

Pour les plus petits, 3-5 ans, ils prendront plaisir à écouter l'histoire. On peut les aider à inventer avec la complicité des images. Par exemple, trouver un nom au chat, créer un menu pour la fête, imaginer une autre fin d'histoire... Il y a aussi des questions à répondre: Qui est Chantal? (p.17), qui est la maman de Madeleine?, comment se nomme le bébé? (p.5)... Le lecteur peut comme Madeleine se livrer à la rêverie, jouer avec son imagination. Tout est possible.

Madeleine rêve mais vit aussi la réalité. La réalité de tous les jours qui amènera la petite fille à échanger ses idées farfelues contre une surprise qui l'attend: "Quelle merveilleuse surprise! C'est encore plus beau que tout ce que j'avais imaginé avec Julien"...

Avec toute la portée des images, ce livre se lit bien. Les phrases sont courtes et faciles à comprendre. Cependant le texte nous laisse sur notre appétit car on ne sait pas tout. C'est pourquoi il faut jouer avec les images. Il y a beaucoup de couleurs, une foule de détails à observer et on peut même s'amuser avec un code secret. Il est avantageux de posséder la série Madeleine puisque certains éléments se complètent dans les albums. En voici les titres: "Le code secret", "Mon petit frère Bertrand" et "Trottinette et crème glacée". Ces trois albums ont été sélectionnés parmi les meilleurs ouvrages québécois pour enfants par Communication-Jeunesse.

Se procurer *Bonne fête Madeleine*, ce n'est pas seulement le lire mais aussi se donner du plaisir à le découvrir par les images et à explorer notre imagination. Et vous savez que les enfants n'en manquent pas!

Pour le mot de la fin, le thématique relatif à l'anniversaire des enfants qui sont nés un 29 février aurait intérêt à être exploité car ce thème se révèle intéressant. Il est très peu utilisé dans les livres pour enfants.

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## FORMULA AND FORCE IN MYSTERY STORIES

**Stone dead**, Marion Crook. Overlea House, 1987. 142 pp. \$3.95 paper. ISBN 0-7172-1615-2; **Payment in death**, Marion Crook. Overlea House, 1987. 172 pp. \$3.95 paper. ISBN 0-7172-1610-1; **Hidden gold mystery**, Marion Crook. Overlea House, 1987. 172 pp. \$14.95, \$3.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 0-7172-2267-5, 0-7172-1612-8; **Spies for dinner**, J. Robert Janes. Collins, 1984. 181 pp. \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 0-00-222840-8; **The mystery of Hemlock Ravine**, Dorothy Perkins. Lancelot Press, 1986. 92 pp. \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-88999-312-2; **Mystery lights and Blue Harbour**, Budge Wilson. Scholastic-TAB, 1987. 128 pp. \$3.50 paper. ISBN 0-59071389-2; **Mystery house**, Jean Booker. Overlea House, 1987. 144 pp. \$3.95 paper. ISBN 0-0-7172-2271-3; **Seven clues in**

**Pebble Creek**, Kathy Stinson. James Lorimer, 1987. 116 pp. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 1-55028-036-8; **The Loon Lake murders**, Robert Sutherland. Scholastic-TAB, 1987. 128 pp. \$3.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-71749-9; **Danger on the tracks**, Bill Freeman. James Lorimer, 1987. 129 pp. \$12.95, \$6.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 0-88862-873-0, 0-88862-872-2.

Some years ago, before the Canadian novel had attained its present deserved international reputation, John Robert Columbo wrote a satirical poem entitled "Recipe for a Canadian Novel" in which he humourously outlined the principal "ingredients" of Canadiana which, up to that time at least, seemed to be the *sine qua non* of the fledgling Canadian novel. Columbo's poem, in its own exaggerated way and through its recipe format, tried to suggest that the Canadian novel was enslaved to a thematic formula which included among other things such Canadian staple products as mountains, mounties, sunsets, maple trees, and that until the novel abandoned these crutches or at least used these ingredients in an original way, the Canadian novel would continue to be as predictable and unexciting as a batch of bran muffins baked according to a reliable recipe handed down from one generation to the next.

I must confess that I felt much the same as Columbo when as an undergraduate in an American and Canadian literature course (in those days there was no such thing as a separate course in Canadian literature), I struggled to find characteristics which would clearly distinguish the poems of Roberts, Carman and Lampman from each other. What a breath of fresh air it was for me when I discovered the poetry of E.J. Pratt and A.J.M. Smith after enduring the indistinguishable romantic effusions of the nineteenth-century Canadian poets!

On the basis of the majority of the novels under review here, I would hazard a generalization that the Canadian children's mystery story is, at the moment, very much at the same stage as the early Canadian novel or the nineteenth-century Canadian landscape poem. It is highly formulaic and sometimes, to its peril, follows a recipe that tends to make it boringly predictable.

