Clarion Review

Historical

Come Ride the Rails with Smokestack Jack
Don E. Shank
CreateSpace
978-1-4776-6480-3
Three Stars (out of Five)

Come Ride the Rails with Smokestack Jack, by Don E. Shank, is a historical fantasy about a young boy named Larry and his encounter with a puppet named Smokestack Jack. Jack escorts Larry through the United States, teaching him the history behind the great nation as they experience adventures and travel into the wilderness on a train carrying other fascinating passengers. The narrative is framed by the story of Larry's loss of his parents, his adoption by his Uncle Ben, and his accident. As he fades in and out of a coma, readers are also held captive as they wonder whether Larry will ever return to the real world.

Shank builds emotion well, causing his readers to forget that certain characters are simply puppets and that Larry is merely dreaming. For instance, when the puppet Sophie becomes soaked in a downpour, Larry's panic draws the reader in. Shank writes, "'The dryness … gotta get her dry, but the joint's working,' [Larry] breathed heavily aloud. 'Need ointment for the eye sockets,' he noted, 'and the jaw and neck too.'" The blend of mental dialogue and physical description combine to create a tense and emotional scene.

The premise of Shank's plot is fascinating, and through vivid storytelling and an approachable tone, he creates a book that quickly engages the reader. In the description of Larry's bike accident, Shank writes, "He hit the board hard, his front tire raising and striking a two-inch splinter on the way." The quick, snappy vocabulary transports readers through the action and holds their attention.

Unfortunately, Shank's foreword, which attempts to set the stage for his unique story frame, does the rest of his book few favors. Frequent run-on sentences and an awkward presentation make it difficult to follow. Shank writes, "And that is assumed by Don to be what Washington picked up in history he personally made or knew about from being on the scene in the early days—which might be the source of the history." The convoluted sentence structure

and unclear pronoun references create confusion from the outset and undermine the potential power of the story that follows.

That said, the formatting of the book is clean and accessible with easily readable font, appropriate and consistent spacing, and a sharp, colorful cover. The illustration on the front is an almost comical-looking sketch and implies that the tale is geared toward children. This is confusing because a young audience would likely find it difficult to follow the multiple layers of plot and framing. On the other hand, the story line and characters would hardly be consistently appealing to adults. Shank's audience is, unfortunately, a bit unclear.

Overall, *Come Ride the Rails with Smokestack Jack* is an entertaining tale that serves as an effective vessel for teaching readers about the history of the United States.

Emily Adams