

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

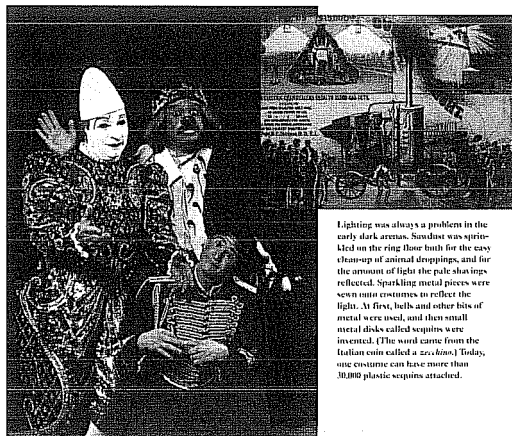
explain the chain of events that led to disaster. In contrast, Ruffman's book eschews a preoccupation with heavy metal and instead uses artifacts from Halifax collections to focus attention on people whose lives were irrevocably changed by the events of 14-15 April, 1912. Both approaches are equally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

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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 both for the easy clean-up of animal droppings, and for the amount of light the pale shavings 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.