A Mixed Brew: Eleven Recent Canadian Adventure Tales

—Jean Stringam

Bell, Joanne. *Breaking Trail*. Toronto: Groundwood, 2005. 160 pp. $9.95 pb. ISBN 0-88899-662-4.

Butts, Ed. *She Dared*. Illus. Heather Collins. Toronto: Tundra, 2005. 121 pp. $12.99 pb. ISBN 0-8876-718-4.

Haynes, Dianne. *Flight or Fight*. North Vancouver: Walrus, 2005. 160 pp. $8.95 pb. ISBN 1-55285-658-5.

Lunn, John. *The Aquanauts*. Toronto: Tundra, 2005. 222 pp. $12.99 pb. ISBN 0-88776-727-3.

Nordin, Sofia. *In the Wild*. Trans. Maria Lundin. Toronto: Groundwood, 2005. 128 pp. $18.95 pb. ISBN 0-88899-663-2.

Razzell, Mary. *Runaway at Sea*. Madeira Park, BC: Harbour, 2005. 152 pp. $9.95 pb. ISBN 1-55017-327-8.

Taylor, Cora. *Adventure in Istanbul*. The Spy Who Wasn't There 1. Regina: Coteau, 2005. 176 pp. $8.95 pb. ISBN 1-55050-315-4.

Tullson, Diane. *Red Sea*. Victoria: Orca, 2005. 176 pp. $9.95 pb. ISBN 1-55143-331-1.

Withers, Pam. *Adrenalin Ride*. Take it to the Extreme 3. North Vancouver: Walrus, 2004. 176 pp. $8.95 pb. ISBN 1-55285-604-6.

---. *Camp Wild*. North Vancouver: Walrus, 2004. 112 pp. $9.95 pb. ISBN 1-55143-361-3.

---. *Surf Zone*. Take it to the Extreme 5. North Vancouver: Walrus, 2005. 160 pp. $8.95 pb. ISBN 1-55285-718-2.

This analysis of eleven recently published Canadian adventure books is heavily influenced by a recent teaching assignment from my university. I have just returned from a two-year stint (fall 2004 to spring 2006) as Exchange Professor at a large Chinese university in the heavily populated north-east coastal province of Shandong. During spring term, before my return to North America, I began to consider the novel selections I needed to make for the children's literature and young adult literature classes I would be teaching stateside come fall semester. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that my views had changed in fundamental ways due to my international teaching experiences. I couldn't think of a single book I wanted to approach in the same way as before I left. In fact, I felt so driven to look at my culture's fiction through the lens of my newly acquired perspectives that I resolved on a no-compromise solution: an entirely new slate of books for both courses. In addition, I wanted to work exclusively with novels published within the last three years, despite the huge workload preparing to teach eighteen new novels would create, especially since little critical material was likely to have been published yet for any of them.

The biggest hurdle in making the novel selections arose because China does not have access to contemporary western texts. The course in YA literature that I had developed and taught while in China was fuelled by class sets of novels I brought over as a gift from my university. Fiction and criticism published in the West after about 1950 are simply not available in bookstores. English Majors in China know American Literature through Hemingway and Faulkner, but they rely on Hollywood movies (with their aberrations of cultural perspective) for an understanding of modern western culture. (My students would frequently ask me, "Is this what American kids really do?" and I'd usually have to answer, "Not usually" or "I hope not!") In addition to the lack of availability of Western YA and children's texts in China, due to time constraints, it wasn't practical for me to ask friends in the US to gather the books and ship them to me to pre-read. The upshot of this impasse was that I had to rely on critical reviews published on the Internet to make my class orders.

The two university semesters in China divide the year equally in half, so on returning home, I had a rather brief window of time to prepare for the fall semester. Part of the mandate of these particular courses is to train future teachers at both the elementary and high-school levels to recognize the quality of the material they are reading. I don't assume that "classics" and their look-alikes are the best diet for the classroom; instead, I strongly encourage these future teachers to develop the

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ability to analyze what the marketplace has to offer. Despite the flexibility of this approach, I felt alarmed when quite a number of the novels I had chosen turned out to be of marginal quality. My tactic to help "save" the course was to set up an analysis of the areas of the reviewers' silences. The students' comments were astute and learning occurred, but it may be a long while before I want to fly by the seat of my pants like that again.

