

Rosie in New York City: Gotcha! Carol Matas. Key Porter, 2003. 127 pp. \$12.95 paper. ISBN 1-55263-185-0.

The Perilous Year. Connie Brummel Crook. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2003. 197 pp. \$9.95 paper. ISBN 1-55041-818-1.

A Dirty Deed. Ted Stenhouse. Kids Can, 2003. 186 pp. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 1-55337-361-8.

Rachel, Book Three: Certificate of Freedom. Our Canadian Girl. Lynne Kositsky. Penguin Canada, 2003. 76 pp. \$8.99 paper. ISBN 0-14-301462-5.

Emily, Book Three: Building Bridges. Our Canadian Girl. Julie Lawson. Penguin Canada, 2003. 111 pp. \$8.99 paper. ISBN 0-14-301461-7.

Lesia's Dream. Laura Langston. HarperTrophy Canada, 2003. 209 pp. \$15.99 paper. ISBN 0-00-639283-0.

Penelope, Book Three: An Irish Penny. Our Canadian Girl. Sharon E. McKay. Penguin Canada, 2003. 107 pp. \$8.99 paper. ISBN 0-14-301464-1.

Flames of the Tiger. John Wilson. Kids Can, 2003. 176 pp. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 1-55337-619-6.

The Thought of High Windows. Lynne Kositsky. Kids Can, 2004. 175 pp. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 1-55337-622-6.

Boy O'Boy. Brian Doyle. Groundwood, 2003. 161 pp. \$12.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-590-3.

When I was in high school in the 1970s, my English teacher taught us that there were only three possible themes in literature: man vs. man, man vs. nature, and man vs. himself (non-sexist language had not yet reached that corner of rural Ontario). All are present in these new offerings in historical fiction, but the unifying theme is one that my teacher never told us about: girl/boy vs. injustice. Fortunately, as my high school history teacher always reminded us, all history is the history of injustice, so there is no end of possibilities available to authors.

The pitfall, of course, lies in oversimplifying such a story by making every character a caricature, painting every conflict boldly in black and white, and offering an easy resolution to complicated issues. In such a rendering, injustice ceases to be more than a minor inconvenience, easily trumped by a spunky kid. A prime example of this occurs in Carol Matas's *Rosie in New York City: Gotcha!*, in which Rosie takes her ailing mother's job and as part of the bargain takes up her fight for better treatment for workers in the New York clothing trade in 1910. Rosie is an appealing character who combines genuine *chutzpah* with a typical kid's puzzlement at why injustices exist in the first place. However, the book's resolution is a little too pat. Of course Rosie and her fellow workers are successful in getting a

better deal for the sweatshop labourers, and of course her father's chain of nickelodeons, into which he poured all of their life savings on a whim, turns out to be a huge success — it's all so easy that nothing seems to have been much of a struggle at all.

Connie Brummel Crook falls into the same trap in *The Perilous Year*, the sequel to her earlier novel *The Hungry Year* (2001). This time, Alex and Ryan have to cope with their father's remarriage and their beloved sister's marriage (both of which they regard as terrible injustices, as only twelve-year-old boys could), even as conflict between the two brothers flares up. But the main action, set in late-eighteenth-century Prince Edward County in eastern Ontario, involves a band of lake pirates and a cache of stolen gold. It's a fun adventure tale in the Boy's Own Stories mould, but again, the conclusion is entirely too neat. Naturally, one of the thieves turns out to be noble, decent, and articulate enough to sway his partner-in-crime. In short, Alex and Ryan happen to meet probably the only pirates who can be convinced by pre-teen boys that they should give up their ill-gotten gold and go on the straight and narrow.

But a good old adventure story that revolves around injustice doesn't have to be so conventional. At first read, Ted Stenhouse's *A Dirty Deed* resembles a Hardy Boys mystery. What is old Mr. Howe covering up? Why does he want that deed back so much? Who lives in the secluded shack in the woods? But if the plot could come straight from Franklin W. Dixon, the book is very much more. Instead of Frank, Joe, and their affluent parents, whose fatherly advice and motherly cookies remain always available, we have Will and Arthur, who live in grinding poverty in a small prairie village shortly after the Second World War. They have their poverty in common but one thing divides them: Arthur is Native and Will is white. They're kindred spirits at heart, but both display flashes of racism, suggesting that even kindred spirits can have difficulty overcoming prejudice. It is a difficult story — we see the deep antipathy of the landowner Howe, who has almost as much contempt for the poor whites as he does for the Natives. And while Will and Arthur solve their own mystery and bring an end to one small piece of injustice, it's clear that very little will change for them. Will does what he can to fix his own family's past and the past of the Howes, but he can never solve the bigger problems of intolerance and injustice that grip his town.

