Checking for Suspects: An Investigation of Mystery Stories

Trouble on Wheels. Ann Aveling. Scholastic Canada Ltd., 1993. 134 pp. $4.50 paper. ISBN 0-590-74598-0. ***Who's Got Gertie? And How Can We Get Her Back!*** Linda Bailey. Kids Can Press Ltd., 1994. 174 pp. $4.95 paper. ISBN 1-55074-217-5. ***Mystery at Lake Placid***. Roy MacGregor. McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1995. 204 pp. $4.99 paper. ISBN 0-7710-5625-7. ***The Invisible Polly McDoodle***. Mary Woodbury. Coteau Books, 1994. 147 pp. $4.95 paper. ISBN 1-55050-062-7. ***The Case of the Golden Boy***. Eric Wilson. HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 1994. 93 pp. $4.99 paper. ISBN 0-00-647939-1. ***Mistaken Identity***. Norah McClintock. Scholastic Canada Ltd., 1995. 183 pp. $4.99 paper. ISBN 0-590-24627-5. ***The Amazon Influence***. Marion Woodson. Orca Book Publishers, 1994. 167 pp. $6.95 paper. ISBN 1-55143-011-8.

In 1967, Sheila Egoff wrote in *The Republic of Childhood*, "A passably good detective story or mystery story for children has yet to be written by a Canadian." In 1975, she concluded that titles in this genre still generally had boring plots, were badly written and were dismissive of females. In the 1990 *The New Republic of Childhood* she found no reason to alter her view that the genre had nothing of value to offer young readers.

Children like mystery stories. They provide an infinite variety of opportunities to identify with clever people who solve challenging puzzles, overcome obstacles and dangers, outsmart wrongdoers, and earn the admiration and respect of the less clever. Unlike adult detective and mystery writers, children's writers often focus on plot at the expense of style. Books for young readers should, at a minimum, manifest a degree of literary excellence; provide a plot that children can climb right into; offer new ideas in the content; handle important themes with integrity. Will a sampling of recent titles support or contradict Egoff's view?

Five of these novels are for readers about nine to twelve. Linda Bailey's detectives, Stevie and Jesse, appear in their third adventure, *Who's Got Gertie...?* Like many juvenile mysteries Bailey's stretches probability — how many kids actually investigate a murder or kidnapping? — but the story hangs together well as the two engaging young sleuths investigate the disappearance of an elderly neighbour. There's a wacky assortment of supporting players, an interesting plot, good action, a dollop of danger, and satisfyingly unpleasant villains. Bailey's kids demonstrate solid detective skills, identifying clues and pursuing leads until their perseverance pays off. There are traditions of the adult genre in their note-taking ("We'll need a list of clues and suspects.") and the detective's "sixth sense" that keeps Stevie on the trail of an apparently blameless woman until her suspicions are rewarded. Concepts like "inconspicuous" are seamlessly introduced and the reader learns some of the tricks and difficulties of shadowing people. Bailey's snappy, scene-setting first chapter and Stevie's sassy narrative grab reader attention and the story trots right along. Best of all are the laughs as Stevie and Jesse's detective zeal is spurred not just by concern for Gertie, who has volunteered to keep an eye on them this summer for their busy parents, but also by the looming threat of a month interned in the dreaded Happy (they call it "Sappy") Rabbits Summer Day Camp — wearing pink ears and cotton-ball tails! — if they cannot recover their erstwhile babysitter.

Ann Aveling's detective, Hunter Watson, in *Trouble on Wheels*, investigates bicycle vandalism at his school. The author delivers a palatable lesson in deductive reasoning as Hunter examines crime scenes, interviews witnesses, eliminates suspects, and cautions angry students not to leap to conclusions about the guilt of an unpopular classmate. Aveling's writing style is flat. Hunter's first-person narrative is both lackluster and pompous, and character development, admittedly not a priority in a genre where we can get away with good guys and bad guys, is negligible. Hunter is a walking analytical mind who wields unquestioned authority in the schoolyard as he coolly pursues his quarry, and other students are merely his instruments in the investigative process. Even so, Hunter falls jarringly from type when, briefly believing his best friend guilty, he raves and spits accusations. Considering it is a concept central to her theme, the author disappoints when she passes up a perfect opportunity to introduce readers to the term "circumstantial evidence" (27).

