

PRINCE RESCUED ON THE ROCK

The ice diamond quest. Eric Wilson. Harper Collins (Canada), 1990. (A Tom and Liz Austen mystery) 130 pp., \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-00-223589-7.

This novel's subtitle shows it to be one of several featuring a boy and girl from Winnipeg, now fourteen and sixteen. Father being away, they fly unsupervised to join their mother at their grandmother's deathbed in St. John's. Tom's reading aloud of their younger cousin's letter about an "Ice diamond" attracts attention from a man and woman who try several times to kidnap them. In St. John's they meet Kathy Munro, the attractive Port Manager. Her wealthy fiancé Richard Livingstone takes them in his yacht to Petty Point, where he is unpopular for serving eviction notices in order to replace an apartment block with a park in memory of his grandfather, a hard-faced employer. After another team of crooks shows interest, we learn that "Ice diamond" is the code-name of the Prince of an unnamed country who is in hiding until his eighteenth birthday, when he plans to return and oust its rebel rulers. Upon discovering a plot by Livingstone to capture and sell him to the rebels, Tom and Liz foil both this and a counter-plot by Kathy, who intends to line her own pockets.

To dismiss the book as James Bond for teenage readers would do no justice to its skilful narration and touchingly real backdrop of family and provincial life: the shared sorrow at the funeral; the friendliness of the locals and vigour of the woman who leads their protest against the evictions; the vividness of Tom's dream about grandfather Livingstone ruthlessly exploiting his sealhunters, and concrete description of the ensuing voyage through rough water. As a storyteller, Wilson has a gift for neat reversals, as at the end of Chapter 2. Tom and Liz, hiding under canvas, hear their pursuers dispute about whether they are aboard, and "cowboy boots" clang away along the "steel deck." As they breathe "quietly, not daring to move...suddenly the canvas was ripped back, and they saw the face of the cowboy, 'Got you,' he said, smiling."

A deeper reversal raises doubts about the characterization. The Kathy Munro who jumps on to Richard's yacht, coolly asks "Where are you bound, sweetheart?", unmasks his plot and announces "I decided to find the Prince, and sell him myself" (117). She is not the same person as the new Port Manager who charmed Tom and Liz in Chapter 3. She could have been, had her willingness to talk to young strangers about her love for Richard embarrassed them as it does the adult reader, but it does not. Nor do they seem surprised by a woman's appointment to a position that in conservative Newfoundland would probably be reserved for men. The identity of the "Diamond" (an heir "on ice") is artfully concealed until the right time, but why not then name the Prince and at least his continent? Again, the author mentions "beautiful" Victorian houses in St. John's but gives no detail. He admirably portrays working people in Newfoundland and their case against unbridled capitalism but the improbable psychology of its central characters limits his book to a thriller to be read just once.

Lionel Adey, who is now retired, taught children's literature and literary approaches to childhood and adolescence at the University of Victoria.