

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

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## Historical Fiction or Fictionalized History?

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*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."<sup>1</sup> 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."<sup>2</sup> 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.

Ostensibly these are the ingredients offered by the Northern Lights series – “stories for young readers from Canada’s exciting past.” The description seems to promise books which will introduce young readers to the genre and the pleasures of historical fiction.

The books are visually appealing. The wrap-around cover designs, using colour tones appropriate for the period and culture, introduce the settings and leading characters. Inside the front and back covers of each book is a bright, readable map of the immediate locale of the story and an inset placing it on a map of Canada. Care has been taken with the historical details of clothing and setting, and some of the illustrations evoke the sense of a vast and lonely land. Because each book has a different illustrator, there is some variation in style. For *Streets of Gold* the illustrations are perfunctory, while those for *The Buffalo Hunt* are richly detailed and imaginative in their conception. Overhead views of the Métis family at dinner, the crowded streets of Grantown, and the running buffaloes reveal in each the varying combinations of drama and pattern. Unfortunately, the imaginative format and illustrations of the series promise more than the texts deliver.

The Northern Lights books are thirty or thirty-two pages in length; their stories are told in the first person from the viewpoints of young narrators, ages ten to fifteen; and they are designed for an audience of young readers. The weaknesses of the series, however, cannot be attributed solely to the limitations of length, content, and potential audience. These are limitations inherent in the series concept. Other series which have the objective of introducing young readers to the past have transcended like limitations. Brinton Turkle’s Obadiah books provide an entertaining introduction to eighteenth century New England – and to some of its language – for the picture book audience, just as Garfield’s Apprentices make eighteenth century England accessible and intriguing for the pre-teens. Garfield’s mini-trilogy in Long Ago Children’s Books follows the picaresque adventures of Tim and Pistol, the fascinating anti-heroes who make their first appearance in *The Boy and the Monkey*.

Leon Garfield has two advantages denied to the authors of the Northern Lights series: his books are addressed to somewhat older readers and he has greater length in which to develop his story. Nonetheless, he must write repeatedly to the measure of forty-eight pages and he too must introduce his readers to another place and time. Yet the books which result are works of genuine historical fiction that invite reading and rereading for both pleasure and understanding. Surely the literary principles that give structure and form to the outstanding historical novels (for children and for adults) of

Rosemary Sutcliff and that are used so effectively by Leon Garfield within the series confines should find some place in any series for younger readers. Children who have been disappointed in their introduction to the genre of historical fiction may never go on to encounter the works of writers like Garfield and Sutcliff.

Garfield structures his stories around strong, sometimes ingenious, plots. By avoiding specific historical events and restricting the content of his books to social history, he avoids the difficulty of contrived conjunctions between specific fact and specific fiction. Thus he frees himself to write stories that take place in the past instead of trying to fictionalize historical narratives that might have had greater impact as straightforward history. Consequently, his stories are based on unified plots that hold the reader with the necessary elements of conflict, tension, and action. The struggle for survival of Tim and Pistol (*The Boy and the Monkey*) is established in the first sentence. Once the scam by which they live is acted out, the progress to Newgate is as swift as it is inevitable. Conflict, tension, and action are intensified by the irony and humour in the courtroom scene, and the reader is delighted by the logic and surprise of the denouement.

Compare with this the slight and disparate elements of action in *The Last Ship*. The twins, Madeleine and Charles, who live in Quebec City of the French regime, want to see the party that their parents are attending at the Governor's chateau. After they have been put to bed, the children sneak out and start to climb Mountain Hill. On the way they see a house on fire and help to put the fire out. Next morning their escapade is uncovered and forgiven. The connections of the action with "the last ship" are tenuous: the last sailing signals the coming of winter, the captain will be a guest at the Governor's party, and the family can laugh over the twins' adventures instead of being sad about the departure of the ship.

Similarly in the three other books, the pattern is one of narrative rather than plot. In *Streets of Gold*, thirteen-year-old Jonathan Barble lies about his age to become one of the recruits who set out to capture the French fort at Louisbourg. As a member of the expedition, he discovers the truths behind the many lies of war and, fortunately, returns home without physical injury. There is no more suspense about Jonathan's safety than there is about the capture of the fort. *The Buffalo Hunt* tells of Pierre Bouchard's first experience in this important Métis event. Because there is little real doubt that he will be allowed to participate and he is speedily rescued after his fall during the hunt, there is little conflict to support the action in his narrative. *The Sky Caribou* begins with a rudimentary plot as the friendship between two Indian boys is threatened when the older one is in haste

to put away childish things. But the boy's story is displaced by Samuel Hearne's exploration of the Coppermine River and the connection between the two plots involves the historical Hearne unconvincingly with the fictional Little Partridge. Whether they lack unity, conflict, or suspense, the result is the same: none of the books has a successful plot. None of them gives the reader the sense of satisfaction to be found in the simplest folktale with its strong beginning, middle, and end.