Some juvenile mysteries are designed to appeal to a particular recreational interest of readers. Roy MacGregor, a sports columnist, sets his first book, *Mystery at Lake Placid*, about the Screech Owls, in the world of competitive hockey. Travis and his teammates hope to do well at a tournament where scouts are in attendance, but find chances of victory jeopardized when someone sabotages their star centre's equipment. Here the mystery is secondary, manifesting itself only by mid-point of the novel. Although it provides the plot line it is really an excuse for some deftly delivered lessons from life in the context of the game of hockey, its acolytes, and the seductiveness of ambition. MacGregor's initial chapters are deceptively light. We meet the team members as they travel to the tournament in a bus driven by their invaluable and much-loved manager, Mr. Dillinger. The high spirits and farts-and-wedgees humour contrast tellingly with the tone later in the book when an uglier side of life intrudes. This is balanced, fluid writing by an author at ease with language who knows and loves hockey and has the talent to transmit this attraction to the reader. We get a close look at Travis with his problems of fear of the dark and small stature. Other characters are little more than attributes — the "Star Trek" fan, the camera nut, Nish with his fixation on sex. MacGregor's adults are more pointedly drawn. There is purposeful foreshadowing as Brown, the obnoxious hockey parent, tries to bully the team into making his son look good for the scouts. The steadfast Coach Muck voices MacGregor's feelings about the respect "the Game" deserves.

Eric Wilson is established — by word of mouth if not critical acclaim — as Canada's most popular author of juvenile mysteries. This slim volume is his previously unpublished (though reworked in *The Prairie Dog Conspiracy*, 1992) first "Tom Austen" novel about the super smart, super brave boy detective matching wits against black hat baddies who kidnap a wealthy classmate. In the vein of the Hardy Boys stories which Tom studies, we are given improbable action with a hearty helping of violence. Wilson sets a brisk pace and piles on the excitement, but his writing here is pedestrian. Characters are cardboard, though Tom is understandably attractive to children. He is bright, resourceful, and dedicated to justice. He has thrilling adventures and always bounces back. However, motivations are simplistic.

Although the young detectives in Mary Woodbury's *The Invisible Polly McDoodle* observe the behaviour of several neighbourhood residents and conduct an admirably systematic elimination of suspects in their investigation, there is never much doubt who is burgling their housing complex. The introspective Polly, a would-be artist who feels overshadowed and unappreciated in her extroverted family, sees detection as the pathway to respect. As she and her friend Kyle put the clues together, she evolves from a state of resentful powerlessness and, like the Velveteen Rabbit, at last becomes "real." Except for an irritating and seemingly chronic inability to use the word "like" grammatically, Woodbury has a pleasant writing style and tells a story well. Polly comes off as a real person with whom we can sympathize in her struggle for self-assertion. Woodbury perfectly sums up the exhilaration and the terror of those first efforts to tear one's self free of the parent shell when, after finally venting all her furious frustration at her parents and fleeing from the house, Polly wonders "can I say stuff like that and still go home?" If Polly's self-absorbed parents are perhaps a little too harshly drawn, we are looking through Polly's eyes and this is how she sees them. Woodbury lets them become more human as Polly herself develops. The author gives Polly and Kyle some interesting clues to gnaw on, provides hints about observing suspects, and introduces concepts such as *modus operandi* and "surveillance." Like Stevie and Tom, Woodbury's detectives take notes (interestingly none uses a computer) to focus their thinking and clarify findings, but Polly also uses her artistic ability to sketch her observations; ultimately it is this knack that catches the crooks.

Norah McClintock's mystery, *Mistaken Identity*, is aimed at readers a year or two older, and it has overtones of the psychological and romantic thriller genres. Sixteen-year-old Zanny has spent a lonely childhood being moved about the United States (McClintock is the only author who sets her story outside Canada) by her secretive and overprotective father. When he dies in suspicious circumstances she undergoes frightening encounters with strangers from his past who believe she has knowledge of $10M he allegedly stole from a Chicago crime family years earlier. This is a high-tension puzzler in which the teenaged protagonist, with no previous detective experience or relevant skills, finds herself pitted against ruthless men on both sides of the law with only her untried problem-solving abilities and her stubborn determination to see her through as she struggles to unravel the enigma of her father. The title aptly forecasts the nature of the story: a brusque DEA agent of unsettling manner, a kindly man who claims to be her uncle, a handsome young charmer who lends much-needed support in her search: which if any of them is what he appears to be? The reader suffers with Zanny the disorienting effects of being thrown blind and vulnerable into a dangerous game where only the other players know the rules. McClintock creates an atmosphere of suspense and subdued menace, and cranks up the pace to a gripping climax. The writing is commonplace but the structure is strong, especially the opening vignettes which propel major characters towards an ultimate dramatic rendezvous and grab the reader right into the middle of the puzzle. Shame on any librarian who doesn't crack the code before Zanny!

