

## History as Story

*Mr. Dickens Hits Town*. Jan Mark. Illus. Regolo Ricci. Tundra, 1999. 64 pp. \$19.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-468-1. *Pier 21: Gateway of Hope*. Linda Granfield. Tundra, 2000. 48 pp. \$12.99 paper. ISBN 0-88776-517-3. *The Rebels*. Robert Livesey. Illus. A.G. Smith. Stoddart Kids, 2000. 96 pp. \$11.95 paper. ISBN 0-7737-6170-5.

The subjects of these books are as different as the formats and methods used to interpret each book's historical information. There is, however, a common element in all three: each author uses a storyteller's approach to shape and present the material. The human story of the past, of people's lives and times, is at the centre of each book.

Jan Mark's book is the only one that is pure historical fiction: except for a character list of "real" people and those that "might have been," she provides no further historical data. In her opening, Mark muses that Dickens's visit in 1842 to Montreal "must have been a memorable experience.... This is what might have happened. Quite a lot of it is true." She proceeds to recreate the time of Dickens's visit as it must have seemed to the British officers and their families stationed in Montreal. The book is a series of short episodic chapters with terse descriptive headers in the style of Dickens (e.g. "In which Mr. and Mrs. Dickens arrive in Montreal and Dorothy is not altogether impressed"). The main voice and viewpoint is that of Dorothy, daughter of Major Perry, whose family gets caught up in the excitement of the planning for and anticipation of the visit as well as the upheaval and revelations that the actual visit brings. The text is mostly dialogue, while numerous lush and colourful illustrations, many full-page sized, portray vignettes drawn from that text. Dickens himself is shown to be controlling and somewhat of a buffoon with a long-suffering wife.

But the historical value of the work lies in the images and scenes it draws that give the reader a glimpse into Montreal society — or, rather, that part of society inhabited by British military types garrisoned there "to protect the border" (16), since memories of rebellions and riots are still fresh. They and their families live in that "solitude" that relishes in all things English and that calls England "home." This sentiment is reflected in their excitement at meeting Dickens, since "each installment of his latest book is awaited like news from the battlefield as it crosses the ocean and journeys up the St. Lawrence" (14). It is a world in which Dorothy can feel proud of her father: "Papa is Major Perry" and this "counts for a good deal in society here" (12). She speculates that "it does seem that nothing ever happens in Montreal unless the military have a hand in it" (16). It is a world where young girls pass the time at embroidery and receive suitors at tea. Thus a single event is used to evoke a time period.

Linda Granfield uses her work on the evolution of Pier 21 to develop the image of that building as a symbol of welcome and homecoming for a different type of arrival, one that occurred numerous times many years after Dickens called on us. Essentially, the book is a photo journal documenting the movement of people — immigrants from many lands and returning soldiers of war — who passed through this port of entry from 1928 to 1971. But rather than ask the reader to merely look at these pictures, the author exhorts her readers to listen: "listen to our tired voices, hear our shuffling feet and murmured prayers...we have stories to tell...." These stories are told through their portraits and through some of the

artifacts of the period — from name ledgers and meal coupons to travel certificates and identification tags — with an emphasis on the faces and fates of people rather than the bricks and mortar of the location. The author selects and arranges the photographs in groupings that serve to highlight specific aspects of the varied groups that came to our shores, not only their customs, dress, and habits but also their experiences while in transit on boats and trains or while detained for processing at Pier 21. Short headings begin each section and provide a simple interpretative framework; they include such titles as “New faces bound for Canada,” “Tags, tots and trees,” “Voyages to safety,” and “Bears, dolls and trains.” Text beside each photograph provides a descriptive or explanatory narrative on the people or activity captured on film; for the most part, the photographs are personalized with actual names (Ausma Levalds, Michael Martchenko), nationalities (a Dutch boy in his wooden shoes), or the recounting of a specific memory. In a way appropriate for her audience, the author features children and their experiences to represent the more general immigrant story. Even when presenting returning soldiers of World War II, she does so through the memory of a young David Campbell who, by chance, found himself with his mother at the pier in the summer of 1945 and who, “like many others who crowded Pier 21 when troop ships came home...welcomed the men and women back to Canada as if they were members of their personal family.” By the time Granfield concludes that “Voices of the past and present mingle and echo...Pier 21 whispers stories,” she has managed to amplify those whispers.

