

Danger in Space

RAYMOND H. THOMPSON

Nivek & Nala from Sirch, Marj Trim. Illus. by Ludo Schmidt-Fajlik. Hoot Productions, Box 1869, Victoria, B.C., 1976. 22 pp. \$8.50 cloth. ISBN 0-919994-01-6.

Space Station Alive, Evadna Chapman. Illus. Fountain Books, 2475 West 37th Avenue, Vancouver, B.C., 1978. 36 pp. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0-9690009-2-8.

Read All About It!, Clive Endersby. Illus. Methuen, 1981. 146 pp. \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-458-94530-7.

The Vandarian Incident, Martyn Godfrey. Scholastic-TAB Publications, 1981. 106 pp. \$1.75 paper. ISBN 0-590-71080-X.

Planet of the Warlord, Douglas Hill. Victor Gollancz, 1981. 128 pp. \$15.95 cloth. ISBN 0-575-03009-7.

Alien Worlds: Stories of Adventure on Other Planets, ed. Douglas Hill. William Heinemann, 1981. 122 pp. \$13.95 cloth. ISBN 434-94285-5.

Science fiction is not a literary form that has flourished in Canada. Moreover, as David Ketterer points out in "Canadian Science Fiction: A Survey" (*CCL*, 10 [1977-78], 18-23), many of the most active authors now reside abroad or are New Canadians. Nevertheless, the Canadian contribution, if small, is not without distinction, particularly the work of authors like Gordon R. Dickson, Phyllis Gotlieb, Spider Robinson, and A.E. van Vogt. Thus it is heartening to note the recent appearance of several books for younger readers which prove that Canadian science fiction remains a vigorous, if sometimes wayward, force.

The two illustrated books for young children, ages 4-8, are a disappointment. *Nivek and Nala from Sirch* is attractively printed on fine quality paper. Unfortunately the illustrations are of indifferent quality, largely because people's limbs are so ungainly, and the story of two young aliens' search for "charger" to refuel their flying saucer is disjointed and confusing, though it does serve as a comment upon the problems of communication. Evadna Chapman's *Space Station Five* recounts the visit of two eight-year-olds to a space station, and

despite some interesting ideas, such as “moss dancing” – bouncing on springy moss in low gravity – this story also rambles confusingly, while the illustrations seem crude and repetitive.

More encouraging is Clive Endersby’s *Read All About It!*, an exciting juvenile adventure story set in an imaginary Ontario town. Three eleven-year-olds foil the conspiracy of the evil Duneedin, oppressive ruler of another galaxy, to seize control of the earth by gaining possession of a rare mineral located beneath a public park. In the process the children learn some valuable lessons: the use of reason and deduction for problem-solving; the importance of determination, resourcefulness, and co-operation in overcoming fears and weakness; the need not to underestimate people. The book is based upon a T.V. Ontario programme, and it is illustrated with some photographs from the show. Unfortunately it also suffers from weaknesses typical of television science fiction: chapters tend to be episodic; unconvincing villains who threaten ominously but do little damage; adults who defer to children; a fondness for deserted buildings as settings; and improbable episodes that are obviously included for technical convenience or visual effect, such as the one involving a poet who is splashed with paint whenever she makes a mistake. This is not up to the standard of Dr Who, but despite gimmicks and a failure to tie all the elements together, it does succeed in generating suspense and interest, and it does suggest some useful lessons about life. Since the price is reasonable, it deserves a place in children’s libraries in Canada.

According to its publishers Martyn Godfrey’s *The Vandarian Incident* is aimed at readers in grades 5-8. It describes how two young space cadets thwart the plans of an aggressive race to wreck intergalactic peace talks. It is space adventure of a type that has remained popular since the early days of science fiction, and the fast-moving action and attention to detail help the reader to remain involved. Moreover, young people will readily identify with the narrative point of view, for the cadets must contend with adult scorn and condescension, not only because of their youth, but also because one of them is a human from Earth, a species new to the galactic scene and consequently of unproven capabilities. The cadets display both courage and initiative, yet one cannot but feel that their ultimate success depends too heavily upon luck. Moreover, the focus upon action results in the neglect of other aspects of the novel: the themes rarely rise above the general assertion that luck, courage, determination, and resourcefulness can defeat an enemy who allows his superiority to lead to over-confidence; and the lessons learned initiate too little in the way of character growth and self-discovery. This is regrettable since the potential for developing both character

and theme is strong, thanks largely to the presence of the second cadet, a girl of another humanoid species endowed with clairvoyant talents. Nevertheless, this is an exciting, if rather contrived, adventure story with sufficient hints of greater possibilities to deserve a recommendation to all younger readers and to libraries, and it is good value for \$1.75. This is a promising first novel by a young Canadian currently teaching in Alberta, and if he can manage to explore his subject in greater depth, his next novel will be worth looking for.

