

Bookworm

The Quints: the compelling drama of Canada's international stars

by Shirley Whittington
 Pierre Berton has another winner in *The Dionne Years*, a well researched and superbly organized account of the early life and hoopla surrounding the Dionne Quintuplets—the five little girls that put Callander, Ontario on the map.
 Berton estimates that the Dionne sisters were a \$500 million asset to the Province of Ontario in the middle thirties. The Quints, at the height of their popularity were international stars of the first magnitude—and the stars came to Callander to see them. Bette Davis made the trip, and so did Alexander Woolcott. Amelia Earhart made the

their playground.
 Affects of isolation How did this isolation affect the children?
 Berton's book details the guardianship and financial arrangements that were made after the Quints' birth. He also tells of the intrigues that went on behind the nursery walls, and the growing rift between Dr. Dafoe and the children's parents.
 Dafoe, who caught the imagination of the world as an overworked, unpretentious and omniscient country doctor who cared little for money is revealed as racist, demanding, publicity-seeking and certainly not penniless.

He made a small fortune from his association with the famous babies.
 The Dionne Quintuplets were brought up very much as royal children are and in 1936, everybody thought they would live like royal children for the rest of their lives. It never occurred to anybody that some day they would have to go out into the world, unprotected and unescorted. They were never taught the simplest of household skills. They had no idea of money management. Their social skills were nonexistent since they played only with each other.
 They were reunited with their family when

they were nine years old, but found themselves unable to relate to a totally foreign environment. When the five finally left home, they fared no better.
 Emilie suffocated to death during an epileptic seizure in a convent near Ste. Agathe. Marie, after a disastrous attempt to run a flower shop, separated from her

husband. She began to drink heavily, and died alone in her Montreal apartment of a blood clot on the brain.
 Cecile, Yvonne and Annette still live in the Montreal suburb of St. Bruno. Cecile works in a supermarket to support her children. Her marriage has failed, as has that of her sister Annette, who lives a

meagre life, supporting her four children on the monthly interest from her trust fund.
 Yvonne never married, and lives a hermit-like existence with her only outings consisting of trips to the local library where she does volunteer work.

Pierre Berton's *The Dionne Years* is an enormously readable book, which is full of the flavour of those depression times. For those who are too young to have experienced "Quint fever," the book will provide a glimpse

into the unsophisticated thirties. And for those who drove miles to see the famous babies, or who were encouraged to keep scrap books of the Quints,

the Dionne Years will make fascinating reading.



A moneymaker

trip too, five weeks before her ill fated round-the-world flight.
 The very survival of the little girls was a miracle. At birth they were so tiny that all five were kept in a butcher's basket, covered with heated blankets in front of the wood stove. Dr. Dafoe, insisted that they not be handled for the first few days after their birth, and that the temperature inside their padded basket be kept constant and high. This very sensible advice probably saved their lives.
 The rupture with the rest of the family began shortly after their birth. The rest of the Dionnes were banished to the upstairs of the storey and a half farmhouse. The downstairs was hurriedly organized into a nursery.
 Four months later, the babies were moved into the specially built Dafoe Nursery, and their gold fishbowl existence began. Although their own parents had limited access to them, visitors by the millions filed past the window that looked out on



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