Les études au sujet de la composition d'une lettre, d'un passeport, d'une circulaire sont fort pratiques et allient bien grammaire et communication.

Les illustrations sont charmantes, vivantes, colorées, bien adaptées au monde des enfants. Les extraits de bandes dessinées pour représenter des situations d'énonciation sont du domaine de leurs intérêts et de leurs lectures.

L'enseignant pourra sûrement s'inspirer de cet ouvrage tout en souhaitant sûrement qu'il y eût un cahier de l'élève avec de nombreuses pages d'exercices. L'enseignant doit palier lui-même à ce manque en composant des fiches d'exercices pour compléter ceux de livre. *Eveil à la Grammaire* convient à des élèves francophones. Ce livre n'est pas indiqué pour des classes d'immersion d'anglophones, bien que tout enseignant puisse s'en inspirer.

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Father to the Man?

WILLIAM BLACKBURN

The Black Tunnel, Susan Brown. Illus. by Maureen Shaughnessy. Scolastic-TAB Publications, 1978. 171 pp. $1.25 paper.

Ernie, Robert J. Ireland. Macmillan, 1978. 125 pp. $1.75 paper.

At the height of her popularity, the best-selling author of children's books Louisa May Alcott once confided to her journal the fact that she was "tired of providing moral pap for the young." As therapy, she wrote a very different sort of book – a Gothic thriller entitled *A Modern Mephistopheles* in which the villain attempts (need one say unsuccessfully?) to seduce the heroine by offering her a *bonbonniere* filled with hashish. The jaded modern reader observes that times have indeed changed and so have our notions of moral pap. Ms. Alcott's villain might well find herself perfectly at home in a respectable "adolescent novel" of today.

And yet, despite flamboyant superficial differences, modern novels are not that different from their mid-Victorian ancestors. They continue to take as their subjects children who begin as outcasts but who end by being assimilated into respectable society. In this basic plot line, modern

adolescent novels differ surprisingly little from such works as Alcott's *Little Men*. If modern children's literature is truly to differ from the moral pap of an earlier day, it must deal very carefully with the process of maturation. Such literature must give a convincing account of the outcast's initial failure to fit into society, and it must certainly give a convincing account of the reasons for his eventual reconciliation with himself and his society. Since both Robert J. Ireland's *Ernie* and Susan Brown's *The Black Tunnel* take as their central character boys who are outcasts, both set themselves the difficult task of depicting this reconciliation, of showing how the child is indeed father to the man.

Ernie is clearly the less successful in its handling of the transition to maturity, despite the fact that Ernie Mezaros, the book's protagonist, is so confused that well-nigh any change must be an improvement. Ernie, the son of an immigrant junkman, despises the Old-World attitudes of his parents. He's been in trouble with the police, and, with the exception of his sister Tina (whose middle-class boyfriend Ernie of course loathes), has no close friends. The coach of the football team is down on him too, and, the night before an important game, Ernie gets "fed up with being blamed for so much." He and a friend go joy-riding in a stolen car. Ernie has an accident, and, panic-stricken, flees from the scene, abandoning his seriously-injured friend. The game next day is one long horror. In a falling-out after his team's resounding defeat, a defeat for which Ernie is held responsible, Ernie is beaten up by an angry team-mate and then attempts to assault the coach. He plots revenge on his enemies – just about everyone he knows – but is unable to control the violence he unleashes.

At this nadir of Ernie's fortunes, the author makes it possible for him to escape the consequences of his actions. The car's owner refuses to press charges; Ernie's injured friend stoutly insists that he was alone in the car at the time of the accident. But Ernie has blurted out a confession to his sister, and, rather than forfeit Tina's good opinion, he tells the whole story to the police. The reader is assured that, having found out that "we must learn from our mistakes and . . . think about how we affect other people," Ernie has "grown up a little, and that's hard work." He is to be permitted to rehabilitate himself by working in the community sports programme, and ends, like the hero of so many moral tracts, sadder but unquestionably wiser.

