Reviews / Comptes rendus

Books / Livres

Navigating Masculinity

The Only Outcast. Julie Johnston. Tundra, 1998. 221 pp. $19.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-441-X.

Julie Johnston's most recent book for young adults, *The Only Outcast*, is her third; its predecessors, *Hero of Lesser Causes* and the popular *Adam and Eve and Pinch-Me* both won Governor General's Awards. In this most recent fiction, Johnston turns her attention to a turn-of-the-century teenage boy's negotiation of issues of masculinity, ability, and self-esteem. The novel makes inventive use of an historical document, a diary of a sixteen-year old visiting his relatives' cottage on Rideau Lake that first appeared in print in 1996 as *A Boy's Cottage Diary 1904*. Johnston gives us italicized paragraphs — some transcribed from the journal, some fictionalized — as the opening of each of her chapters, and the balance of those chapters delve into what the diary does not disclose. As her protagonist Fred muses, "I've been thinking, maybe a diary is like a photographer's picture. You don't get to see all the stuff that happens before a picture's taken, or after it, either. In a diary, it's about the same. If you want to know everything that goes on in the life of a diary writer, I imagine you're out of luck, unless you can read between the lines."

Johnston's novel reads between the lines most imaginatively, and what it reads is a story about growing up male that young readers at the other end of this century can recognize. Fred, wounded by the loss of his mother, is overshadowed by a patriarch who seems to spring from the pages of Laurence's *Stone Angel* — a harsh, cold man who seems bent on "making a man" out of his ineffectual-seeming, stammering young son. Repeatedly it is made clear to Fred that he is not measuring up to his father's standards of masculinity, but by the end of the novel a perhaps-too-pat transformation occurs: the patriarch, too, is suffering the loss of his wife, like his fictional predecessor Jason Currie of Laurence's Manawaka. And when Fred learns that his own father doesn't measure up to some of the masculine benchmarks he sets his son, a complex look at father-son dynamics is ours for the pondering.

What I found less satisfying in this admittedly accomplished book was the resolution of this masculinity question: bidding farewell to his former love interest, Fred accepts her sarcastic taunt, "You men are all alike," with a certain amount of satisfaction: "*You men*, I was thinking. I liked that, me and all the other men. I'm not a total outcast; I'm like the others, hard to understand." Granted that Fred has had opportunity to see the depths beneath the surface of his father's raging Old-Testament-patriarch performance of masculinity, does this resolution still enforce the notion of manhood as a rite of dissociation and independence? Clearly Johnston's novel also has enough depths beneath the surfaces to keep an adult reader pondering too.

Lorraine York *is a professor of English at McMaster University who has written on Timothy Findley, Alice Munro, and Farley Mowat. She lives with her partner and her seven-year-old expert consultant in Dundas, Ontario.*

Bringing History in out of the Cold

Trapped In Ice. Eric Walters. Viking/Penguin, 1997. 206 pp. $19.99 cloth. ISBN 0-670-87542-2. ***Across Frozen Seas.*** John Wilson. Beach Holme, 1997. 120 pp. $8.95 paper. ISBN 0-88878-381-7.

Across Frozen Seas is a young adult (YA) contemporary problem novel crossed with an historical fiction through a dream-fantasy device. Dave Young of Humboldt, Saskatchewan begins having dreams about being Davy Young, one of two cabin boys on the ill-fated Franklin expedition to discover the Northwest passage in the 1840s. A prologue mixes reported dream and present reflection. Then fourteen chapters alternate from real-present (narrated in the first-person past tense) to dream-past (narrated in first-person present tense). The present chapters shrink as the past takes greater hold on Dave/Davy, and as Dave's present life gets more problematic. In chapter fifteen the present Dave gets lost in a prairie blizzard outside his grandfather Jim's house, and Davy's climactic past scene in a similar arctic blizzard merges with the present. An epilogue in the present ties up the loose ends.

While there are creaks at the edges of both genres (undeveloped parental marital problems in the YA present; documentary history book information loosely packaged as fiction in the historical fiction past), the central story is gripping enough. The crossover dream-fantasy device is captivating at the outset as Davy and George run around Dickens's London, and Dave tries to sort out what's going on in his head, and again at the end when the past world and present world merge. For the most part, however, the crossover is simply a device to get into a historical story which otherwise can't be told in the first person since there were no survivors, and the device creaks as