

THE CONSTRICTIONS OF TIME

Your time my time, Ann Walsh. Press Porcépic, 1984. 156 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 0-88878-219-5; *Stuck fast in yesterday*, Heather Kellerhals-Stewart. Douglas & McIntyre, 1983. 135 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-024-3.

Both Ann Walsh's *Your time my time* and Heather Kellerhals-Stewart's *Stuck fast in yesterday* are time-warp or journey-into-the-past fantasies, and both are only partially successful, perhaps because of problems unique to the genre.

Ann Walsh's story is, however, somewhat unusual in that its heroine, Elizabeth Connell, can move from present to past and then back to the present again merely by turning a magical ring that she finds in a cemetery. But not just any cemetery, of course; her discovery occurs in Barkerville, a small British Columbia town recreated to look exactly as it did in the gold rush days of the 1870s. Elizabeth moves to this area when her mother, at 35, decides that she "wasn't being fulfilled by her life in Vancouver." Elizabeth has little sympathy for her mother's identity crisis, however, bitterly resenting being dragged to a place she generously describes as "the absolute end of the world."

Fortunately, however, Barkerville is within biking distance, and Elizabeth becomes completely enthralled by this living replica of the past. Soon thereafter, the magical ring allows her to confront the very real world of 1870 Barkerville.

Elizabeth is clearly a girl in need of a fantasy and, for much of the book, neither the reader nor Elizabeth herself is sure whether the time trips are real or just the hallucinations of a troubled, lonely girl. The story's climax, in fact, revolves around Elizabeth's final confrontation with the reality of her fantasy.

So, the premise is a sound one: to send a girl into Barkerville's past to discover how valid this twentieth-century recreation actually is. But alas, this is not to be, for Elizabeth's story quickly becomes little more than a traditional love story, for what Elizabeth finds in the past is not Barkerville, but Ken, a boy with whom she inevitably falls desperately in love. And, as the back cover blurb asks, "What happens when you fall in love with someone from another time?"

What happens is that a potentially fascinating historical fantasy becomes a predictable adolescent romance. Ultimately Elizabeth's doomed love affair ends when, while trying to save her dying lover, she almost dies herself. Her crisis, however, does reunite the family, and her now presumably fulfilled mother decides they can return to the security of present-day Vancouver.

The abruptness of the ending reflects the major problem in the book: it never quite believes in the fantasy enough to develop the full possibilities of a confrontation between the two worlds.

Stuck fast in yesterday also begins quite auspiciously. Jennifer, the heroine, yet another troubled adolescent, is forced to go to an exhibit of old photographs. There she sees a photograph of two children (whom she dubs the "seen but not heard children") who seem to be signaling her. And, as in Ann Walsh's

story, these present-day reminders of the past soon propel the heroine into a very real past. Jennifer's journey, however, also includes a villain, an enigmatic old-fashioned photographer named Mr. Blackwood, who seems determined to make Jennifer's journey a permanent one, to make sure she does stay "stuck fast in yesterday."

That particular yesterday is not so much a place as a nineteenth-century Canadian family that includes the very two children she saw in the picture. Thus, once again, the premise is sound: a child retreats to the past to discover the secret of these strange children and uncover the sinister plans of the man who created these "seen but not heard" children.

Unfortunately, the reason why the photographer chases Jennifer through time is never made clear nor, in fact, is the point Ms. Kellerhals-Stewart is trying to make in her story. Do we celebrate Jennifer's rebellion against antiquated nineteenth-century constrictions and applaud her quest to be independent (she actually gets down to her bloomers to defeat a boy in a footrace in one episode)? Or do we spank her for being so eternally irritable and selfish? Though the novel recreates the past with true sensitivity, there is no overriding sense of direction, no explanation of what this clash between past and present, between good and evil, is meant to represent.

Jennifer's return to the present is particularly confusing. In the midst of the malevolent shouts of the photographer, somehow the love of Jennifer's two friends saves her and she suddenly finds herself in the very place from which the journey began. Was this an hallucination? The question is not only left unanswered, but unasked, and a story which initially provided quite an engaging portrayal of the past winds up in a rather confusing present.

Yet, the problem in both these books may be one inevitable in any time-travel fantasy: they are not truly fantasies; their other worlds are governed by the same rules of fact that fetter all real worlds. Such worlds, however attractive, cannot offer the infinite possibilities of the other world of fantasy. Clearly, Ms. Kellerhals-Stewart faces this problem when she, I think unsuccessfully, tries to make her yesterday both an objective correlative for Jennifer's dilemma and an accurate portrait of nineteenth-century Canada. Thus, unfortunately, one is inevitably stuck fast in what yesterday was, and cannot fully explore what a true fantasy world can be.

J. Kieran Kealy teaches children's and medieval literature at the University of British Columbia and he is the author of articles on Chaucer, North American folklore and children's literature.