Discovery and Adventure in Fiction and Fact

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The Ghost Ship, Delbert A. Young. Illustrated by William Taylor. Clarke, Irwin, 1972. 191 pp. $5.50 cloth.

According to Hakluyt: Tales of Adventure and Exploration, Delbert A. Young. Clarke, Irwin, 1973. $6.95 cloth.

Before his death in January 1975, Delbert A. Young produced a total of five books: the well known history of the RCMP, *The Mounties* (1968; rpt. PaperJacks, 1973), three historical novels of sea-faring adventure based on Renaissance explorations, and, in the curiously titled *According to Hakluyt*, a collection of modernized versions of some contemporary sixteenth-century factual accounts of early voyages of discovery to Canada and elsewhere. His two early novels - *Mutiny on Hudson Bay* (Gage, 1973) and *Last Voyage of the Unicorn* (Clarke, Irwin, 1969) - have earned him a wide audience and much well-deserved critical praise. Sheila Egoff recommends both without qualification: in *Mutiny*, "fiction and history are well blended, . . . and the slight use of conventional seventeenth-century speech helps to draw the reader into the past"; *Unicorn* "is true adventure lightly touched with fiction, but it makes a compelling story because of the innate drama of men endeavouring to survive."[1] *Unicorn* won Young his first Hudson Bay Company Beaver Award; *The Ghost Ship* more recently won the same award. Lorna Sykes, writing in the Book Review Section of the Vancouver *Providence*, declared that she "never realized that [*Last Voyage of the Unicorn*] was a children's book until the end"; the *Canadian Author and Bookman* in 1969 hailed Young as "emerging as a major contributor to Canadian literature for young people."

One wishes it were possible to insist - without reservations - that Mr. Young has fulfilled his literary promise in his final two works, but neither is a totally satisfactory performance. Both *The Ghost Ship* and the *Hakluyt* can be considered "near misses": they can boast the merits - and these are considerable - of Young's previous Renaissance fiction, but both have flaws serious enough to prevent young people from responding to these merits unless their reading is aided and guided by a wise librarian, teacher, or parent. Fortunately the weaknesses of

both books are such that they can be turned to advantage by educators willing to make the effort. Later I will suggest ways of presenting the books to young readers (and the pun is inevitable); first, however, it is worth seeing why the two are well worth the trouble.

Young had a genius for selecting intrinsically exciting historical incidents about which to write: his first two novels deal with attempts to discover the Northwest Passage; *The Ghost Ship* is based on Drake's piratical raids on the Spanish treasure ships during his circumnavigation of the globe; the *Hakluyt* presents accounts of thirteen Renaissance voyages of exploration and discovery, eight of them to Canada. In the novels, Young fleshes out the basic materials with sufficient fiction to make the stories and the past vivid and meaningful. His effectiveness is achieved primarily through the sophisticated use of a technique which keeps the reader both involved and alert. In each of the novels Young uses a perceptive but not atypical teenaged boy as both participant in, and narrator of, the adventures shared by all on the voyage. Thus, since the story is told in the first person, we are both presented with descriptions of events and involved in those events because we share a youngster's emotional and intellectual response to them.

