

## FANTASY, SCIENCE FICTION AND REALISM

**Prudence Valiant, Aviatrix Extraordinaire**, Christopher Majka and Sheilagh Hunt. Formac Publishing Company Limited, 1991. 96 pp., \$6.95 paper. ISBN 0-88780-082-3; **Spaceship Down**, Bev Spencer. Illus. Sharif Tarabay. Scholastic Canada Ltd., 1993. 149 pp., \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-74602-2;

Prudence Valiant accepts the challenge of delivering a mysterious box to the coronation of the new Sultan of Samarkand. A necessary trip, the Emir of Rinort says, if Prudence, "aviatrix extraordinaire," is to foil the sinister plans of a would-be assassin.

The strength of this book lies in characterization and the tightly-constructed story, which effectively uses foreshadowing, beginning with the Emir's whispered word "Holograms ...". Incidents which create suspense, deepen the conflict and keep the plot humming along as swiftly as Prudence's "vintage single-prop aeroplane" include an airliner attack and a waterlogged cockpit, which results in loss of altitude and a soggy lunch. Mirages and holograms, in the guise of a pool and a mountain are devised in the hope of delaying Prudence's trip and her delivery of the box. Added to this exciting action are exotic settings, and disguised comic opera villains. In attempting to thwart the wily Prudence at every turn, these villains never once lose their audacity or inventiveness, resulting in a book fuelled by breathless suspense. Prudence Valiant, never wavers in her determination to complete her assignment, never loses her delicious sense of humour, learns by her mistakes and forges ahead despite every roadblock thrown up in her path.

The daunting vocabulary will require readers to make frequent side trips of their own into the nearest dictionary, and the conclusion, based upon holograms, is rather confusing. A few young readers may finish the book so winded by the swiftly rising suspense and so gratified over the success of the resourceful, highly likeable heroine, they may lack the energy, perhaps even the need, to quibble over exactly *how* Prudence Valiant won the day in Samarkand!

The world depicted in *Spaceship Down*, is totally unlike the cheerful fantasy, operatic world of *Prudence Valiant*. The "space brats," Treat, a reluctant space traveller, and the cynical Rafe, are antagonistic toward one another. Wakened up out of cryogenic sleep, they are faced with a crash landing on a survey station far from Earth, and saddled with the responsibility of a third survivor, four-year old Cal. Cal's disappearance, in a futile search for his dead mother, acts as an inciting force or catalyst, drawing Rafe and Treat out of their doomed spaceship. This action not only saves their lives, it also leads them into witnessing a confrontation between the human "spacers," who destroyed Treat and Rafe's spaceship, and the planet aliens. The ensuing battle forces Rafe to deal with his own deep-seated fear of aliens and come to terms with the fact that both species, humans and aliens alike, share the same mix of good and evil, but perhaps more importantly, that they can help one another.

Spencer has done a remarkable job of characterization, particularly with Treat, making the problems of space technology and travel accessible and fascinating even to reluctant readers of science fiction. Treat's character has a certain toughness, a resilience that rings true. She also has a finely-tuned intellectual and emotional awareness of people and aliens. Rafe's character and emotions are guarded, due to his witnessing the death of his parents by aliens in an earlier space travel trip. A satisfying conclusion follows Rafe's acceptance of Treat's friendship, and his agreement to listen to Treat's plan to return to the planet later in an attempt to establish communication with the intelligent aliens.

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### THE CONVENTIONS OF THE TIME-SLIP NOVEL

**The Painted Hallway.** Nancy-Lou Patterson. The Porcupine's Quill, 1992. 205 pp., \$12.95 paper. ISBN 0-88984-142-X

Although the interest of time-slip novels lies in the confrontation between present and past (or future), like many of the best children's books they frequently rely on well-worn conventions to engage the young reader: The child protagonist is cut loose from parents (sent to spend a summer holiday with an aunt or uncle, exiled to boarding school). Soon, new friends are made and the adventure begins.

Nancy-Lou Patterson's *The Painted Hallway* employs the first of these conventions; to its detriment, it modifies the second. When her parents go off for a summer research trip in Europe, Jennifer Scott moves in with her great-grandmother Margaret Laura Melville Grant (her "Grandnan") at Thistle Manor, the family's lovely ancestral home in Thistleton, Ontario. Her new companions, though, are not children, but older women: Mary Douglas the housekeeper, Mina Dassel the town librarian, Ellen MacLean the clergywoman, and the family doctor. Despite the author's obvious intention to provide models of strong female characters, the reader may find this largely undifferentiated group rather dull company for a young girl setting out to unravel the mystery that plagues her: Who painted the exquisite murals on Thistle Manor's hallway:

At each arched opening, so cunningly painted that the stonework almost seemed real, she stopped and looked into the painted distance.

Here a wide sea stretched beyond a charming port town, where sailing ships passed to and fro, their white sails filled with wind. . .

And here a forest of large dark trees opened upon a sunny glade, ... (30)

Whether the young reader will be as gripped by this mystery as Jennifer is is doubtful; it presents a puzzle, not an adventure. Unlike Abigail in Ruth Park's *Playing Beatie Bow*, Jennifer is not trapped in the past, nor does she befriend children from long ago, as Tolly does in Lucy Boston's *The Children of Green*