

Literacy: The Case for Light Reading

S.J. FREISEN

Go Jump in the Pool! and *Beware the Fish!* Gordon Korman. Illus. by Lea Daniel. Scholastic-Tab, 1979, 1980. 185 pp., 177 pp. \$1.25 each, paper. ISBN 0-590-71014-1, 71026-5.

McDonald Hall, "the best boarding school for boys in Canada", rings with the adventures of a pair of boys who can do anything from shinnying up a drainspout noiselessly in the dead of night, every night, to amassing twenty-five thousand dollars to build a pool. They share their joys and troubles with the fearless peerless denizens across the highway in Miss Scrimmage's Finishing School for Young Ladies. Authority figures take something of a beating at McDonald Hall, where the Headmaster gets lines like, "I don't care about the budget, my boys must have their evening snack." Parents are shadowy figures beyond the brilliant landscape of the school in which these boys test their strength. The surrounding world consists of standard public figures, like police, and public structures, like banks, which come into play only insofar as they serve the glittering personalities of Bruno, Boots and friends.

Clearly these books will appeal to young readers. They can be quite hilarious and require no more suspension of disbelief than many classics or most bestsellers intended for adults. A.S. Neill, the founder of the renowned Summerhill School, mused in his diary that few young people "have a sense of humour; theirs is a sense of fun. Make a noise like a duck and they will scream, but tell them your best joke and they will be bored to tears." Even after they can appreciate your best joke, the sense of fun remains, witness the antics in college dormitories.

When reading is still hard work, books that are full of fun and adventure may encourage the needed practice. Eric Wilson, a teacher of reluctant readers in British Columbia, states that to become a mature reader a student must read a wide variety of books, a situation he considers possible only when reading is regarded as a recreation. Wilson's own books (*Terror in Winnipeg*, *Murder on THE CANADIAN*, and *Vancouver Nightmare*) are similar to Korman's in that they employ rapid action and dialogue, as do those of Douglas Hill (*Galactic Warlord*). The concerns are different: Wilson's protagonists worry about cleaning up the environment; Hill's are out to save the earth from destruction and avenge his planet; and Korman's try to save the school or its honour. All would please A.S. Neill; all begin "with 'Hands up, or I fire!' or a kindred sentence."

Whereas Wilson, a teacher, is accustomed to the problem of rolecasting and seems to avoid it by involving girls only peripherally in the world of his male characters, Korman jubilantly peoples his world with females, some of whom are as brave, quick-witted and daring as his males. The girls are, to boot, all-knowing and all-attentive. When the boys must repair a trampled flower garden, the girls feed them a fabulous meal out of doors and do all the gardening themselves, within minutes. They then dirty the boys up and send them back to their Headmaster, whose wife arraigns him for persecuting the angelic darlings. This is rolecasting only insofar as it fits the script.

In these books all the characters are stereotypes. They, like the plot, are merely a frame on which to hang a series of funny incidents and running gags. Unlike Kevin Majors' *Hold Fast* in which everything the protagonist did was in character because Majors was trying to capture on paper a particular Maritimes' approach to life, Korman's characters and events are bent to the purpose of his books - making people laugh. Alternatively, Barbara Smucker in her historic fiction *Days of Terror* creates characters, but bends them to facts which she has recognized. In all cases, the characters are held true to the author's purpose.

A more viable criticism of Korman's work would be to question his sentence structure and his lack of feeling for words. Nonetheless, his writing has the qualities which will get it picked up and read, and therein lies the beginning of literacy. A rudimentary definition of literacy could posit that it is the ability not merely to read whether clumsily or quickly, but to know that part of the world is inhabited by people who read and use books. A.S. Neill says, "I couldn't tell you the capital of New Zealand . . .; all I know is that I could find it out if I wanted to," and "So why learn up stuff that you can get in a dictionary every day?" But you must be able to use that dictionary and know when to turn to it. Neill's assertion is carried a step further by the well-loved quotation from D.H. Lawrence in "Education of the People": "Teach a boy to read, to write and to do simple sums and you have opened the door of all culture to him, if he wants to go through" and by Thomas Carlyle: "The true university of these days is a collection of books."

Certainly the business of our daily lives is centered on language. As the television documentary "A Requiem for Literacy" pointed out, even the flashing delights of the electronic media have their beginnings in the written word. Yet literacy is more than an ability to find information. It is an enrichment of the whole of one's life, expressed in a greater understanding of oneself and others. Joseph Gold in *A Word to the Wise* says, "But is it adequate that after decades of schooling, our citizens should be no better equipped to lead a richer life of the mind than they are, no freer to find out

who they are, what they can do, and how they might order and enjoy their world and their perception of it?" Elsewhere in the same book he says, "the heart of this learning and self-realizing process is language."

These are great things to be asked of books which will appeal to readers around Grades 4 to 6, especially considering that Gordon Korman is just sixteen years old. I have deliberately left mentioning the author's age to the last and have appraised his books in relation to others by mature writers because that is how they will be read. Once a book is printed, bound and sent forth the author's physical age is no longer apparent. Korman is a prolific writer with three books published and two more in manuscript form. He is developing quickly, perhaps almost unconsciously, and will probably find a strong voice of his own soon if he is able to keep his feet through the wave of attention he is receiving. At present, his publisher announces that Korman is negotiating for a television series based on Bruno, Boots and McDonald Hall.

Meanwhile, his books serve the purposes I have stated, but let it not end there, with a profound purpose laid upon books written out of a sense of fun. Sometimes it is important to take a breather, to get away from whatever you are doing. Not even television, with its constant breaks for commercials, changes of mood, treatment and topic every half hour, can give the refreshment possible from reading. Only a book can give a couple hours of light nothing, a sustained mood, wiping away for the moment all thought, all responsibilities, penances or problems other than those of the other world opened to us by its author. As Sidney wrote in "Defence of Poesy", "And with a tale forsooth he cometh to you, with a tale, which holdeth children from play, and old men from the chimney corner."

S.J. Freisen is a Toronto writer, creator of the television series "Tell Me a Story".

