

public information. Régine Miller survived the war because her parents had arranged for her to be cared for by other families, and because she follows the edict on which the book is titled, "tell no one who you are" (112). Van Mansum survived partly because he was not Jewish and, in spite of his underground activities and subsequent imprisonment and incarceration in a transit camp, he always managed to escape the worst fate. Van Mansum now lives in Ottawa; Miller lives in Montreal. Although twelve years younger than van Mansum, Miller, like van Mansum, remembers childhood with both painful longing and enormous faith. Both survivors also acknowledge and appreciate the efforts of righteous individuals who risked their lives to protect Jewish children and others during the war, including the men and women in the Communist movements in both Holland and Belgium.

The sorrow in Régine Miller's narrative is, at so many moments, heartbreaking; there is such poignancy in the language, in the careful construction of chapters and in the sharp reconstruction of time and events, that it is difficult to read the book at one sitting. It is emotionally easier to read van Mansum's story, less constructed and, in the end, more joyous. But both *Tell No One Who You Are* and *A Friend Among Enemies* are crucially important books; as it is often said, it is we who must never forget. The narratives of survivors assist different generations in remembering our history, painful and cruel though it is.

The difficulty in recommending these books is in calculating at what age a young reader is subject to the injunction that we must not forget. At what age is the sorrow useful to the cultivation of a mind and soul? In the end, this must remain a personal decision for readers and their families. It seems almost trite to comment that, in addition, *Tell No One Who You Are* and *A Friend Among Enemies* are extremely compelling narratives, for which the writers to whom the heroes narrated deserve some of the credit.

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REMEMBERING THE UNIMAGINABLE

Worse than War: The Halifax Explosion. M. Pauline Murphy Sutow. Four East Publications, 1992. 42 pp., \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-920427-33-2. **Survivors: Children of the Halifax Explosion.** Janet Kitz. Nimbus, 1992. 144 pp., \$12.95 paper. ISBN 1-555109-034-1.

These two books, both presumably published in time for the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Halifax Explosion of 1917, represent very different approaches to the event recognized as the largest man-made explosion before Hiroshima. There are presumably a wide variety of ways of approaching this fact and acquainting young readers with the event. These two authors have undertaken their tasks in two very different ways. Initially, adult readers might want

to ponder the issue of what information is to be conveyed to them. Lately, this matter has arisen in connection with Hiroshima and a spate of children's books recently published on the subject. Some aspects of such a consideration include which "facts" are to be presented to young readers, how graphic details should be, and whether blame for such horrible events can be apportioned.

Looking first at M. Pauline Sutow's *Worse than War*, we immediately note the abbreviated text—thirty-nine pages of largish print and many pictures seems very brief, and, one might assume, would require focus. Alas, focus is what this book conspicuously lacks. The text gives many details about shipping matters—four pages of sketches indicate how the two ships, the *Imo* and *Mont Blanc*, were positioned just prior to the explosion. Then, when the explosion actually occurs, Sutow's understatement is almost bathetic: "the *Mont Blanc* exploded with a mighty force. A Halifax scientist, Alan Ruffman, has described the Explosion as a scientific event"; she then goes on to talk about seismic, water and air waves in a manner that seems less than informed and is actually distracting. Her prose is awkward and cluttered with references that should be placed in her footnotes: "Alice Bardsley has written of one girl, Barbara Orr, who was thrown up the side of Fort Needham, yet still survived. Barbara Orr was lucky. Many others who had been blown uphill were killed." The plethora of names is confusing for adults, and, doubtless, would be virtually meaningless for the young readers at whom this text is ostensibly directed. Sutow, in short, appears to have cast far too wide a net in her search for relevant matters for inclusion in this book and as a result the reader comes away with a sense of a huge topic rather disconnectedly put forward.

Matters that might have been of interest to young readers are not clearly articulated. The school that served as a morgue, for instance, is famous in Halifax musical circles: the Chebucto Road School, where the city's school music program is centred, has on its walls, still, photos of the school as a morgue, and many sensitive young musicians, I am told, imagine the violin and cello cases as coffins for youths. Sutow calls the place "a Halifax school," and not even the photographs offer further information; the overall effect of this lack of precision is a kind of glazing over in the reader when Sutow begins her lengthy statistical chronicle of the dead, maimed and missing. The overall effect of a perusal of the book is to make one wonder why and for whom the book is written. The answer may lie in the Acknowledgements where we learn that both the Nova Scotia Department of Tourism and the Canada Council helped with funding. As a weary tax-payer, this reviewer finds an ironic comment on the book in the misspelling of Hugh MacLennan's name in the final Sources and References section: had Sutow simply quoted the relevant passage from *Barometer Rising* her readers would have a far more comprehensive and readable account of that December morning in 1917. MacLennan's account is, after all, considered a classic.

Writing about the explosion for the young is, of course, not easy, and talking down to children is often one of the perils of putting together a book like Janet Kitz's *Survivors: Children of the Halifax Explosion*. It is one of several virtues of this book that she does not do this, in part because she has had the good sense to

let the survivors of the title speak for themselves. When she writes that a child was first afraid, then later reassured by kindly caregivers, her statements have the ring of truth and first-hand experience, which, indeed, this book is based upon. Kitz's earlier book, *Shattered City: The Halifax Explosion and the Road to Recovery* (1989), covered the event and its ramifications in the definitive terms, and the author there was at pains to clarify and illustrate wherever possible. *Survivors* is an offshoot of her original research, and is as elegantly told and illustrated as its forerunner: in *Survivors* we follow the day in the lives of several children who lived to tell about their experiences. The book has, therefore, a focus and a symmetry that is very pleasing—the reader follows the adventures (and there are some told here that are not for the squeamish) of these children who, as adults in the book's final chapter, come together for an impromptu reunion in 1985, when they are present for the dedication of the memorial bells on Fort Needham. Ms. Kitz has judiciously chosen and underscored details that are almost certain to appeal to the voracious curiosity of the young. One of the rare moments of comic relief in the book is the mention of a strange white substance splattered over the kitchen walls of one of the ruined homes, whose chatelaine comments that she had been making bread when the explosion occurred and that the dough had risen—but not quite as she had anticipated. Combined with telling photographs (one, of a survivor's nightshirt that never could be washed clean of its explosion fallout of grime, for instance) her document amply covers the explosion by putting human faces on it and, one can readily imagine, giving young readers a "way into" an event of almost incomprehensible horror. The mere fact that these children survived and went on to lead full lives, in spite, in some cases, of crippling injuries, makes *Survivors* an ultimately heartening and life-affirming testament for readers of all ages.

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OF SHOES, AND SHIPS, AND SEALING WAX

Fire Ship. Marianne Brandis. The Porcupine's Quill, 1992. 119 pp., \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-88984-140-3. **Terror at Snake Hill.** Earl Plato. Vanwell Publishing, 1991. vii & 159 pp., \$12.95 cloth, \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0-920277-67-5, ISBN 0-920277-69-1. **Flight.** Connie Brummel Crook. Stoddart, 1991. 292 pp., \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-7737-5457-1. **Honor Bound.** Mary Alice and John Downie. Illus. Wesley W. Bates. Quarry Press, 1991. 216 pp., \$16.95 cloth, \$9.95 paper. ISBN 1-55082-026-5, ISBN 1-55082-027-3.

Of shoes—and ships—and sealing wax—
of cabbages—and kings—

(Lewis Carroll)

For the last two decades, Canadian writers of historical fiction for young readers have been more focussed on shoes, ships, sealing wax and cabbages than on kings.