1904. 226, 223 pp. $12.95, 15.95, cloth. ISBN 0-00-216682-8; 0-00-216816-2.

As a teenager I was fascinated by forensic science. The dry and orderly art of piecing together evidence of chaotic violent events gives one, I thought, a god-like control over the real world. John Wilson Murray has such god-like control over events when he lurks in the dark to discover the identity of the fire-bugging fireman or as a younger man, when he foils a Confederate plot to free 4,000 prisoners from Johnson Island.

Unfortunately for young adult readers, judicious modern editing does not allow Murray's adventures to emerge from the 1904 typeface as readably as they deserve. Likewise, the fictional frame of the stories of this great Canadian detective remains undeveloped, despite the publisher's optimistic comparisons of John W. Murray and his editor to Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson. Such comparisons are justified only by the actions of the men, not by the literary form in which they are related.

Each story stands alone; thirty-three stories unconnected except by the character of the detective, and some more engrossing than others, follow one upon the other in the memoirs, proving that the inexorable science and logic of John Wilson Murray will always outwit the criminal mind. Murray may not have been a Mountie but he always got his man. His *Further adventures* follows the same pattern. One might note that the successful C.B.C. television version of these memoirs needed a Dr. Watson figure to provide continuity. In the written memoirs the crimes range from murder, to arson, to forgery; when Murray was employed in railroad detective work he was even involved in the transportation of a mad woman to an asylum.

I can only recommend the *Memoirs of a great Canadian detective* and *Further memoirs of the great detective* to librarians and teachers as an excellent resource for those students who need to take a different approach to Canadian social history in the late nineteenth century. Only the most avid young readers of detective fiction will be able to enjoy these short stories as if they were a nineteenth-century version of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine.*

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WHERE DO WE GO AFTER *STAR WARS*? RECENT CHILDREN'S SCIENCE FICTION

The huntsman, Douglas Hill. Heinemann, 1982. 135 pp. $14.95 cloth. ISBN 434-94284-7; ***The city under ground,*** Suzanne Martel. Tr. Norah Smaridge. Douglas and McIntyre, 1982. 157 pp. $6.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-019-7; ***Short visit to Ergon,*** E.M. Osborn. Exposition Press, 1971. Reprinted 1982. 181 pp.

$8.50 cloth. ISBN 0-682-49873-4; ***Atomic archers target: terror,*** D. Harold Turner. Illus. John Walter. Peguis Publishers, 1983. 85 pp. $6.95 paper. ISBN 0-919566-93-6; ***Billy and the bubbleship,*** Elwy Yost. Scholastic-TAB, 1982. 164 pp. $1.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-71093-1.

One of the biggest problems facing the writer of children's science fiction today is that he or she has to compete, not just with other writers, but also with the cinema. George Lucas's *Star Wars* trilogy, not to mention its numerous high-technology imitators, has captured an audience far larger than any children's writer can command — and one of the unfortunate (so far as writers are concerned) side-effects of this popularity is that children now *know* what the future looks like. They have *seen* it (probably several times), touched it (in the shape of the innumerable spin-off toys and models), played with it. It seems as real as anything else in their environment, and it is almost impossible for anyone working with mere words to produce anything so concretely convincing as an Imperial Death-Star, so satisfactorily frightening as a Darth Vader, so stirring as the spectacle of Ewoks battling startroopers with all the limited resources of stone-age military technology. It is hard, in other words, for a man or woman armed only with a typewriter to compete with thirty-or-so million dollars' worth of state-of-the-art special effects.

What role, then, if any, is left for the writer of children's science fiction? If it is impossible to match the sheer spectacle that the cinema can provide, is there anything the writer can offer which the cinematic blockbusters do not? Believable characterization and credible dialogue are two things which immediately suggest themselves: it should not be too difficult, surely, to portray relationships less mawkish than the Luke/Han Solo/Princess Leia triangle, or to provide conversations which go beyond the "am I pleased to see you, old buddy" shorthand which passes for communication in the Lucas trilogy. Similarly, one would imagine it might be feasible to offer something more by way of narrative interest than the storyline of *Star Wars* and its sequels provide — which is little more than cops-and-robbers or cowboys-and-Indians in futuristic dress.

