

Child Power to the Rescue

PAULA L. HART

The Odd Lot Boys and the Tree-Fort War, J. Robert Janes. Illus. by Affie Mohammed. Scholastic - TAB, 1977. 144 pp. \$1.15 paper.

J. Robert Janes' *The Odd Lot Boys and the Tree-Fort War* offers the modern reader an escape from the surfeit of juvenile books dealing with the excruciating problems of growing up in today's complex society. Though the book does have a central problem - saving the beloved tree-fort and the vacant lot on which it is situated from being sold - the stress is on adventure.

The book holds promise of updating the neighbourhood romps of Farley Mowat's books, but Janes misses his opportunity by letting his tale become unbelievable. The plot basis is sound enough: the odd lot boys (Big Eyes Murphy, Bones Bannerman, Buddha Wong, Nicky the Greek, and Ziggy Altman) have succeeded in building an untidy but entirely satisfactory three-storey tree-fort, where they play undisturbed amidst the wild tangle of a two-acre vacant lot. One day, however, Bones and Big Eyes are interrupted in the middle of a fish fry by the arrival of Ross G. Boyle, an enterprising realtor who promptly sets up a "For Sale" sign. The boys reply by covering Boyle's sign with their larger, more colourful lemonade sign.

Their next strategy is to enlist Willy, the house-bound crippled boy who lives opposite the lot, to act as their full-time spy. He agrees to do this in return for membership in the boys' club. The alliance becomes mutually advantageous, especially when Willy turns out to be a useful plotter as well. The boys provide welcome company for Willy, but he also has an ulterior motive: to visit the tree-house. The mini-war between Boyle and the boys rages alongside the attempts of club members to get Willy into the fort and to encourage him to begin walking after two years of being confined to a wheel chair.

While the boys' success in getting Willy to walk is happily accepted by the willing reader, other turns of the plot are less easy to accept. It is hard to believe that the boys alone are responsible for capturing a robber while waiting for Willy's mother outside a downtown building. It is equally unlikely that they could organize the neighbourhood ratepayers in putting a stop to Boyle's plans for a highrise on the vacant lot. The neat conclusion of having the grateful townspeople raise \$45,000 to buy the lot and turn it into a people's park, one in which the boys can keep their fort, effectively takes the plot out of the realm of realism and places it in the uneasy area of wish-fulfillment. This absence of a credible plot is especially crucial in an adventure-centered book, for plot constitutes, in fact, the book experience.

Plot flaws are not, unfortunately, ameliorated by successful character portrayal. While the reader applauds Janes' efforts to show what a truly multi-ethnic society Canada is, his characters remain stereotypes (Bones, the black

boy who dabbles in voodoo; Nicky the Greek, whose father owns a restaurant; Buddha Wong, the chubby Chinese whose father owns a corner store) and never become real personalities in their own right. Even Willy, delightfully feisty and outspoken, (as in his reply to the offer of club membership: "Okay," Willy barked. "I accept. But if you think I'm going to go through all that nonsense about eating worms, you're dead wrong."), for some reason has never tried to walk before his contact with the boys.

The unbelievable plot and simplistic characters cause the book to founder as successful realistic adventure. It has, nonetheless, some very appealing bright spots. Readers will respond to the buoyant spontaneity of the boys. They don't think of the stodgy moral or legal implications of covering the "For Sale" sign with their lemonade sign: it is a quick and effective solution. Similarly childlike, they do not consider the ramifications of hoisting Willy into the clubhouse with makeshift equipment: he wants to do it and they are using the only materials they have. Certainly the most entertaining moment comes when the odd lotters smear chicken innards on Boyle's sign and leave a claw stuck in the O of his name. This is beautifully revolting.

Janes, a mining engineer and geologist, is obviously conversant with the language of construction and building materials, and without doubt he remembers what it is to look at the world as a child does. Although he has textbooks, travel stories, novels, and other trade books already to his credit, *The Odd Lot Boys and the Tree-Fort War* must be considered an apprentice work in juvenile fiction.

The six textured black and white illustrations by Affie Mohammed are too few to have any real impact on the book presentation, with the disturbing exception of the two rather sympathetic portrayals of the unscrupulous Boyle.

Paula L. Hart is an extra sessional lecturer in children's literature for the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University.

For the Reference Shelf

PHILOMENA HAUCK

Canadian Books for Young People/ Livres canadiens pour la jeunesse, ed. Irma McDonough. University of Toronto Press, 1978. 148 pp. \$7.50 paper.

Children's Literature: A Guide to Criticism, Muriel A. Whitaker, 1976. Athabasca Publishing Co., 1976. 64 pp. \$2.50 paper.

Profiles, ed. Irma McDonough. Canadian Library Association, 1975. 159 pp. \$6.00 paper.