

Solomon Snow and the Stolen Jewel

Kaye Umansky

Candlewick Press (Mar 13, 2007)

\$12.99 (256pp)

978-0-7636-2793-5

Solly begins his day among underwear, arguing parents, and the constant rain of England: "...drab moorland rolled away into the distance...Everything wet. Wet and broken. And the savings gone." Pa has used the last of the savings for a trip to the ale house—having confused a red tin for a green one. "I'm colored blind ... It come on quick." Solly will leave this comic confusion and begin a mock-Victorian venture to the sea coast that is filled with intrigue, thievery, daring escapes, and well intentioned plans that go astray.

Solomon Snow is off on his second adventure with his cranky, but literate, friend Prudence. Prudence's father has been imprisoned for poaching and is waiting to be sent by convict ship to Black Island. Leaving their home town of Boring, they ride in Solly's donkey cart filled with "Old Mother Rust's unmentionables." Along the way they pick up the Infant Prodigy and devise "a fool proof" plan to free Prudence's father.

At the same time the two heroes begin their rescue mission, the villain, Dr. Calamari, sends his faithful servant and a dwarf to steal a priceless ruby that carries the curse from an Egyptian pharaoh. Both stories run in parallel until they intersect in a fog-filled night, with daring escapes and mistaken identities that lead to the startling climax.

This is the second in the Solomon Snow series. This series fits in with the numerous children books that Umansky has written in the last twenty years after working as a teacher and musician. Her humorous "Pongwiffy" series about an unkempt witch has been adapted for television in her native England and Australia.

Humor is the strength of this story that moves at a fast pace. There are many jokes and puns for young readers, and always an odd turn. When Solly purchases a cart for the family laundry business he asks about "...the dilapidated box on wheels." The seller replies, "Less to go wrong." The thinness of the donkey is a concern—the seller replies: "Small appetite. Cheap to feed." After he purchases the cart and donkey, Solly learns that the donkey only moves when a sea chantey is sung.

Along with the quirky humor there is a cast of colorful and odd characters. The Infant Prodigy is a circus star and singer of "Tragic songs" with an insatiable appetite for "sweeties." Other circus performers are: Miss Pandora Constantinople, Wee Willie Whippersnap, and Amazing Flambo, Eater of Fire. And there is the comic Shorty, a thieving one-eyed dwarf who partakes of the adventure in a shoeless clown suit. Unfortunately he has incurred the curse of the ruby—with slap-stick comic effect.

Kaye Umansky has written a "jewel" of a book for young readers. This is a story that twists and turns with humor and surprises—and as Solly says at the end: "It's got all the right ingredients."

LARRY NEITZERT (April 10, 2007)

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