Few cases involving auto theft, dangerous driving, and leaving the scene of an accident end so happily. And yet the legerdemain which allows Ernie to accept the responsibility for his actions while evading their consequences is by no means the book's only weakness. The author exhibits that kind of sophistication that many believe to be *de rigueur* in the adolescent novel because they confuse bluntness with honesty. (In their salad days, Ernie and his friends "would pick up some girls and some booze or pot and get stoned"; a passing drunk asks Ernie "How come you got high heels and long hair? You some kinda fairy or something?") But this contrived

directness is the only attempt at sophistication the book can boast. All the major characters are fundamentally good at heart. Like its characterization, the novel's diction and sentence structure are simple to the point of monotony. Perhaps Mr. Ireland intends this book for adolescents whose limited reading skills are not equal to their appetite for sophisticated fiction. Perhaps this is why the means which the author allows himself to use are inadequate to his subject. He sets himself the impossible task of trying to be always serious and interesting without ever being complicated. In attempting this, he denies himself that richness of language which is one of the principal resources of the novelist, and so the novel shares, rather than transcends, the limitations and inarticulateness of its protagonist. The novel means well, but "the whole problem of learning to stand on your own, of becoming an adult," is strong meat, not the pap Mr. Ireland manages to make of it.

Susan Brown's *The Black Tunnel* is recommended by the publisher for Grades 5-7, but is in fact far more sophisticated than *Ernie* in characterization, diction, and in treatment of moral problems. Twelve-year old Tom Kirby is, like Ernie, an outcast. He has failed the initiation test of a boy's club called the Cobras, and has in consequence been branded a coward – "Chicken Man." The initiation consists of making one's way, alone and in utter darkness, through a half-mile tunnel. Tom, who suffers from claustrophobia as a result of a trauma in infancy, does not understand his inability to conquer his fear of the dark. In his ignorance, he comes to accept the Cobras' evaluation of him. His school work suffers; he has no friends, and feels estranged from his parents, thinking that they too would despise him if they knew of his cowardice. Tom begins to understand himself better after he befriends Andrew, a boy rendered as lonely as he by the twin handicap of extraordinary intelligence and deplorable co-ordination. This friendship begun in loneliness grows as Tom comes to share Andrew's interests, and is cemented firmly when Andrew declines an invitation to join the Cobras. The gang members harass the two boys, and one day force Andrew into the tunnel moments before it is to be flooded. Tom must enter it, mastering his own fears to save his friend's life. He does so, and his courage shames the other boys. The repudiate their leader, who has been Tom's chief persecutor, and offer to re-instate Tom as leader of the Cobras. Tom thinks this over, and realizes that he no longer craves the good opinion of these peers: "It's too late for me just to slip back." He has overcome his fear of the dark tunnel – but far more significant is the fact that he has overcome his fear of that greatest of bugbears, public opinion. The other boys may think what they like; at the novel's end, "for the first time in his life, Tom knew that he was free."

There is much to praise in this book. The tunnel of Tom's nightmares is a metaphor for universal fears: in the boy's life, "there were so many dark places everywhere." The novel shows very plausibly how Tom's self-doubt tortures him and threatens to poison all his relationships. It is perfectly

frank about the fiendish glee children can take in tormenting the weak. The friendship of Tom and Andrew is treated skilfully and without sentimentality: for instance on one occasion Tom's misdirected anger at himself almost brings the two to blows. The novel shows a sophistication of diction and technique which is challenging without being daunting; Unlike *Ernie,* it glows with such phrases as "these were hugh geometric crystals shooting out like sculptured icicles, like cold crystal plants yearning towards the light." There is a depth of personality to both Tom and Andrew; Andrew is particularly remarkable for being highly intelligent without being either a freak or an abomination to good manners. Best of all is the novel's insistence that maturity has little to do with conformity, and Tom's discovery that self-satisfaction is worth more than a bushel of golden opinions. Even if there were nothing else to commend the book, this serious attempt to treat the problem of moral authority and individual responsibility would suffice to make the book more than the moral pap by which the appetites of our children are so often betrayed and led astray.

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