

**Reality Begins at Home: Contemporary
Novels of Domestic Realism**
—Deborah Stevenson



- Brenna, Beverley. *Wild Orchid*. Calgary: Red Deer P, 2005. 156 pp. \$7.95 pb. ISBN 0-88995-330-9.
- Casselman, Grace. *A Walk in the Park*. Toronto: Napoleon, 2005. 152 pp. \$8.95 pb. ISBN 1-894917-19-7.
- Chalifour, Francis. *After*. Toronto: Tundra, 2005. 133 pp. \$9.99 pb. ISBN 0-88776-705-2.
- Fréchette, Carole. *Carmen*. Trans. Susan Ouriou. Calgary: Red Deer P, 2005. 108 pp. \$16.95 hc. ISBN 0-88995-322-8.
- Goobie, Beth. *Something Girl*. Victoria: Orca, 2005. 105 pp. \$9.95 pb. ISBN 1-55143-347-8.
- Grant, Vicki. *Dead-End Job*. Victoria: Orca, 2005. 104 pp. \$9.95 pb. ISBN 1-55143-378-8.
- Halvorson, Marilyn. *Blood Brothers*. Markham, ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2004. 139 pp. \$12.95 pb. ISBN 1-55005-085-0.
- Horvath, Polly. *The Vacation*. Toronto: Groundwood/Anansi, 2005. 203 pp. \$12.95 pb. ISBN 0-88899-693-4.
- Jocelyn, Martha, ed. *Secrets*. Toronto: Tundra, 2005. 175 pp. \$12.99 pb. ISBN 0-88776-723-0.
- Korman, Gordon. *Jake, Reinvented*. Toronto: Scholastic, 2003. 213 pp. \$22.99 hc. ISBN 0-439-96933-6.
- Polak, Monique. *On the Game*. Toronto: Sidestreets/Lorimer, 2005. 178 pp. \$4.99 pb. ISBN 1-55028-876-8. [also a paper-over-boards edition, 1-55028-877-6; no price given]
- Ryan, Darlene. *Rules for Life*. Victoria: Orca, 2004. 163 pp. \$9.95 pb. ISBN 1-55143-350-8.
- Shiple, Jocelyn. *Seraphina's Circle*. Toronto: Sumach, 2005. 141 pp. \$10.95 pb. ISBN 894549-51-1.
- Walsh, Ann, ed. *Dark Times*. Vancouver: Ronsdale, 2005. 182 pp. \$9.95 pb. ISBN 1-55380-028-1.
- Weber, Lori. *Split*. Toronto: Sidestreets/Lorimer, 2005. 152 pp. \$4.99 pb. ISBN 1-55028-878-4. [also a paper-over-boards edition, 1-55028-879-2; no price given].

As the editor of a review periodical of children's literature south of the 49th parallel, I see nearly every trade book for young people available for purchase in the United States; as the daughter of a Canadian and a fan of global sharing of literature in general, I've been pleased to see the increasing availability of Canadian children's literature in the US. Canadian voices are coming more directly, too, with Canadian publishers distributing in the US, so American readers no longer have to rely largely on the interest of American publishers in finding or republishing Canadian writers. As a consequence, we see a more complex picture of Canadian children's literature, one that includes stellar works we might not otherwise have seen, books as forgettably mediocre as our home-grown embarrassments, recurring depictions of issues that correspond to our own concerns, and viewpoints that come out of a different national culture and history. The fifteen titles reviewed here, all contemporary Canadian domestic realism for young readers, aren't perfectly representative of that category, but they're nonetheless indicative of broader patterns of the genre as a whole.

A Canadian author long popular in the US, Gordon Korman appears in US libraries the old-fashioned way, in editions from US publishers. Now, he's even a US resident, living on Long Island, writing about events in his own backyard

and reexamining a classic American novel. Early on, *Jake, Reinvented* drops helpful hints about its derivation from *The Great Gatsby*, with a dedication "to Jay and Daisy," an epigraph from Fitzgerald's work, and a blurb on the front jacket flap that mentions that the story takes place at F. Scott Fitzgerald High and claims that it's "a new look at age-old truths." It doesn't spell out that it's a retelling of Fitzgerald's novel, and I think that's a good thing: with texts based on other works, it's often hard to move beyond the revision-to-original access, examining every plot point for its correspondence rather than its effect in the current work; besides, readers who figure it out for themselves will find satisfaction in putting the pieces together.

In this version, the drama plays out in high school, where our narrator, Rick Paradis, is on the verge of senior year. Rick's a kicker and backup quarterback on the football team, whose star is Todd Buckley; Todd's the school star off the field, too, enjoying the perks of his status, including his gorgeous girlfriend, Didi, but also the other girls he can reel in during her absences. New this year to F. Scott Fitzgerald High is Jake Garrett, whose cool charisma and knack for giving electric parties makes him the hot social news of the season. It turns out that Jake used to know Didi; in fact, Jake was her geeky math tutor, and his yearning for the



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unattainable high-school goddess propelled him into the creation of his new persona, the kind of guy that Didi would not only notice but would pant for. His strategy works to a T, and soon his and Didi's affair is the worst-kept secret at school. Rick knows, however, what Jake can't face: that Didi will never throw over the school star for Jake, and that Todd's awareness of Didi's cheating—and his revenge—is only a matter of time. It's a cunning revenge, because Todd tells oversized lineman Nelson Jaworski that Jake has been messing with Nelson's girlfriend (it was, of course, really Todd). When a drunken Nelson charges after Jake with intent to kill, Didi swings a well-timed bottle that fells Nelson; when the cops come, Jake takes the rap for Didi's action; when Jake faces trial for assault, his perennial party guests—including Didi—are nowhere to be seen.

