

Ecco Homo paintings. The characters' faces do show some tiredness, and even the children's eyes are a bit shadowed; nevertheless, although the text states that the family suffer cold and have "hardly any food to eat," they appear to be well fleshed, the children cute and cherubic.

Most of the illustrations zero in on the human figures, especially on faces and hands, thus emphasizing the characters' physical closeness. In the opening scene, mother and daughters are encircled by the father's protective arms. In the second, the mother holds the two daughters. In the last scene set in the past, Anna lies dreaming, her head and upper body encircled by a spirit goat. Indeed, hugging is the most prevalent action depicted in the book (in more than half the illustrations). Except for a small picture of the goat being milked and another of the goat trying to eat the wash, not much activity occurs. Anna never does anything active: she observes or sleeps or nestles against the goat. Even when other children are searching for treasures, she simply crouches on the rubble. The lone dynamic scene occurs on the cover, which shows a girl and a goat playing tug-of-war. In spite of beginning with Anna's birth, the story initially focuses on Wanda; it is Wanda's profile, for instance, that dominates the scene of the goat's arrival. The focus then shifts from children with mother to children with goat. Yet after the family's return to their home city, Wanda fades from both text and illustrations. Most child readers or listeners will wonder what has happened to Wanda, for she appears to have been replaced by Anna. In fact, the two girls are not clearly distinguished — except, at first, by size. This impression is reinforced at the two crucial moments in the story, where the same words are used to describe the girls' reactions. When the nanny goat arrives, "Wanda stared and stared, and then looked up at her mother, asking the question just with her eyes." When the mother later evokes memories of the goat, "Anna looked up and asked her a question, just with her eyes."

In general, then, the illustrations do not do full justice to the text. They are disappointing after Wilson's earlier work, such as *Selina and the Bear Paw Quilt* and *Sarah and the New Red Dress*, where the girls are active individuals rather than pretty dolls. Obviously, a picture book for children is not expected to dwell on the horrors of war, but in *Anna's Goat*, the emphasis on sweetness and harmony can be cloying at times. In spite of this, the book succeeds in demonstrating how innovative solutions can help people cope with adversity and how memories of a harsh past can be creatively transformed and used.

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*Diana Shklanka teaches at the University College of the Cariboo.*

### Conflicts and Connections in Two New Books by W.D. Valgardson

*The Divorced Kids Club and Other Stories.* W.D. Valgardson. Groundwood, 1999. 184 pp. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-370-6. *Frances.* W.D. Valgardson. Groundwood, 2000. 190 pp. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-379-8.

*The Divorced Kids Club and Other Stories* and *Frances* provide contemporary realism at its best for young teens, giving voice to their sometimes impolite, irreverent, and

frustrated reactions to life in general and to elders. Valgardson's openness, frankness, and humour are impressive, as are his characterization and treatment of intergenerational issues. Teens dismissive of their immediate elders often find a wisdom and an affirmation of values in the lives and words of people over fifty — inhabitants of "old folks' homes," "raging grannies," small business owners. Not all adult characters are sympathetic, of course: many — especially the parents — are preoccupied, weighed down with money problems, frenetic, secretive, unthinking, some even uncaring and cruel. However, the young protagonists come to see how vulnerable and human all adults are. There is nothing sentimental in Valgardson's depiction of character, whatever the age.

A distinguished writer of fiction and drama for adults as well as a professor in the creative writing program at the University of Victoria, Valgardson now brings his proven talents to the writing of children's picture books, short stories, and novels. Canadian children seem to be the fortunate beneficiaries of family dynamics, which led Valgardson to write for young people in the past several years: *Frances*, for example, is dedicated to his granddaughter Holly. On his web page, under the rubric of the "Effect of family upon my fiction," Valgardson attributes the origins of all his writing to his great-grandmother's emigration from Iceland to Canada in 1876 as a very young child, and to his experience as a teenager in the Interlake area of Manitoba in the late 1950s, hearing her stories and treasuring them and that community.