What information did I wish the reviewers had given me? Briefly, I wanted to know if the plot was original and the characterization fresh. Does the author use language both imaginatively and with precision? Are there scenes with sexual or violent content, and to what purpose are they included? Is the author able to juxtapose cultural and social issues within an ethical framework? If the list sounds like pretty standard fare, let me mention how infrequently these four issues were addressed. Most reviewers followed the advice of Thumper's mother (from *Bambi*): after the ubiquitous plot summaries, when I expected the critical material to follow, the reviewers either said something nice or didn't say anything at all.

One might assume that the eleven books in this selection of recent Canadian adventure fiction written for children and youth, ages approximately nine to sixteen, would have many similarities. To examine this assumption, I will use a description of adventure tales in which critic Martin Green identifies the range of action and characterization in the adventure tale to be

> . . . a series of events, partly but not wholly accidental, in places far from home—most often also from civilization—which constitute a challenge to the person they happen to. In the adventure tale, that person responds to that challenge with a series of exploits which make him/her a hero/heroine, that is, eminent in such virtues as courage, fortitude, cunning, strength, leadership, and persistence. (1)

Another description I value is by critic and

historian, Dennis Butts, who observes that the range of action found in adventure tales comprises a blend of the probable and the extraordinary which, in itself, is likely the most important feature of the adventure form. For example, most young heroes are born of respectable parents, never wealthy, but sometimes poor because of misfortune or an injustice done by a wicked person. Similarly, "The young hero's main characteristic is usually his sheer normality; he is neither particularly clever nor stupid, but has plenty of spirit and common sense" (Butts 70).

Perspectives on the nature of an adventure tale vary from the exotic to the ordinary, from the noble to the common. The characterizations in the eleven books in this collection tend to follow Butts' view of normalcy, but exhibit significant diversity in format. They range from science fiction, non-fiction, and an animal tale to historical fiction, contemporary sports-adventure fiction, and international mystery.

The Aquanauts by John Lunn is futuristic science fiction involving four teens—two girls, age sixteen and seventeen, and two brothers, age ten and seventeen, whose ages suggest a high-school readership. I question Tundra's judgment in marketing the novel to children age eleven to fourteen. It seems to me that the sexual innuendo used by seventeen-year-old Jules as part of her tough-girl image is definitely too raw for a middle-school child. In trying to establish her own primacy, Jules demeans the seventeen-year-old male, Marco, who has asserted his own right to respect as a chess player: "Jules practically fell over laughing. 'You stud! Ooooh, take me now. You discovered the secret about what makes girls lose it'" (50). Later, as the four are on the verge of forming the human bonds necessary for individual survival, naming themselves as a club, Jules takes another crack at Marco: "'Chess, cryptology. Slow down, boy, you're getting me hot again,' Jules teased" (72). That kind of teasing is best left for high school.

Another reason I find the age-range inaccurate is that the dilemma the teen characters face is based on some fairly sophisticated scientific concepts surrounding the space-time continuum. Their task is to save Greta's father from a group of evil X-lab scientists by physically accessing various layers of time and then being able to recognize and travel between these layers. The concept is highly engaging and the author handles the scientific aspects well.

Throughout my reading of the novel, I suspected that Lunn felt either a self-imposed or a publisher-imposed constraint on the length of his manuscript. Of all the fictional subgenres, science fiction and fantasy are well-known to take

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the longest to introduce because the alternate reality and the concepts of advanced science have to be carefully set up for the reader. Two recent examples come to mind: a particularly successful futuristic sci-fi novel and a 2004 Newbery Honor Book, *The House of the Scorpion* by Nancy Farmer was approved by Atheneum for publication at 380 pages; and the 2006 Newbery Honor Book, *Princess Academy*, a fantasy by Shannon Hale, was allowed 314 pages by Bloomsbury Children's Books. Either Tundra or Lunn himself should have believed in the story enough to demand the space necessary—more than 221 pages—for first-class development. I wanted more.

The short length impacted nearly every aspect of the book. The psychological issues involving the butch girl, the Goth girl, the computer Geek, and his game-boy playing brother make for successful characterization, but the motivations of the adults were not developed enough to go beyond stereotype. The X-lab scientists and Dr. Simms, the director, were such stock villains that it was hard to believe the whole evil-scientist bit. Their characterizations needed some kind of build or explanation, some foreshadowing of their craziness. As they are portrayed, why would Greta's father, Dr. Kovachi, associate willingly with such a maniacal group? Why couldn't he see any hints of their true characters, as the teenage children and the reader certainly can?