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and contrast—but Korman has wisely taken the material beyond a checklist of correlations into an interpretation of its spirit. High school is a frighteningly effective setting for the story, since that's where facades first really become currency, and the jock world, with its automatic status and privilege, is a perfect generator of the social striations and hierarchies ripe for exploration. Jake's status as a former math nerd is the one weak spot: it's not entirely credible even within the book that this would be an effective dirty little secret beyond which Jake could never really move but could only pretend to overcome, but it's hard to come up with an alternative suggestion that would carry the seedy mundaneness that would make Jake genuinely unworthy. The book excels, however, at making Jake's spell believable, even as you know it's doomed; and Korman's cool, inviting wit and perceptive exploration of human dynamics will engage young readers whether they've heard of F. Scott Fitzgerald or not.

Polly Horvath is also familiar to US readers from long publication here, but she's travelled the opposite direction from Korman, leaving the United States for Canada (British Columbia). While some of her previous books have involved a Canadian setting (*Everything on a Waffle*) or Canadian characters (*The Trolls*), *The Vacation* is set firmly in the American landscape. Henry, the book's twelve-year-old narrator, finds his life turned upside down when his mother decides to take off to Africa as a missionary, despite her general lack of religion, and Henry's father reluctantly accompanies her. This leaves Henry in the charge of his mother's two sisters, Aunts Magnolia and Pigg. The fissures between Henry's new and old life soon turn into yawning chasms: eccentric interior decorators Magnolia and Pigg completely redo Henry's house; Henry's mother disappears in Uganda; and Magnolia, galvanized by a bout of illness and a pivotal birthday, decides that she needs to have an adventure, so she, Pigg, and Henry pile into the car. Initially, the plan is simply to hit the beach "for a month or two or three," but the aunts soon find the beach's charms exhausted and opt instead for being "just on vacation," which, to Henry's consternation, means "driving around looking for stuff." Their travels take them from the Appalachian Trail to Henry's estranged grandfather's place in Kentucky, from

the Everglades (where Henry wanders off for three days) to Louisiana (where they have a strained visit with Henry's father's cousins) to Oklahoma. There they lose Pigg, who's fallen for a cowboy and stays behind to marry him, but gain Henry's mother (safely retrieved from Uganda) and father (recovering from malaria), and the regrouped mobile collective hits a series of national monuments and parks across the Plains and into the Midwest.

Here, as usual, Horvath combines bone-dry humour, a narrator inclined toward internal reflection, and a collection of events that hover between the tragic and the absurd, protected from the first mostly by authorial tone (which is why a plot summary of a Horvath novel can give a highly misleading impression of the actual reading experience). Tone also comes into play in making characters, especially Aunt Magnolia, bearable and amusing as literary companions, even as it's crystal clear how annoying many of them really would be, especially in the close confines of a car on a long trip (Henry eventually utters a *cri de cœur* of "HOW DID I END UP WITH ALL YOU UNPLEASANT PEOPLE?" [171]); Mame and Patrick Dennis on a picaresque romp this isn't. Yet Horvath is still richly comedic, glorying in both the weirdness and the special quotidian tedium of travel, the pattern of chain hotels and the

idiosyncrasy of people within them.

The travel becomes so much the movement of the novel that the interiority of the climax may mean it slips by readers seeking something more overtly dramatic than a stop in Iowa; many, though, will realize that, for all its mileage, this is a novel about internal movement more than external. Like much of Horvath's work, the book focuses on the dance with chaos (even bodies erupt uncontrollably here, whether it be with Magnolia's autoimmune skin lesions or Henry's father's malaria) and puts it centre stage, and the protagonist's real journey consists of learning to swim in the waves of disorder rather than finding a route to a calmer sea. Henry does undergo some traditional adolescent individuation, but ultimately, this is North American Zen, astringent, funny, and particular, as Henry finds the pleasures and even joy of acceptance.

It's about as long a narrative trip as you can take to get from the unique voice of Polly Horvath to the multivocal narratives of short story collections, but such anthologies, too, have their own editor-inflected gestalt, even as they can, sometimes unwittingly, offer an interesting view of the larger genre in microcosm. Marthe Jocelyn's *Secrets* sports a luscious theme ripe for booktalking, while Ann Walsh's *Dark Times* examines the more nebulous topic of loss, yet there are some revealing

similarities in the collections: the majority of stories in both collections are told in the first person, and they tend to shed a retrospective glow, describing experiences from what seems to be a later, perhaps even adult, vantage point.

