

Seven Young Adult titles

Reviewed by Donna Gamache

Racing Home

by Adele Dueck

Regina: Coteau Books for Kids, 2011, ISBN 978-1-55050-450-7, 185 pp., \$8.95 paper.
(Juvenile Fiction)

Ghosts of Government House

by Judith Silverthorne

Regina: Your Nickel's Worth Publishing, 2011, ISBN 978-1-894431-63-7, 114 pp., \$9.95 paper.
(Juvenile Fiction)

Full Steam to Canada: A Barr Colony Adventure

by Anne Patton

Regina: Coteau Books for Kids, 2011, ISBN 978-1-55050-457-6, 175 pp., \$8.95 paper.
(Juvenile Fiction)

Ghost Messages

by Jacqueline Guest

Regina: Coteau Books for Kids, 2011, ISBN 978-1-55050-458-3, 185 pp., \$8.95 paper.
(Juvenile Fiction)

Ice Storm

by Penny Draper

Regina: Coteau Books for Kids, 2011, 978-1-55050-451-4, 198 pp., \$8.95 paper. (Juvenile Fiction)

Picturing Alyssa

by Alison Lohans

Toronto: Dundurn, 2011, ISBN 978-1-55488-925-9, 210 pp., \$12.99 paper. (Juvenile Fiction)

Drummer Girl by Karen Bass

Regina: Coteau Books, 2011, ISBN 978-1-55050-462-0, 231 pp., \$14.95 paper. (Teen Fiction)

Racing Home by Adele Dueck begins in June, 1908, and tells the story of twelve-year-old Erik Brekk, who has just arrived in Saskatchewan from Norway, with his sister, Elsa, aged nine; his mother, Inga; and his stepfather, Rolf Hanson. Erik's father, a fisherman, died in a storm at sea when Eric was three.

Inga married Rolf the previous year in October, and just a few months later the couple decided to leave Norway and move to America – much to Erik's dismay, for it meant leaving behind everything he knew, particularly his grandparents' farm. Rolf had decided to follow his brother, Lars, to Minnesota. Only Lars wasn't there; he'd left a message saying that he'd moved to Hanley, Saskatchewan. So the family loaded everything onto a train and followed him there.

In Hanley they discover that Lars, with his wife, Kirsten, and son, Olaf, have moved to the brand new community of Green Valley, 56 kilometres away, on the banks of the South Saskatchewan River. Lars and a partner have bought a lumberyard in Hanley and plan to start one in Green Valley, too.

Leaving Inga and Elsa in Hanley for the time being, Erik and Rolf set off with a team of oxen and a cow to join Lars and to find land where they can settle and begin farming.

Erik is dismayed at all the changes from what he has known – the sod houses which the homesteaders build until they can afford a regular house; the flat, treeless land stretching into the distance; and the oxen Rolf has purchased, instead of the fine horses Erik was used to in Norway. He doesn't understand, at first, why Olaf seems to dislike them, and he's not happy when he later discovers why. It's only as the two try to save an injured horse, and later as they deal with horse thieves, that they learn to appreciate each other – allowing the author to work in themes on the importance of family and the pioneers' experiences on the Canadian prairies.

I enjoyed this fast-paced book, though I found the characters a little too 'good.' Erik is unhappy with all the changes and resents the hard work he must do, but there are no real arguments with his stepfather. He just keeps his mouth shut and does what he is told without questions or protests – and he seems able to do the strange, hard work without needing to be taught much. He and Elsa get along a little too well, also.

I would have appreciated a glossary for the occasional Norwegian words. Usually it was possible to figure them out, but sometimes not for a page or two, and if the word was then used again several chapters later, the meaning might have been forgotten.

Ghosts of Government House by Judith Silverthorne is a short, fast read for slightly younger readers, perhaps 9–11. The main characters are two young girls – Samantha, called Sam, and her friend Jensyn, known as J.J. The setting is modern-day Regina, but there's an historical twist, as ghosts from the past form an integral part of the story.

The story begins with a community club group of children taking a special 'after hours' guided tour of the Government House Museum, a building used as the residence for six of Saskatchewan's lieutenant-governors, beginning in 1891. Sam and J.J., both aged about ten, are part of the tour but, feeling somewhat bored, they do a little exploring on their own. Suddenly the lights go out and they hear a mysterious "slap-slap, slap-slap" as if someone wearing flip-flops is coming towards them. Then the footsteps continue, right through a closed door. Frightened, the two girls rejoin their group, only to be informed that the power had *not* gone out. When the girls later tell Sam's twelve-year-old brother, Gabe, about their experience, he doesn't believe them. Determined to prove to him that the ghost was real, they make a bet to that effect, and make plans to return to the museum to investigate further.

