

Popular Literature for Young Readers

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Mini-Bike Hero, Claire Mackay. Illustrated by Merle Smith. Scholastic-TAB, 1974. 105 pp. \$1.05 paper.

Mini-Bike Racer, Claire Mackay. Illustrated by Merle Smith. Scholastic-TAB, 1975. 199 pp. \$1.05 paper.

It is easy to see why *Mini-Bike Hero* and *Mini-Bike Racer* are immediate hits with junior readers; the novels are escapist literature. Such stories are pleasure-giving because the imagination is minimally challenged, there is no preaching, the uncomplicated characterization is readily acceptable, the action is abundant, thrilling, suspenseful, and each plot and sub-plot has an upbeat ending. Although we bookish types would have it otherwise, the fact is that light reading is preferred by most children, as it is by most adults. Moreover, it is especially suitable for nine-to-twelve year olds who are stepping out of childhood but not quite into adolescence when one must face up to the confusing task of "growing up". Thus, *Mini-Bike Hero* and *Mini-Bike Racer* are highly satisfying, TV-like entertainment packages for this in-between age-group.

Contrary to expectations occasioned by the titles, the stories are not about mini-bikes and racing. Rather, the plots feature the activities and adventures of Steve, age eleven, who functions as an adult, and who is indeed superior to the adults with whom he interacts. He also outclasses his age-mates.

Mr. Svenson of the Strathemeyer Syndicate (Hardy Boys and others) says, "Our big success has been to let the young heroes do the doing, and to keep adult interference to a minimum".¹ Claire Mackay also uses this technique. She has the protagonist lead a double life in each of the books. In *Mini-Bike Hero*, Steve's Dad has forbidden him to even utter the word "mini-bike", so Steve is forced to lead a normal conformist life coupled with a secret life of earning money for, and learning about mini-bikes. This tantalizing duplicity ends suddenly with Steve in a state of grace: circumstances confront him with a chain of tasks wherein he takes a wild ride down a treacherous slope to assist a friend pinned under a motorcycle, hurries on through a punishing storm to warn an Indian village about an imminent flood, daringly rescues an Indian baby for its screaming mother, then continues on a nightmare, miles-long ride in rain and darkness with a broken arm into town to contact the police and lead them back to the injured man. All of this happens on his first trip to the hills with his mini-

¹Bobbi Ann Mason, *The Girl Sleuth* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1975).

bike. Steve never looks back.

In *Mini-Bike Racer*, his surface life provides him with opportunities to maintain and polish his hero role, while his inner life is one of hurt, and of toughening up to be a loner, a man. His best friend gives in to jealousy and becomes Steve's challenger. A resolution occurs when Steve becomes the hostage of a dangerous thief.

Steve is a protagonist with whom young readers can readily identify. As noted, this age group is about to begin the process of breaking away from their psychological, emotional, and financial dependence on parents. Steve's determination to have a mini-bike typifies their own capacity to be absorbed in hobbies or sports or some other interest. His display of expertness on the mini-bike and his derring-do makes their own dreams seem attainable. The demands of Steve's various job commitments, the strain of the terrible secret, the opportunities to perform heroically, allow for the vicarious trying on of adult-like responsibilities, roles and satisfactions. Julie's presence in the second story is the provision for exploring a relationship and friendship with the opposite sex. They even "play house" for an afternoon, babysitting Kate. Kids need such fictional experiences to expand their sense of developing individuality and values. Unconsciously, readers take at least a few steps in Steve's shoes.

The underlying story thread consists of Steve's developing manhood. Children are well aware that Canadian society places high premiums on masculinity and on financial independence. The stories reinforce their growing understanding that financial independence is symbolic of adulthood, and that to be masculine is to be adult. Steve, always the man-child, is a fine model. He doggedly earns every penny for his mini-bike. He displays incredible physical prowess. From these stories boys are reassured of what they have to do, to be, while girls are reminded that it is okay to attempt new competencies but they should keep their expectations low. This indeed is in keeping with the shaping children receive in the real world.

Although Steve is a highly likeable superhero, his story would have been better in the telling had he been merely a hero. In the unfolding of Steve as a paragon, Mackay overdoes situations and events. The story thus becomes cluttered and sometimes ludicrous, as shown earlier in Steve's return to grace.

Another example is seen in Steve's acquisition of a dog. Steve and Julie are babysitting wee Kate, who wanders off from her country home. Steve locates her just as she is about to pet a snarling dog made cranky by a steel trap that is biting into its leg. Steve's father and teacher are attributed the same unlikely transformation. When the facts are in, they instantly undergo a change from insensitive misusers of adult power, to warm, supportive devotees.

A final example of clutter, and the worst of its kind, is seen in the inclusion of an "Indian" episode. The negative depiction is entirely thoughtless and unnecessary. Consider the images that the following words and phrases portray as the episode evolves: "settlement"; "shack"; "a wrecked car with its engineless hood half in the river" (the wreck is right in front of a house). After Steve's alert about the flood (to a people who have a

heritage of closeness to nature), “. . .the whole village. . .crowded together in a knot. . .gazing in fear at the crumbling dam.” “His shout startled them into flight and they ran to the safety of higher ground. . .” A woman “. . .gave a piercing scream. ‘My baby!’ she wailed.” Only Steve moves to rescue the child from the wrecked car as the wall of water rushes upon it.

The passage portrays the native people as slobs, dimwits, and cowards. When was it ever necessary for young white heroes to get a step up by standing on the necks of the native people? How can the scales fall from our children’s eyes if they haven’t fallen from the eyes of our authors and editors? Hopefully, in another printing of the story, this section will be removed.

According to her editor, Mackay did not intend to write a series, nor does she perceive the two books, her first, from that point of view. However, the framework has that kind of potential. The introduction of a female mini-bike racer in the second book promised interesting possibilities. As it turns out, Julie is no slouch, but neither is she any threat to the status quo, because Mackay cops out. Gender aside, Julie has the potential to be an equal peer in the story, and a positive role model for both girl and boy readers. Instead, she is repeatedly rendered ineffectual, as when she wins the Big Race only because the two top contenders, Steve and Kim, were not in it. She participates in Steve’s rescue by staying back, albeit under protest, to keep the dog quiet! In keeping with the majority of story-book females, Julie is a background character, a prop for the male hero.² Nevertheless, the structure is there so that Julie need not remain in that fringe position, should another story be forthcoming.

Mackay is an author whom children will recognize as being on their side. She raises mini-biking from the realm of disreputableness to one of respectability. She chastens a too-critical father, caricatures a dragon-teacher, then chastens her, too. For just a spot of fun, a cops-and-robbers chase becomes a cops-and-mini-bike chase, in which the law is foiled. So when plausibility is strained by the introduction of incredible situations contrived to enhance the hero, the kids cheerfully suspend judgement and accept them as delightful extras.

Merle Smith’s illustrations capture the glamour of owning a set of wheels, and the excitement of action and spills. Word and picture come together neatly and the books have sold extremely well. It is this reviewer’s hope that Julie will dry her tears, stop the phony protesting, the settling for third best, and get down to the solid action of which she seems capable. Her creator must know that there are countless readers who hope that both Julie and Steve will ride again.

²Federation of Women Teachers’ Associations of Ontario, . . . *And then there were none*, Toronto, 1975.

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