Secrets contains twelve stories, two of which I've seen developed into novels, and one of which (Dayal Kaur Khalsa's "Tales of a Gambling Grandma") is a venerable stand-alone text, so with the collection's absence of notes, it's difficult to know which, if any, stories are original to the collection itself; judging by the chatty "Meet the Authors" bios, contributors hail from both the US and Canada. The writing is generally thoughtful, smooth, and stylish—this is a collection of capable prosodists—so the entries are always at least solid. The thematic development, however, doesn't rise to the same standard throughout. Several stories are narratively creative but emotionally predictable in their treatment of a kid's hiding a serious adult flaw or her own misstep; the Khalsa story and Martha Slaughter's "Road Trip," while strong stories, both focus more on the sharing of stories than genuine secrets. Standout selections are Jocelyn's own "How It Happened in Peach Hill," the compact, sly, and satisfying account of a fake medium's daughter who turns the family's habit of secrecy back on her mother, and Loris Lesynski's "I Don't Have to Tell You Everything,"

which succeeds as both a lively and readable story and a reflective exploration of secrecy itself as the narrator realizes the craft and value of privacy; this entry is particularly interesting as the only story to really explore the theme itself rather than documenting an example of it. The collection gains additional value from its preteen accessibility: at least in the US, most short-story anthologies tend toward a sophistication that finds few readers below teenaged or nearly so. On the other hand, the determinedly female focus—all contributors are women, and all the protagonists are girls—may leave male readers wondering if this whole secrets thing is some girls-only secret itself.

Ann Walsh's *Dark Times* is similarly single-sex in its list of contributors, though of its thirteen stories, four feature male protagonists or narrators (a further story leaves the narrator's gender undescribed); aside from one story that suggests a family of First Nations origin, it is also, like Jocelyn's collection, seemingly racially homogeneous as well. Since prior publication is clearly indicated for three stories, the other ten are presumably original, culled, according to a note from Walsh, from 200 submissions. There are a few surprising commonalities—four of the stories touch on adoption, whether kinship or formal, and two of those treat the theme of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, a direct agent of the

loss explored in those stories (and it's interesting that both stories' authors chose to separate the biological mother from the stories' events). Though this collection is thoughtful, it's not quite as strong as Jocelyn's anthology: a few stories run to the purposive about issues or the process of grief, too obviously displaying the firm hand of adult guidance behind their young protagonist's point of view. Some of the most poignant pieces are those where loss isn't resolved, but continues as an unending part of a protagonist's days, as with Gina Rozon's "Explaining Andrew," wherein a teen bitterly mourns the tragedy of his older brother's schizophrenia, and Libby Kennedy's "Dreams in a Pizza Box," whose nameless protagonist has lost both home and mother and cannot relinquish the impulse to search for elements of the life that was swept away; other particularly memorable entries are Diana Aspin's "Cold Snap," a testament to the strength of rage in the face of loss, and Sarah Ellis's "Sisters," in which the narrator finds a sister's disappearance from family discourse more frightening than her actual absence. Though the reading level runs slightly higher than the stories in Jocelyn's anthology, these too are readable to kids below high-school age, a useful opportunity for youngsters whose taste runs to browsing.

Also accessible to pre-young adult readers is Grace Casselman's novel, *A Walk in the Park*,



Even as an issue-driven book, *A Walk in the Park* lacks punch, because it diffuses its energy across a multitude of lessons—readers learn about cancer, women’s rights, adoption, bullying, peer pressure, smoking, and drugs, and none of them in particularly credible or emotionally complex ways.



which follows fourteen-year-old Terra Morrison as she tries to fit into her new Calgary school. Unsure of her place in the new social order, she initially finds herself hanging with the bad kids, who shoplift, smoke, and use drugs. Soon, though, she finds a more comfortable berth with nice-guy Glenn and his friends, and she embarks on a gentle romance with Glenn. Her newly found security allows her to face another hurdle: a meeting with her birth mother. The move to that last plot point is a considerable leap, but it’s just one of many in the book: from the start, this narrative is more a collection of purposive and didactic elements than a compelling and plausible story. Even as an issue-driven book, *A Walk in the Park* lacks punch, because it diffuses its energy across a multitude of lessons—readers learn about cancer, women’s rights, adoption, bullying, peer pressure, smoking, and drugs, and none of them in particularly credible or emotionally complex ways. The good characters are walking homilies—the effort to

make Glenn and pals into role models results in their sometimes becoming judgmental prigs—and the bad ones cardboard villains, wherein all the vices obligingly reside together the better to dismiss them in one fell swoop. Add in Glenn’s salt-of-the-earth grandparents, beloved by all the neighbourhood young people (Grandma, you will be unsurprised to hear, bakes chocolate-chip cookies, while Grandpa tells stories that impart useful wisdom), and a wages-of-sin drug overdose, and you’ve got a morality play whose obvious datedness isn’t quite enough to make it entertainingly camp. The writing style is pedestrian, and the kids talk like public service announcements (the obligatory statement “If they were really your friends, wouldn’t they accept you how you are?”—and haven’t we laid that canard to rest yet?—comes not from an out-of-touch parent but from Terra’s former best friend [44]).