The father-daughter relationship of the Kovachis is another strand that has either been neglected or truncated. Dr. Kovachi ages so much when he is captured by the mad X-lab scientists that he can't go back to earth-time with Greta. He will die, along with the villains. There is a certain amount of "Oh, now we can love and understand each other" stuff when she successfully moves back and forth through the layers of time to find him and attempt his rescue, but there's not a second of regret as they approach his death. The daughter shows no remorse and only the briefest acknowledgment of her father's fate. After all, how will Greta live and support herself without a father?

Another bit of evidence to prove the book's length and development has been sabotaged (assuming that the author would never truncate a story in this way, but that a publisher would) is the unsatisfying ending. Much is made of a piece of Greta's Goth jewellery she had given to Nicky as a token of her intent to return, which up until the ending had not been a significant element in the book. Also, teen readers will be sad to discover that the rather delicately handled romance between Marco and Greta, which has been developing throughout all layers of time, comes to nothing. Goth Girl Greta will not be going to the senior prom with Marco, who is no longer a geek in her eyes, because her time-travel has aged her to thirty-something, complete with grey hair and a few wrinkles. This anti-climax occurs after the reader has struggled through life and death issues and unimaginable layers of time, observing the protagonist's real progress in understanding herself and making positive changes. Pity. I'm going to hope for a new, expanded edition to come out soon. Until then, I still like the story enough to recommend the book as a good read for my older teenage friends.

The biographical material surrounding twelve historic (1540–1945) Canadian women heroes and anti-heroes in *She Dared* by Ed Butts fits very closely with the patterns of plotting and characterization in fictional adventure tales described by the critics quoted above. The author tends to open each tale *in media res*, locating the heroine/villainess at a point of conflict and then capturing her essence through flashback and the denouement.

Butts's writing is graceful, and his ability as an historical researcher gives credence to the plots, making this volume an excellent collection. A traditional rule of thumb for choosing a book for a particular young reader, however, is to match the age of the reader to that of the protagonist, with flexibility given to a protagonist who is a few years older than the reader, but almost never younger. The content of *She Dared* seems to defy the publisher's target age of ten to fourteen, because the subjects are all mature women. Surely the suggested reader age should include high school students at the least.

The "Further Reading" section at the end is certainly welcome, but I can't help wishing for more careful identification of source material to help students with their own research project development. Incidentally, only the story of Martha Black has already been covered in the three-volume Her Story series, written by Susan E. Merritt.

Flight or Fight by Dianne Haynes and *Runaway at Sea* by Mary Razzell have several things

in common: they are both marketed to ages fourteen and older, both feature sixteen-year-old protagonists who don't like their mothers, and both have elements of mystery. Neither book can be said to follow the mystery format closely, since there is no murder requiring detection; instead, each tale involves a public disaster that needs honest, observant teenagers to identify the perpetrators.

The animal rescue theme in *Fight or Flight* embodies a strong non-fictional aspect that enhances the fairly standard fictional plot line. The perpetrator of a huge oil slick that is killing the birds of Vancouver harbour turns out to be a profit-driven, environmentally calloused shipping corporation complete with a Deep-Throat type of informant. The story opens on sixteen-year-old Jane and her two best friends, who drive cars, take long-distance running seriously, and rescue wild life, as well as fighting criminal polluters and dealing with problems arising from Jane's parents' cooling marriage. All of these activities suggest that these are mature young women.

Surprisingly, however, the author includes some distinctly middle-school behaviour. For the past six years, the friends have signalled each other all's well (with mirrors in summer, flashlights in winter) from their upstairs bedroom windows, both morning and night, in *Anne of Green Gables* fashion (39). The author also has the girls giggle a lot, although they haven't said or done anything the least bit amusing. Here's a sample: While Flory reads aloud the scientific description of a sea bird called a scoter, Jane is soberly thinking about one particular scoter she rescued from an oil spill, but Amy "was on the floor under the kitchen table, tears rolling down a face contorted with glee, waving her arms in an unflattering imitation of a scoter and ululating to the best of her limited abilities, having never heard ululating—or even the word ululating—before" (52). There is no actual joke here, but if all three girls were involved in the laughter, perhaps the social contagion would have taken the reader to laughter as well. As it is, with only one of the three in hysterics, and she not even the dominant protagonist, the reader is unlikely to identify with her enough to experience any vicarious laughter.

