

## Female Detectives and Their Sidekicks

*What's a Daring Detective Like Me Doing in the Doghouse?* Linda Bailey. Kids Can, 1997. 185 pp. \$4.95 paper. ISBN 1-55074-321-X. *Who Took Henry and Mr. T?* Dave Glaze. Coteau, 1996. 137 pp. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 1-55050-107-0. *The Intrepid Polly McDoodle.* Mary Woodbury. Coteau, 1998. 181 pp. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 1-55050-113-X.

Spunky female detectives star in each of these mysteries. Each sleuth is teamed with a male partner, probably to capture that often elusive boy reader. This aim is commendable and important, so writers should realize it takes more than male genes to interest young readers. He must be someone boys can relate to or admire. Of course the most important quality of a book both boys and girls want is a really good story.

In *What's a Daring Detective Like Me Doing in the Doghouse?* Jesse Kulniki and Stevie (Stephanie) Diamond are everything a kid would want in a character — ingenious, funny, daring, and loyal to each other. That's one reason why the series is now five books strong. While Stevie is the viewpoint character, narrator and mastermind, Jesse more than holds his own. Full of energy, courage, great one-liners and comedic timing, she herself appeals to either gender.

Polly, too, is the viewpoint character in *The Intrepid Polly McDoodle*. Her partner, Kyle Clay, also shares a detective agency with her, and this is their second case. They balance each other. Polly is artistic, emotional, and social. Kyle is methodical and brilliant. Unfortunately, he's not the kind of guy boys will relate to. When he sees boys racing their ATV's (something my son used to yearn for) his response is, "What a noisy crew. I was hoping the country would be quiet. Aren't there noise pollution guidelines?" He has huge owl glasses, sticking-out hair, whistles Beethoven and Mozart while riding his bike, and is absorbed by science and learning — a total nerd. Middle-grade boys probably won't hang around with him. Will they like reading about him? Girl readers will enjoy Polly, who feels unsure about growing up and the changes it will bring, who misses her friend that moved away, and feels inept when the new girl in school seems to look down on her and becomes friends with Kyle. Her continual referring to herself as "The ... McDoodle (fill in guilty, suddenly timid, desolate, etc.) becomes a bit wearying, but is a perfect way to show the self-absorption of that age. As an artist, Polly is believable and appealing to any young person interested in art. I've watched many artists sketching compulsively during meetings, and her efforts to get the deer's legs right were realistic.

And then there are Caroline and Winston. In *Who Took Henry And Mr. T?* it's hard to figure out why the two detectives are friends, unless Winston is a masochist. In an adult book, Caroline would be called names beginning with B. She bosses everyone around — even the principal — is picky, and self-righteous. Winston is a wimp. The bully picks on him and extorts his money, but Caroline is worse. She orders him around, belittles him, makes him clean his locker and do homework, and — I was horrified — "hit Winston's face so hard little stars flashed in front of his eyes." By contrast, in Bailey's novel, Stevie considers slapping a hysterical Jesse, but realizes, "I'm just not the smacking kind of detective," and calms him down with an alpha stare instead.

We feel sorry for Winston, until he spouts off yet another definition of any

hard word, tempting us to push him around some ourselves. The reason why he does this is never supplied, so it remains annoying. We can't understand what keeps these two together. They never have fun. They exist in a vacuum, with no history, little mention of a family life, especially Winston's. What kind of parents would give a boy that name and send him to public school, and have such poor communication that their son is ashamed to tell them about the bully?

There are three main male characters in the novel — a bully, a pompous nitwit vice-principal, and wussy Winston — not a single role model for young boys here. The bravest, most interesting males in the story are the guinea pigs. We may need more strong women in real life, but modern children's literature requires more strong, interesting males to entice boys to put down the hockey stick or joystick and pick up a book. This author is a man who has taught for twenty years. Surely he knows what boys want to read. Why didn't he write a much-needed story for them?

Readers will forgive character flaws if the story surrounding them is good. Glaze's detectives face the theft of two guinea pigs and \$500 from their classroom, so it's a reasonable mystery for middle-graders to solve, except that grade five seems at least a year too old for students to be excited about guinea pigs. Suspense is built nicely by alternating chapters between the stolen guinea pigs, the detectives, and the intruder. I was surprised that the principal allowed the children to stay in the office where the culprit and her aggressive mother would know who told.