A more successful work for middle-graders is Jocelyn Shipley’s *Seraphina’s Circle*; though its

cover labels it “A Young Adult Novel,” its easy readability and twelve-year-old protagonist will draw younger readers, who will find the more mature moniker pleasing. In this novel, the past and the present interweave when Morgan, a young track star, spends the summer at her grandmother’s farm in the country. She’s resentful of her banishment, a consequence of misbehaviour at home, and she’s afraid she’s losing ground with her cool new friend Jade and forfeiting her social and athletic place to “the evil Arden Hampton-Price.” It doesn’t help that Morgan’s older cousin Clare, whose family lives on an adjoining farm, is hard-working, self-sacrificing, and, to make matters worse, incredibly nice, leaving Morgan keenly aware of her own shortcomings in comparison. This summer, though, there’s something different about Clare—she’s got a college-age boyfriend with whom she’s madly in love, despite her family’s disapproval, and Morgan thrills to be included in this private part of Clare’s life, so much so that she covers up Clare and Renzo’s secret liaisons. In doing so, she is replicating family history: Seraphina, her great-aunt, embarked on a secret romance with a local man of whom her father disapproved, and Clare and Morgan’s grandmother acted as their go-between and cover story; that romance ended in tragedy when Seraphina died in an accident on the way to

see her beau, and the melodramatic story has been a key part of Morgan’s youth, enacted and reenacted beneath the tree named for Seraphina and planted in her honour. Echoes of the past come frighteningly close when Clare, too, suffers a terrible accident, leaving her comatose in the hospital and Morgan guilt-ridden at the part she’s played in her cousin’s fate.

Ironically, the Seraphina dimension is the least successful in the novel. It’s helpful in demonstrating Morgan’s move beyond her rebellious romanticism, and the allure of the tragedy-based favourite game (akin to the Finch children’s playing at being Boo Radley in *To Kill a Mockingbird*) is believable, but the actual duplication of earlier happenings isn’t commensurately literarily profitable—it’s like singing the chorus twice, but with different names. The young generation’s continued obsession with the story is somewhat implausible, even given the apparent lack of television and Internet at Grandma’s farm. Shipley’s also a little heavy-handed with other elements: Arden is a bland and reductive villain, a point for Morgan to grow beyond rather than a character, and the dark hinting at Morgan’s horrible misbehaviour suggests something akin to drug-ridden orgies rather than the eventually revealed truth that she snuck out to a party she was forbidden to attend.

Nonetheless, Shipley writes Morgan's narration with smooth surety, capturing concisely the frustrating process of adolescent individuation ("What I don't get," says Morgan about her mother, "is how I can pretty much hate her but still totally love her on the same heartbeat" [9]) and the importance and complexity of peer relations (Jade is Morgan's only chance for social significance after the rest of her friends dumped Morgan for Arden). Though the book reaches beyond Morgan to the adult viewpoint at times, it's definitely sympathetic toward its protagonist, while understanding her level of development. In a particularly subtle yet apt movement in the narrative, Morgan berates herself for her self-centredness in the face of Clare's accident but unwittingly (and credibly) cannot move beyond that self-focus, telling herself that everyone is wishing she, and not Clare, were the injured girl; she can't quite make the developmental level wherein she is simply not significant in this picture. (Irish author Siobhan Parkinson, in *Something Invisible* [2006], brilliantly tackles that developmental shift). The author also creates a whole network of family dynamics, which believably fall into patterns yet also undergo changes as the story progresses; that's a refreshing alternative to young people's literature wherein grownups are set in stone while the adolescent is

in constant turmoil.

Of course, age is not the only determinant of reading ability, and even teens who can read sophisticated material enjoy a break with more easily digestible books. At the moment, Canadian publishing would seem to have the edge on the United States industry in producing the much-desired category of high interest, low reading ability, often shortened to "hi-los," suitable for generally reluctant or temporarily vacationing readers. Both the Orca Soundings imprint ("teen fiction for reluctant readers" says the Orca website) and the Sidestreets books from Lorimer (more subtly coded as "edgy," "contemporary," and "high-interest" [*New and Recent* 15]) would fill this bill, and they're made additionally appealing by their accessible yet dramatic looks, with their compact trim size and high-contrast covers. The Orca Soundings books, Vicki Grant's *Dead-End Job* and Beth Goobie's *Something Girl*, will be particularly attractive to reluctant readers, as the books have big print, big drama, big pace, and a small page count, both just making it past that critical 100-page mark that's a common criterion for assignments. They're therefore likely to be successful as reader enticements, but they draw on some disturbing conventions and assumptions to get there.

In *Dead-End Job*, Frances tells, in chatty, unnuanced narration, of her growing unease

about Devin, the new guy in town. The estranged son of the local artist (or so he claims), Devin immediately takes a shine to artistic Frances when he meets her working behind the counter at a convenience store. Frances has a boyfriend, the jealous and insecure Leo, and her interest in Devin is largely a friendly one; Devin, however, considers Frances his soulmate and pursues her, deliberately feeding Leo's increasing suspicions until he finally breaks up with Frances. When Frances rebuffs Devin, he reveals his true psycho-stalker colours, cornering her when she's alone in the store with a plan to kill her and then himself, since that's the only option if he can't have her. This is a standard, formulaic woman-in-jeopardy plot, where Frances is carefully isolated from anyone who can help her (her parents are, in true young adult horror fashion, shadowy, nonexistent figures, to the point that her claim of closeness with her mother when she's held captive by Devin seems more like a bid for sentimental credit than a truthful characterization); the absence of cellphones isn't just anachronistic here but necessary for Frances's effective endangerment. As is common in such female-centred horror plots, the eventual danger is made possible only by the protagonist's behaving stupidly under the creepy banner of "only trying to be nice"; when Frances asks herself "What did he think? That I was an idiot?" (69), it's hard to quarrel

with his characterization. It's a book that takes the reality of being young and female, pretends that it makes girls even more vulnerable than it does, and uses it for literary sport; the breathtaking speed of the wrap-up after Frances finally fights Devin off (long enough to get to her boyfriend, anyway, who apparently can be assumed to have handled the matter) and the hint that her danger isn't really over make it clear that the point of this book isn't Frances's victory, but her sustained vulnerability. Sure, it works as a reading hook, but at an unnecessarily high cost.

