

Wilderness House Literary Review 1/4

EDDIE AND NELLIE a Book Report

It's a small book, a boy-sized book, measuring four and a half inches by six and three-quarters. It's hard bound, as books were in those days, in reddish-brown Buckram cloth, embossed on the front with black trim and corner scrolls, but no words, no title. The spine, decorated in the same black décor but also including several patches of faux gold, announces the title, *Frank in the Woods*, one of the Frank and Archie Series by the publisher, Porter & Coates.

Inside though, we find that Porter & Coates, of Philadelphia, apparently owns, or did own, a subsidiary imprint house in Cincinnati, Ohio, R.W. Carroll & Co., and that is the actual print source for *Frank in the Woods*. The book is "registered" — the word "copyright" apparently not in use — in the year of its publication, 1865.

The book enjoyed staying power. The front endpaper is personally dedicated in scratchy blue ink hand script: "*Presented to Eddie By Nellie On His 14th Birthday Oct 20th 1881.*" Sixteen years after publication the book is still being purchased for young male readers in the family.

But what family? There is no surname, only the given names of Eddie and Nellie. And who is Eddie to Nellie? Best guess: brother and sister. The inscription lacks the endearment that would have been included had the gift been from a favorite aunt or even Eddie's Mother, and had the book been from one of those, the familiarity of the first name of the giver would not have been so prominent. The adolescent penmanship testifies that the gift came from another juvenile. Since Eddie has just reached the manly age of fourteen, it's safe and logical to assume the gift was not from a girlfriend. No, the giver was Eddie's sister who was careful to not

display any public affection for her brother, but she did present him a favorite book.

The author is one Harry Castlemon, apparently a prolific writer whose YA works include multiple titles in The Gun-Boat Series; The Go-Ahead Series; and The Rocky Mountain Series. All of these books are individually cover priced at \$1.25 or \$1.50 and all are (were) available in boxed sets. For instance, six volumes of The Gun Boat Series were available “in a neat box” for \$7.50. Three volumes comprise the other two series, and they too come “in a neat box” for \$4.50 or \$3.75. There is no price break or premium for buying by the boxed set, but neither is there a charge for the “neat box” that contains the set. Nellie thought well enough of Eddie to give him a single volume, but not enough to spring for the complete set.

Castlemon utilizes the *Authorial Intrusion* technique as he sets the scene in the opening pages, reminding the reader of who the characters are, making the assumption that the reader has a history with his characters:

“Our scene opens in the swamp that stretches for miles north of Lawrence [Maine] A rude hut . . . ready to receive beneath its friendly shelter four boys, whom you could easily recognize as our old friends of the sailing and fishing frolics described in “The Young Naturalist.” We left them, after a hard day’s work at fox-hunting. . . . To enable the reader to understand how we come to find them here in the woods, twenty miles from any human habitation, we must conduct him [the reader] back to Lawrence, and relate a few incidents with which he [the reader] is not acquainted.”

He does so again at the conclusion, making the boys’ literary adventure into a serial similar to the genre that later intrigued movie-going youngsters, and which has passed into cinematic history just as Castlemon’s literary serial also has become passé.

The author's narrative, as might be expected for the times, is worded in formal English, but surprisingly the four young boys speak to one another in the same precise phrasing. The author perhaps sees his juvenile characters as younger versions of himself, or the way he would like to see the young people of his day conduct themselves. Harry, the boy character, not Harry the author, addresses his companions:

"Now, boys, this is the kind of life I enjoy. Doesn't it make a fellow feel comfortable, to lie here and listen to the storm, and know that he is securely sheltered? For my part, I don't see how a person can live cooped up in a city all his life."

Note that the four boys' ages are not actually delineated in the story, but before embarking on their adventure, Frank and Archie agreed that they required permission from "Aunt Mary," and then cajoled that permission from her, indicating that these are indeed young boys, possibly early teenagers. The other two boys, Harry and George, later are recorded as having obtained their parents' permission to join their cohorts. If parent or guardian approval was required, and heeded, then these four are not young men but young boys.

However, the boys are remarkably self sufficient and proficient in woodcraft. Perhaps that's indicative of not just boys but of all the people of the time. This stalwart quartet treks twenty miles a day over wilderness country, in a storm, then rises eagerly the following morning, washes their faces in snow, and cooks a camp breakfast. No fast food breakfast biscuit sandwiches here!

