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CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN THE DYNAMO



The mad hacker. Susan Brown and Anne Stephenson. Scholastic-TAB, 1987. 113 pp., \$3.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-71388-4; **Satellite skyjack.** G.P. Jordan. General Paperbacks, 1987. (MicroKidz Mystery Adventures #5) 134 pp., \$3.95 paper. ISBN 0-7736-7095-5; **Clone patrol.** G.P. Jordan. General Paperbacks, 1987. (MicroKidz Mystery Adventures #6) 145 pp., \$3.95 paper. ISBN 0-7736-7098-X; **Weather or not.** G.P. Jordan. General Paperbacks, 1987. (MicroKidz Mystery Adventure #7). 132 pp., \$3.95 paper. ISBN 0-7736-7138-2.

Since the work of Marshall McLuhan, George Grant, and Neil Postman, it has become less easy for us to view technology as neutral, as simply possessing a potential for good or bad which will be manifested one way or the other depending on who controls it. These thinkers have exposed such a view as a positivistic idealism for complacent (or beleaguered) scientists, politicians, and technicians to hide behind. McLuhan coined the phrase "the medium is the message", and Postman in *Amusing ourselves to death* makes a coherent application and extension of McLuhan's ideas to television. George Grant sees in our love affair with technology a dramatic symptom of the modern age's equating of the realms of good and necessity. Because technology can do x, y, and z so much faster and more efficiently (in terms of person/hours and the bottom line), so the argument goes, it must be good. Progress becomes the universal value, and technology means progress. In *Lament for a nation* Grant saw Canada succumbing to the lure of technological progress centred in the United States. The ethos of technological modernity he called the "dynamo".

The four books under review here all feature computer technology and adolescent detectives; but here the similarity ends. *The mad hacker* by Susan Brown and Anne Stephenson is a traditional pre-teen mystery novel which capitalizes on the computer trend; the authors know a sales gimmick when they see one. However, the import of my opening paragraph is not directed at *The mad hacker*. The novel exists for the mystery, not the technology, and on

the whole Brown and Stephenson have put together a diverting few hours of entertainment for readers from 9 to 12. While sorting out which of their friends has written a computer program blocking access to the grade seven computer projects, and why, Amber and Liz discover that the experimental computer their school is using is the focus of attention for thieves stealing the programs from its memory. Though the two plots are not well integrated, they are serviceable. Characters on occasion go beyond the stock-in-trade superficiality of this genre. Amber and Liz's teachers Mr. Sharkman and Miss Belcher, for example, come in for a lot of adolescent humour, but with a brief stroke the authors indicate that these characters are people with lives beyond student perceptions. In a staffroom scene, Miss Belcher asks Sharkman to speak to Amber and Liz about their wild behaviour. When he responds "I gather you want me to have one of my famous little chats with them", Miss Belcher replies, "You've got your image; I've got mine." They know their images and play them--and their knowledge lifts them above the cliché. Such a touch excuses the standard teen detective stuff elsewhere in the book, and places Brown and Stephenson's work clearly above that of G.P. Jordan's *MicroKidz Mystery Adventures*, which comprise the remainder of this review.

Satellite skyjack, *Clone patrol*, and *Weather or not*--numbers 5, 6 and 7 or 8 titles to appear so far from General Paperbacks of Toronto--have disturbing implications. From a distance there is little to make heavy weather about: the *MicroKidz* are amateur sleuths in the tradition of the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew. It would be an understatement to call them computer whizzes. These "kidz" are computer geniuses. Expense appears to be no object: these teens are surrounded by a battery of technological gadgetry which becomes an extension of themselves, or, from another perspective, which reduces them to gadgets. When we look more closely from this perspective we see that the confusion of values and progress I spoke of in my introduction runs deep. Nowhere is there any recognition of either the monetary or moral cost of living in this dynamo. All is gadgetry, dazzle, hype. A developed attention span and an ability to connect one scene with another are not important requirements. Flaccid plot and character development are compensated for by yet another gimcrack which saves the day. In fact, from the author's special thanks to Apple Computer Inc. in each book, and Cliff Kearns's glitzy covers, to the free offer of a "MicroKidz full-colour wall poster and a copy of the G.P. Jordan *Chips and stars newsletter*", the whole project reeks of cheap commercialism. Combined with the obvious American locale (Florida) of these Canadian books, such promotion lends credence to Grant's belief that we have sold our Canadian birthright for a mess of American melting pottage.

In the dynamo traditional morality assumes the cast of a quaint holdover from some not very comprehensible past. In *Satellite skyjack*, for example, the *MicroKidz* discover a plot to hijack satellites. Through the use of oodles of high tech gadgetry they succeed in planting their own "laser transceiver" on the

space shuttle illegally, and thus in foiling the criminal plans. The fact that in the process they have jeopardized the entire mission is glossed over because of their ultimate success.

"That was a stupid and dangerous thing to do!" shouted Mr. Benson.

The youths had never seen him so angry. Marceau [the astronaut] added his own personal concern.

"If that had accidently discharged in the cargo hold of *Reliance*, I might not be standing here today."

The youths hadn't realized the seriousness of their actions and they were very contrite. Thor, however, began steering the conversation around to show how their misjudgment might actually help. . .

Contrition is expected when acknowledging guilt, but Thor's immediate attempt to "steer" the conversation away from their guilt reveals both the MicroKidz' utter lack of contrition, and G.P. Jordan's lack of awareness of the real moral dimension involved. Contrition, in the dynamo, is a buzzword, and little else.

