

army, Aaron goes through his own soul-searching, as he learns to eat non-kosher foods and even externally converts to Christianity to survive. However, despite his change of lifestyle, his new experiences and his new doubts, Aaron remains a basically admirable character. He is admittedly bitter against Zev, and certainly desires revenge against him, but he never takes that revenge. His doubts and soul-searching have mainly to do with his faith. While these doubts add interest to the story, they are not likely to really engage the modern reader who may know very little about Jewish beliefs.

Zev is utterly despicable from beginning to end, from his desire and play for Miriam *after* he has kidnapped Aaron, to his repeated refusal to face what he has done, constantly condoning his increasingly repulsive behaviour with an assurance that God would want him to act this way. While unfortunately realistic, Zev is so utterly unlikeable that he, like Aaron, is unlikely to engage the reader.

The themes in the novel are interesting. Matas asks questions about good and evil, including why bad things happen to the innocent or fundamentally good. However, overall this novel does not work because the characters are too black-and-white, too unambiguous. Further, the horrific details of the ugly army-life for Jewish boys in Russia in the 1800s are gruesome and although linked to the theme of racial discrimination, seem a little excessive. Matas has taken potentially powerful material here and written a competent history but not a compelling novel.

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## TWO TALES OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION

**Margy.** Margaret Smith. Don Mills, ON: Maxwell Macmillan, 1992. 162 pp., \$14.95 \$9.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 0-02-954096-8, 0-02-954136-0; **No Room in the Well.** Cecil Freeman Beeler. Red Deer, AB: Red Deer College Press, 1993. 174 pp., \$8.95 paper. ISBN 0-88995-099-7.

There are similarities and disparities between *No Room in the Well* and *Margy*. Both are set in the Dirty Thirties and both deal with adolescent girls struggling to find their places within their families and to handle the emotional turmoil of growing up.

Both young heroines are strong-willed but sensitive. Margy, who is desperate to please the maiden aunts with whom she has been sent to live, can let her temper get the better of her (screaming and clawing at her stepmother when the latter wears her Momma's shawl—the incident that precipitates her removal to her aunts' home in Ontario), but, under her aunts' tutelage on how to behave as a young lady, Margy learns to withhold her outbursts. Corinne, on the other hand, lacking the environment of genteel poverty of an Ontario town, is less con-

strained—flailing her fists when teased or ready to pummel anyone and anything when frustrated.

It is Corinne's ability to express her full emotions, whether it is beating up on neighbour Mertie or talking to her other self (the Me who lives in the well), that makes this story more immediate. *Margy* is more distant. Reading *Margy* is like watching an Edwardian drama unfold. Beyond her desire to please the aunts so she won't be "just another mouth to feed" and her longing for her Momma who died four years previously, Margy's soul is never fully revealed. How, for instance, does she feel about the father who abandoned her? Is she not deeply angry he chose his new wife over her? Her last image of him, as she is driven off to a new life in Eastern Canada, is of a man who does not wave good-bye. After that scene, he becomes a murky character, mentioned directly only twice: once when she receives a letter from him announcing the arrival of her half-brother and once, at the end of the story, when the aunts insist she recopy her report card for him. One feels something has been left unresolved.

In the beginning, in their Prairie farmhouse, Margy and her dad are very close. There is one intimate scene in which they listen to the radio together, each taking turns with the earphones. Yet after she is shipped off to the aunts, he fades away. Although based on a true story, there is enough fiction in *Margy* that the author could have explored more deeply and helped resolve Margy's feelings towards him.

Apart from the one problem, this is a good story of Margy's adventures and misadventures as she settles in with her aunts, makes friends and struggles with school work, and comes to realize that her aunts love her and the "Fine House," as she calls it, is home.

*No Room in the Well* also deals with dual themes of being needed and growing up; however, this story never leaves its 1930s Prairie setting. Three interconnected plots run concurrently. Corinne, who handles all farm chores while her dad is away, feels useless when he returns and takes over. It is also dawning on her that Mama is expecting a baby and in their tiny, two-roomed farmhouse (in which Corinne shares a corner of a bedroom with her parents), there will be no room for her when the baby arrives. Then there is Moses, the old farm horse who is getting old. When Corinne's father brings home a mare in foal, will there be no room for Moses in the stable? Running as a sub-plot is the well where Corinne goes to talk to her other self. As the well fills up with the runoff of winter snows, there is no space for Corinne to hear the echo of her voice, the words of Me.

Both are strong stories, but each is approached differently. Despite its Dust Bowl setting, one instantly identifies with Corinne of *No Room in the Well* and her mood swings: her feelings of being unneeded, her fear of being usurped by the Someone who is coming, her strength at coping with a harsh Prairie winter, her rage and her vulnerability. Even building her a room of her own is at first unsatisfactory: she fears losing the intimate relationship with her parents in their overcrowded bedroom.

*Margy*, on the other hand, provides a panoramic, albeit nostalgic, look at small town Ontario during the Great Depression when appearances mattered and ladies were still ladies even if their dresses were “turned” (resewn with the inside out for renewed wear). It is a gentle story of a growing warmth between a bewildered young girl and her frosty aunts but, unlike *Corinne*, it is hard to imagine *Margy* in a 1990s setting. There is a decided “glimpse of the past” feel to this story.

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#### “ANGELS WATCHIN’ OVER ME”

**My Mother’s Ghost.** Margaret Buffie. Kids Can Press, 1992. 215 pp., \$4.95 paper. ISBN 1-55074-091-1.

Following the death of her younger brother Scotty, Jessica Locke’s family leaves Winnipeg to start anew in Willow Creek, Alberta. Jessica’s father, a former RCMP officer, has chosen to re-start their family’s life in the horse ranching and recreation business. No one else is feeling his outdoor enthusiasm, least of all Jeanie Locke, Jessica’s mother, who has fallen into a deep depression penetrated from time to time by what she thinks are ghostly visions of Scotty—hence the novel’s title.

What is unique and refreshing about this particular ghost story is its linking of two generations—both mother and daughter—in their quest for the supernatural, as opposed to the more standardized plot scenario of the isolated protagonist whose ghostly experiences few would believe. In the context of books for young adults, the novel’s culminating in such a partnership is significant in that it breaks away from the alienated teen motif and allows for the incorporation of multiple perspectives while still focusing the story on the experiences of its young protagonist. Interestingly, Jeanie Locke’s perspective is highlighted by the extension of her professional career as a photographer into the realization of the novel’s supernatural sequences, all of which are seen in photo negative—an effect which simultaneously rationalizes, yet dramatizes, the silhouetted figures and glowing white pupils of the otherworldly characters.

Paralleling the structure of Margaret Buffie’s first novel for young adults, *Who Is Francis Rain?*, *My Mother’s Ghost* also deals with a modern-day family in crisis which learns to cope by developing an understanding of an historical family, from their home’s past, which experienced similar domestic difficulties. In this case the link to the past is Ian Shaw, the young, crippled son of a British remittance man and his bitterly disillusioned wife, Augusta. Augusta’s bitterness towards the pioneering life of the Canadian west, combined with her overprotectiveness of Ian, lead to his virtual imprisonment in the family house with only a journal as a temporary means of escape.

While the novel’s surrealism is delightful, the realism of its plot construction