Chapter 25

East, West, and Finding Yourself in Caroline Lawrence’s “Roman Mysteries”

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Introduction

Caroline Lawrence’s “Roman Mysteries” series uses an ancient Roman setting to explore themes of identity for her four young detective characters. While they do not visit Eastern Europe, ideas of East and West, centre and periphery, are important in making sense of their journeys, both literal and emotional. This popular series of detective novels for children aged eight and above was written in the United Kingdom between 2001 and 2009 by an American living in London, and has also become a well-received BBC television series.1

The theme of “finding yourself”—going away in order to grow up and gain self-knowledge—has a particular importance in children’s literature.2 While one can argue that it lies at the heart of much literature, children are seen as not-yet-complete humans, who need to develop more than adults. So E.L. Konigsburg, in From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler (1967) sends Claudia Kincaid to live in New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art in order to better understand herself, to find the something different inside her which allows her to continue living her life. So Lucy goes through the wardrobe to Narnia, and Bilbo goes on a journey in The Hobbit. Arguably, this theme is already

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1 The BBC series consisted of 10 episodes, released in 2007–2008, directed by Paul Marcus (5 episodes, 2007), Jill Robertson (3 episodes, 2008), and Marcus D.F. White (2 episodes, 2008). This article focuses on the books; the television adaptations are interesting, but they do not follow the full trajectory of the narrative in the books, and stop after ten episodes rather than seventeen, at The Slave-girl of Jerusalem. This suggests that the decentred final sequence of the series is more challenging than the earlier episodes and harder to sell.

present in classical epic: Odysseus's adventures lead to a deeper understanding of what it means to come home, and Aeneas must journey until he can find and define a new home. In modern adult fiction, too, the idea of finding yourself remains a key theme: romantic plot lines focus on finding yourself by finding your true other half; while for children, finding a secure family functions in a similar way.

In Roman thought, ideas of East and West were a potent part of the rhetoric of belonging. Rome is both the centre of the world and the locus of Western identity.3 Aeneas moves from East to West, from Trojan and Phrygian (and Phoenician) femininity, and oriental mystique, to down-to-earth Italian and Roman masculinity.4 Similarly, but in reverse, Lucan's Pompey moves from Rome to the East where he is weakened, feminised, and finally destroyed.5 This is, of course, to oversimplify: were the Greeks still counted as East for Rome?6 Probably: Asia Minor certainly was. The Greeks themselves could associate the

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