

Before Sliced Bread: Memoirs & Cuisine: A Collection of Canadiana

Jeannette Kerr

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This book is a charming account of a well-lived life and a sparkling introduction to Canadian culture.

Before Sliced Bread is an extended love letter to Jeannette Kerr's native Canada, chronicling her childhood in prewar Montreal and Newfoundland and her later years working and raising her family in several other provinces. This nostalgic compilation of family lore and memories harkens back to an era she describes as when "things were simple and life was reverent," but her tone never gets cloying or melancholy.

Kerr recounts the joys of winter sports outfitted in her Red River Coat and tasseled hat, throwing stink bombs at a gaggle of boys, and tucking into smoked meat sandwiches from Schwartz's Deli. Canadian readers will smile knowingly as these tales unfold, and those unfamiliar with Canadian culture will learn a lot.

Studding the memoir like raisins in a Figgy Duff (see page 66) are recipes for twenty-eight traditional Quebecois, Acadian, and Anglo-Canadian foods. Kerr draws not only from her own culinary heritage (she is the product of a French-Canadian mother and a Newfoundland father of Irish descent) but from her years as the chef-owner of La Corbeille, a fine dining restaurant in Bathurst. Her portraits of various ancestors, friends, and neighbors nicely introduce these delicious tidbits, and each finished dish is illustrated with one of the author's elegantly composed color photographs. It is a mouthwatering tour of this geographically and culturally diverse country, from the molasses taffy and fried fiddleheads of the Maritimes to the hearty farmhouse fare of her grandmother-in-law's Manitoba kitchen.

Kerr is a great ambassador for Canadian history and culture, but does not shy away from noting some negative aspects of the good old days, like the ethnic and religious prejudices that divided her old Montreal neighborhood or the sometimes harsh treatment she and her childhood friends received from the local Catholic priests and nuns. Her prose really shines when she describes celebrations with her family and friends. She masterfully evokes all the senses in her description of the rousing French-Canadian Christmas season, replete with the scent of spruce boughs, the sight of window candles flickering "like so much diamond dust," and the pleasures of feasting and caroling during the all-night party on Christmas Eve, *le réveillon*.

Sometimes the author switches from the past tense to the present tense, sometimes even in the same paragraph, and tightening up these minor syntax errors would be an improvement. This book is a charming account of a well-lived life and a sparkling introduction to Canadian culture.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (November 9, 2015)

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