

lonesome by his best friend's departure to summer camp, "Ter" must come to terms with his own lack of identity and his own burgeoning masculinity. He begins a friendship with the troubled Lucy, a thirteen-year-old girl who behaves outrageously to hide her own sense of despair. The story that emerges is a mixture of the two twelve-year olds' quests — for family and for friendship.

Withrow is a skilled storyteller. While the novel has an ill-defined beginning, it quickly transforms into a moving examination of adolescent turmoil. Withrow intersperses her narrative with sharp social commentary that includes feminist discourse and insights on popular culture — both of which stand out in tone but seem to fit into the overall dynamic of the story. Although obvious, such discourse is not awkward, and Withrow is able to manipulate weighty issues into relevant plot vehicles. I am not certain, however, that this book would most appeal to the audience it is professedly written for. Nine- to twelve-year-olds may not appreciate Withrow's subtlety and may long for more closure than she is able to offer.

Often quite humorous, Withrow does not patronize her characters; their conflicts are sensitively drawn. Terence's insights often border on the very mature, but they are not out of character and are always framed in the kind of insecurity that renders this character infinitely likable and ultimately believable. Lucy is a difficult character; she straddles a very fine line between the potentially insane and the simply creative and emotionally damaged. Withrow spends considerable time developing the nuances of this character, but never brings Lucy entirely out of the shadows of her own story — a device that while in some ways frustrating, fits in nicely with the novel's depiction of adolescent reality. The end of the novel does not offer resolution of Lucy's myriad emotional problems, but this device suits the tone of the story. Withrow offers temporary resolution, but will not pretend that an adolescent's problems simply disappear with finality upon a story's climax.

Ultimately, *Bat Summer* offers an insightful portrayal of adolescent relationships. Sarah Withrow has woven a story that speaks to both the creative and the ordinary reader; the text itself ultimately nestles somewhere in between.

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When a Picture Isn't Worth 1,000 Words

Buddy Concrackle's Amazing Adventures. Chris McMahan. Coteau, 1996. 163 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 1-55050-101-1

With his repeated use of blank photos throughout *Buddy Concrackle's Amazing Adventures*, Chris McMahan is telling his readers that words can be as poignant as any illustration. In order to envision what the blank boxes might have shown had they had a photo in them, readers must use their own imaginative skills to unravel the text's potential. To entice young and potentially hesitant readers into such a posi-

tion, McMahan uses highly decorative language, rich in imagery, to describe eccentric characters in far-fetched situations. At first glance, his use of bizarre characters and occurrences may seem excessive, yet some of the most outrageous passages prove to be the story's greatest strengths. A vivid description of "whipped liver perogies for only 99 cents a serving" (44) at a highway diner will make any young reader more nauseated than the sight of a photograph alone.

While the far-fetched content forces imaginative minds to work extra hard, it also adds to the high comic appeal of *Buddy Concrackle's Amazing Adventures*. Even though the Concrackles find themselves in a variety of strange situations, they are consistently besieged by one odd-ball in particular: enter Ear Drums MacLeod, a quiltsman whose penchant for tedious anecdotes and off-key bagpipe performances is sure to test the patience of any family, including the free-spirited Concrackles.

Besides their comic charm, McMahan's eccentric characters also play a subversive role in showing the author's disdain for a conservative and intolerant American society. Buddy's father must remove the propeller off his hat when crossing into the United States as any peculiar tendencies are sure to rouse the suspicions of border officials. Buddy's father also purchases "the Spirit of the Fourth of July" kite, and after its various firecrackers and mini-rockets are shot off, the Concrackle family awaits "the splendidous exploding conclusion to this aeronautic display of patriotism!" (90). Yet when the kite misfires only to have "a small black clump" (90) remain, readers are reminded of the folly that surrounds such popularized displays of American patriotism.

Despite embedding his own political agenda in the text, McMahan still knows how to use material that will stimulate young imaginative minds. To dismiss *Buddy Concrackle's Amazing Adventures* as overindulgent, far-fetched writing proves short-sighted. Given McMahan's effort to foster an imaginative engagement with text among young readers, his decorative style seems quite appropriate.

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More than Surviving

Jess and the Runaway Grandpa. Mary Woodbury. Coteau, 1997. 208 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 1-55050-113-5.

Mary Woodbury's previous juvenile novels include *The Invisible Polly McDoodle* and *Where in the World is Jenny Parker?* (1989). Like its predecessors, *Jess and the Runaway Grandpa* is a story of adventure and action featuring a strong female protagonist forced to face her deepest fears and to exercise all her ingenuity. The rather dark opening brings together the principle cast of Jess Baines's life at the funeral of her cat. Present are her mother, Naomi, whom Jess has mothered after her divorce; Brian, her ex-friend, now alienated from her by the gender politics of junior high; Sonny, Brian's distant father; and substitute grandparents, the Mathers, who are