Janet Lunn's Time/Space Travellers

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Each of Janet Lunn's three novels for children is very precisely located in space. The first, *Double spell* (1986), takes place in Toronto, and more specifically in a house which dates from the early nineteenth century but has benefitted or suffered from sundry additions and accretions since then. The action of *The root cellar* (1981) centres upon a tumbledown old farmhouse in Prince Edward County, Ontario, while that of *Shadow in Hawthorn Bay* (1986) occurs in the same small corner of the same small island. What is more, Lunn lives in the very house (no longer tumbledown) of which she writes in *The root cellar*, and I should be surprised if she did not have an equally specific house in mind when writing *Double spell.* One can sense this personal knowledge of and attachment to a locality just from reading the books. But the care with which Lunn recreates the settings of all three books is more than mere self-indulgent nostalgia. For it is necessary that the houses in the first two books be recognizable when seen as they appeared a century or more ago, since in both cases characters find themselves timetravelling to the past. By contrast, the protagonist of *Shadow in Hawthorn Bay* does all her travelling in space. But it is equally important, though for different reasons, that the new community and environment she finds herself in be presented convincingly.

Double spell is the story of a whole family, and more particularly of twins with that family and the ups and downs and rich complexities of their relationship. These are intensified when they buy an antique doll and find themselves becoming involved, through shared dreams, mysterious coincidences, and finally a frightening overlap of past and present, with the lives of twins who owned the doll and its twin back in the 1830s. For the most part the story is one of mystery, suspense, and detection, with a heart-stopping climax, followed by too many details left to be unravelled by hurried historical research in the epilogue. But what may well remain in the reader's mind longest is the fate of Hester — Hester the first of Lunn's misfits, a spoiled, rich, nineteenth-century misfit who resents being excluded from the special world of the country-cousin twins she visits, and whose malevolence brings tragedy to them, and hence brings trouble to their twentieth-century counterparts. Neither Hester's failure to fit in nor her guilt is resolved in her lifetime, however. She remains a shadowy minor

character. What matters to us, the readers, is the understanding of her plight shown by the twins who stumble backward in time into her story, and the way the generosity of their response enables her troubled spirit to find its eventual rest.

Rose, on the other hand, the twentieth-century protagonist of *The root cellar*, is both time-traveller and misfit. She is a much more thoroughgoing time-traveller than the twins, moreover. An orphan reared in an exclusively adult world by a rich, New York grandmother, who bitterly resents having suddenly to begin a new life in Ontario with an aunt and uncle and their four sons. Her discovery of a doorway into the past provides what seems to be an escape from an intolerable present. Her adventures within that past, however, in the aftermath of the American Civil War, involve her in far more gruesome realities than those of her new home in the present, and lead to her assuming responsibilities she continues to fulfil long after she has recognized that where she truly belongs is in twentieth-century Ontario. What seemed an escape becomes her proving ground. In the end, of course, she returns to the present — in a storm and the nick of time. For the root cellar route to her discovery of where her own true roots lie has been washed out in a flash flood. However therapeutic fantasy may sometimes be, we remain there too long at our peril.

In each of these stories, though more clearly in *The root cellar*, a journey in time provides the protagonist(s) and the reader with a learning experience. In her latest novel Lunn abandons the device of linking past and present through timetravel, and substitutes a spatial journey within a purely historical narrative. The journey, moreover, is one-way, though the learning is two-way, both the traveller and those she learns to live among having something to teach each other.

In *Shadow in Hawthorn Bay*, Mary (or Mairi), a highland girl, journeys from Scotland to loyalist Upper Canada in answer to a psychic summons from her cousin, Duncan, the two of them having been inseparable until, four years earlier, his family emigrated. She arrives to find that Duncan has died while she was still in mid-Atlantic, and that his family are on their way back to Scotland. So she sets to work to earn her return passage. In spite of herself, however, she becomes more and more involved in and useful to the lives of her new neighbours. Yet still she clings to her goal and to her loyalty to the memory of Duncan, refusing to consider the possibility of marrying and settling in Canada. Her sense of not belonging is kept alive — nurtured almost — by her pathological fear of the forest and by her persistent belief in the "old ones" — spirits, ghosts, fairies — as well as her own frightening powers of prophetic second sight. And it is over such matters that much of the reciprocal learning (and therefore reader learning) takes place. As readers, we are privy to Mary's flashes of prophetic vision, and are consequently impatient with Canadian scepticism as

to the possibility of any such gift, and in more general terms with a similar undervaluing of the more imaginative side to Mary's nature. She in turn, when for instance she discovers to her horror that it is human friends rather than fairies who have been leaving her gifts of food (and therefore that she is not under special supernatural protection), must acknowledge that she has been downplaying the importance of human neighbourliness and affection.

The climax of the book comes when her neighbours are forced to admit that the charges of witchcraft to which Mary's stubborn persistence in keeping to herself and holding fast to her beliefs has led are groundless, and when Mary for her part recognizes that whatever summons she received and has continued to receive from Duncan's unhappy spirit is a selfish one to join him in death. Symbolically she forces herself to walk deep into the forest. And there she discovers such silence as tells her that in this new land, as yet scarcely inhabited even by the Indians, there are no "old ones," no guardian spirits from the past. They themselves, she and her neighbours, are the new "old ones," and it is on each other they must rely. When finally she agrees to marry her patient, loving suitor, and admits in so doing that she never felt as much a part of the community in the old country as she does now, it is on the understanding that both she and her husband will remain true to what each has always been as well as welcoming what the other will bring to the partnership.

I refer above to the book's climax. There is much less of a sense in this story than in its predecessors, however, that a climax has been deliberately contrived, just as there is no need of the device of time-travel to establish a link between past and present. The ending is the natural outcome of all that has gone before; the book's relevance to the lives its readers lead is clear throughout. Perhaps the crucial difference is that the shape of the narrative is no longer circular, ending where it began. Mary is not a misfit from the start, like Rose (or Hester). She becomes a misfit by making her journey — a journey in space rather than in time. She is therefore able to achieve her reconciliation, and it is appropriate that she should do so, in and with her new environment rather than her old one — in and with what she comes to recognize as her new home.

The message that people must often return to what they are running away from in order to be able to accept themselves is an important one. But so is the message that they can move on, can find new aspects to themselves by adjusting to a new and initially daunting environment. This lesson is implicit in *The root cellar*, since Rose's escape into the past is also an attempt to return to New York — to the familiar — and her eventual return to Ontario is an acceptance of the new as well as of the known. But this theme of adjustment to the new is altogether more up front in *Shadow in Hawthorn Bay*, even though there is again a submerged countertheme

— that in adjusting one must retain an essential core of the old self. And it is the centrality of both these themes to the Canadian consciousness, far more than the truly detailed, authentic, and very engaging picture we are given of early pioneer life, which for me constitutes the Canadian content of this book. They are like opposite sides of the same coin, as when in *The diviners* Morag must return to Scotland in order to discover that her real roots are in Manawaka. But it is a pleasure to find a book — especially one for the young — in which the coin falls so unequivocally heads up (and forward looking) rather than tails.

Bibliography

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