

Children's Book Review

Cultural Hybridity in Two Historical Novels

Ketchum, Liza (2005). *Where the Great Hawk flies*. New York: Houghton Mifflin. 272 pp., ISBN: 9780618400850 (pbk). \$16.00. (Ages 12 up).

Sommerdorf, Norma (2006). *Red River girl*. New York: Holiday House. 192 pp., ISBN: 9780823419036 (pbk). \$16.95. (Ages 8-12).

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Hard physical labor characterized the teenage years of early Americans, and we experience this breadth of labor in two young adult novels, Norma Sommerdorf's *Red River Girl* and Liza Ketchum's *Where the Great Hawk Flies*. Josette, in *Red River Girl*, has a French father, and her Ojibwe mother has just died. In 1847, she and her family make a hazardous journey by oxcart from Canada to St. Paul, Minnesota. Along the way, Josette does the exhausting work of butchering buffalo, drying the meat, and curing hides. She also collects wild rice in a canoe, just as her ancestors did. Josette cooks, cleans, cares for her younger brothers, and serves as an interim schoolteacher, with barely a complaint. In addition, when a Dakota hunting party visits their camp, she functions as an interpreter.

Josette has a few moments to enjoy her Métis (French/Native American) heritage in the form of dancing and storytelling but, mostly, she works and develops a love for a young teamster named Denis. This historical novel is based on the life of an unnamed Métis girl who appears in the diary of Harriet Bishop, a schoolteacher in early St. Paul. The mysterious and talented young woman, described in the diary as "a large half-breed girl," piqued the author's interest and spurred her to imagine her life within an entire novel.

Where the Great Hawk Flies has two main characters, two adolescent boys and their stories are told in alternating chapters. Hiram is a tow-headed European American, whereas Daniel's mother is Pequot and his father emigrated from England. Daniel's mother, who is the local doctor in their corner of Vermont, left her native village when she married. While Hiram fetches water, chops wood, and mends cabins, Daniel uses native skills that he learned from his relatives to catch fish by hand, track animals, and build a wigwam.

Several years earlier, during the Revolutionary War, Hiram had survived an Indian raid upon his village. His uncle was captured in the raid, and Hiram harbors a deep-seated prejudice against Daniel, even though the Pequot were not involved in the raid. Hiram also suffers from post-traumatic stress syndrome in the form of panic attacks.

Daniel, naturally, is hurt and angry that his new neighbor calls him names. He is also conflicted when his Pequot grandfather visits and wants to make him a shaman. Daniel loves his grandfather but does not feel a calling to be a healer. Initially, he shuns the wampum belt that is a gift from his grandfather. This novel is also based on a true story and draws on the experiences of the author's ancestors, one of whom was a Pequot doctor married to an Englishman.

While Josette is comfortable with her biracial identity, Daniel is in turmoil. Josette is surrounded by other Métis but Daniel, his mother, sister, and visiting grandfather are the only non-Whites in their community. Josette is emotionally stable. She does encounter some tragedy in the form of illness and a drowning, but she bounces back. Readers will learn more about history and culture than about adolescent psychology in *Red River Girl*. Daniel, on the other hand, struggles with his identity, and his father and grandfather do not help matters by arguing over leadership of the family.

The narrative of the boys is harder to follow than that of Josette. *Red River Girl* is written in diary format, which makes for easy reading, but *Where the Great Hawk Flies* includes dialect and poems that separate different parts of the book. *Where the Great Hawk Flies* is also a longer book that uses a smaller font size. Both books translate native terms in their appendices.

American middle-class readers will likely be vicariously exhausted by the characters' hard work, but they may reflect gratefully on their own comparatively easy home lives. Instead of campfires or wood stoves for warmth or cooking, they have thermostats and microwaves. Instead of inkpots and feather quills for writing, they have computer keyboards. Although the readers may develop a deeper appreciation for their modern conveniences, they will notice that characters in these novels live in close-knit communities where people depend on each other for survival. The communities that are remote from isolating, contemporary suburbs.

Josette, who is mature for her age, is an admirable character, but the stealing and name calling of the immature Hiram are troublesome. We worry about the effects of his pranks and insults on Daniel. Of the two novels, the angst-ridden characters in *Where the Great Hawk Flies* strike this reader as more realistic, but *Red River Girl* excels in its thick descriptions of a buffalo stampede, the broad Mississippi River, and the pale soapstone hills of St. Paul. Sommerdorf's prose is loveliest when she describes Josette's new home, beside a cool spring, atop a high hill overlooking a bend in the river. Her new home could not be more inviting; it is a soothing scene.

Both books reach credible, realistic conclusions. Josette does not marry her great love but balances personal ambition with sacrifice. We leave her assisting the local schoolteacher and hoping to attend college in Montreal. The

ending is not romantic but it is hopeful. We leave Josette as we first met her ... hard at work.

Where the Great Hawk Flies concludes with a note of reconciliation: Hiram and Daniel, former enemies, manage to be on speaking terms. Hiram has overcome his prejudice against Indians, and Daniel has found his true calling as a carpenter. Daniel has also made peace with both sides of his heritage. In our final glimpse of the two boys, they cooperate to build a canoe. It is not only the teens who learn lessons in *Where the Great Hawk Flies*. Daniel's grandfather discovers that it is actually the girl in the family, Daniel's sister, who is called to be a shaman, and he overcomes his gender bias.

Sommerdorf is a new novelist, while Ketchum has many books to her name. Read together in a classroom situation, their two novels with biracial characters will succeed in generating much discussion about history, geography, and cultural identity. One novel focuses on girls; the other on boys. They are set in the Mid-West and the Northeast, along a riverbank and in the deep woods. We travel south with Josette but stay put with Hiram and Daniel.

The title of *Red River Girl* is straightforward. Josette begins her life on the banks of the Red River in Canada and ends up living along the Mississippi. The significance of the other title is more complex. Hiram avoided capture during the raid by fortuitously following a hawk, which led him to a good hiding place. It turns out that Daniel followed the same hawk to another nearby hiding place, during the very same raid, a symbol of their interlinked, albeit divided, existences. Liza Ketchum magnificently weaves together history, poetry, and symbolism to impart her vision of inter-dependence within a multicultural world—a vision shared by Norma Sommerdorf.