The protagonist is somehow awkward and shy with her mother, boisterous and cool with her friends, and mature and competent with animals. It should make her a complicated life-like person, but it doesn't. First she's a poster child for animal conservation; then she's a non-communicative teenager who doesn't like her mother—what's new? Jane remains something of a stick figure because the author includes build-ups to scenes that simply aren't written; the reader just has to

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guess what happens. Having the story told as a series of set-ups and post-climax descriptions is an anti-climactic approach to plot-building.

One puzzling aspect of the story is why the shy, vulnerable Jane becomes sexually active with her very first boyfriend, football hero and school heart throb, Jake, without the reader being aware of her considerations. We don’t even know they are an intimate couple until the following reference is inserted into the story: “She printed the letter and Jake folded it into an envelope from his dad’s desk drawer. When she headed for the door, Jake grabbed her by the hand and spun her around to face him. ‘We are not going to waste precious time alone in this big empty house.’ He grinned at her, his dark eyes twinkling. ‘C’mon back upstairs. The stamp can wait’” (170). Haynes’ brief reference is understatement, for, emotionally, Jane is highly vulnerable, and the subsequent break-up with Jake is a huge source of grief that sends her to bed for two weeks, fighting depression (187).

By comparison, the romance in *Runaway at Sea* is handled gently. The protagonist considers sex with several suitors, but decides she’s not ready yet. The non-fictional elements of *Runaway at Sea* that highlight the dramatic realities of a typhoid epidemic on a cruise ship during the Vietnam War era heighten the tension surrounding events in a dysfunctional family. The book includes in-depth information on nursing and medical techniques used to stem a typhoid epidemic on a cruise ship arriving in Vancouver Harbour in the 1970s. The question here is, how much shit will a YA audience wade through? Poo is funny from about age ten on up through middle school, at least to boys. But shit is not exotic, not cool, and not funny in a semi-mystery. Who can even imagine identifying with a character about to shit him/herself to death? My bet is that a teen reader the age of the protagonist would say, “Gross, gross, gross!”

Runaway at Sea opens in the midst of the action, usually a good choice with YA material, but the author does not give us enough back story to make sense of certain story elements until way too late. For example, nothing is given to justify why the protagonist, Anne, is running away. She comes off as a bratty teenager who has no notion of the physical peril connected to her wilful behaviour.

The author withholds the reasons for Anne's dysfunctional relationship with both parents nearly until the resolution. Far better to have given us enough back story to begin with so that the reader feels a deeper connection with the protagonist by having seen the final blow-up between Anne and her mother, a scene that would explain why a nice girl is all alone in the red-light district of San Francisco. Similarly, showing Anne at a dance class before she runs away from home would help foreshadow the delicate romance of the ballroom scene aboard the cruise ship.

Readers of Pam Withers's Take it to the Extreme series will welcome her third book, *Adrenalin Ride*, as well as her fifth book in the series, *Surf Zone*. This collection also includes *Camp Wild*, a very short Pam Withers tale aimed at reluctant readers. Her heroes embark on dangerous wilderness journeys via dirt bike, surf board, and canoe. Marketed to the twelve-to-sixteen age group, the stories are fast, action-packed, and plot oriented. Teens think it and do it.

Jake and Peter of the Take it to the Extreme series are the clever fifteen-year-old heroes who figure out the villainy before the adults do and who are very much in charge of their own survival. The adults merely enter at the denouement to administer justice. There is no need to expect depth, for there is little sense of ethical dilemma. Right and wrong are clear-cut with no blurred edges. Early in *Adrenalin Ride*, we read, "Even as his teeth sank into the muffin, though, [Jake] couldn't help thinking, 'How did Peter buy that muffin without his wallet?' With loose change in his shorts pocket, he hoped, but even the muffin melting in his mouth failed to chase away an unsettled feeling. Had Peter taken up stealing?" (7–8). The theme continues with discussion of the importance of avoiding a police record and how peer pressure must be resisted, but by the end of the first twenty-seven pages, the theme of dishonesty begins to shift to the bad guys, and Peter's kleptomania does not figure at all in the denouement. Both books have an occasional female and more than an occasional "message," but since both are administered with a light enough touch, no doubt the teen reader would zoom right past on the testosterone-laden adventure line.

On occasion, the proofreading needs a more careful eye. For example, the novel *Surf Zone* has a major pronoun reference problem in Chapter 4 (27). Logically, the "He" that opens the chapter must refer to Jake in the paragraph ending Chapter 3 (26). Even if the chapter hadn't broken there, the action has changed focus and includes a time lapse, which also makes the pronoun unusable. Another issue to cavil about is the copy-editing

in the series, which needs to be done much more carefully, a complaint applicable to many of the eleven books in the collection I was sent.