A distinctive aspect of Young's narrators is that each is biased. Very early in each book we learn that the lad is writing about his adventures for a definite purpose. Each narrator writes in retrospect, and each begins his narrative convinced that he has an accurate perspective on his experiences. The young Nicholas of *Mutiny* writes in an attempt to justify his conduct in joining the men who took over Henry Hudson's ship and left him and his son adrift in an open boat; Niels describes the voyage of the Unicorn to show that the expedition failed not because his captain was incompetent, but because all hands were devastated by a disease unknown to the science of his day (trichinosis contracted from eating bear meat). Ted of *The Ghost Ship* is more complexly characterized than his predecessors, and he is the only narrator likely to prove a problem to young readers. He is a twentieth-century Canadian who believes he spent a year - 1578 - sailing around the Americas on Francis Drake's ship, the Golden Hind: he writes of his adventures, he tells us, to convince himself that he is not insane, that all he recalls was not a delusion or dream. As the novel begins, he tells us of his major bias: he decidedly prefers the past to the present. Two thematically parallel situations are introduced to illustrate the prejudice: Ted, writing in the twentieth century, dislikes his recently acquired step-father and knows that he is growing estranged from his mother because of her second marriage; he also feels that, given the choice, he would return to the sixteenth century forever. Unlike Young's earlier narrators who are static characters, Ted undergoes a process of development and enlightenment during the course of the novel. As he relives his adventures while writing about them, he slowly comes to terms with the present: by the end of the novel he is "really hitting it off" with his stepfather and he has determined to "get on with living and enjoying life in the present" (p. 191).

The difficulty with *The Ghost Ship* is that Young's technique may be too sophisticated for many readers. The teenagers on whom I tested

the novel thought it was filled with internal contradictions: in addition to Ted's shift in attitude towards the past and present, we find characters using Elizabethan English when Ted first arrives on the Golden Hind and just before he returns to his own country; in the central chapters, however, all speak fairly modern English. These are not, in fact, examples of an author losing control of his materials, but rather attempts at depicting Ted's response to his situation. As Ted recalls his experiences, he also begins reliving them: what appeared strange to him at first soon becomes commonplace as he begins forgetting his twentieth-century existence; as he becomes acclimatized to life on the Golden Hind, he hears with sixteenth-century ears and views all from a sixteenth-century perspective. People no longer sound like characters in Shakespeare's plays to him. Only later in the novel, as the plot requires him to begin recalling modern times, do things in the past again strike him as strange; finally, back in his twentieth-century environment, we see that he has achieved sufficient maturity to evaluate and reject the past.

Thus, while there is a satisfactory literary reason for Young's apparent inconsistency with language and with the attitudes he has Ted express, Young does not make the logic behind his technique sufficiently clear to his audience. Readers should be alerted in advance to the fact that their narrator is evolving and maturing as he tells his story. It would be inconsistent for Ted as a character to be aware of the fact that his experiences are modifying his attitudes; readers who are unaware of this, however, may miss one of the major satisfactions of the novel. And, because all three of Young's narrators define their prejudices, alert - or alerted - readers are encouraged to ask themselves whether these narrators are being completely objective in their reporting and evaluation of events. Young in all three novels helpfully provides bibliographies - some annotated - for any readers interested enough to search for alternate and factual accounts of the same historical incidents.

Young's narrators are also instrumental in convincing us that while there was infinitely more opportunity for heroism, adventure, and excitement in the past, there was at the same time infinitely more filth, disease, suffering, and - by our standards - utter stupidity than much historical fiction shows. The youthful narrators put us in touch with both sides of Renaissance life: while they live with the crews of the ships they sail, they have frequent personal contact with their captains. Men such as Sir Francis Drake and Henry Hudson are rightly seen by the young narrators as larger-than-life world conquerors: to their contemporaries they were as awe-inspiring as today's astronauts. We see equally clearly the grim realities of the ordinary seaman's life before the mast: the cost of permitting a visionary to search for the Northwest Passage was so much scurvy, malnutrition, lice, lack of sanitation, and such an inclination to attribute every vagary of the weather to supernatural demons that one is awed by the fact that men could survive under such conditions long enough to discover and explore the Americas. Young's novels do not present us with anything like the old technicolor movie versions of explorers and pirates: rather, they strike an excellent balance between the romantic excitement of the Age of

Discovery and the reality of the hardships which made the discoveries possible. Because they are more than mere adventure stories, the novels give youngsters a fairly accurate insight into what, in fact, it must have felt like to be alive at a time when the face of the world was changing daily.

