

Adventure and Mystery: A Special Kind of Craft

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The Dragon Children, Bryan Buchan. Illus. by Kathryn Cole. Scholastic Tab, 1975. 134 pp. \$1.50.

Captives of Cauldron Cave, Dorothy Powell. Illus. by Kathryn Cole. Scholastic Tab, 1977. 153 pp. \$1.05 paper.

The Summer of Satan's Gorge, Dorothy Powell. Illus. by Kathryn Cole, Scholastic Tab, 1973. 123 pp. \$1.05 paper.

Mystery of Disaster Island, Ann Rivkin. Illus. by Kathryn Cole, Scholastic Tab, 1975. 144 pp. \$1.05 paper.

Mystery of the Secret Tunnel, Frances Shelley Wees. Illus. by J. Merle Smith. Scholastic Tab, 1976. 158 pp. \$1.05 paper.

The five novels listed above are all basically adventure stories. Dorothy Powell's two books, *The Summer of Satan's Gorge* and *Captives of Cauldron Cave* both recount the summer adventures of an attractive young heroine, and are interesting combinations of animal story and youthful romance. Very different from Powell's novels are Frances Shelley Wees' *Mystery of the Secret Tunnel* and Ann Rivkin's *Mystery of Disaster Island*, which deal with buried treasure and possess salty sea characters and the intrigue of the detective story. The most curious of the novels is Bryan Buchan's *The Dragon Children*, which is replete with an exceptionally nasty villain and a very helpful ghost. These five novels are not written for the same audience. Powell's are about teenagers and are most appropriate for adolescent readers; the remaining three have child characters and are designed more for readers under the age of twelve.

Powell's two novels are similar in several ways, not the least of which is the immediate situations of their respective heroines. Lenny O'hare, who figures in *The Summer of Satan's Gorge*, is sent to her "adopted" grandparents in Rock's End, while her father, an unsuccessful writer, goes off with her mother in search of ever illusive magazine assignments. Lenny feels abandoned by her parents, and resentful that her life has always been one of unpaid bills and embarrassing incidents with creditors. Just as Lenny feels no sense of "home", so too does Robyn, the heroine of *Captives of Cauldron Cave*. An orphan, she attends a convent school and looks forward to her all too brief summers with Bub, her "boisterous, agnostic" forest-loving uncle and guardian. Both girls have their romances, and here too there is a similarity. Their boyfriends are also unhappy about the way life has treated them. Todd, who is the focus of Lenny's attention, has suffered the horror of watching his father die in front of him and now, because of the remarriage of his mother, feels an outcast in his new family.

Craig, the hero of *Cauldron Cave*, is the born athlete, crippled by an accident and bitter about his new physical limitations. There is perhaps too much sentimentality in all of this, but both novels do give a sympathetic and realistic rendering of adolescent dissatisfaction at the apparent injustices of life. Teenagers, and even younger children, are aware of their parents' shortcomings and, like Lenny, find them embarrassing and difficult to accept. Certainly there are many children, who are not from happy, secure homes, and who wish for nothing more in life than a feeling of permanence and belonging.

Both of Powell's novels are also animal stories, although *Captives of Cauldron Cave* more so than *The Summer of Satan's Gorge*. *Cauldron Cave* is concerned with the recovery of the lost Great Dane, Saladin, and the three pups he adopts. Powell successfully counterpoints the adventures of the dogs with Robyn's desperate and guilt-ridden search for them. There is a good deal of Jack London in the story as Powell notes Saladin's change from loveable pet to an animal motivated by "primitive appetite." In *Satan's Gorge* Powell's interests lie elsewhere. The search for the bobcat that may have carried of Lenny's kitten is consistently interrupted by unrelated incidents. What must be recognized is that it is Lenny's reactions to the animals, rather than the animals themselves, that are important. They not only signal Lenny's gradual maturation, but also reveal to Todd her needs as an individual and as a growing young woman.

In *Cauldron's Cave* little is said about the feelings which exist between Robyn and Craig, because they are drawn together by a desire to find Saladin and by their life and death struggle in the caves rescuing the dogs. In *Satan's Gorge*, though, Powell looks directly at the relationship between Lenny and Todd, and particularly at Lenny's growing physical awareness. Lenny has new sexual feelings and is disturbed by them; with Todd she experiences "the overwhelming urge to press closer and the feeling that she should pull away." But she learns that this conflict is a part of womanhood, and that it is something which is never totally resolved. Just as Lenny grows to understand herself, Todd comes to understand Lenny as an individual, and demonstrates that he too is growing up. He puts aside his condescending way of treating her as a "poor kid" and sees that Lenny's desire for physical closeness is not simply a tribute to his male ego. For Lenny the realization of a mature relationship comes when Todd recognizes and accepts why she cannot go swimming; this "shared knowledge was a warm and tender thing -- a good thing -- making her feel tremendously important." Powell deserves credit for treating such intimate matters in a tasteful yet meaningful way. It is this feature which will especially draw young readers to the novel.

