

Winnipeg's Kid Sleuth Solves Another Case!

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Terror in Winnipeg, Eric Wilson. Illus. by Gavin Rowe. The Bodley Head/Clarke Irwin, 1979. 103 pp. \$8.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-370-30232-X.

Canada's elementary school detective is back! After apprehending a murderess while riding CP Rail between Winnipeg and Vancouver (*Murder on THE CANADIAN*, 1976) and breaking up a drug ring on Canada's west coast during his summer vacation (*Vancouver Nightmare*, 1978), Tom Austen is home in Winnipeg and involved with DEMON, a terrorist organization which ostensibly wants to stop industrial pollution in Manitoba but which actually desires to "smash *all* capitalists, and destroy the government" (p. 84).

As with Wilson's earlier works, the book's opening sentence is a "grabber" which immediately yanks the reader into the nonstop action. Though "a savage dog lunged at Tom" (p. 7), the reader will soon find that the danger is more illusory than real. By that point, however, so much of the chapter will have been read that most fifth and sixth graders will continue on until they encounter the chapter ending narrative hook which propels them into the next chapter. Before children realize it, the book's ten chapters will be finished, and it will be time to find the next Tom Austen mystery.

If some of the children who pick up another book are among those normally categorized as being non-readers, Wilson would likely be pleased. "While my books are published for all young people ages 10 to 14, they are written with one particular audience in mind: the reluctant reader."¹ Following a B.A. from U.B.C. in 1963, Wilson took teacher training. His first teaching position included a class that had no interest in reading, but the experience led him to the realization that "the way to make slow learners love to read is to give them an adventure mystery that they can't put down." Since the publication of *Murder on THE CANADIAN*, "Wilson has alternated between teaching and writing, earning enough money by teaching to finance a year or so travelling and researching another book."

That the fictional Tom Austen attends Winnipeg's Queenston school is no accident - Wilson was a student there for two years before his R.C.M.P. father was posted elsewhere. He says: "When I attended Queenston school

I was into the Hardy Boys, like all boys then. I felt it would be better if the hero was a Canadian, preferably the son of a famous Mountie who solved his father's cases for him. I promised myself that someday I'd invent such a hero." In the earlier Austen stories, Wilson, apparently not trusting his readers to make the connection between his main character and Frank and Joe, made numerous references to the series' heroes. Fortunately, in *Terror in Winnipeg* such references are dropped. Tom and the Hardy brothers each have a father who is involved in criminal investigation, but there the similarity between the two series ends. In none of the novels is Tom's age given. It appears that Wilson is true to the specifics of his novel's settings, and the real Queenston School contains kindergarten through grade six, a situation which would make Tom twelve at the most. While 18-year-old Frank and 17-year-old Joe flit about dashing on their motorcycles, poor preteen Tom is forced to use public transit, to beg rides from his teachers or to walk.

Terror in Winnipeg exhibits ingredients common to most mysteries written for early adolescents. As with all junior detectives, Tom's insatiable curiosity naturally leads him into life-threatening situations from which he must extricate himself. Because a detective needs an assistant through which he can reveal clues as he uncovers them, Tom is followed about by his fainthearted classmate, Dietmar Oban. Tom's relationship with Dietmar has undergone a transformation since 1976 when Dietmar was identified as "the most sarcastic kid in Queenston School" (p. 13) and "Tom's rival" (p. 8). Dietmar's barbed comments remain directed at Tom, but it appears the boys' shared adventures aboard *The Canadian* and in Vancouver's Skid Road have reduced the adversary portion of their relationship. As young sleuths must be able to work in conditions unfettered by parental constraints, Tom was away from home in the two earlier books. Now Tom is in Winnipeg, his father, a senior police official, is "out of town, teaching a course at a police college in the east" (p. 20). The whereabouts of Tom's mother remains unknown.

Plotwise, *Terror in Winnipeg* is the weakest of Wilson's Tom Austen stories, possibly because the motivation for the criminal activities is the most sophisticated. In the '76 and '78 books, murders were committed for such personal reasons as jealousy, revenge or financial gain. In the present work, DEMON is attempting to close the plants of Manitoba's wealthy industrialist, James Dorchester, because of the environmental damage created by his factories. Near the book's conclusion, however, it is suddenly revealed that DEMON's concern over ecology has just been a ruse and that the organization's planned assassination of Dorchester and of Manitoba's Premier Jaskiw is to be the signal for political revolution. How widespread the revolution is to be or whether it is to come from the right or the left of the political spectrum is unclear. While granting that DEMON is an exciting

name for a terrorist group and is laden with sinister connotations, in our acronym-glutted world the term demands explanation.

To put its plan for revolution into effect, DEMON first has to carry out its threat to kidnap Dorchester's daughter, Dianne. Unwittingly, Tom assists DEMON by trying to show Dianne, another of his schoolmates, that her father's electronic security system is not foolproof. During confusion caused by Tom's triggering an alarm, DEMON demolishes the gate just at the moment Tom and Dianne arrive at the estate's entrance, and the gang takes the two children captive. Tom later escapes from DEMON, but before he does, he overhears the name of the group's leader. Armed with the name Lee, a sexually ambiguous given name, and motivated by the knowledge that he was indirectly responsible for Dianne's being kidnapped, Tom spends the next four days uncovering Lee's identity and Dianne's whereabouts.

Since the identification of Lee is the key to the plot's resolution, Wilson must simultaneously hide the name's owner while providing clues to allow readers the opportunity to deduce the villain's identity. Unfortunately, the means of masking Lee is clumsily handled. DEMON's leader is one of Tom's teachers who has been feigning a romantic interest in another of Tom's teachers, Mr. Stone, in order to obtain information from him on the activities of his sister, Manitoba's Attorney General. Of course, if Ms. Ashmeade's first name should be prematurely mentioned, the plot would be brought to an abrupt halt. And so a credibility-stretching situation is created: Mr. Stone says, in response to Ms. Ashmeade's addressing him formally, "Please call me John" (p. 31); yet he never uses her given name. Further, Wilson later violates one of the rules of detection writing by withholding a clue from the reader.

Characterization is not strong in the Austen stories, but then this literary element is rarely a significant concern of the mystery genre. Solving the mystery or crime is the focus, and characters must assume roles, a situation which precludes their becoming flesh and blood individuals. Setting can contribute to suspense as well as add to a story's realism. As Wilson's titles indicate, he considers domestic locales to be just as suitable for crime as exotic lands. Each book contains a map which delineates where specific events occur and which would allow someone in the appropriate city to walk in Tom's shoes. Specific locations, such as Winnipeg's zoo and the Legislative Building, are described in adequate detail to be immediately familiar to the local reader. The concern expressed in *Terror in Winnipeg* over Cree Indians' contracting Minimata Disease from eating mercury-contaminated fish does have actual historical antecedents. During the seventies, commercial fishing was closed in a number of areas in northwestern Ontario and Manitoba because of industrial pollution.

The Tom Austen mysteries do not pretend to have social significance nor to be memorable literature. Mysteries offer children delight via the mental challenge of the criminal puzzle and excitement through vicarious experience and wish fulfillment. Each book provides practice in reading skills and contributes to the acquisition of the reading habit. Adults who decry the mystery's value should remember that such books contribute to producing the child who has not given up on reading and who may still be led by the concerned teacher or parent to the wider realm of children's literature.

NOTES

¹Marjorie Earl, "Adventure, Mystery Book Attracts Reluctant Readers", *The Tribune*, Wednesday, October 3, 1979, p. 22. All subsequent quotations from Eric Wilson are taken from this article.

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