Of the three novels, *The Ghost Ship*, because it uses a twentieth-century narrator describing sixteenth-century life, is best able to provide a meaningful contrast between the Renaissance and the present. It is, however, a novel youngsters are very likely to discard after looking over the first few pages. My captive audience completed the first chapter only because they had absolutely no choice in the matter; once introduced to the sixteenth-century sailor's life on board the Golden Hind at the beginning of Chapter Two, however, they were enthusiastic about continuing.

Two factors operate to alienate readers at the outset: the title is misleading and disappointing, and the frame story - the fictional means which Young uses to transport his narrator from the present to the past - is poorly conceived and ineptly written. Surely a reader has the right to expect a novel called *The Ghost Ship* to center on a ship possessed by the supernatural; surely he will feel cheated when he discovers that the work has nothing in common with either *The Flying Dutchman* or "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." The book is, in fact, successful because neither the ship nor the men on it nor the voyage itself are in any way haunted or ghostly: as Young himself points out in an introduction (which should be an epilogue: no reader wants a "lecture" on history *before* enjoying his historical fiction), all the incidents in the novel - except, obviously, the frame story - are based on recorded history. Sheila Egoff agrees that the central section of the work is "accurate," but she finds it "dull,"[2] an evaluation I find incomprehensible. It is the rare page on which we do not find Ted and Drake's men boarding a Spanish galleon, ransacking a town for treasure, battling their way through a storm at sea, or the like.

To teenagers, an aspect of the novel even more frustrating than the title is the confusing means by which Young presents the journey of his modern Canadian narrator through time to the year 1578. Science fiction - to say nothing of science itself - has so accustomed us to the possibility of time travel that, so long as the author does not actually prevent our suspension of disbelief, we are perfectly willing to accept characters jumping across time and space at the drop of a pseudo-scientific term. Had Young simply permitted Ted to wander into an inexplicable "temporal-spacio warp" or some such and find himself, one sentence later, four hundred years in the past and inhabiting another boy's body, no reader "enlightened" by Saturday morning television would have minded in the least. As is, alas, Young alienates his readers with an interminable twenty-one page first chapter in which Ted rambles on about a mishmash of events which seem somehow to be connected with his tumbling into the sixteenth-century. He has a series of headaches which he attributes to a virus, but which seem to be related to the fact that Ned, his Renaissance counterpart, was knocked on the head during a shipboard accident; Ted is reading himself to sleep (an account of Drake's voyage, of course) when his bedroom suddenly

appears to exist in both past and present simultaneously. Ned - who at this point in the novel is either a ghost or a hallucination or a time traveler (or all three at once) - has the ability to wander around the house (especially through walls) and across the centuries at will, but is unable to accomplish what he wishes until he tricks Ted into saying, "I wish we could trade places!" (p. 20). The problem with the sequence is that Young has jumbled his mythologies: we have elements of folklore, magic, science fiction, fantasy, and Freudian wish-fulfilment (how better to escape an unwanted stepfather than by leaving someone else in your body to cope with him?). Worst of all, nothing is clarified at the end of the novel: the boys end up in their rightful centuries, but we are never told how or why.

Readers are justified in being outraged at all this nonsense, but are we justified in permitting it to make them turn away from a novel that is, in most other respects, highly rewarding? A trick - and it would be hypocritical to call it anything other than a "trick" - which works is to relate the first chapter to the overall characterization of Ted. Throughout the novel we see that he is a highly opinionated young man, and it is perfectly consistent that such a person would not care to admit to himself that he is incapable of understanding how it was possible for him to spend a year in the sixteenth century. In the first chapter Ted can be seen as fumbling for an explanation: he is reviewing everything he remembers in hopes of finding a satisfactory answer. Not everything he tells us, however, may be relevant: can readers separate the wheat from the chaff and show how the exchange of Ted and Ned actually took place? While their ingenuity may (or may not) amaze you, it is worth keeping in mind that whatever theory is evolved - reincarnation, time travel, magic, dream, amnesia, or whatever - the major value of the novel is elsewhere: the trick is justifiable only as a way of letting readers see the Renaissance through twentieth-century eyes.

