

Canadian Books for Middle School Readers

by Dave Jenkinson

The following five books, though disparate in content and genre, all deal in one way or another with the theme of survival.

1. An absolute must read for serious mystery fans is Shane Peacock's *EYE OF THE CROW*, the first "case" in "The Boy Sherlock Holmes" series. Having observed that the adult detective's family background and childhood are not described in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's novels, Peacock sets out to provide this back-story, and he does so brilliantly while creating a sophisticated and reader-engaging murder mystery that is set in a richly described London, England, of April-May, 1867. Thirteen-year-old Sherlock is Rose and Wilberforce's middle child. Sherlock's brilliant father, who once aspired to teach chemistry at a university, had that goal forever blocked when he, a Jew, dared to elope with the gentile daughter of a country squire who then financially cut off his daughter while using his standing to block any opportunities Wilber had for social or economic advancement. Now, Wilber, also a bird lover, tends the doves at the Crystal Palace, and Rose takes in sewing and teaches singing to children from upper class homes. Mycroft, Sherlock's older brother by seven years, has already left home while Violet, his younger sister, had died before reaching age four.

Though Sherlock's parents scrape together sufficient monies to send him to school, Sherlock prefers spending his many truant days hanging around Trafalgar Square where he reads discarded issues of *The Illustrated Police News*. A headline regarding the stabbing murder of a young woman catches Sherlock's attention, and when he later sees that the accused killer, Mohammad Adalji, an 18-year-old butcher's apprentice, is "to be bound over," Sherlock decides to join the crowd outside the Old Bailey Courthouse. There, he encounters Mohammad who says to him, "I didn't do it!" Moved by Mohammad's words, Sherlock decides to visit the murder site, something he does twice, and these actions, coupled with Mohammad's having spoken to him directly, cause the police, in the form of Inspector Lestrade, to arrest Sherlock as Mohammad's accomplice. Because the murder weapon, a bloody knife, can be traced directly to Mohammad, Sherlock recognizes that Mohammad will be convicted at his trial in three weeks and hung, as was the practice of the time, almost immediately afterwards. With his own survival at stake as well, Sherlock manages to escape from his police station cell, and he races against the trial's date to find the real killer. In his quest, Sherlock receives assistance from both ends of the social ladder. While incarcerated, Sherlock had met Irene Doyle, also about 13, the daughter of a well-to-do man who is with the Society of Visiting Friends of London ("We comfort the unfortunate, the guilty, the falsely accused, whatever you are, sir."). On London's mean streets, Sherlock butts heads with Malefactor and the Irregulars, Malefactor's gang of 12 young street thieves. An enigmatic character ("I was once more than I am now,..., and I will be more again one day."), Malefactor grudgingly helps Sherlock.

A more demanding read than the average juvenile crime novel, *EYE OF THE CROW* provides much social history along with the mystery which increases in tension as Mohammad's trial/execution day approaches. Be certain to remove the peekaboo cover to find the illustration beneath as well as the map of London streets printed on the inside of the dust jacket.

Peacock, Shane. *EYE OF THE CROW*. Tundra, 2007. 250 pp. ISBN 978-0-88776-850-7. \$24.99.

2. Also set in the past is Marsha Skrypuch's *PRISONERS IN THE PROMISED LAND*, the contents of which, in our post 9/11 era, should be instructive regarding Canada's need to avoid repeating previous errors. Part of the "Dear Canada" series, Anya Soloniuk's story, told via diary entries, begins on Monday, April 13, 1914, the day the 12-year-old, who is living in Galicia (part of

Austria-Hungary), receives the diary, a namesday gift sent to her by her tato [father] who has already emigrated to Canada. A 14-year-old Anya concludes her diary on Friday, July 21, 1916, when she exhausts the blank pages. Initially, the family, consisting of Anya, her younger brother Mykola, and their mother and grandmother, must travel by train and then ship from their village of Horoshova to Montreal where they are reunited with Tato on May 5, 1914. Between then and April 19, 1915, Anya adjusts to her new life in the promised land while learning English in school. Her father continues his factory job while Mama becomes a domestic and Baba takes care of Mykola in the family's small third floor flat. During this period, Anya and her family experience the prejudice too often directed at immigrant groups, but it greatly intensifies after World War I begins and they are declared to be enemy aliens. When both of Anya's parents lose their jobs due to their employers' misplaced patriotism, Anya must quit school in order to provide the family's sole income via her garment factory job. An unemployed Tato, jailed for loitering, is then sent to an internment camp at Spirit Lake in northern Quebec. On April 19, 1915, by government order, a train takes the rest of the Soloniuk family to join Tato at the isolated camp, and there they are imprisoned for some 14 months before, ironically, being released because the very factories and employers who fired them now need their labour.

PRISONERS IN THE PROMISED LAND is a rich read, one which is supported by a lengthy epilogue which informs readers about what happened to the characters following the diary's closure. A nine page "Historical Note", plus 11 pages of black and white photos and two maps (one of Europe in 1914 and the other of Canada showing the locations of the 24 internment camps), all remind readers that, although Anya is fictional, all of the book's major events are anchored in actual historical happenings.

Skrypuch, Marsha Forchuk. PRISONERS IN THE PROMISED LAND: THE UKRAINIAN INTERNMENT DIARY OF ANYA SOLONIUK. Scholastic, 2007. 243 pp. ISBN 978-0-439-95692-5. \$14.99.