The stories Robert Livesey tells are also about historical people who risked their lives for change. Their courage did not come solely from leaving their homeland but from questioning the status quo. His subjects are the rebels who “have upset, yet influenced, [Canada’s] development as a nation.” Those represented are mostly political rebels from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and from across Canada. They include the “usual suspects” such as Papineau, Mackenzie, and Riel as well as some lesser-known ones as Dumont, de Cosmos, and Big Bear. Grouping the subjects by geographical area and political cause provides cohesion to all the rebellious acts recounted and connects individuals to the historical context of each period. A final chapter introduces readers to some rebels whose courage and conviction outside the political realm allowed them to “defy social attitudes and conventions with their lifestyles”; they include Norman Bethune, Nellie McClung, as well as the surprising story of Dr. James Barry, a woman who passed herself off as a male doctor for many years. Livesey’s writing style is a type of colour commentary on the action and events being described; this is especially true in his re-creation of battle scenes. With short paragraphs, subheadings, and lively writing, this survey of Canada’s rebels is fast-paced and easy to read; the numerous pencil illustrations also contribute to the depiction of the people and their actions.

Granfield’s and Livesey’s books are definitely in the realm of nonfiction and have the usual features of such works. Granfield includes a section entitled “Pier 21 at a glance” that contains a timeline, statistics, and addresses for the Pier 21 Society. Livesey’s work includes maps and an index of names and events while also imparting an abundance of facts and figures. It also gets creative with the addition of instructions for five different activities geared to reinforce specific knowledge of the individuals examined (creating rebel trading cards) or general recreation of the symbols of rebellion and protest (creating a revolutionary banner). *Pier 21* lacks

depth in that, while evocative and sometimes derived from real memories, the text accompanying the photographs is often based on assumptions and projections by the author ("with the gentle touch of her hand, this young immigrant mother comforts her small son"). While it might be reflective of a lack of artifacts, there does seem to be a greater representation of British (war brides, home children) and other well-dressed immigrants than of the latter post-war economic refugees. The use of the term "DPs" with its derogatory connotations is also unfortunate. *The Rebels* provides very sketchy data on any given character and no true understanding of any rebel cause can be garnered from the text. The author's introduction is simplistic and overly dramatic: "a successful Canadian rebel is a person who achieves change through peaceful means, not bloodshed," while "some rebels...break the law, take control by force, or even kill" (1). Some characters are included but there is little or no development of their actions or role in the events of their time; the inclusion of and a quote from Florence Nightingale is questionable in a work on Canadian rebels. The need for tighter editing is also apparent in two casual references, on facing pages, to people being sent to a penal colony: one indicates it was in Australia, the other that it was in Van Diemen's Land. With these failings, these titles remain more of an interesting scrapbook or quick survey of the topic rather than interpretative historical or biographical works. As fiction, *Mr. Dickens Hits Town* has no such expectations.

In general, all three books are enjoyable reads that entertain and maintain the storyteller's voice in their presentations. For material aimed at those aged between eight and twelve, they each provide a good lens through which to filter the events, actions and experiences being recalled and could serve to introduce or to use as a related activity in a more in-depth study of their topics.

---

---

*Anna Chiota is Manager, Branch Services with the St. Catharines Public Library with over twenty years experience in children's services and with an MA in History.*

### Shakespeare For Kids

*All the World's a Stage: William Shakespeare, A Pop-up Biography.* Michael Bender. Raincoast, 1999. Unpag. \$24.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55192-271-1. *Hamlet For Kids.* Lois Burdett. Firefly, 2000. 64 pp. \$19.95 cloth, \$8.95 paper. ISBN 1-55209-522-3, 1-55209-530-4.

Introducing children to Shakespeare so that they can learn to love the works of the Bard in spite of the complexities of his language and the passage of 400 years can be difficult. Michael Bender's *All the World's a Stage: William Shakespeare, A Pop-up Biography* attempts to make Shakespeare's historical context accessible to a young audience. Following fresh on the heels of the Academy Award-winning pseudo-biographical film *Shakespeare in Love*, Bender's text presents a glimpse into the Bard's life that is more suitable to children than the nudity-filled mainstream movie. *All the World's a Stage* provides a good overview of Shakespeare's life and the context of his times including descriptions of Stratford-upon-Avon, London, the life of the