

boring to read (87). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Matas has not written one of those.

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*Alan West recently completed his doctorate at the University of Ottawa. While his dissertation was on selected British utopians and dystopians, one of his preferred subjects is children's literature.*

### Overcoming Hardship in Toronto and Afghanistan

*Looking for X.* Deborah Ellis, Groundwood/Douglas & McIntyre, 1999. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-382-X. *The Breadwinner.* Deborah Ellis, Groundwood/Douglas & McIntyre, 2000. \$18.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-419-2.

In a fine Canadian tradition, Khyber, the eleven-year old heroine and narrator of *Looking for X*, uses her intelligence and the power of her imagination to overcome what might have been an otherwise degrading and depressing environment. She has exchanged her real name (which she hates) for that of the Khyber Pass in Afghanistan. She imagines this as a wild, romantic place where she can stand and direct lost travellers. She dreams of travelling to such places, all of them quite different from her actual home in Regent's Park, a depressed area of Toronto. There she lives with her mother, Tammy, a former stripper now on welfare, and two younger twin brothers (or half-brothers: we aren't sure if their father was hers) who are autistic. Her days are filled with looking after David and Daniel and attending school (where she does well, despite run-ins with snooty classmates). She works in a restaurant on Saturdays in exchange for her breakfast. On occasion she extorts money from wedding parties who wish to be photographed in the greenhouse in nearby Allan Gardens, by getting in the way until she is bought off.

One very important activity is visiting her friend "X" and bringing her a sandwich. X is a deranged, elderly street woman who travels with her worldly goods in a small suitcase, is terrified of the "secret police" and — from one of the few times that she speaks — was once a folk singer.

The decision (made under the influence of a "green-fanged" social worker) to send the twins to a house in the country where they can get needed professional care precipitates a crisis. Khyber runs to find X. In the Allan gardens they are assaulted by skinheads; afterwards Khyber is falsely accused of breaking a school window. She goes in search of X (whom her mother regards as no more than an "imaginary friend"), as her only possible alibi.

Her search takes her, tired and hungry, on a long trip through downtown Toronto. It is Hallowe'en, and the streets are full of monsters. Khyber is finally rescued by an all-girl band of Elvis impersonators, who bring her back home. The true culprits who broke the window have been found, and her name is cleared. She and her mother decide to move to the country to be near the twins, who are doing very well in their new home. The family will still be in close contact. She says goodbye to her friends, including the mysterious X.

From the opening sentence, “Mom used to be a stripper,” the book moves quickly, with lively text and unexpected twists. There are colourful and accurate (for a fellow Torontonion) descriptions of the city’s streets and parks. The night scenes, with X fleeing from unknown evils, add a convincing air of mystery to the book, which well deserved its Governor General’s award.

The reader comes to realize that Khyber is not, in fact, a “deprived” child. She is surrounded by love. Her mother is strong, wise and kind. The twins show her real affection. She has good friends in Valerie, the cross waitress, in her mother’s friend Juba and in the Elvis impersonators, who will continue to help the family. Virtually all the “good guys” in the book are women; there is a strong subtext of women helping women, which may well be so in this world. Though the family lives minimally on welfare, the social net provides good professional help and a warm, caring environment for her autistic brothers.

These points are mentioned to illustrate the vast difference between the situation of a child of a single welfare mom in Canada and a middle-class child in present-day Afghanistan, in a much more exotic story, which has, curiously, less sense of mystery.

Parvana, the protagonist of *The Breadwinner*, is another eleven-year-old, the daughter of educated parents. During the fighting that followed the departure of the Soviet army from Afghanistan in 1989, the family has moved from one house to another as each has been bombed. Now Parvana, her parents, Nooria, a grown sister and two younger siblings share one room in Kabul, the capital, which has been under control of the Taliban army since 1996. They survive as best they can by the father reading and writing letters in the market for a largely illiterate population, and by selling the last of their possessions. Parvana helps her crippled father walk, and normally women are not permitted to go out on the street without a man accompanying them.

Then her father is imprisoned for the “crime” of having studied in England. Parvana becomes, in effect, the “breadwinner” of the family. Her hair is cut, she dresses as a boy, and takes over her father’s letter-reading and -writing business in the market. With another transformed girl, she earns money by digging up human bones as a source of bone meal, and becoming a street peddler. As a “boy,” she can accompany her sisters outside for sunlight and fresh air. The family is helped by Mrs. Weera, an athletic grandmother and former physical-education teacher. She and Parvana’s mother start a school (forbidden to girls under the Taliban) and a secret magazine. Hope arises when the rest of the family go to Mazar, a city free of the Taliban, where a marriage — and education and a decent future — await Nooria. Parvana, whose disguise as a boy must be protected, remains behind. Then the Taliban capture Mazar. Parvana’s family may be in a refugee camp. Her father returns from prison, very weak. As the book ends, he and Parvana are going to look for the rest of their family. They set out in a more hopeful spirit than one would expect.

This rapidly-moving story, full of exciting incidents, presents convincing details of daily life under one of the world’s most repressive regimes, which is especially noted for its bad treatment of women. Since women’s movements outdoors are so restricted, fetching water and buying food present major problems; but life goes on. The book shows how the human spirit may survive and grow

even under such conditions. As in *Looking for X*, women help each other, as exemplified by the strong Mrs. Weera, and a mysterious woman behind a window who throws Parvana gifts. There are a few decent men as well, and even a human Talib. Royalties from *The Breadwinner* will help support education of Afghan girls in refugee camps in Pakistan.

Both books can be warmly recommended as good reads for young adults as well as for their affirmation (never didactic) of the strength of the human spirit.

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*Donn Kushner is a writer, scientist and violinist. He has spent years juggling his many interests and since his retirement from university teaching in microbiology is devoting more time to his many writing projects. His books for children include **The Violin-Maker's Gift**, **The Night Voyagers**, **Life on Mars**, **The House of the Good Spirits**, and **The Dinosaur Duster**.*