Stenhouse avoids the improbable happy ending that Matas and Crook fall into, something that also rescues Lynne Kositsky's rather flaccid *Certificate of Freedom*, the third Rachel book in the *Our Canadian Girl* series, which picks up Rachel's story after her family has been hounded out of their newly-built house in post-American Revolution Nova Scotia. Confident that they can turn things around as a family, Rachel and her mother are instead kidnapped by a rogue soldier who sells them as slaves after stealing their certificates. The boorish Mr. Pritchard and the dastardly Sarjeant Gyssop are drawn broadly enough to be caricatures (Gyssop, who leers unpleasantly on the book's cover, really should be twirling his moustache evilly every time he appears), and even Eliza Pritchard, Rachel's new mistress, is a bit of a stock character — the God-fearing and doomed slaveholder who grants Rachel her freedom as a deathbed wish (although she isn't quite virtuous enough to free Rachel any sooner than that). However, the book's conclusion, even admitting that it is clearly intended to keep the reader on the hook for another volume, avoids an easy resolution. Rachel is freed from the Pritchard household and escapes her own injustice, but her mother is still enslaved, having been sold to someone else in the

area. Rachel's struggle for justice, then, will continue.

Julie Lawson's *Building Bridges* (also part of the *Our Canadian Girl* series) and Laura Langston's *Lesia's Dream* offer similarly ambiguous conclusions. Both deal with the immigrant experience, and in each book the injustice is the same kind of racism that Rachel faced in Kositsky's *Certificate of Freedom*. Lawson's Emily befriends Mei Yuk, the daughter of her family's beloved cook, only to realize that not everyone in her circle is enthusiastic about welcoming Asians into late-nineteenth-century Victoria, British Columbia. Emily's attempt to include Mei Yuk in her life even alienates her best friend, Alice, whose parents cannot abide by the people they believe are poisoning their city. *Lesia's Dream* takes up the theme in a more sophisticated and nuanced way. Lesia and her family flee oppression and prejudice in the Ukraine for a better life in Canada, only to find that escape is not so simple as moving from one country to another. They have the misfortune to arrive on the prairies shortly before the First World War, which raised nativist suspicions of anyone who might be connected in any way to an enemy state. Lesia and her family, because they are Eastern Europeans, are immediately suspect, and the book certainly has its fair share of objectionable Anglo-Canadians who make life miserable for the family. But Langston avoids this easy stereotyping — two of the more odious characters are the horrid Millie, another immigrant who believes herself to be vastly superior to Lesia because her family has been in Canada longer, and Wasył, an itinerant Ukrainian labourer who is just a little too smooth and oily and who is apparently out to gain advantage from the misfortunes of others. Clearly, white Canadians did not hold a monopoly on intolerance.

In a perfect world, Emily's determination would be enough to overcome the racism of Victoria, and Lesia's work ethic would convince all of her neighbours to treat Ukrainians as human beings, but both authors are true to the period. There is no epiphany in which Alice admits the error of her ways and Mei Yuk is welcomed by the other schoolchildren. Instead, there is only Emily's reluctant admission that this kind of injustice will be much more difficult to beat than she imagined, and that holding to her principles might even make life miserable for her. By the same token, Lesia's fortitude is severely tested by her experiences, and she comes within a hair's-breadth of chucking everything and going back to the Ukraine. Even though Langston's clever framing story suggests that everything works out for the best in the end, Lesia realizes that prejudice will be a constant companion when she decides to stay.

