

A fusion of Lewis Carroll and Diana Wynne Jones, *More Minds* is definitely inventive. For example, during Lenora's journey into the past, candy falls from the sky and everything continually changes form. Furthermore, typographical tricks show Lenora's scattered thoughts. The surrealism is, however, too frantically-paced for most of the bizarre events to be amusing or meaningful. The brilliant invention of a book that means whatever the reader wants it to mean is thus wasted. Other inventive touches are more thematically relevant. When Lenora imagines into reality both a double of herself who conforms to her parents' ideal of the obedient daughter and a double of Coren who behaves as the perfect suitor, she underlines the difference between social ideals and individualism. These vacuous stereotypes she creates demonstrate a trivial-minded conformity intended to enhance respect for the individualistic protagonists. Unfortunately, the adventures involving Lenora, Coren, and their mindlessly babbling doubles are satiric without being humorous. They are also too long, pushing aside the quest motif. Another similarly troubling element is Sayley, a girl who resembles Lenora in her refusal to curb her imagination. Sayley may suggest that Lenora is not unique in her rebelliousness, but she is mostly a distraction, and the scene in which she intimidates a vicious motorcycle gang is so strained in its attempt at comedy that it falls embarrassingly flat.

It fails as rollicking comedy, and its plot is unnecessarily convoluted, but *More Minds* contains some intellectual pleasures for those willing to ignore its excesses.

Raymond E. Jones teaches children's literature at the University of Alberta. The author of Characters in Children's Literature (Detroit: Gale Research, 1997), he has published a number of articles on Canadian children's literature.

A Journey to Awareness

The Clay Ladies. Michael Bedard. Illus. Les Tait. Tundra, 1999. Unpag. \$19.99. ISBN 0-88776-385-5.

Michael Bedard calls them the Clay Ladies, but they are better known to history as The Girls. Frances Loring and Florence Wyle were two of the most prominent Canadian sculptors of the twentieth century, known as much for their eccentricities as for their vision and prolific output. In this charming story-within-a-story, a little girl learns some enduring lessons about life and art from these remarkable women and the magical, sculpture-filled world they created in an old church.

The book is about the process of realization and the awakening of understanding. We see the Clay Ladies through the child's eyes, and experience with her the dawning awareness of them. At first, they are simply the objects of rumours passed around the neighbourhood. Then, as her curiosity grows, she spies on them and they become disconnected body parts seen through a web of branches. Gradu-

*Illustration from
The Clay Ladies*



ally, as she becomes more comfortable in their world, she sees them as complete human beings, warm, compassionate, and strong. Once the girl is fully conscious of them, they can become her mentors.

The child's growing awareness of the Clay Ladies is paralleled by what she learns about the creative process, which is itself a process of realization. She perceives the sculptures as "upon the brink of waking," and Florence explains that this is the nature of sculpture: "Try to feel the life in it ... Keep at it till you can feel the life of the thing. Then it almost makes itself." More an enabler than a creator, the artist's task is to coax the inner essence from the raw material, to assist in revealing what was always there but lay hidden. The Clay Ladies pass on to the child a love of this task, along with a greater appreciation for the world that surrounds them. "You have to stop and take the time to look at things," Florence tells her, for perception is the first step in the creative process.

Even Les Tait's illustrations bear upon the theme of growing awareness. They have a dappled, almost pointillist feel to them, which give the impression that they, like the child's perceptions, are just on the brink of being realized. At the same time the vantage point for the illustrations is constantly changing, so that the reader sees things from a new direction on each page.

For Loring and Wyle, sculpting is a magical process that quickly becomes addictive. "Once you get the feel of the clay in your hands," Frances tells the child, "there's nothing else you want to do." As proof of the enduring power of creativity, Bedard nicely sets the main story within a framing story, in which the girl, now a grandmother, passes on the legacy of the Clay Ladies to her grandson. It is an effective device that gives the lessons a transcendent quality that they might not otherwise possess.

Down to the Sea in Ships

Ghost Liners: Exploring the World's Greatest Lost Ships. Robert D. Ballard and Rick Archbold. Illus. Ken Marschall. Scholastic/Madison, 1998. 64 pp. \$19.99. ISBN 0-590-1451-X. *Titanic Remembered: The Unsinkable Ship and Halifax.* Alan Ruffman. Illus. Formac, 1999. 72 pp. \$14.95 paper. ISBN 0-88780-467-5.

I agreed to review these books with a certain amount of trepidation, because it would force me to go public with my secret vice: I am a fan of reality TV shows, those disaster-fests in which amateur videos of car crashes and tornadoes are passed off as entertainment. As I nervously awaited receipt of the books, I wondered if they were shameless attempts to hook a new generation to television-on-the-cheap. What was the difference between picture books of shipwrecks, and “World’s Wildest Police Videos” or “When Good Pets Go Bad”?