Beth Goobie is a familiar name from her many and varied novels, and her writerly experience shows in the telling yet compact writing of *Something Girl*. The narrator is fifteen-year-old Sophie, known to her intimates as Froggy, who has been convinced by her father's constant deprecations and dangerous physical abuse that she is a "stupid, no good, nothing girl." Sophie is bolstered by a devoted and eccentric young friend, Jujube, her former babysitting charge, and she's smitten with Jujube's kind and handsome neighbour, Rick, though she's convinced he'll never like her in return. Though Sophie is in counselling, she resists revealing the truth about her father's abuse (she's convinced that if she can just repair her misbehaviour her father won't need to hit her any more), and one night, a beating goes



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far enough to require Sophie's hospitalization, an event that finally proves the catalyst for change.

It's certainly a well-meaning story of a girl finally finding a way out of anguish, and such rescue dramas, like Dave Pelzer's lastingly popular (at least in the States) memoir *A Child Called "It"* (1995), are a staple in some young readers' literary diets; but I think we're past the time when something can go unexamined merely for being a staple, and the differences between the conventions of the plot and the real-world implications of those conventions are worth exploring. The exciting and violent crisis is a near-obligatory motif that conveniently structures a plot, but it's unfortunately achieved here, as in many books, by making concerned adults fail at follow-through until the rescue has peak value (there's no indication that any of the adults have the responsibility of mandatory reporting); poor Sophie has to be abused for maximum drama to achieve maximum rescue satisfaction. At least toward the end, the book emphasizes that the abuse isn't Sophie's fault, certainly a legitimate message, but

one undercut by the book's emphasis on personal testimony—even more than intervention—as a turning point. If Sophie would only *tell*, the book sighs, drawing out the drama of her confession just as horror fiction draws out the drama of its victims' vulnerability; since she's been exposing the truth to readers all along, we're ultimately complicit in her abuse, doing nothing despite being told. In the end, the telling that the book has been building toward is actually spoken for Sophie by Jujube, while Sophie, paradoxically, finally rids herself of self-blame by erupting in a fountain of it. Fortunately for everyone, Sophie does seem to be recovering, both physically and emotionally, the incontrovertible proof of which lies in the acquisition of a cute boy. Ultimately, it may work better to consider these rescue dramas as folkloric satisfactions, the playing out, like urban legends, of emotionally and societally satisfying myths; that approach would relieve the book of its mimetic burdens and thus some of its more (presumably unintentionally) depressing implications.

The books in the Lorimer Sidestreets

imprint read at a higher level than those in Orca Soundings; the page counts, though still reassuringly small, are somewhat higher as well. The covers have an eye-catching and distinctive design: a moody, close-up portrait in black and white with shadowed font in a bold red for title and author. It's such a specific look that it was startling to discover the vast differences between the two review titles within this imprint, Monique Polak's *On the Game* and Lori Weber's *Split*.

On the Game makes sure that even readers unfamiliar with the titular phrase get the point right up front, since the cover offers a pair of sexy legs in stiletto ankle-strap sandals in the background. The individual on the career path in question is fifteen-year-old Yolande, who starts out expecting a summer filled with nothing more eventful than hanging out with her best friend, Gabrielle, and working as a counsellor at a day camp. Yolande, however, has embarked on an unwise involvement with a charismatic man, Étienne, who calls her "Tiffany" and buys her clothing and jewellery; thus convinced of his love, Yolande will do anything to keep him, including going out with other men at his request. Only when the knowing Hélène, another of Étienne's girls, lays it on the line for Yolande does the teen realize that she's become a prostitute, though initially she's mostly troubled by the fact that she's not the only girl

in Étienne's stable. Soon, though, Yolande's got a bigger problem: believing she's going away for a country weekend with her true love, she finds herself shipped to the middle of nowhere to work rough trade for a friend of Étienne's. Fortunately, Gabrielle and two other camp counsellors manage to follow Yolande, infiltrate the establishment, and spirit her back home, saving her from the fate worse than the fate worse than death.

It's hard to know what we're meant to make of all this. The story of a young woman drawn into iniquity by misplaced love is as old as the hills, but it functions more effectively for the likes of Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1794), who could step outside the rules merely by stepping out with her unsuitable young man; the book is not entirely prepared to condemn sex per se, so one is left to consider at exactly what point Yolande took her wrong turn. One juncture, perhaps, is when she fell for Étienne in the first place; unfortunately, the book's tendency to work in shortcuts rather than characterization means his carefully observed blackness, his carrying of a pager, and his wearing of the kind of shirt "guys called a wife-beater" (26) all seem to be flagged as significant warning signs (similarly, visible cleavage and possession of a cell phone are the province of the experienced whore). In the effort to keep Yolande sympathetic, it's made clear that she does this for love, and she's

hungry for love because of the premature death of her father; even the pragmatic Gabrielle, however, suffers a moment of temptation that could lead to her own enslavement, so apparently there's really no way to be proof against pimps. Yet it didn't seem to work out too badly for Yolande, who got closer with her mom, got some nice presents, got a song written for her by a rock star, and didn't have to do much that took strenuous convincing. This seems, therefore, less like a cautionary tale than a romance novel that went wrong—the book's breathless descriptions of the high life, happy interpolation of brand names (which, like "Crystal" rather than "Cristal" champagne, are not always spelled correctly), and luxuriation in scenes of expensive pampering make it seem like this prostitution thing might be a good deal if you could only find the pimp who really did love you.

