Two Mysteries: Pirate Treasure and Wisdom

JOHN SMALLBRIDGE

The Hand of Robin Squires, Joan Clark. Illus. by William Taylor and Mary Cserepy. Clarke, Irwin, 1977. 145 pp. $7.95 cloth.

This novel is based on accounts of searches conducted from 1795 to 1971 for buried treasure on Oak Island off Nova Scotia. Excavations have produced many findings including a 90-foot shaft, but no treasure. This book offers a feasible, fictional explanation of the findings and the mystery of the missing treasure.

The narrator, nineteen-year-old Robin Squires, tells his story while waiting in Boston, 1709, to return to England. His first-person narration invites immediate reader-identification and his blend of visual detail, conversations, and action creates a sense of time present.

The first ten chapters (53 pages) move the story quickly from spring 1703 in Shilston, England, through to the summer of 1704 on Oak Island. Robin's father, Charles, has invented a pump and proved its worth in flooded tin mines of Cornwall. Robin's uncle, Edward, arrives after two years at sea. After his father dies, Robin, who now owns the drawings and is the only one who knows how to construct and operate the pump, convinces his uncle to take him to North America.

While aboard Edward's ship, *The Queen's Privateer,* Robin learns about the duplicity of his uncle, the cruelty of Billy Boles, first mate, and the wiliness of Powderlegs, the legless surgeon. The latter tells Robin of how the three seized Spanish treasure chests during the Battle of Vigo Bay, 1702. Robin's suspicions are corroborated: his uncle is a pirate. The boy's initial impression of "setting forth on the biggest adventure of my life" takes on ironic meanings. He finds there are 85 black slaves chained on deck; he hears of how one slave axed off his foot and attempted escape; he learns of the s-shaped island and the shaft and treasure vault his father designed. Initiation into grim realities leaves Robin physically sick and emotionally shaken.

The next fourteen chapters deal with that "fateful summer" of 1704 on Oak Island. Here Robin chances to meet a Micmac Indian, Actaudin, his own age and an orphan. He takes Actaudin to his uncle who chains him with the slaves. Robin helps Actaudin escape but is captured himself and, chained in Actaudin's place, put to work digging the flood-water tunnel. Edward keeps Robin alive until he can construct and prove the pump. That

time arrives. Robin complies knowing his life is forfeit. Actaudin returns secretly. Robin realizes that to free himself from the manacle he must consent to have Actaudin chop off his left hand at the wrist. The two flee pursued by Boles who meets a gory but just nemesis. The boys reach Actaudin's village and the last chapter provides a succinct and imaginative resolution.

The plot is constructed of many tightly integrated events judiciously restricted to a relatively short time span. Action is never impeded by lengthy descriptions or explanations. Those necessary are given with admirable economy, often worked into conversations. Each chapter advances the plot significantly and contains sufficient foreshadowing and suspense to impel the reader to finish the book 'at one sitting'.

Coincident with the plot development is a development in the narrator's character. The fourteen-year-old innocent orphan matures into an experienced young man of considerable courage and wisdom who knows the values of friendship, sacrifice, and freedom. Robin, his story, and his prose style will appeal to readers 10-15. Boys will readily take to him and so will girls (for young people have always been able to read any good book regardless of the protagonist's sex).

All the cruelties in the book, such as the killing of Actaudin's dog, the lashings, and the severings, are "natural" and "fitting" insofar as they derive naturally from the characters of Edward and Boles and are true to the times of Queen Anne's early eighteenth century England: war with Spain, press gangs, slavery, and privateers turned pirates. Each cruelty used emphasizes the serious reality of a particular predicament and justifies the drastic measures taken by the boys as solutions.

A continuous, rich thread of ironic implication runs through the book. The narrator recalls and balances his youthful expectations against his knowledge of subsequent happenings. Nothing is recalled unduly or extraneously; there are no errors in timing apparent. Occasionally Robin reflects on some of these balanced elements but never sententiously or to "point a moral." The reader is often led to determine implications and meanings himself. The preamble preceding Chapter One neatly indicates the method. At nineteen Robin says that in the process of telling the story, "I am putting aside my old life and freeing myself for the new." The implications become fully understood only when the reader learns later of Robin's manacle and hand. Balanced events and "reflective irony" make for a pattern and structure that are appealing.

A different appeal, strong and obvious, is found in the engineering problems presented by shaft, tunnel, and pump. Two explicit diagrams enhance this appeal and are far more exciting than a treasure map could be. The other black line drawings are adequately suggestive of mystery and emotion, but the double-page drawing of Oak Island is unimaginative and a waste.

Does *The Hand of Robin Squires* qualify as "Canadian historical fiction?" It deals with no great issue in Canadian history, uses an uninhabited setting, at time almost "pre-Canadian-history," and contains no characters who are Canadian (except, perhaps, Actaudin!) But remember that Joan Clark, the author, has chosen an almost 200-year-old, still-living mystery centred at a very real place in present-day Canada, just up the coast from where she spent her childhood, and has used it as the warp upon which to weave her fiction.

It is the tight, patterned weft of her fiction, her plausible story, that makes her book good "Canadian historical fiction". After reading *The Hand of Robin Squires* I thought of Barbara Smucker's *Underground to Canada* and Paula Fox's *The Slave Dancer.* I have made no specific comparisons but remain content in thinking that if this book even suggests comparisons with those two it has something to recommend it, and perhaps something even international and beyond the narrower confines of "Canadian historical fiction."

John Smallbridge is a professor in the Faculty of Education, University of Western Ontario, and teaches two courses in children's literature.

Will the Real Riel Please Stand Up?

GEOFF TAGG

A Very Small Rebellion, Jan Truss. With Essay by Jack Chambers and illustrated by Peter Millward. LeBel Enterprises, 1977. 96 pp., $6.95 cloth, $3.95 paperback.

A Very Small Rebellion is the second book by Alberta writer Jan Truss. It follows her highly acclaimed *Birds at the Window* and marks her debut as a writer of children's fiction. The book, which contains a narrative essay by University of Toronto linguistics professor Jack Chambers, and illustrations by Peter Millward of the University of Alberta Fine Arts Department, was published to commemorate the 91st anniversary of the death of Louis Riel.