

vive the devastating poverty of the period. Meg and Jamie Bains find work, one with the railroad and the other with the stage company. The conflict between stage and rail company, culminating in an action-packed race between the two forms of transport, is exciting enough in its own right because of Freeman's strong writing, his ability to re-create an historical setting, and his skill in highlighting the dramatic potential of a situation. But the conflict between rail and stage, neither of which is either villain or hero, finds itself represented in a finer tone within Jamie himself who is caught between his duty to his family and sister and the natural affection he feels for Will Ryan the head of the stage company. This is a novel which does not take the intelligence of its youthful readers for granted. As such it is a delight for both children and adults to read.

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TEENAGER AND ROCK STAR

Dear Bruce Springsteen, Kevin Major. Doubleday Canada, 1987. 134 pp. \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-385-29584-7.

With the publication of his first novel, *Hold fast* (1978), Kevin Major won a number of awards, including The Canada Council Award and Book of the Year Award from the Association of Canadian Children's Librarians. Since then Major has published three more books, the latest of which fully lives up to his promising start. *Dear Bruce Springsteen* is a powerful and well-written novel with none of the whining overtones which so often emerge from the teen problem novel.

Far from shore (1980) and *Thirty-six exposures* (1984) are the two novels Major published before this latest. They are both well-written books but lack the convincing characterization and resulting power which marks both *Hold-fast* and *Dear Bruce Springsteen*. The explanation for this may be that with the two middle novels, Major did not use the first person narrative mode, choosing to use five different narrators (*Far from shore*) or third person narration (*Thirty-six exposures*). Neither allowed Major to fully develop the cen-

tral characters. In *Dear Bruce Springsteen*, Major utilized the form of the epistolary novel to return to the first person view point.

Until recently my only experience with teen problem novels has been with the work of Judy Blume and Norma Klein, neither of whose books entertained me and whose characters I found unsympathetic. Once I got going with *Dear Bruce Springsteen* though, I was hooked. Major's writing is much more thoughtful than Judy Blume's. His characters are multi-faceted, and they do not judge others solely by externals. In all four of Major's books, while the main characters may not always be easy to like, they are real.

Terry Blanchard is both real and likeable. He is a perceptive fourteen-year-old who tries not to be too judgmental. His father has left the family after what has obviously been a time of turbulence. Terry who loves both his parents, tries very hard to understand his mother's side of the break as well. He recognizes that his father was not always responsible for his family nor much of a support for them:

I been trying to see Mom's side of this, but it don't make no sense to me. It's like she's already given up on the old man. And all she wants is for him to send her money and leave her alone.... Okay, so he mightn't have been very good to her sometimes, but that's no reason not to try and work things out. (71)

It is this ability to perceive the different sides of a problem that makes Terry such a sympathetic character. He also recognizes faults within himself and is not too quick to blame them on other people or on circumstances.

Terry's fan letters to Bruce Springsteen soon take on the form of a journal as Terry writes at least weekly and sometimes daily for seven months to the rock musician. In his letters Terry explains his thoughts and worries about his parents' split, about dating girls, and about finding some purpose to his life. Terry identifies with Springsteen's well-publicized working-class background and angst-filled adolescence, often referring to articles about Springsteen as he describes his own problems.

Links between Springsteen and Terry's father are drawn throughout: on page one Terry establishes that Springsteen and his father must be the same age; Terry's father, who has always wanted to be a professional musician, introduced him to Springsteen's music. An event which gives Terry confidence and focus is the organizing of a lip sync contest at his high school, proceeds from ticket sales to go to a local family who lost all their uninsured belongings in a house fire. Again a parallel with Springsteen, who is noted for his philanthropy.

When Terry first starts writing to Springsteen his father does not write to him, and his mother will not discuss her feelings with him. By the time the contest takes place, Terry has realized that there is no hope of his parents ever being reconciled: "I sort of got to see better how different the two of them are,

I guess I'm somewhere in the middle" (98) and he has accepted the fact that his mother will remarry. He has also come to terms with himself. As he writes: "The past few months have been a bit crazy. The letters that I wrote to you are the one thing that tied it all together" (133), Terry can take responsibility for his relationships with his family. He initiates communication and no longer feels the victim, a valuable lesson for any person of any age.

Of all Major's books, this is the least obviously set in Newfoundland. Traces of the dialect remain in the way Terry phrases some sentences, and in his word choice. And for the person familiar with the setting, Napoli's Pizza and a few other such references strike a chord. But for the most part, *Dear Bruce Springsteen* could be set anywhere in rural North America.

Kevin Major has already been recognized as an important Canadian children's author. The title of *Dear Bruce Springsteen* may attract many new readers. They have a treat in store, not only with this novel, but in discovering the three that came before.

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ACCEPTABLE PRE-TEEN NOVELS



My impossible uncle, Raymond Plante. Scholastic-TAB, 1984. 94 pp. \$3.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-71699-9; **Things just aren't the same: a story about growing up**, Catherine Brett. Illus. Yvonne Indart. Women's Press, 1987. 104 pp. \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-88961-115-7; **One chance to win**, Gillian Richardson. Illus. Em Lachance. Ragweed Press, 1986. 112 pp. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 0-920304-56-7.

These three Canadian books are all written for the age group ten to thirteen, but the themes and topics differ widely. *My impossible uncle* (written by Raymond Plante and translated from the French by Rochelle Lisa Ash) is a light-hearted romp about a girl (Julie) whose actress mother has left her in the hands of her lovable but irresponsible Uncle Philibert for a few weeks. The mother, in Europe making a film, keeps in touch periodically by telephone. The divorced father performs a minor role in the story; he is stuffy, ineffectual and somewhat detached from Julie's life except when he is personally embarrassed by