

BREAKING THE ICE THAT KEEPS CHILDREN FROM HISTORY

Polar the Titanic Bear. Daisy Corning Stone Spedden. Intro. Leighton H. Coleman III. Illus. Laurie McGaw. Little, Brown and Co., 1994 (Madison Press Book). 64 pp. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-316-80625-0.

As a worker in historical education, I applaud Little, Brown and Company's *Polar the Titanic Bear*. This book gives young readers a splendid visual picture of the upper-class world before World War One. As a parent, I am disappointed that the sagging text detracts from the publisher's claim that touts *Polar* as a "delightful read-aloud picture book."

The story, written by Dorothy Stone Spedden in 1912, chronicles the world travels of the wealthy Speddens with their only son and his stuffed polar bear, Polar. Polar accompanies his young "master" aboard luxurious ocean liners, one of them the Titanic, whose sinking they both survive! Our enchantment with historical mysteries, such as the sinking of the Titanic, helps ensure healthy sales for this book.

Serious disadvantages plague the story which was originally written over 80 years ago as a child's Christmas gift. Without the excitement of the Titanic disaster, the story seems long and tedious. The overly charming prose style further adds to squirming by young listeners. The introduction and epilogue penned by the discoverer of the manuscript, Spedden's relative Leighton H. Coleman, are intended to explain pre-World War One life. However, few young readers have the patience to read beyond the story, and, when read aloud these mini-essays become further passages to "translate" to children.

Polar's powerful visual message, not its text, has undoubtedly helped raise interest in the book abroad and catapult its sales in North America. It makes rare use of archival material. The precious period postcards and touching Spedden family photos generously sprinkled throughout make *Polar* very appealing.

Illustrator Laurie McGaw's magic watercolours complete the visual spell. Polar could have been a cold white bear, not McGaw's whimsical character with lilac-tinted fur and a lively glint in his black eyes. An outstanding artist, McGaw's credits include many portraits, bookcovers and another children's book, *The Secrets of Vesuvius*. She well deserved her Governor General's nomination for *Polar*.

At a recent Story Evening at the Dufferin County Museum, McGaw captivated her young audience with explanations of how she researched and painted *Polar*. But she did not read the book. *Polar* virtually defies reading aloud. Strong readers aged ten to twelve would do best with the text. Yet the visual packaging of yesteryear and the alluring mystique that envelops the Titanic tragedy easily pop *Polar* into a parent's hands. Do take it home, but don't be disappointed if it rarely gets read. It's worth looking at again and again.

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