

generations of readers. Now readers of her journals can share that momentary privilege — and wonder at its marvellous persistence in days that were marked by worry and despondency.

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### **Proceed with Caution: *Stormy Night***

*Stormy Night*. Michèle Lemieux. Kids Can, 1999. 232 pp. cloth. ISBN 1-55074-692-8.

This highly original book should have a warning label on the cover which reads "Caution: existential material contained inside, not necessarily suitable for children."

The plot: on a dark, stormy night, a young girl cannot sleep. Questions and comments about life and death run through her head. The author presents a question or comment on one page which is accompanied by a pen-and-ink drawing on the facing page. Unanswerable questions are posed, such as,

Who am I?

What exactly is fate?

Is there anyone watching over me?

Will the world come to an end someday?

Will I know when it's time to die?



*Illustration by Michèle Lemieux from Stormy Night*

*"And what if life were just a dream ...  
and dreams at night were really real?"*

Midway through the book, the storm outside intensifies and her fears surface: "I'm scared of being abandoned ... of being separated from everyone I love ... of being left all alone in the world!" She turns to her dog, Fido, for comfort. By the book's end, the girl gets hungry and the sun comes up. The girl shares a snack with her dog and goes to sleep with a happy smile on her face.

Without an enlightened adult to guide a child or teen through this book, the existential nature of its contents could create distress for the sensitive reader. Children and teens do not always know how to articulate their fears, especially when it comes to difficult questions about life and death. Even an adult dealing with death, divorce, or other unpleasant challenges in life may find this book unsettling.

I unscientifically solicited the views of several school teachers and university-educated mothers. I could not find any parents or teachers who were willing to share it with their children or class. Mothers of teens thought that it was particularly unsuitable for that age group, given the level of anxiety and moodiness inherent in that phase of life.

I was not afraid to read this book to my own young boys of ages five and seven, since I routinely encourage their questions about life and death, especially since their grandfather's death. I was hoping to initiate a discussion with them, but found that they wanted simply to answer the questions with "yes," "no" or with their own interpretations of God and heaven. More than once they asked if it was almost over, and I felt that they were listening dutifully, hoping that I would soon be finished so that they could get on to other things. Although the older boy liked the black-and-white illustrations, which are unusual and sometimes even humorous, the book had no clear story line to hold their interest and they made it clear that they didn't want to read it again.

*Stormy Night* won the prestigious Ragazzi Prize at the Bologna Book Fair in the young adult fiction category and was initially published in Germany where it achieved renown before being published in Canada. Most reviewers have given unqualified support to the book. *Teacher Librarian* (April 2000, vol. 27, no. 4, p. 20) wrote that the book was "A charmer for all ages." *Resource Links* (December 1999, vol. 5, no. 2, p. 7) said that the book was "Excellent, enduring, everyone should see it!". The *Quill & Quire* review (July 1999, vol 65, no. 7, p. 50) stated that "This is a surprising book in every way. Design, concept, marketing ..." and that "The drawings ... are what give this book its depth". The review concludes by saying that "age categories aren't the whole story here" and suggests that the book is appropriate for young adults, art lovers, and "thinkers of all ages."

I would agree that this book is appropriate for thinkers and art lovers, but I did find it surprising to actually find this book prominently displayed in the picture book section at several bookstores that I checked. If you read or give this book to a child, you should be prepared to have a conversation about life, death and other unknowns. I might buy it for my friends turning forty this year.

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