

SCHOOLBOYS IN BATTLE

Soldier Boys. David Richards. Thistle-down Press, 1993. 254 pp. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 1-895449-06-5.

A throwback to the children's literature of a bygone age, *Soldier Boys* is a new addition to the canon of "ripping yarns" of the Victorian empire. With a plot that revolves around two boys who, instead of playing at soldiers, get the chance to be the real thing during the Northwest Rebellion of 1885, it would not be out of place amongst the *Boys' Own* stories of G.A. Henty. Richards' research is impeccable, but the book itself is unsatisfying. The characters are one-dimensional and not terribly engaging, largely because their motivation seems so shallow. In his determination to be even-handed and sympathetic to both Tom Kerslake and Luc Goyette, Richards has created characters who are bland and uninteresting. Because the reader cannot fully understand why the boys have taken up arms, it is difficult to care about their fate.

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SECRETS AND ESPIONAGE

Ellen's Secret. Jean Booker. Scholastic Canada, 1994. 157 pp. \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-24231-7. **Signal across the Sea.** Dorothy Perkins. Lancelot, 1994. 177 pp. \$9.95. ISBN 0-88899-547-8.

In these two books depicting life in Northern England during the blitz, the uncertainties and secrets of wartime mirror the personal tumult of two young women making their adolescent transition from child to adult. In *Ellen's Secret*, the twelve-year-old heroine is left to cope on her own when her mother leaves her with neighbours to look after her husband who has been injured in a night-time bombing raid. In *Signal across the Sea*, fourteen-year-old Pam is similarly thrown on her own resources when her parents are drawn into the War effort (her father in the Navy, her mother in a factory) and decide to evacuate her to Canada for reasons of safety. Both novels successfully bring home the dangers and moral dilemmas that arise in wartime, with many references to night-time bombing raids, men going off on dangerous assignments, food and clothing shortages, and the difficulties of telling friends from enemies.

Secrets abound in Ellen's world, and the book is structured around Ellen's discovery of a downed German soldier who is hiding near her home and stealing food. Ellen's secrets are sometimes childlike—she has lost her lunch money and replaced it with rent money left by her mother; she is failing math; she has lost one of the school rabbits that she was charged with caring for; and she is often careless with her personal belongings. More interestingly, as she approaches