From the Internet the girls learn that, over the years, there have been various mysterious happenings in the museum, leading some people to believe that ghosts might live there. During their next few visits Sam and J.J. encounter a number of ghosts from different periods of history and are able to communicate with most of them. The individuals had apparently enjoyed living there so much that they came back after they had 'passed on.' But they are all lonely, and it's up to the children to bring them together to make things more pleasant for everyone.

Although this is basically a ghost story, the author manages to insert a useful museum plan and information about the building's past – as a residence for the lieutenant-governors, as a hospital for war veterans following World War II, as an adult education centre and as a residence for the museum. The information is worked in carefully, and doesn't slow down the pace of this imaginative novel. She also manages to incorporate themes of grief and learning to adjust to the loss of a loved one, as J.J. has lost her mother to cancer, and Sam's Grandma Louise has lost her husband.

Author Judith Silverthorne has always been fascinated with Government House, and the stories about strange happenings there, as reported by both former and present staff – such as objects being moved around, or the inexplicable sound of children crying or laughing. One particular ghost, dubbed Howie, is believed to be a former Chinese cook whose footsteps are heard shuffling down

halls and through closed doors. Some of these stories are incorporated into this fictional adventure tale.

Judith Silverthorne is an award-winning author, with many children's novels and two adult non-fiction books to her credit. The conclusion of *Ghosts of Government House* leads one to suspect that there may be more adventures for the "Sam and J.J. Ghost Detective Agency."

Full Steam to Canada: A Barr Colony Adventure is another book for younger readers, about 9–11. This novel tells the story of Dorothy Bolton and her family who immigrate to Canada in 1903 with the Reverend Isaac Barr. Although the Boltons are a fictional family, Dorothy's story is partly based on the life of Dorothy Holtby, whose family was one of the Barr Colonists – a group of settlers who came from England under the direction of Rev. Barr and took up homesteads in the area around Lloydminster, in present-day Saskatchewan. Saskatchewan writer Anne Patton has based this novel on diaries and conversations with actual Barr colonists, including a journal kept by the real Dorothy's brother, which is quoted in several places.

The novel begins with Dorothy's father considering the move to Canada from their home in York, in northern England. Dorothy, who turns 10, and her brother, Frank (nearly 18), are keen on the idea of moving, but Mrs. Bolton and 16-year-old Lydia are very much against it. Eventually, spurred on by Rev. Barr's promises of free land, a wonderful climate and a colony with many amenities, the decision is made to emigrate. The family boards the *SS Lake Manitoba* and starts its journey across the Atlantic. Dorothy is a high-spirited but naïve tomboy, and when the rest of her family suffers from seasickness, she takes the opportunity to explore the ship and make friends. She also learns responsibility throughout the journey as she helps to care for a small child whose mother is "in the family way."

The story follows the Bolton family as they cross the ocean to Saint John, New Brunswick, and then travel by train across the continent. It ends with the colonists reaching Saskatoon where, to Mrs. Bolton's dismay, the settlers must be satisfied with accommodation in a city of tents. Rev. Barr had made many unrealistic promises and many of the colonists were not experienced in farming, so the next few years would prove a difficult time. The stage is clearly set for a sequel, which is apparently partly written, in which the colonists will continue on from Saskatoon to Lloydminster.

Full Steam to Canada, in its early stages, was the winner of the Saskatchewan Writers' Guild John V. Hicks Unpublished Long Manuscript Award in 2009.

I enjoyed this story, and I think middle-grade readers, especially girls, will enjoy it, too. Dorothy is an engaging character, with a mind of her own. I appreciated the glossary, map, and pictures at the end of the book. (I found it similar in several places to my own novel, *Sarah: A New Beginning*, which brings an English family to Manitoba in 1891, so readers who enjoy Anne Patton's book might consider checking out my book, too.)

Ghost Messages, by prolific Alberta author Jacqueline Guest, is another historical book, also with a resident ghost. The year is 1865 and 13-year-old Ailish O'Connor lives with her father in Ireland, her mother having died of 'the fever' two years before. Ailish and 'Da' live in an ancient wooden caravan and move around the countryside. Ailish has 'the second sight' and earns money by giving tarot readings, a family tradition. Her father dreams of joining his brother in Newfoundland, and of buying a fishing boat and a grand house. He has recently bought, from a young Russian soldier, a tiny jeweled statue of a golden horse, purported to be from the czar's palace in St. Petersburg, and said to be worth a small fortune. He plans to sell it to obtain the funds for Ailish and himself to emigrate.