Withers's *Camp Wild* (aimed at reluctant readers age ten and older) also has a male protagonist, Wilf, age fourteen. It involves a single event, very simply told, and thus has a development more like a short story than a novel. Unfortunately, the message the tale sends to its readers is deeply flawed. As the reviewers' plot summaries all tell us, Wilf is angry at his parents for working too much and not paying him enough attention, and specifically, for ignoring his claim of being too mature to attend an outdoor summer camp as in previous summers. Despite being a junior counsellor, Wilf is selfish and mean to his bunkmate, Herb (also age fourteen), and to a ten-year-old camper named Charlie, also in his charge. Nevertheless, both boys admire and look up to Wilf, follow his example, and justify his choices. Wilf steals canoes, food, and equipment, and is discovered by Herb. The two boys disappear down the river into the forest, soon to be followed by Charlie.

The boys clearly risk their lives running the dangerous rapids, yet experience no bodily injury. At the end of the river run, they are met by rangers, camp counsellors, and parents. Wilf's parents reward his behaviour by taking him immediately on a camping trip, the camp counsellors offer him a paid position for the next summer, and the rangers say not a word about his wrong choices. The message for older readers: act out your grievances with dangerous, dishonest, and irresponsible behaviours and you will be rewarded with understanding and respect from every adult around you. The message for younger readers: follow the example of an older kid who breaks the rules, treats you bad, and does dangerous stuff and you'll be safe, approved of by adults, and admitted to the cool group. A deeply contrasting position to mine is found in a review published by *CM Magazine*, opining that *Camp Wild* "manages to portray some of the complexities of parenthood and the mistakes that parents can make. Overall, this novel is quite dynamic and compelling. It is worth the ride! Highly Recommended. 3½ star rating" (Eagles-Daly). Did we read the same book?

Breaking Trail is set in the Yukon, a traditionally exotic setting for modern readers, with sled dogs and winter peril. The specific age of the protagonist is never mentioned, but the book makes sense whether she is age ten or sixteen. Since the book is directly and simply told, it also may be interesting to a reluctant reader. Becky is determined to develop and train her own team of racing sled dogs, a feat taking courage and physical strength. She is also aware of and concerned about her

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father's depression, and fears that the family will end up in a divorce if her mother gives up on him. The author, Joanne Bell, creates a subtle parallel between Bear, the lead dog of the father's outdated, working dog sled team and the father himself, who has lost his source of livelihood in the Yukon at a time when his trapping and outdoor skills have been supplanted by modern lifestyles. Why, the story asks, is it humane to shoot a dog when its heart gives out, but when a man's will (heart) gives out, he's forced to go on and on despite his pain? Becky carries these family burdens as well as her ambitions for her dog team. She plays the role of midwife when the lead dog of her new racing team gives birth, and when the one surviving whelp turns out to have been fathered by Bear and is destined to lead her fledgling team to success during seasons to come, it suggests indirectly that the father will yet have an enduring role to play in young Becky's life, despite his bout with depression. A finely crafted tale.

In the Wild, set in Sweden, comes to us via an English translation, so possibly less exotic to the original audience than to Canadian readers. Author Sofia Nordin introduces us to a sixth-grade class in Sweden, with a protagonist designated as an unpopular student for no specific shortcomings. On a week-long class outing in the woods, Amanda's raft overturns and she is lost in the woods with Philip, the boy who has given her the most grief. Amanda's parents have taught her basic wood lore and survival skills, which she uses to keep them alive. The information about edible plants and survival techniques, plus their scary encounters with animals and the elements, keeps the tension high throughout.

After their rescue, Amanda wonders if her new friendship with Philip, born of their isolation, will last:

> I catch myself wondering if this is the last time Philip and I will laugh together. About something that's ours, something that's funny but only we understand why. Almost the way friends laugh together.
>
> Because Philip and I aren't meant to laugh

together. Especially not the way friends do. We belong to two different parts of the class, the school, even the world. We've just ended up in the same house for a few days, laughing at things together because there was no one else there.

Now we're on our way back to the real world. (111)

This denouement begins to feel at odds with the adventure fiction my culture has taught me. The robust Imperial boy hero and his twenty-first century antecedent, as well as the indomitable heroine, inevitably discard their class anchors in contemporary North American adventure tales. My culture teaches me to expect all vestiges of class distinction to melt away as the heroism of the protagonist unfolds. It comes as something of a jolt to have to question these values this close to the end of the novel, since we've been taught to assume the isolation adventure tale will translate into social acceptance for Amanda when she and Philip re-join their classmates.

