

## Chasing the Money: An Entertaining Sleight of Hand

*Chasing The Money.* Dennis Foon. Blizzard, 2000. 56 pp. \$12.95 paper. ISBN 0-921368-93-3.

Dennis Foon is one of Canada's pre-eminent writers of theatre for young people, having penned such celebrated plays as *New Canadian Kid*, *Skin* and *Seesaw*. *Chasing the Money*, his latest creation, is a work that examines problems associated with compulsive gambling. Kip, the young protagonist of this piece, is a teenager who has discovered gambling and finds it thrilling. As he says early on in the play "I do it for the spice. Life's just life without the spice. Put a little money in and suddenly everything gets interesting." Conflict arises when he falls in love with a girl named Joey, the daughter of a professional Magician, King Hewitt. Joey knows all about the dangers of gambling because her father gambles regularly and loses big time.

What elevates this play above a simple lecture on the evils of gaming is its focus upon story. The play unfolds swiftly and the tone it sets catches the rhythms and zest of teenage life dead on. Gambling, for Kip, is a great adventure. The play wisely avoids undue sentimentality and instead embraces theatricality. As Joey's father is a magician, his magic act is utilized throughout the play as a metaphor for life. The effect is bracing. The relationship between Joey and her father is established and examined through the device of the classic pierce-the-box-with-swords magic act. A suicide is deftly captured when one of the characters slips into a box, and then disappears — never to be seen again. Scenes fire along quickly, and the theatricality of the play allows the audience to digest content quickly, preventing the play from becoming didactic.

The counterpoint to this is that the play sometimes moves so swiftly that one feels a little rushed. One wants to settle in and understand Kip a little better — but he is just encountering his greatest test when the play ends. Still, what Foon has sacrificed in a more intimate portrayal of his protagonist, he has more than made up for with clever storytelling in this entertaining and thoughtful exploration of gambling and young people.

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## One Book or the Other

*The Game.* Teresa Toten. Red Deer, 2001. 208 pp. \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-88995-232-9.

I found *The Game* very unsettling. The most unsettling thing about it is that I cannot decide whether my being unsettled is a good thing or a bad one.

What was unsettling was that, as I made my way through the novel, it read alternately like two different books. Depending on how I let myself think about it

at any given moment, it seemed like one or the other — and there was no way of reconciling the two.

The first book was something along the lines of *Arsenic and Old Lace* or *The Madwoman of Chaillot* — the kind of story about insanity in which the crazy people are the sane ones, in which madness is cute and charming and harmless while the supposedly rational conformists are sick and wrong. In this first version of *The Game*, Danielle Webster (and I ask you, how cute is that?) learns the wisdom of her wackiness from her loveable co-inmates in the Riverwood Youth Clinic. Encouraged by their charming playfulness, joyous eccentricity, and clever wit, she heals herself by coming to understand that her parents, like theirs, are deeply flawed fools who make normalcy the sickest form of perversity. If the grownups in her life are sane, then she is glad to be mad and fortunate to have found an alternative community of blissfully nutty people to sustain her perception of a deeper truth.

The second book demands a less fanciful idea about mental illness — indeed, about the world in general. Life is real, and it is ugly. Mental illness is neither charming nor wise. Danielle has nearly killed herself with drugs and alcohol in response to her wealthy father's brutal abuse and demands for perfection. Her friendly co-inmate Scratch mutilates herself in response to *her* stepfather's sexual abuse. In addition to Danielle and Scratch, the clinic harbours a potential rapist who constantly threatens to attack them. These girls need help, and they get that help from the clinic staff who, as well as (or instead of?) being the loveable but ineffectual eccentrics of the first story, are good at their jobs. Normalcy is what these girls lack and desperately need to achieve — and what Danielle does finally seem to achieve.

The confusions come to a head as the book approaches its end. Healed one way or the other, Danielle can run off to be with her new-found friends in defiance of stultifying normalcy — the expected happy ending of the first story. Or she can go back home to her mother and live a happily normal life — the expected happy ending of the second story. Her choosing one or the other would have made it clear what kind of book Teresa Toten intended to write. Unsettlingly — maddeningly? — Danielle chooses both to go home with her mother and leave life with her friends an option for the future. Madness is sanity — but then, so is sanity.

I see two ways of making sense of all this. The first is that Toten never quite decided how she felt about madness or what kind of book she wanted to write—that *The Game* is a confused mess. The second is that, in its unsettling uncertainty, the book cleverly replicates the condition of its protagonist—that it is a brilliant evocation of what it might be like to be mad. I cannot decide which. I recommend *The Game*, then, for readers who like games. Read it and try to figure it out for yourself.

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