

My Oxfordian Bookshelf

A Question of Will

by Lynne Kositsky

To my knowledge, *A Question of Will* is the only book for younger readers ever written on the Shakespeare Authorship Question. Published in 2000, *A Question of Will*, stands far above its Stratfordian competition such as *William Shakespeare* in the Usborne Young Reading series (2008).

Surprisingly, it was never reviewed by an Oxfordian publication. This is a real shame because changing minds about William of Stratford and Edward de Vere and the relationship of each to the plays and poems of Shakespeare has been, and will continue to be, a long-term project. It should start in high school where, coincidentally, this book begins.

Kositsky's main character, Perin Willoughby – known through most of the novel as Willow – is also the narrator. The premise of the book is that she is a Canadian girl, attending school in England. While on a school trip to the restored Globe theatre in London, she slides backward through time to 1595. Much of the action takes place in and around London's first playhouse, the Theatre. Willow addresses the first boy she encounters:

“Scuse me,” I whispered, mouse-like, before he drifted out of range. He made a fed-up sound like chalk squeaking, and stopped a second time.

“Could you tell me the way to the Globe?” Sheez how dumb could I get? Here I was in the middle of history somewhere, still one rose short of

This new column for *The Oxfordian* examines an overlooked or otherwise forgotten book that deals with the seventeenth Earl of Oxford or issues surrounding the authorship question. By definition, books featured here will not be newly-published. Reviews of new Oxfordian publications will continue to be featured by *Brief Chronicles* and the *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter*. Any reader who would like to write an appreciation of a book sitting on their own Oxfordian bookshelf, is invited to contact the editor and propose a title. This issue, Chris Pannell examines *A Question of Will* by Lynne Kositsky, published by Roussan Publishers, in Montreal.

a bouquet, and trying to find my way to a playhouse that maybe didn't even exist yet. In fact, everything was so weird, I couldn't even be sure I was in England.

“The Globe?” Not a flicker of understanding lit up those baby blues.

“Yes, you know, Shakespeare's theatre.”

He must have understood that at least, cos suddenly he was making noises like a pop can exploding. “Will Shakspere, you mean? Certainly, certainly; you'll find him at the Theatre.”

Heavenly creatures, wasn't that just what I'd asked him in the first place?

(Kositsky 14-15)

From this interplay between the modern and Elizabethan world, comes a great deal of the novel's energy and tension. Willow represents the modern mind in the sixteenth century, yet her vivacious and infectious narrative transforms this ‘fish-out-of-water’ story into much more than the question of how will she get back to her own time. She manages, against perilous odds, to thrive by means of her intelligence, her 20th century knowledge of business and human relations, and a little psychology.

Travelling in disguise as a boy, she sees her share of unwanted romantic attention from de Vere's daughter Bridget. She encounters Will Shakspere and quickly falls into the role of his servant. She also becomes part of the acting company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, largely on the strength of four years of dance lessons and the critically important fact that she can read. She experiences her share of bullying. She observes discrimination against Jews, the ingrained misogyny of the times, and the easy way in which the upper classes will take whatever they want from their social inferiors:

But the lady didn't care one iota. She abandoned [Pyke] and Blossom in the hall, and, as soon as we were out of sight, she tucked up to me like I was an orange, squeezing herself against my skinny body like she was trying to extract juice from me (46).

The hidden joy of this book is the way the language pops in such passages. Kositsky handles the Elizabethan idiom very well. In the early pages, Willow must very quickly figure it out too: what she calls “the lacy language.” We are also engaged by the very reasonable idea that some of Willow's twentieth-century speech will rub off on those closest to her.

For many things, she relies on her mentor and older-boy guardian, John Pyke (whom she quickly dubs The Pykester). Thinking like an entrepreneur, Willow convinces Pyke they can overcome their chronic poverty by establishing a business to sell what we would recognize as French fries during performances at the Theatre.

“Let us go via Cheapside,” I advised, the doggam puppy gnawing on my shoes like they were chew toys. I gave her a sneaky kick when John Pyke wasn’t looking, and she bared her teeth at me. “That way, if you’ve got some cash, we can buy some potatoes, and start frying them up for the spectators.”

“Sure thing,” replied my friend, for the umpteenth time that week. Another apprentice, a little prig named Thomas, bent his head our way before getting on with his work. I could have sworn he was listening.

And I’d have to warn John Pyke about tongue-tickling a phrase to death. “Say OK Pykster.” He neatly obliged. “Good stuff,” I replied. “Let’s go” (41).

The sights and smells of London are vivid. Willow’s difficulties of dressing as a boy and hiding her body in the close confines of her shared bed are done well enough to make the reader squirm.

Of particular interest to Oxfordians will be Kositsky’s portrait of Edward de Vere, who appears several times in the book.

I was still majorly puzzled when I thought of Vere, cos although he was obviously immensely popular with the crowd, and though John Pyke had given him a good say-so, he remained a sinister mystery to me. I thought back, remembering his visit to the Theatre. Dark, stooped and inscrutable, he hung out in the gallery like a Mafia boss. I was sure that he, not my blockhead master, had to be the brains, the man behind any plot, and I only prayed it didn’t involve killing anyone (40).

Twice Willow has to be the go-between, ferrying a play manuscript from de Vere’s residence to Shakspere. On another occasion she meets de Vere in her room, the room she shares with Will Shakspere:

As I reached our bed-chamber, I spied the faint flicker of light within. Had our landlady kindly left a candle to light our way, or was some dude loitering there, waiting to have a word with Shakspere? Only one way to find out. I trickled open the door.