3. Principally set in the children's ward of a hospital, *MS. ZEPHYR'S NOTEBOOK*, by K.C. Dyer, is another story of life-and-death survival. As the book opens, 15-year-old Logan Kemp, who has been released from the hospital, has snuck back in during the middle of the night, and for the reader, the question becomes "Why?" The title's notebook belongs to the Abigail Zephyr, the in-hospital teacher, and the notebook's dated entries, largely provided by Logan and two other patients, supply much of the answer. As readers get into the book (and the notebook), they discover that an increasingly hostile relationship exists between two patients, Logan and 14-year-old Jacqueline Hornby-Moss, aka Cleo. Initially, the pair's dislike for each other appears to be just based on their different personalities, but eventually Logan reveals his animosity towards Cleo is rooted in their medical problems. Logan must be fed intravenously because of Crohn's disease while Cleo has been hospitalized for anorexia and bulimia. Logan dislikes Cleo because he sees her as someone who can choose to eat, but elects not to, while his health condition doesn't offer him that choice. The go-between person for the two is 11-year-old Kip Graeme. Born with only one kidney, Kip has been rehospitalized following a kidney transplant. Despite Logan's initial dislike of Cleo, when he learns that she has "escaped" from the hospital, he breaks back in as he believes her entries in Ms. Zephyr's notebook will reveal her intentions which he fears might be self-destructive. Another important part of the story is the relationship the three patients have with their parents and how these relationships have impacted their life choices. In addition to Dyer's prose portions, the "notebook" text contains emails, handwritten notes, memos, completed forms and copies of medical reports, and later, as Logan goes in search of Cleo, he and the still hospitalized Kip communicate via instant messaging.

Dyer, K.C. MS. ZEPHYR'S NOTEBOOK. Boardwalk Books, 2007. 204 pp. ISBN 978-1-55002-691-7.

4. In Gordon Korman's latest fun novel, *SCHOOLED*, Claverage Middle School (steal the "l" from its name and it's "C average" Middle School) has a tradition of electing, by acclamation, the school's biggest loser as the grade eight president and then humiliating him/her for the rest of the school year. Zach Powers, captain of both the soccer and football teams and Big Man on Campus, has already selected this year's victim – Hugh Winkleman, captain of the chess club and "since kindergarten, the primo nerd, bar none." However, Zach quickly reconsiders his choice with the arrival of a new student, the long-haired Capricorn (Cap) Anderson. Up to now, Rain, who is Caps' 67-year-old grandmother, has raised and homeschooled her orphaned grandson on Garland Farm where the two are the last members of a hippie commune established in the 1960s. Because Rain has broken her hip and requires some two months of hospital rehab, Cap must be placed in foster care and attend "regular" school until the two can return to Garland. Having never experienced the world beyond Garland's seven acres, Cap is truly a stranger having to survive in a strange land and someone his temporary foster mother, Mrs. Donnelly, describes as "a time traveller, about to step into a world that had forgotten the sixties except for J.F.K. and the Beatles." Cap's arrival also provides Hugh Winkleman with much wanted anonymity, and while Hugh adopts a "better him than me" philosophy, he feels guilty and becomes Cap's first, and initially only, friend among the school's 1,100 students. Fans of Korman's writings will recognize that loser Cap will eventually overcome and that the mighty Zach will fall, but not before a great deal of humour and some delightful chaos occur. When Cap naively stumbles into becoming the school's most popular student, Zach and Hugh even become allies as each tries to reestablish his former place in the school's social pecking order.

Korman, Gordon. *SCHOOLED*. Scholastic, 2007. 208 pp. ISBN 978-0-545-99990-8. \$19.99.

5. If you're using Gary Paulsen's *HATCHET* in a literature circle on survival, you might want to consider adding Liam O'Donnell's *WILD RIDE* for those whose reading skills are on the weaker side as it's an easy-to-read graphic novel. In mid-July, Devin Chang, 10, his older sister Nadia, and skateboarder Marcus Ashmore, along with Gerald Wiley, a government bureaucrat, are passengers in a single engine plane, piloted by Jack Hanlan, that is taking the group to Big Horn Valley in "the butt end of British Columbia" where the Changs' mother is conducting an environmental audit. On their way to the valley, Hanlan significantly alters their route of flight before encountering a hail storm which downs the plane. During the crash landing in a lake, Hanlan is killed, but his four passengers all swim to shore where they must survive until rescued, an event which may be delayed due to Hanlan's departure from the submitted flight plan. Despite Marcus's being the son of a world-famous environmentalist, he exhibits no interest in the environment and initially serves as the antagonist to the Changs as they await rescue. His role, however, is quickly usurped by Gerald Wiley who, Devin accidentally discovers, is being bribed by Klomax & Nash, a large paper company, to sabotage the environmental audit, thereby allowing K&N to log the valley. When Devin exposes Wiley's criminal activity, Wiley attempts to murder the juvenile trio by having them "accidentally" burn to death in a forest fire he sets. Ironically, the fire, which was to be the instrument of the juveniles' death, becomes the vehicle that alerts rescuers to their location. In addition to the storyline, O'Donnell does some unobtrusive teaching regarding wilderness survival skills, including offering the contents of a personal survival kit and information on how to make a Hudson Bay Pack. The publisher, Orca, has left the book unpaginated, an approach which helps thwart reluctant readers who choose books partly on length.

O'Donnell, Liam. *WILD RIDE*. Orca, 2007. Illustrated by Mike Deas. 64 pp. ISBN 978-1-55143-756-9. \$9.95.

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