Robin Hood in the Arctic

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The Snow Hawk, Leslie McFarlane. Methuen, 1976. 127 pp. $1.50 paper.

The Mystery of Spider Lake, Leslie McFarlane. Methuen, 1975. 128 pp. $1.50 paper.

Agent of the Falcon, Leslie McFarlane. Methuen, 1975. 122 pp. $1.50 paper.

Breakaway, Leslie McFarlane. Methuen, 1976. 127 pp. $1.50 paper.

Squeeze Play, Leslie McFarlane. Methuen, 1975. 128 pp. $1.50 paper.

The Dynamite Flynns, Leslie McFarlane. Methuen, 1975. 126 pp. $1.50 paper.

The Last of the Great Picnics, Leslie McFarlane. Illustrated by Lewis Parker. McClelland and Stewart, 1974. 99 pp. $2.79 paper.

A Kid in Haileybury, Leslie McFarlane. Cobalt, Ontario: Highway Book Shop $2.50 paper.

The first six of these books, published in the Methuen Checkmate series, contain adaptations of magazine stories published by Leslie McFarlane in the twenties and thirties. Two of the books contain a single narrative, while the rest are collections of stories. All are stories either of northern adventure or of hockey, set in a world that has since considerably changed: a far north of trappers and dog-sleds, prospectors and crude mining towns, of law and order tenuously maintained against violence and skulduggery; a hockey scene without big money or television, physically raw, and pervaded by desperate local loyalties. But these remain classic examples of tales that are both highly interesting to pre-high school children and yet easy going for most reluctant readers.

Adventure stories of any kind tend to be set in worlds of our collective imagination rather than in those to which we have more direct access. Wisely, McFarlane and his editorial collaborators have declined to note changed historical circumstances beyond some brief and necessary comments on the altered circumstances of professional hockey. The more primitive the setting, the more scope for individual initiative and survival. We are in the land of the Bitter River, of Lonely Lake and Blizzard Bluff, where only a hard mineral version of nature emerges from the ice and snow.

Several of the northern stories concern the activities of the Snow Hawk, a Robin Hood of the Arctic, who acquires a reputation as a daring criminal while in fact robbing thieves in order to compensate their honest victims. He is at first hunted by the police and then becomes their agent. The RCMP is in fact a kind of presiding genius in these stories: many of the protagonists are police officers, keeping the peace zealously and heroically on lone assignments. Unfortunately, the coherence of the Snow Hawk story is somewhat diminished by its curious distribution through the volumes: it starts as one of three stories in one volume, continues in a story in another book, and concludes in *The Snow Hawk,* which contains one continuous narrative. The attempt to make these fragments self-contained is not completely successful.

The stories are strong on suspense. McFarlane is adept at establishing a taut situation with great economy. In one opening a constable watches a motorboat roar at full speed onto a rocky shore in a snow storm. Huskies utter warning howls as a stranger approaches a remote hideout, or pull up in snarling confusion before a body on the trail. In several cases the hectic pace continues full tilt through a literally action-packed narrative. A story with several dramatic shifts of power (in the sense of who is holding the gun, or who knows where the money is) may be completed in less than twenty pages. Most people will find these stories hard to put down, partly because it is like trying to jump off a moving train. There is of course plenty of fighting, described with admirable pace and with little sense of repetition and McFarlane has no difficulty in sustaining the action and suspense over longer periods. The Snow Hawk, for instance, finally achieves his goal of rescuing his father from a band of desperate outlaws only to have his plane crash; setting out on foot he is almost devoured by wolves, before being rescued by men who imprison him as an alleged murderer; escaping again, he finds his injured father at bay before the prusuing outlaws: with their leader in his sights, he realizes he is out of ammunition. . . .Thankfully, his good luck is as spectacular as his misfortunes. The danger with such breakneck speed, especially in the stories that depend on a compounding of puzzling events, is that of anticlimax. When we are finally told what has been going on, the explanations sometimes fall a bit flat.

