

Socio-Political Realism for Adolescents

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Season of Burnt Grass, William Dentyn. Illustrated by Kathryn Cole. Scholastic-TAB, 1974. 119 pp. \$1.05 paper.

Realistic fiction for older children which has socio-political insight and meaning has been rare. The need for it is perhaps higher in countries like Canada where multi-culturalism has emerged as a rather sudden, sharp-edged phenomenon. Leaving aside this special need, I can say that almost no country seems to have evolved the method and media to help children come to terms with an extremely intricate and fluid reality. In one country it may be immigration, in another casteism, racism or simply regionalism, but in one shape or another political reality involves children as much as it involves adults. To grasp such a reality, children must be provided with means to know and understand it. Textual material for social study classes has so far been grossly inadequate to fulfill this need. In fact, it is very often as shapeless and biased as the commercial media. However, fiction has the potential to amalgamate the political, social and personal factors of a situation. William Dentyn's *Season of Burnt Grass* is a fair attempt in this direction.

Dentyn's story is located in Kamala, a small town in a newly independent African state, where things have not stabilized and certain people can still make a political career out of an "Africa for Blacks" kind of mentality supported by random terrorist activities. When the novel opens, Anne Seymour, the daughter of a European officer who has been in service since colonial days, is coming home for a holiday from her boarding school. The story gets a start in the second chapter when Sipande, a local Black politician, officially known as the Resident Secretary, but unofficially an operator of terrorist activities and the Party Youth, enters the compartment in which Anne is traveling and tells her that she should stop meeting Paul Kabanga, the black boy whom she loves. Anne decides to ignore Sipande's threatening advice. Through the main part of the novel, she and Paul come to a closer understanding of each other and the world around them under the shadow of Sipande's threat and precisely because of it. They realize the political implications of their relationship and the irony of its unacceptability to both native Africans and local Europeans. Sipande gets a leverage against the family in an incident which involves Anne's brother, Brian. It looks certain that the Seymours will have to leave Africa. Just in time, however, Sipande's links with terrorist guerillas are exposed by an uneasy accomplice, Wilbur. The last chapter informs us that Anne is going to join the local secondary school.

The author of this novel handles an intricate plot with dexterity. In *Season of Burnt Grass*, this quality is essential to the goal Dentyn sets for

himself of reflecting through a single unit of relationship the entire social and political ethos of a community. He has to delineate at least half a dozen characters in detail—a rather ambitious task for a 119-page work—in order to achieve his goal. What he creates around Anne and Paul is not the stereotype of a traditional small town environment hostile to adolescent love. His aim is to bring out the non-personal implications of an emotional relationship. In a multi-cultural setting, the implications assume tremendous importance, perhaps greater importance than the relationship itself. This circumstantial feature offers an advantage as well as a risk to the novelist. The advantage is that he can easily avoid the hackneyed raciness of adolescent love novels. The risk is of ending up with a journalistic width devoid of an emotional appeal. Having considered the novel carefully from these angles, I can say that Dentyn has successfully used the advantage and avoided the risk.

One of the very special features of the book is its nonstereotyped approach to characters. Anne as the central character has neither the sentimentalized attributes of female adolescence nor the daredevilry of the heroines of many contemporary adolescent books which find easy acceptance in anti-sexist circles. She is a bold individual trying to cope both with an alien environment outside her family and with middle class morality inside it.

Dentyn's use of language is cautious and selective. His vocabulary and syntax demand that readers read passages carefully. At places his descriptions achieve a surrealistic appeal which heightens the impact of the African setting and of its reflection in Anne's sharp sensibility. Imaginative teachers can make use of this book for fiction reading exercises in the classroom. The interaction of characters and the role of atmosphere can be good topics of discussion after the reading.

Season of Burnt Grass will appeal to boys and girls in the twelve to seventeen-year-old bracket. Unfortunately it is printed on poor quality paper and does not have an attractive cover. There are a few good sketch-illustrations, but certainly not enough to compensate for the uninviting appearance of the book. In spite of its poor format, however, I strongly recommend this novel for school and public libraries.

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