As the story opens, Ailish and Da are in Foilhummerum Bay for festivities which are celebrating the impending voyage of the *Great Eastern*, a giant ship which will lay the first underwater transatlantic telegraph cable, 1600 miles from Ireland to Newfoundland. Da brings home a new acquaintance, Rufus Dalton, who attacks Da, steals the figurine horse, and takes it aboard the ship,

where he is the cable crew chief. Ailish, determined to get the treasure back, trails Dalton and gets onto the ship but inadvertently remains on board when it sails.

On board, Ailish is assisted by a crew member, Paddy Whalen, and a mysterious young sailor, Davy Jones, whom she meets below deck (Only towards the end does she realize that Davy is a ghost, although the reader will have figured this out much sooner.) Ailish cuts her hair to disguise herself as a boy and is accepted as a cabin boy, enabling her to continue searching for the stolen horse – using her wits and a little ghostly help to solve the mystery.

Although Ailish and her father and some other characters are fictional, the basis of the story is true, and several historical figures are included. The ship is described in accurate detail, and events such as the cable being lost miles below on the ocean floor did happen. The suspected sabotage by Fenians is a recorded fact, as is the solution of the ship's problem. There is also a legend of ghosts aboard the ship, said to be a pair of workers who had fallen to their deaths during its construction.

Though the story seems a little farfetched in spots, especially in some of Ailish's plots and in the successful conclusion to her quest, it makes a suspenseful story that young readers will enjoy. The double meaning of the book's title is a clever touch, and the historical aspects about the laying of the cable are intriguing.

The book is designated for those age nine and up, but I wonder if some of the expressions used are a little too advanced for that age level; for example, the terms "rotund ruminant," "nemesis," and "abscond." A glossary of nautical terms does help with seafaring words.

Ice Storm, by British Columbia author Penny Draper, is Book #5 in the "Disaster Strikes" series published by Coteau Books. This one differs from the earlier books in the series in that the disastrous situation is more contemporary – the January 1998 ice storm which struck much of eastern Canada and the US. The worst hit area was southern Quebec, and this is the setting Draper uses. By using two main characters, 12-year-old girl cousins, she succeeds in giving readers a sense of what happened in both rural and urban settings. With one girl primarily English-speaking, and the other from a Francophone family, we see the bilingual character of the province as well.

Alice, the city girl, lives in Montreal with her father, her mother having died three years earlier. Alice's life centres on figure skating, which she practises several hours a day, both before and after school. But competitions strike fear in her heart, and secretly she wishes she had time for friends and social activities. Her only recreation is talking by telephone or e-mail to her cousin, Sophie, who lives with her parents and nine-year-old brother, Sébastien, on a dairy farm east of Montreal.

When freezing rain causes thick ice to form across the region, much of the area is virtually paralyzed. Power is eventually cut off to over three million people, as lines and pylons buckle. Alice and Sophie must learn to act as adults and deal with the frightening conditions. Both girls, as well as Sébastien, prove resourceful in the ways they adapt to the dangerous situations. Alice faces the challenge of saving a neighbour injured by a falling tree, while Sophie and Sébastien struggle to help care for and save their herd of 50 dairy cattle.

Although the story is fictional, many actual incidents are included, and both the best and the worst of people are shown. The author shows the co-operation and generosity of many during the month-long ordeal. Dairy farmers share generators; Mennonite farmers from Ontario come to help milk cows by hand; over 7000 troops are called in; and electrical technicians from distant provinces and states arrive to help restore the power. On the other hand, the greed and thoughtlessness of other people is also shown. In some places stores are looted; houses are broken into; and generators are hoarded or stolen and sold at exorbitant prices. Several pages of author's notes at the end of the book add other historical details about the ice storm.

Ice Storm rates a definite recommendation from me for young readers 9–12. Those who enjoy it might decide to check out previous books in the "Disaster Strikes" series, four of which were also written by Penny Draper. Her earlier books dealt with the Frank Slide of 1903; the Toronto Pier Nine

fire of 1949; two shipwrecks off Vancouver Island in 1906; and the tsunami that struck the Burin Peninsula of Newfoundland in 1929. Both male and female protagonists are featured, so boys and girls alike can enjoy this series.

Picturing Alyssa by Saskatchewan author Alison Lohans is a time-travel novel for readers aged about 10–12. The main character is Alyssa Dixon, aged 11, who lives with her parents and older brother, Ethan, in North Dakota. Alyssa's family are Quakers, with pacifist beliefs, and Alyssa enjoys taking part in peace marches with her own family and her best friend, Rachel.