In contrast, Lori Weber's *Split* is a focused and emotional coming-of-age story, set in an insular, blue-collar neighbourhood in 1978 Montreal. Seventeen-year-old Sandra narrates in the present tense, telling of life since the departure of her mother six months ago. On her own with her uncommunicative, unemployed father, she strikes up a relationship with a neighbour boy, Danny; she and Danny drive out on expeditions to talk, to have sex, to check out locations where Sandra might find out more about where her mother has

gone. As the months pass, Sandra gives up on contacting her mother and takes a housemaid job at a downtown hotel, a job acquired for her by Margie, her mother's best friend. When she encounters indications at the hotel that her mother has been there before her, she begins the search again, losing her job in the process, but eventually wringing from Margie the story of her mother's departure—and current contact information. While to contemporary young readers, this is a historical novel, set as it is over a decade before their own births and thirty years before now, it's not a book that's drawing on its period to justify its issues; the result is a view that's perceptive, rather than sweetly retrospective, of a kind of community we don't see much in literature for young people. This is a street where everybody knows everybody and nobody's going anywhere, both literally as well as metaphorically; any departure from this insularity serves as liberation, so Sandra's mother, who in a contemporarily set American book would have pursued a doctorate or become an artist, can create an almost unbridgeable gap merely by moving to a different neighbourhood in Montreal and finding work as a waitress. Danny may chafe at the restrictions, but it's clear he's not going to move beyond the confines of his neighbourhood, and it's eventually clear to Sandra that she's merely a pleasing diversion in his increasingly



Brain-damaged gentle giant sidekick? Check. Wild black stallion that saves the protagonist's life? Check. Criminal who escapes justice because of a legal technicality and a “high-priced lawyer”? Check. Key information obtained by fortuitous eavesdropping? Check.



limited life. Yet the lives of the story's characters are still respected, with the description of the hard work of Sandra's hotel-worker colleagues a potent distillation of larger, longer lives spent in overlooked labour, lives that in this novel are centre stage. Relationships are foregrounded, with supportive strands of female sympathy and solidarity, whether it be among the hotel workers, between Margie and Sandra or Margie and Sandra's mother, or even, in a quick, mostly implicit moment, between Sandra and Danny's mother, who wouldn't wish her own life—the kind of life her son would provide—on Sandra. Yet the most important female relationship in the book is one of absence: the severed connection between Sandra and her mother; it's complemented by the complex and undercommunicative relationship between Sandra and her proud, hurt father.

Marilyn Halvorson's *Blood Brothers* isn't technically a series entry, but it functions much like one. This novel is the fourth in a sequence about

protagonist Steve Garrett; he's appeared in *Brothers and Strangers*, *Stranger on the Run*, and *Stranger on the Line*, wherein, presumably, the back story frequently explicated within *Blood Brothers* actually played out. As the novel begins, Steve is living in Montana and working reluctantly for a criminal concern that repaints stolen cars; since he's evading the law in Canada, where he's broken parole, and ducking bad guys who still seek him, he's short on legitimate options. Family loyalty calls him home to Alberta when he discovers that his younger brother, Beau, has been diagnosed with leukemia and needs a marrow donor. And that's barely the beginning, since this is a book that's determined to tie up four books' worth of loose ends: Steve's long-gone mother returns (with an eleven-year-old daughter, purportedly Steve's half-sister but actually his full sister), the villains pursuing their vendetta against Steve abduct him and then die in a fiery crash pursuing him after he escapes, and Steve finally reunites with the

love of his life, who's intent on staying by his side regardless of the troubles he still faces. (Oh, and Beau recovers.) While this kind of sagebrush soap aims to be true to genre rather than true to life, the implausibilities get dense even for the genre, and the writing ends up surprising only ironically, by going to the hackneyed when you think no book would dare heap the corn on any further. Brain-damaged gentle giant sidekick? Check. Wild black stallion that saves the protagonist's life? Check. Criminal who escapes justice because of a legal technicality and a "high-priced lawyer"? Check. Key information obtained by fortuitous eavesdropping? Check. And when you need some information for closure, the newspaper, of course, prints it (the radio that turns on just when the relevant story airs was apparently broken). The style of Steve's narration matches the plot elements perfectly, from Steve's beating at the hands of "goons" (27) to his lambasting of a deserting friend as "yellow to the bone" (23) to the description of his little sister as "an untamed little outlaw with the kind of wild innocence that was only a distant memory for me" (81) to his warning to his returned sweetheart: "You don't want to be tangled up with somebody like me. You'll just get hurt" (138). Back story is interwoven throughout to catch readers up from the first three books; while it's sometimes tactfully tucked in, the events are so melodramatic

that it's tough to reduce them to a quick mention without rendering the summary absurd. The result is reminiscent of so many influences it's hard to know where to start: B-grade (at highest) Westerns, Stratemeyer Syndicate formula adventures, *The Fugitive*, Mickey Spillane tough-guy narratives, mid-century paper-over-board series featuring television characters (imagine if one of the volumes about the Mickey Mouse Club's Annette Funicello had featured her on the lam from the law—how cool would that have been?).

