

dull ache, the kind that I catch sometimes from certain people. It starts in the middle of my body, and it always dances up and out from there — like the northern lights when they shift and disappear and reappear somewhere else” (58).

We are not allowed to get through a crisis and believe in “happily-ever-after” in Brooks’ world. Even in good relationships there is shadow and difficulty.

While Wynne-Jones does take on difficult issues such as parental separation and even the rumour of a small town murder, the themes of his stories appear lightweight beside those of Brooks. In this brief collection she tackles parental rejection, abuse and neglect, homophobia, adultery and betrayal between friends, suicide, alcoholism, inter-racial marriage and more.

Despite the darkness of many of her themes, however, Brooks does write with optimism. When sixteen-year-old Laker is told by his mother that he cannot live at home anymore, he finds comfort in an unexpected relationship with 82-year-old Henry Olsen in “The Kindness of Strangers.” The partner of Sam’s gay father in the title story helps her to learn to forgive and trust her father again. Again, there are no heroes or villains in these stories, only people who often stumble, and often hurt one another, but just as often help and love each other.

In the final story of the Wynne-Jones collection, “Gloria,” the narrator reflects “... some days taste so good they are like promises” (142) and this is so of some stories too. Different as they are, both these new releases by Greenwood taste that good.

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SUPERHEROES SAVED BY HUMOUR

Losing Joe’s Place. Gordon Korman. Scholastic Inc., 1990. 233 pp., \$3.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-42769-5. **The Twinkie Squad.** Gordon Korman. Scholastic Inc., 1992. 194 pp., \$3.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-45250-9. **Just Call Me Boom Boom.** Martyn Godfrey. Scholastic Canada Ltd., 1994. 132 pp., \$4.50 paper. ISBN 0-590-73081-9. **Wally Strutzgummer, Super Bad Dude.** Martyn Godfrey. Scholastic Canada Ltd., 1992. 143 pp., \$4.50 paper. ISBN 0-590-74033-4. **Ski Stooges.** Paul Kropp. Scholastic Canada Ltd., 1992. 168 pp., \$4.50 paper. ISBN 0-590-74062-8.

Dialogue fresh from the halls of junior high, fast moving action, pervasive humour, and lively characters, all contribute to the entertainment value of these books. In spite of these admirable qualities, these books lack subtlety in their characterization and plots. No loose ends are left untied, and any wrong-doing is overshadowed by the humour of the situations. Nonetheless, the moral lessons are there and characters who stray, if they are not punished, do see the errors of their ways.

In the Korman books, Douglas in *The Twinkie Squad*, and Jason in *Losing Joe’s Place*, outsmart adults in outlandish ways and in the process accomplish what the adults are unable to do. Not always do plans work as expected, but these intrepid characters tackle the next-to-impossible, from rehabilitating a bunch of

misfit seems to transforming an unpretentious deli into an overnight success. Much of the humour is based on exaggeration both in characterization and in implausible situations.

In *Losing Joe's Place*, Jason and his two friends are on their own for the first time with summer jobs in Toronto. Here is a situation ripe for misadventures and humour where the boys are sometimes at the mercy of other characters: Mr. Plotnick, their mouthy and unscrupulous landlord, shouts his way through the book; Jessica, the romantic interest, fast-talks Jason into doing her summer school home-ec. assignments and who also has perfect aim with a brass knuckles keychain; and the incredible and unexpected house guest, oversized Rootbeer Racinette, who changes hobbies like dirty socks and who endures super-human physical punishment in order to put food on the table when money becomes scarce. The humour keeps readers turning pages, but the unreality of the characters and their zany exploits does tend to wear thin by the end of the book.

