The Long, Lonely Voyage from Childhood to Adolescence

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Cariboo Runaway, Frances Duncan. Illustrated by Karen Muntean. Burns & MacEachern, 1976. 121 pp. $5.95 paper.

Crusty Crossed, Dorris Heffron. Macmillan, London Ltd. 1976. 177 pp. hardcover.

Kap-Sung Ferris, Frances Duncan. Burns & MacEachern, 1977. 126 pp. $4.95 paper.

These three well-written novels are attempts to chart the hazardous course of those who must navigate the turbulent and at times terrifying waters of young adolescence. *Crusty Crossed, Cariboo Runaway, Kap-Sung Ferris*—each cleverly and sympathetically depicts the transitional phase of development between childhood and maturity.

For the protagonists of these novels, as they leave behind the safe, known world of childhood to explore the challenging, often overwhelming world of adulthood and society at large, the questions that arise have no simple answers. Each gropes tentatively towards a resolution of inner and outer conflicts. Each finds the odyssey a painful experience. Each is tormented by periods of self-doubt. But each is finally rewarded by priceless gains: a sense of self-worth, a recognition of her own identity and of her own place within the larger cultural identity of society as a whole.

For two of the protagonists—Elva the mid-nineteenth century would-be adventurer, and Crusty, the stalwart, war-time evacuee—this transitional period of their lives is heightened by the fact that circumstances dictate leaving their physical childhood surroundings, exchanging these for the novel, unnerving and strange settings of an alien society.

There is a difference between their situations, however: Elva decides of her own accord that because of certain circumstances (her mother's ill-health, their relative poverty, her father's continued absence after six years in the gold fields) she must set out on her daring journey to find her father and bring him home—fortune or no fortune; Crusty, on the other hand, is forced by powers beyond her control (the war and her parents' fear for the safety of their three daughters) to leave her home and native land to settle in

a new country, in the New World–Canada. But for each, the upheaval is a disturbing experience.

In *Cariboo Runaway,* Elva Parkhurst, at thirteen years of age, and disguised for her own protection as a boy, leaves the sheltered, regulated society of mid-nineteenth century Victoria, B.C., exchanging it for the chaotic, grasping society of the Gold Rush Trail. She willingly takes on the burdens of maturity (heightened when she is followed and joined by Tim, her younger brother). She does not always succeed in her attempts at self-sufficiency but she frequently comes close to success.

Finding herself in a society which is characterized by greed, where only the self in its most rapacious form counts, she sees how lives are sacrificed, how people's regard for each other is reduced to its lowest terms. She trudges along, wearily, beside uncaring, disillusioned prospectors and sees men who are weak or old left to die, helpless, at the roadside.

In the course of the book, Elva travels many miles, literally and figuratively, finally catching up with her elusive father who, like others before him, has fallen prey to the demon gold.

Mr. Parkhurst seems smaller than Elva remembers and his gold hair, like his dreams of gold, has become "tarnished". Lured by the ever-enticing prospect of increasing his wealth, he has squandered all at the poker table and now faces a murder charge.

With the aid of their mother and of the judge, and with some cunning detective work on their own part, Elva and her brother eventually succeed in bringing the real villain–Redbeard–to justice. But not before they have learned much, in the process, of life and living; brushing with murder, gambling, drunkenness, hunger, Indians, hostage-taking and more before the story is done.

By the end of the book, Elva is happy to return to her true role as a girl, with no further use for disguise, now wanting only "to be me." And Elva comes to acknowledge that she, like her father, has been following a dream rather than reality. Now she and her family opt for the reality of remaining in Barkerville–the "hard country" of the gold fields having failed to conquer their spirit.

Tanis "Crusty" Kane (so nicknamed because, on first sighting Canada at sea, she described it as a "crusty bit of bread floating on mouldy blue soup") has her world turned upside down by the fortunes (or misfortunes) of war. The gap between her childhood home (a rambling, centuries-old building affectionately nicknamed "The Boot") and her Canadian uncle's unpretentious home is enormous. Crusty, with sisters Vanessa and Harriet, trades her life as the daughter of a classical pianist mother (Eileen) and a moral philosophy don father (Wesley) in world-renowned Oxford, for the

more mundane mores and customs as the niece of an almost penniless, but immensely human couple–Jim and Dot–proprietors of the local clothing store in the Maritime town of Big Point. (A point in fact *so* small that it's not even large enough to appear on a map!)