*The Intrepid Polly McDoodle*, set outside Edmonton, has a nice "cottage country" feel to it — a place where kids can have independent adventures. Small Shadow Lake is shown at the beginning on a simple map. Great idea; kids love maps. I was glad to see the Native characters fit in naturally without any fuss or stereotypes. The crime here is an environmental one — someone has been dumping hazardous waste into the stream. Kids are as likely as anyone else to discover this, and since these three are environmental zealots who are working on a school ecology project, it is a logical and timely mystery.

Woodbury, a convert to environmental awareness, goes overboard preaching the good message until we agree when Polly says, "lighten up." At times the characters sound like fussy adults: "Don't they know smoking is bad for their health," "they were glad of their helmets," "that young hockey player," and only an obsessive housekeeper would notice they put their dishes in the dishwasher, "without rinsing them."

Smokers really get a bad rap in modern books, and in *Polly McDoodle* and *Who Took Henry and Mr. T?* it's easy to pick out the villains. They smoke. Good guys don't. That's too simple a stereotype. Hitler was a nonsmoker. It could be rightfully upsetting to any young reader with a beloved and perfectly nice, smoking family member.

Elsewhere, Woodbury handles the good guy/bad guy issue with sensitivity. No one is all bad or good — even villains have redeeming qualities. Seeing how Mrs. Getz talks to her sons, the dead dog incident, and especially Sam treating his young brothers with kindness, we form some sympathy for the boys. The oldest son tells Polly, "What do you know about us? Nothing, absolutely nothing," and

teaches readers a gentle lesson.

*What's a Daring Detective Like Me Doing in the Doghouse?* begins with a Prime Minister's stolen underwear, an audacious prankster, lots of dogs, and a search to solve "crimes with dignity." This promising setup and snappy dialogue make us settle happily into the book, content that we're in the hands of a master storyteller. In her best mystery yet, Bailey writes a perfect blend of great characters, wonderful wit, and exciting plot. The two sleuths discover that the dog whom they have just dyed green and given a very bad haircut to, belongs to the President of the USA, and all police forces and FBI are searching for the criminal who stole him. Stevie and Jesse must uncover the prankster before they are accused of the crime themselves. Okay, so the mystery isn't that likely to happen, but we enjoy its twists and turns. The first two books reviewed here are so serious. This one has comedic scenes, such as Ms. Schultz's "staff meeting," Stevie's first night with the dog and her cat sleeping in her room, and Stevie's wry asides, that make the reader laugh out loud. This novel transcends the male/female character problems. The story is so good it doesn't matter whether the main characters are boy, girl, or kangaroo. And that's the way it should be.

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*A former school librarian and teacher, Gisela Sherman is the author of three novels for young people. Her mystery, Grave Danger, won the HARAC Award for Best Children's Book of 1998, has a starred listing in the CCBC's Our Choice catalogue, and has been translated into Swedish and Norwegian. Sherman has taught creative writing at Mohawk College and McMaster University.*

### Mindful Excess

*More Minds.* Carol Matas and Perry Nodelman. Scholastic, 1998. 188 pp. \$4.99 paper. ISBN 0-590-39469-X.

In *Of Two Minds* (1994), Carol Matas and Perry Nodelman introduced readers to Princess Lenora, who repeatedly violated orders that she not use her power to make real everything she imagined, and Prince Coren, who resisted constant appeals to use his ability to enter other people's minds. The plot had the pair opposing Hevak, a dictator who was, ironically, an imagined version of Lenora herself. *More Minds*, a sequel originally published in 1996, not only continues the story but also reverses the thematic emphasis that celebrated individuality over conformity. Lenora, who previously represented unfettered individualism, now learns that, because no one imposes order, chaos rules: a destructive giant mysteriously appears, events become unpredictable, and everyone, including Lenora, has lost special powers. Like the previous story, this fantasy has an ironic climax. Going into the past, Lenora discovers that she herself imposed the controlling laws that irk and restrain her in her own time. In an epilogue that obviously prepares for a third adventure, Lenora, who knows that many people are unhappy with her imposition of order, sets off to change the world again.