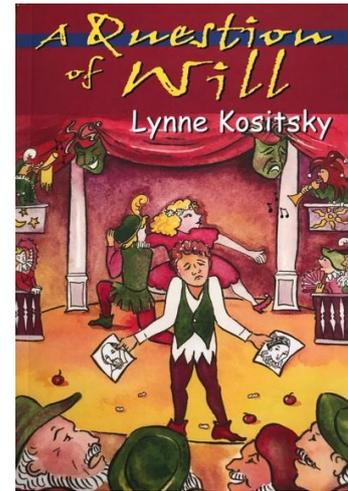


***A Question of Will* by Lynne Kositsky**

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Review by Alice Crampin

I greatly admired the book that Lynne Kositsky wrote with Roger Stritmatter, *On the Date, Sources and Design of Shakespeare's The Tempest*, so I was very interested to read this book for young people, which aims to introduce them to the Shakespeare Authorship Question in an entertaining way. It was first published in 2001 by Roussan Publishers; an audio version has been produced by Author's Republic (available at www.audiobooks.com and Google Play); and now it is back in print, thanks to a new edition that has been published by the Shakespeare Oxford Fellowship. It is also available from www.amazon.co.uk so could now reach a wide audience. I am one of its new readers.



The format is a time travel story, which children with an interest in history often find very appealing. A bored and somewhat alienated Canadian girl on a trip to London with her unfriendly Shakespeare class is suddenly transported back in time to the theatre milieu of the 1590s. Whereupon, her character completely changes, and she becomes feisty and filled with initiative, as she battles with the challenges presented to a girl who is pretending to be a boy actor, in a dangerous, dirty and unfamiliar London. Perhaps she becomes too feisty? In no time at all she is deluging her chief companion with pet names, and bringing modern ideas of fast food to the theatre. Then, she goes on to take Queen Elizabeth's presence quite in her stride. She calls the monarch 'Queenie', and then, to amuse the court, she starts introducing theatre awards called 'Bessies'. She uses a lot of Canadian slang throughout 'the whole doggam story', and I'm not sure how clear this would be to young readers from elsewhere. There is much word play, too, designed to appeal to a specific age group:-

"Lugging the, well, luggage"

"The merchants were, well, merchandising again"

"The palace spruced with, well, spruce boughs"

"The dark got, well, darker" ... etc.

In the course of her adventures the young heroine comes up against the open secret of the day; that the aristocratic Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, is the author of the plays for which Will Shakspere is the front man. In this telling, de Vere is complicit in this subterfuge, and herein lies one problem for any author who takes this approach. You have to take decisions on issues where Oxfordian scholars are still divided, and you are imposing certainty where there is none, in order to attract young people to a particular view. A fixed picture is presented, rather than an introduction to a fascinating puzzle. I think this could be a turn off for some children. Elements of the deliberate fantasy in this story are so outrageous that the de Vere part could get dumped, in a young person's mind, along with those Bessies.

However, there is a clever and rather satisfying endnote, when the heroine is returned to her present. She had begged her sixteenth-century pal not to let de Vere's secret outlast him. She warns of the obfuscated future.

Back in the present, she finds there is now one difference from when she left. The conventional wisdom has changed, and the old are now teaching the young that, of course, Edward de Vere was the greatest playwright of all time. The visit to the past has well and truly delivered for the future!

The new edition of the book was distributed in November 2019 at the Convention of the US National Council of teachers of English, to encourage teachers to use it in their classrooms. What an encouraging sign of changing times over there!