Planet of the Warlord tells a story in many ways similar to *The Vandarian Incident* for a slightly older group of readers. Douglas Hill, however, is no newcomer, for he has written and edited books on a wide range of subjects. Born in Manitoba and educated at the Universities of Saskatchewan and Toronto, he has resided in Britain since 1959 and is now literary editor of the weekly *Tribune*. He has just completed a series for adolescents entitled "The Last Legionary." The Last Legionary is Keill Randor, sole survivor of a martial race, and the earlier stages of his galactic quest to avenge the treacherous massacre of his planet's population, which culminates in this novel, is told in *Galactic Warlord* (1979), *Deathwing Over Veynaa* (1980) and *Day of the Starwind* (1981).

His enemies are powerful and cruel, but Keill is a warrior of such supreme skills that he has little real difficulty defeating them, especially with the aid of a winged alien telepath named Glr. Unfortunately, their innate superiority is so evident that it robs the story of much suspense. Although crisis succeeds crisis, the reader has as little doubt of the outcome as does the hero himself. It is ironic that Keill should attribute his adversaries' downfall to arrogance, overconfidence, and cruelty, for he is himself guilty of these very qualities. Convinced that his skills will preserve him from any trap, he invites capture in order to find his enemies and he is pitiless in accomplishing his revenge, even if it is justified. Nor does he seem any wiser for his experiences. This is an exciting adventure yarn, but it fails to consider its own implications. A more thoughtful examination of the military hero is conducted by another Canadian emigré, Gordon R. Dickson, in his books about the Dorsai (see my article in *CCL*, 15/16, [1980], 38-46). Hill's series is expensive, and although it is reprinted in the United States by Atheneum for \$8.95 (U.S.) even that is a high price for a short adventure novel, however readable. Libraries with generous budgets might be tempted, but most will wait for a less expensive paperback edition.

High cost may also hinder sales of *Alien Worlds*, a science fiction anthology edited by Hill. This is unfortunate since the seven stories are well chosen to illustrate the dangers of exploration in hostile

environments, and, as the editor points out in his thoughtful introduction, to demonstrate "that, whatever else mankind learns in his travels to alien worlds, he will surely learn a great deal about himself" (p. 3). Arthur C. Clark's "Summertime in Icarus" and Bob Shaw's "Gambler's Choice" admirably demonstrate the authors' mastery of suspense, as the human protagonists struggle to survive against unexpected danger, and learn a bleak lesson about their own vulnerability. Both Ray Bradbury's "The Million-Year Picnic" and the excerpt from C.S. Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet* suffer from being removed from a larger context, but they do build tension successfully, even though the former is not one of the author's best Martian stories. John Brunner's "Report on the Nature of the Lunar Surface" is a slight piece, but Robert Silverberg's "Collecting Team" is satisfyingly ironic and, like Carol Emshwiller's "Pelt," makes a chilling comment about mankind's short-sighted greed. This is a worthwhile anthology, and it will appeal to adults and adolescents who share an interest in space exploration. However, libraries with tight budgets might find one of the many paperback anthologies on the market to be better value.

If there is a common feature among these four books for older children, it is awareness of the dangers that await us in space – dangers, moreover, that we often bear with us. *Alien Worlds* offers the most sombre warning, but all present their protagonists with a formidable challenge. It is interesting to observe too that much of the threat comes from the environment itself. This is a thesis as popular in Canadian literature as it is in science fiction, and its attraction for Canadian science fiction writers is thus bound to prove powerful. In the face of difficulties, human ingenuity and determination can achieve much, but even with luck the margin of survival remains precariously thin. Despite the exciting action, these are essentially cautionary tales for a generation beset on all sides by perils more serious than they often realize. Welcome to the sobering 80's.

Raymond H. Thompson teaches medieval literature and fantasy/science fiction at Acadia University. His bibliography of Gordon R. Dickson will be published by G.K. Hall in spring 1983.