

Diana Wieler's *Magic Nation*: Text as Life versus Text as Game

Ran Van Magic Nation. Diana Wieler. Douglas & McIntyre, 1997. 229 pages. \$18.95, \$7.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 0-88899-317-X, 0-88899-316-1.

Ran Van Magic Nation is the conclusion to Wieler's trilogy about the quixotic Rhan Van. While Cervantes' hero is inspired by tales of chivalric gallantry, Wieler's Rhan visualizes the world according to the quasi-medieval lore of his favourite video games. He sees himself as "a knight, an employee of the Universe." In *Ran Van the Defender* and *Ran Van a Worthy Opponent*, Wieler complicates her hero's quest, forcing him to confront the ancient dilemma of Free Will and Destiny, of whether he is just "a bit of light on some celestial screen — the video game of the gods'." By the end of the second book, Rhan's quest is to "find out what it's for."

In *Ran Van Magic Nation*, Rhan is still trying to figure out "where he was supposed to fit in the world" and "who he was supposed to be." But he has unfortunately acquired paraphernalia that would exclude him from serving as a legitimate role model for Every Young Man's quest: he is now a super knight of the video board and comic book, capable of incredible speed, agility and strength, of clairvoyant visions and x-ray intuition. He wields the powerful two-handed sword of truth, the video camera, like a "wunderkind," and acquires a toy store chainmail gauntlet destined to fit him perfectly. At the end, he is happily ensconced in his "Magic Nation": "He had all that he needed — the sword, the armor, a kingdom and a princess."

But the process of Rhan Van's consummation into his Magic Nation, sealed with the sentimental heavenly benediction by Gran and Lee, is shabby narrative gimmickry, inconsistent with the palpable realism of Wieler's fictional world. When the bellicose, fast-driving, hard-drinking, heavy-smoking eighteen-year-old that is Rhan widens his life agenda with the fierce determination to "find out what's for," his story has the potential for an even deeper kind of excitement and suspense. Rhan does burn all the juvenilia of his Magic Nation early in the concluding volume of the trilogy, but this unfortunately does not anticipate a mature understanding of how fantasies and myths are to be reconciled with real life. Towards the end of Rhan's story, his fellow knight, Lee Dahl, is inducting him into pinball: "Pin ball is real. What happens, happens. You're not playing against somebody else's brain, their idea of what should happen. This is physics, It's real life. That's the challenge" (178). Neither Rhan nor Wieler pick up this challenge. They both duck back into the flashy insubstantiality of the video arcade.

Diana Wieler's *Drive*: Willy Loman as "The Chocolate King"

Drive. Diana Wieler. Douglas & McIntyre, 1998. 245 pages. \$18.95, \$7.95 cloth, paper. ISBN-88899-347-1, 0-88899-348-X.

Diana Wieler's latest novel, *Drive*, is a return to the frank realism of *Bad Boy* and the dynamics of that interface between young developing psyches and

the society in which they are learning to function. Eighteen-year-old Jens Frieson, a born salesman who believes Willy Loman's mantra, "personality always wins the day," has that enviable "drive" that society typically endorses with success and money: "All I want is to get the ball'" he tells his first employer, Jack Lahanni. But in the course of one long weekend, Jens loses both his job as a car salesman and a compensatory role as rescuer of his younger brother from a ruinous music contract. "I had the ball, I had it in my hands. And there was no game'," he cries desperately to himself. Unlike Willy Loman, Jens is rescued from his attempted suicide by a younger brother, Daniel.

Daniel, the quiet, sensitive, shy, prodigally artistic but socially maladapted antithesis of his elder brother, is seen through Jens's narrative. The weekend-long odyssey both brothers share is a chilling dialogue, not just between the two distinctly different brothers, but between Jens's superficial success-driven self he would flaunt to the world, and his soft, indeterminate inner self that yearns for affirmation of his birthright, of his place in his family, of his ability to form a relationship. In this almost allegorical interaction with the younger, suppressed Daniel, Jens comes to recognize the "cardboard man" he had been building: "I had nothing to prop me up now'," he says to himself, "'It was just me'." Acknowledgment of his endless and furious denigration of Daniel marks the process of reconciliation between the brothers and between the divisions in Jens's own psyche. At the end of the weekend, Jens has recovered some of his former driving enthusiasm, but his priorities and values have shifted: "It all depends on where I was headed, and who I took with me'." As he says to himself earlier, "I wondered if [Daniel] was the older brother and I had just been born first'."

Drive is not without some of the prurient grit that has become a trademark of social realism. But unlike Cormier's *Chocolate War* or Foon's *War*, where the focus is on the endless sociological loop of violent power brokering and domination, Wieler probes the hidden layers of the young emerging psyche as it reflects and deflects its social determinants. In this respect, Jens, the "Chocolate King" of his small prairie town high school, is the protagonist of a unique parable about growing up, successfully.

Mary J. Harker teaches children's and young adult literature at the University of Victoria. She is currently working on a book about the fantastic in children's literature.

Canadian Plays for Young Audiences

TYA 5: Theatre for Young Audiences. Mira Friedlander and Wayne Fairhead, eds. Toronto: Playwrights Canada P, 1998. 268 pp. paper.

Mira Friedlander and Wayne Fairhead's anthology of Canadian plays for young audiences offers readers and potential producers scripts which illus-