Compared to Powell's novels, Ann Rivkin's *Mystery of Disaster Island* and Frances Wees' *Mystery of the Secret Tunnel* are hardly true to life. Rivkin places her novel on a Pacific coast island, which is noted for mysterious disasters and a lost treasure, and where is situated an abandoned mansion built many years earlier by a European prince. There is, furthermore, something too easy about the way John and Linda Stafford convince their father to buy the island, and with the way the children cope by themselves with the unknown strangers who try to force them from the island. St. John's, the location of Wees' novel, is not quite so romantic, but the adventures of the Patterson children are still distant from the world of everyday experiences. Lost in the fog they discover pirate treasure, the so-called "Loot of Lima," and become the object of an un-

known assailant who will stop at nothing to keep the treasure to himself. Four fishermen are nearly drowned and the Pattersons themselves nearly killed when someone tampers with the brakes of their car.

But these things are the stuff of adventure, and both novels possess the fast-paced action necessary in all adventure stories. It is true that neither novel contains the character development of Powell's books, nor do they possess any real purpose other than entertainment. But the absence of character and message does not mark them as inferior, for the good adventure story has an accomplishment all its own, to make the reader believe the unbelievable. This is largely accomplished by keeping the reader preoccupied with "what comes next," although in the novels of Rivkin and Wees the unreality of situation and action is also balanced by the natural behaviour of the children. Regardless of their grownup adventures, the Stafford and Patterson children go to bed at an appropriate hour, attend church on Sunday, and enjoy boat rides, fishing trips, baseball games, and clam bakes.

The fifth novel in this review, Bryan Buchan's *The Dragon Children*, centers on the efforts of John and Cathy to catch a rather loathsome crook, who, masquerading as a building inspector, condemns the houses of elderly people, and then offers them a special deal on repairs that are not needed. The most curious character in the novel is Steve, who initially alerts the children to the situation, and then irritatingly appears and disappears for the rest of the story. The children are led to Mrs. Winch, a lonely, kindly lady, who has been unfairly designated the neighbourhood witch and who is coincidentally Steven's mother. The catch is that Steven has been dead for twenty years. Along with John we discover this fact at the end of the novel, and are left with only one conclusion, that Steven is indeed a ghost.

Buchan's novel is well crafted, for with the final identification of Steven, things which had foreshadowed this disclosure quickly come to mind. There is Steven's peculiarly out-of-date clothes, and the picture of Steven which John early in the novel just misses seeing. Steven also has the inhuman knack of appearing and disappearing, and when John follows him it is hardly surprising that he loses Steven's trail at the cemetery. The nicest touch occurs early in the novel when Cathy tells young Scott the legend of Sleepy Hollow and specifically mentions that ghosts cannot cross water. This is, of course, an explanation for Steven's limited involvement. He cannot go home because it is on the other side of the river.

In addition to being a clever story, *The Dragon Children* teaches some valuable lessons, the most important one being not to judge people too quickly. We all remember experiences in our childhoods when we labelled an elderly person a witch, only to discover when we grew up that we had been both silly and cruel. Moreover, Buchan's book tells its young readers that too often the elderly are forgotten when they still have much to contribute, and that simply to be old is not to be peculiar.

As one might expect, Powell's novels are more stylistically sophisticated than the others discussed in this review. There are vivid pictures of sea and sky in *Satan's Gorge*, and from *Cauldron's Cave* one gets a real sense of darkness and oppressiveness of being alone in a cave. Powell is also adept at revealing the inner thoughts of Lenny and Robyn, who are both going through difficult and

painful times. With their emphasis on action, the remaining novels all possess a crisp dialogue which contributes to the momentum of the stories, and which at the same time accurately captures the speech patterns of children.

These novels are five successes worthy of a place in any children's library. They are at once entertaining and thought provoking, the kind of stories children often devour at one sitting. Their greatest strength, though, is a realistic portrayal of teenage and childhood sentiments and feelings. In coupling real life with entertaining, well developed plots, they clearly demonstrate that the writing of successful fiction for children and adolescents is a very special kind of craft.

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Animal Lessons: Correcting the Perspective

ADRIENNE E. KERTZER

Bel Ria: Dog of War. Sheila Burnford. McClelland and Stewart, 1977. 204 pp. \$10.00.

The animal story's origin in fable still colours our interpretation. We rarely read animal stories just to learn about animals; the wisdom we seek concerns mankind. Even books that seem to move beyond the fable format and its moralistic structure challenge us in this way; *Bel Ria* for example, a new book by Sheila Burnford raises the question always pertinent to the children's animal story -- just what is the lesson here?

Although appropriate for adolescents, *Bel Ria* does not appear to be a traditional children's story. The phrase "In Memoriam 1939-1945" and the epigraph from *Hamlet*, "Let Hercules himself do what he may,/ The cat will mew and dog will have his day" give the time and the subject, the terrifying experience of the Second World War as viewed by a dog, *Bel Ria*. Deprived of his Gypsy mistress by the strafing of a German plane, *Bel Ria* suddenly loses all sense of meaning in his life. Desperate to hold onto something that recalls his dead world, he tracks down an English soldier whose wound had been dressed by the gypsy only a few moments prior to the bombing. Such are the chance occurrences that make as much sense as anything else during war. Corporal Sinclair does not want the dog. Fighting for survival, he has enough to worry about without taking on a dog or the tiny monkey that clings to its neck. But he feels respon-