As we might expect, these northern stories differentiate clearly between crooks and honest men. On one side we have high-graders, bootleggers, barroom bullies, murderers, robbers and crooked fur-traders; on the other, policemen, trappers and honest fur-traders. In a country where people move around primarily to sell or acquire furs and gold there is plenty of scope for interaction between the two groups. You cannot hope in these circumstances to avoid meeting a few villains with visages of sinister cruelty, or tall husky heroes with square jaws and blue eyes, but McFarlane manages very creditably to avoid excessive stereotyping of style. The style in fact is admirably crisp and clear throughout.

The hockey stories employ similar moral demarcations. In place of crooked traders we find dirty players, mean defensemen and sore losers. Rookie policemen are replaced by nervous, impulsive young hockey stars. McFarlane knew the rough world of northern hockey in the twenties at first hand, having been one of the first to "broadcast" live hockey reports by telegraph while a reporter in Sudbury. There is certainly a feeling of authenticity about the rivalries and bitternesses, and the injuries which threaten to destroy superb talents. But realism is sacrificed to larger, more obvious patterns, as time and again the protagonist makes a dramatic comeback in the last period of a deciding play-off game.

The actual texture of the game, then, is not the main focus, though McFarlane manages to make it compelling enough. Hockey plays do not offer much promise of descriptive variety, and we are subjected to rather frequent accounts of tooth-rattling body checks, and flashy centres streaking across the blue line; but in general the problem of repetition is handled with virtuosity. The stories, however, are concerned primarily with rites of passage of young players of amazing talent thrust into the world of professional hockey. The longest, *The Dynamite Flynns,* follows the progress of two cousins who form an invincible defence line; one of them falls prey to the corruptions of the city–liquor, women and gambling, in their mildest manifestations–until finally extricated to help win the series for his team. Another story describes the gradual maturing of a young ace sharp-shooter, striving against the envies of older players and the perils of his own inexperience. Other young stars get series jitters, or are blackmailed by men trying to fix a series. One rather interesting story describes a great but fading player who refuses to accept that his day is over. Humiliated on the ice, he arrogantly denounces the apparent treachery of his friends, until through the combined wisdom of a young brother and an old comrade he is able to bring his career to a satisfactory and graceful close, encouraging his young rivals rather than envying and sabotaging their achievements. The evocation of the transience of a hockey star's glory is one of the strengths of all these stories.

It should be stressed that these books are not remotely comparable to the Hardy Boys stories McFarlane was writing at roughly the same time. An adult can find a genuine interest in the Checkmate books, while nostalgia can be one's only positive response to the adventures of Frank and Joe. The contrast is even more obvious when we turn to *The Last of the Great Picnics,* which was originally published in 1965 and has wisely been reissued by McClelland and Stewart in the Canadian Favourites series. It is a gentle and vivacious account of a country political picnic in the last days of Sir John A. Macdonald, seen through the eyes of a young farm boy who is sensitive to the momentousness of events while retaining a strong sense of their ridiculousness. McFarlane manages to combine the unselective impressionability of the child with the sardonic eye of the mature observer. There is a fight worthy of H.G. Wells, in which our hero drives his antagonist from the field, and a splendid final encounter with Sir John A. himself.

A Kid in Haileybury is not really a children's book at all, though McFarlane considered it as such. It is a recreation of his childhood in a northern Ontario mining town, and thus overlaps to some extent with his other autobiographical work, the more lively but less personal *Ghost of the Hardy Boys.* It is pervaded by solemnity and nostalgia for the strange isolation of remote towns, linked to the wider world of social change mainly through the Eaton's catalogue. What we have here almost is a straight version of Mariposa. The loving reconstruction of a town that has disappeared before a succession of catastrophic fires becomes at times a somewhat monotonous recital of vanished places and practices. But there are some superb descriptions of a child's winter, and a larger collection of colourful and distinctive characters than seem the fair share of such a small community. All in all, McFarlane's gesture of affection and farewell is a moving document.

David Palmer's interview with the late Leslie McFarlane appears elsewhere in this issue.

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