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.

Vivienne Denton has taught at Concordia University, McMaster University, and L'université de Montréal. She now lives in Toronto and is employed by the Robarts Library.

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?

First, you may ask, what does the Formula involve? Superficially, it calls for stories tailored to set length (117 pp.), under a stock title, with a prefatory highlight, and with action set in a remote northern or western region. The hero-figure, usually a boy, will be either visiting a strange environment or seeking acceptance from an alien society. Flung on his own resources, he will prove himself by surviving and tracking down a villain. The police or other authority-figures will either fail to understand him or pursue a wrong scent. In the end, he will win official approval, sometimes enriching his new-found world in the process.

Socially, the Formula took account of the breakdown of the family, the optimism regarding resource industries, and the general affluence of the early sixties. Now the new edition of the Secret Circle Mystery Series must make its way against an economic headwind blowing in the reverse direction.

The Mystery of the Wildcat Well is a tale whose impact is now threatened by the National Energy Policy and the oil slump. Its background is a scramble for new wells that would motivate an oil company to use spying and sabotage in order to beat a rival company to a "gusher." Following his mother's death, the hero, Rory, joins his father, the boss of an oil-drilling team north of Edmonton. With help from an Indian family, and an old trapper, he tracks down a spy.

The interest of this novel is due less to its first-hand account of life in a drilling camp than to its use of the perennial theme of the teenage hero seeking father's acceptance. Thus the climax comes not when Rory, alone outside camp on a bitter night, sees the spy reading a message from the "mole", but after a search-party has brought him back and father, standing over the shivering boy's bed, threatens: "One more crazy stunt and I ship you back to Edmonton and into a boarding-house." In the end Rory returns to school in that city, but with his father's affection.

A similar theme informs *The Clue of the Dead Duck*. The hero, a foster-child significantly named Morgan Perdue, finally secures adoption by Black Ab Magee, despite the enmity of brother Red Ab's wife and the irrational suspicion of a police-sergeant, aroused by the kidnapping of his foster-brother Young Ab. The emotional climax comes when Morgan, unable to endure the policeman's suspicion, jumps up at him swinging ineffective fists. Held in mid-air, he stammers, "You s-s-s-said you've got a boy of your own about my age ... Don't you sometimes g-g-g-give him a break, even when he seems to be wrong? Give him a chance to prove that he isn't wrong?" From that moment the police sergeant accepts his co-operation. Although its anti-RCMP bias may soon date the story, the hero's yearning for acceptance should preserve its appeal to adolescent readers, despite its somewhat folksy naming of characters.

This book varies the Formula insofar as its "villain" is an affluent

Member of Parliament in central Ontario who falsely attains a reputation as a shot by bribing an alcholic lakelander to smuggle in illegal decoy ducks. Another variant is that Sally, daughter of a rich resort owner, plays a more active role than that of girl-helpmate. The author manages to imbue Morgan, Sally and Young Ab with a good deal more life and solidity than the Indian boy and girl of the *Wildcat Well* story. His theme and topography seem likely to wear better than those of the oil-exploration story, unless our ecologically-minded children exclaim "Why allow duck-shooting at all?"

A variation likely to endear *The Mystery of the Muffled Man* to girls is the visiting heroine Carol's deflation of male arrogance in her cousin Chris and his friend Dumont. The preposterous plot concerns a released bank-robber who, having attracted Carol's attention on the train by his disguise and his rudeness, next catches Chris' notice by trying to brain the family dog. The robber searches for his cache in a mine unknown even to the local trapper-guide. The trio of teenagers inadvertently tracks him down through a series of misadventures on an ice-fishing trip to a little-known lake. Again the author, who has since become famous for his *Why Shoot the Teacher,* sustains interest mainly by his human cameos: the city-bred Carol's recounting to the astounded boys of survival lore picked up from her reading; her equally astonishing capacity for practical judgement; the vertiginous and terrified Chris being guided step-by-step down from a forest ranger tower; the conscience-stricken trapper's statement to the police, upon hearing the children are lost in the bush. Notwithstanding its improbabilities, this story shows a meticulous craftsmanship in its planting of significant details, its switching of viewpoint, and its tidy denouement.

The Secret of Spaniard's Rock has an even more implausible plot. A scientist turned forger finds lodgings with elderly relatives in an old coastal island lighthouse. Two children, Bob and Sue, find forged notes, and are run down by the villain's cruiser. True to the Formula, they choose not to inform the police, who will not believe them, but relate the episode to their father, a Vancouver journalist. The thinness of the characters and dialogue may be judged by the response of the hero's sister to the capsizing of their row-boat: "Treading water alongside, Sue said, Oh, Bob! That was awful close." Later she reacts like a gangster vowing to "fix these rats, yet." This time there are no compensations for thin plotting, for the book gives scarcely any impression of Galiano, one of the loveliest Pacific-coast islands.

