

A PORTRAIT OF THE MENTALLY-CHALLENGED CHILD: SERIOUS BUT SENTIMENTAL

The summer kid. Myrna Neuringer Levy. Illus. Alice Priestley. Second Story Press, 1991. 87 pp., \$5.95. paper. ISBN 0-929005-20-1.

In *The summer kid* Levy creates a genuinely warm novel about ten-year old Karen who, as the novel opens, looks forward to going to the cottage with her grandmother. But she quickly changes her mind when she discovers that she will have to spend most of her time with Tommy, the “strange” little boy next door. Karen soon learns that Tommy’s unusual behaviour is the result of a learning disability and that even though he doesn’t behave like other children his age, he has some very special qualities, such as his extraordinary ability to build, which becomes the catalyst for their friendship.

The novel’s theme is particularly important and deserves more attention, especially when mentally-challenged children are increasingly being placed in regular elementary school classrooms. Levy’s intent is to show children that individuals with mental disabilities are still capable of living fully, of engaging in fruitful reciprocal relationships. Her approach to her topic is delicate, at no time preachy or overpowering. If anything, she lapses at times into sentimentality—a problem novelist’s occupational hazard. Still, this criticism is not apt to come from the eight- to ten-year-old audience that Levy has targeted. They will respond to the engaging plot, be drawn into thoughtfulness by the largely serious mood, and feel at home with the accurately-pitched diction.

Alice Priestley’s illustrations are sure to guarantee her the recognition that she deserves; however, at times they do not coincide with the text. We learn at the end of the novel that Karen and Tommy—the “little” boy—are the same age, yet the illustrations contradict this. While in one picture Karen seems to be much older than Tommy because of the difference in height, in another picture Tommy and Karen are depicted as basically the same size. Such misrepresentation begs questions about both the illustrator’s understanding of the text and the editor’s eye.

The summer kid is a rewarding example of a young girl’s maturity in looking beyond the stereotype to the human being beckoning for recognition. Levy’s book is a salutary corrective to Judy Blume’s presentation of this age group in such books as *Blubber*, and it joins the ranks of Bernice Thurman Hunter and Jean Little.

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