As the rescue proceeds, Amanda ponders whether anyone has even noticed that she and Philip have been gone.

When I think about the class it's as if nothing has happened. As if we never fell in the river or lived in an abandoned house or went hungry together. Philip and I. Because I'm sure everything is going to be just like it always was.

Soon Philip will have forgotten everything and he'll start to tease me again. Things will return to normal in the classroom, the cafeteria, the schoolyard. Vanya will stare at my clothes and ask why I'm such a loser. . . . (114).

Readers raised on the Disney version of Cinderella or Hans Christian Anderson's "The Ugly Duckling" may start to feel their sense of what is good and proper starting to slip out of focus here. We know the last paragraph of the novel will give us whatever hope we are going to get:

Then Philip says it, the extraordinary thing.

'We've been good. Amanda is great to have around, just great.'

I stare at him and he laughs. It's friendly laughter. He's not kidding.

That's the first time anyone in my class has ever said that about me.

I'm great to have around. (115)

The End. Readers are left with hope, but no firm assurance that Amanda's social position as misfit has actually changed. As an adult North American reader, I would love to know how a sixth-grade

Swedish child would understand the tale.

Two of the eleven novels involve exotic international settings. *Adventure in Istanbul* takes us to Turkey with teen detectives, and *Red Sea* involves survival in the waters of the Middle East. *Adventure in Istanbul* is marketed to late elementary-school children, ages nine and older, the publishers suggest, and—I would add—through middle school, since the thirteen-year-old female twin protagonists are in grade nine. The media release for the book describes it as "a re-written, re-edited, and redesigned edition of the original title, *Vanishing Act*," the pilot number for a new series, The Spy Who Wasn't There (Coteau Books). *Vanishing Act* was originally published by Red Deer Press in 1998 and is listed as one of 24 novels by various authors in the Canadian Juvenile series, Northern Lights Young Novels.

I wonder why, in a rewritten edition only eight years old, the author includes so many hopelessly dated intertextual references. *Adventure in Istanbul* reads as though it were written somewhere in the mid-twentieth century. For example, the twin named Maggie is affectionately called "Maggie Muggins" at least seven times (17, 23, 74, 124, 134, 142, 184). The reference is to a mid-twentieth century CBC Radio show that later ran as a television series from 1952 to 1982, starring Maggie Muggins, a freckle-faced girl in a gingham dress. Young readers today are far more likely to connect the last name of Muggins with a character who will be mugged in the story than with a pert young thing who wears her red hair in two long pigtails.

The same twin, Maggie, is also called Mary Sunshine (57, 77), referring to a silent film (1916) and an American musical (1959), both entitled *Little Mary Sunshine*. Maggie's echo of Professor Higgins' famous line from the 1964 movie, *My Fair Lady*, "By Jove, we've got it" (143) would certainly be lost on a contemporary middle-school audience, as would Jennifer belting out "Oh, What a Beautiful Morning," a song from the 1943 Broadway play and 1955 Hollywood film, *Oklahoma* (74). There is no point established in the tale for having this particular family sing an obscure tune having its origin in Plymouth, England during the 1750s, so contemporary middle-schoolers will likely think Grand (the grandmother) is weird when she breaks into the song, "My Father is the Keeper of the Eddystone Light" (124). When Sam and the girls try to follow along with Grand's singing, the scene drifts off into absurdity. The author's references to classic works (including Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* [37], James Barrie's *Peter Pan* [167], and Edgar Allen Poe's "The Raven" [250]) may be justifiable, but whether or not the intended readers will even

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recognize them is questionable.

Many elements in the material culture represented in *Adventure in Istanbul* are also dated. False eyelashes for street wear (15) are very reminiscent of the 1960s and limited to stage use since then. Another example: current middle-school girls' cosmetic know-how would certainly inform the protagonists that a person with super curly hair never uses a hairdryer (94) unless s/he plans to frizz it out to the proportions of a 1960s Afro. Furthermore, the cover photo of two girls with straight, blondish hair—one long, one short—does not match the extensive physical descriptions given of the girls in the book: "Jennifer's long brown hair with its tight, thick curls barely moved" (16). One or the other has to go.

