

# what we know...

## Who is Jean Little?

Born in 1932, Jean Little is one of Canada's most successful children's authors and the first to deal with issues of disability. Her work and life provide a window into the history of disability in Canada.

## Little's Connection to Guelph-Wellington

Jean Little and her three siblings grew up in Taiwan with their missionary parents Llewellyn and Flora. The family moved back to Ontario in 1939, and after a brief period in Toronto, relocated to Llewellyn's hometown of Guelph in 1940. Little completed elementary and high school in Guelph, struggling with loneliness and exclusion due to her visual impairment. She found solace in poetry and fiction, and increasingly in writing it herself. Despite making friends in high school and joining the Canadian Girls in Training, she often felt like an outsider. After graduating from Victoria College, University of Toronto in 1955, Little was hired by the Rotary Crippled Children's Centre to teach a special needs class in Guelph. She taught at the Beechwood Crippled Children's Centre in Guelph throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s.

As former missionaries, Little's parents were committed to service both within the church and the larger Guelph community. Her mother spent two years as the Chair of the Wellington County School Board and was an active board member of the Elliot (a non-profit old-age home in Guelph); she won an award as Guelph's volunteer of the year in 1949.<sup>1</sup> Her father was president of the Rotary Club in Guelph. He also led a Sunday School group and was involved in the liberal and civically oriented Student Christian Movement at the Ontario Agricultural College.<sup>2</sup>

## Disability and Citizenship

Little's own life and experiences with her pupils informed her desire to create new narratives that featured more realistic and compassionate depictions of childhood disability. In her stories, Little argued that relatively small accommodations could secure people's full participation in society, that pity for people with disabilities was not productive for them or for anyone else, and that people with disabilities could be independent. She provided her readers with characters whose disability had an impact on them, but was only one aspect of their lives. This was an important political intervention at a time when people with disabilities were regarded as objects of pity, and were often seen only through the lens of their disability.

The views that Little expressed in her writing were influenced by her upbringing in a missionary family that was oriented towards social justice, her own experience of visual impairment, and the cultural currents of postwar Canada. In the years after World War II, Canada was struggling with the integration of millions of new immigrants and trying to forge a new identity as a nation. English Canadians were beginning to imagine themselves as an example of how different peoples could live together in harmony, though the reality was far from matching this ideal.<sup>3</sup> Little's fiction often contrasted the experiences of new immigrants to Canada with the experience of disability. She used the post-war discourses around the integration of new immigrants to make similar arguments for the integration of people with disabilities.

**"Children deserve to know that life is difficult and sad and trying and confusing – and exciting and fun and surprising and wonderful."<sup>4</sup>**

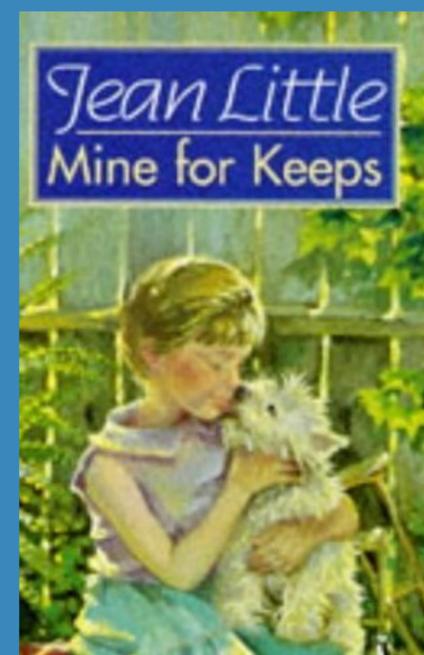
**- Jean Little**

## DISABILITY AND CITIZENSHIP in the Life and Fiction of Jean Little

### Mine For Keeps

Synopsis and significance:

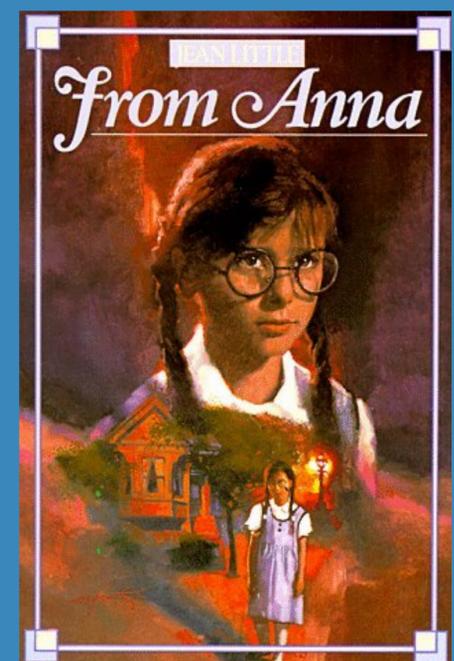
- *Mine for Keeps* tells the story of Sally Copeland, a young girl with cerebral palsy.
- Although Sally's disability is central to the book, Little focuses on Sally's struggle to make friends, achieve independence, and fit in with her family members.
- In teaching readers how people with disabilities should be treated, Little draws on notions of citizenship that were prominent in postwar Canada.
- Little's depiction of people with disabilities through *Mine for Keeps* was groundbreaking in the world of children's fiction because Sally had a happy-ending without recovery, a notion that was inconceivable to many readers.
- *Mine for Keeps* was chosen as Notable Children's Book of 1962 and received the Little, Brown and Company's Children Book Award.
- The book is still in print today and has been published in England, Japan, Denmark, and the Netherlands.



### From Anna

Synopsis and significance:

- *From Anna* tells the story of a young Jewish girl with a visual impairment who moves to Toronto from Germany.
- Anna attends a special Sight Saving class and is, for the first time, praised for her what she can do instead of being scolded for what she cannot.
- In addition to the central theme of disability, Anna's story highlights themes of loneliness, injustice, and family dynamics, making this book well-received and relatable to many elementary school readers.
- Anna's story teaches readers that even though people with disabilities will often face adversity and hardship, these individuals can learn how to fight back, befriend sympathetic peers, and become a part of their community through giving.
- Little reports that *From Anna* is her favourite novel because she sees it as a retelling of one of her most beloved books, *The Secret Garden*.



## References

<sup>1</sup>JLC, File XR1, MS A715137, "City Doctor Recipient of Award," *Guelph Mercury*, n.d.

<sup>2</sup>JLC, File XR1, MS A715137, Funeral Program for Llew Little in "Miscellaneous Family Related Items."

<sup>3</sup>Franca Iacovetta, *Gatekeepers: Reshaping immigrant Lives in Cold War Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 2006); Jose Iguartua, *The Other Quiet Revolution: National Identities in English Canada, 1945-1977* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006)

<sup>4</sup>JLC, File: XR1, MS A715046, Jean Little, "A Child's Right to Laugh and Grieve," *Children's Book World*, date obscured, probably early 1970s.

## Researchers

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