

Mysteries for Children

DAVE JENKINSON

Mystery at Star Lake, Margaret Goff Clark. Illus. by E. Harper Johnson. Scholastic - TAB, 1965, reprinted 1974. 120 pp. \$1.05 paper.

Mystery in the Flooded Museum, Margaret Goff Clark. Dodd, Mead, 1978. 173 pp. \$7.05 hardcover.

Since 1961, Margaret Goff Clark, a member of the Mystery Writers of America, has been regularly serving up juvenile mysteries in which she effectively utilizes ingredients common to the genre: an adolescent possessing an over-active curiosity gland is located away from parents for the summer holidays in a new and slightly intimidating environment. Surrounded by nine or ten people of mixed age and sex, most of whom are strangers, the central character is suddenly confronted by a mysterious occurrence which may have been criminally motivated. With the adolescent hero near the forefront, the search begins to uncover the identity of the person or persons who committed the act. Happenings which permit both simple and sinister explanations are strewn throughout the plot so that suspicion falls one or more times on almost all of the characters. Finally, and with some significant input from the juvenile protagonist, the criminal is exposed and punished.

Mystery at Star Lake, Clark's fourth book (first published in 1965), utilizes a wilderness lake setting near Ontario's Algonquin Provincial Park. Clark explains, "Most of my books grow out of my own experiences. Places especially turn me on."¹ The American-born author and her husband spend their summers at a cottage on the edge of Algonquin Park, and intimate knowledge of the area has also led to her using the park for the locale of another work, *Death at Their Heels* (Dodd, 1975).

Isolated Star Lake is where Jeff Ramsey, 13, and his brother Hal, in his early twenties, intend to spend their summer enlarging a cabin recently purchased by their father; however, upon arrival at the cabin they find "two words were scrawled on the door, two words in blood-red paint: GET OUT" (p. 9). The next morning their boat is gone, and a smashed oar testifies that the boat had not simply drifted away. Sticks of dynamite found planted under the Ramsey cabin confirm someone's serious intent to drive them out. But why? And are these incidents in any way connected to the fish poaching which is suspected to be taking place in Star and neighboring lakes? Suspicion constantly shifts amongst four possible suspects as each appears to be obviously guilty and then is revealed as apparently innocent. Just when it seems that guilty party will have to be parachuted into the book, the bad guys, who were in this case the first suspects, are caught.

Written almost a decade and a half ago, *Mystery at Star Lake* has aged well though a few middle-school readers, with copies of *Playboy* or *The Joys of Sex* secreted under their mattresses, will snicker at one of the characters, 16 year-old Benny, who is embarrassed when some adults find his hidden book - *Your First Date*.

The action of *Mystery in the Flooded Museum*, Clark's most recent book, occurs in the Fort Pitt Museum in Pittsburgh and uses Hurricane Agnes of June, 1972, as an effective backdrop. Susan Drummond, 15, is doing volunteer work at the museum when someone steals an extremely valuable wampum belt that had been given to George Washington. Though it appears the robbery had to have been committed by one of the staff, the search for the thief is interrupted by natural events taking place outside the museum. Fed by the rains of Hurricane Agnes, the Allegheny and Monogahella Rivers threaten to pour five or six feet of water into the building, and everyone must turn to rescuing the museum exhibits. The suspects are again numerous and, at one point, even include Susan. During the evacuation of the museum pieces, Susan unwittingly stumbles upon the thief and, following a tension-filled episode in which it appears she might drown, Susan is able to relay the thief's identity to the police and secure the belt's return.

In addition to being exciting mystery stories, Clark's books also touch upon some of the problems of growing up and in particular, the difficulty adolescents have in convincing adults that they are no longer dependent children. Though both Jeff and Susan feel some pride in thwarting a crime, their greater self-satisfaction is in proving to a significant adult that they can be trusted to behave in a responsible, mature manner. Jeff Ramsey was acutely aware that his brother was almost a decade older than he and hoped that his summer of working on the cabin would find Hal "ready to treat him as an equal instead of like a little kid." (p. 1) Though Hal perceives some of Jeff's early antics to be puerile, at the novel's conclusion Jeff can report that when he met his brother's eyes "they were looking at him man to man". (p. 120) Susan Drummond also feels the need to prove herself, but in this instance, two adults are questioning her maturity. Her father thinks she is "too young to take a job" (p. 60) while the museum director, Richard Winter, "had doubts about having high-school and college students working at the Fort Pitt Museum" (p. 16). Like Jeff, Susan causes her doubters to alter their perceptions.

"Almost anyone could have a motive" (p. 114) says Susan in the *Mystery of the Flooded Museum*. In part the success of a mystery can be measured by the author's ability to maintain suspense through offering up a series of characters possessing plausible motives for committing the crime. Characters in mysteries play one of three parts. At the extremes are the central character and the bit players; the former is fully developed while the latter tend to be stock figures who assume roles such as mother or pesky-tag-along-younger sister without ever emerging as distinct individuals. In the middle are the three or four people who could be the criminal. The rate at which their characters are revealed is carefully controlled by the author; too much information too soon will prematurely affirm or deny their involvement. Frequently the character details are deliberately ambiguous. Frank Tallpine, a Mohawk Indian and part-time custodian at the Fort Pitt museum, is shown to believe that Indians have been abused by the white majority. By stating that "all wampum should belong to the Indians" (p. 107), Tallpine makes himself a prime suspect; yet the reader will come to see

that Tallpine's means for obtaining the wampum are not only legal but highly praiseworthy. In juvenile mysteries, appearance is not necessarily reality, or as the character Winter puts it: "You can't tell a thief by the look of his face" (p. 71).

And nowhere is Winter's statement more true than in the case of Clark's bad guys. Adam Barnwell, the wampum thief, is initially introduced as a "fat, jolly-looking man" (p. 45), but unlike a Walt Disney villain, he is thoroughly nasty. Clark's bad men are not opposed to using physical violence. Barnwell, in addition to knocking a woman over the head, physically overpowers Susan and leaves her, tied and gagged to drown in the museum. In other Clark mysteries, such as the *Mystery of the Marble Zoo* (Funk & Wagnalls, 1964) and the *Mystery of Sebastian Island* (Dodd, mead, 1976), the villains are equally as rough. Clark tends to make adult males be the books' heavies and their actions result from a single motive, financial gain. Consequently the Pierce brothers want to get rid of the Ramseys because their presence on Star Lake disrupts the Pierces' lucrative fish poaching; Adam Barnwell steals the wampum belt because his alimony payments do not leave him enough money for what he calls "the finer things I can't have" (p. 144).

Clark's heroines, unlike her heroes, evidence romantic interests. If the findings of reading interest studies regarding differences in reading preference according to sex are correct, then boys will not be pleased that "Susan liked Eric" (p. 13) and hoped "he'd think of her as someone more than a friend and fellow-worker" (p. 14). While this particular romantic involvement forms a very minor subplot, in other mysteries such as *The Mystery of the Buried Indian Mask* (Franklin Watts, 1961), the romance becomes fully entangled in the major plot. In general, however, Clark's fast-paced mysteries, with their mix of male and female protagonists and their effective use of chapter ending narrative hooks, will make good reading for upper elementary and early junior high readers.

NOTES

¹"Clark, Margaret Goff" in *Something About the Author*, ed. Anne Commire (Detroit: Gale Research, 1976), vol. 8, pp. 26-27.

Dave Jenkinson teaches children's and adolescent literature at the faculty of Education, the University of Manitoba.