

## CHILDREN'S BOOKS

# A Tragicomic Tale of Wanderlust and the Fur Trade, Told by a Squirrel

By Lenora Todaro

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The writer E. L. Doctorow — who, in “Ragtime” and other novels, pioneered a new way of presenting historical material in fiction — once said in an interview: “The historian will tell you what happened. The novelist will tell you what it felt like.” This kind of novelist deposits the reader in another era to walk in someone else’s shoes. History plus empathy equals artistry.

The impulse to immerse young people in epochs other than their own drives such books as Avi’s Crispin series, about an orphan in 14th-century England; Laurie Halse Anderson’s “Seeds of America” trilogy, about enslaved teenagers during the Revolutionary War; and Margi Preus’s Newbery-winning debut, “Heart of a Samurai” (2010), about a Japanese boy on an American whaling ship in the 1840s.

Preus’s protagonists tend to be young people straddling two cultures. Like Manjiro in “Samurai” and the Norwegian immigrant Astri in “West of the Moon,” they’re bighearted adventurers and seekers of justice. Some are based on real people; others are inhabitants of real experiences, as in “Village of Scoundrels,” about French teenagers who hide Jews during World War II. Always they dive into the whorl of time and give us a fresh perspective.

Preus’s charming eighth novel, **THE LITTLEST VOYAGEUR** (Margaret Ferguson Books/Holiday House, 176 pp., \$16.99; ages 7 to 10), features a twist: Her protagonist inhabits not only a different time period, but also a different species. Jean Pierre Petit Le Rouge is a red squirrel caught between “fur-bearers” like himself and 18th-century French Canadian voyageurs.

The bulk of the story — accompanied by Cheryl Pilgrim’s fetching pencil drawings — takes place on a river, as eight men, each comically named Jean (Jean Paul, Jean Luc, et al.), journey from Montreal to a trading post on Lake Superior, where they will barter with the Anishinaabeg. Having smelled “wanderlust, a call to adventure of the grandest sort,” Le Rouge hides in the voyageurs’ canoe, curious about what new goods they seek. He sings with the men as they paddle, but all they hear is “chirring,” a sound so annoying they threaten to turn him into “squirrel stew.”

Le Rouge’s squirrel’s-eye view makes the narration intimate: “I heard the loons singing their sad songs to each other, from lakes far apart. And I heard the crew discussing my fate.” He finds refuge in the pocket of Jean Gentille, a book lover and kind soul among gruff traders.

Throughout, there’s lilting nature writing, like this description of what Le Rouge sees from a tree: “Below me, the river split into many glittering waterways, divided by a confusion of islands and peninsulas.”

When the voyageurs arrive at Lake Superior, Le Rouge discovers they will be trading for “the skins of my animal brethren.” Horrified, he riffs on Thoreau’s “Walden” (which wouldn’t be written for 62 years): “I am going into the woods,’ I chirred to my crew, ‘to live deliberately.’”

There he meets Monique, a flying squirrel, and together they rouse a posse of disparate, fur-bearing animals, from wolves to chipmunks, to join their protest against the voyageurs’ trade in skins — a plan that turns prankish but offers a contemporary message against cruelty to animals, leaving the reader wondering if we humans have progressed at all.

In an afterword, Preus offers a pronunciation guide for the French phrases sprinkled throughout. She explains the role of the Anishinaabeg traders, and the fate of beavers in particular — victims of a fetish for fur hats among European fashionistas.

The novel bristles with details from the world of 18th-century fur trappers, such as what was needed to make a canoe (birch bark, spruce root and pine pitch) or insect repellent (bear fat and skunk urine).

Preus plumps up these historical facts with flesh — and leaves the reader knowing what it might feel like to be a smart, intrepid squirrel finding his way as an adventurer while standing up for his fellow creatures, in the company of rough-and-tumble men all named Jean.