

His dream explodes into the nightmare of the fire and his desperate but ultimately successful attempt to save Mogul, who is chained to the ship's deck.

While the first half of the novel includes many convincing scenes—especially effective are the descriptions of the circus and its performances, and such moments as the boy's comical bewilderment upon seeing a group of wax figures he first believes to be real people—the second half succumbs to melodrama and its attendant one-dimensional characters. The cowardly villain—whose “flaming red hair and . . . big stiff flaming red moustache” (62) are none too subtle reminders of his role in causing the ship's fire—is a relation to those black moustached villains in old silent pictures. And a scene where Mogul chases him across a field but cannot seem to catch him would challenge the credulity of most readers. The boy is as much enamoured by Selena, the circus performer, as he is with Mogul. But this “princess,” whom the boy idealizes as an exotic version of his dead mother, remains simply that: a fairy tale princess.

The novel is cleverly structured around the recurring image of fire and has some finely taut scenes, but the generally flat language and characterization deflate its theme of loyalty and love. Early in the novel a perhaps minor but nonetheless irritating confusion over usage occurs a number of times as the narrator speaks of “my father and I” at one moment and “I and my father” in the next breath, the latter expression presumably meant to add historical authenticity to the boy's speech. When at the novel's conclusion the narrator affirms, “Yes, love was real, I knew, as real as the best dream you could dream,” what should be a convincing paradox is clouded by the melodrama that intrudes upon the novel's essential realism.

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QUESTING FOR FATHERS: AN OLD FORM WITH A MODERN THEME

Guardian of the Dark. Bev Spencer. Scholastic, 1993. 170 pp., \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-74583-2. **The Dragon's Tapestry.** Martine Bates. Red Deer College Press, 1992. 183 pp., \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-88995-080-6. **Nobody's Son.** Sean Stewart. Maxwell Macmillan, 1993. 233 pp., \$15.95 cloth, \$10.95 paper. ISBN 0-02-954160-3, ISBN 0-02-954181-6.

Three recent novels explore the theme of youth's quest for self-realization within the context of the fantasy story. Although taking different approaches to resolution of the protagonist's inner conflict, stemming in each case from an absent father, all employ conventions of the genre: a conflict between forces of good and evil; a hero/ine singled out by a uniqueness of character which itself springs from adversity; skills/knowledge the hero must use appropriately in order to prevail; a period of trial, usually during a journey, which refines the hero; and an object of power, essential to victory in the final conflict. (Atypi-

in particular gives the book a strong visual appeal (stemming from the author's theatrical experience?), a quality shared by other excellent fantasy. The story sprawls a bit, but this is great reading from an unquestionable talent. The more mature language and content suggest an audience of about fourteen and up; they may be expected to look forward eagerly to any successor to *Nobody's Son*.

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AN "ISSUES" APPROACH IN CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS

We're Still a Family. Frances Arnold. Illus. Lori Broadfoot. Winnipeg, Manitoba: Jem Books, 1994. 32 pages, \$6.95 paper. ISBN 0-9697473-0-6. **Steven's Baseball Mitt: A Book about Being Adopted.** Kathy Stinson. Illus. Robin Baird Lewis. North York, ON: Annick Press, 1992. Unpag., \$14.95 cloth, \$4.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-233-5, ISBN 1-55037-232-7. **Real Sisters.** Susan Wright. Illus. Bo-Kim Louie. Charlottetown, P.E.I.: Ragweed Press, 1994. Unpag., \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0-921556-42-X. **Tiger Flowers.** Patricia Quinlan. Illus. Janet Wilson. Toronto: Lester Publishing Ltd., 1994. Unpag., \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 1-895555-58-2. **In Other Words.** John C. Walker. Illus. Connie Steiner. Toronto: Annick Press, 1993. Unpag., \$14.95 cloth, \$4.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-309-9, ISBN 1-55037-310-2. **Where There's Smoke.** Janet Munsil. Illus. Michael Martchenko. Toronto: Annick Press, 1993. Unpag., \$4.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-290-4. **Strike!** Maureen Bayless. Illus. Yvonne Cathcart. Charlottetown, P.E.I.: Ragweed Press, 1994. Unpag., \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0-921556-41-1.

It is the world around the child that for better or worse must provide the ingredients that will direct his imagination and ultimately shape the style of his literacy. One of the most important of these ingredients is the picture book. For it is here that the child will have his first encounter with a structured fantasy, mirrored in his own imagination and animated by his own feelings and imagery. (Leo Lionni, qtd. in M.E. Wrolstad and D. Fisher, *Toward a New Understanding of Literacy*)

These books fill a needed gap in children's literature: all deal with special issues and challenges facing some families today—AIDS, death, divorce, adoption, labour disputes, smoking, and physical disabilities. These issues have only recently begun to be treated in Canadian literature for young children. The authors, writing from different points of view, all demonstrate a sensitive understanding of young children's feelings when faced with emotional confusion or personal disability.

Frances Arnold is a single parent with a six-year-old son. She was inspired to write a book for young children about separation and single parent families when she could not find a suitable published work that reflected her own situation. *We're Still a Family* consists of a series of short stories describing family changes when the parents separate. In some stories, the father moves away and in others he takes an active role in the child's life. The last story relates a variety of family situations. In all the stories, the father is the absent figure.

The book, narrated by the child, achieves its aim in reflecting the intense feelings of hurt and anger in a 3-6 year old child when he learns that his parents will no longer live together, but still love him. The vocabulary is easy to