How closely does the Formula fit the two stories of recent composition? In the case of *Strange Lake Adventure,* scarcely at all. Admittedly the action, set in a northern winter, consists of a race to stake out a claim for a bed of a rare nickel. (Ironically it has for this reason dated more in three years than the other tales in twenty.) But there the resemblance ends. The three children Marya (16), Eric (10) and Anna (9) travel by snowmobile to help the sick prospector Howie. Eric bor-

rows snowshoes from Marya in order to reach the cabin quickly while she drives round by the summer route. A mysterious bushmobile nearly runs Marya down but it belongs to a mining company presented as rivals, not as villains. The concluding race to the assay office, the best episode, has more humour than melodrama, as the children and Howie travel in his horse-drawn limousine which has been fitted with skis. The book, in short, has no conflict of good guys and bad guys, or of the generations, nor any final reprimand and reconciliation.

One weakness lies in the male characters. Where Marya and little Anna talk and act like sensible girls, Eric alienates us from his first excited jabber and somersault, while Howie, with his secret room in the cabin, his absence from town for years at a stretch and his too rapid recovery from illness, never becomes believable. Eric and Howie, however, can be tolerated as minor irritations in a tale that offers fine winter scenes, an encounter with a lynx, and a thrilling final dash to town. But few children, I fancy, would read it a second time.

This leaves us with another recent story even less conforming to type. True, *The Mystery at Cranberry Farm* has villains (a former resident who poses as an author and his wife who keeps house for a sick aunt), an attempted crime (the stealing of valuable miniature books left by the original Rose Cranberry), and, as usual, children unearthering a treasure (the three Vancouver youngsters invited to visit this sick great-aunt in her Okanagan farm-house). The author, Lynn Manuel, shows a high degree of skill in providing fresh turns, building up suspense and leading her characters to believable though false conclusions. Often, the real clues left by Rose Cranberry, the original owner of the farm-house, consist of puns on words such as "wool-gathering", which leads to the shearing hut where the thieves are found.

The lively great-aunt and the three children Tritch (11), Teddy (12) and Tory (7), are fully-rounded characters. Yet weaknesses inhere in the far-fetched plot and the implausibly-motivated villains and parents. The author's devotion to metrics is also annoying. Remarks like "you could see for kilometres" do not yet sound right. The author is at her best when sketching rural flora and people, at her weakest in portraying big-city adults and their cultural pursuits.

Two conclusions seem to follow from this survey. The first is that the Formula set up by the publishing industry in the nineteen-sixties is breaking down under the influence of our less black-and-white morality and our economic decline. The two recent works resemble the earlier ones in length and plot-line, but the macho stereotypes of adventurous boy and sisterly helpmate have gone. The second is that the Formula does not produce enduring literature for children. Except in the nostalgic *Cranberry Farm,* we look in vain here for any distinctive vision of life, any original or striking use of language, any characters likely to become permanent acquaintances. A story not written as a "mystery", "secret" or "adventure", and set in one of the regions in which most Canadians

live and work would be a refreshing change, and might lead to more genuinely imaginative writing.

Lionel Adey, Associate Professor of English at the University of Victoria, B.C., teaches courses on Children's Literature, Fantasy and Literary Approaches to Childhood and Adolescence. He has published articles and a book on C.S. Lewis.

Historical Fiction or Fictionalized History?

BARBARA L. MICHASIW

The Last Ship, Mary Alice Downie. Illus. by Lissa Calvert. Macmillan of Canada, 1980. 30 p. $6.95 case. ISBN 0-88778-201-9.

The Buffalo Hunt, Donald and Eleanor Swainson. Illus. by James Tughan. Macmillan of Canada, 1980. 32 p. $6.95 case. ISBN 0-88778-206 X.

Streets of Gold, George Rawlyk. Illus. by Leoung O'Young. Macmillan of Canada, 1980. 32 p. $6.95 case. ISBN 0-88778-202-7.

The Sky Caribou, Mary Hamilton. Illus. by Debi Perna. Macmillan of Canada, 1980. 32 p. $6.95 case. ISBN 0-88778-203-5.

In a paper entitled "History is People," Rosemary Sutcliff explains the principles that shape her writing of historical fiction for children and what she believes are, as much as the historical setting, its essential ingredients. She illustrates with vivid examples the continuity of the fundamental human emotions and responses that link the people of the past to the people of the present and "make nonsense of time."[1] To this shared humanity she adds the holding power of story: ". . . at the beginning of all things I merely find, or am found by, a story which I want to tell, which seems to be worth telling, and above all which I want to *hear*, and tell it to the best of my ability."[2] There the ingredients are: people, story, and writing style, each one essential as the history if the reader, especially the child reader, is to find enjoyment in historical fiction.