In Big Point the pressures to conform are great. Crusty soon finds herself up against the adolescent's difficulty of trying to reconcile two, at times conflicting, views: herself as seen by herself, and herself as seen by others (especially schoolmates). Fortunately, her upbringing has provided her with the right equipment for resolving this dilemma: her father's parting "moral" advice being: "You must develop a worthy concept of yourself. . . .Call it your self-image. Follow it and thereby you may prevent serious inner conflicts."

Of course, Crusty goes through many a slough of despond and valley of despair as well as other experiences before reaching the desired goal. She survives the death on the voyage out of her friend and "protector" Vivaldi, a golden canary as much in love with classical music as Crusty herself. Crusty also survives the taunts of cocksure Canadian schoolchildren, secure in the comfort of their own known surroundings, who ridicule her strange and "foreign" accent, dress, and manner.

So Crusty learns to accept being the butt of unenlightened prejudice, but she also learns that prejudice works both ways. Of the English, a Canadian schoolfriend repeats to Crusty what he's heard around him: "They're over-confident, over-bearing and over *here*!" And, in a letter from her mother, Crusty reads a war-time description of the Americans stationed in Britain: "Americans! Over-confident. Over-sexed. And over here." *Plus ça change*. . . .

But, it is in the resolution of a very personal situation that Crusty finally triumphs, proving for herself the wisdom of Wesley's philosophy. For Crusty survives the agony and pangs of first love and even, eventually, accepts the inevitability of separation and the ending of that love.

At the end of two years in Canada, Crusty faces the prospect of returning to England and her parents. But, not wishing to give up Jay, her first boyfriend, she plans to run away and hide until the plane taking her sisters home has left. Unwittingly, she hauls down upon herself and Jay the wrath and scandalous gossip of a vocal group within the community. Forced to reconsider her feelings, her actions, she comes face to face with, of all things, "serious inner conflicts."

Being the true daughter of her moral-philosophising father, her course of action is now clear and she concludes: ". . . .it certainly was not part of my self-image to cause trouble for others."

So, with a newly-acquired maturity, Crusty bids farewell to the surrogate parents she has come to love, to the land she has grown to appreciate

and to the boy whose friendship and love she has shared and whom she will never forget.

But on returning home, Crusty finds that re-adjustment to the English way of life is no easier than adjustment to Canadian life had been. However, with Wesley's wise encouragement that she neither deny her Canadian experiences nor hate her parents for being what they are, Crusty prepares to wait for the hurt of missing Jay to pass. And Wesley, who has lost an arm and a lover in the London air raids, consoles her with the thought that "in a long long time" the pain "will be less awful."

Crusty has indeed been "crossed" in love and in cultural identity but, resilient creature that she is, we feel sure that she has within her the resources to overcome any temporary "inner conflict."

For Barbara Kim Ferris, in *Kap-Sung Ferris*, the jolt from the known world of childhood and cultural identity is deliberately self-induced. Kim, born Kim Kap-Sung in Korea, had been brought to Canada and adopted as a very young child by a loving Canadian couple and their twin sons. She has been a well-integrated member of family and school and has excelled as a skater.

However, Kim's sudden rejection of this secure environment is triggered by the catalytic action of a storekeeper who unjustly accuses her of shoplifting and then attempts to get himself off the hook by claiming that all "orientals" look alike to him.

Kim's journey from childhood to adolescence is almost entirely a mental one. But, towards the end of the book, it takes on a more physical aspect when, like Elva in *Cariboo Runaway*, she runs away from home and stows away on board a ship. But in doing so, Kim is also running away from her adoptive parents and their culture. For Kim's ship is bound for the Orient, where she intends to search for the parent who is her "real" mother and for her "real" country and identity.

But there is an added irony leading to Kim's dramatic action: she *cannot* escape from what she *is* because two things set her apart immediately–her oriental appearance and her skating prowess. In her emotional immaturity Kim feels that *only* by denying her ability (thereby almost flunking tests and competitions that she wishes to win) and by going to places where she feels she will not be conspicuous (i.e. Chinatown in Vancouver and now the Orient) can she overcome her predicament.

