

against stereotypes, Indian or female, it is worth any amount of genteel condescension or well-intentioned anachronism.

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MEG TO THE RESCUE: FICTION WITH A SOCIAL MESSAGE

Trouble at Lachine Mill, Bill Freeman. James Lorimer, 1983. 128 pp. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0-88862-672-X.

Bill Freeman's latest novel is the fourth in his series about Meg Bains (now aged fourteen) and her brothers, all of whom work very hard to help their widowed mother in her efforts to support her family. In this story, Meg and her twelve-year-old brother, Jamie, go to work in a Montreal shirt factory.

As in most series, the characters and the sequence of events are, at least in part, predictable. The children are generally naive about the working conditions which they face, and these conditions are inevitably far worse than they had expected. The boss is brutal, insensitive and drinks too much. The workers at the factory/at the logging camp/on the ship are underpaid, underfed and ill-treated. Eventually these workers, encouraged by Meg, are determined to deal directly with the owner. He is forced to accede to their demands for union recognition and better working conditions in order to protect his own interests. There are variations from story to story, but these components are generally present.

The format of the books is similar also: map at the front, photographs of the period inserted, all together, in the centre. The more recently published books appear to have been printed on better quality paper stock. This is fortunate because the yellowing paper of the earlier books is unattractive to young readers.

The dust jackets (or covers in the case of the paperback versions) are colourful. The cover of *Trouble at Lachine Mill*, painted by Alan Daniel, is very eye-catching in its depiction of a horse rearing in front of two frightened children.

Many children feel comfortable with series books, and the characters become friends. But it is for other reasons that the Freeman novels should be read by Canadian children (9 to 13 age group). These books are well researched and accurate in historical detail. The photographs are informative and representative of the themes. The children are credible human beings who become tired, hungry and cranky from time to time. The main protagonist is a young girl

who is intelligent, lively and courageous. But most of all, the stories deal with conditions endured by Canadian workers, particularly children, in the late nineteenth century. The child who reads these stories understands why unions became necessary in order to protect workers against the greed of many owners. The struggle to establish trade unions has been long and difficult, and the pioneers in the movement should become familiar figures to young Canadians.

Study guides are available for the first two stories, *Shantymen of Cache Lake* and *The last voyage of the Scotian*. These are excellent adjuncts to the novels because these typically Canadian stories make excellent material for novel study in the classroom. This point was made by publisher James Lorimer (in the study guide to *Shantymen*) when he wrote that the study of such materials results in "a deeper, more realistic understanding of this country and its past."

In spite of the fact that *Shantymen of Cache Lake* won the 1976 Canada Council Award for Juvenile Literature, the best book in the series is *The last voyage of the Scotian*. It is a rollicking good yarn about the demise of a fine old ship. The characters are interesting and believable, including the "villain" who is the ship's captain. Freeman describes him as a flawed human who has some good qualities. The social message gets through, but more subtly than in the other books in the series. *First spring on the Grand Banks*, the third book in the series, provides an interesting insight into the Newfoundland fishing industry, but is not as good a "read" as the other stories.

Trouble at Lachine Mill is fast-paced and absorbing, although rather heavy-handed in its treatment of the class struggle. In fact, the reader may sometimes wonder why all bosses and other people in power are so unremittingly insensitive, greedy and even cruel. These unpleasant qualities are occasionally brought out in stilted prose such as this statement of purpose by Murphy, the factory foreman:

Troublemakers. That's what I've got in that mill of mine. They give me trouble morning to night, but I'm going to break them. Break them under my hard, ruthless heel. They're finished! (p. 2)

Meg and Jamie prevail, as usual, against the villainous bully and in their efforts to help their fellow factory workers. Freeman hints that readers will meet them again when they find a new job in Toronto. They will probably even encounter the foreman because they spot him boarding the first-class car of the train which is taking them to their next job. At this rate, Meg and her brother will have covered all of Canada before they are twenty.

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