Canadian winter, and with the description of getting stranded on a remote road in a sea of mud. I also reacted with a shock of recognition to the description of the curling rink as the "true center of Silver Creek society" and of this middle-aged game as seen through adolescent eyes. Susan copes with the people at the rink, and with the discomforts of winter but the coping takes its toll, as does the sight of the dreary landscape "silent, still and rigid . . . like another planet." This is wasteland imagery and it reflects one of the central themes of the novel, the view of Silver Creek as a cultural and social desert. A recent book on Canadian culture makes the point that "in cold latitudes" and "in hard times . . . the consolation of the arts is needed." It is precisely this consolation that is lacking in Silver Creek.

This lack in the final analysis produces Susan's emotional distancing from the town, and her determination to leave. On the whole, I find Bleeks' rendering of the Northern Canadian town to be convincing, and his characterization of Susan a relief after woolly-headed cuteness.

For many adolescent readers, too, it will come as a relief to discover a competent female adolescent who has had to cope with poverty, who shoulders more than her share of family responsibility, who can deal with crises calmly and with common sense, who seems neither obsessed with nor frightened by sex, and who is sick to death of the whole scene. The novel ends on the hopeful note that it is permissible for Susan to put her own welfare first, that it is O.K. for her to choose a better life. It is a message that many adolescents need to hear.

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History as Fiction

DAVID W. ATKINSON

Two for the Unknown Land, Frances Thompson. Borealis Press, 1977. 134 pp. $5.95 paper.

Quest of the Golden Gannet, Dorothy P. Barnhouse. Breakwater Books, 1979. 96 pp. $4.95 paper.

Historical fiction is not easy to write. A writer must be true to historical fact, yet transcend mundane detail to create believable, human characters in situations that entertain and perhaps teach as well. Frances Thompson in

Two for the Unknown Land and Dorothy P. Barnhouse in *Quest of the Golden Gannet* are particularly successful in achieving this balance, and each writer is to be commended for having produced a well-crafted juvenile novel that mixes adventure and intrigue with history.

While the two books are both historical fiction, they are quite different from one another, drawing upon different periods in history and using historical detail in different ways. *Two for the Unknown Land* recounts the adventures of the twins, Olaf and Birgit, who accompany their father, Gunnar the Blacksmith, on Thorfinn Karlsefni's search for Leif the Lucky's Vinland. Set against the English-French wars of the seventeenth century, Dorothy Barnhouse's *Quest of the Golden Gannet* tells the story of young Tad Evans, who goes in search of his father, presumed lost on the Newfoundland fishing banks.

Thompson takes her story from two Icelandic sagas, the *Graelendinga Saga* and *Eirik's Saga,* each of which recounts tenth-century expeditions to North America. Thompson is remarkably true to her sources. But the two sagas are themselves sketchy, especially when compared to other richer examples of the saga tradition, and thus she has considerable room to maneuver without having fiction contradict fact.

Most of Thompson's characters are real people, at least insofar as they figure in the original sagas; there is Erik the Red, his daughter Freydis and sons, Leif and Thorvald, Thorfinn Karlsefni and his wife Gudrid, and the steward of Erik, Thorhall the hunter. Olaf and Birgit are not mentioned in the sources, nor are their father and mother. But this by no means makes them less convincing, for Thompson's purpose is to capture in all her characters something of the "Icelandic personality" – one that is tough, proud, resourceful, and courageous.

Barnhouse's book differs from Thompson's because the action of the novel is not as closely tied to particular historical events and virtually all her characters are fictional. That Tad's father is imprisoned by the French after the capture of St. John's by Pierre D'Iberville is the reason why Tad does not hear from his father and comes to believe him lost at sea. But it has very little to do with the central action of the story which dwells on lost silver and the problems of helping an indentured apprentice escape. Unlike Thompson, Barnhouse does not use any actual historic figures as characters in her novel.

This is not to say, however, that Barnhouse is not concerned, like Thompson, with creating a sense of historic versimilitude that goes beyond surface detail. Certainly what transpires in the *Golden Gannet* is related to actual historic circumstances. The conflict between the English and French is, for example, never far beneath the surface; the ketch carries different nameplates depending upon whether a French or English ship crosses its path. That the Reverend Morin is involved in illicit shipping is a reflection on the unfairness of English mercantile policy that limited who could fish, who could trade, and even who could live in Newfoundland.

