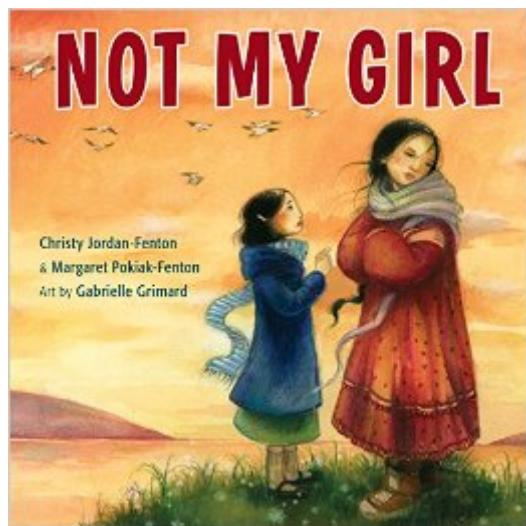


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# Not My Girl



## Synopsis

Margaret can't wait to see her family, but her homecoming is not what she expected. Based on the true story of Margaret Pokiak-Fenton, and complemented by evocative illustrations, *Not My Girl* makes the original, award-winning memoir, *A Stranger at Home*, accessible to younger children. It is also a sequel to the picture book *When I Was Eight*. A poignant story of a determined young girl's struggle to belong, it will both move and inspire readers everywhere.

## Book Information

Paperback: 36 pages

Publisher: Annick Press (January 9, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1554516242

ISBN-13: 978-1554516247

Product Dimensions: 9 x 0.1 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 3.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars (See all reviews) (8 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #999,045 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #80 in Books > Children's Books > Education & Reference > History > Canada #145 in Books > Children's Books > Geography & Cultures > Explore the World > Canada #1331 in Books > Children's Books > Biographies > Multicultural

Age Range: 6 - 7 years

Grade Level: 1 - 4

## Customer Reviews

By 1884 it was compulsory for the First Nations children of Canada to attend either a day or residential school. The "Indian residential schools" were mostly active from 1876 through the middle of the 1900's, and "educated" over 150,000 children. Always controversial, the modern consensus is that the schools, on balance, did great harm - stripping the children of family and cultural connections and estranging them from their native languages in the name of civilization and assimilation. Since 2008 multiple apologies have been issued by those who funded, supported and operated the schools. All of this stands as background to the story of Margaret Pokiak, who was delivered to a residential school as an eight year old and returned to her home and family two years later as an almost unrecognizable stranger. Margaret's story does not cast her as an Oliver Twist in a Dickensian institution. The school is referred to only obliquely and there is no description

of her routine at the school. The book begins exactly at the time of her return home and describes in plain and moving prose the difficulty, struggle and emotional turmoil she experienced trying to truly return. This part of Margaret's story was first told by this author in *A Stranger At Home: A True Story*. That book was published in 2011; it ran to over 125 pages, was basically a prose memoir with photos and artwork, and was aimed at readers in the 9 to 12 year range. "Not My Girl" is intended for a younger, (say, 6 to 9 year old), audience and is a condensed version of the story, supplemented strikingly and effectively with touching and emotionally resonant new artwork. "Not My Girl" retains the power and authenticity of the earlier work while succeeding in making the story accessible to younger readers. This is a stunning and timely testimony, without bitterness or blame, but with a clear and plain statement of the wrong that was done. It ends on a strong, hopeful and affirmative note, which may not be entirely realistic but does seem to me to be appropriate for the book's audience of younger readers. So, a calm but compelling story of the importance of family, friends, and society, told with restraint and elegance and not a single false or overwrought note. What a nice find. Please know that I received a free advance copy of this book in exchange for a candid review. Apart from that I have no connection at all to either the author or the publisher of this book.

