

The Key to Mystery Stories for Children

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Maple Island Mystery, Janice Cowan. Borealis Press, 1976. 104 pp. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0-919594-59-X.

The Mystery of Castle Hotel, Janice Cowan. Borealis Press, 1978. 85 pp. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0-919594-56-5.

Theft of Gold, J. Robert James. Scholastic-Tab, 1980. 163 pp. \$1.50 paper. ISBN 0-590-71060-5.

The Case of the Moonlit Gold Dust, George Swede. Illus. by Danielle Jones. Three Trees Press, 1979. 34 pp. \$2.95 paper. ISBN 0-88823-023-0.

The Case of the Missing Heirloom, George Swede. Illus. by Danielle Jones. Three Trees Press, 1980. 36 pp. \$3.95 paper. ISBN 0-88823-027-3.

Secret of the Lost Empire, Elwy Yost. Scholastic-Tab, 1980. 173 pp. \$1.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-71055-9.

The most puzzling thing about many mystery stories for children is guessing what could have inspired the author to attempt such a book to begin with. Certainly the principal requirement for writing a good story for children is that one should know something of the craft of story-telling. When writing a good mystery story for children, one should obviously also know something of the mystery story. A writer who has mastered neither the basic techniques of fiction (e.g., how to handle plot and character) nor the time-honored conventions of the classic mystery is unlikely to produce anything worth the attention of any reader whatsoever. Furthermore, since children's literature is usually denied two of the principal props of fiction for adults – sex and violence – the writer of mystery stories for children labours under particular constraints. The success of that writer's work is likely to depend on the adroit handling of such banalities as plot, character, dialogue. The four authors discussed here all know something of their trade, but each of them illustrates the truth of the old tale which insists that it is not enough to be able to rub the lamp; one also has to know what to do with the genie.

Among these six novels, the two by George Swede are the best-balanced; they are also the shortest and the least ambitious. *The Case of the Moonlit Gold Dust* introduces the reader to Inspector Holmes of the Halifax Police, his cat, Watson, and his dog, Sherlock; with the timely assistance of his intrepid pets, Holmes foils a ring of gold smugglers. *The Case of the Missing Heirloom* shows our heroes recovering a stolen diamond pendant. Mr. Swede's whimsical naming of his central character broadly indicates the sophistication of his fiction. He writes for the younger reader (perhaps in Grades Two and Three); his stories are really bridges between the animal tale and the mystery story. Plot is kept simple, and character is adequately, if superficially, delineated (even Franklin, an ex-convict wrongfully suspected of stealing the diamond, is only skin-deep). Vocabulary and length are such as to challenge the young reader without daunting him, and Danielle Jones' droll pen and ink drawings enhance the appeal of these slim volumes. Within his self-imposed limits, Mr. Swede's touch is consistently sure, and his two novels entirely praiseworthy.

One cannot say the same for Jane Cowan's *Maple Island Mystery* and *The Mystery of Castle Hotel*. The former tells of three Nova Scotia children who outwit a gang of thieves in a hunt for buried pirate treasure; the latter takes the same children on a visit to Toronto, where they capture a gang of counterfeiters. Both novels show the author's awareness of the machinery of the mystery story. *Maple Island Mystery* has a good deal of messing about in caves (Ms. Cowan ought to take another look at *Tom Sawyer*); *Castle Hotel* features a mock castle complete with what appear to be several miles of secret passages, one of which (you guessed it!) is adjacent to the vault of a local bank. But machinery alone will not carry a novel - not even a novel intended for the ten-to-twelve-year-old market. Ms. Cowan's handling of character is flat; her villains are so uniformly villainous, and her children so uniformly good, that no one is ever in much danger of being interesting. In fact, there is no danger of any sort in these novels; all the good characters seem to be captured and tied up by the villains at one time or another, but all emerge from their encounters with desperadoes and killers with nothing more serious than a sprained ankle. Some purists may sniff at the mechanics of the author's prose - even a writer for children should know where the commas go - while others will complain of the author's implicit contempt for the intelligence of her audience. (How many competent writers of mystery fiction for adults would attribute a single cache of buried treasure to Captains Kidd, Blackbeard, and Morgan? Morgan had been dead for a decade before Kidd began terrorizing the seas, and Kidd went to the gallows fifteen years before Blackburn turned to piracy. Similarly, would such a writer needlessly cumber a tale of

counterfeiting with a mysterious Xerox machine which produces copies so good that they cannot be told from genuine banknotes?) One could perhaps overlook the feeble characterization, or excuse the dialogue which resounds so richly of tin – but Ms. Cowan's serene and gratuitous disregard of both plausibility and historical fact is as unpardonable as it is unnecessary. She needs to give more consideration both to her audience and also to the traditional strengths of mystery fiction.

Elwy Yost's *Secret of the Lost Empire* is a better-made novel than either of Ms. Cowan's efforts. Some years before the story opens, Christopher Skye has gone missing in his search for the legendary Falls of Orellana. His son Jon and his brother Howard find both Christopher and a lost Inca city when they are coerced by the evil Mr. Plumm and his sexy sidekick Maria into joining a treasure-hunting expedition deep in the jungles of the Amazon. Mr. Yost has the advantages of exotic locale and substantial scope for character development (the boy searching for his father has been good material since Telemachus was a pup). One could wish that Mr. Yost had done more with these opportunities. The best scenes in the book are, like the opening duel between Jon and a deadly snake, those which profit from the author's knowledge of film. But the Amazon jungle is little more than a painted backdrop for Jon's adventures as he runs miles of perilous rapids and single-handedly makes monkeys of the entire Inca army in an interminable rooftop chase. Characterization likewise receives short shrift; no significant complexities develop, and the encounter with evil so deftly promised in the novel's opening scene materialises at the most superficial level. Moral triteness buries all. Mr. Plumm, who might have been a latter-day Long John Silver, is tidily swept over the Falls while attempting to desert his companions and escape with the treasure. The sultry Maria turns out to be a revolutionary with a heart of gold; she evaporates at the novel's close, her slim black cigarillo and deadly rifle leaving not a wrack behind. The novel is fast-moving but shallow, and its handling of all but plot leaves a good deal to be desired. While *Secret of the Lost Empire* certainly shows promise, the reader can legitimately hope for a more successful integration of the elements of fiction in Mr. Yost's forthcoming work.

Like *Secret of the Lost Empire*, J. Robert Janes' *Theft of Gold* is recommended by the publisher for Grades Five to Seven; it is, however, superior to those novels discussed above. Its superiority consists not so much in plot (four children combining forces to outwit a gang of gold thieves planning to loot the Royal Ontario Museum) as in its handling of character. Plot is in fact a little weak; there is a little too much mystery (not the least of which is the author's curious

refusal to identify the novel's setting as the city of Toronto). But the children are plausible characters, not little plaster Wasps; one stutters, one barely tolerates his sister, one steals. They undergo genuine anxiety and suspicion, and learn to suspect their own certainties when their favourite suspect is exonerated at the novel's close. One could wish that Mr. Janes had done a little more with character (as in the spirited rivalry between Spider Slater and his sister), or that he had honestly evaded that compulsive non-violence which characterises so much of today's fiction for children. (Is it really necessary to allow the villains only a toy gun? Even television is a better guide to the realities of modern life.) But these are largely trifles. The novel's plot is sound, if a little complicated, and the author's handling of character, dialogue and detail stand him in good stead throughout. Many of those who write for children today would do well to emulate Mr. Janes' careful study of the traditional resources of good fiction.

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