Of the books under review, however, four at least would appear to fit into narrative categories no less well-tried. Both Elwy Yost and E.M. Osborn offer versions of the earthling-visits-alien-planet tale, while Suzanne Martel and Douglas Hill provide variations on the post-holocaust theme, with Ms. Martel depicting a subterranean civilization that has grown up since the war, and Mr. Hill a world reduced to barbarism and ruled by callous aliens, rather in the manner of Ursula LeGuin's *City of illusions.* Even D. Harold Turner's *Atomic archers target: terror,* with its duel between juvenile archers and terrorist mercenaries, is essentially a reworking of the old story, where wilderness-wise kids take on clumsier adults in the wild — a story which goes back to Arthur Ransome and beyond.

Not that there is anything wrong with well-tried narrative formulae, of course: the real test is whether or not the writer succeeds in making them come alive. By these standards, *Atomic archers* is only sporadically successful. There is a genuine fascination in the descriptions of the hunting and survival techniques which have been mastered by the children of the staff at Canada's top-secret nuclear fusion station in Manitoba, and which are put to good use when they take to the woods after the station is seized by right-wing mercenaries. The mercenaries themselves, though, are rather less believable: they are simply *too* incompetent, falling into every trap the children set for them. The story is also marred by its ponderous attempts at humour: one of the children loves long words, and speaks like a rather indifferently observed parody of a sociology lecturer. ("Categorically speaking, sir," he began, "at the point of time which Victor has just postulated, Ted and I will make an ambulatory corroboration of the nimrods' proficiency . . .") This, together with some shameless plugs for nuclear fusion as the energy technology of the future, tends to get in the way of the overall narrative flow. Nor are matters improved by the ending — a farcically protracted version of the familiar "I've got you covered" — "That's what you think" situation. (Kids spy on mercenaries; mercenaries surprise kids; more kids surprise mercenaries; still more mercenaries surprise kids; friendly Indians surprise mercenaries — one wonders why it should stop there: why not another layer of mercenaries, who are in their turn surprised by Eskimos? It could go on for ever.)

Woodcraft is also pitted against advanced technology in Douglas Hill's *The huntsman,* where Finn Ferral, discovered in the wilderness as a baby, uses his almost supernatural knowledge of the wilds to track down his foster-father and sister after they have been seized by the aliens, who carry them off to work in their slave camps. Here, however, the conflict is more real: Finn is more formidable, the aliens far more dangerous than is the case with the opposing sides in *Atomic archers.* Finn also acquires an impressive ally in the shape of Baer — part man, part bear — who aids him in his quest for his lost family, and also exacts some exceedingly satisfying vengeance on the aliens. The opposition between the "natural" skills of Finn and the unnatural scientific experiments of the aliens suffers somewhat when it transpires that Finn himself is the product of one of those experiments, but this does not detract from the real excitement of the action scenes — in particular Finn and Baer's assault on an alien stronghold, guarded by the "Bloodkin," who are the bestial products of the aliens' genetic manipulation. The least satisfactory aspect of the novel is its conclusion, which is left rather crudely open-ended, in obvious preparation for a sequel (which has duly appeared since).

Suzanne Martel's *The city under ground* offers a very different picture of the world after a nuclear war. Her subterranean civilization, which has evolved beneath the remains of Montreal, combines various standard futuristic features — food and drink pills, synthetic hormone treatments, advanced communication

devices — with the moral atmosphere of an old-fashioned *lycée.* Her heroes are clean-limbed young boys who work, exercise, and engage in adventures that never go *too* far beyond the bounds of duty laid down by the adult hierarchy. (The lure of becoming a "first-class citizen" is too great.) The odd thing is that the author actually appears to approve of her artificial world: there is, of course, another society, living in the now safe open air above them, leading a more primitive, natural existence, but their discovery is not shown as offering an escape to freedom from the enclosed, sterile world below, as is most often the case in stories of this kind. Instead, it turns out that the subterranean civilization is able to bring untold advantages to its more primitive neighbours — in particular the "Upsilon rays" which cure all illnesses, and hence prove handy in dealing with the contagious diseases to which people on the surface are still subject. (This unfashionable predilection for technology over nature is perhaps a reflection of the novel's date of composition: it was first published in 1963.)

