

Coming of Age in Canada and Africa

Smoke that Thunders. P.J. Reece. Thistledown, 1999. 164 pp. paper. ISBN 1-895449-88-X. *Keeper of the Mountains*. Shirlee Smith Matheson. Thistledown, 2000. 148 pp. \$14.95 paper. ISBN 1-894345-13-4.

Accounts of Africa have very often presented it as an empty slate onto which writers project their fantasies and desires. Given Canada's past silence over its indigenous peoples, in some ways Canada can be viewed as a blank whiteness onto which writers have also inscribed a history that reflects and grows out of the concerns of the early settlers. Though very different in style, the novels *Smoke that Thunders* and *Keeper of the Mountains* acknowledge and address these imperialist pasts. As well, while the novels are also set in very different places and times, they share a number of other concerns: both feature a male teenager from British Columbia; they are both coming-of-age narratives; and, most striking perhaps, both involve variations on the archetypal journey into the interior where the main character undergoes hardship, only to arrive at a closer understanding of himself.

Smoke that Thunders is the more boisterous of the two. The author engages with Tanzania's colonial past in a tongue-in-cheek manner, naming his main character David Livingstone, and repeatedly drawing attention to its significance in order to undercut the association. Unlike his namesake, David is not seeking to bring light to the "dark continent," but he is after a personal enlightenment as he tries to come to terms with his dead father who, his mother rather disparagingly observes, never seemingly achieved his full potential. He is also attempting to understand his relationship with a girl back in British Columbia. His impulsive flight through Tanzania — described in thoroughly unromantic language and evoked quite convincingly as the confusing, yet captivating, mundane, yet richly varied country that it is today — is wildly improbable. For instance, never having flown an aeroplane, he not only takes off and lands one safely, but manages to navigate it well enough to circle over Victoria Falls, open the door, and throw out the body of his friend. The unlikely nature of his quest, though, is complemented by the wildly exaggerated characters he meets along the way, such as the piratical tire thief, Sadarji the Sikh, whose biceps are "as thick as a Christmas turkey" (43), and the Kawasaki-driving priest from Quebec. There are some very funny moments in the book, but the wry narrative voice takes the edge off the more spiritual, philosophical message behind the quest. So, when David's acquaintance, Mr. Ngoma, asks, "Who amongst us would not give their right hand to die climbing the mountain in the shadow of which they have lived their entire life?" (148), the clichés, however intentional and true to character, distance the reader, making it difficult to take David's experience seriously. And Ngoma's own haunting experience of being clawed on the hand by a duma, or cheetah, is devalued, especially when only a few pages later he once again orates, "I have heard it said there comes a time when we are taken by the hand to rendezvous with destiny" (153). As a result, David's singular achievement, the flight over Victoria Falls, or *Smoke that Thunders* — a literal translation from the Swahili, *Mosi-O-Tunya* — which is a flight not only for himself, but for other characters he has met along the way, fails to be singularly convincing.

Much more successfully balanced in its blend of adventure, realism, and mysticism is *Keeper of the Mountains*. The first chapter itself could act as a model for a creative writing class: the scene is firmly set in the Peace River country of the

1930s, and most of the main concerns are introduced: the conflict between the main character, Chris Haldane and his rival, Billy Turner, over the girl, Jessie Watson; the pull of the wilderness on Chris, and his conflicting desire for the city; his obligation to tradition and to visit the mountains of the title; an effortlessly evoked sense of the camaraderie between the cowboys; and mention of the Bedaux expedition, an unsuccessful attempt (based on an actual event) to drive five modified Citroens through the Rockies and forge a trail through to the Pacific. These conflicts and concerns are naturally woven together as Chris joins the expedition and tests himself against difficulties he encounters. Whereas in *Smoke that Thunders* the people David meets are largely caricatures, in this novel David's companions on the journey are a varied and mixed lot of eccentrics, young cowboys, and sophisticated filmmakers. Like David, Chris Haldane is the main focus, but the author perhaps places too much of a burden on him. Not only is he tough and adaptable, but his sensitivity attracts Jessie Watson. His natural athleticism and courage also captures the attention of the filmmakers who are filming the expedition, and his mixed blood (his mother is from the Beaver tribe; his father a Danish immigrant) allows Shirlee Smith Matheson to introduce a spiritual dimension as Chris, it is suggested, is "a chosen one" (49). As he comes to recognize and accept his role as guardian of the land, he is also the only one to question Bedaux's motives. While the novel works well at the level of adventure, and does skilfully weave "fact and fantasy" (80), its conclusion moves towards a kind of new-age mysticism with Chris's vision of ecological degradation in the future. Nonetheless, his vision does complement the lovingly-depicted landscape and its people which the author has produced, and his ascent of the mountain where he experiences the vision is much more portentous than David's in *Smoke that Thunders*.

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An Arctic Journey

Napachee. Robert Fagan. Beach Holme, 1999. 120 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 0-88878-403-1.

Napachee, Robert Feagan's first novel, is in many respects a conventional wilderness survival story for young adults: as in Farley Mowat's *Lost in the Barrens*, two young people from different cultures find themselves alone in the northern wilderness, journeying through isolation and hardships to become reunited with family. On the journey, the traditional lore of the native youth provides the means of their survival, and the young travellers end their journey with renewed respect for the skills and endurance of the aboriginal people of the North. As in Jean George's *Julie of the Wolves*, bonding with wild animals is a central element of the journey: in *Napachee* the young people are accompanied on their journey by a polar bear cub. The journey itself is a very ambitious one — overland from Fort Providence, south of Yellowknife, to the Mackenzie River, and then by boat to Sachs Harbour on Banks Island in the Beaufort Sea.