The ethical questions raised by certain forms of scientific inquiry are also little more than superficial counters in Jordan's novelistic video game. In *Clone patrol* a geneticist who needs funds to continue her research, teams up with a racing enthusiast bent on winning the Derby by cloning a champion race horse. Reasonably enough, for G.P. Jordan, they finance their enterprise by pirating and cloning computer components. The MicroKidz help track down the cloned components, and so discover the genetic cloning enterprise poised to enter the Derby. They also find huge vegetables, and genetically mutated dual vegetables such as potatoes. Once the crooks are caught, the genetic cloning itself raises no real problems. Nowhere do the negative elements of the computer cloning industry--stressed numerous times in the book--transfer over to the genetic cloning industry. This is because the bottom line is not ethics but bucks. Progress is good if it provides a good return on investment. The only bad thing about the crooks is that "the release of illegally cloned microcomputer parts threaten[s] the economy." Ironically, Jordan explains the beneficial economic spinoffs of cloning research: "farmers in different countries could raise special herds; for instance, cattle that yield more milk but can resist certain diseases, or sheep with thicker wool that can be shorn more times a year." Those interested in the political power implications should read *Food first* by Frances Moore Lappé and Joseph Collins. Their book reveals the connections between technological food production and multinational corporate wealth and power in the west. The "new-found wealth of scientific material" that Jordan sees in cloning perpetuates an ethos of "progress" which has less and less place for or understanding of a morality which values people over profit.

The final novel in this review, *Weather or not*, provides an illustration of

the way information can be controlled in order to secure profit. The Micro-Kidz stumble upon a villain's plot to hold the world for ransom by controlling the weather through the use of an "electromagnetic generator." After numerous earthquakes, cyclones, hurricanes, tidal waves, and tornadoes, not to speak of nuclear blasts to change the direction of the jet stream, the Micro-kidz foil the plot with the aid of their robot Mr. Chips, which is equipped with artificial intelligence and so has a "conscience" translated to mean it won't let itself be destroyed. As in *Clone patrol*, once the crooks are dealt with, the technology is hailed as a benefactor:

Great possibilities awaited the world with mankind better able to influence the weather. Climate control was too precious to be misused by those seeking power for themselves. In the true spirit of scientific advancement, all people should benefit from the discovery.

The notion that all should benefit, combined with the belief that the strongest will in humans is the "will to live" leads to a confusion of values seen most clearly in Jordan's treatment of media control. Freedom of information is a value not to be questioned, yet when denial of such freedom suits the powers that be, that is what will happen. And those powers are, again, economic. During the climate crisis a governmental research agency controls the news, keeping tabs on what the public is led to believe.

"On what they're *led* to believe?"

"Because if the truth was told. . . panic would break out. The world financial system would collapse, as would one government after another!"

"You mean a global revolution?"

"Yes."

The will to live, seen in economic and political terms, translates into the necessity--the rightness--of media control. As the "authorized" reporter puts it: "We hope to avert any problem with rumours or false reports in this way, so that you at home can be certain of hearing the truth from us . . ." And truth, clearly, is what those in control of the media want it to be. The benefit of all becomes the benefit of the one in power. How is this any different, in effect, from the villainous misuse occasioned "by those seeking power for themselves"?

In the dynamo, conscience in the traditional sense is an encumbrance. We need a conscience we can dispense with, or which is malleable enough to be made to fit our universe of progress. A conscience which makes demands of us, which might, God forbid, ask us to sacrifice something, or put responsibility above survival, offends against Jordan's progressive categorical imperative: the will to live.

As critics we need to respond fully and articulately to this development in

Canadian children's literature. The medium is the message, and the message here is that glitz and superficiality characterize a world whose values are desperately confused, if not pernicious.

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CONNECTING BOOKS AND PEOPLE

Connections: paperback reading for young people. Fay Blostein. Ontario Library Association, 1988. 276 pp., paper. \$12.95 ISBN 0-8869-028-6.

Whenever a new publication by Fay Blostein appears, those of us who work with young adults take special notice. Over the years, Blostein has proven to be one of the most astute and knowledgeable proponents of quality literature. Her earliest bibliographies were effective for their thematic approach. Her *Invitations, celebrations* (O.L.A., 1980), an instant bestseller in the library world, combined thematic bibliographies with a potpourri of creative and practical ideas for using books with young people. It remains a valuable working aid for teacher-librarians.

Now, Blostein has chosen young adults themselves to be the prime consumers of her latest contribution to this field. The Foreword is directed specifically to them, and if they are to comprehend what the book is all about and how to use it, it is essential that they read it. Three general themes establish connections young people will make with themselves, with their family, friends and acquaintances and finally with their world and its issues. The format involves the reader: questions are posed which demand thinking, if not answers. Titles are then listed which relate in some way to the questions, and activities suggested are relevant to the interests of teenagers. The first sixty-one pages are devoted to these questions and lists.

Having made the connections, the reader proceeds to "Finding the connections". Listed alphabetically by title are the books cited earlier by title alone. The reader will discover complete bibliographical references, brief motivating annotations, an indication of reading level, a subject heading, and perhaps a reference to an award listed at the beginning of the book.

In "Afterthoughts", Blostein questions the reader further and provides suggestions for ongoing activities. The book concludes with a subject index and a list of titles of well-known biographical reference books.

The book is attractive; its format, appealing. The use of a variety of types, heavier and lighter print, and an interesting use of space will catch the eye of a young reader.