It is, of course, perhaps unfair to indict the Canadian children's mystery story, since all mystery novels are more or less formulaic. But it is exactly the "more or less" that makes the crucial difference between a good story and one that slavishly follows the formula. John Le Carré, for example, managed to turn the hum-drum spy-mystery story into an engaging art form by carefully adapting the formula to his own imaginative vision, and, until it was done and then re-run to death, the television programme *Columbo* (no relation to John Robert) was a refreshing change from "normal" T.V. mystery fare.

In the novels under review, I can detect at least three common elements which, taken together, seem to serve as the fail-safe recipe for the mystery story. The first element is the rural setting of most of the stories and the pre-

dominance of Canada's coastal provinces as appropriate environments for mystery. Of the ten books under study, three (admittedly by the same author: Marion Crook's *Hidden gold mystery*; *Stone dead*; and *Payment in death*) are set in British Columbia, the former two in Cariboo country and the latter in Chilliwack. Budge Wilson's *Mystery lights at Blue Harbour* is set in rural Nova Scotia as is Dorothy Perkyns' *The mystery of the Hemlock Ravine*. Two novels are set in rural Ontario: J. Robert Janes' *Spies for dinner* is located on and around the Georgian Bay area (which hardly qualifies as rural these days, I fear), and Robert Sutherland's *The Loon Lake murders* is set in Algonquin Park. Two of the novels, *Seven clues in Pebble Creek* by Kathy Stinson and Jean Booker's *Mystery house* have no particular location specified, although references in the former to names such as Pebble Creek and Stony Road hint at a rural setting. One can, of course, speculate until the cows come home as to why the country serves as a more appropriate milieu than the city in these novels. Perhaps the country still holds more mysteries than the city, or perhaps country children are more intrepid explorers of wide-open spaces than their city counterparts. Indeed, two of the novels, *The mystery of the Hemlock Ravine*, but especially *Mystery lights at Blue Harbour*, get significant story mileage by playing with the relationship between country and city kids. In any case, for the writers of these mysteries, the rural world is reserved for children to test their sleuthing abilities. In fact, the hardships and greater criminal dangers of city life may lead some writers for children to conclude that the city is a more appropriate context for more experienced gum-shoes and grown-up professional sleuths.

A second characteristic found in many of these stories is the almost unbelievable omniscience of the children who end up solving the mysteries and the consequent shallowness of the character portrayal. Almost always the children in these stories are far too inquisitive for their own good and their mania for going the extra half-kilometre into the forest or beyond the ravine (one could, I'm certain, write an article on the presence of ravines in Canadian children's mystery stories) at times strains credibility. Most children I come

in contact with (be they country or city types) are afraid of the unknown and, additionally, have far more important personal problems on their minds to deal with. Their concerns are with the mysteries within themselves rather than the ones beyond the ravine. For the most part, the children in these mystery stories are a remarkably "together" bunch. And I fear that their togetherness and their passion for penetrating into the external unknown is an offence against verisimilitude born of the Canadian children's mystery story's reliance on the pastoral convention (which also, of course, helps to explain the pre-



sence of the rural setting in much of this writing). Only Marion Cook's female protagonist in her well-written Susan George mystery series (*Payment in death* and *Stone dead*) shows any recognition that there is some relationship between her growth as a human being and the dangerous situations in which she finds herself. Others charge blindly into situations and resolve them, but one regularly feels that one is skating over the surface of the human dimension for the sake of observing precocious little detectives who bring the same passion for discovery to a jig-saw puzzle as they do to the mysteries they inevitably solve.

### Mystery House

Jean Booker



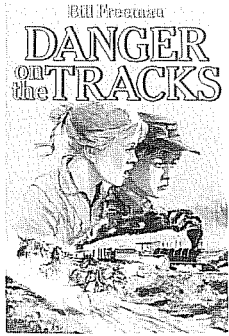
Jean Booker's protagonist in *Mystery house* also seems aware of the relationship between her own personal problems and the mystery in which she becomes entangled, but the issue is not so adroitly or subtly drawn as in Crook's novels. Finally, what I'm trying to suggest is that many of these novels are weak in realistic character portrayal, and it is the exception rather than the rule to find protagonists who have any real depth to their lives. The most extreme example of this can be found in Kathy Stinson's story *Seven clues in Pebble Creek*. Stinson's novel is a story without background or context, which is to say that it isn't really a novel at all but a series

of linear episodes held loosely together by two boys who discover written riddles and finally a solution to the riddles that the various clues suggest. The story is weak because we learn little about the inner lives of these children. Do they have a home life? Where do they live? What do their parents do for a living? How do they relate to the mystery of their inner worlds? None of these questions are really dealt with in this novel. However, near the novel's conclusion Stinson does introduce a touching spiritual element into the story when the two boys discover that the reward they are entitled to as a result of solving the riddles will be a new friendship with an old and lonely man, previously misunderstood and feared by the community.