Rachel's family has recently suffered the loss of a baby, Charlotte, who was stillborn, and Mrs. Dixon, a seventh-grade teacher, is in a deep depression over the death. Besides coping with a mother who no longer gets out of her nightgown, or even bathes or washes her hair, Alyssa must deal with problems at school. A popular girl, Brooklynne, has started to bully her, something that gradually escalates to include both cyberspace activities and physical abuse. Another problem is her teacher, Mrs. Fraser, who dislikes Alyssa and Rachel's pacifist activities. The girls feel she is picking on them. When Mrs. Fraser assigns a genealogy project, designed to show how a student's ancestors helped to protect America's freedom, Alyssa is at a loss as to how to portray her Quaker ancestors.

As she researches information for her project, Alyssa sorts through a box of old family photos. While studying an old photo, she is suddenly propelled backwards through time, landing in Iowa in 1931. The family she meets there is a large one, with a new baby due any day, and gradually Alyssa comes to realize that they are her mother's Quaker ancestors, and that one of them is her great-grandmother. During this visit and several subsequent ones, Alyssa adjusts to living conditions in 1931 – including problems with a recalcitrant rooster – and starts to appreciate her family's history. In fact, as the troubles in the present escalate, she starts to wish she could stay in the past.

This book is different from most time-travel stories in that the people at home in the present miss Alyssa during her absences. They wonder if she has run away or been abducted, and start to worry that perhaps she has suffered abuse. Another difference is that she is actually able to convince her ancestors that she is a descendant from the future. Also, she is able to take items from the present to leave with the Iowa family, and to bring back one item from that time. There is a unique twist near the end of the book when the past and present connect.

I enjoyed this story, both the conflicts in the present and the interesting details of the historical story. The author handles the shifts between past and present well, and readers should have no difficulty with that. Occasionally the language seemed a little advanced for 10-year-olds. I also felt that perhaps the difficulties in each time frame were solved just a little too easily.

Regina writer Alison Lohans has more than 20 books for young people to her credit.

DrummerGirl by Alberta writer Karen Bass is a more mature novel, for middle teens, with a modern-day setting. The author's previous young adult books, *Run Like Jager* and *Summer of Fire*, both had World War II elements, but the new novel is set completely in the present.

The main character is Sidney Crowley, usually called Sid, aged 15. Sid's mother left the family when Sid was three, and there has been no contact with her ever since. Sid's older brother, Devin, is now away at college, so at home there are just she and her dad, whom she calls James.

At the beginning of the story, Sid is a definite tomboy who "doesn't fit the mould" at school. Her only friends there are a couple of male classmates, Taylor and Narain, and her favourite class is carpentry. Outside school, Sid's passion is playing the drums. She is determined to become the new drummer for the hottest school band, called The Fourth Down or TFD. However, a couple of the TFD members are unsure about having a female in the band, particularly one who usually dresses in a rather sloppy manner.

Just at the same time, rumours begin circulating around school that Sid is gay – which she is not. To convince the band members that she would be a suitable choice as drummer, and to convince

everyone that she is straight, she decides to undergo a complete change of wardrobe and appearance. With no mother to guide her, she enlists the help of her cousin Heather, whom she has never liked.

The sudden transformation has far-reaching results, some good, but much of it bad. Her friend Taylor – who has problems of his own, including his sexual identity – hates the change, but Sid doesn't know why. Members of TFD appear to like her drum-playing but react in unexpected and unwanted ways towards the new Sid. She has to learn to deal with them, and to decide just how much she is willing to change in order to gain acceptance with the band.

At the wedding of a cousin, Sid meets Brad Dmitri, who attends a different school, and the two immediately hit it off. But when Sid's troubles at her school escalate, she is afraid Brad will find out about them. She also has to decide how much of the 'new Sid' to retain.

This is an excellent book for middle teens. Karen Bass has worked a lot of themes into this novel – including bullying, both at school and on the Internet; sexual orientation and sexual harassment; rejection by friends or family members; and guilt over the far-reaching consequences of one's actions. Despite covering a lot of issues, the story moves at a fast pace. Teens, especially girls who love music, will enjoy it, as will those who are struggling to be accepted by their peers, or to find their own place in society.

Drummer Girl recently received a bronze medal in the Moonbeam Children's Book Awards. 🏆

Donna Firby Gamache is a writer/retired teacher from MacGregor, Manitoba. Her newest work is *Sarah: A New Beginning*, a novel for children, loosely based on the coming of her great-grandparents to Canada in 1891.

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