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AN INVESTIGATION OF DETECTIVES.

How Come the Best Clues Are Always in the Garbage? Linda Bailey. Kids Can, 1992. 175 pp., $4.95 paper. ISBN 1-55074-094-6. **Mystery at Meander Lake.** B.J. Bayle. Riverwood, 1992. 106 pp., $5.95 paper. ISBN 1-895121-14-0. **The Ghostly Tales of Mr. Tooth.** Gerald Holt. Riverwood, 1992. 104 pp., 5.95 paper. ISBN 1-895121-13-2. **The Mystery of the Missing Will.** Jeni Mayer. Thistledown Press, 1992. 158 pp., $7 paper. ISBN 0-920633-90-0. **A Forest of Suspicion.** Josée Plourde. Trans. Frances Morgan. Quintin Publishers, 1993. 91 pp., $5.95 paper. ISBN 2-89435-013-9. **The Mysterious Mr. Moon.** Anne Stephenson. General Paperbacks, 1990. 111 pp., $ 4.95 paper. ISBN 0-7736-7284-2. **Ghost Voyages.** Cora Taylor. Scholastic Canada, 1992. 135 pp., $3.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-74058-X. **Quincy Rumpel and the Sasquatch of Phantom Cove.** Betty Waterton. Groundwood, 1990. 91 pp., 6.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-129-0. **The Prairie Dog Conspiracy.** Eric Wilson. Harper Collins, 1992. 110 pp., $14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-00-223753-9. **The St. Andrews Werewolf.** Eric Wilson. Harper Collins, 1993. 109 pp., $14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-00-223906-X.

These mysteries range in quality, style and geography. My favourite is *How Come the Best Clues Are Always in the Garbage?* Stevie Diamond is a smart, sassy, brave-to-the-point-of-foolish grade sixer in Vancouver, trailing the thief who robbed her mother's employers, The Garbage Busters. Her motive is plausible—without the money, her mother doesn't get paid, and Stevie doesn't get allowance. The environmental message fits in naturally. The plot moves fast with great dialogue, comic timing, odd clues and hilarious situations such as the stowaways in the van, and the flying ketchup finale. I like the way Stevie refers to mystery book heroines for ideas, her serious black detective costume, and her flip realism, such as when she makes Jesse her partner: "If I'd had a choice, I would have picked somebody a bit cuter ..." After solving this case, Stevie and Jesse receive their own business cards, which I hope means a sequel.

Why hasn't anyone told B.J. Bayle that the first chapter should be the hook that lures readers into a story? Chapter one of *Mystery at Meander Lake* is so bogged down with back story, geography and whining, that most readers will drop out before chapter two. Despite all the description, I couldn't visualize Meander Lake. The illustrations did not help, but a map, which kids love, would

have. The very busy, very politically-correct plot tackles mysterious prowlers, a missing fortune, racial prejudice, dognapping and dog-abuse, marital problems, and the thirteen-year-old detective's acceptance of his handicap.

I like the three detectives, and am glad the author avoided the villainous Germans cliché. But she used the cranky, silly old widow cliché—so the kids could spout morals at her. Too bad more time wasn't spent on the mystery and the action, such as the exciting wheelchair chase, rather than the preaching.

The Ghostly Tales of Mr. Tooth will fascinate middle readers. The two cartoonish characters on the cover mislead one to expect a funny story. It isn't. While Hal waits alone for his dad after school, the crossing guard appears from the mist to keep him company. It's a good excuse to tell chilling ghost stories, many involving younger boys, set mostly in England where the best hauntings originate. Challenging vocabulary (crypt, cathedral) is simply explained. When Mr. Tooth turns out to be a ghost himself, the reader is satisfied with his deductions.

Mystery of the Missing Will begins well enough with two fifteen-year olds exploring an eerie abandoned house at twilight. I willingly suspended disbelief that such a house would be unlocked, that the major clue still lies on the main stairs of a house dead empty for years, and that a ghost would speak to strangers on the first visit, until too much seemed unbelievable. It's hard to like Meredith, the viewpoint character. She complains constantly about her friend's wealth, about the mystery, and everything else. I prefer Sam, who is spunky, adventurous, and has real problems. But Sam, who did so much to find the will and help others, is rewarded with brutal proof of how little her parents care for her, and shipped off to a foreign boarding school without a hint of a happier life to come. It may happen in real life, but who needs such hopelessness in books?

Why whiny Meredith, with no emotional or physical ties to the ghost, is chosen, is never explained. The heirs—who matter to the plot—are barely developed, while six pages are wasted in a scene with two inconsequential characters at the library. The frequent use of "commented" instead of said, and the overuse of the past progressive tense are irritating.

Mayer is at her best in the haunted mansion. She should have stayed there more. Descriptions and events there, especially the rescue from the cellar, promised much but fizzled into too little build-up of tension or emotion. We're never told if the ghost finally rests in peace, and Sam ends miserably, so the point of this drama was to make Meredith happy. Given her whiny self-centredness, that isn't enough.

