The Metaphor or the Moral? Didacticism in Contemporary Adolescent Fiction

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Superbike!, Jamie Brown. Clarke, Irwin, & Co., 1981. 172 pp. hardcover. ISBN 0-7720-1306-3.

Like death, taxes, and the poor, didacticism is always with us. "The great evil of men," observed Mencius some twenty-four centuries ago, "is that they like to be teachers of others." Mencius was not speaking of literature written for children; no more was Geoffrey Hartman when he remarked in *Beyond Formalism* that "we need to find a way of speaking without speaking from above." And yet both these men have something to say to students and authors of children's literature. We have learned to scorn naked moralizing in such literature — yet how can it impart values without alienating its audience? How can it speak without speaking from above? Traditional authors still make their story subservient to their lesson; others, resolutely modern and determined to be sympathetic at all costs, too often pander to the prejudices of their adolescent readers instead of imparting anything at all. I do not know if Jamie Brown is familiar with Mencius and Hartman; I do know that his novel *Superbike* suggests one way of teaching without moralizing or condescending, of speaking with, rather than at, one's audience.

Jamie Brown is the author of one volume of autobiography *(The Lively Spirits of Provence,* 1974), and three other novels *(Stepping Stones,* 1975; *So Free We Seem,* 1976; *Shrewsbury,* 1977). *Superbike!* his first novel for adolescents, won the 1982 Young Adult Canadian Book Award of the Saskatchewan Library Association. *Superbike!* is the story of Neil Hackett, a high-school senior whose life is apparently falling apart. His mother has just re-married, and Neil believes his step-father views him as "just the penalty clause." School is a disaster: his teachers find him "bright but completely unmotivated"; "he was the only kid he knew who was flunking gym". His foxy girlfriend, Marsha, leads him around like a St. Bernard pup. On impulse, Neil spends his last cent on a Ducati 900 Super Sport racing motorcycle — and the bike proves his salvation. In order to run the bike, Neil turns to at school — astonishing his teachers — and takes a part-time job as well. His new-found sense of responsibility (and a lucky win in his first race) open his step-father's eyes, and he becomes Neil's manager. Neil finally sees through Marsha — a girl as hard as a coconut, and as hollow — but

not before he has almost thrown away his chances with Carol, a girl less flashy but far more solid. The novel ends with Neil, having placed fourth in a desperate race, looking forward to the future with the confidence that comes from self- knowledge and self-reliance.

For all its virtues, *Superbike!* does have its weaknesses. The prose is rather vapid — always a temptation for those writing for adolescents. The characters tend to be types rather than individuals. Neil is a boy confused, not a boy gone wrong — at worst a sheep in wolf's clothing — and this ensures the truly remarkable ease with which honest hard work clears up virtually all his problems. Had Neil been more of a desperado, he could not have resolved his difficulties so neatly.

Still, the book's strengths certainly outweigh its weaknesses. The prose is bland, but clean, and the accounts of racing action are particularly well done. The values upheld by the novel arise inevitably from the story — Neil learns nothing at all from being lectured at, but learns a good deal from accepting responsibility for his bike. The theme of responsibility unifies and enhances a complex plot. Best of all, the author has the strength of character to resist the clichés which plague adolescent fiction. He rejects both trendy bleakness and the guaranteed happy ending. (Neil does not win his last race, and he has only a chance of winning Carol back; the future depends on him.) Furthermore, *Superbike!* is entirely free of the glibness, the sneering wit, the condescension-masquerading-as-candour which mar so many of the novels being turned out for teenagers today. Mr. Brown is not trying to perpetrate another soap opera for adolescents — he somehow contrives to make do without rape, abortion, drug addiction, and the rest of the menagerie of relevant subjects — and for this he deserves our gratitude.

Unlike some authors, Mr. Brown is not reduced to moralizing, or to pandering to the cynicism of his audience. His novel is solid because it relies on the metaphor at its heart. From Plato to Pirsig, the figure of the charioteer has provided a way of talking about self-knowledge and self-control. Before one can master the vehicle — be it a chariot or a Ducati Super Sport — the charioteer must first master himself. This is precisely the lesson Neil learns. The metaphor of the motorcycle marries theme and fiction. That the bike is a real object requiring real discipline is evident to the reader; this enables the author to explore the theme of responsibility without cant or moralizing. (There can be no question of speaking from above; experience soon teaches us that it is pointless to moralize at a recalcitrant carburetor.)

Perhaps one could wish Mr. Brown's prose a little more zesty, and his treatment of character a little more profound. But he avoids the cardinal blunder of speaking from above because he writes honestly of something he knows and loves — he even borrowed a Ducati in order to "get the feel of a competition machine once more" before starting the novel — and because of his happy use of one of the traditional resources of fiction: metaphor. The opportunist sacrifices all to sym-

pathy; the moralist sacrifices story to moral; the writer of fiction tells a story which is a way of sharing experience. Mr. Brown finds a metaphor which makes experience accessible, and he rides it for everything it's worth. In *Superbike!* he, like his hero Neil Hackett, runs a very fine first race. *Qu' il continue!*

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Memories and Pictures of Pioneer Life

GWYNETH EVANS

Grandfather Symons' Homestead Book, R.D. Symons. Illus. Western Producer Prairie Books, 1981. 80 pp. $8.95 paper. ISBN 0-88833-082-0.

Kitimat My Valley, Elizabeth Anderson Varley. Northern Times Press, 1981. 228 pp. $12.95 paper. ISBN 0-920390-03-X.

Grandfather Symons' Homestead Book is a recent addition to what seems to be becoming a distinctive and distinguished Canadian genre — the social history picture book. Evoking the experiences of childhood in a rugged, rural environment, books of such artists as Kurelek, Ann Blades and now R.D. Symons use both illustrations and descriptive text to give the reader vivid impressions of another way of life. The combination of paintings and text makes these books widely appealing; although Symons deliberately addresses himself to the generation of his grandchildren, the three dozen pictures and the information about prairie homesteading will interest readers of any age. Like Kurelek's *A Prairie Boy's Winter* and *Summer,* the *Homestead Book* depicts seasonal chores and fun on a prairie farm in the early years of this century. Symons' painting style is very different from that of Kurelek, but the format of the book is similar; a painting of a rural scene or activity is accompanied by a descriptive text on the page facing. Symons gives us three pictures and two anecdotes for each month of the year, then invites the reader to participate by providing an enticingly blank page