

Spencer has done a remarkable job of characterization, particularly with Treat, making the problems of space technology and travel accessible and fascinating even to reluctant readers of science fiction. Treat's character has a certain toughness, a resilience that rings true. She also has a finely-tuned intellectual and emotional awareness of people and aliens. Rafe's character and emotions are guarded, due to his witnessing the death of his parents by aliens in an earlier space travel trip. A satisfying conclusion follows Rafe's acceptance of Treat's friendship, and his agreement to listen to Treat's plan to return to the planet later in an attempt to establish communication with the intelligent aliens.

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THE CONVENTIONS OF THE TIME-SLIP NOVEL

The Painted Hallway. Nancy-Lou Patterson. The Porcupine's Quill, 1992. 205 pp., \$12.95 paper. ISBN 0-88984-142-X

Although the interest of time-slip novels lies in the confrontation between present and past (or future), like many of the best children's books they frequently rely on well-worn conventions to engage the young reader: The child protagonist is cut loose from parents (sent to spend a summer holiday with an aunt or uncle, exiled to boarding school). Soon, new friends are made and the adventure begins.

Nancy-Lou Patterson's *The Painted Hallway* employs the first of these conventions; to its detriment, it modifies the second. When her parents go off for a summer research trip in Europe, Jennifer Scott moves in with her great-grandmother Margaret Laura Melville Grant (her "Grandnan") at Thistle Manor, the family's lovely ancestral home in Thistleton, Ontario. Her new companions, though, are not children, but older women: Mary Douglas the housekeeper, Mina Dassel the town librarian, Ellen MacLean the clergywoman, and the family doctor. Despite the author's obvious intention to provide models of strong female characters, the reader may find this largely undifferentiated group rather dull company for a young girl setting out to unravel the mystery that plagues her: Who painted the exquisite murals on Thistle Manor's hallway:

At each arched opening, so cunningly painted that the stonework almost seemed real, she stopped and looked into the painted distance.

Here a wide sea stretched beyond a charming port town, where sailing ships passed to and fro, their white sails filled with wind. . .

And here a forest of large dark trees opened upon a sunny glade, . . . (30)

Whether the young reader will be as gripped by this mystery as Jennifer is is doubtful; it presents a puzzle, not an adventure. Unlike Abigail in Ruth Park's *Playing Beatie Bow*, Jennifer is not trapped in the past, nor does she befriend children from long ago, as Tolly does in Lucy Boston's *The Children of Green*

Knowe.

And her new-found friend Mina Dassel is less fun than Tolly's Alexander and Linnet. An aficionado of herbal teas (hardly a grabber for a young reader), Mina helps Jennifer interpret her nocturnal visions: the violin music summoning her to the painted hallway; the pretty young girl holding a slim book; the menacing, heavily-cloaked figure looming in the doorway.

If there is surprisingly little excitement as Jennifer matches these visions with a gradually revealed series of clues—a handkerchief embroidered with a “J,” a bundle of yellowed letters—it is because Jennifer never really moves *into* the past: she *sees* the young girl and she *learns about* her great-great grandmother Abigail's unhappy early years in Canada and some less-than-respectable family history.

A retired professor of fine arts, Patterson excels at descriptions—of buildings, landscapes, and people:

Her hair, finely tendrilled and delicate as golden wire, clung about her alabaster cheeks, where only the faintest pink blush burned like a white rose close to the stem. (69-70)

Unfortunately, nothing and no one is left undescribed. Dr. Farquhar is a “*severe-faced* woman with grey hair pulled back in a bun and a pair of *gold-rimmed* pince-nez perched in front of the *sharpest violet-coloured* eyes Jennifer had ever seen.” She speaks in a “*brisk, business-like* way” while the room is filled with a “*warm, leafy* light” (49). By the time we have gotten to the “*red-carpeted* staircase,” Grandnan's “*thin, transparent* face” and “*warm, sharpeyed* presence,” all on the same page, we are adjectived out.

Loving descriptions of architectural details (terms like “dado” and “belvedere” dot the text) and terms like “scullery” betray the author's nostalgia for a British-tinctured past. The result is a book that doesn't ring true to its contemporary, Southern Ontario setting. How many thirteen-year-olds call their moms “Mother,” (except in tones of adolescent pique, which the well-bred Jennifer Scott never displays)? Why is Mary Douglas folding a huge stack of lavender-scented white linen sheets for a household of two older women? When was the last time you heard a late-twentieth-century woman use a locution like “Come along into the house, child, and I'll make you some tea?”

If a strong plot often glues kids to a novel, it is not indispensable. Like *The Painted Hallway*, Lucy Boston's *The Children of Green Knowe* is almost plotless. But Boston builds a strong cast of characters: Tolly's vibrant great-grandmother, Boggin the irascible handyman, the playful ghosts of the children from long ago. And the magical atmosphere of Green Noah flows effortlessly from Boston's pen. This is what Nancy-Lou Patterson wants to happen in *The Painted Hallway*. It is her all-too-obvious efforts that weigh the tale down in descriptive detail, without a good story or strong characters to redeem it.

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