If this isn't enough to sink the project, the script is redolent with dated language: "hedge caper" (55) sounds like 1920s TV detective language. Teens do NOT say "always in the soup" (8), or "cotton pickin'" (67), much less "getting a bee in her bonnet" (111). The author uses the acronym SAG to mean Secret Agent Grandmother (199) instead of the commonly used reference to Screen Actor's Guild. There is also a glaringly dated international reference. The UAE (United Arab Emirates) currently displays its fabulous wealth in phenomenal architecture and the importation of western fashion design to create a tourist mecca to attract Westerners. The author, however, makes reference to the emirates as being uncivilized and backward (111). On the other hand, the reference to the Canadian breakfast cereal Shreddies instead of the American equivalent, Wheat Chex, adds nice local colour (77).

Part 1, "Vanishing Act," should have been deleted entirely. The author spends 96 pages setting up the stereotypical qualities of thirteen-year-old twins and their neighbourhood male friend. Jennifer, the daring one, tries out a magic spell of invisibility triggered when she tells a lie, which can only be reversed by her own

laughter. The whole section is redundant, boring, and full of posturing, foolish explanations, and unnecessary events—a waste of the reader's time. Much poor writing is evident. Often repetitive, it frequently contains fused sentences, and some very approximately accurate word choices. Following are a few examples: "Crazy as it was it was the sort of thing she would do" (12). "She stopped [,] suddenly serious" (11). "'The only way to find out is to use it two more times . . . and then if [it] is three, it will be too late'" (16). "Then the girls had done one of their rare victory dances. Victory dances weren't rare, but usually only one of them was doing the dancing. The other had lost or had nothing to celebrate. This one was mutual and truly triumphant" (66).

Incidentally, what is the author trying to accomplish by having the twins repeatedly lie to their mother? Apparently deception is to be understood as cute and lively, not duplicitous (12, 75), since this teen novel, like so many others, is based on the ubiquitous "absent parents" structure—which is not the same as "absent adults." Adults can be present, and in this case, grandparents are.

The setting and characterization could have been done much more effectively and efficiently when built upon the action of the plot in Part 2, perhaps entered as a flashback.

When we finally reach Part 2, entitled "The Adventure Begins," on page 99, the action that makes the book worth reading finally begins. It's not a particularly original plot, but a disappearing twin adds a fun twist. One especially notable instance of good writing near the end of the book is the author's description of hate: "This is what it feels like to hate someone, she thought. It's awful. She understood now why people said that hatred did the most harm to the person doing the hating. It was like the feeling you had when you had hurt yourself and the pain spread through your body until you couldn't think of anything else" (193). Would modern middle-school children read that far into this book? Not many.

The fourteen-year-old leading lady of Diane Tullson's *Red Sea* is bratty, rebellious, and nasty. Defying her mother's rules, she is involved in under-age drinking and experiments with sex, and she grossly lies to family and friends, telling them that her stepfather has sexually assaulted her in her sleep (24). Libby's refusal to return to the ship on time causes the family to depart on their Red Sea journey without the protection of a convoy of friends and in the face of a devastating storm (27). Middle Eastern tribal pirates attack their boat, kill Duncan, the stepfather, and seriously wound Libby's mother. Alone, Libby discovers how to keep her mother alive, manages to forgive herself

Another problem: all the men are portrayed as inferior to the women.

for her mistakes, and learns how to sail the ship to a safe port.

After Duncan is killed and her mother severely wounded, a lot of the story is inside Libby's head. Robinson Crusoe needed a Friday to talk to so his readers would know what he was thinking and to facilitate character development by showing two perspectives. Libby dwells on her earlier behaviours, so the reader does not experience any changes and growth, much less an epiphany, with her. The ending, therefore, seems contrived. Her development from immature to mature is the stuff of formula fiction, and unconvincing in this novel.

The most satisfying part of the book is Tullson's expert knowledge of sailing. Whether or not it is likely that Libby could deduce or intuit the expertise to actually sail the disabled vessel, it is definitely the part of the tale that most engages the reader.

A survival story requires suspense, but this novel doesn't really have it because we have no emotional attachment to the characters. We don't know any of the characters well enough to care whether they live or die—with the exception of Libby, who we know and dislike. Can Libby be a protagonist if she is a character the reader doesn't like and won't identify with? By definition, she is an anti-hero, "a protagonist in a modern work who does not exhibit the qualities of the traditional hero. Instead of being a grand and/or admirable figure—brave, honest, and magnanimous, for example—an antihero is all too ordinary and may even be petty or downright dishonest" (Bedford 15). Imagining Libby as a character who makes the difficult changes in attitude would be an author's option, but Tullson jumps us from the ruminations of a bad girl straight into the choices of a good girl after her "change of heart," without ever taking us through the ethical dimensions of that change.

