

Leaping before You Look

Tarragon Island. Nikki Tate. Sono Nis, 1999. 184 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 1-55039-103-8. *No Cafés in Narnia*. Nikki Tate. Sono Nis, 2000. 174 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 1-55039-107-0. *Raven's Revenge*. Nikki Tate. Sono Nis, 1999. 156 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 1-55039-095-3.

Three novels by Nikki Tate point out the folly in jumping to conclusions about people, but show characters who are at their best when in mid-leap. The heroine of Nikki Tate's *Tarragon Island* series is twelve-year-old Heather Blake, aspiring writer, keen observer of people, and confirmed urbanite. When her parents move the family from Toronto to a farm on a small island off the south coast of British Columbia, Heather is furious. For one thing, the move has tangled the lines of allegiance in her family. In Toronto, Heather had frequented cafés and poetry readings with her artist father; on *Tarragon Island*, her mother's rural veterinary practice takes precedence and her father is irritatingly content with the new order. The first novel in this series charts Heather's gradual acceptance of change: little by little, she gathers new writing subjects, makes friends, and begins to accept the foibles of her parents and, eventually, of herself.

Tarragon Island is narrated by Heather, and it is her particular slant on things — her emotional colouring of each incident and her assumptions about people — that makes the novel worth reading. Heather leads an active interior life, constructing dramatic scenarios from bits of half-overheard conversations and the stuff of her imagination. That she is often unreasonable or mistaken in her ideas about people makes her an interesting and sympathetic character. Unfortunately, at the points where Heather's mistaken notions are dispelled, she becomes much less interesting. For instance, she decides that the family that lives next door is desperately poor and would make good research material for a newspaper article on poverty. When she discovers that her neighbours are wealthy, she changes track and writes an anti-consumerist article on the distinction between "Wants and Needs," inspired by the moderation practiced by the neighbours. The pious tone of her essay chokes out the more engaging voice of the misguided Heather, but happily, these tonal shifts in the narrative are few, and a gentle humour presides over much of it.

One of the best sources of humour in the novel is the characterization of Heather's parents. The parents keep up a self-congratulatory banter about their move to the island, apparently viewing their new community through a mist of utopian fantasy. This mood has dissipated by the start of the second book in the series, *No Cafés in Narnia*, in which the parents are preoccupied by illness and grief. This is the most interesting of the three books reviewed here because of its skilful handling of complicated emotional issues. The title captures the tension between Heather's desire to escape into a benign fantasy and her acknowledgement of its impossibility. Within the first few chapters, Heather's grandfather dies, her mother becomes clinically depressed, and her ailing grandmother arrives for an extended stay. Meanwhile, outside the home, Heather struggles with her sense of identity as she tries to fit in at school and in her writing group. Tate convincingly portrays what a pre-adolescent experiences in these situations: the fear and anger around a parent's serious illness, the betrayals committed in an attempt to buy peer acceptance, the frustration of wanting to control one's own sphere without having the

resources to do so.

These are the main concerns of the novel. But there is also a minor theme, developed in a mystery subplot, about mistaken assumptions. When a box of rare stamps is donated to her friend's charity drive, Heather helps find the identity of the donor and, as it turns out, the thief of the valuable goods. In the course of the detective work, Heather draws some mistaken conclusions and ends up having to re-examine her preconceptions about people.

Mistaken assumptions also drive the characters in *Raven's Revenge*, the fifth book in Tate's *Stablemates* series. In this novel, twelve-year-old Jessa and her friend Cheryl go to horse camp, where the camp veterinarian is a witch, or Wiccan practitioner. Knowing nothing about his practice or beliefs, Jessa and her friends work up a semi-hysterical fear of Dr. Rainey, convincing themselves that the bad luck befalling them at camp is a result of a witch's spell. By the end of the novel, the girls are duly enlightened by the vet and his handsome (and here, rather smug) adolescent son, who explains, "My dad always tries to show me beautiful things in nature. He wants me to be respectful of all living things and that includes dumb people who think witches are evil beings who practise black magic" (149).

Ultimately, prejudice is reined in by reason, but the idea of keeping an open mind towards the unconventional is really a minor concern in the novel. The plot is mostly taken up with an escalating series of pranks carried out between the girls in Jessa's cabin and their rivals. This novel is firmly grounded in the school story tradition, with its episodic plot structure, scenes devoted to the planning and execution of practical jokes, and the occasional adult intervention when the pranks seem to be getting too nasty or dangerous. There is little psychological depth or thematic development in *Raven's Revenge*, apart from the concluding emphases on getting along nicely with others even if you don't like them, and not leaping to wild conclusions about unfamiliar religious beliefs. With its details about horse riding and camp life, this novel will probably engage young readers who share those interests. But for this reader, Nikki Tate is at her best in the Tarragon Island books with their skilful handling of narrative perspective and their focus on pleasingly fallible characters.

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Like a What?: Sloppy Similes in a Sleepytime Book

This New Baby. Teddy Jam. Illus. Karen Reczuch. Groundwood, 1998. 24 pp. \$16.95. ISBN 0-88899-327-7.

Like Marie-Louise Gay's *Moonbeam on a Cat's Ear*, *This New Baby* is a "moon" book — a night-time book of blue-soaked illustrations and restful verse. Teddy Jam's text celebrates the arrival of a new baby into a family by comparing the infant's languid sleep and awakening eyes to the nocturnal events in nature: the drifting of a hawk