So much for life on post-holocaust earth, then — what of other worlds? E.M. Osborn's alien planet, Ergon, is a Utopia, whose citizens, in the intervals between consuming that well-known alien delicacy, coffee and danish pastry, discourse ponderously about Truth, the Life-Force, and other weighty concepts. They also live for several hundred years — or maybe it just seems that way, given the way they talk. The grinding didacticism of the whole (we also learn that monogamy is good, and that drugs are bad) is scarcely relieved by the character of the narrator, a U.S. astronaut who ends up on Ergon after having "missed Mars," and who is given to beginning chapters with irritating attempts at colloquialism such as: "What ja know? Seems Astra is Dirke's girl friend. He sure knows how to pick 'em." Which unfortunately doesn't make passages such as the following, however admirable the sentiments expressed, read any more like credible fiction:

> It is necessary for us to provide that generations yet unborn have freedom and economic opportunity. At the rate land and natural resources are alienated and monopolized, in a hundred years or so, half the population of the United States will be little more than peons, having only their skills to sell, and no right to a single inch of land on which to live, except by courtesy of some corporation. At first, exploitation poses as benevolent, but paternalism is never the equal of freedom. Since all men are potentially equal, what basis has any person or corporation to claim the right to control the sources of wealth, which actually belong to every child born into the world.

What ja know?

Which brings us to Elwy Yost's *Billy and the bubbleship,* by far the most original and successful of the novels reviewed. Aimed at a slightly younger audience, it owes much of its success to the author's capacity to *identify* with the way children think. Its starting point is a truly childish — in the best sense of the word — fantasy, the product of the kind of speculation at which children

so signally excel adults. Where do bubbles go after you blow them? What would it be like to be *inside* a bubble? In response to these questions, Elwy Yost improvises a fast-moving and consistently entertaining story in which Billy Brown, after blowing himself a bubble from the liquid produced by a melting meteor, takes off through a black hole to the planet of Zomar, where he encounters kidnappers, magicians, mad queens, beautiful princesses, and takes part in a chess-game played with live pieces (where any pieces taken get thrown to a nearby sea-monster). There are ice-guns which freeze people (or unfreeze them), and crystals which provide a simultaneous translation service, but the pace is so fast that the reader is already taking a new wonder for granted before there is time to question the plausibility of the last one. Yet Billy also finds it possible to combine his wild adventures with a return to domestic normality: when, after months of excitement, he finally arrives home, it is to find that no time at all has elapsed on earth. Everything is exactly the way it was — his parents don't even know he has gone. Billy can have his cake, and eat it too. Perhaps there are some things plain old words still do best.

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OLD IS NEW AGAIN

Fabien 1. Un loup pour Rose, Fabien 2, Une nuit au pays des malices, Ginette Anfousse. Illustrés par Jacques Léveillé. Montréal, Editions Leméac, 1982. 40 pp., 8,95$ broché. ISBN 2-7609-9845-2.

Tout au début de *Fabien 1. Un loup pour Rose* et *Fabien 2. Une nuit au pays des malices,* l'auteur avertit son public des "ressemblances avec des personnages et des situations déjà connus." En effet, les associations et les renvois ne tardent pas à venir. Le narrateur de *Fabien 1. Un loup pour Rose,* ayant perdu son chemin, grimpe l'escalier qui déferle du ciel et se trouve dans le royaume de Fabien, une étroite galerie que celui-ci partage avec quatre chats et un raton-laveur albinos appelé "Ma Rose." Là, son jeune hôte lui raconte le devoir qu'il s'est donné de rendre heureuse sa Rose, elle qui est dépourvue de masque noir. Il quitte sa galerie et parcourt le monde à la recherche d'un loup qui lui convienne. Il s'adresse à divers personnages: au premier ministre-président, à Madame Zazette de la Babiolerie, à Monsieur Henri de Maisonneuve, à Albert Monette, trappeur, à un ours et finalement se trouve face à face avec le loup lui-même. Tout cela pour découvrir que le loup n'a pas de masque noir et que "Ma Rose," grâce à l'amour, finit par accepter sa singularité. Même sans parler de la portée idéologique, les similarités de structure avec *Le Petit Prince*