

We Followed the Stars to Canada is a straightforward account of a Dutch farm family's decision to emigrate to Canada after World War II. The family is portrayed as very democratic and optimistic. The story does not centre on any of the children but rather shows the family working as a unit: although it is the father's idea to emigrate to Canada, he asks the family for their approval. Young readers are given a glimpse of wartime events through the father's storytelling, which shows the bravery, toughness, and tolerance of some Dutch people during those dangerous times. Readers will also get a surprising picture of rural Canadian life in the early 1950s, which did not have indoor plumbing or electricity. This historical record would be suitable for young readers who need illustrations to help them understand the written events. Much of the action and behaviour is explained so that the reader does not have to imagine it.

All four books show young readers that each historical period offers similar challenges and that people from all backgrounds share similar values of loyalty, honesty, bravery, a longing to belong, and a need to feel safe and secure. Finally, children like to read about child characters who are empowered, who overcome life's difficulties, and who show them "how it can be": these books offer all this.

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Plagues and Boogeymen

A Company of Fools. Deborah Ellis. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2002. 180 pp. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55041-719-3.

Deborah Ellis's new novel, set in the Abbey of St. Luc near Paris in the fateful year the Plague arrived in northern France, is the "chronicle" account of the adventures of the quiet Henri and his rowdy urbanite choirboy companion, Micah. Upon Micah's arrival at the Abbey at the very beginning of the novel, he soon begins to cause havoc within the Abbey wall: he is loud, obnoxious, and dirty, everything Henri is not. Unlike his choir brethren, Micah does not aspire to heavenly things, but he can sing better than any of them. The other boys tease and taunt Micah, who would rather sing the bawdy street songs his troubadour father had taught him than the hallowed *Te Deum*. A poor orphan himself, Henri finds himself paired with Micah by the choirmaster, and they quickly become close friends.

An abrupt meeting with a traveler from southern France lodging at the guest-house, who tells of the Plague and its arrival in Marseille, interrupts the boys' quiet life. Although the boys initially believe they are safe from this "boogeyman" within the sacred precinct of St. Luc, jesting with one another on the veracity of the evil lurking outside the abbey walls, they soon see for themselves the morbid effects of the Black Death during a procession into the very heart of nearby Paris, where they see the *danse macabre* and corpses in the city streets. Some of the abbey's brothers and a few choirboys, including Micah and Henri, form a small troubadour group called "A Company of Fools" to lighten the spirits of those suffering in the city. While visiting the Hôtel Dieu hospital, Micah sings for a young girl who miracu-

lously recovers from the infection and whose father, the local noble Lord Morley, travels to the Abbey believing Micah's singing cured his daughter. Quickly, the original motive behind the Company is twisted: the abbey's Prior and the Lord Morley exploit Micah's talent and hubris by capitalizing on the performances of the troupe to get rich. Micah's own belief in his ability to sing away the Plague and his love of money get the better of him as he becomes a willing tool in the scheme, infuriating the remaining members of the Company who seek to put an end to the charade.

This well-written novel is suited for ten- to twelve-year-old readers. Ellis writes in clear prose; chapters are not overly lengthy and there is a short glossary for quick reference at the end of the book. The author does not seek to hide the devastating effects of the Plague upon medieval French society. Henri tells of bodies in the streets of Paris and notes in the last chapter of the loss of half of the Abbey's brothers. Nor does Ellis provide a concrete period explanation for the Plague; indeed, there wasn't one, and although the characters suggest possible explanations and cures, ultimately they are perplexed about the cause of the disease. Ellis explores her characters' lack of knowledge as a discursive method through which she can introduce her examination of tolerance and ethics to her younger readers, whom she presumes have a similar lack of knowledge about this time and place.

Indeed, the themes of tolerance, ethics, and social conscience feature prominently in Ellis's body of work, in which she seeks to engage seemingly simple plotlines in complex settings and social situations. Like her previous work on life in Taliban-run Afghanistan and in urban Toronto, *A Company of Fools* seeks to address important social questions. Unlike Harry Potter, however, Micah cannot save the world from the terrors of the Black Death. His initial lack of an ethical compass illustrates the necessity of such an aspect of character as to make its absence in the Prior and Lord Morley the abhorrent fault which causes their downfalls. Realizing this fault, Micah saves himself by returning the money his singing had profited him to the people of Paris. This is where Ellis's work shines: she does not shy away from presenting to her readers the harsher lessons her characters learn. During the last few chapters, the boys have evidently realized that people are not always nice and that even adults can be childish. Ellis also examines death and loss outside the abbey as well as within it. Although the Abbot succumbs to the plague early on, it is not until one of the boys dies of the infection that the Plague-as-death becomes the full-fledged nemesis to the boys' earlier youthful exuberance. Eventually, everyone yields to the Grim Reaper, something that not even Micah's golden voice can alter.

Structurally, the first half of the novel is weaker than the second; it takes Ellis until halfway through the novel to introduce the Company of Fools, which may prove tedious for younger readers looking for more plot movement. The absence of any female characters is obvious, but while some might think this is a problem, it is in keeping with to the historical setting Ellis has chosen. This absence is met head on by Henri's dismissal of girls and women early in the novel as something he had never encountered in the cloistered world of the abbey.

The novel might present several challenges to some of its intended readers. The historical context of the novel could present potential problems in terminology as well as setting, something that Ellis exploits to a certain degree. Several Latin passages appear within the text, and, although they are explained either within the text itself or in the glossary at the end of the book, their use along with several

ecclesiastical terms such as Eucharist presume a certain amount of religious knowledge which might be pressing for some of today's more secularly-minded youths. As well, some terms are misleading in a work of carefully crafted historical fiction. The novel purports to be Henri's "chronicle" account, yet the term is never adequately explained; the genre of the novel seems an odd manner in which to introduce a dramatically different literary form to most likely unknowing readers. Furthermore, regardless of the fact that the Abbey of St. Luc is fictitious, to call its church a cathedral is confusing given the supposed pedestrian proximity to Paris; oddly enough, there is no mention of Notre Dame. These shortcomings will probably not be evident to most ten-year-olds, and they do not detract from the overall plot of the novel, which would work well in parallel with a medieval history unit that would expand on the provided historical note. Despite these minute points, Ellis has provided young Canadians with a fine novel with great characters and a wonderful plot while examining a complex historical event. Well done.

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