The first person narrative ought to allow for character development even within the inevitable limitations of space. But the ages of the narrators deny them insight and interpretive powers. By choosing to be the conventional third person narrator, Leon Garfield can know as much or as little about his characters as he wishes. They may be shown to the reader with humour or irony or clothed in mystery. Possul, in *The Lamplighter's Funeral*, may be only a bewildered child stumbling unaware through London's darkness, or he may have in him the selfish selflessness of the saint. He attaches himself to the reader as completely as he does to the unwilling Pallcat. Not only do Garfield's characters change inwardly, they change others. Miss Sparrow, the printer's devil, exudes energy wherever she goes. She disrupts the pages of *Tom Titmarsh's Devil* as she disrupts Tom's life, precipitating the "fortunate fall" that carries him from blameless moral innocence to responsible guile.

It is this interaction of character and character, of character and action that gives the fictional creation life. Again and again in the Northern Lights series this process is cut short. Jonathan Barble, lonely and unsure beside his older comrades, is happy when he is treated kindly by a recruit who is sixteen: "I shook hands with Matthew Brown and after that we were firm friends. Soon I had many friends in Canso."<sup>3</sup> But his comment is not followed by events that show the friendship in action, and when "two of my friends were captured by a small Indian scouting party"<sup>4</sup> they are without individuality and, indeed, nameless, as is the friend who "was blown up while loading a cannon."<sup>5</sup>

In *The Buffalo Hunt* there are touches of individuality that occasionally allow the life of the illustrations to be reflected in the text: "Loupe has a face like a wolf and loves to put her long nose into everything."<sup>6</sup> Father Dumont does not approve of Loupe following Pierre to school; but when the pair come to borrow some tea, his response is different:

"... I see Loupe is with you too," he added with a frown. But then he smiled and gave Loupe's ears a scratch. I think he likes Loupe in spite of himself.<sup>7</sup>

Little Partridge is allowed a warmly human reconciliation with his alienated older friend, but the friend and his motivation have never been more than one-dimensional and so the fact of the reconciliation carries no conviction.

Flatness of character can, in part, be attributed to the flatness of language imposed by the identities of the first person narrators. This sacrifice of descriptive powers leaves the series poorer. Adjectives and adverbs are scarce and factual; to find a simile or metaphor requires a careful search. The Reverend Mr. Sewell (*Streets of Gold*) with his red wig asked "looked like a mad pirate"<sup>8</sup> and when the sky caribou are "moving among the stars. The sparks from their fur make flashing lights."<sup>9</sup> *The Buffalo Hunt* is a story of the Métis; yet other than the designations of the grandparents, there is not a single French or Indian word included to flavour it with the languages of their culture. If necessary, phonetic pronunciation and meaning could have followed the words in the text.

Without some texture of language there can be little texture of narrative. The past becomes dull and ordinary despite the attempt to project into it the enthusiasm of children's voices. Compare the bland description of mother dressed for the Governor's party: "She is very beautiful in the green velvet gown from France. Her curls are piled high with ribbons and feathers,"<sup>10</sup> with that of the printer's devil arriving at the bookshop:

Miss Sparrow's complexion was of a streaky, Satanic black, like an old boot or a burnt tree. This was as much from trade as from nature; she was so liberally daubed with printer's ink, that, put her in a press you might have had fifty clear impressions without the need for re-inking her once.<sup>11</sup>

Or consider the emotion implicit in the introduction to Tim's monkey: "Bright in a scarlet jacket, it clung at the boy's brown coat as if it was a second heart . . . and stared out at the passing world with eyes like undertaker's buttons."<sup>12</sup> These are images charged with meaning that juxtapose life and death.

Setting too grows more tangible through imagery. There is a forceful contrast between the lie and the reality in the picture of fallen Louisbourg:

. . . when we entered Louisbourg, instead of gold and silver there was rubble everywhere. Children were crying. Their mothers stared at us with hatred in their eyes. The men and boys looked tired and unhappy. Many were in rags. There were no mountains of rubies and pearls - only heaps of broken glass.<sup>13</sup>

But in this sentence describing the strange little lamplighter's progress through the sufferings of London's slums, there is emotion and sight and sound: "The rain was not heavy; it was more of a fine drizzle, a weeping of the night air that made the torch hiss and spit and give off smoke in thick bundles."<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Garfield's images are inseparable from their context. On the Passover night of *The Fool*, even the light of the link-boy's torch evokes the ritual theme: "They all joined in the refrain and even as they did so, a bright and burning light came along the street scouring out the shadows and reddening the fronts of the houses till they seemed to run with blood."<sup>15</sup>

Repeated patterns, whether of myth, ritual, or historical event, offer the writer of historical fiction yet another means of presenting the continuity between past and present. *The Sky Caribou* takes its title from the name given by the Chipewyans to the northern lights and the lights appear twice in the story: once when the explanation is given and the reader is told that Little Partridge and Running Deer have watched them together, and again when the two Indian boys are reconciled. For the child reader, however, there is no suggestion that identifying the lights as sky caribou might be part of a larger pattern of belief or mythology. Such a pattern can supply the vital structure of a story and add reverberations of meaning that include the reader, even if unconsciously, in the creative process. Although in *Moss and Blister* Leon Garfield brings his parallel nativity story up short with the birth of a girl child, his tale has been shaped and enriched by the association. Similarly, he uses Bunting's literal belief in the myth of the Passover ritual to achieve the touching and ironic epiphany that concludes *The Fool*.