Vere. Verily. Another of the brown paper packages was in his hand. Lounging on the bed, wrinkling his nose like he smelled a bad, bad smell. Which, this being Shakspere’s room, he did.

“Ah, Willow,” was all he said, but he mouthed my name, sadly, slowly, and the air squirted out of me like toothpaste from a tube. My scrumptious victory in the Theatre crashed and burned. As usual, I was a flop.

“Yes sir? Perhaps I offended you in some way with my performance?”

“No child, not in the least; your portrayal was more than passable, though I never understand our custom of following a tragedy as painful and

poignant as that of *Romeo and Juliet* with a prancing jig. Think of the message Willow, the research and the countless hours that contribute to the creation of such a work.”

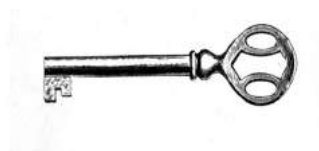
Wow! He’d admitted it. Or as good as. Hinted he was the playwright. Now I was almost positive he’d scribbled this play, and all the others too.

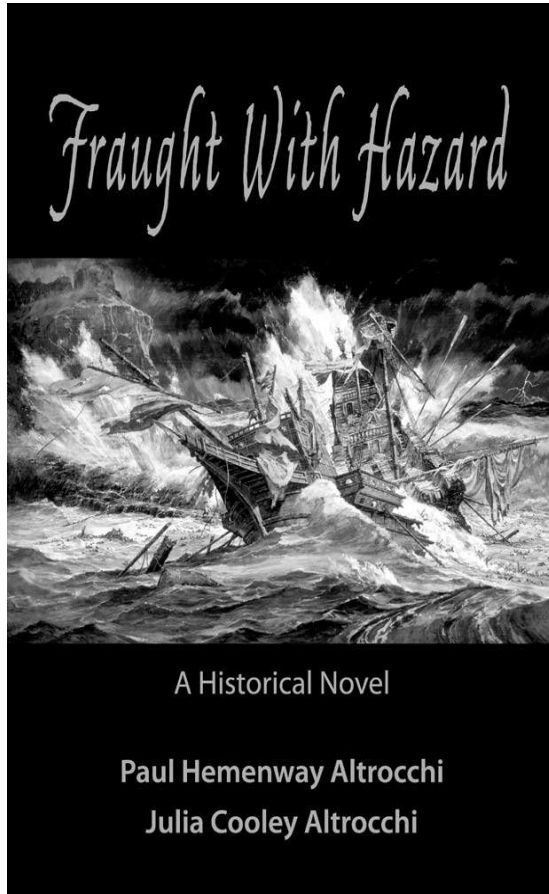
(66-67)

Willow’s involvement with the authorship question begins when she hears – and becomes fed-up hearing – a classmate in her 20th century school arguing with their Stratfordian teacher about who wrote the plays. As early as page two, the students are expressing their frustration with studying *Macbeth*, and Willow begins as at least an agnostic on the question of authorship. Through her experience in the past – and because at a very early point, she has been thrust into a stage role, by Burbage – she comes to a much deeper understanding of many aspects of the plays.

Lastly, the book succeeds because its dramatization of the SAQ and its principals – Shakspeare, Edward de Vere, Burbage, Queen Elizabeth – is not heavy-handed. It seems like a book a Stratfordian could enjoy because of these characterizations and Kositsky’s gifts with language exert more force, than any message the story carries. The minor characters – lesser-known figures like Willow’s friend John Pyke, a thief named Gabe Spencer, the lustful Bridget Vere, and the benign Mistress Lewes – all serve to make the novel’s progress smooth and entertaining. The lost play Cardenio even makes an appearance.

Willow does make it back to her own time, to the classroom where she began, and there is a very surprising outcome to her time-travels, which I won’t reveal. The book concludes with a five-page afterward, where Kositsky places her fiction in the context of the Shakespeare Authorship question. When this book was published, reviewers were uniformly positive on it as a recommendation for teen and young adult readers. One called it ‘entertaining, educational, and amusing.’ Another identified *A Question of Will* as ‘an excellent addition to the recent abundance of Shakespeare stories; a rich, quick read that could fill requests for sci-fi, comedy, or historical fiction in one fell swoop.’





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- Alexander Waugh, English author of *Fathers and Sons: The Autobiography of a Family*

Amazon.com Books: hardcover \$27.95; softcover \$17.95

Errata (The Oxfordian 16)

We would like to apologize for and correct errata that appeared in *The Oxfordian*, Volume 16 (2014).

On page four, in the second to last paragraph: “William Shaksper . . . got Anne Hathaway pregnant [in 1582], and so had to marry her. They had twins a few months later.”

In fact, it was Shaksper’s daughter Susannah who arrived a few months later. The twins were born two years after Susannah.

On page eleven, in the second paragraph: “The poems’ subsequently pirated publication by Thomas Thorpe in 1607 under the title *Shake-speare’s Sonnets* with a teasing dedication to a “Mr. W.H.” . . .”

In fact, the sonnets were published in 1609 under the title *Shake-Speares Sonnets*.

On page seventy-three, in the second paragraph: “[Richard] Roe’s book is illustrated with his and Stephanie Hopkins Hughes eloquent photographs captioned with witty and often illuminating comments.”

In fact, Hughes did not contribute photos to Richard Roe’s book. Pictures were contributed by Sylvia Holmes.