Sharon E. McKay's *An Irish Penny*, the latest *Our Canadian Girl* volume focusing on Penelope, puts a milder kind of prejudice into a different context during the First World War. Penny, shipped off to live with her grandmother after the Halifax explosion of 1917, discovers that it's not easy being Irish. She faces taunts and teasing rather than the threats of imprisonment and dispossession that plagued Lesia's family, and she is in some ways a counterpoint to the dreadful Millie, who is only too happy to cast off her ethnicity to fit into English Canada. Penny, on the other hand, refuses to bow to the injustice of prejudice and learns to celebrate her heritage rather than be ashamed of it. As Lesia and Penny discover, war generates the kind of heightened emotions that provide a fertile garden for prejudice to grow. This was as true in the First World War as it was in the Second, which provides the backdrop to three novels, all with very different settings. In *Flames of the Tiger*, John Wilson adopts a very effective narrative tool: Dieter, a German teenager trying to escape the collapse of Nazi Germany, tells his life story to a badly wounded Cana-

dian soldier he comes across on the battlefield. Since Dieter's dream has long been to escape to Canada and build a new life with his sister there, he keeps talking in the hopes that the conversation will keep the soldier alive long enough to help the siblings get to Canada. In these snatches of autobiography, Dieter reveals a family that has been rent in more ways than one by the National Socialist revolution. His brother Reinhard becomes a diehard Nazi, much to the chagrin of their father, a German of the old school who regards the dictatorship of Adolf Hitler as a kind of bad dream. The family slowly slides into poverty because his father is constantly passed over for promotion, probably because he makes little secret of his lack of enthusiasm for Nazism. All of these details ring true, although the escape of Dieter and his sister from Berlin is a bit far-fetched; Wilson has them travelling hundreds of miles across wartime Germany, out of the Russian zone and into the Canadian zone, where they could meet up with the Canadian troops. There is also a (perhaps unintended) irony in the story. Given Dieter's determination to escape to Canada, it is ironic that Wilson has him being forced to serve with the twelfth SS Panzer Division, a unit which is known, more than anything else, for murdering Canadian prisoners of war in the Normandy campaign.

If *Certificate of Freedom* revealed Lynne Kositsky on autopilot, her later novel *The Thought of High Windows* shows the full range of her talents. Again we have a teenager battling injustice, but there are no concessions to the reader's tender feelings. This is a difficult and often depressing story, but one that is ultimately rewarding. Esther is a Jewish teenager who must deal not only with the persecution of the Nazi state but with her total lack of self-esteem. She sees herself as too fat, too frumpy, badly dressed, unattractive, and stupid, and some of her fellow Jewish refugees are all too willing to confirm her low opinion of herself. But beneath Esther's self-loathing, Kositsky shows us something more — a girl with remarkable fortitude and, if not a strong will to live, a strong determination that her light will not be put out until she's good and ready. The story is uncompromising, and Kositsky never flinches from the demands of her subject matter. Everyone who means anything to Esther is wrenched away, yet she survives. What is ultimately compelling is not that she is willing to continue resisting the Nazis but that she is able to continue living at all.

Esther shares some similarities with Martin O'Boy, the protagonist in Brian Doyle's novel *Boy O'Boy*, set in Ottawa at the end of World War II. Like Esther, Martin finds himself in depressing circumstances: his parents fight constantly, the family is mired in poverty, and his gran, apparently the only positive influence in his life, dies at the beginning of the novel. If Esther dreams of escaping through high windows, Martin dreams of escaping into someone else's life, of going home to a different house and a different family where he could be happy. But in a book that is every bit as challenging as Kositsky's, Martin instead finds one of the worst kinds of injustices: the horrors of sexual abuse at the hands of a church organist. For Martin, deliverance comes not from high windows but from his boyhood hero Buz Sawyer, a neighbour who went away to join the air force. In a conclusion that is emotionally satisfying for the reader but a little disappointing for the reviewer, Martin spills his secret to Buz at a homecoming celebration at the railway station, and Buz and a couple of burly sailors dispense some rough justice to the abuser. Not only that, but Martin comes out of the experience with two 50-dollar bills, courtesy of an eccentric millionaire who passes out cash to celebrate the end of the war. It's all a little too easy — would that all cases of sexual abuse and poverty could

have such a simple and satisfying resolution. Still, there is no denying the power of Doyle's story. His Martin O'Boy is a poignant character, someone who just wants life to be a little more pleasant and can't quite understand why it cannot be.

Ultimately, this is the strength of the best of these books. Injustice is as mystifying to its victims as it is self-evident to its perpetrators. Will and Arthur, Lesia, Esther, Martin O'Boy – they experience injustice firsthand but find it difficult to understand why they are on the receiving end of it. What is it about them that makes them so deserving of the abuses they suffer? To their credit, Stenhouse, Langston, Kositsky, and Doyle know that history provides countless questions like this but few easy answers.

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