I could fill pages with what's wrong with *A Forest of Suspicion*, but it doesn't deserve that much space. Whenever the author interrupts her endless, cliché-ridden, condescending, preachy narrative with dialogue, it is stilted and preachy. Awkward translating makes it worse. Here's a sample: "Alex served himself a

much smaller portion. He was watching his weight. From a distance, they really did look like two people in love, talking quietly." These kids are ten and nine-years old! Here's some sample dialogue: "The Trottiers are breaking the law in the woods. Uncle Denis is a conservation officer. We should tell him about it right away." They tell on someone every chance they get. Environmental homilies are slammed at us with a two-by-four, yet most chapters end with a wasted blank page. In short, the book reads as if it were written and published in one afternoon, in the garage of someone who hasn't met a real kid since 1934.

In *The Mysterious Mr. Moon*, a weird guest at their parents' inn arouses twelve-year-old Peter and his younger sister's suspicions. In a funny and resourceful investigation, they determine he is a wanted criminal about to murder a rich widow—in their own dining room. Everyone including the police chief is present for the suitably chaotic climax when Peter and Allison expose the "murderer" and his plot.

Some small points should have been improved. Why open with a dishwashing scene, when a run-in with the strange guest would jumpstart the action and interest? Some dialogue telegraphs information we should learn more skilfully; a clue—"there's something vaguely familiar about you"—is never picked up by the young sleuths. Two scenes (pp. 30-31 and pp. 77-79) stray from the viewpoint characters. The setting and story are interesting, with nice dry humour, and a clever, perfectly wrapped up conclusion. I enjoyed the spoof of the balding, over-eating writer who wears coke-bottle glasses.

Ghost Voyages is a good ghost story with a twist. The main character, Jeremy, becomes a ghost whenever he uses his grandfather's magnifying glass to inspect his stamps of Canadian historical ships. Cora Taylor drops Jeremy into the action and gunfire of exciting historical events, and describes details to interest modern young readers. The historical scenes are vivid, fast-paced, interesting. The story propping them up is weaker. Jeremy suffers through the drip of all mothers and her family complications. We don't learn that he's nine until page 94, even though his age is crucial to the ending, which comes too suddenly. Some foreshadowing of the magic cut-off age would have added suspense and fair warning. My main worry is that the topic, and the 135 pages of small print, make this a book suitable for older readers. If Jeremy were eleven, the right audience would discover this interesting adventure.

In *Quincy Rumpel and the Sasquatch of Phantom Cove*, Quincy is a spunky member of an eccentric, terrific family. Their dream vacation resort turns out to be a run-down dump, stalked by an elusive and stinky creature. If their friends, Bert and Ernie, cannot make this place profit, the Rumpels fear they'll return to their old profession, counterfeiting. When the children bravely discover the sasquatch, it helps them, and they save it by keeping proof of its existence a secret.

This story starts fast, with wonderful real dialogue—"I need one too," said Quincy. "A bikini. I think I'm getting hips." There are hilarious scenes, such as the chicken situation, the fishing rod, and the rowboat crash. The children do the admirable thing, and everyone ends happily, with the promise of further adventures.

15,000 young fans can't be wrong about Eric Wilson and his mysteries that thrill and educate. Wilson writes for reluctant readers, in simple sentences that sometimes leave an annoying staccato effect, but his plots are jammed with action, tid-bits of Canadiana, and danger.

In *The St. Andrews Werewolf*, fifteen-year-old Liz Austen faces a smorgasbord of plots. There's the play she's in, controversy over town development, arson, an abused girl, a forbidden island, a werewolf haunting the cemetery, and assorted odd characters. Wilson misses no trick, from the creepy servant playing a mournful organ, to night-time escapades and timely thunderstorms, but it works. The atmosphere is spooky as the action and suspense escalate to a satisfying climax. Wilson obviously cares about vulnerable kids. Liz is courageous and kind, real enough to fall for the gorgeous star, but smart enough to see through him. She makes the new Nancy Drew look like a paper doll.

The Prairie Dog Conspiracy, a flashback to Tom Austen's first case, is less successful. I liked Tom's preparations for detective work, but found the plot hard to believe. A second reading proved it was skilfully crafted, but almost every event relied on incredible coincidence (such as the cellular phone on the windowsill) instead of Tom engineering at least some incidents himself. The eleven-year-old rushes into dangerous places and after gun-toting criminals so thoughtlessly that I wanted to scream, "Don't do this at home, kids!"

While his sister Liz displays sensitivity to the vulnerable characters in her book, Tom spares little thought for the terror and danger that the kidnapped Dianne must be going through. Neither does anyone else. I was appalled when, after Diana's abduction, everyone discussed Tom's performance on television, instead of poor Dianne! Dietmar is an awful best friend. He never helps willingly, derides Tom at every occasion, and his humour is nasty. Wilson likes to educate, but Charity's description of her mother—"She juggles three jobs to make ends meet because she married young and didn't have any professional training"—pushes it. Simple sentences and small criticisms aside, The Austen adventures come the closest to the exciting mysteries of old, where sermons mattered less than dark passageways, hidden rooms, old secrets, and plots that made me turn pages past midnight.

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