

Spider's Web is a *good read*, with a catchy buildup to a climactic revelation worthy of the best afternoon teen-soap, but this does not deflect awareness from problems. Stewart trips over her Net nuances, and the plot twists around incongruencies that pit incompatible technologies against one another. There is some problem with admitting that the inspiration for a book that purports to be net-savvy was inspired by an article about Bill Gates's house, as the "About the author" notes admit.

Why do I see these "details" as problematic? Well, if the detective fiction writer thinks that .308 cartridges work just fine in a blunderbuss, we have a logical problem that may thwart the reader's enjoyment as much as the narrative development. In *Spider's Web*, Spider moves into a house with a computer that can alert the authorities at the first sign of trouble, and can access her stepfather's corporate electronic art collection, yet Spider uses a modem when connecting to the Internet through a command-line interface. She communicates in a text-only environment while using a natural language processing capable computer. Overall, a more sophisticated presentation of the medium, cultural and gender issues would have better served the narrative.

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Pedagogy and Human Interest in Two Historical Children's Novels

The Golden Rose. Dayle Campbell Gaetz. Pacific Educational P, 1996. 156 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 1-895766-21-4. *Prairie Fire!* Bill Freeman. James Lorimer, 1998. 196 pp. \$9.95 paper. ISBN 1-55028-608-0.

Two books about pioneering in the mid-1800s in Western Canada should invite comparisons, but *The Golden Rose*, by Dayle Campbell Gaetz, and *Prairie Fire!*, by Bill Freeman, are studies in contrasting approaches to writing historical fiction for eight-to-thirteen-year-olds. Neither novel is entirely successful in the proportioning of pedagogy and human interest.

The Golden Rose focuses on a family of English settlers who almost destroy one another through inner conflict triggered by the death of the older daughter on their arrival at their site in the BC Interior. Although, traditionally, pioneering chronicles focus on the conditions and challenges of an alien, hostile environment, Gaetz draws attention to the often unexpressed dysfunction of families subjected to physical and emotional rigours for which

they are unprepared. The fourteen-year-old heroine, Katherine, feels isolated and inadequate after her sister's death, becoming the scapegoat of the family's projections, while other family members come to exhibit their worst qualities: her older brother turns sullen and selfish, her father becomes increasingly domineering and insensitive, while her mother retreats narcissistically into the accusatory silence of a suicidal grief. It is up to Katherine, with the aid of a Native boy her age and a tiny rose-shaped nugget that symbolizes her sister's delicate, caring spirit, to find the inner qualities she needs to heal the family's wounds and restore harmony.

Sometimes, however, the human drama seems to unfold at the expense of the physical one. Surprisingly, the idealized landscape of England is never evoked, while natural and topographical details relating to day-to-day existence are scanty. In addition, the important scene where Katherine and her father encounter a bear in their garden is clumsily drawn and strains credibility. *The Golden Rose*, however, rises above such lapses through its often moving account of the debilitating effects of destructive family dynamics on its most vulnerable, yet ultimately most courageous, member.

Prairie Fire! is strong on instruction and weak on human interest. The seventh novel in the history of the peripatetic Bains family follows the fortunes of Peggy Bains and four of her children as they stake their claim in the newly formed province of Manitoba, build a modest house, plant their crops, and deal with explosive situations both natural and human. *Prairie Fire!* succeeds as a practical compendium of survival skills for homesteading but is hampered throughout by a lack of human focus. *Prairie Fire!* seems too self-consciously a book in a series, rather than a compelling story that can stand on its own. Younger children who have not read the previous volumes will be disadvantaged: they will find the efforts at "catch-up" in the early pages distracting, while Freeman's choice to focus more or less equally on all the characters makes the story less involving than that of *The Golden Rose*. Indeed, the Bainses in this instalment are a family without inner conflict and, therefore, without great interest.

Prairie Fire! also illustrates the profound challenges in presenting to younger readers charged subject matter like bigotry and racism. The novel takes place six years after the Red River Resistance and execution of Thomas Scott by Métis leader Louis Riel. The Bainses, among the first of an influx of European settlers into traditional Métis territory, find themselves in the midst of a simmering land dispute which is resolved, at least at the local level, during the novel's climax by an act of Métis neighbourliness. This resolution suggests that while the violent prejudices of racial stereotyping were a fact, they did not so much embody an ingrained characteristic as a superficial trait readily overcome, hardly an apt representation of the collision of historical forces the novel attempts to portray.

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