Finally, one of the most valuable exercises for young writers - or for young readers with imagination - is suggested in the final chapter of *The Ghost Ship*. Suggest to readers that they write - or imagine - the other half of the novel. We see throughout why Ted comes to reject the past in favor of the present, but we hear very little of Ned's ideas about our century. Precisely why would a Renaissance teenager be so eager to escape our way of life? Why would he prefer his lice and vermin to our sterile plastics and television? The exercise in imagination could lead students to a vivid perspective both on themselves and on their ancestors.

The Ghost Ship is, on the whole, worth the trouble required to get readers past the obstacles put in their way by the author. One wishes it were possible to dismiss Young's *According to Hakluyt* as simply not worth the trouble, but unfortunately we are stuck with it. Its appearance will undoubtedly prevent publication of the versions of the Hakluyt narratives which could be infinitely more valuable to schools and libraries than Young's. Buried in Hakluyt's original *Principall Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation,* an epic Renaissance publication (1598-1600) which runs to 1.5 million words, are dozens of contemporary accounts of the discovery and exploration of Canada, of the initial encounters of Europeans with

Indians and Eskimos, of the animals and fish the early travelers saw (or imagined they saw), and the like. Modern texts of these factual accounts and records have long been needed. Pre-teens would, of course, respond only to the more colorful of the records, but surely these should be readily available in simplified versions. Older students however, require accurate, modern spelling editions with appropriate critical apparatus: the original Hakluyt, for example, has Columbus discovering America in 1592 rather than 1492, and he, of course, uses Renaissance rather than modern (and recognizable) names for places. Adequate notes identifying errors, name changes, and other problems in the original are thus essential for any student of the materials. There are a few abridged, modern spelling editions of the *Navigations* available with notes, but none contains more than one or two of the accounts of the explorations of Canada. The complete Canadian materials are, at present, available only to the most indefatigable researchers in the old spelling, eight-volume Everyman edition[3] which contains no notes and a highly unsatisfactory index: there is only one listing for "Canada" although references to Canada are found in hundreds of the records. A usable collection of the Canadian materials - or, at least, of the major Canadian materials - should be available to every high schooler as a basic research and resource instrument.

Young's *According to Hakluyt: Tales of Adventure and Exploration* is an unsatisfactory substitute for what is needed. In the first place, both title and subtitle are misleading. Nothing in the volume is "according" to Hakluyt, nor does it contain what most people would call a "tale" about anything. Richard Hakluyt was an archivist who published all the documents he collected; he translated the occasional foreign original into English; he rarely - very rarely - transcribed an account dictated orally. The most distinctive feature of the original *Navigations* is Hakluyt's tendency to print everything he could lay his hands on; side by side we find contradictory accounts of the same voyage, with Hakluyt making no attempt to reconcile differences in "fact": the reader must decide for himself which authority is accurate. Nor can any of these records or accounts be termed a "tale" if by the term we mean "fiction": every document in the collection - including those modernized by Young in his edition - purports to be accurate and factual. Our knowledge that Renaissance sailors did not, in fact, observe sea-unicorns frolicking does not alter the fact that the men - unless they are lying - did see something which they believed to be sea-unicorns.

Young writes well and the narratives included in his volume are effectively modernized; the syntax and vocabulary are predominately twentieth-century with sufficient archaic but recognizable terms (such as "well-victualled") that the reader is given something of the flavour of the original. All of the accounts he presents are intrinsically interesting and well worth reading. Of the voyages to Canada, he prints the Frobisher expeditions, the three by Davis, one by Hore, and one identified only as "The Voyage of the Sunshine and the North Star" (an expedition whose captain Young does not identify and whom I have not yet tracked down); there are also two voyages to the South Atlantic and three circumnavigations. Young's collection obviously lacks unity: if the intent were to give a sampling of the materials in Hakluyt, more

diversity is needed; if the intent is to focus on Canada, why the non-Canadian expeditions and why not Cabot?

