

A Story of Survival

JAMES HARRISON

Strange Companion, Dayton O. Hyde. Clarke, Irwin & Co. 1975. \$6.95 cloth.

This is an admirable story for any child of eleven or over who is interested in wild life and could identify with a boy surviving in the bush on his own. It tells of David, a thirteen-year-old, who runs away from his stepfather and stows away on a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service plane at Edmonton airport. Instead of taking him south to the States as he had hoped, however, the plane heads north to count ducks and geese on their breeding grounds, and crashes in the bush. The pilot, Archie, breaks his leg, and David, who has learnt a great deal about roughing it in the wild from his stepfather, patches up the plane as a shelter, traps hares with snares made from the plane's electrical wiring, and keeps the pair of them alive.

The season is early spring, and they find a female whooping crane dead on her nest, with one unbroken egg under her, which they are able to incubate by the warmth of their bodies. Archie knows quite a lot about these very rare birds, and he and David make attentive foster parents. When Rusty, the young crane, is mobile enough, Archie uses homemade crutches to take him for a walk while David inspects his snares. The pair of them stray too near a cow moose with her new-born calf, and the man is trampled to death in the marsh trying to save the bird from her enraged charge.

David realizes, when he finds his friend's body, that the leg had not been mending as Archie had kept assuring him it was, that they would never have made that three-hundred-mile journey on foot they had been discussing since it became obvious they were not going to be rescued, and that Archie had probably been spared a lingering, painful death. The rest of the book tells of the journey by boy and bird toward the nearest road, and of David's eventual rescue, thanks to a message carried by Rusty when, finally, the instinct to migrate takes him flying south to escape the approaching winter.

David's original decision to run away from home, though necessary if the story is to take place at all, is minimally motivated. This is probably as it should be, since the boy will come to rely so heavily, later in the book, on all his stepfather, Kise, has taught him, and will wish himself back home so often. Indeed, Kise and all the other adult figures in the book are somewhat idealized. Archie, when one considers he is suffering from a badly broken leg which is not mending, and knows the chances of rescue are minimal, is unbelievably cheerful and appreciative of David's efforts, unbelievably concerned about Rusty's fate as one of the world's forty-odd surviving whooping cranes. However, the effect of all this goodwill on the book is more than counterbalanced by the adversity David encounters from other quarters.

At times, indeed, the author strains our credulity by presenting David with unnecessarily severe problems. Even Robinson Crusoe did not have to forge his own axe, and a plane of this kind would surely have had one aboard. More seriously, some may find David's success in keeping his sanity and staying alive for a year in the wilderness quite beyond belief. The author has concentrated so consistently, however, on the practical steps that must be taken at every stage (David must blaze a trail all the way, for instance, lining up his last two blazes before making a new one, to keep going in a straight line) that even the adult reader can forget to be incredulous that a thirteen-year-old can find the inner resources to be disciplined in all he does. Moreover, the psychological pressures are convincingly minimized by David's having Archie as a companion in the early days, and Rusty to care for most of his journey, only being left on his own during the final winter months in an abandoned cabin. And here he does approach breaking point.

Obviously the opportunities are endless for the author to introduce his young readers to the ways of the wild, as well as to the techniques for survival. Hares and ptarmigans change colour with the seasons; the old male whooping crane suddenly becomes hostile to last year's offspring, driving him away, as mating time approaches; the mother moose eats her calf's afterbirth to avoid attracting predators. There is also a good deal of propaganda on behalf of preserving endangered species. Now and then these didactic aspects to the book are clumsily pedantic (and even careless), as in: "David tipped back his head and tried to come up with his own mocking challenge, but his voice lacked the buglelike resonance of the crane's twenty-four-foot (*sic*; 24-inch?) trachea. . ." But for the most part they are skilfully interwoven so as to arise out of or to advance the action.

In brief, Mr. Hyde's style is clear and readable, the characters (especially those of David and Rusty) are easy to identify with, and the action moves briskly and rises to a climax as David faces his severest trial near the end of the book. The picture given of nature, while not unduly stressing its harshness, is honest and authentic. (Even Archie's death is seen in terms of fitness or unfitness to survive.) The qualities David needs if he is to stay alive—courage, energy, inventiveness, perseverance, meticulous attention to detail, and the resilience not to despair after a setback, however severe—emerge clearly from the details of the story. Over and above David's struggle to survive, moreover, is his strong sense of the importance that Rusty should survive, and, as the book proceeds, the strange but very real bond established between this unlikely pair of comrades. Of its kind, and within the sensible limits observed by the author, this is an attractive, exciting, worthwhile book, and a deserving winner of the Dutton Animal Book Award for 1975.

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