In *Two for the Unknown Land* the most noticeable example of this kinc of historic reference is to Icelandic religious beliefs. Although Christianity was formally adopted in Iceland about the year 1000, there were many whc still preferred the old gods. The inevitable conflict between the old and the new is highly visible in Thompson's story. When Karlsefni's band is threatened with starvation during the first winter, he demands that each member pray to the Christian God; the old-line Thorvald insists, however, on appealing to Thor. And when a whale is washed ashore, Thorvald contends that it is because of his entreaties to the old Norse god of thunder.

These books also offer more than the sometimes dull continuity and quietude of real history; simply put, both writers recognize that the medicine of history goes down much more easily if it is sweetened with action and suspense. In this regard, thought, there seems to be too much action in *Two for the Unknown Land*, or at least too many isolated episodes which often remain undeveloped. At the beginning of the novel, for instance, much is made of Olaf's vision, and it is indeed a powerful scene. But it is virtually forgotten in the rest of the story.

Despite this disproportion, the work by no means falls apart, and it does have a solid structure that centers around the changes that take place in Olaf and Birgit over a two-year period. Olaf outgrows his lameness and becomes the son of whom his father can be proud. Birgit also grows, from the impetuous little girl who stows away on Karlsefni's boat, to a young women ready to accept the responsibility of marriage.

Like any good adventure-mystery story, the *Golden Gannet* is a tightly structured novel, as one incident follows naturally and quickly from a preceding one, leading to an inevitable climax, in this case a wild north Atlantic storm. Barnhouse also maintains the interest of her youthful readers by holding back details and gradually letting the mystery surrounding Tad's father unfold. Why does Tom Darby, for example, look "long and intently" at Tad when he comes on board, and how did the knife belonging to Tad's father get on the ship in the first place?

A particular strength of the two novels is the believability of their characters. Even though Thompson writes about heroes, she by no means paints a rosy picture of these adventurers of the high seas. She does not ignore their pettiness and shallowness, and uses Olaf and his sensitivity to the world to contrast with the shortcomings of his elders. It is Olaf who feels the injustice of killing the great white bear, and remarks that the Icelanders are really the invaders in a land which is not really theirs. Thompson depicts Olaf's father, Gunnar, as a violent man, prone to sudden rages, and Thompson does nothing to soften the callous duplicity of Freydis, as it is documented in the original saga. Also part of this realism is the close relationship between Olaf and Birgit. It is not only convincing for the way each child serves as the other's intimate, but also for the way the relationship changes as each child grows.

The characters of the *Golden Gannet* are not quite so real, and in contrast to those of *Two for the Unknown Land* they sometimes come close to being romantic stereotypes. Tad's uncle, lovingly called Skipper, is the old sea man given one last chance to prove that he is not finished, and Tom Darby, Bye Winter, and Leach are very much the typical pirates. There is also Joe Boy, the former slave, versed in "weird spells" and voodoo, and Johnny Bent Thumbs, "the savage redskin" who talks too much like something from an old Hollywood western. The strongest character in the novel, apart from Tad, is Angel Morin, the captain's daughter, who shares Tad's adventures and who, along with Tad, escapes the label stereotype. The reason for this is that Barnhouse spends more time developing Tad and Angel into characters with whom the reader can easily identify.

Neither *Two for the Unknown Land* nor *Quest for the Golden Gannet* is especially profound in the message it tells, but both novels do dwell on certain fundamental issues. Just because Olaf is lame is no reason why he cannot make a contribution to the voyage, and Thompson seems to tell her readers that brains rather than brawn may make a real hero. In the *Golden Gannet* we are told about love and commitment, courage and responsibility. Above all, we learn about the importance of hope, the one thing that keeps Tad going in the face of what seems the certain death of his father.

Historical fiction should never replace the reading of history itself, but both these books are still to be recommended for the way they capture the sense of their respective periods. Their greatest contribution, however, is that they make history come alive and reveal to young readers that history is not just dates and places but it is the experiences of people not unlike themselves.

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