The boys reach the remote cabin of the old hunter, "Uncle Joe." Just whose uncle is not specified; perhaps not a real relation as much as simply everyone's uncle. But another man shares the cabin at the moment, Uncle Joe's brother, Dick, who is shown to be hero and mentor to the boys. Not an athlete on America's team; not a racecar driver; not a hip-swinging, electric guitar banging rock star, but an Indian-fighting, hunting and trapping superman of the wilds:

“He was a fine specimen of a North American trapper, fully six feet in height, with a frame that seemed capable of enduring any amount of fatigue. Thirty years among savage beasts, and still more savage men, had brought him in contact with almost every variety of danger. He had . . . taken on more than one rough-and-tumble fight with Rocky Mountain grizzlies; was very expert with the rifle; could throw a tomahawk with all the skill of an Indian; and could lasso and ride the wildest horse that ever roamed the prairie.”

The stellar resume of Dick the wilderness hero, goes on in great detail to describe more of his exploits, It's no wonder that Frank and his companions within the pages, and the newly-turned fourteen-year-old Eddie to whom Nellie presented the hard-bound adventure, it can be assumed, held Dick in such high regard. But the trapper idols did not live so poorly, at least in Harry Castlemon's stories. Another member of the trapper team is part of the cabin crew as well:

“Bob, who was one of the hired men, began to bustle about, and, after hanging the tea kettle over the fire, he drew out a pine table, and covered it with a snow-white cloth, and dishes which shone in the fire-light in a manner that would have delighted a new England housewife. Then came ham and eggs, which, with the coffee, were cooked in the fireplace, wheat bread, honey, and fresh butter and milk.”

This passage, if in today's literature, would carry a strong implication of homosexuality — multiple men living together under the same roof, remote from civilization, with at least one member of the group defined by feminine traits and work assignment. Castlemon does not overtly pursue that notion, but it would carry such implication in the modern-day permissive world. Whether Castlemon intended such a veiled implication is up to the reader, and most likely would not have presented such meaning to the juveniles to whom his stories are directed. If the author did indeed intend social commentary, political correctness had not affected his wilderness paradise. Dick's dog leads the way when he alerts

the cabin to possible danger with his barking and growling:

“ ‘Injuns ag’in, by all that’s miserable,’ . . . ‘Come back here, dog,’ said Dick. ‘I don’t blame you, ‘cause they are a mean, thievin’ race. The animal understands their natur’ as well as I do,’ he continued . . . ‘Me and him war [were] brought up to hate Injuns, an’ we believe in makin’ war on ‘em wherever we find ‘em. It’s a mighty wonder that they don’t steal Joe out of house an’ home.’ ”

Hate, racial intolerance and possibly libel— any editor today would blue-line such author’s work out before publication. And if the editor passed it, the publisher’s legal squad surely would prevail and have the offending copy removed, particularly in a young adult book that would be sure to be banned from the school library. Today’s schoolboy, today’s Eddie, must be protected from such human thought.

A pair of local Indians with whom Uncle Joe was friendly, entered the cabin and prepared to sleep on the floor in front of the fire, much to the dismay of Dick who continued denigrating the Indians as thieves and rascals. The following morning with the Indians gone early, Dick may be proven right; some fox traps are missing from inventory and of course Dick blames the loss on the two Indians. The four boys are excited over the grand adventure, trailing the Indians to retrieve their property, lead by Dick the Indian fighter.

The young boys’ precise command of language shows up again in a passage following Dick’s notice to them that the Indians were too far ahead, and they would have to run in order to catch up to them. Dick challenged the boys to keep up with him.

“We should not care about running a race with you,” answered George; “but if you will hold this gait, we will agree to keep up with you.”

It’s difficult to imagine middle teen boys of today speaking so, and one must wonder if indeed that similar aged boys of

the era of this story were so precise in thought and expression.

As for Mountain Man Dick, had he lived in present day, surely would be in social, literary and possibly legal troubles when, after catching the Indians and recovering the boys' traps, laid a severe tongue lashing on the pair and called them "painted niggers." And he didn't stop there with his abusive political incorrectness. Back at the cabin Dick regaled the boys with trapping stories that led to a tale about his favored and heirloom bear trap. It seems the coveted item of trapping equipment was stolen from time to time but once was purloined by "*a yaller-hided Mexikin Greaser.*"

To his credit, though, Dick had a talent for enduring in the wilderness and instructed the boys in woodcraft. That education for the young characters in the story no doubt empowered the young readers of the tale as well, and fourteen-year old Eddie might well have looked upon the birthday gift book as his very own adventure survival manual. Sister Nellie had given him so much more than a mere book.

