



Timecruiser

by Chris Crowther
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Reviewed by Keith Muscott

'Taleweaver' is Chris Crowther, just as 'Tusitala', the teller of tales, was Robert Louis Stevenson. Unlike RLS, Chris is an ex-helicopter and aircraft pilot, DCA member, passenger boat skipper, and an ardent lover of the Norfolk Broads, which leads him to write mystery fiction that is rooted therein. One thriller, *Bladestrike*, ranges more widely in its locations and is published by Wheatmark in the USA. There are six or seven of his titles available in the UK. Visit his website to learn more: www.chriscrowther.co.uk
 When I lazily accessed the 'product information' on Amazon (*above*) I was struck by the engineering precision of the book's dimensions: 19.8 by 13.1 cms. Naturally I reached for a tape – my copy is 19.9 by 13.

Slack work there, Chris, but the numbers even out, so no complaints...

Timecruiser is aimed at a younger readership than his other books. The dedicatees are Thomas, Millie and Amy, 'another three voyagers who love the Broads'.

Sarah Rogers has illustrated the text with drawings as charming as those she gave us in the past for *Dinghy Cruising*. Sue Crowther has drawn a sketch map of the Norfolk Broads as they are now, with a wise reminder that the area was a lot different long ago. I sense that there was as much family fun in getting this fictional crazy boat a-building as there was in listing the contents of Billy Bones's chest.

The back cover reads:

'A run-down boatyard, a strange boat and three youngsters left alone on board with a warning not to touch anything. But Max had to show off...

"Leave it alone, Max!" warned Jenny. But it was too late...'

(I like him already.)

The infernal machine suddenly fires up with 'an ear-splitting whine and a teeth-chattering vibration, while a blue mist seemed to envelope the whole boat...' And we're off.

As you've already guessed, this purple-hulled ex-sail and oar lifeboat with the body of an old Land Rover for the wheelhouse and cabin is a time machine in the honourable tradition of HG Wells. This is by no means a criticism, as the concept is evergreen in fiction of all kinds. If you doubt that, consider the work of JK Rowling and the resurgence of Doctor Who. (This rickety vehicle is, despite appearances, more attractive than a telephone box, however.)

The children are left alone on board while their parents go shopping, and its builder, Professor Hazleblade, slips out for a moment to pick up a new optical drive from a courier at the main office. Hazleblade is a polite unruffled British version of Christopher Lloyd's excitable absent-minded Dr. Emmet Brown in the film *Back to the Future* (1985).

Hazleblade's vessel has a big

magnetic band around its hull, ostensibly to combat marine growth. It is called *Eldridge Echo*, not to flag up a local newspaper's sponsorship, but to invoke *USS Eldridge* and the notorious story of the 'Philadelphia' affair. The professor has created an 'anti-gravity experiment to achieve quantum tunnelling through space and time'. As you do.

Allusions like this are woven skilfully and naturally into the narrative. The dialogue flows realistically, and the central characters combine well: the twins Max and Jenny with the technically-minded Faru, who has learned to sail during a family visit to Bangladesh when he signed on to his uncle's small trader in the Ganges Delta. They also have iPads and play computer games, of course – or Max does, at least.

Max's rash intervention sets them ten years down the line, and the Broads have changed, with the windmill pumps restored to generate electricity. There are recharging points everywhere now, and the internal combustion engine has been banned, so the Land Rover's old diesel, chugging away to charge the batteries and allow them to return to their own time, might get them into trouble with the rangers. When they do get away, the lever sticks and the date becomes 279CE, in Roman Gariensis Ostium. And the fun really begins.

As you would expect, there is plenty of sailing action as the story builds, but not in modern dinghies. And yes, the *EE* does get to sail frequently, too – on water. Several other historical periods are visited, courtesy of the clapped-out diesel that can't generate a full charge, and of course they meet many other interesting characters.

The book sits well in the British tradition of historical fiction for young people; the sort that entertains and informs equally. It is appropriate for a wide age range, given the presence of a helpful adult. Chris controls his material really well and his books continue to impress. I look forward to his next one. *KM*