The format of the book is poor. One can follow the routes taken by the various explorers only by studying large scale, detailed maps while reading the accounts; the maps included in the volume are totally inadequate for this. There are three very small scale maps, each less than one page in size; each map presents (in uniform grey) four continents and three oceans. The three maps are identical except that different locations are marked on each; by no means are *all* the places mentioned in the accounts shown. I doubt that any student could fully understand either the narratives themselves or the geographical references in them unless he had access to an atlas to accompany his reading.

The majority of the accounts are introduced by biographical information supplied by Young; most are followed by commentary designed to aid in understanding the narrative itself. These materials are often valuable and necessary but, as is the case with the maps, what is provided is not quite adequate. Young is inconsistent in that he points out some errors - especially in latitudes and longitudes - made by the original authors of the accounts, but he leaves a number of confusing statements unexplained. Likewise, while some Renaissance names for locations are identified in modern terms, others are not. We learn, for example, that Frobisher's Queen Elizabeth Foreland is our Resolution Island (p. 8), but we are never told that when Hore speaks of the West Indies, he means the Maritimes (p. 4). Students should, of course, be encouraged to undertake research into the questions not answered by Young; the defects in his volume could in this way be used as a means of introducing properly motivated students to reference works.

The major weakness of Young's *According to Hakluyt,* as I see it, is that the volume does not present enough of the Canadian materials to which students should have access. I would suggest that, in the long run, the most valuable use to which the Young volume might be put is to encourage readers to use it as an aid in introducing themselves to the original Hakluyt *Navigations*. Although inadequate in many respects, the index in the Everyman edition is sufficient to permit students to locate the original texts of the accounts which Young modernizes. The Young versions are close enough to these originals that students working with both simultaneously would rapidly develop the ability to read the old spelling texts and familiarize themselves with the pecularities of Elizabethan syntax. Once unintimidated by Renaissance English, teenagers would find - literally and metaphorically - a plethora of new worlds opening to them: many (but by no means all) of the factual Hakluyt narratives are as exciting in themselves as the historical fiction which is so frequently based on them.

References

1 *The Republic of Childhood*, 2nd ed., (Toronto: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975) p. 130.

[2] *Republic of Childhood*, p. 94.

[3] New York: Dutton, 1907; reprinted 1962. The introduction in Volume 1 by John Masefield is excellent.

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"Je Lis Tout Seul" - Vrai ou Faux?

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Je lis tout seul, Editions Hurtubise, Montréal, 1973.

Je lis tout seul comprend deux collections de livres. La première est divisée en six séries de quatre livres chacun. La deuxième se divise en dix séries de trois ou quatres livres chacun. Comme professeurs d'un programme d'immersion française, voici notre évaluation de ces collections.

La première collection peut être utilisée en maternelle comme livres lus par le professeur aux élèves et en première année comme livres lus par l'élève lui-même. Chaque livre de seize pages entretient des sujets divers tels que les animaux, la ferme, les oiseaux, la mer et beaucoup d'autres. Les histoires traitées dans ces livres sont courtes et réalistes. Même si elles sont courtes elles sont complètes et en seize pages elles peuvent bien nous situer un endroit: "À la ferme," "À la plage," "La boutique des bêtes;" elles peuvent figurer des personnages: "Jean et sa voiture," "Le bébé oiseau," "Un petit singe"; et elles peuvent présenter du suspens: "Une maison pour un lapin." Réalistes, elles décrivent des animaux: "Le coq," "Deux petits ours", et les choses qui nous entourent: "Un incendie," "Nathalie et sa poupée," "Le cirque."

Parlons maintenant de l'attrait visuel des livres. Chaque page contient une image, de couleurs vives, qui explique par elle-même le sens de l'histoire. En d'autres mots, l'image raconte l'histoire. Ceci est