Each of the twenty chapters starts with an elaborately scrolled— actually not scroll but vines and blossoms—initial letter that's seven lines high, and since the openings are not always the same word, that initial letter scrollwork varies in design, lending a noticeable artistic flair to the look of the book.

That fancy artwork initial lettering is not the only graphic treatment in the book. There are two full-page illustrations, printed one side on glossy photographic-weight paper decidedly different from the texture of the text stock, much as one of our modern-day books would treat photographs interspersed between text pages. These ink sketches are not the work of a single artist, or at least that artist does not get personal credit, but the style does indicate that the same artist created both pieces of work. The drawings are

identified by the corporate name of the art house, Milburn & Mallory, but there is no frontispiece credit line for Milburn & Mallory such as we sometimes see today for contributing artists and photographers.

Oddly enough, both drawings depict a moose. In the first, young Frank is under attack by a wounded rogue mature moose and in the later one, the boys have broken a young moose to harness, making the animal their sled horse. Artistically, the wise old experienced moose that attacked Frank looks very much like the young, and presumably more modestly antlered, moose trained to harness. An insignificant conclusion could be reached that the artist never saw a real moose.

The boys' adventures continue to include encounters with wolves, foxes, beavers, a painter [panther] and a grizzly bear, as well as the harsh winter weather, all in the company and under the guidance of mountain-man Dick. It's easy to assume young male readers of the era sharing in these literary adventures with author Castlemon's intrepid cast.

And if Castlemon's four boy character's story were not enough, those boys and the readers are treated to more of Dick's exploits back at the cozy cabin as the mountaineer storyteller regales the boys with more of his exploits in the wilderness. But obviously Frank, Archie, Harry and George are simply straw men to whom the tales seemingly are directed when the real audience is the young reader Eddie and his kind.

The adventure coming to a close, the boys head for home, each carrying his own remembrance of their escapades, and author Castlemon adds his summation as if to remind the reader as well.

There was no danger that the boys would soon forget the wild scenes through which they had passed during their short sojourn in the woods. Each had something to remind him of some exciting

hunt which he had gone through. Frank thought of his desperate struggle with the buck, during which he had received scars that would go with him through life. Harry remembered his adventure with the wolves. George shivered as he thought of his cold bath in the pond. And Archie, in imagination, was again in pursuit of the black fox.

The episode closes with the boys in dialogue with one another, embellishing their tales, but the intrusive Harry Castlemon has the last word:

“Here we will leave them, only to introduce them again in other and more stirring scenes on the Western Prairies.”

For this reviewer, it’s a broad leap from Maine to the Western Prairies, but author Castlemon is capable of broad leaps, geographically and literarily. Subsequent titles in the series have Frank placed not only on the prairie but also on the Mississippi River and in the Rocky Mountains. Obviously the young character is well traveled.

However, there is a charm to the stories, and undoubtedly they thrilled the boys of the era to whom they were directed. This was a time before motion pictures, before television, text-messaging and interactive adventure games at the arcade. They also are very substantial books, several quality grades above the dime novels that preceded them. As noted, the books are small, for smaller hands, but big in content to feed big imaginations.

Actually, the book really isn’t physically so small. At 250 pages and between 50,000 and 55,000 words, it qualifies as novel by today’s word-count standards. Eddie could have done a lot worse in fourteenth birthday presents than to receive yet another volume of Frank and Archies’ epic adventures, and was lucky indeed to have Nellie in his life, whoever she is, making his participation in those adventures possible.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The numbers on Jim Woods would show he has published more than 400 articles in many of the outdoors magazines; he solicited, assembled and edited two published anthologies, one fiction and one nonfiction; and he has published seven books. The latter includes a writing tutorial, three collections of short fiction, a memoir of his world big game hunting experiences, and two suspense/adventure novels set in South Africa.

As for his more personal resume, he was born in a roadside grassy ditch in Depression era Arkansas when his family-to-be was en route on foot to Kentucky. The Blue Grass State came a few days later, and after seventeen years, on high school graduation day, Golden California beckoned, and he traveled alone. His first real job while still in high school was not flipping burgers but the very literary position of stripping covers from last month's unsold magazines to be returned from the distributor to the publisher for credit.

California was not all that Golden, and home became the U.S. Navy that showed Jim oceans were not barriers, but gateways. With that lesson, he has set his wandering feet on six continents and was within spitting distance of Antarctica. Once in Angola he was a gunpoint prisoner of the mercenary Cubans, but as they say, that's another story.

His third novel, also in a South Africa milieu, is in work. Jim Woods lives and writes in Tucson, Arizona.

