

Nostalgic Summers: The Legacy of Roderick Haig-Brown

Saltwater Summer. Roderick Haig-Brown. Harbour, 2000. 246 pp. \$14.95 paper. ISBN 1-55017-222-0.

Harbour Publishing's reprint of Roderick Haig-Brown's 1948 classic *Saltwater Summer* is both welcome and timely: at a time when the entire salmon industry of British Columbia is threatened, it is comforting to return to a tale in which one is reminded of just how intoxicating salmon fishing and life in the great outdoors can be.

Saltwater Summer picks up the tale begun in *Starbuck Valley Winter*, but now Don Morgan and his best friend, Tubby Miller, are not trapping on Northern Vancouver island but fishing commercially along the length of the B.C. coast. Like the earlier novel, *Saltwater Summer* is both a primer on how to survive in nature and a further chapter in the maturation of the two young heroes.

The story begins when Don finds that there are not enough fish in the inland waters to pay off the mortgage on his 32-foot salmon troller and is forced to journey to the treacherous but more prolific waters along the coast. When Tubby agrees to accompany him, he is fully aware that "when you go along with Don...you run into trouble and hard work, too much excitement usually and far too much discomfort." And of course all of this proves to be true as they endure numerous storms, seductive peers, and even a rupture before embarking on a final adventure involving the sea rescue of a traditionally cantankerous old sea-captain. The concluding comments on the success of their mission capture what Haig-Brown suggests is the ultimate lesson one can learn from such saltwater summers: "It became a shared thing...a bond of experience far stronger than the realities of...shattering waves and the nearness of death."

But Haig-Brown never simply chronicles an adventure; he comments precisely and, for his time, rather audaciously on the world about him, on the dishonour attached to killing a buck out of season and, most tellingly, on the racial prejudices faced by Japanese fishermen.

Ultimately, *Saltwater Summer* — like all of Haig-Brown's justly celebrated classics — is a celebration of nature, realizing its "greater power, beyond control, all around." And I suppose Haig-Brown is also reminding us that "there's really fine people all up this old B.C. coast once you get away from roads and cities."

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Ten Days that Changed her World

The War Within. Carol Matas. Scholastic Canada, 2001. 151 pp. \$18.99 cloth. ISBN 0-439-98810-1.

In *The War Within*, Carol Matas departs from the Holocaust novels that have established her reputation. While the result is not completely successful, Matas's willingness to push the boundaries of children's historical fiction, to risk alienating her readers by asking uncomfortable questions, remains impressive. Turning to a rarely examined aspect of the American Civil War — the experience of Jewish families in the South — Matas uses a thirteen-year old narrator, Hannah Green, to explore questions of identity, loyalty, and education. Hannah takes her status as "Israelite" for granted until orders issued by General Ulysses S. Grant on December 17, 1862 force her to ask, "Why do they hate us?" For it is on that day that Grant ordered the immediate expulsion of all Jews in the Department of the Tennessee; the reason given was that "[t]he Jews, as a class violat[ed] every regulation of trade."

If this direct quotation from General Orders No. 11 disturbs some readers because of its stereotypical linking of Jews and business, other readers are likely to object that examining the Civil War through the experience of a Jewish adolescent is beside the point. The latter may ask why Matas doesn't explore the Holocaust from the perspective of a Nazi. The answer, of course, is that Matas has done exactly that in her most recent Holocaust novel. Yet in *In My Enemy's House*, she controls that perspective by making the Nazi official's daughter a secondary character. In contrast, the conflict between Hannah's chosen identity as a "Southern Lady" and her religion, the way that Hannah comes to realize that slavery is wrong and personal identity is complex, is the focus of *The War Within*.

Hannah's experience is not presented as representative of all Jews. Matas is careful to demonstrate that Jews had different views on both slavery and the Civil War. Hannah's older sister falls in love with a Jewish captain fighting for the Union; when Hannah seeks adult wisdom to resolve her growing confusion, Mr. Adler tells her that Jewish scholars are on both sides. The novel focuses on the ten days that followed Grant's order. As in Matas's *Daniel's Story*, Hannah recalls the events that have challenged her sense of self. Unable to write in her diary during this period of upheaval (here too the parallel to Daniel, deprived of his camera, is clear), Hannah tries to make sense of her new uncertainty regarding the legitimacy of slavery and the validity of the Confederate cause. The novel is strongest when it concentrates on this uncertainty. Late in the novel, after a very Victorian hallucinatory and cleansing fever, Hannah questions whether the "painful changes taking place in [her] are for the best." Uncertain about the future or whether she will be happier in it, Hannah turns to her father, back from the war, sounding remarkably like the father in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*: "You have each one of you been brave and strong.... I cannot tell you how proud I am of all of you." The novel ends with Hannah and her father studying together, still searching for answers.

Matas is less successful in constructing the voice of her heroine. She seems torn between making Hannah sound like a nineteenth-century Southern belle (telling the reader obsessively details of dress) and a more modern voice, self-consciously noting whenever her thoughts deviate from the ladylike. As in all her historical fiction, Matas carefully provides historical details: titles of the books her heroine reads, the medicine she takes to fall asleep. More historical background appears in the afterword: General Orders No. 11, its impact upon the Jewish community, and its revocation on January 7, 1863. Referring her readers to scholarship on the subject, she cautions that historical fiction, no matter how historically accu-

rate, is “first and foremost” a fiction. In such fiction, Matas is to be applauded for drawing attention to the conventions governing historical fiction — whose stories are we willing to tell? — and her willingness to question the effectiveness of historical fiction as pedagogical practice. Hannah learns through experience, not the words of another, and a major lesson she learns is that words alone cannot change the proslavery views of her brother. Does historical fiction then only teach us what we already know?

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