

Verve, Humour, and an Eye for Detail

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The Black Joke. Farley Mowat. Illustrated by Victor Mays. McClelland and Stewart, 1973. 218 pp. Paperback reprint. \$2.75

The Curse of the Viking Grave. Farley Mowat. Illustrated by Charles Geer. McClelland and Stewart, 1973. 243 pp. Paperback reprint. \$2.95

I have just read, pondered and inwardly digested all four of Farley Mowat's recently reprinted books for young people: *Lost in the Barrens* (1956), *Owls in the Family* (1961), *The Black Joke* (1962), and *The Curse of the Viking Grave* (1966). I encountered the same Mowat who had given me pleasure in adult books such as *A Whale for the Killing* and *Wake of the Great Sealers* (Prints and Drawings by David Blackwood). No question about it, the man writes well, for any age. He tells a good story, with verve, humour, and a sharp eye for detail. He also manages to convey a feeling for the texture of the Canadian land and its people, "the stuff of which our pride was made," as Mowat describes his grandfather in *Wake of the Great Sealers*.

The Black Joke is a modern adventure story with a feeling for the historic traditions of Newfoundland and the sea. Jonathan Spence is having difficulty surviving in the Thirties. The villainous store-keeper of the outpost (one is reminded of E. W. Thomson's Old Man Savarin) hatches a scheme for getting possession of Jonathan's ship. Jonathan loses "Black Joke" through a legal trick, and is badly hurt while attempting to steal his own ship and escape from the authorities in St. Pierre. Rescue depends upon his teen-aged son Peter and nephew Kye. Jonathan's old friend Pierre finds the marooned boys. Pierre and his fisher-friends on the island of Miquelon plan to hijack "Black Joke" as it is bound for the United States with eight hundred cases of contraband liquor. They will hide the liquor and return it only after Jonathan's fine is paid and the ship legally signed over to him once again. When the expected adult help fails to materialize in time, three boys stowaway on the refitted "Black Joke" in a desperate last-minute venture. They set a flash fire which panics the crew and leaves the boys and Captain Smith to battle the flames alone.

Humorously, the American captain is actually relieved to see Pierre and the Miquelon fishermen: "'Kidnapper, nothin'!' he replied with feeling. 'It was them *kids* done the nappin'. Drove off my crew, hijacked my boat, and damn near got me burned to a crisp into the bargain! Mister, there ain't nothin' you can do to me that they ain't already thought of!'"

True to the spirit of comedy, the villain is at least partly restored to the good graces of the community: "Even Smith, his hands heavily bandaged, appeared on the dock. Word of how he had put out the fire had spread rapidly, and he was no longer looked upon with hostility by the fishermen, for they could appreciate a brave deed as well as anyone."

The fast-paced story has all the classical elements of its type: piracy, rum-running, stowaways, and a brief survival episode à la Robinson Crusoe. When "Black Joke" runs aground, Peter and Kye are marooned on a high and lonely rock while Jonathan heads for help. They erect a home-made tent and savour the pleasures of having to live like Crusoes until tedium sets in: "Their diet of cold water, raw eggs, sea-biscuits and the occasional handful of brown sugar was beginning to sour. Worse still, the rats on the island, which normally lived on the cliff-face eating puffins' eggs and young puffins, had discovered the camp...As the fourth day dawned, the boys found that the pleasures of being marooned had worn pretty thin."

The Black Joke, like Mowat's *Owls in the Family*, is slanted to slightly younger readers than is *The Curse of the Viking Grave*. This adventure for adolescents is a sequel to *Lost in the Barrens*, and it has a more melodramatic plot and a more involved narrative than its predecessor. *Lost in the Barrens* is truly a Canadian Crusoe tale, with the subarctic wilderness of northern Manitoba replacing the desert island as setting-cum-challenge. Two boys, one Indian and one white, get separated from the Indian party searching for cariboo to feed their starving band. They are marooned when their canoe is shattered by rapids. They rescue one gun, a little ammunition, and some simple tools. Armed with these, and with their determination to survive, they manage to build a cabin and kill and cache a winter's supply of meat. Much of the interest of the book lies in its How-To aspect, as Mowat describes how Jamie and Awasin make everything from lamps to skin parkas and moccasins.

Its other fascination lies in its loving feeling for the animals and the land, and the sense of man's kinship (that word beloved by Charles G. D. Roberts) with this kingdom. The boys kill only what they need to eat; other killing is murder. Animals help to people the land and reduce loneliness. The description of the cariboo herd, flowing forward as irresistibly as the sea itself, has both power and beauty: the boys feel that they have "looked deeply into one of the great mysteries of the animal world."

The sequel features four young people loose in approximately the same area. Mowat likes to get his adults offstage to leave things up to the teen-aged protagonists. Trapper-teacher Angus McNair becomes sick and is hospitalized. His fifteen-year-old nephew Jamie ignores a letter telling him to report to the Child Welfare authorities in Winnipeg, and heads for the Barrens in search of the Viking relics which he had discovered on the earlier expedition with the Chipeweyan, Awasin. There is a third youth, an Anglo-Eskimo called Peetyuk, and Awasin's sister Angeline--a Canadian mosaic. The romantic attraction between Angeline and Peetyuk (played humorously against Jamie's disgust with girls in general) would appeal to adolescents.

Mowat's depiction of Indian and Eskimo life is both sympathetic and humorous. Indian and Eskimo legends are woven into the main story. As in *The Black Joke*, the youths accomplish fantastic and Homeric feats, including shooting the rapids of a river, which no one has achieved before. Somehow it all seems to be possible, while Mowat has us in his spell. In *Lost in the Barrens*, however, there is an interesting

incident where natural conditions almost defeat the two boys, and the Indian cautions: " 'If you fight against the spirits of the north you will always lose. Obey their laws, and they'll look after you.' "

There are fine descriptions of animals and of the northland in *The Curse of the Viking Grave*, as in its predecessor. Mowat's technique ranges between humour and, at times, sublimity, as in the following:

The rumbling of the animals' guts and the musical clinking of their ankle joints filled his ears, while his nostrils were full of the sweet, rank smell of the beasts. His fear began to evaporate, to be replaced by a strange excitement and by a feeling of awe such as he had never known before. So much tumultuous life swirling past him, unhurried and unafraid, stirred him to his inner being. A feeling of affinity, almost love, for these magnificent, imperturbable, animals swelled through him. When the herd had passed by he remained standing as if entranced, staring after them until they were far away.

From the technical viewpoint, the quality of the paper in these paperback reprints is cheap, but the binding is sturdy, an essential for children's books. The half-dozen dramatic black and white illustrations by Victor Mays in *The Black Joke* give the feeling of woodcuts, while Charles Geer's illustrations for the *The Curse of the Viking Grave* are suitably romantic, melodramatic and humorous. It is a pleasure to see Farley Mowat's lively novels made available to children in an inexpensive form.

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