As usual I received this book free for the purposes of review. Also as usual I give my candid thoughts below. The story, as you can tell from the description, is that of a young Inuit girl who returns home from what is essentially boarding school only to be rejected by her friends and family because she is now an outsider. To the positive side, the story is a pretty moving and complex one. It raises some serious and deeply difficult questions about what it means to belong to a group and the divide between native cultures and the outside world. As an adult I really feel for the main character because she's representative of all those who find themselves in a modern world yet tied to an earlier time by family bonds. The negative side, unfortunately, is that I can't imagine any child wanting to read this book. The point is strongly made on me but there's no way I could ready this to my own kids and make them understand the complicated issues this book is trying to address. This is just too deep and too emotional for any 5-7-year-old to really get it. Add to that the fact that the illustrations are at times rather warped and abstract and you get a book that I just wouldn't take a chance on. In summary, I love the point this book is trying to make but this is just the sort of children's book that will end up in the clearance bin. It's trying to say too much to the wrong sort of audience. It's a pity because it's a good message. Just not aimed at the right crowd.

Not My Girl by Christy Jordan-Fenton and Margaret Pokiak-Fenton is an adaptation of *A Stranger at Home*, which depicts the struggles which Olemaun faces as she attempts to rediscover her place within her Inuit community and her family after being apart from them for two years. Because I have read both books, as I review Not My Girl, I will also be comparing and contrasting the two versions.

I will start with what I liked about Not My Girl. It contains a couple of particularly touching subplots. The first involves dogs. Neither those belonging to the community or to the family recognize her scent. When Olemaun attempts to reconnect with the dogs, she is greeted with snarls and snaps. Her father advises that she needs to give them time. One day, Olemaun snatches up a puppy from the family's pack of dogs and takes him with her on a walk to see a friend. When she doesn't get to see her friend, Olemaun spends the day playing with the puppy at the beach, forgetting about the fact the puppy is still of the age that it needs milk from its mother.

The second involves Christmas. Her brother receives a train and her sister a porcelain doll. When Olemaun's parents ignore her wish for similar toys, she breaks down and cries. She tried so hard to belong but obviously failed. Or so she believes. Not My Girl also contains vividly descriptive language and would serve as an excellent mentor text. Consider this simile: "It was as though the wings of one thousand birds soared in my heart." It's followed up with this metaphor: "The birds in my heart fell to the sky." Fenton carries the bird image further: "I wondered what kind of bird I had become. I no longer felt like I belonged to this flock." Later, readers are treated to this description of the northern lights: "where the iridescent fronds of the northern lights danced down from the sky." Again, Fenton extends the image to portray how Olemaun feels. "Grandmother once told me that if I whistled to them, their tendrils would reach down and snatch me away. I whistled until my lips hurt, but they ignored me."

Next, I will turn to what I didn't like about Not My Girl. Even more so than her first attempt at a picture book, I feel as if Fenton merely abbreviated the original story instead of creating a new one to fit its unique format and audience. For me, the introduction doesn't quite hit the mark. It feels rushed, summative, and even leaves out important facts. I know that Olemaun has been to an outsiders' school, where she learned to speak English and other academic skills, and that her mother views her as a stranger. If not for having read Fenton's earlier books, however, I wouldn't know what Olemaun had been to a white man's school, why that was problematic for her, or how horrific that experience had been. For readers new to Fenton's books, Not My Girl may not provide enough context for them to fully appreciate it. My second complaint is that upon first read, Not My Girl feels episodic and not unified. Rereading it, I finally comprehended that Fenton choose to

emphasis Olemaun's relationship with the local dogs. Both her estrangement from and acceptance by the dogs parallels the reaction of the community and her family to Olemaun. In *A Stranger at Home*, a lot more details are included such as the shyness displayed by her siblings when Olemaun attempts to play with them, the family's decision not to return to Banks Island, and her mother's recognition that the white man's ways are changing their culture despite the family's protest. Fenton has eliminated all of those, focusing mainly on the dogs, which will I realize appeal to younger readers. However, Fenton's story still feels overwhelming to me as an adult, which means I suspect young readers will need an adult to guide them through it. Although *Not My Girl* may prove difficult for its audience without support, both of Fenton's picture books stood out to me as suitable mentor texts. They are rich in language and beautifully illustrated. Each would make an excellent addition to schools, while Fenton's chapter books could be enjoyed by young readers themselves.

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