As I read the books, however, my misgivings vanished, for both are solid, well-written accounts with fine illustrations and high production values. There is no doubt that they are intended to capitalize on the recent Titanic-mania, but that in no way compromises their worth. Quite the contrary, few things have generated among young people more interest in things historical than the recent Titanic film, and we should applaud every effort to build on that interest.

Ghost Liners traces the last voyages of five doomed ships (the *Titanic*, the *Empress of Ireland*, the *Lusitania*, the *Britannic*, and the *Andrea Doria*) using an effective mixture of contemporary photographs, eye-witness accounts (particularly from young survivors), historical reconstructions, and details gleaned from recent undersea explorations. All of these elements will captivate the young reader (not to mention the reader’s parents), but it is Ken Marschall’s exquisite illustrations which will command the most attention. Some are stunningly detailed paintings of the ships in their death throes, while others are eerily evocative scenes of their final resting places on the ocean floor. There is no need to feel guilty about being drawn to these magnificent illustrations, or to worry that enjoying them betrays an unhealthy interest in disasters, for their primary interest is historical: they freeze a moment in time in a very powerful way, and the other elements in the book give those moments historical context.

Titanic Remembered is a little different. More than most cities, Halifax has turned its connection with the *Titanic* into a tourist attraction, and this book is part of that transformation. It is essentially a tourist guide, intended to direct city visitors around the sites that have connections to the great ship. While some of the connections are tenuous (will many people be interested in the local buildings erected by a property developer who died in the sinking?), they are all intended to emphasize the human element of the story. So we read of two infant brothers who survived the sinking, while their father (who had been trying to kidnap them from his estranged wife) perished, and of the victims whose remains were not identified until decades after the disaster. Some of the photos (particularly those of bodies being prepared by embalmers) are a little strong, but there is no denying their impact.

These books take two different approaches to the same events. *Ghost Liners* is fascinated with technology and machinery, using new advances in undersea exploration to unlock the mysteries of the past. With each sinking, it attempts to

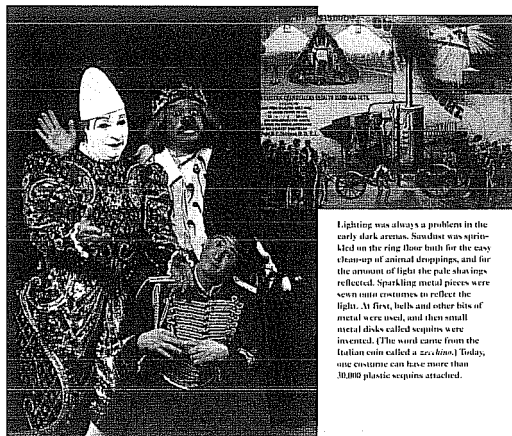
explain the chain of events that led to disaster. In contrast, Ruffman's book eschews a preoccupation with heavy metal and instead uses artifacts from Halifax collections to focus attention on people whose lives were irrevocably changed by the events of 14-15 April, 1912. Both approaches are equally effective, for it is as much the human story as the fallibility of technology that makes these tragedies of enduring interest.

*Jonathan F. Vance is an associate professor of history at the University of Western Ontario. Among his publications are **Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning and the First World War** (UIC Press, 1997).*

A History of the Circus

Circus. Linda Granfield. Greenwood/Douglas & McIntyre; 1997. 96 pp. \$19.95. ISBN: 0-88899-292-0. *Kids Perform Circus Arts.* Bobbie Kalman. Crabtree, 1997. 32 pp. \$21.95. ISBN 0-86505-630-7.

Nowadays we can view such things as death-defying aerial stunts, motorcycle acts, and contortionists in popular circuses such as Barnum & Bailey, Cirque du Soleil, or Ringling Brothers. Historians believe that circuses have entertained both young and old alike since at least 2400 BC. In her well-researched book *Circus*, Linda Granfield examines the history of this unique form of entertainment, providing a concise overview of its evolution and its fluctuations in popularity. We learn that four thousand years ago, acrobatics were performed on bulls in Crete and that the modern circus was born in the 1700s with Philip Astley in Britain. Granfield follows



*Illustration from
Circus*

Lighting was always a problem in the early dark arenas. Handlins was squirreled on the ring floor built for the easy clean-up of animal droppings, and for the amount of light the pale shuttles reflected. Sparking metal pieces were sewn onto costumes to reflect the light. At first, bells and other bits of metal were used, and then small metal disks called sequins were invented. (The word came from the Italian coin called a *sequino*.) Today, one costume can have more than 30,000 plastic sequins attached.