Some might suggest that to ask children's authors to probe the depths of their characters' souls in an attempt to at least raise the question "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" is too much to expect from stories written for children. I disagree. It seems to me that children, no matter what their ages, are very interested in questions that have to do with the relationship between themselves and the world in which they find themselves. Without asking authors to become preachers or moralists (even Sir Philip Sidney was unconvincing when he tried to make too many moral claims for "poesy") I would suggest that children's writers try to find a meaningful balance between the world within their characters and the more visceral elements of the mystery story. And by saying this I do not mean to imply that Canadian writers of children's

literature need transform themselves into various manifestations of Judy Blume.

The final common ingredient in the Canadian childrens' mystery story is the virtual isolation of the hero from the parental and/or legal world of authority and worldly wisdom. Time and again the protagonists find themselves forced to rely on their own resources. This isolation is either physical, as in Robert Sutherland's *The Loon Lake murders*, where the two children, David and Sandy, are cut off from any police support by being alone – except for the villains – in Algonquin Park, or more devastatingly, psychological, as in *Mystery house* where Chris the young teenage girl is left to fend for herself in a family where her kind but misguided and preoccupied father and step-mother are too busy with their own careers to come to her assistance or listen to her. Even when she tries to make them aware of the deceit that surrounds them, these very efforts are met with disapprobation and lead to further isolation.



The virtual isolation of sleuthing children is pushed to absurd extremes in J.Robert Janes's novel *Spies for dinner*. Not only do the four children get little support from the few adults they know they can trust, they also find themselves surrounded by others whose actions are suspect. In this novel the reader is asked to believe that four children – two girls and two boys – can overcome the evils of one German, one Chinese, one Russian, "one tough guy from Ohio," plus three Japanese karate experts, and one female double agent, all in search of a laser's computer chip for the purposes of industrial espionage. And if this isn't enough isolation

and potential paranoia for one story, add to it that this league of nations action is set in a lodge near Georgian Bay and the whole novel loses whatever credibility it might otherwise have had. *Spies for dinner* is a traditional good-guys, bad-guys story based largely – as many of these types of stories were – on racial stereotypes. As such it is a rather unsubtle and stark story for children.

In drawing this review to a conclusion, I must pay special tribute to the best novel in this group of ten, namely Bill Freeman's *Danger on the tracks*. Freeman's novel stands above the others not because it ignores the elements in the formula that this review has touched upon, but rather because it uses these components in a far more creative and imaginative way than the other novels. Freeman's story is only partly fiction; it bases its plot in a real crisis involving the rivalry between the stage coach and the iron horse in nineteenth-century southwestern Ontario. The two young characters who find themselves in the middle of this conflict are a brother and sister who have left their home in Ottawa to find work so that their fatherless family back home might sur-

vive the devastating poverty of the period. Meg and Jamie Bains find work, one with the railroad and the other with the stage company. The conflict between stage and rail company, culminating in an action-packed race between the two forms of transport, is exciting enough in its own right because of Freeman's strong writing, his ability to re-create an historical setting, and his skill in highlighting the dramatic potential of a situation. But the conflict between rail and stage, neither of which is either villain or hero, finds itself represented in a finer tone within Jamie himself who is caught between his duty to his family and sister and the natural affection he feels for Will Ryan the head of the stage company. This is a novel which does not take the intelligence of its youthful readers for granted. As such it is a delight for both children and adults to read.

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## TEENAGER AND ROCK STAR

**Dear Bruce Springsteen**, Kevin Major. Doubleday Canada, 1987. 134 pp. \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-385-29584-7.

With the publication of his first novel, *Hold fast* (1978), Kevin Major won a number of awards, including The Canada Council Award and Book of the Year Award from the Association of Canadian Children's Librarians. Since then Major has published three more books, the latest of which fully lives up to his promising start. *Dear Bruce Springsteen* is a powerful and well-written novel with none of the whining overtones which so often emerge from the teen problem novel.

*Far from shore* (1980) and *Thirty-six exposures* (1984) are the two novels Major published before this latest. They are both well-written books but lack the convincing characterization and resulting power which marks both *Hold-fast* and *Dear Bruce Springsteen*. The explanation for this may be that with the two middle novels, Major did not use the first person narrative mode, choosing to use five different narrators (*Far from shore*) or third person narration (*Thirty-six exposures*). Neither allowed Major to fully develop the cen-