Young readers may be unaware of the poverty of language, and oblivious to the lack of a shaping myth. But they will not be deceived by the pretense of the narrative voice. The opening paragraphs or pages of the books are lively and attention-catching. The point of view is appropriate for the narrator and in three of them the action begins immediately. Just as the reader becomes involved the mode changes abruptly from fictional to didactic, and through the person of the young narrator speaks the voice of the teacher. After introducing her twin brother, Charles, Madeleine also introduces the other members of her family and explains their occupations. She describes the landmarks of the Lower and Upper Towns and distinguishes the functions of the two convents: "One is a hospital and the other is my school,"<sup>16</sup> not omitting the subjects she studies. Then she tells in some detail how her family prepares for winter and what she herself must wear:

I have thick woollen clothes, high moccasins, fur mittens, a long red cloak and a fur hat. On the coldest days I pull my hat lower on

my head and my mocassins higher and higher on my legs and I disappear inside my red cloak.<sup>17</sup>

Eleven of the thirty pages and the story has not begun!. The same kind of information can be given without interrupting or forestalling the story. Winter also brings a change of costume in *The Enemy*: "A chill had begun to strike through the air and Miss Linnet took to coming out in a green worsted shawl and Larkins wore his sleeves rolled down."<sup>18</sup> At the same time a smooth transition has been made from one stage in the development of the plot to another.

The fiction of the young protagonist's ingenuousness cannot excuse the insistent voice of instruction. Pierre begins his story talking easily and naturally about running a message to Grandmère's house and then he too assumes the didactic stance:

My grandmère is an Indian. Grandpère is a French-Canadian fur trader. Papa is their oldest son. He is half Indian and half French Canadian, so he is called a Métis. The Métis are a very special people who live on the prairies. I am Métis too and so are all the people who live in our town. It is called Grantown and was founded by the greatest chief of the Métis, Cuthbert Grant. The Métis all have chiefs, just like Indian tribes.<sup>19</sup>

No child unprompted speaks like this.

The storyteller, on the other hand, can explain a character in his time and place and yet show his humanity about him:

Luckily Tom Titmarsh's master was a sensible, fatherly man who took his duties toward his apprentice seriously, and was prepared to stand in the place of a parent. He advised Titmarsh to have as little as possible to do with Miss Sparrow.<sup>20</sup>

In two sentences the reader is shown Mr. Crowder as an individual *and* told about the responsibilities of a master to an apprentice.

The narrative voice of *Streets of Gold* is less false only because Jonathan Barble's story is essentially the same as the real topic of the book – the siege and capture of Louisbourg. He is the thirteen-year-old reporter on the scene and any personal comments he makes are a gesture towards human interest. The reader knows why he is there. It is this naked teaching voice that destroys the credibility of the protagonists as characters and makes unmistakable the schizophrenic purpose of the series: the books are fictionalized history masqueraded as historical fiction. The facts take precedence over the stories and substitute information for life.

In the genre of historical fiction, history should serve the story, not dominate it. Narrative is no substitute for plot; illustrations no matter how lively will not breathe life into one-dimensional characters; language may be easy to read yet fail the imagination. With a firmly fictional purpose for the Northern Lights series, less could have been so much more. Fewer facts truly assimilated and dramatized through character and action could have resulted in memorable stories – and, perhaps, memorable history.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Virginia Haviland, ed., *Children and Literature: Views and Reviews* (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresmann and Company, 1973), p. 308.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>3</sup>*Streets of Gold*, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>6</sup>*The Buffalo Hunt*, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup>*Streets of Gold*, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup>*The Sky Caribou*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>10</sup>*The Last Ship*, p. 18.

<sup>11</sup>Leon Garfield, *Tom Titmarsh's Devil* (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1977), p. 5.

<sup>12</sup>Leon Garfield, *The Boy and the Monkey* (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1969), p. 7.

<sup>13</sup>*Streets of Gold*, p. 28.

<sup>14</sup>Leon Garfield, *The Lamplighter's Funeral* (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1976), p. 37.

<sup>15</sup>Leon Garfield, *The Fool* (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1977), p. 43.

<sup>16</sup>*The Last Ship*, p. 8.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>18</sup>Leon Garfield, *The Enemy* (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1978), p. 26.

<sup>19</sup>*The Buffalo Hunt*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>20</sup>*Tom Titmarsh's Devil*, p. 8.

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