

*Kathleen Ernst*  
WRITING AT THE INTERSECTION OF PEOPLE, PLACES, AND THE PAST



## Preview of *Trouble at Fort La Pointe*

An American Girl History Mystery

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Wisconsin 1732. Suzette Choudoir has spent each of her twelve summers at La Pointe Island on Lake Superior, where Ojibwe people camp by the French fur-trade fort. If her papa wins the trappers' competition, the prize will let him stay with his Ojibwe family year-round instead of wintering in far-off Montréal with the other French voyageurs. But a troublemaker sabotages the competition, and Papa. Only someone who's both Ojibwe and French can figure out what's going on--someone like Suzette.

Everyone in the Ojibwa camp was happy that the weather had cleared, and many friends came to the lakefront to see Suzette's family off. "We'll be crossing today too!" Gabrielle told Suzette happily. "We're just not packed up yet."

"I can tell Papa is eager," Suzette laughed. "He's moving fast!"

Papa splashed into water, a heavy bundle of furs balanced with long-practiced ease on his shoulder. If he minded the biting cold water, he showed no sign. "This is the last one, Suzette," he called. "Ready to go?"

The family owned two large birchbark canoes for transporting family and goods, and a smaller one Suzette used for short trips along the shoreline. The three canoes were staked and floating in hip-deep water off shore to protect their fragile seams from rocks. Suzette was not permitted to paddle across the open waters of the great lake, so Papa and Yellow Wing packed her canoe full and tied it behind one of the larger ones. Suzette and Mama waded out and



settled Charlotte in place before gently climbing into Papa's canoe. Grandmother paddled in the bow, or front, of Yellow Wing's canoe.

"We'll see you on the island!" Gabrielle yelled, waving hard. Then Papa and Yellow Wing dipped their paddles for the first powerful strokes.

Suzette sat in the center of Papa's canoe, wedged among their belongings. She kept an eye on Charlotte, whose cradleboard was braced against a crossbar. Mama paddled in the bow and Papa in the rear. Leaning back against a bundle of furs, Suzette dabbled her fingers in the water. A pair of merganser ducks paddled nearby, then dove, chasing fish below the surface. Papa was already singing one of his favorite paddling songs.

Soon the shore of the mainland faded behind them. Content, Suzette barely noticed when she felt a trickle of cold water in the bottom of the canoe. She reached for a piece of heavy cotton cloth kept as protection against leaks, and sopped up the water. But before she could wring out the cloth, the trickle became a stream. "Papa! We're taking water."

"Mop it up the best you can. It can't be serious. Yellow Wing and I sealed every seam with fresh pitch yesterday." Papa began to sing again. At first Suzette wasn't worried either. Wasn't Papa one of the best canoe men on the great lake? He and Yellow Wing knew how to tend canoes. But water was soon appearing faster than she could soak it up. She scrambled to find a small birchbark mukuk and began to bail.

Papa stopped singing. "I've got water back here now. What is this?" He sounded puzzled. Mama turned around. "My feet are wet too. Phillipe, shall I stop paddling and help bail?" "No." Papa's blue eyes narrowed with worry. "We're a long way from either shore. We need to paddle hard. Suzette, keep bailing."



"I'm trying!" It was difficult, though, because the canoe was packed so full that there was little room to scoop the mukuk. Suzette felt the cold water around her thighs. A shiver chased away the sun. They were in the middle of the passage now, about evenly distant from the mainland and the island. Too far to swim in the icy water. Too far to shout for help. The loaded canoes were riding low in the water already, and water was rushing in faster than she could get rid of it.

They were in trouble.

Yellow Wing eased his canoe close, frowning. "What's this? That canoe was sound yesterday." "I don't know, but we're taking water. Come closer." Papa stopped paddling and grabbed the other canoe. "Suzette, pass Charlotte over to your grandmother."

A finger of fear, icy as the lake, crooked around her heart when she looked at her baby sister. Charlotte was asleep, shaded from the sun by a woven mat. Suzette gingerly lifted the cradleboard and passed it to her grandmother's waiting arms. "Papa, shall I try to cross over too?" Suzette asked. "Or pass over some of our belongings to lighten our load?"

"No. The other canoe is too full to take any more weight. And I need you to bail." Papa leaned into his paddle. The powerful muscles he'd developed during his voyageur days rippled beneath his shirt. Every stroke sent the canoe surging ahead.

The water had risen to fist-deep. Suzette reached for the bailer again, feeling another shiver of fear down her spine. "Don't worry, mignonne," Papa called.

If we must, we will throw a bundle or two of furs overboard. That will lighten our load."



“Papa, no!” Papa needed to turn in every one of his furs at the trading post. If they discarded furs, he would surely lose the competition!

The fun of rendezvous was forgotten. Mama and Papa’s hard paddling seemed to bring them no closer to La Pointe. Despite Suzette’s bailing, water rose two fists deep inside the canoe. Cold water bit through her leggings. Whenever she dared, Suzette snatched a glance toward the island. The fort danced teasingly in the distance. Water rose three fists high.

Soon every muscle in Suzette’s body ached, drawn tight as a bowstring with worry and the effort of desperate bailing. She felt sick as she watched water rise to within two fists of the canoe’s top edge.

Finally Mama stopped paddling and turned her head, careful not to upset their balance. “Phillipe, we mustn’t swamp. We will lose everything.”

The brief silence was painful. Suzette heard a gull calling and looked again toward shore. It was still too far to swim. They could not reach shore without lightening their load. And the water was so deep that if they threw their belongings overboard, the blankets and kettles and tools they needed to survive could not be retrieved.

Papa put his paddle down. “I’m going to toss over some furs.” His voice was tight. Suzette watched him struggle to loosen a bulky bundle of stiff furs free from the tightly-packed canoe. No! she wanted to weep. All her hopes for the future were about to be cast overboard.

Suzette didn’t think. Instead came the sudden slam of cold, burning her skin, stealing her breath, as she eased her feet over the canoe and slipped into the water. It took all her effort to grasp the canoe before the lake claimed her.



"Suzette!" Papa bellowed. The canoe was rocking dangerously. He steadied it even as his huge fist clamped around her wrist like iron. "What are you doing?" He began to pull her from the water.

"Papa, pa-paddle!" Suzette begged, her teeth chattering. "Please d-don't lose any furs." She wanted to say more but the lake was squeezing her chest, locking out the words.

"Phillipe, pull her in!" Mama cried. Her voice could have cracked ice. Suzette heard her mother's fear and found the strength to speak once more. "Paddle!" she gasped. "I can hold on."

She heard a paddle splash behind her. "Phillipe, keep going," Yellow Wing echoed urgently. "I'll stay beside Suzette. If she slips, I'll grab her. Now go!"

Suzette moved hand-over-hand until her weight was balanced behind the canoe, and clenched her fingers around the cedar frame. Her legs felt like logs, too stiff to kick. She closed her eyes and concentrated on holding on. A few moments later she heard Papa bellow again, then distant shouts.

"Help is coming, Suzette," Papa called. "Don't let go."

"Edgar Nominee for Best Children's Mystery"  
— **Mystery Writers of America**

"Ernst has written a well-plotted mystery and does a commendable job of integrating setting and cultural details into the story."  
— **Booklist**

"The story moves well and reveals much about the life of French and Indian traders and the culture in this region."  
— **Children's Literature**

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