Clarion Review

Young Adult Fiction

Check Mate!
Chris Milligan
David Smith
FriesenPress
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Three Stars (out of Five)

Middle-grade kids with a taste for high-seas adventure will like this rollicking tale.

Can sworn enemies become friends? Can a twelve-year-old survive life on the high seas, both physically and mentally? Although David and Guillaume, young protagonists in Chris Milligan and David Smith's *Check Mate!*, each join their vessels for vastly different reasons, both boys form friendships and learn important lessons while struggling for survival.

David Goodchild is a twelve-year-old cabin boy from London traveling on the *Royal Hudson's Bay* under Captain Nicholas Smithsend. Guillaume Bisaillon is a twelve-year-old "petit mousse" on the French warship *Le Pelican*, serving under Captain Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville. Both boys are excited and a bit hesitant to leave their families, but Goodchild has no choice as he must work to help his mother after his father's untimely death. Bisaillon goes to sea due to his love of sailing and his fascination with the ships and sailors he meets in his hometown. Neither boy is aware of how much he will see and how life-changing his voyage will be.

Because of the unrest between the British and the French, when the two ships meet, their orders are to "take, burn or destroy" the other. The French make the crew of the *Hudson's Bay* prisoners on their own ships, and the two boys from different worlds meet for the first time.

More of a novella than a novel, this story will appeal to middle-grade readers who are fascinated by adventures at sea and the mechanics of sailing and warfare in the late 1600s. While the story is brief, young American readers may find it challenging due to the instances of French, Mohawk, and Inuktitut languages that slow down the reading. There are also extensive chapter endnotes at the conclusion of the story, which may intimidate most casual middle-grade

readers. That said, the authors go to great lengths to explain the historical events of the time period and detail the famous shipmen from both France and England.

Character development comes primarily from the events at sea. Both boys are already quite mature for their age when they begin their journeys, but as they witness the struggles and deaths at sea, they grow into young men. Because of the brevity of the story, there is more tell than show with an epilogue detailing what becomes of the boys.

Illustrations are used throughout the story. Each boy is represented by a symbol—a lion for England and a fleur-de-Lis for France. This is helpful to track who is speaking when, particularly when the battle begins. The other illustrations are reproduced from various sources or rather crudely drawn. The maps are helpful in anticipating when the boys' meeting will occur. Unfortunately, a good deal of the words that go along with the maps are difficult to read.

While uneven, *Check Mate!* may find a place with educators at the middle-grade level who are looking for stories of rollicking times on the high seas for their adventure readers. With some guidance, this book could find itself in just the right hands.

Lynn Evarts