For all that, the book has a certain integrity and charm. Unfettered by contemporary interests in verisimilitude and emotional subtlety, it's exactly the old-fashioned story it sets out to be—readable, eventful, and sentimental, while pretending to taciturnity. The readerly pleasures here are not belletristic ones: identifying with an unappreciated hero, picturing yourself as the oft-unappreciated saviour of a family, the persistent cutting to the chase or the fight or the emotional moment to ensure constant high-action payoff. This is actually a somewhat difficult kind of book to evaluate, since many of the conventional criteria are irrelevant to its real audience. It lacks the energy, awareness, and sheer writerly excellence that would make it a joyous revitalization of a classic genre in the way that, say, Iain Lawrence's *The Wreckers* (1999) revisits Stevensonian sea

adventure; it's instead the kind of book to which such a reinvestigation refers.

While the US sees a fair amount of Anglophone Canadian children's literature, Francophone materials, especially for readers beyond picture-book age, are rarer imports, so Carole Fréchette's *Carmen* offers a viewpoint I don't usually see. Carmen, fourteen (flap copy wrongly labels her fifteen), is a diffident schoolgirl. Overwhelmed by the prospect of giving a speech in class and horrified that she had the temerity to slip a Valentine's Day note into the locker of the boy she secretly adores, she bunks out of school. She wanders through a department store, but flees after shoplifting a handful of lipsticks, only to find herself face-to-face with a television camera doing a vox pop; in answer to the question of what she wants for her Valentine's Day, she stammers with unexpected truth, "Today . . . I want . . . I . . . I want to be loved" (21).

When broadcast, that statement is portrayed as a cry for help, and its appearance sends ripples through the community: there's excitement among the pack of Carmen-baiters at school (led by a Mean Girl with the fabulous Mean Girl name of Odile Saint Amour), distress by Carmen's best friend, and interest by the boy Carmen likes (but not by her parents, who miss her television appearance and whom apparently no one thinks

to alert). Meanwhile, Carmen herself has been taken under the wing of a charismatic alternative musician, spending the day with him as he prepares for a show and finding herself on stage as a key part of the performance.

The book is an interesting combination: the scenario is predictable wish-fulfillment, from the attentions of the prominent musician to the thwarting of the mean classmates to the elicited interest of the boy Carmen likes (not to mention her parents' convenient ignorance of her peripeteia), yet wishfully satisfying scenarios are rarely so elegantly written. The present-tense narration, translated from the French, evinces a lovely cool fragility, sometimes quietly touched with humour, that suits the book's short-story sensibility; this is more an extended vignette than a novelistic trajectory. As a consequence, the common dilemmas described shimmer with a certain grandeur, and Carmen's "secret desire to be someone people notice" (91) is poetic rather than stagy. The dialogue stretches credulity by being as prettily turned as the narration, but such wish-fulfilling eloquence is a kind of fiction likely to be enjoyed by readers. With style like this, though, the book doesn't need to cheat the way it does: the breaking point of plausibility comes at the book's conclusion, wherein Carmen returns to school a conquering heroine, breaking up Odile Saint

Amour's moment in the spotlight and awing the television station (which has obliged the narrative by following up the next day to talk to Carmen) by refusing to play along with them. Up until then, though, the book manages to be both delicate and colourful in its depiction of a literal journey of self-discovery.

Though Francis Chalifour's *Afterward* was written in English, it too has a French Canadian sensibility (Chalifour also writes in French), perhaps the more evident to Anglophone readers for leaving some of its elements untranslated. This novel is the wry, yet heartbreaking, story of a fifteen-year-old boy's adjustment to his father's suicide. Called back from a school trip to New York because of an unspecified family emergency, young Francis returns to Montreal to find a tragedy: his father has hanged himself in the attic. The ensuing year is a morass of confusion and grief, pain, and guilt as Francis, his younger brother, Luc, and the boys' mother come to terms with their altered lives. The story is set, for no obvious narrative reason, in 1992; that and the fact that the protagonist is also named Francis suggest that this may be autobiographically based fiction. If so, Chalifour has been able to make the most of his first-hand experience without flattening it into audience-unfriendly confessional: his style is fluid and contemplative, yet straightforward,

each chapter comprising a sequence of detached vignettes that concatenate with surprising effectiveness. His understanding is deep about both the grand and small effects of bereavement; the novel is capable of almost unbearable poignancy (Francis's small brother tries to hang the dog, intending that the beloved pet would go and find Papa) and hard, unprocessed truth ("I thought I would never survive it," the preface flatly begins), but it's also perceptive about the wearing, mundane consequences of family loss and the way everyday social questions become minefields; and the event becomes his protagonist's defining characteristic ("I was Son of Suicide man" [29]). The resolution is somewhat overhasty, but the emotional chronicle remains compelling; the narrator's voice is both appealing and credible, with the random touches of abrupt humour ("Spock used to scare me. Actually, so did Barbra Streisand" [38]) gently leavening the reading as it fills out Francis's grief-stricken character.

