

pas si méchants que ça, et de toute façon ils sont évacués à la fin du roman. Tout, bien sûr, se termine pour le mieux dans le meilleur des mondes avec Mathieu le drogué, troublé mais courageux, pris en charge par Rafaële et sa mère. La vraie victime de l'histoire est finalement Benoît, le petit ami d'Hélène, celui que la petite fille n'aime pas trop et qui se voit évincé sans douceur au profit de Mathieu, ce dernier ayant le don non seulement de faire bouger les objets, mais aussi de faire battre les coeurs.

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CAUGHT IN POLITICAL MAELSTROM

Forbidden City. William Bell. Doubleday, 1990 200 pp., \$12.95 paper. ISBN 0-385-25257-9; **Freedom run.** Phil Campagna. Western Producer Prairie Books, 1990. 160 pp., \$12.95 paper. ISBN 0-88833-318-8.

A literary and cinematic theme of proven appeal concerns children or young adults called upon to play a role, perhaps a decisive role, in the great political or social events of their day. When executed by a skilled, well-informed author – such as Esther Forbes in that classic and still-compelling tale of the American Revolution, *Johnny Tremain* – the result is a story of adventure which excites and educates. While both novels under consideration here contain moments of high drama, neither meets the standard set by Forbes for developing characters and evoking an historical period.

In William Bell's *Forbidden City*, 17-year-old Alexander Jackson accompanies his father, a CBC cameraman, to Beijing to cover the events which led up to the mass demonstration in Tian-an-men Square in May and June of 1990. We follow Alexander's transformation from a self-centred, predictable middle-class Toronto high school student, who dotes on his collection of toy soldiers and model war-planes, into a mature and thoughtful young adult, who, as a result of his experience of the horror of the massacre, literally and figuratively puts away childish things.

On the night of 4 June, Alexander finds himself in Tian-an-men Square with his camcorder as the army moves against the student demonstrators. Over a two-way radio, he hears his father being arrested; he sees Lao Xu, his father's government-appointed minder, whom he has come to admire, shot by soldiers, and is himself wounded by gunfire. He is rescued by a group of students who treat his wounds and beg him to take their story to the West. In the novel's exciting climax, Xin Hua, a young female student, takes Alexander on a harrowing bicycle trip through the streets of Beijing in an unsuccessful at-

tempt to reach the Canadian embassy. Discovered by soldiers, Xin Hua is summarily executed. Alexander is deported along with his father, but he manages to bring his video cassettes and photographs safely home to Toronto. His ritual destruction of his prized arsenal of military models symbolizes his recognition that war and violence can no longer be seen as games; his experiences have changed his life irrevocably.

William Bell has taught in China, and the novel's accuracy of detail as well as the sense of outrage that permeates his description of the events of June 1990 is rooted in that experience. A year in China, however, is not a sufficient immersion in that society's complex culture to enable Bell to develop deep and convincing characters for Lao Xu, the party functionary with a heart of gold, or Xin Hua, the embodiment in human form of the Goddess of Democracy erected by the student demonstrators in Tian-an-men Square. Portraits of Alexander, his father, and Eddie, another CBC correspondent, are somewhat better drawn, but Bell's attempt to craft the novel in the prose of a teenager – things are frequently "intense" or "mega"-something – is unconvincing and distracting.

Another 17-year-old caught in the maelstrom of political struggle is Michael Preston, central character in Phil Campagna's first novel, *The freedom run*. Leaving rural Saskatchewan to accompany his girl-friend Carol on a church-sponsored mission to Chile, Michael becomes involved in assisting Orlando, a young Chilean guerilla to escape to safety in Argentina. Michael finds himself leading a number of youth missionaries and a band of orphans through the Andes, pursued by the evil Col. Basaulto, a cartoon composite of Inspector Javert and any number of brutal Latin-American militarists. Campagna makes the chase exciting, if you are prepared to suspend judgment on the ability of ill-equipped, untrained North American teenagers to survive for six days both exposure and the Chilean army. After the ordeal – ending in a contrived scene in which Michael is restrained by conscience from killing Col. Basaulto – the young guerilla returns to Chile to continue the armed struggle, and the young missionaries return to Canada, better friends and more mature.

Campagna's grasp of Chilean history and politics is minimal. The reader might have been spared the painful attempts at Latin-American dialect: "Why, my young friend, have you been ronning from me?" – written for Col Basaulto (but not, significantly, for Orlando). The story of Michael's emergence through adversity from insecurity and alienation is handled well but is often lost in a mélange of motifs drawn from sources as diverse as *The sound of music* and Bruce Cockburn's *If I had a rocket launcher*.

Attending both to the accuracy of setting and the development of engaging characters and stories is difficult even when dealing with relatively settled and well-known historical events, but doubly so when setting a story against a background of current affairs, which change rapidly and unpredictably. If the two books under review lead young people to take a greater interest in world

affairs, they will have served a good purpose. They are less successful, however, in promoting the self-examination which the best and most educative literature compels in us.

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MINI-REVIEWS

Yukon Chinook. Karen Walker. Yukon Fish and Game Association, 1991. 32 pp., \$8.95 paper. ISBN 0-9695099-0-1.

Although published as a picture storybook, *Yukon Chinook* is an informational book for older readers containing a wealth of well-organized information lavishly illustrated in full-colour. Most of the illustrations show the distinctive physical characteristics of salmon at different stages of development.

The problems with this picture book include the absence of needed narrative content and the layout of the book. If Leo Lionni had not given the little black fish a name, if we could not identify him in the illustrations, and if his adventure were a subplot, would we so readily cheer Swimmy's survival and view him as a very memorable character (*Swimmy* 68)? The absence of story in *Yukon Chinook* makes it highly unlikely that young readers will view the generic salmon as a memorable character. The layout of the book is problematic because different perspectives of the environment are placed side-by-side, divided only by a slight change in the hue of some colours. Also, the lead-in lines in several illustrations direct the reader's eye into the seam of the book (12-13, 18-19).

In spite of the short-comings of this book as a picture storybook, I think middle-grade teachers will find *Yukon Chinook* a very helpful resource in science units of study that centre on ecology issues.

Sawiti: A whale's story. Alexandra Morton. Orca Book Publishers, 1991. 47 pp., \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-920501-56-7.

This book is the story of a baby orca's social development during her first year. The story is complemented by spectacular colour photos of the pod's social behaviour.

Soon after Sawiti, an orca or killer whale, is born, adult females nudge her