Marion Woodson sets her novel on Gabriola Island where sabotage is creating tension between loggers and environmentalists. When someone begins leaving threatening messages to drive Nick's activist mother from the Island and a boobytrap injures Allison's father, who owns the logging company, the teens realize their hopes of friendship rest on unmasking the troublemaker. A tribal medicine stick sent from the rainforest by Nick's estranged father appears to possess magical power. It becomes a kind of facilitator and focus of mental energy as the teens collect and evaluate evidence, a task complicated by the author's skilful strewing of red herrings. Woodson hooks readers' attention from page one with an encounter between the disputing parties, then transfers it to Nick whose gaze is intently focussed on a girl in the crowd. Using Nick's memory of the first time he saw Allison, the author threads together recent events which are the background for the plot. Woodson writes well, and has a talent for transporting the reader into her setting of dark forest and sun-bright ocean. Her characters are real people whose inner nature determines their actions. The emergent relationship between Nick and Allison is crafted with a sure hand in a fully realized novel that soars beyond the traditional bounds of the genre.

The best mystery writers for any age find a balance between the entertainment value of an intriguing, well-presented puzzle and the opportunity for perceptive readers to arrive at the solution before — but not too long before — the denouement. Faithful to the standard set by Agatha Christie, Marion Woodson maintains internal integrity, placing the villain and the information we need to identify him in the first third of her story, but limns a couple of other likely suspects with confident strokes to keep us guessing. Ann Aveling also offers two possible but innocent suspects, dropping solid clues while artfully deflecting reader attention from culprit. Ron MacGregor gives us the information we need to identify the saboteur before the team does, and Norah McClintock shows her hand to the alert reader by the halfway point. Eric Wilson's novel, despite the scattering of honest clues, relies heavily on coincidence. A loose horse stands still for Tom to mount, a bicycle conveniently appears where it's needed, a crook takes so long to clear his eyes that Tom has time to try three different escape methods and make a phone call. The resolution requires that Tom spot the kidnappers while walking in an evacuated area of the city during a flood where not only are there no police to warn people away but the evacuation has been carried out without a search of the building where Dianne is being held.

The sexes are fairly evenly represented in important roles. Woodson, Bailey and Woodbury use girl/boy detective teams, the girl being the dominant force in the latter tales, while in a plot twist McClintock also briefly employs a team though the heroine is in fact the instigator and resolver of the investigation. It is pleasing to note that juvenile mysteries tend to feature partnerships rather than the traditional superior/subordinate pattern of the adult genre. MacGregor's detectives are boys, but several players on the team, including the ace centre, are girls. Nish's adolescent perceptions of women and sexuality undergo a nifty readjustment when female team members react unexpectedly to his capturing of an adult movie on the hotel tv. Aveling's females serve chiefly to play parts in squirmingly

awful subplots about grade five romance and a teacher's strange behaviour which is revealed at the end to be — gasp! — due to pregnancy, surely as hackneyed a theme as children's literature has to offer. Wilson casts his single female player not only as a victim but also as a silly bit of fluff. Bailey's Stevie is spunky, resourceful, and gutsy in a crisis. Woodbury's Polly resolutely faces obstacles from inhibiting parents to menacing bullies, and effects the thieves' arrest. Zanny, alone and frightened, is susceptible to Nick's attention and the promise of romantic involvement, but she isn't a wimp and doesn't let herself be victimized. In the crunch her courage and her brain save her. Bailey even gives us a female villain.

