History and Myth

VIVIENNE DENTON

River Race, Tony German. Toronto, Peter Martin Associates, 1979. 158 pp. $10.95 hardcover, $5.95 paper. ISBN 0-88778-194-2; 088778-195-0. [A Tom Penny Adventure]

That Scatterbrain Booky, Bernice Thurman Hunter. Scholastic-TAB Publications Ltd., 1981. 179 pp. $1.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-71082-6.

Within Canadian children's literature there is a large body of historical fiction. One reason for this is, no doubt, the seriousness of our culture; we believe children's literature should instruct while it entertains. But probably another reason is that Canadian history has produced vibrant and powerful myths: Yukon gold digger, Indian brave, Mountie, voyager and lumberjack seem truly to be the raw material of legend and folk-tale. In fact, such figures *must* serve this function in a culture without indigenous fairies and ancient heroes. Canadian history also provides men of daring, rebels like Riel and Mackenzie, and hardy early settlers like those of the Viking and Selkirk settlements; they are men larger than life, struggling in a hostile landscape tailor-made for heroes. This background fosters historical romance in which youthful heroes and heroines become embroiled in uprisings and bloody skirmishes. But remarkable and epoch-making events are not the only materials suited to engender an imaginative appreciation of their heritage in children. The two books discussed here could both be called historical fiction; both give Canadian children an appreciation of their history, but they approach the task of bringing a historical epoch alive in quite different ways.

In *River Race* German writes a historical romance in the manner of one of the favourite authors of my childhood, British writer Geoffrey Trease. German chooses a colourful epoch in history and writes a suspense-filled adventure story. *River Race* is a tale of lumbermen on the Gatineau river in the 1830s, reminiscent in subject matter of O'Connor's *The Man from Glengarry.* It is filled with colourful stereotypes: a French Canadian with quaint French-English speech and ceinture fléchée; the Irish lumbermen who brawl as only the Irish are supposed to be able to do; the man of business who is a canny Scot. German's story traces the adventures of a teenage boy who becomes involved in the fighting, fraud, and intrigue in the affairs of rival lumber companies.

Tom Penny, the hero, is a young immigrant from England, an apprentice bookkeeper in his family's timber firm who has spent the winter in the lumber camp. The book opens as the ice is about to break up,

releasing the winter's logs into the river to float downstream to be sold. But the competition is stiff and the race down river to Quebec markets is full of adventure. Before the ice breaks, the brawling Irish attempt to sabotage the Penny operation on the Gatineau. Once in Ottawa, Tom is alarmed by the fears of his best friend who hints that he's enmeshed in intrigue. Tom arranges a rendezvous to aid him, only to arrive in time to witness his spectacular death in an explosion which blows up a log weir. Tom finds himself suspected of the murder of his friend. He has been framed. To the race down river is added the further excitement of Tom's escape from justice, while his friends rally to help him vindicate himself and unmask the real murderer.

The novel suggests something of the wild life of the lumber camps and the get-rich-quick mentality of the fledgling commercial community from the hay day of lumbering. But the story is poorly paced, and for all its excitement readers will find it does not rivet their attention as it should. The prose is relentlessly curt and tense, with no relaxation in mood. The adventure packed narrative never lets up. It is not satisfying as an adventure story; nor does it rest long enough to give a satisfactory appreciation of what living in that era was like.

Paradoxically, despite its vivid characters and exciting events, *River Race* is likely to have less hold on the young reader's interest than the more relaxed *That Scatterbrain Booky,* a low-keyed story in which the only events are the mundane happenings of daily life in a suburban family. The story is an account of life in the 1930s, its heroine a girl of ten whose father is out of work and whose family is suffering the tensions and worries of the depression. Though this kind of historical novel has none of the colourful dash of historical romance, the detailed account of daily life has appeal. It presents an era with immediacy and humanity. Hunter's Toronto child of the depression, Booky of the title, will interest children for she is just like them. She perceives the vicissitudes of the times as they impinge on the world of a child.

In the novel the unemployed father is depressed and irritable. Mother is overburdened by the pressures of feeding her ever hungry brood and keeping them clothed. Each new baby increases the burden. Hunter's record of life in the depression is mediated through areas of experience that are big in the lives of children: school, sibling rivalry, festive occasions, family arguments, the birth of a new baby and the penny-pinching necessary in hard times. The guilty feeling that follows persuading mother to buy a pair of patent leather shoes two sizes too small loom much larger in the life of a child than the historically more significant disasters of the times.

The Toronto children I polled for opinions of the book loved it and were delighted to find a setting with familiar names: Eatons, the Ex, the Santa Claus Parade, and even street names that they recognized. The experiences come from Hunter's own childhood; photographs of the period, not specifically related to the text, but depicting family life

in the thirties, provide the child with a context.

The first book uses colourful myths, yet manages to be, in the end, much less interesting and less evocative of life in the chosen historical period than the second story with its trivial, everyday family happenings. Hunter's book, also based on an era which has become part of Canadian mythology, is fresh and compelling because it moves beyond stereotypes and offers the young reader insight into the characters and their plight.

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Adventure By Formula

LIONEL ADEY

The Mystery of the Muffled Man, Max Braithwaite. McClelland & Stewart, 1962, Seal ed. 1981. 117 pp. $1.95 paper. ISBN 0-7704-1668-3. [A Secret Circle Mystery]

The Mystery at the Wildcat Well, Robert Collins. McClelland & Stewart, 1965, Seal ed. 1981. 117 pp. $1.95 paper. ISBN 0-7704-1684-5. [A Secret Circle Mystery]

The Secret of Spanish Rock, David Gammon. McClelland & Stewart, 1963, Seal ed. 1981. 117 pp. $1.95 paper. ISBN 0-7704-1669-1. [A Secret Circle Mystery]

The Clue of the Dead Duck, Scott Young. McClelland Stewart, 1962, Seal ed. 1981. 117 pp. $1.95 paper. IBSN 0-7704-1667-15. [A Secret Circle Mysteryz]

Mystery at Cranberry Farm, Lynn Manul. Illus. by Sylvie Daigneault. Gage Publishing Ltd., 1981. 159 pp. $4.95 paper. ISBN 0-7715-6285-3.

Strange Lake Adventure, Sharon Siamon. Illus. by David Simpson. Gage Publishing Ltd., 1979. 128 pp. $3.15 paper. ISBN 0-7715-5982-8.

As a glance at publication dates will show, the Formula belongs to the affluent sixties. How well does it suit the hangdog eighties, and how closely do recent books adhere to it?