

A WIDE RANGE IN SHORT STORIES

Paradise Cafe & other stories. Martha Brooks. Thistledown Press, 1988. 108 pp., \$12.95 paper. ISBN 0-920633-57-9.

These fourteen entertaining Canadian short stories are a refreshing addition to the growing collection of quality young adult fiction. They are appealing to the young reader who enjoys the relevancy of high school days and to the adult reader who will perceive the timelessness of those bittersweet moments. Martha Brooks has with total recall perceptively captured the brief experiences which loom so large in a young person's life. Brooks explores relationships with great empathy; often her young protagonists, through a growing insight, begin to understand why life is the way it is for them.

Although each story is told in that inevitable first person which is part of the genre, the author has captured the unique quality of the characters, struggling through that special adolescent rite of passage. Her care for accurate detail, nuances of language, and concern for more than surfaces give the stories a depth and texture unusual in young adult fiction.

Ranging from urban to rural locales, the setting for most of the stories is some part of Western Canada. The young reader will develop an awareness of how different lives can be, yet how common many of our problems are. Whether the characters are placed in the nostalgic days of the sixties or current times there will be little difficulty in relating to the lives Brooks's characters lead. The search for identity, love, and connections assumes a uniqueness in the telling. Each story is a gem.

Brooks introduces the collection with an excerpt from Joni Mitchell's "Chinese Cafe" which sets the tone for what is to follow. Denis in "Wild Strawberries" never forgets the frail and beautiful Celine who dies of T.B. just before she is to marry his Uncle Guy. There is pathos in young Alphonse, who, on the death of his beloved dog, says, "I'll . . . tell him about me and what I plan to do with my life. . . he has a right to know what he'll be missing" (34). The CRUSH will be remembered as the reader observes desirable Karl the King in his silky university jacket skating at the roller rink with Sheila-Rae. Ernie, a young mentally retarded boy, the unacknowledged child of a girl from a prominent family, shows the difficulty of functioning where there is no love. Other young people in the stories discover loneliness, social exclusion--and also romance and compassion. One character comments, "Some memories are so strong and sweet and sad they seem to have a life of their own," (54).

These short stories have staying power. One regrets finishing the last page and saying goodbye to a host of characters who have won our hearts because of their human imperfections and their reality. The search for friendship and

love, the longing to belong are universals which Martha Brooks has shared ably with the reader.

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MYSTERY AND MESSAGE

Nightmare Mountain. Myra Paperny. Overlea House, 1988. 224 pp., \$15.95, \$3.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 0-7172-2478-3, 0-7172-2479-1.

Myra Paperny's latest children's novel combines adventure, mystery, nature and ecological awareness, the problems facing children of a "broken marriage", the trauma of having to fit into a new family unit, and the budding friendship between two adolescents, Cassandra and her new step-brother Jordan. The novel can scarcely contain all these themes and it is a toss-up whether it is essentially a problem novel or a detective story.

Young readers will gravitate to Cassandra Fox with the love of hiking and outdoor life which she shares with her father. Jordie is ill at ease hiking, but young readers will come to enjoy and respect him as friendship develops between him and Cassandra. Each child is in a precarious situation: Jordie is defensive of his father, Cassie of her mother, yet by the end of *Nightmare Mountain* both appreciate their "new parents".

The world of nature is where Cassie and her father feel they belong. That world, Cassie discovers, has remained stable and secure. To her father Dan, it is like the "other world" of fantasy. He explains to Jordan the night before they are to set out on their hiking trip: ". . . It's like lifting an evergreen curtain--and we'll disappear behind it--presto" (24).

Sometimes the adults, Dan in particular, talk like a book as they lesson the children, yet even the adult reader accepts Dan's rather stilted style. His enthusiasm for the outdoors and wild life is part of his character, and he seems to want to impart all the knowledge he has gleaned from his reading to the children. Some of this information, we realize later, is necessary to explain comments by participants in the poaching mystery which unfolds later. For instance Dan misinterprets Jordie's simple question about the marvellous Rocky Mountain sheep's mysterious appearance and disappearance, "Where did they come from?" and gives a dictionary definition of the sheep and their cousins: the all-white Dall's sheep, brownish Stone's sheep with amber horns, smaller types in the southern deserts, and the Rocky Mountain bighorn. This information will be useful later in determining the meaning of a hunter's