

des jeunes, avisés comme ils le sont ou prompts à saisir les bonnes intentions qui manquent d'originalité.

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## GIRL INTO WOMAN: TWO HONEST NOVELS

**Snow apples**, Mary Razzell. Douglas & McIntyre, 1984. 160 pp. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-032-4; **Salmonberry wine**, Mary Razzell. Douglas & McIntyre, 1987. 192 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-062-6.

The glossy, romantic-tinted paper-back cover on *Snow apples*, Mary Razzell's 1984 first novel, is perhaps misleading. It might make a potential reader think that this story is a conventional romance of a young woman growing up in a B.C. outport and being torn between several knights-in-armor only one of whom will turn out, in the second-last chapter, not to have feet of clay.

*Snow apples* is not of the romance genre at all. True, the small village setting, well evoked, plays an important role in this story. And true, a good number of the people in the novel do indeed have feet of clay. But the fact that the heroine herself is something less than a model of perfection makes all the difference — much to the better — between this book and one of the clones spawned by the sentimental press.

*Snow apples* presents the year in the life of Sheila Brary during which the girl becomes a woman. Concerned with questions of identity and maturity, the author chooses with care the problems and predicaments which her heroine must encounter and which will shape her personality. Razzell moves her heroine with admirable dexterity through the tentative transition from fifteen-year-old daughter to sixteen-year-old adult.

As a literary subject this transition is hardly novel. In condensing this year to a 160-page-series of significant events, another author might have yielded to lyricism and vague abstract generalizations, imbuing the heroine with mystic qualities representing "womanhood". Razzell's outstanding merit is in never giving way to transcendental interpretations of this phase in her heroine's life. The reader is, fortunately, never allowed to leave the head and heart of the first-person narrator.

Since Razzell is writing about a female, the experiences concern insecur-

ity, separation and isolation. Many of these experiences are not pretty, and some are very disturbing. But this seems to be Razzell's point: there are always forces beyond the heroine's ken or control, in childhood and in adult life, which will push and pull her. With maturity she sees some of the forces more clearly — the estrangement between her mother and her father, for example — but it is not certain that she will ever understand them. This exceptional novel ends with its young heroine facing more doubts than at its beginning.

By simple unpretentious means, Razzell suggests the enormous complexity of becoming a woman. The clear, easily readable prose readily reflects the girl's anxieties and bewilderment in front of life's inexplicable unfairness. The moments of unqualified contentment during this year in the life of Sheila Brary are rare, but Razzell's unadorned style lets the reader share all the more vividly her heroine's final joy on savouring the satisfyingly crisp and tangy *mature* snow apple.

In *Salmonberry wine*, Mary Razzell has given us the further adventures of Sheila Brary, now determined to affirm her independence and to embark upon nurse's training. The circumstances of this subsequent year in her life allow the author even greater scope for demonstrating an effective grasp of realism and dramatic prose.

The inside of a modern general hospital affords ample opportunity for portraying reality, and Razzell has exploited the opportunity admirably, even at the expense of an embryonic romance line. The reader lives through Sheila Brary's apprenticeship in her profession and in all of the tensions and conflicts among administrators, doctors, nurses and patients. While she does contrive the predictable sentimental liaison between nurse and young intern, her variants on this theme, and her continuing insistence upon realism in her characters — none of whom is more perfect than in life — render this conventional development at least credible.

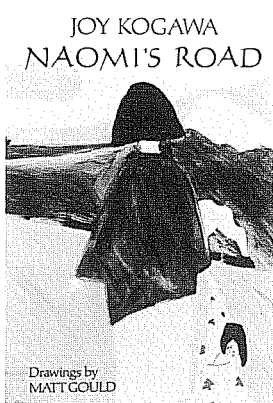
Once again, as in *Snow apples*, there are no ideal people. But the author's gentle sense of irony softens her heroine's disillusionment, and even the nasty villains manage to redeem themselves from time to time, so that when Nurse Brary discovers just how devoted she really is to her new profession the reader feels that this devotion will not be misplaced. Razzell develops the need for patience and perseverance, even love, in the face of adversity, a lesson which Sheila Brary absorbs from the life of her self-sufficient Norwegian mentor back home.

Just as *Snow apples* is more than a story about a girl growing up in a B.C. outport, so *Salmonberry wine* is much more than just a romance about nursing. Into each of these books Razzell has woven serious themes of life and new life, of independence and compassion: in the first her heroine develops primarily in her relationship with her mother, and in the second in her relationship with a dying patient.

There is no reason that the literary life of Sheila Brary should end after only two years. After all, the romance with the handsome young intern never was any more than promised. One assumes, hopes, that Mary Razzell will afford young adult readers at least a couple more episodes filled with her honest, uncloying view of the disappointments and the joys of real life.

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## CHILDHOOD TRAUMA



**Naomi's road**, Joy Kogawa. Oxford University Press, 1986. 82 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 0-19-540547-1; **The valley of flowers**, Veronica Eddy Brock. Coteau Books, 1987. \$13.95, \$5.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 0-919926-75-4, 0-919926-74-6. **The empty chair**, Bess Kaplan. Western Producer Prairie Books, 1986. 172 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 0-88833-205-X.

Although these three books are fictions, all are highly realistic accounts of childhood suffering. We are explicitly told at the end of *The valley of flowers* that it is based on experience; the voice and perspective of the protagonist, Sandy, seem identical with the author's, and the story of her four-year stay at a tuberculosis sanatorium during the 1940s reads like an autobiography. *Naomi's road*, based on Kogawa's adult novel, *Obasan*, tells the story of a Japanese-Canadian family's internment during the Second World War through the voice of a little girl who may be based on Kogawa's memories of herself as a child, but who emerges as a fictive creation quite separate from the adult author. This fictive quality is true as well of Rebecca, the 10-year-old narrator of *The empty chair*, a revised version of an adult novel published in 1975 about a Winnipeg girl in the 1930s whose mother dies and who must cope with her father's decision to remarry less than a year later. Interestingly, readers seem to me more likely to identify with the more imaginatively conceived protagonists of the latter two books rather than with the one most directly based on the author's personal memories.

Racism plays a part in all three books. It looms as the driving force behind Naomi's tragic story; at the personal level, little Mitzi tells Naomi