The Twinkie Squad shares the same shortcomings. A popular, yet worn theme has the wealthy and spoiled protagonist, Douglas, enrolled in public school by despairing parents after he has been expelled from numerous private schools. His snobbish attitude promptly gets him into trouble again and he is placed in a special self-help group of other misfits known disparagingly by the rest of the school as "Twinkies." Unfazed by the dubious reputation of this motley crew, he soon becomes the centre of a series of giddy antics. The principal and teachers are beset with gerbils running free in the halls, a terrible stink coming from within the walls, and a play which threatens to come apart at the seams and literally does when Douglas' clown suit explodes. All of these episodes are of Douglas' making with the humour here visual and earthy, just the sort of comedy in which most children delight. This book, however, suffers from just too much going on. The shifts from Douglas to Commando and his father each setting booby traps for the other are amusing, but distracting and overdone. I could not avoid seeing the similarities in these episodes to the hilarious scenes in *The Pink Panther* movies between Peter Sellers and his ambushing servant, Kato.

Godfrey's books are only slightly less obvious in the exaggeration of characters and situations, with humour surfacing in subtler ways. It's bad guys beware as Wally in *Wally Strutzgummer*, *Super Bad Dude* and Boom Boom in *Just Call Me Boom Boom* surprise even themselves by becoming superheroes similar to the ones that they write or fantasize about.

In these two books the plots share the same formulaic outline, with Wally and Boom Boom not really meaning to do wrong, but not always making the right decisions. Wally makes an unfortunate bet, using a dinner with his girlfriend, Carol, as the prize, never dreaming that he will lose, and he steals his brother's valuable comics twice, with the idea that he is only borrowing them. Similarly, Boom Boom breaks into a computer disk and trespasses into the deserted Wilson Mansion more out of curiosity than dishonest intent. Lurking in the background of each of these books are the thieves who switch valuable display items for ones of little value. This latter theme is one of the more obvious similarities between

the two books. With a flurry of commotion and with true superhero pizzazz, Wally and Boom Boom help apprehend the crooks.

Kropp's characters in *Ski Stooges*, if not bigger than life like those in the Korman and Godfrey books, at least manage the heroic and make us laugh in the process. Fred, who is brought on a skiing holiday as baby sitter for Justin and Jason, is a klutz, an improbable hero with a physical appearance that would scare crows. Fun revolves around Fred's love life as the boys attempt to help him connect with Chantal, the gorgeous ski instructor. Along the way they are helped by Oscar, the computer, who gives dubious romantic advice. Much of what keeps interest active in this book is the visual and uncomplicated slap-stick humour. When Jason and Justin's father tries to control a careening snowmobile, a snowman in his path is demolished. When the snow flakes settle, dad has the snowman's carrot nose in his mouth.

Korman, Godfrey, and Kropp have admirable talent for writing funny dialogue, describing absurd situations, and for creating off-the-wall characters, all with which young people can readily connect. However, these books lack open-ended spaces where questions can arise and where imagination can go to speculate on the unknown. All have happy endings where everything is explained, settled, or is confidently resolved. Nevertheless, they are lighthearted romps for youngsters who might otherwise shy away from reading.

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A CHILD DISCOVERS TCHAIKOVSKY

Tchaikovsky Discovers America. Esther Kalman. Illus. Laura Fernandez, Rick Jacobson. Lester Publishing, 1994. Unpag., \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 1-89555-82-5.

Tchaikovsky remains one of the most popular of the "classical" composers in North America today. He is also the creator of music that is very accessible to children. This book, based on the award-winning cassette/compact disc produced by Susan Hammond, is an introduction which is admirable on several accounts.

First, the composer is introduced to the North American child on home ground: the fictional eleven-year-old child of Russian immigrants living in New York meets the famous composer during his visit to the United States and (briefly) to Canada in 1891. The details of his trip are true, taken from the letters and diaries of the composer as translated in various publications which the author lists on the reverse of the title page.

Second, the themes brought out in the story are important ones in the life and music of the composer and correspond to what the growing child will learn if he or she pursues this interest in later life. While committed to honesty, the author has omitted a great many details about Tchaikovsky which are unsuitable, in the minds of many, to a children's book. Indeed, the very concept of presenting only