Teen readers and adult reviewers who respond to the invitation at the end of *Frances* to visit Valgardson's web page <<http://www.finearts.uvic.ca/~wvalgard/>> will find a rich context for much that appears in both these books. The web page is an inspired and obvious contemporary touch for curious teens for whom turning to the Internet is second nature. Since *Frances* generates much interest in the history of New Iceland, it is useful to find historical facts about the Icelandic immigration to Gimli, in the Interlake area of Manitoba, to find the effect of Icelandic family history and the power of place on Valgardson's writings for both adults and children, and to find a general manifesto for his art. Valgardson explains that, growing up in the Gimli area, he found that "New Iceland still existed in the minds and hearts of the original settlers from the 1870s and in their descendents." Then, as other groups brought their cultures and languages to the area, the Interlake became the "vibrant, passionate world" into which Valgardson was born. For him, "it combined all the characters, all the conflicts, all the local colour I needed for a lifetime of writing." Specifically, he recreates this world and its minds and hearts in *Frances* and in three short stories in *The Divorced Kids Club and Other Stories*: "Cabin Fever," "Mrs. Galoshers," and "The Divorced Kids Club."

Conflict provides the basis for all plots in these two works: between child and parent(s), between teenage friends, between the young and the old, between city and countryside, between developers and environmentalists, between teens and the law, between the new world and the old, between physical sight and insight. However, out of the conflicts come connections, always hard-won and never sentimentalized or sensationalized. All connections arise out of new ways of seeing: the past, and hence the present; the eternal, and hence the ordinary or the real; the other, and hence the self.

There is a tough edge to the realism of *The Divorced Kids Club and Other Stories*. Teens steal, attempt suicide, take up life on the streets, quarrel; as the young protagonist in the "Sand Sifter" — my favourite story — discovers, "There's no happy ending" (75). The language in the volume is contemporary and colloquial; says the abandoned young boy in this story, "Life sucks," and his does. The first-person narrator in "The Divorced Kids Club" talks about her "scary" realization that adults "may be bigger but they aren't always using a compass that works" (170). The humour and frankness, apparent in other stories as well, diffuses the darker tones of the collection. Ultimately, all these stories underline the power of decision making. At the end of "Bush Boy," Jeremy learns that "you make your choices" (150), and he, like all of the young protagonists here, finally makes a good one.

*Frances*, published a year later, takes up where "Cabin Fever" and "The Divorced Kids Club" finish. The academic folklorist father in "Cabin Fever" "often said that things happened for which there was no explanation" (129). His daughter, with "supersensitive senses," lives out one of these happenings and touches a part of an old Icelandic woman's past. In *Frances*, wisdom belongs to the aged Mr. Johannson, a retired high school teacher from the OFH (Old Folks Home), who knows that there are "stranger things in this world than science has any answer for" (178). He translates, from the Icelandic, fragments from the diary of thirteen-year-old Frances's great-great-grandmother. As Frances begins to achieve, through her tangible connections to Ingibjorg's past and Ingibjorg's rune staves, "another way of seeing or thinking," she unlocks the mysteries of her own painful past. She learns from Mr. Johannson to "use the past as a compass to navigate the future but live in the present" (190), and in a poignant final scene she completes, for Mr. Johannson, the journey he cannot make in this world. She then prepares herself for a journey to Iceland to complete the journeys that so many of her ancestors could not make.

In *Frances*, a thirteen-year-old girl connects with "or feels part of something bigger" (125). That power beyond explanation appears in scenes of natural supernaturalism or magic realism — in the golden light of the dragonfly moment as the dragonflies land on Frances's body at sunrise; or in Ingibjorg's ghostly whisper of Frances's name at the old farmhouse (111). It becomes the reality to which Frances connects herself — not quite the limited reality her mother is always telling her to "get connected to."

Ignore the covers, and even the titles, of these two books, which belie the complexities and magic of the narratives themselves. Greenwood should rethink its marketing strategies. Do read and recommend these books. I'm placing *Frances* on my children's literature course for next year.

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*Corinne Davies is an associate professor of English at Huron University College, an affiliate of the University of Western Ontario, where she teaches eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British literature, children's literature, and Poetry and Prosody. She has published on Robert Browning, T.S. Eliot, and Margaret Atwood.*