

Strapping Young Lads

a novel by Brian Dunning

Synopsis

Innocent prep schooler Corky Bumberton is being dragged into yet another caper by his scheming friend Hewlett. This time, the plan is to win the attentions of a lovely brunette through the "borrowing" of a time-traveling backpack developed by her grand-uncle the Colonel and his friend the Professor. The price? Steal the Colonel's important scientific manuscript on time and space, and deliver it into the hands of the Colonel's arch enemy, the Poet. Corky's reluctance is rendered moot when he suddenly finds the world--and history--dramatically changed.

Corky and Hewlett learn the true nature of what has happened when they find the present day, and the world as they know it, gone; and find themselves sailors aboard a wooden fighting ship beset by pirates. Corky learns that the ship's captain is a distant relative of the Colonel's, and has written a scientific document that appears to be part of a puzzle. But Hewlett's acidity nearly gets them keelhauled to a premature end.

The instant Corky and Hewlett steal the document, they are taken to a bizarre future where a warmed Earth is a vast flooded swamp, and the vestiges of humanity fight a jungle war against an ever more bizarre enemy, wrought from the Poet's misuse of the Colonel's manuscript. History has been shattered, and Corky must now assemble the rest of the puzzle to restore the normal world. Corky and Hewlett are captured by Cyndy, a beautiful but deadly jungle commando, and pegged as spies of the Poet, who is reviled as the enemy of humanity. Corky manages to escape, and he, Hewlett, and now Cyndy are whisked away to yet another world...

On a tropical Pacific island, a turn of the century British researcher struggles to unlock the secrets held by a native tribe. When Corky, Cyndy, and Hewlett are dragged in, bound with vines, the natives put them to the ultimate test. Again, Corky finds that the researcher is a distant relative of the Colonel's, and the document provided by the pirate captain happens to complete his research. A puzzle piece is completed, and the first step to restoring history is taken.

But all is not yet well, as the three wind up in the West: the year, 1888; the place: Coffin, Nevada. They find that a beautiful jungle commando from the future is a handy asset in a town full of gunslingers, banditos, and surly bartenders. Hewlett's annoying nature takes Cyndy nearly to the breaking point, but she grows increasingly drawn to Corky's honest and pure (though admittedly naive) nature.

The most flamboyant of the Colonel's forebears, snake-oil salesman and frontier sham-peddler Avalanche Wheeler, reveals that he has lost the family estate through his gambling debts. But he is no dummy. He follows the three and learns their secret; steals their backpack intending to profit from it, and leaves them stranded in a town full of rough characters, with no money, and no escape.

Neither is Corky without resources. They follow Avalanche Wheeler to the year 696, a Viking stronghold on the American east coast. The women Valkyries reign, as in a Wagnerian opera, as the men have long since fallen to the dragon. Avalanche Wheeler has made a niche for himself and collected quite a stockpile of golden relics which he intends to bury, in order to recover them in his present day. Cyndy finds herself torn between remaining to join these pure warriors, and her growing affection for Corky, who represents all that she has never known. Hewlett wastes no time in aggravating his way into a death sentence, and only Corky can save them all by wresting the backpack from Avalanche, from the very teeth of the dragon itself.

And now Corky, Cyndy, and Hewlett find themselves in a place without time or space: the Center of Existence, which, as irony would have it, turns out to be a run-down brownstone in Queens where the combover Author of Ubiquity conceives everything that happens in the universe, and must bang it all out on a malfunctioning manual typewriter, uttering curses all the while. Corky manages to work a deal with the vulgar Author, to whiteout and rewrite some of the Poet's earlier actions...

At last, in their own time on the Colonel's estate, the Poet's iniquities are revealed, the Colonel's manuscript is recovered, Avalanche's golden treasure is unearthed, and Hewlett claims full credit in the presence of the Colonel's grandniece. Corky cares nothing for such things, now that Cyndy is ready to leave, to return to her own time to fight her own battle with her own people. Neither can stay with the other, but neither can bear to be apart. But they have the backpack, and that means they have all the time in the world...

Brian Dunning

brian@briandunning.com

<http://www.briandunning.com>