

## A HARMLESS DIVERSION

*Danger on the river*, J. Robert Janes. Clarke, Irwin & Company, 1982. 151 pp. \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7720-138-8.

What can one say about a children's novel whose publisher unashamedly claims it to be nothing more than a "fast-paced" adventure story? Perhaps very little. For, not unexpectedly, if one decides to judge it by the usual criteria set forth in the best critical handbooks, *Danger on the river* fails to measure up to the expected standards of either "good" or "great." The plot is predictable: a gang of boys — which includes the stereotypical "fat boy" who steals his mother's cookies to retain membership in it — and a bunch of "nosy" girls who do mock battle on a polluted river eventually join forces to stop the illegal dumping of chemical wastes. The characters themselves are mere caricatures and though the motive for their actions involves a contemporary social problem, nothing is made of it in either a didactic or thematic way. By the same token, any analysis of such literary attributes as style, tone or theme will fail to redeem the novel from its inevitable designation: "mediocre." Only its situational humour offers any hope for praise.

And yet, if one were to be less academically stuffy, one might find reasons to be less negative than that. One could say, for example, given the intention of both author and publisher (who are more honest than wise) that as an unpretentious adventure story *Danger on the river* is better than most on our library shelves. It is told simply but well, with occasional funny moments, moves to its outcome with ease (though without much suspense), and its author understands how to create colloquial dialogue. One might, in fact, if the apologist were allowed his say, go beyond that to argue that books of this kind — intended for experiential pleasure rather than for aesthetic enjoyment — do indeed have an important place in our children's lives — as do comic books and Nancy Drew; that, in fact, the critical handbooks themselves aim at choosing the "rarest kind of best" and often ignore the most-read books. Or one might argue, as Peter Dickinson does, that "a high proportion of [children's] reading matter can healthily consist of things no sane adult [or critic] would actually encourage them to read." For we know full well that many discriminating adults are themselves often diverted by pure escapist fiction and films. So *Danger on the river*, while it may never become "loved or cherished," may nevertheless entertain and divert and even encourage the reading habits of under-read children.

But, supporter though I am of Canadian books, that is as apologetic and evasive as I can be. Certainly I would prefer the "adventure" stories on your shelves and in your children's hands to be Canadian, because so many, even poorer than this, are American. And I would go further to say that, if fast-paced adventure stories are to be part of your curriculum or library, *Danger*

on the river is a better read than most. But I can't encourage the habit, nor can I say that the book is worth its price.

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## WIN A CHILDREN'S AUTHOR OR ILLUSTRATOR

- 1984 Children's Book Festival contest

The Children's Book Centre, announces a special "Win-an-Author-or Illustrator" contest which is open to any Canadian school, library or community centre. Submit a detailed description of a program which would increase understanding of Canada's unique cultural heritage, through making use of an author or illustrator for a week in the school, library or community at large.

The two "prizes" in the contest are Barbara Smucker (author of *Underground to Canada*, *Days of Terror* and *Amish Adventure*) and Ian Wallace (author/illustrator of *Chin Chiang and the Dragon's Dance* and *The Sandwich*.) Each will be "won" by a Canadian community for Children's Book Festival Week, November 17 to 24.

The contest is funded by the Federal Multiculturalism Directorate and coordinated by the Children's Book Centre. There will be no cost to the winning communities.

Contact: Peter Carver, Festival Coordinator, Children's Books Centre, 229 College Street, 5th Floor, Toronto, Ontario M5T 1R4 - Phone: 416-597-1331.

# THE STORYMAKERS

## The Children's Book Festival 1984

Behind every story there is someone's imagination.

The 1984 Children's Book Festival spotlights all the people in Canada who have helped build the treasure-house of stories you love.

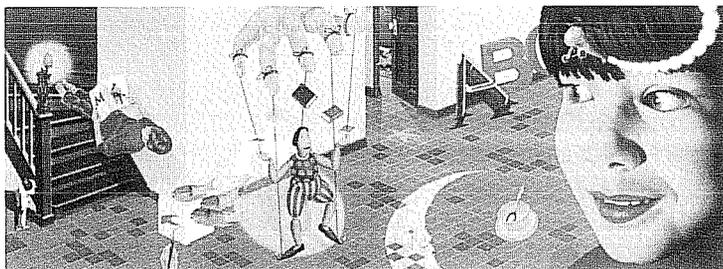
The storyteller, the writer, the artist, the designer, the editor, the publisher - each has the special vision needed to create stories which people of all ages will enjoy.

Ask your librarian, teacher or bookseller to show you books that contain stories you will enjoy and grow to love.

Listen to the stories your parents, grandparents and friends love to tell when people get together. Write them down so that you'll have them forever.

Above all, make up your own stories for friends, for younger brothers and sisters - or just for yourself.

Remember, we can all be storymakers.



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