WHAT CAN AND WHAT CANNOT BE CHANGED


For those entering adolescence, acceptance of oneself and acceptance from others are pertinent concerns. Cora Taylor’s first novel, Julie, depicts a young girl’s struggle to confront and understand abilities that mark her as “different” from others. Ten-year-old Julie Morgan is a “Celtic throwback” whose psychic abilities, inherited from Great-Grandmother Morgan, set her apart from her siblings on the family farm. Visions, smells and voices provide Julie with knowledge of both past and future events, knowledge which can be at once a helpful gift and an isolating burden. Fellow psychic Granny Goderich and Julie’s father demonstrate loving acceptance of the girl, but Julie’s mother’s fear and rejection contribute to the girl’s attempts to hide and deny her abilities. A family crisis motivates Julie to reconsider her special powers, recognizing what she must accept and what she can change because of her abilities. Ultimately, the young adult reader is put in the position of choosing whether or not to “accept” the role of psychic powers in determining the novel’s conclusion.

Taylor’s evocative and beautifully crafted descriptions draw the reader into sharing Julie’s premonitions. When sheets on a clothesline become “ships with rows and rows of full, fat sails tossed as though the black summerfallow field were ridged with waves and not furrows”, the rhythmic, poetic prose brings the seatossed boats to life. Similarly, Taylor demonstrates a good ear for dialogue between children, capturing typical sibling teasing and rivalry over possessions and territory.

Yet an overall unevenness is evident, and may possibly be attributed to the novel’s growth from its original form as a short story. The beginning and conclusion of the novel are clear and dramatic, but the middle is muddled, and this affects reader identification with Julie and her concerns. At five years of age, just as at ten, Julie can outsmart her parents with her
carefully worded replies; in this sense she is static. The third person nar-
ration allows for different characters’ reactions to Julie’s psychic experi-
ences, but this can also create a distance between the reader and Julie. For
example, when Julie and her mother, Alice, first visit Granny Goderich,
Julie’s actions are described, but the scene’s emotional impact arises from
a concentration on Alice’s thoughts and feelings. Because of the resulting
imbalance, Alice seems more fully realized; Julie seems slightly wooden.
Problems like these are frustrating because one wishes to have had the
chance to get to know Julie better — her story is haunting.

Julie is the winner of the Canadian Library Association Book of the Year
Award for Children, the Canada Council Children’s Literature Prize and
the Alberta Writers Guild Best Children’s Book Award. This thorough
acclaim is questionable, and invites comparison between Julie and other
award-winners. Yet Julie is a promising first novel; Cora Taylor’s next
work is eagerly awaited.

Heather McKend is the author of Moving gives me a stomach ache.

BALLET FOR BEGINNERS

The ballet book, a young dancer’s guide, Andrew Ptak. Key Porter

This book is designed for the fairly serious ballet student about nine to
eleven years in age. Detailed verbal descriptions of basic positions and
steps are enhanced by large black and white photographs of intent youngs-
ters in practice clothes performing the exercises described. Complicated
movement sequences are illustrated in series of three to seven pictures.
The book’s uncluttered layout and clear typefaces produce a pleasing inte-
gration of text and illustration and should help satisfy the young ballet
fan’s thirst for instruction and amusement. Because the photographs were
taken especially for this volume, at the Quinte Dance Centre, the dancers
are ordinary Canadian kids with ordinary bodies, rather than the exotic,
wiredrawn Bolshoi students who frequently populate children’s ballet
books.

As it is obvious that Andrew Ptak has taken considerable pains to create
a visually attractive, usable text, I find some of his decisions mildly trou-
bling. All the students demonstrating the steps are female, yet the section
on “How ballet started” and the chapter on “Famous ballet stars” both