Another problem: all the men are portrayed as inferior to the women. Libby's inattentive father lets her know he can't handle being with her for very long. She says of him, "Not that Dad was jumping up and down to take me. Every other weekend is more of me than he can handle" (6), yet she resents her father for being absent from her life. Of brother and sister Mac and Emma, sailing friends of Libby's parents, the narrator tells

us that the older sister is the "unspoken leader" in the duo (18). Duncan, the stepfather, treats Libby graciously, but does little to stand up to her tirades. Moreover, he dies in the pirate attack, and any teen reader knows that a hero doesn't die until the story is over. The remainder of the men constitute the villains in the story: the abusive boyfriend and the murderous pirates.

Despite the early suggestion that incest will be a major issue, other kinds of violent sex are actually portrayed. The pirates are loathsome men, and Tyson (Ty), Libby's older nineteen-year-old boyfriend—disrespectful of all the girls he dates, as Libby knows full well—is also a repulsive character. In a number of ways, Ty and the pirates are similar. The pirates steal everything they can from the boat; Ty steals Cokes from 7–11 and sex from younger girls (109). They both show great insensitivity and a need to control their victim(s). But most significantly, both Ty and the pirate Libby refers to as the Eggman take sexual advantage of her. Tullson writes graphically about Libby's rape by the pirate:

> It's not so much a kiss as a crushing of lips and teeth and tongue, God, a thick, prodding mass of tongue that fills my mouth. I gag and twist my face away. Eggman grabs my chin with greasy fingers, his thumb digging deeply into the underside of my chin so that I can't breath. His saliva is drying on my lips and I want to wipe it off. But I leave my arms at my sides. I will myself to a blank place of not knowing, not knowing that my mother is laying at my feet in a puddle of blood, that Duncan is blown apart on the sea, that it's only me with these men. . . . Eggman licks his lips. I close my eyes. If I try, if I really focus, I can hear my own heart beating, the blood pulsing through the tiniest vessels into the deepest places of my brain. If I try, then I don't have to know what Eggman is doing. (46–47)

Ty's sexual activity with Libby also receives full discussion by the author. Tullson writes that at the goodbye party before Libby leaves, Ty gets fourteen-year-old Libby drunk and date rapes her while she is unconscious (37-38), but Libby refuses to tell her parents about it. Later, while alone on the boat after the pirates' assault, Libby remembers oral sex with Tyson. "Ty, once, at McDonald's, followed me into the women's restroom. It made me laugh the way he just walked in like it was perfectly normal and acceptable. I don't think anyone noticed, and even if they did, Ty wouldn't have cared. In the tiny stall, I wondered if I'd ever get the knees of my jeans clean and if people would be able

to tell from my jeans what I'd done" (71). Later, Libby reminisces about the date rape in a way that justifies Ty's actions: "I may not remember much of the party, but I wouldn't have refused Ty. I never did, even if I wanted to" (161). Do we want young females to learn this kind of passive response to abuse? It is one thing for an author to show a teen audience the negative result of sex too soon or sex with a predatory character, or on the other side, the positive aspect of mature sexual response, but it is unconscionable for an author to confront an unprepared child reader with material about abusive sexual encounters.

Sex with a minor is a felony, yet Tullson totally passes it over and so does the publisher. Why do reviewers ignore the criminal aspect of Ty's behaviours? If this book were made into a movie it would never rate the G or PG that accompany the guidelines for viewing by twelve-year-olds. Violent action can often be rated PG-13, a rating many teens admire because it allows them full access to the action/adventure they crave. But violent sex and under-age sex are both rated R. Why should a book be rated more leniently than a movie? Why should we accept a rating of twelve and older on a book that would be rated R if put on the screen? Something is definitely wrong here. If the author or publisher thinks that young people don't notice or care about such things, I would like them to have heard a class of university students age twenty-something express their disgust for the lack of appropriateness of *Red Sea* for children age twelve plus.

It takes courage for reviewers to acknowledge what they actually read and for publishers to deny themselves the possibility of a couple of years of reader interest, especially in a country where the writer/publisher community is fairly small. The alternative is to continue publishing inaccurate press-release material and rosy-hued reviews. Of course, the biggest stakeholder in all of this is the young reader in Canada and beyond.

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