

they aren't really happy. However, when you're a teen life isn't always happy anyway, is it?

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### Trouble in Teendom

*Stranger at Bay*. Don Aker. Stoddart Kids, 1997. 246 pp. \$5.99 paper. ISBN 0-7736-7468-3. *What They Don't Know*. Anita Horrocks. Stoddart Kids, 1998. 240 pp. \$9.99 paper. ISBN 0-7737-6001-6. *Angels Turn Their Backs*. Margaret Buffie. Kids Can, 1998. 239 pp. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55074-415-1 (bound), 1-55074-417-8 (pbk.)

Three recent young adult novels, *Stranger at Bay* by Don Aker, *What They Don't Know* by Anita Horrocks, and *Angels Turn Their Backs* by Margaret Buffie each approach serious ethical and/or emotional problems of their teenage protagonists with a vigorous honesty. Aker's hero has to choose between stealing drugs from his father and telling the cops the truth that will implicate him; Horrocks's narrator focuses on the rage her little sister experiences when she learns the truth about her paternity; and Buffie's protagonist battles both the fear of insanity and her actual illness, agoraphobia.

All the young adults suffer the impact of a realignment of their parents' conjugal affairs. Aker's book involves the effect of a father's remarriage, job loss, and relocation on fourteen-year-old Randy who is still suffering the trauma of his mother's abandonment of him as a child. Similarly, the sisters in Horrocks's story must adjust to their father's remarriage after their mother chooses a career incompatible with child-rearing. Buffie's book, with the mother as custodial parent, traces the consequences on fourteen-year-old Addy of a marriage break-up subsequent to the mother's relocation for her career. The adults in each book proclaim repeatedly the importance of cooperation and communication in building a successful family unit. The teens, however, experience agonies about who gets membership in the new configuration. Who has the right or obligation to belong to that "happy family who works things out together"? This conflict accounts for parents and children continually misjudging each other's value systems throughout the novels. In the end, all three authors come down firmly on the side of the parents, believing, it seems, that it is more productive to define the family according to current cultural mores rather than to right the teen's injured sense of truth and justice at the base of the conflict. Practical or cynical? Apparently it depends on which side of the generation divide you see from.

All three authors choose first person narration with varying effect. Aker's hero, Randy, gives a particularly wry and self-deprecating view of teenhood as well as life-with-parents in an often acerbic tone which is genuinely funny from first chapter to last. Horrocks's tale is told by an older sibling who tries to make sense of her fourteen-year-old sister Hannah's sudden change to antisocial, even self-destructive, behaviours. This narrative device effectively turns an otherwise simple, linear plot into a puzzle, a mystery to be solved, as Kelly's love for her sister forces her to become involved in the chaos of Hannah's life. The author reproduces letters, notes, essays, and stories which Hannah has created throughout her school years and stored in a private box under her mattress, an innovative method for conveying the well-balanced happiness and buoyant history of this now-troubled girl. Horrocks's use of the searing sarcasm of the self-involved teenager attempting to delineate herself against her family and peers is effective because the artifacts of Hannah's early life create a sympathetic perspective and because the older sister's personality becomes a buffer for the reader.

Buffie's heroine, Addy, has a sarcastic tongue as well, but we are not given a view of her personality prior to the onslaught of her agoraphobia. Readers need to see Addy making some kind of valiant attempt to create a life for herself in order to make a positive connection with her; instead, Addy watches her favourite movies repeatedly, reads her favourite novels again and again, cries a lot, and invents lies for her mother. Until the last few pages of the tale, she is a spoiled, rude, self-interested misfit who is fighting mental illness. A misanthropic heroine can make for marvellous irony or deft insights, but Buffie gives us only a disagreeable teenager.

All three protagonists — Randy, Kelly, and Addy — are announced by the authors as being unusually intelligent. Aker's Randy has a memory which enables him to accurately recall pages of written text years after having read them. The plot hinges on Randy's use of his particular gift which inadvertently embarrasses a teacher and creates the motivation for revenge. His giftedness also justifies the engagingly sophisticated humour in Randy's criticism of his uneducated, non-intellectually inclined step-mother. In Horrocks's tale, Hannah speaks resentfully of her older sister's academic accomplishments which teachers ill-advisedly use to remind Hannah of her own disinterest in scholastic achievement. The contrasting valuations serve to add credibility to Kelly as a reliable narrator. In Buffie's story, Addy's high intelligence is only mentioned in one brief flashback in which Addy expresses dismay that her scholastic abilities have alienated peers, whereas her only-ever best friend (before the move) accounts intelligence to be one of the reasons she likes the painfully shy Addy. Otherwise, Addy's superior abilities have no impact on the tone, characterization, or plot of the novel.

Buffie's excessive descriptions of the embroidered pictures, of Addy's emotional takes on events, of her parent's quarrels, slow the pace of the

narrative to near tedium. In addition, the supernatural element in the tale never quite meshes with, nor delineates by apposition, the novel's realism. The deceased expert on stitchery whose workroom Addy inherits, Lotta Engel, was also a victim of agoraphobia. For the major part of the novel this apparition seeks to further entrap poor Addy with her unfinished art projects in scenes invariably dark and filled with foreboding. A scruffy African Grey parrot who sometimes acts as a medium for Lotta dominates many of the scenes, but Lotta is able to assume aspects of corporeality in removing needlework stitches and in communicating directly with Addy on occasion and through dreams on others. Essentially, the parrot is both annoying and superfluous: neither does he add to characterization nor does he advance the plot.

Horrocks opens her novel with a chapter in which older sister Kelly muses on the nature of story and suggests various tale openings she could employ. In doing so, Horrocks cleverly previews some of the main elements of the story to come; however, without any preliminary sense of Kelly as a character available, the ideas seem more author-driven than character-driven. Horrocks also ends the tale with Kelly's further musing references to story, thus creating a strong sense of closure to an essentially linear structure. Initially the narrator suggests that Peter Pan is a thematic model for the ensuing tale, and we are left to puzzle out how this intertextual reference fits the story we are given. When Kelly revises her observation with the offend comment that Hannah's "story turns out to be about Humpty Dumpty, not Peter Pan" 240 pages later, it's tempting to feel the irritation of having been misled rather than the intended relief of understanding.

Aker opens his tale with Randy's nightmare, a recurring event which, combined with subsequent experiences of *déjà vu*, we gradually learn stems from his repressed memories of his separation from his birth mother. Between times, Randy's healthy and exuberant sense of self seems so unconnected to this trauma that it comes as something of a surprise each time it surfaces. Similarly, at the end of her novel Horrocks involves the father in a near-fatal auto accident that neither arises from characterization nor from any logical plot necessity. It's mere melodrama. Perhaps both authors believed ongoing pain would prevent a cloying "happy ending," but believable resolutions can only spring from characterization that moves the protagonist through the plot.

These reservations aside, the novels contain much to respect. Aker writes strong conflict which includes nuance and humour, and Horrocks gets the tragedy of the downward spiral in Hannah's choices heart-wrenchingly right. Both are acclaimed highly teen-worthy.

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