

HUNGRY FOR A GOOD STORY?

The Book of Changes. Tim Wynne-Jones. A Groundwood Book, Douglas and McIntyre, 1994. 143 pages, \$7.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-223-8. **Traveling On Into the Light.** Martha Brooks. A Groundwood Book, Douglas and McIntyre, 1994. 146 pages, \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-220-3.

Groundwood has recently released two collections of short stories by two very different writers that nevertheless are both examples of what writing for young people should be. The writers, Tim Wynne-Jones and Martha Brooks, share a penchant for characters with unusual names and a determination to tackle some of the “difficult” issues of growing up. Their individual styles, however, are distinctive.

The Wynne-Jones collection, titled *The Book of Changes*, is written with a light hand. The stories read so easily, the situations laced with chuckles and smiles, that the reader’s first impression is of pure entertainment. Yet the tales trigger reflection upon a host of difficult topics. From the opening story, “The Clark Beans Man,” where Dwight, the new kid in town, finds himself at the mercy of the school bully, to the penultimate tale of “Dawn,” where young Barnsey must deal with the Christmas-time separation of his parents, the stories touch upon genuine crises in the lives of young people. The characters are not heroic nor are they of the rebel, anti-hero mould. Neither are they “average kids.” Each is a unique individual attempting to deal with the inevitable difficulties of growing independence and growing knowledge about the world and the people in it—young people coping with the surprises of which daily life is made, learning as they go.

My personal favourite in this collection is a story titled “Mad House,” told from the point of view of Solly, an emerging rock and roll guitarist, who just happens to come from a family he finds more than a little embarrassing. Dad paints in the dark, so he’s “not influenced by what the palette says” (36); Mom takes electric guitar lessons; sister reads “novels the way most people eat nuts” (36); little brother is, well, a seven-year-old; and Earl, Solly’s developmentally-challenged uncle, loves Garfield and never remembers to take his laundry out of the washer. As Solly sets the dryer for the regular cycle, he muses, “Maybe if I put my whole family in the dryer, they’ll come out regular ...” (39).

Help comes from unexpected quarters in these stories. It is Solly’s Uncle Earl, the pajama-clad detective, who brings to light another family’s near tragedy. Dawn, sporting nine earrings, nose rings and a mohawk, “orange along the scalp and purple along the crest” (115), introduces calm when life becomes just so much “rubbish.” The class nerd tames the school bully, and the ghost of a prince, in the title story, brings last ditch inspiration for a homework project.

The Brooks collection, *Traveling On Into the Light*, is considerably heavier fare. There is humour here too, but Brooks’ characters are much more introspective than those of Wynne-Jones. Brooks has been described as having a “keen eye for detail” and indeed her writing is more dense than is the style of Wynne-Jones. While her stories are not shy on dialogue and action, they dwell more lingeringly on observation, and on reflection: “... now there’s more of a warm,

dull ache, the kind that I catch sometimes from certain people. It starts in the middle of my body, and it always dances up and out from there — like the northern lights when they shift and disappear and reappear somewhere else” (58).

We are not allowed to get through a crisis and believe in “happily-ever-after” in Brooks’ world. Even in good relationships there is shadow and difficulty.

While Wynne-Jones does take on difficult issues such as parental separation and even the rumour of a small town murder, the themes of his stories appear lightweight beside those of Brooks. In this brief collection she tackles parental rejection, abuse and neglect, homophobia, adultery and betrayal between friends, suicide, alcoholism, inter-racial marriage and more.

Despite the darkness of many of her themes, however, Brooks does write with optimism. When sixteen-year-old Laker is told by his mother that he cannot live at home anymore, he finds comfort in an unexpected relationship with 82-year-old Henry Olsen in “The Kindness of Strangers.” The partner of Sam’s gay father in the title story helps her to learn to forgive and trust her father again. Again, there are no heroes or villains in these stories, only people who often stumble, and often hurt one another, but just as often help and love each other.

In the final story of the Wynne-Jones collection, “Gloria,” the narrator reflects “... some days taste so good they are like promises” (142) and this is so of some stories too. Different as they are, both these new releases by Greenwood taste that good.

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SUPERHEROES SAVED BY HUMOUR

Losing Joe’s Place. Gordon Korman. Scholastic Inc., 1990. 233 pp., \$3.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-42769-5. **The Twinkie Squad.** Gordon Korman. Scholastic Inc., 1992. 194 pp., \$3.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-45250-9. **Just Call Me Boom Boom.** Martyn Godfrey. Scholastic Canada Ltd., 1994. 132 pp., \$4.50 paper. ISBN 0-590-73081-9. **Wally Strutzgummer, Super Bad Dude.** Martyn Godfrey. Scholastic Canada Ltd., 1992. 143 pp., \$4.50 paper. ISBN 0-590-74033-4. **Ski Stooges.** Paul Kropp. Scholastic Canada Ltd., 1992. 168 pp., \$4.50 paper. ISBN 0-590-74062-8.

Dialogue fresh from the halls of junior high, fast moving action, pervasive humour, and lively characters, all contribute to the entertainment value of these books. In spite of these admirable qualities, these books lack subtlety in their characterization and plots. No loose ends are left untied, and any wrong-doing is overshadowed by the humour of the situations. Nonetheless, the moral lessons are there and characters who stray, if they are not punished, do see the errors of their ways.

In the Korman books, Douglas in *The Twinkie Squad*, and Jason in *Losing Joe’s Place*, outsmart adults in outlandish ways and in the process accomplish what the adults are unable to do. Not always do plans work as expected, but these intrepid characters tackle the next-to-impossible, from rehabilitating a bunch of