She learns, however, that self-integration is not so superficial; it is more than "skin-deep". For, in Chinatown where, at her own request, she celebrates her birthday, she finds that although *outwardly* she has all the credentials for feeling at home, she feels *more* conspicuous than ever.

And Mrs. Duncan adds further irony to her plot. For Kim's best friend, Michelle, has all the outward appearance of a "normal" (by Kim's standards) Canadian; she is a "white" person. Yet Michelle has an agonizing inner life. She feels insecure because her parents are divorced and because she herself is well over average height for her age (a characteristic she shares with Crusty Kane). This is a disadvantage not to be *overlooked,* as anyone in a similar situation will agree!

Mish envies Kim her home life: two parents, two brothers, home-made meals. In contrast, Mish is often left alone with t.v. dinners by her lawyer mother, Kate, who seldom seems to give much thought to her daughter but devotes her time–spare and otherwise–to the rights of others.

Like Mish, Kim finds it difficult to confront her parents with her inner conflict. Suspecting that they have never taken out Canadian citizenship papers for her, she suddenly realizes that, if this is so, then she is neither Korean nor Canadian. And she sets out to change all that. Not without a few misgivings, however, as when along the way she is confronted by Bindu, a new immigrant schoolmate from Uganda who arrives with her own set of prejudices against Canada. Before long Kim finds herself defending her adopted country, but she still feels that her allegiance may not be fully justified.

Eventually, like Crusty and Elva, Kim and Mish learn that dreams are dreams and reality is reality, although, to be sure, the two do get blurred occasionally.

A few hours of the life of a stowaway and Kim passes from the state of excitement, through boredom, to being downright scared. And rescue by police, family and friends is not as unwelcome when it occurs as Kim expected it to be. Meanwhile, Mish has been forced to realize that Kate's specialized knowledge and cool skill in dealing with others are very useful attributes in time of crisis.

Fears overcome, hostilities resolved, discussions can begin. Kim discovers that she had not been wrenched from her real mother's arms or cruelly kept apart from her. Dying of tuberculosis, Kim's sick mother had given her up for adoption to ensure Kim's own health and future welfare. And her adoptive parents have not taken out citizenship papers for her as they want her to "choose" her country for herself when she is old enough to decide.

There is no miraculous reversal in Kim's attitude. She remains hesitant at adopting her new country and agrees with her parents' suggestion to postpone such a decision. But, at the end of the book, as an insurance (assurance?) Kim asks Mish to get Kate's advice "about getting citizenship" just in case, as she puts it, "I ever need to know."

Mrs. Herron and Mrs. Duncan have shown themselves to be successful writers of novels for the adolescent age group. Both have managed to avoid falling into the trap of over-sentimentalizing the early teen world. Anguish, guilt, repentance, sorrow, joy: all are recorded in turn, but never overworked. A touch of delicate sympathy pervades all three novels and is most successfully achieved in *Crusty Crossed.* Poignant, but never pathetic, these stories are deft depictions of the adolescent world. The protagonists finally reach "home" all the better for, and greatly enriched by the experiences of voyage and trail.

These three books are excellent leisure-time reading for 11–14 year olds. No sugar-sweet heroines here, but down-to-earth convincing personalities. *Crusty Crossed* and *Cariboo Runaway* would also be good classroom resource material, providing interesting illumination of earlier days, and demonstrating how little human nature changes the world over and from one era to another.

Kap-Sung-Ferris would perhaps have less appeal for boys since they are only sketchily outlined in the story, but it would provide useful discussion material in any classroom where immigrant children are present. *Crusty Crossed* would serve a similar purpose.

There is no room in the space of this review to delve into all the richness of setting, intracacies of plot and counterplot, suspense and intrigue, and galleries of well-delineated minor characters that abound in all three books, but especially in *Crusty Crossed* and *Kap-Sung-Ferris.* These are further delights that lie in store for readers. For would-be prospectors of literary wealth there's gold a-plenty–nuggets, dust and all–in "them thar books."

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