

tention, but her spotlighting of child characters, however tiny they may be, also draws us into each poem's world. A Junebug in Else Holmelund Minarik's "Little Seeds" speaking to a little girl who appears to be the same size as the insect, exemplifies the poetic world of small this volume presents. Without exaggeration, intrusiveness, or meretricious cuteness, the illustrator helps the poems to speak.

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### SHADES OF THE PRODIGAL PERSON

**Caitlin.** Catherine Dunphy. James Lorimer, 1990. 159 pp., \$4.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 1-55028-253-0, 1-55028-255-7; **Wheels.** Susin Nielsen. James Lorimer, 1990. 183 pp., \$4.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 1-55028-362-6, 1-55028-360-X.

As the notes at the front of these two books indicate, they are based on a Canadian television series, and the authors have used the original television scripts as the foundation for their novels. Since I have never seen the television series, *Degrassi Junior High/Degrassi High*, I have no way of comparing how successful each medium is at fashioning its material. However, James Lorimer and Company seems to be on to a good thing with the Naf Naf and skateboard set since the two books under review are numbers 16 and 17 in the *Degrassi Series* with the promise of more to come. In short, the novels seem to be selling at least as well as the T.V. series appears to have, if my sources for the popularity of the latter are correct.

Catherine Dunphy's *Caitlin* tells the tale of a fourteen-year-old girl who is passionately drawn to all of the pressing issues that threaten the quality and length of our lives as well as that of the planet on which we live, but, as it turns out, often leaps before she looks. When we first see her she wants the first page of the school newspaper, which she edits, to carry a story on chemicals in the water supply rather than the frivolous alternatives suggested by other members of the editorial staff and even by the faculty adviser, Mr. Raditch.

Her gradual isolation from uncommitted friends and preoccupied family – her closest friend moves to Markham and her family is otherwise engaged – leaves Caitlin on her own with her social conscience. One day, however, she meets Robert, a video store salesman, who, like her, is committed to pressing social issues. He lends her a copy of the film "If you love this planet" and begins to talk to her about the dangers of nuclear energy.

Inevitably, Caitlin becomes seduced by Robert's maturity, sensitivity, and

commitment to causes that she too is temperamentally drawn to. He invites her to meet and then to join his group. In order to do this, she must lie to and turn her back on those to whom she had previously "belonged" – parents, peers, and even her male friend Joey who, next to Robert, appears immature, insubstantial, even silly. Caitlin has suddenly been catapulted into what she regards as a serious world and she takes to it immediately and unthinkingly.

Things come to a head when Caitlin's new group decides to model itself on the Greenham women and to set up a protest camp at the Darlington nuclear reactor site. This venture goes terribly wrong (or so Caitlin believes); she learns that she has been deceived by her own group as she herself had earlier deceived her friends and parents, and that noble causes lose some of their appeal and become positively dangerous when zealots do "whatever it takes" to effect change.

I am not altogether charmed by Catherine Dunphy's *Caitlin* but this may be as it should since the book is not really intended for me. For one thing, the writing is not always forceful or strong. But what bothers me most is the contrived ending in which, *mirabile dictu*, everyone – not just Caitlin – learns something about her/himself. Caitlin learns to be more circumspect with those with whom she associates and to be less impetuous; her parents learn to spend less time enslaved to their jobs or recreation and to spend more time with their daughter and keep up-to-date on vital issues; even the faculty advisor to the school newspaper, a former activist himself, is moved to remember that even kids "these days believe in things too." And Dunphy leaves us with a neatly-tied package when she has Caitlin remind us that it isn't "always easy getting at the truth." I'm left wondering whether the audience for whom the book is intended needs to be spoken to quite so baldly.

Susin Nielsen's *Wheels* is a better written novel than *Caitlin* with a more sophisticated structure. In this work, Nielsen makes good use of the flashback technique to quickly fill in the reader on the details of Derek's parents' death and the strong emotional impact it has on him. Derek Wheeler (a.k.a. Wheels) is, like Caitlin, a dislocated teenager who finds himself emotionally at sea and unable to come to terms with the sudden death of his parents. Like Caitlin, he turns his back on those best equipped to help him, to turn to a more exciting life with two down-at-heel teenagers who sneak into theatres, shoplift, drink to excess, and con Wheels out of his money. As was the case with Caitlin, Wheels finds his life with his new friends exhilarating by comparison to the stable existence represented by his grandparents, friends, and school. Not knowing the rest of the novels in this series, I can't help wondering – based on these two – whether the Degrassi books are written to a formula: for whatever reasons, an unhappy teenager finds life unsatisfactory, turns to a more exciting life with fair-weather friends that flirt with illegalities of various sorts, and returns again to the more stable existence she/he once abandoned with a new-found sense of its worth and his/his own. In the two books reviewed here, I can't help

seeing shades of the prodigal person myth. But Nielsen does a better job shaping this material and presenting it than does Dunphy.

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## CANDIDE "COOL"

**Des graffiti à suivre...** Francine Ruel. Montréal, La courte échelle", 1991. 154 pp., broché. ISBN 2-89021-166-5.

Le roman *Des graffiti à suivre...* de Francine Ruel satisfait bien, presque un peu trop, à la loi du genre chez les enfants: il amuse et éduque. Sa structure limpide répond aussi à la définition du "récit-problème": dans un univers tout ce qu'il y a de plus familier, s'installe une suite de drames qui, bien sûr, seront finalement résorbés. Le héros-adolescent Lucas s'ennuie à l'école, à la maison où il est souvent laissé à lui-même malgré sa double famille de parents – dont un père clown – et tente, comme bien d'autres de sa génération, de faire la part au rêve à travers le mythe du spectacle. Sa grande ambition est une petite gloire à la mode années 80-90, groupe de musiciens rockeurs, cependant mêlée d'un sentimentalisme confessé qu'à demi pour Gros Chien Sale, le grand chien "aux yeux nonos", résidu d'une enfance aux idéaux moins "cool". Cet univers de passions limitées s'élargit au fur et à mesure du roman pour faire connaître aux jeunes lecteurs(trices), en même temps que les difficultés de Lucas en tant qu'énigmes ou graffiti à déchiffrer, une leçon d'apprentissage de la vie sans tambours ni trompettes bien qu'avec "base" et batterie, si l'on veut rester dans le ton du roman. Le chien est perdu; la petite demi-soeur affronte la maladie aiguë et fait vivre à son frère qui la garde les angoisses de la peur de la mort; Lucas parmi ces épreuves rencontre tout de même l'amour, le premier, le "vrai", coup de foudre, rougeurs et tremblements; mais surtout il découvre la responsabilité, les affres des décisions urgentes à prendre seul; il arrive aussi peut-être à deviner à quel point les adultes les plus rébarbatifs, telle l'institutrice Blanche surnommée Coque-l'oeil, peuvent se révéler parfois des enfants aussi passionnés que les vrais. [La "maîtresse" aux allures sadiques se découvre "une passion folle pour les chiens" après avoir hébergé Gros

