

Social consciousness in the novel is presented ambiguously at times. For instance, when Emma meets some disoriented immigrants traveling to York from England, she notes that these, among the many others that arrive daily, will be met by the "committee of substantial people in York" (124) formed to help integrate the immigrants into the New World society. But, she realizes, while the impulse behind the setting up of this committee was partly benevolent, it was mainly born of a desire to keep the streets clear of low-life. What does Emma think of this? We do not know.

But the reader is certainly led to sympathize with Emma, not because she has not attained what she thought was "her rightful place as a gentlewoman" (*Quarter-pie window* 9), but because of her workload, which increases daily, and of the nature of the tasks she must perform, made particularly difficult by the era in which she lives. Brandis has achieved a good balance of narrative and historical detail. The details of the material culture of Toronto past are fascinating in their own right.

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#### OF POST HOLES AND FENCES

**Dare.** Marilyn Halvorson. Stoddart, 1988. 191 pp., paper \$9.95 ISBN 0-7737-5216-0; **Sixteen is spelled O-U-C-H.** Joan Weir. Stoddart, 1988. 138 pp., paper \$9.95 ISBN 0-7737-5229-3.

Bad boy reluctantly spends the summer on a ranch where he learns the value of hard work and, after a crucial incident involving a horse, makes an important discovery about himself. Add that the boy is sixteen and the first-person narrator of the novel, and you have a sparse but accurate account of both Marilyn Halvorson's *Dare* and Joan Weir's *Sixteen is spelled O-U-C-H*. But, as the titles suggest, this is where the similarity ends.

Weir's title indicates the relative simplicity and naivete which mark her story – perhaps because her narrator Tim lacks insight. That's clearly her intent, but it limits the telling of her tale. More difficult to justify is the story's didacticism, even in the romantic sub-plot. Tim tries to fit into ranch life, in order to fit into the heart of the ranch owners' sixteen-year-old daughter Hilary. En route he learns about the value not only of hard work, but also of community and racial tolerance. In a modern jousting tournament at the mid-summer rodeo, the chivalric virtues of honesty and brotherhood are strongly touted: consequently, after a prolonged struggle Tim admits his responsibility for an accident involving the ranch owner's favorite horse.

What makes this chivalric rebuilding of character so disconcerting is its objectification of Hilary. Her affections respond to Tim's movement toward maturity, and she is merely its sexual monitor. Sex is the reward for virtue here, and Hilary and the novel are the less for it.

Tim is a shallow character but he does move towards some depth while helping out on the ranch: digging post holes, he learns not only to dig deep in the earth, but deeper into himself. A similar parallel between ranch work and psychological recovery is found in *Dare*. Darren ("Dare") Jameson takes down some barbed wire fencing bare-and single-handed, leaving him bloody and sore. But an emotionally-barbed fence which he must also dismantle threatens to leave him bloodier and sorer.

Dare hates ranch life almost as much as he hates the stubborn Laura, a substitute teacher with whom he's had memorable run-ins. Through a series of irresponsible mishaps, Dare ends up in a Calgary jail with a huge, bestial biker, a drunk, and a sickeningly lecherous homosexual (a portrayal which is stereotypically disturbing). But Halvorson, through fine crafting and teasingly placed hints, keeps the reader more absorbed in Dare's coming to face his responsibility for his mother's accidental death nine years before. A full understanding of the circumstances of that death doesn't occur until Dare himself is ready to face them, almost to replay them, by rescuing Laura's horse from a burning barn. Such facing up results from Dare's acceptance of one dare after another, from those which tempt him to further betrayal and irresponsibility, to those which invite him to face his own past. That such dares govern his actions shows how illusory the boy's sense of his own self-control, self-direction, actually is.

Because the stakes are so much higher for Dare than for Tim, because this isn't a cowboy story where the guy gets the girl and the horse lives happily ever after, the narrative is more intense and painful. Halvorson catches Dare's struggle in the occasionally raw honesty of her prose. However, a less conventional narrative form might have served her better: the linear narrative is never buffeted by the powerful feelings Dare relates. This is not a big reservation, but it reflects my concern that so few children's writers in this country take formal risks. Halvorson is one who, I think, could; *Dare* might have been a place to start.

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