SCHOOLBOYS IN BATTLE

Soldier Boys. David Richards. Thistledown 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.

Jonathan F. Vance *is a sessional lecturer in the Department of History at Wilfrid Laurier University, and the author of* Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning and the First World War, *forthcoming in 1997 from UBC Press.*

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 Perkyns. 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

adolescence, Ellen begins to question the omnipotence and honesty of the adults around her. No one is being fully honest with her about her father's injuries, her parents have "abandoned" her precipitately, and hints of a secret world of adult sexuality arise when Ellen spots a schoolmate and a spinster neighbour at the cinema with strange men. Ellen's "secrets" are seen at first through a child's eyes, and then with more complexity and realism as she learns and grows. Although more inclined to ignore problems, Ellen finds strengths that she did not know she had as she struggles with the moral choice of turning in the hidden soldier or helping him to escape unharmed. Unlike her friend Mavis, who unquestioningly adopts her father's bigoted and simplistic opinions, Ellen makes her own moral decision in coming to see the German soldier as an individual human being, rather than simply a caricatured wartime enemy.

Signal across the Sea is a more straightforward adventure/mystery novel. At the beginning of the novel, Pam accidentally blunders into enemy espionage activity while she is visiting her grandparents at their farm in Northern England. The rest of the book traces Pam's journey across the Atlantic to Halifax, with strangers in pursuit. As in *Ellen's Secret*, the descriptions of the physical landscape and daily details of life in wartime England and Canada are well-done and convincing. Like Ellen, Pam grows in moral understanding as she is left to cope on her own with sickness and danger. Where Ellen experiences conflict with her mother, Pam has difficulty understanding her rigid and snobbish grandmother, but both learn to see these relationships from a more comprehensive and forgiving viewpoint.

While *Ellen's Secret* focuses on the inner world of its main character, *Signal across the Sea* instead offers a formulaic and one-dimensional approach to most of its characters. Minor characters and events abound in this novel, and it is hard to sustain interest in such a "representative" approach to the people of wartime Britain and Canada. Narrative believability is further sacrificed to the cause of fitting in as many mystery conventions as possible. The heroine stumbles across a secret activity, is pursued by strangers, learns about secret codes, is nearly poisoned, finds a hidden letter, has her room searched in her absence, is kidnapped, overhears her captors plotting, and finally escapes from enemy spies by alerting the authorities through a hidden radio. Unbelievable coincidence abounds — Pam's room in Halifax has been serving as a message drop for the same spies who are chasing her; she uncovers invisible handwriting; and later has enough knowledge of secret and Morse codes to help solve the mystery. There is so much "action" in this novel that credibility is strained, and events become predictable and uninteresting.

The ending of *Ellen's Secret* is also a bit contrived, with all of the novel's threads tied together very quickly. It is unlikely that Ellen would encounter an English-speaking German soldier, and even more improbable that he would successfully tutor her in math while they are waiting to be dug out of a bombed-in building. At times the dialogue in the novel is a bit wooden. In the end, though, *Ellen's Secret* offers a realistic and detailed portrayal of World War II from a child's point of view. The suspense is well-sustained, and the narrative is interesting throughout. Where *Signals across the Sea* quickly becomes formulaic and too predictable, *Ellen's*

Secret does not become cluttered with undeveloped minor characters and didactic historical detail, and succeeds better on an emotional level and as a novel as a result.

Helen Salmon *is a Humanities reference librarian at the University of Guelph library.*

CONNECTING WITH THE CHILDREN OF WAR

Catch Me Once, Catch Me Twice. Janet McNaughton. Creative Publishers/ Tuckamore Books, 1994. 169 pp. $11.95 paper. ISBN 1-895387-38-8. **The Lights Go On Again.** Kit Pearson. Penguin Books, 1994. 201 pp. $5.99 paper. ISBN 0-14-036412-9.

In a country relatively untouched directly by war, Canadian children are exposed daily to the stories of war, violence, and terror that fill the electronic and print media. Lacking the sophistication of those adults whose perusal of the most recent *Maclean's* or recollection of a brief segment on *The National* enables them to pronounce confidently on current affairs, our children turn to literature to make sense of the senseless in their world.

While talking heads either bicker or pontificate about the tragedy of war and ethnic brutality in the former Yugoslavia, at least a dozen children I know turned to *Zlata's Diary: a Child's Life in Sarajevo* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1994), a moving, authentic personal testament, to find a voice that they could understand describe events that beggar the imagination. Similarly, the success of a number of superb novels of the Holocaust, notably Lois Lowry's *Number the Stars* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989) seems to be attributable not only to skilled and sensitive writing but also to a need of our children to connect with the children of war, dislocation, separation, and uncertainty.

A widespread interest in the experience of children in wartime may win some readers for two fine novels of domestic life in Canada during the Second World War. In both the books under review, young people struggle with timeless problems of growing up, but in an atmosphere of insecurity and foreboding, one not so different as we might think from that which we have made for but often seek to conceal from our children.

Janet McNaughton's *Catch Me Once, Catch Me Twice* is set in St John's, Newfoundland, in 1942, the mid-point of the war. Evelyn McCallum, a twelve-year-old tomboy from an outport in Trinity Bay, is forced by her father's overseas service to move with her mother, who is ill and experiencing a difficult pregnancy, to the capital. They are taken in by her father's parents, a distinguished physician and his reserved but very caste-conscious wife.

From her arrival, Evelyn feels alone and out of place, conscious of her grandmother's disapproval of her rough edges as well as that of the "townies" in her school. She is befriended by Peter Tilley,who is two years her senior but in the same class, having lost two years of school to a serious infection which has