envoi create pathos? What impact does it have on *Sunshine Sketches* as a whole?
2. Do you agree with Catton’s idea that books that are vicious cannot be loved?
3. L’Envoi closes by saying that we all have roots in “the little Town in the Sunshine that once we knew” (191). Is this true? Are we all—at least in some ways—like the people of Mariposa?

25 Lynch, Gerald. “From Serial to Book: Leacock’s Revisions to *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, *Studies in Canadian Literature*, vol. 36, no. 2, p. 109.

26 “‘The Luminaries’ with author Eleanor Catton.” *The Sunday Edition*. CBC Radio One. www.cbc.ca/radio/popup/audio/listen.html?autoplay=true&clipIds=2415677228&mediaIds=2415676713&U=%5Bobject%20object%5D&contentarea=radio&contenttype=audio, 29:49.

27 Leacock, Stephen. *How to Write*. John Lane the Bodley Head, 1943, p. 213.

28 Leacock, Stephen. “American Humor.” *Essays and Literary Studies*, John Lane, 1916, p. 92.