

The Squirrel that Saved the Day

Sody Salleratus. Aubrey Davis (reteller). Illus. Alan and Lea Daniel. Kids Can, 1996. 30 pp. \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55074-281-7.

In *Sody Salleratus*, the squirrel saves the day, a plot twist that would appeal to young children, as they too are small and “weak.” This book is storyteller Aubrey Davis’s retelling of “Sody Sallyraytus,” an American-English folktale first recorded by Richard Chase in his 1948 *Grandfather Tales*. Davis’s picture-book version would appeal to children aged two to five.

In the story, Boy goes to buy “sody salleratus,” the nineteenth-century American word for baking soda. He is eaten by a bear who lives under a bridge. Girl, Old Man, and Old Woman meet the same fate. Squirrel escapes by running up a tree: the bear follows and — “BOOM!” — falls and splits open. Everyone emerges undigested.



Davis adds great sound effects to Chase’s version: Boy walks with a “hippity-hop” whereas Old Man goes “crickity-crack.” Davis leaves out much of the American dialect, thus losing some of the authenticity yet increasing clarity for the modern Canadian child. In Davis’s story, the whole family eats biscuits made using the “sody salleratus,” with the squirrel casually lying on the brand-new bearskin rug.

This story is somewhat violent, but I found that while adults might be disturbed by it, children weren’t — at least the children I read it to weren’t. My nephews enjoyed the comical aspect of the story that the illustrations bring out so well: the bear may be toothy, but he also playfully wears Old Woman’s bonnet. Their enjoyment is unsurprising: Davis, a Toronto-based storyteller, credits the students of the Metropolitan Toronto School Board for helping him recreate this story.

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Riding the Ark into the Light

Stephen Fair. Tim Wynne-Jones. Groundwood Books, 1998. 218 pp. \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-295-5. *Garbage Creek and other Stories*. W.D. Valgardson. Illus. Michel Bisson. Groundwood Books, 1997. 132 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-308-0.

There is a melancholy to Tim Wynne-Jones’s books that is not merely the natural melancholy of youth. It is the melancholy of life itself, as his young

characters start to appreciate the difficult compromises of adult life, and the shining simplicities of childhood fall away. It is a process of things shifting into focus, of the scales falling away from their eyes, as it were. But it is a painful process, and what they learn to see, in the end, is not always pretty.

Stephen Fair is a rich, multilayered book, complex and sometimes difficult. The title character, a likable, witty boy of fifteen, is stranded in a tangle of family mysteries as he seems to be stranded in the nightmares with which the book begins. He lives with his mother, Brenda, and his little sister, Toni, in one of Wynne-Jones's wonderfully outlandish structures: a house built in the shape of a ship and called The Ark. His father Doug, who built the house, has left the family ("jumped overboard" thinks Stephen to himself), and his older brother Marcus has run away from home. Stephen has heard not a word from either of them since they left, and his pain at this simmers constantly just below his surface. When it bubbles up, as of course it will, and overwhelms him, he calls himself Stephen Dark.

But that is not his immediate problem. His immediate problem is that, despite a family which is loving (if bereft) and a happy circle of friends, there is a kind of sickness in the Ark which has infected Stephen with nightmares and unease, and which is not of his own making. In many ways this is a book about the sins of the fathers, about the ideals of the hippie generation turning to misery in the lives of its children. As one of Stephen's friends remarks, "We're all fatherless" (89). The parents who drifted together and then drifted apart again in the name of "freedom" have indeed left many young people fatherless. Or motherless. Or both. This is a serious difficulty for today's generation that, as Wynne-Jones shows so beautifully, they tackle with an enviable grace and humour.

There is no lack of love in Stephen's life, but there is a lack of candour, a lack of the entire truth. His spirit senses this and reacts by hurling him into nightmare, into a journey he must take to become whole. There are secrets in his past and in his present, things kept from him. Things that should never have been kept from him at all. And when he starts to discover the truths he needs to know, there is a devastating revelation.

But Stephen is fifteen, a difficult age, but an age at which his character is settling into its own strength. He is of a poetic, thoughtful nature (he writes a probing poem using only the letters of his own name), and he has a generous spirit and inner resources. What he discovers knocks the wind out of him, but it doesn't knock him senseless. In the end he makes a brave decision on the side of mending rather than tearing apart. Unlike the other men in his family, he chooses not to go, but to stay.

This bald summary cannot do justice to this intelligent gem of a book. But one thread of imagery which runs through it may help to illuminate its intent. The movie *Casablanca* is a touchstone throughout the novel, and Stephen and his friends even begin to call themselves "the usual suspects."

That fine double-edged phrase neatly points out a fine double-edged truth. In *Stephen Fair*, the usual suspects are in fact the members of your own family. But just as in the movie it turns out that, though they may at times be flawed individuals, they aren't really criminals at all.

There is a difference between coping and enduring. Enduring is a stalled misery, a paralysis. All it can do is wait for the pain to pass. Coping is active, thoughtful. It may be in a tight spot but it looks around for the likeliest way out, and if it can't find it, begins to build one. The children in the funny, well-written stories by W.D. Valgardson are all copers. These are happy stories, for the most part, which is not to say there isn't darkness in them. There is poverty and loneliness and the difficult meagreness of life in a recession. There are broken families and a polluted world. But there is a lot of laughter, as well, and resourcefulness. Copers are always resourceful. And they don't forget how to laugh.

Valgardson has a pointed, spare style that has a way of cutting through to the essence of his characters with minimal fuss. So in "Not Lonely," the young boy Tom, left with a neighbour while his parents are obliged to be away, steadfastly refuses to admit he is worried and in fact, desperately lonely without them. He just sets about taking care of his house and preparing for their return. No whiner this one. And so in "The Sand Artist," Rainbow, who lives in a shack on the beach, has a subtle, but loving bond with her mother. They are often dangerously poor, but can convey a lifetime's understanding of each other with one "Uh-huh." You can virtually see the expressions on their faces. This is a kind of wizardry and a perfect ear on Valgardson's part. It is almost identical to comic timing, the right word at precisely the right moment, and it is a rare gift.

These are modern stories with modern problems. In two separate stories there are boys who are more or less addicted to the Internet. One of them ends up being dragged out into the world and discovering the pleasures of non-virtual reality. The other saves the day in a tight spot because he has learned some essential information on the net. But Valgardson doesn't pass judgment; he merely acknowledges that this technology is a fact of modern life, for good or ill. And that is one of the reasons for the fresh, bracing flavour of these stories. The modern world may have concocted a host of new problems for humanity, but we continue to be resourceful. There is still hope, if we continue to cope.

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