

On The Occident Express

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Murder on 'The Canadian', Eric H. Wilson. Illustrated by Tom McNeely. Bodley Head (Canada), in association with Clarke, Irwin, 1976. 108 pp. \$6.75 hardcover.

As its title suggests, this first novel by British Columbia writer Eric Wilson is distinctly derivative. This fact is turned to some advantage, however, by the book's exploitation of its literary echoes. Like the child protagonists of the nineteenth century whose perceptions of the real world are coloured by an absorption in gothic romances, Mr. Wilson's Tom Austen models himself on Sherlock Holmes, the detectives of the Agatha Christie novels, and most of all on the Hardy Boys. Tom's devotion to his literary predecessors is treated with a similar irony. His extravagant suspicions of ticking parcels, poisoned food, and bugged washrooms lead him into various absurd misconceptions, and his satirical schoolmate, Dietmar, is quick to provide appropriate practical jokes and sardonic quips.

Needless to say, this enthusiasm for detection is ultimately vindicated, since it leads Tom into successful as well as abortive investigations. Under the protective cover of his irony towards the boy's pretensions, Eric Wilson manages to introduce a murder story of high melodrama in the unlikely setting of a westbound transcontinental train. The two boys board the train at Winnipeg, and are awakened on their second night by murder in full traditional dress, complete with screams, a bloody knife, a corpse, and a group of dubious fellow-passengers conveniently circumscribed by a railway sleeping car. Inevitably, Tom's lone persistence in refusing intuitively to accept the obvious solution leads him to a confrontation in which he is forced to play a hazardous personal role in the apprehension of the murderer, far from the reach of the benevolent authorities.

The appeal of a murder mystery is usually assumed to lie in the suspense with which we await the revelation that the least likely candidate is the real villain. While searching for cunningly-placed clues and rejecting false leads, we hope paradoxically that the author will still be able to surprise us, for we wish to have our ingenuity exercised but ultimately baffled. I have frequently found this a rather arid kind of reading activity, and the young readers for whom this book is intended (around ages seven to ten) will probably not feel obliged to pause over clues or make short-lists of the possible culprits, but will simply allow themselves to be carried along by the story, which is companionable if not compelling. For those, however, who will wish to decide as soon as possible who done it, Mr. Wilson does a fairly workmanlike job of reconstructing the classic genre, though there are at least seven blatant and unexplained or unconvincing attempts to direct the young detective's suspicions towards characters who eventually prove

innocent. This is stacking the odds rather heavily against the reader. To accuse such a book of being contrived would be churlish, but children are likely to sense a lack of deftness when one of the longest episodes in the book, in which the hero trails a suspect through a small prairie town, turns out to be a complete red-herring. The climax of the story is momentarily chilling enough for the book's intended readership, but could surely have been extended somewhat; rescue appears just as things are getting really interesting.

Mr. Wilson is fairly successful in transferring the romance of the long-distance railway journey to a Canadian setting, but his attempts to update the social milieu are less happy. The murder plot hinges on the marital dissatisfaction of the beautiful victim, the alcoholism of her husband, and the vengeance of her unsuccessful rival for his affections. This sort of thing provides a rather odd contrast to the slightly anachronistic tone of the conversations of the two boys, whose literary roots stretch back not just to the Hardy Boys but discernibly to sagas of boarding-school chums. In this context we expect cardboard villains, and adults who are stereotyped and mostly remote figures, but although the novel provides several examples of such characters the three adults concerned in the murder refuse to occupy an alien world of innate viciousness or crude and clear-cut motives. As Tom is forcefully aware, they are caught in a tangle of conflicting loyalties, pervasive unhappiness and vague longings. In a book written for young children one does not look for an exploration of adult themes, but by including such potentially volatile material Mr. Wilson calls into question the precarious emotional reality of the entire fabric. Confronted at close quarters by the brutal murder of a woman who has infatuated him, and by the arrest of her husband whom he has befriended, the young detective goes to work with extraordinary insouciance. He is of course concerned to vindicate the wrongly accused, but we find no significant emotional response to such an extraordinary event. Tom's main reaction is to welcome the opportunity to deploy his powers of detection.

What children will make of this inconsistency of focus I am not sure. They will certainly enjoy the sprightliness and wit of the narration, and the book comes handsomely bound and printed, with pleasant illustrations by Tom McNeely.

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