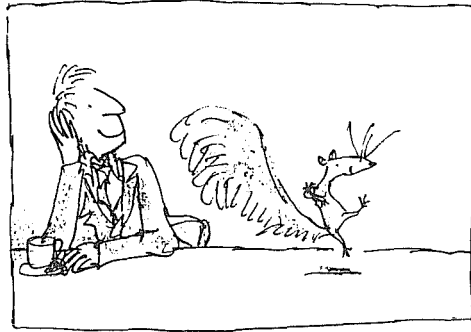


to hoard exemplified by the Pickerings, and the mousish tendency to scavenge and waste exhibited by the Smiths. Willie, of course, takes only what he needs — one #10 note to use as a window shade, and food as needed from the Pickering kitchen — and lives in harmony with his environment: hanging his trapeze from a pipe, and swimming in a pool formed by a leak. His simplicity of character is mirrored in the next generation of Pickerings and Smiths — Richard and Lucille — who marry for love alone, and who genuinely share with Willie qualities only aped by the parents: “a love for people, a sense of belonging to a good world, a patient and wise understanding of human weakness.”

Allan’s humour, whether direct or (more often) understated, is consistently of a moral cast: the Smiths approve of Richard Pickering, who teaches history, because it is “time there was a professor in the family;” and the Pickerings think Lucille is a “dear” when they discover she comes from “one of the wealthiest families in the land.” Some of this will doubtless escape younger readers, but they will enjoy Willie and laugh at Quentin Blake’s expressive line drawings depicting him (Fig. 1). Older children will respond to the satiric humour, and adults will appreciate Allan’s subtlety in having Willie reverse the intent of Shakespeare’s Miranda (*The tempest*, V, i, 11. 188-9) when he laments, on nearly being clobbered by Mr. Smith, “ ‘Barbarians! What kind of world is this that has such people in it?’ ”



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PERSISTENT PICAROS

Harbour thieves, Bill Freeman. James Lorimer & Co., 1984. 138 pp. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0-88862-746-7.

The fifth book about the adventures of Meg and Jamie Bains, *Harbour thieves*,

takes place in Toronto in the summer of 1875. The two young picaros struggle to survive in the streets and the docks of a city not underpopulated with street urchins. The book attempts not only to recount the exciting circumstances of Meg's and Jamie's life in the streets, but also to give the young reader a sense of history. The plot takes the characters to famous landmarks in Toronto: the old jail, the Globe Newspaper offices, Toronto Island, Union Station, the Gooderham and Worts distillery, and so on. To aid the reader's historical imagination, a sixteen page section of historical photographs and a map of Toronto in the 1870s are included. The map and photographs are splendid, depicting most of the important locations for the book's action. Whether this accounts for the rather scant descriptions of place in the written text or not is difficult to tell. However, action and adventure, not description or character, are the things to catch and hold the young reader's attention.

At the book's beginning, Meg and Jamie come to Toronto from Montreal and from their previous adventures at Lachine Mill. Fourteen-year-old Jamie falls in with a gang of newspaper hawkers and shoeshine boys. An older lad called Stinger coerces the boys into helping him rob warehouses and homes. Fear of Stinger and desire to "be one of the gang" implicate Jamie in felony.

The result is capture. Detective Moffat, an unshakeable foe to street urchins and other suspicious characters, succeeds in chasing down Jamie and his companions in crime, and they spend some unpleasant time in Toronto's smelly and dirty old jail. The plot then turns to Jamie's quest to extricate himself from crime and to prove his innocent intentions. Jamie and Meg are instrumental in leading Detective Moffat to the thieves' hideout and to the discovery of their boss. All of this Freeman brings off efficiently and effectively enough to keep young readers interested. The action and dialogue move swiftly and with a minimum of description or digression. The didacticism that informs us that crime's most permanent punishment is dislocation is no less appropriate for its heavy-handed expression: "And, Jamie. I'll give you until sunset tomorrow night to get out of the city." The book ends with Jamie and Meg on the move again, hoping to find "something somewhere" and rationalizing that "at least we'll be free to start again." This, of course, means "to be continued."

Harbour thieves hints at such complex themes as freedom, crime and punishment, social injustice, and survival, but these hints, like the book's historical milieu, remain unexplored. The same is true of character. Two of the book's more interesting characters are Stinger and Detective Moffat, long time adversaries whose relationship is never developed; finally they remain stereotypes.

Young readers, however, will find this a diverting book. For its attractive design (with photographs and map) and for its absorbing adventure, *Harbour thieves* is certainly a book to recommend to reluctant readers.

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