

Times Colonist

Books for Young People

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First Nations artifact takes young voyager back in time

Hannah and the Spindle Whorl

by Carol Anne Shaw

Ronsdale Press, 244 pages

Review by Catherine J. Johnson

“The raven can travel between different worlds, coming and going into the darkest places to bring back visions and instructions for both the seeker and healer. Ravens are figures of magic and symbolize change. Messages that lie beyond time are nestled in the black wings of the raven, and can be read only by those who are worthy of having the knowledge.”

Twelve-year-old Hannah discovers she is worthy of that knowledge after she finds a First Nations artifact—a spindle whorl—in a cave by her home in Cowichan Bay. Archeologists from Victoria come to investigate and, with Hannah and her new friend Max, uncover a pictograph, learning that the site was once the village of Tl’ulpalus, a thriving Cowichan community.

It’s when Hannah visits the cave later, alone, that she is whirled 150 years back through time and meets Yisella, a Cowichan girl her age, whose mother owns the spindle whorl.

Shaw’s passion for First Nations history is evident throughout, from “the million different sights and smells” of the longhouse, to the thieving of personal items by European settlers looking for “curios.” Natural history is not given quite the same attention, with an incorrect squirrel species; sea otter behaviour attributed to local river otters; and crow calls attributed to ravens. And it was curious that Hannah’s home was consistently referred to as a “houseboat” when details point to it being a float house, not a boat. These slips do not detract from the compelling storyline though—Shaw knows how to keep it moving.

Hannah’s mysterious trip through time is an absorbing adventure, including her near-death experience in a raging river; an encounter with a Sasquatch (or was it?); an unexpected creative gift revealed; a tragic smallpox outbreak; and friendship, including Hannah’s cat Chuck who puts up with Cheerios being stuck to his nose.

The narrative bumps over occasional superfluous details, and there are a few confusing passages, but Shaw’s deft use of interior monologue makes up for it: she moulds Hannah’s quirky character and adventures into a believable, first-hand experience for readers. Hannah’s journal entries impart information in age-appropriate language and further contribute to credibility (which is important considering this is time travel!).

The story zings along, conveying wholesome work ethics, acceptance of others, fitting in as a minority, and dealing with loss and grief.

Hannah discovers there was fun stuff to do before computer games and TV, although she does wow the villagers with her iPod and digital camera. She is an intelligent girl with an upbeat spirit and a lovable way of describing things: "My pen is one of those hokey ones you get at cheesy souvenir shops: a killer whale swims back and forth when you tip the pen up..."

Hannah refers to her dad as a "creative genius," and tells him, "I'm a writer's daughter. I'm programmed to keep a journal. It's genetic."

Hannah and the Spindle Whorl is engrossing good fun and would be a treat for young (and young at heart) readers this Christmas.

Catherine J. Johnson is a Cowichan Valley author and editor, former float house dweller and naturalist.