Francis Chalifour is one of several Canadian authors with whom I've recently and gratefully become familiar. One of my favourite aspects of the increasing distribution of Canadian literature in the US is the opportunity to discover talent that is new at least to me, and that US readers would be poorer without. In *Rules for Life*, Darlene Ryan also proves to be just such a talent, setting up the

book's central conflict right from its arresting first line: "I knew my father had had sex the moment I walked into the kitchen" (1). Sixteen-year-old Izzy could probably handle that, but her father immediately informs her that he's in love with his co-worker Anne and that they're going to get married. That sends Izzy reeling: it's been only two years since her mother died, and she figures that she and her older brother, Jason, were family enough that her father didn't need to go looking for more; what's more, Izzy, who has taken over her mother's role in administrating the family, is sure that her flighty and disorganized father is going to pile the new responsibilities on her, a suspicion that's only enhanced by her discovery that Anne is already pregnant.

This is a plot that could have offered up a conventional message of the difficulty of change and family adjustment, but Ryan is sharper and more authentic about family dynamics than that. For one thing, Izzy's view isn't really wrong—she and her mother are in fact both being supplanted, her father has been both terribly unfair and utterly characteristic in springing this on her, and when Anne goes into labour prematurely and the baby dies, it is indeed Izzy who has to handle the situation while her father is unreachable, out in the countryside. Izzy's half-guilty, half-satisfied punishment of Anne, the one clearly blameless

person in all this, is utterly credible. Another strong element is the back story and continuing subplot surrounding Izzy's brother, Jason, who is supposedly clean after a history of drug abuse; this thread is believably picked up in the middle, but still develops as the story progresses. The dramatic climax is more novelistic than realistic, but the strength of the characters and the book's wise avoidance of resolving every last problem keep it compelling nonetheless.

Another voice I'm glad to have heard is Beverly Brenna's, whose *Wild Orchid* recalls William Mayne's *Gideon Ahoy* (1987) and Virginia Euwer Wolff's *Probably Still Nick Swansen* (1988) in its focused evocation of an atypical mental state. Its narrator, eighteen-year-old Taylor, is resentful about spending her summer in Prince Albert National Park so that her mother can be with her new boyfriend; since Taylor has Asperger's Syndrome, she finds changes in structure and schedule particularly distressing. There is one change she's hoping for, though, and that's to find a boyfriend. Her encounters with a few willing and interested boys don't amount to much (she's troubled by the probable presence of germs in others' saliva), and she instead becomes involved with the local nature centre, developing a friendship with Paul, a naturalist there.

Engaged as we are inside our own heads,



Her encounters with a few willing and interested boys don't amount to much (she's troubled by the probable presence of germs in others' saliva) . . .



most of us take our world view as the baseline of normality, extrapolating as best we can to the differing versions of our world that other people possess. A lesser writer might have allowed explanations to rob the book's heroine of that basic human self-centredness, but Brenna grants Taylor full primacy. Taylor is aware that she has Asperger's and that other people might not think the way she does (" . . . sometimes I feel that the English I speak is a different language from everyone else's English," she says thoughtfully [42]), but her way of being is perfectly natural and seems so to the reader as well: her impulse to count words in sentences, for instance, comes across as a legitimate focus of attention, one that has lost out to semantic emphases purely by random neurological chance in other people. There are also periodic quiet reminders of Taylor's long, assisted work at developing conscious strategies to perform socially. The result is a comradely portrayal rather than a guidebook to a foreign land, a portrayal that Asperger's Syndrome readers can read without feeling exoticized or

condescended to. Yet it's also a clear picture of a young woman undergoing maturation in ways that all readers will find familiar; Taylor's frustrations with her mother are utterly understandable as she struggles for independence, and her occasional succumbing to the temptation to yank her mother's chain will be universally recognized. This is not, thank heavens, a Very Special Book about Asperger's, but a subtle and understanding book about Taylor herself.

It's interesting to note some trends when looking at this collection of books. "Realism" is always to some extent a misnomer, since books have many goals beyond mimesis and the best books are not necessarily those that most accurately depict daily life. It's nonetheless edifying to examine the inflected nature of the reality within these texts, since those inflections are related to the trends of the genre as a whole in Canada and the US. These books are, for instance, predominantly, almost entirely focused on white kids, and predominantly, almost entirely focused on straight kids. (I'm well aware that

there is terrific Canadian writing about people of colour and gay/lesbian issues, but I think it's telling that a grab of fifteen contemporary realistic titles managed to be as undiverse as this.) As in the US, domestic realism in these works is often beset with unconscious anachronism, with writers creating contemporary childhoods based on their own youthful experience; this practice makes for a glaring technological gap when writers who grew up without cell phones and Internet connections often seem unaware of the crucial everydayness of these forms of social linkage in the contemporary

kid world, leaving their fictional reality as quaintly dated to youngsters as one without automobiles. Heavy-handed didacticism is alive and well, and plot contrivance for authorial convenience clearly roots as easily in provinces and territories as it does in states. Yet there are also poignant family stories, compelling personal narrations, and quirky, individual creations that I'd hate to have missed. Perhaps that's the way in which realistic fiction is most like reality—while much of it is flawed, within it there can still be reward and revelation enough to make it all worthwhile.

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