In the juvenile mystery, parents must be moved aside temporarily so kids can take the stage as decision makers and initiators of action. In these as in most mysteries, traditional authority figures such as police and teachers are reduced to insignificant roles, police because the young detectives need to supplant them and teachers because, as we know from all great children's stories, the real life of childhood is lived in spite of school. However the villains are usually adults. A story where the kids are clever and triumphant and adults are not only outsmart-able but also in the wrong is psychologically pleasing to young readers. A common pattern is to replace the parents with adult substitutes who relate to the children in supportive but less constricting ways. For Polly, there is her artist neighbour Isabel who, unlike Polly's parents, respects her career ambitions, talks to her as an equal, and trusts her with a valuable piece of jewellery which proves a catalyst in Polly's maturing. Coach Muck is a symbolic father to the young hockey players. Their relationship is equalized by mutual dependence in pursuit of common goals. When parents argue about how to deal with the saboteur, Muck turns the decision, and thus the balance of power, back to the young players. Woodson keeps Nick's mother on the scene but mitigates her normal parental influence through the device of a mysterious illness while at the same time she functions as an agent to push Nick into an adult role; he becomes a detective out of concern for her.

A frequent criticism of juvenile mysteries is that writers may build plots around serious crimes while downplaying violent aspects and the real human impact of such events. This is especially true in series where detectives like the Hardy Boys breezily thwart kidnappers and wrestle murderers with seldom a scratch. Stories where carpets fly and tunnels open to fabulous worlds where no known rules apply give broad signals that they deal with the fantastic and make no pretension to touch the child reader's real life, but mysteries where all elements except the crime are equatable with a child's experience do not give these same signals. Authors who serve children well ensure that violence has a believable impact on the lives of characters. Woodbury's children are aware of their mortality. ("This isn't a game. It's dangerous.") Her thieves aren't glamorous, merely bullies who exploit the vulnerable and hurt nice people. Bailey's overall touch is lighter, but the potential for tragedy is well represented when Stevie and Jesse are pushed over a seawall and nearly drowned. Wilson effectively juxtaposes Red's casual dismissal of violence as "part of the game " with Tom's shock at realizing he will murder without remorse. McClintock's sense of proportion is firmly in place as she lines up Zanny, with a normal young

woman's relative powerlessness and inexperience at interpreting others' motives, against a devious government agent and a murderous hoodlum.

These novels showcase the mechanics of detection in a variety of ways guaranteed to hold the attention of most children. There are lots of opportunities to absorb problem-solving strategies which could be applied to everyday lives. Young detectives like Polly and Stevie and Tom are worthy role models in another sense: because juvenile detectives cannot be expected to have the knowledge of adult crime investigators we often learn that they have picked up skills by reading! (In a nice twist McClintock's villain, masquerading as a good guy, explains how he knows so much about searching houses by claiming to read mystery novels.) Well-crafted stories like Woodson's, Bailey's and McClintock's may serve as a springboard to the great literary detective writers like Sayers and James. As long as Canada produces authors like Bailey, Woodson, MacGregor and McClintock, the future of this genre looks pretty bright.

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The Subtle Subversions of L.M. Montgomery

At the Altar: Matrimonial Tales. L.M. Montgomery. Ed. Rea Wilmshurst. McClelland & Stewart, 1994. 248 pp. $24.99 cloth. ISBN 0-7710-6173-0. ***Christmas With Anne and Other Holiday Stories***. L.M. Montgomery. Ed. Rea Wilmshurst. McClelland & Stewart, 1995. 224 pp. $19.99 cloth. ISBN 0-7710-6199-4.

> Since the publication of her journals ... Montgomery seems much more interesting as a person and worthy of attention as a writer. Is it because we now know of the occasional despair that lay behind the sweetness and light of most of her writing?
>
> Afterword to *At the Altar* 221

Rea Wilmshurst has published articles on and co-authored a preliminary bibliography of Montgomery's works. With the publication of *Christmas With Anne and Other Holiday Stories* and *At the Altar: Matrimonial Tales*, Wilmshurst adds to a growing series devoted to the revival of Montgomery's short stories. Along with the other short story collections — all of them containing previously unpublished or generally inaccessible material by Montgomery — *Christmas With Anne* and *At the Altar* will be appreciated not only for the stories themselves, but also for the accompanying illustrations. Of particular interest are the illustrations in *At the Altar*, which are reproduced from the original publications.

The stories in *Christmas With Anne* and *At the Altar* are assembled according to the themes of the holiday season and marriage. Wilmshurst argues in her Afterword to *At the Altar* that Montgomery's stories seem to "fall naturally into certain categories," and so ought to be grouped thematically (220). Wilmshurst's thematic titles, however, could create the erroneous impression that the stories are