

generally well drawn. Some readers may wonder why, in a world where VR technology involves all the senses, there is no device that would enable Joan to walk in the real world. Despite such quibbles, *The Faces of Fear* is an exciting book which explores the very real fears that plague all teens. Although few have as much to deal with as Joan, most will be able to identify with her struggles. Joan cannot escape her disability, but she does find a friend who recognizes her heroic and beautiful self.

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### Good Sports and Good at Sports

**Fast Break.** Michael Coldwell. James Lorimer, 1995. 92 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 1-55028-514-9. **Lizzie's Soccer Showdown.** John Danakas. James Lorimer, 1994. 124 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 1-55023-464-9. **Riding Scared.** Marion Crook. James Lorimer, 1996. 94 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 1-55028-530-0. **Sink or Swim.** William Pasnak. James Lorimer, 1995. 89 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 1-55028-480-0. **A Stroke of Luck.** Kathryn Ellis. James Lorimer, 1995. 84 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 1-55028-506-8.

Lizzie is shy, tall, and skinny; she wears braces and isn't part of the "in" crowd. Dario Cavalito is terrified of the water. Angie is accused of trying to sabotage Paula's skating equipment. Jeff must deal with a new stepmother, a move to a new city, and problems with the school basketball team. Gillian, who is terrified of horses, is enrolled by her divorced father in an expensive riding school.

These are the "relevant," "timely" problems faced by the central characters — all twelve-years-old — of five novels in the Sports Stories series published by James Lorimer. These characters resolve their conflicts in part because of their involvement in sports. For example, in *A Stroke of Luck*, by Kathryn Ellis, Lizzie, learning that Paula has damaged her own equipment because she hates having to please her parents, helps the girl face her problems, acquires a new friend, and wins a scholarship that enables her to take the skating lessons her single-parent mother can't afford. And, in Michael Coldwell's *Fast Break* Jeff stands up to the team bullies when they torment his geeky friend, learns to like his stepmother, and finishes second in an important competition.

The five books, along with the other dozen or so titles in the series have been published, according to the publicity blurbs, because "Sports novels can get otherwise reluctant readers enthusiastic about books. The subject

matter ... gets them to pick up the book in the first place, and the fast-paced sports action keeps them involved from start to finish." Each book is around 100 pages, is set in an easily recognizable Canadian setting, and involves both boys and girls, and people from a variety of cultural and ethnic groups (although race is never an issue) and a variety of economic levels. Characterization is fairly shallow and character development uncomplicated and simple.

The sports action is, perhaps, the most convincing part of each story, as the authors write knowledgeably and vividly about the competitions in which the heroes are involved. However, the emotional problems each central character faces seem trite and clichéd and the resolutions and happy endings are too easy. In learning how to become proficient in a specific sport, each hero finds ways to overcome inner conflicts, family difficulties, and peer group pressures. As any reader of sports pages knows, athletic competition does not always build character; it may, in fact, bring out harmful aggressions and often emphasizes ego gratification. And, as baseball manager Leo Durocher observed half a century ago, nice guys often finish last.

In addition to the triteness of some of their plots, the novels make questionable assumptions about the moral and social values of sports. As a result the books seem like moralistic fables. Like many sports novels of the early twentieth century, they implicitly preach the values of friendship, honesty, and dedication, shaping both characters' actions and contests' outcomes to emphasize these points.

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### A Strong Message from a Cast of Outsiders

*Stranger on the Line.* Marilyn Halvorson. Stoddart, 1997. 182 pp. \$6.99 paper. ISBN 0-7736-74578.

Marilyn Halvorson has woven an entertaining and fast-paced story of courage and hope in *Stranger on the Line*, the third novel in her Steve Garrett series. Steve, now a disillusioned mixed-up twenty-year-old, teams up with a dozen rejected race horses and a crippled ex-jockey to discover that perhaps life has purpose after all.

There are many strengths to this book, including Halvorson's delightfully light hand with humour: "... it's not the fall that kills you, it's the sudden stop at the end." Another strength is her skill at capturing sharp graphic images: "... a huge bull moose raised his ugly mug from the pond. He stood gawking with a pink water lily hanging out of his mouth."