

Le style manque parfois de rigueur; on y relève des expressions mal formulées et des comparaisons insignifiantes. Quoique les descriptions permettent d'imaginer un monde fantastique et passionnant, elles ne figurent pas dans les illustrations. Ces dernières demeurent secondaires, sont dépourvues de couleur et se répètent sans autres détails. Même la couverture du livre et les premières pages où figurent de grosses lettres ou de petits paragraphes sur de grands espaces blancs, donnent l'impression que l'ouvrage n'a pas été conçu pour attirer l'attention du regard sur les dessins. On y trouve tout de même des images poétiques, et qui, lues à haute voix, laissent libre cours à notre imagination.

Somme toute, *Les longs bras de la nuit* présente une histoire enrichissante pour tous ceux qui craignent encore l'obscurité. Bien que le récit manque de fantaisie, il aboutit à une conclusion qui, espérons-le, incitera les enfants (et même plusieurs adultes) à surmonter cette peur inexplicable éprouvée dans le noir.

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## LIFE WITHOUT FATHER

*Mama's going to buy you a mockingbird*, Jean Little. Viking Kestrel, 1984. 213 pp. \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 0-670-80346-4.

After his father's death from cancer eleven-year-old Jeremy Talbot realizes "how it was going to be from now on":

Never again would Dad buy them anything. Never again would he hand out their allowances or give them money to buy a popsicle or a comic book. Never again.

Jean Little makes this realization one of the many powerful scenes in her moving story of a boy's coming to terms with death and, in the process, encountering a surprising friend. *Mama's going to buy you a mockingbird* does not unfold with a clear line separating the debit of death in the first half from the asset of friendship in the second; on the contrary, Little paves the way for Jeremy's restorative friendship with Tess Medford, one of his teacher-father's best pupils, and succeeds in weaving her gawky, mysterious but ultimately sympathetic presence into the resolution of the story.

Little fills her book with the crowded but tender moments of family life. Only when his mother Melly starts to sing the mockingbird song — a favourite soother in this closely knit family — does Jeremy admit that "Dad was dead." Because he is too big to be rocked or to cry, he finds solace in gorging on the hot and

crunchy johnnycake dessert provided by "one of the church ladies." Although Jeremy feels the squeeze of hurt "like a giant hand" and has been touched by "a cold fingertip of fear," Little does not spend too much time with metaphorical language. Instead she wisely concentrates on the special perceptions of this boy, stroking the talisman of his father's gift of an owl carving, admitting that pretending "pushed the unreal, the unbelievable sadness away," suffering through the intolerably "polite day" of the funeral and cursing the beauty of the first snowfall.

Jeremy emerges as a very likeable youngster who, although he professes to be tired of "walking a tightrope" and being good, is definitely gifted with his father's wit and insight. Thanks to his father's coaxing he finds an unlikely kindred spirit in the tall girl his school chums laugh at. Although the narrative voice is omniscient, the point of view is entirely Jeremy's. As a consequence the people who matter, or come to matter, most to him — parents, sister Sarah, Tess Medford and her grandfather — are fully drawn characters, while irritants, like Aunt Margery and certain teachers, and most of his peers stay undeveloped in the background. Sketchy too is the Muskoka cottage backdrop and the city locale somewhere close to Hamilton.

Little handles the issue of death without stooping to mawkishness. She incorporates nursery rhymes, biblical texts, hymns and ditties by Dennis Lee and Hilaire Belloc, blending them all into this story of grief and recovery that, miraculously, does not sermonize. The only too-tidy aspect of her plotting, however, is the coincidence of Tess and Jeremy's mothers sharing the same hospital room when the children were born. Of course the device means that Melly can dispell some of the mystery about Tess's teenaged mother, and about her grandparents' reaction to this child of an unidentified father. Although Mrs. Talbot can thereby become a mother figure for Tess and Mr. Medford can revel in the role of "grandpa" for Jeremy and Sarah, this Dickensian (or is it Fieldingesque?) plot hinge does strain credibility.

One of the "neat books" that Melly brings to the cottage for reading aloud is *The great Gilly Hopkins*. Her choice and Little's reference to it are revealing, I think, for *Mama's going to buy you a mockingbird* is an honest family story that touches and encourages in many of the same ways as the fiction of Katherine Paterson.

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