

A PROBLEM NOVEL WITH MERIT

Sunny. Mary-Ellen Lang Collura. General Paperbacks, 1991. 146 pp., \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0-7736-7289-3.

Sunny belongs to the Canadian stream of new realism in children's literature: it is a problem novel with more psychological depth and literary merit than is usual in American examples of the genre. The narrator, Sophie Cochrane, is a contemporary adolescent struggling with alienation from her parents, the trauma of a broken home, and failure at school. As befits the narrative voice of a teenager, the language is often colloquial. There are, however, passages of genuine beauty. The characters mature and develop and the story progresses through domestic tragedy to a positive, hopeful ending that has been prepared.

Collura structures her narrative around two intertwined story elements. The first is the anxiety-ridden world of Sophie's family. Her younger brother, Mike, is a Down's syndrome child, her father an inarticulate fisherman seething with resentment, and her mother a discontented housewife unable to cope with her husband's rages.

When her mother leaves, Sophie takes refuge in the second world of the story, the world of Sunny, an injured race horse. Sophie and Mike develop a special relationship with Sunny that leads them into friendship with the outsider, "mean old Olga...the Ogre" (21), a survivor of Auschwitz.

Although Sunny's world provides Sophie with some respite from the problems at home, there are several links between the two worlds, neither of which is all sunshine nor all darkness. In the outside world Sophie encounters anti-semitism and prejudice against the handicapped while at home her father gradually mellows and reveals the angry exterior hides a loving parent.

In an early scene in the novel, Sophie describes Mike:

The setting sun sent streams of light over the water, shone through the golden hair of our figurehead [Mike] so that he looked like a shimmering being from another dimension, an angel or an alien. Light covered him like shining lace and charged him with mystery. (10)

Later in the novel, Sophie sees a photograph of Olga's brother, who, like Mike, is mentally handicapped and intimately associated with light. Nicknamed "Sloneczma" or "Sunshine" because he was "the light of his family" (142), he straddled a pony, "sunlight highlighting his outline" (42).

Those who know Collura's earlier novel, *Winners*, will recognize the recurring pattern of the salvation of a troubled adolescent through involvement with a handicapped child and a horse.

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