

Review articles & reviews/ *Critiques et comptes rendus*

TALENT IN, TALENT OUT

The Minerva program, Claire Mackay. James Lorimer, 1984. 178 pp. cloth, paper. ISBN 0-88862-717-3, 0-88862-716-5.

The Minerva program has, to my certain knowledge, kept an eighty-three-year-old, a fifty-three-year-old and an eleven-year-old up long past their bedtime, because none of them could bear to stop before reaching the end. It has all the necessary ingredients of an irresistible story: suspense, surprise, humour, an engaging heroine with a difference, a mysterious villain, dialogue so real that its author has to be an inveterate eavesdropper on today's kids, an ingenious plot satisfyingly resolved and, to add a special, new flavour, a computer. All of these, joined by flawless writing, would seem to be more than enough. Yet this book has other elements which make it worthy of special attention.

Minerva is a seventh grader with a low opinion of herself. Until a year before the story begins, her family has lived in a small apartment on St. Clair Ave. After they move out to "the eastern edge of Toronto" Minerva is lonely until she discovers Sophie, her best friend and faithful ally. Even Sophie cannot help Minerva to be less than a klutz at gym or to bear patiently with her lively small brother James.

The fact that Minerva is black while Sophie is white is just that, a fact. It is refreshing to read a book where a diversity of ethnic backgrounds are represented without this resulting in the Problem which provides the focus for the story. This lighthearted approach to something deeply serious, when added to the attractiveness of this heroine and her little brother, will do more for the cause of anti-racism than a plethora of admonitory lectures. Not only are black children respected and enjoyed in this book but so are many other "minority groups": the elderly, the kids at the video arcades, the cashiers at the supermarket, the teenagers who follow "punk" styles, even the teachers at the school Minerva attends. Each character in turn becomes a personality rather than a token figure.

The inventiveness of James, his energy, his maddening effect on his sorely tried older sister, his irrepressible high spirits plus his ingenuous charm and his unusual climbing ability cannot help but win laughter and affection from the most sophisticated reader. James is one of the book's greatest assets.

Other books have contained endearing kids and have handled minority groups

with sympathy. This story adds an insight into the subtler dilemmas and delights which have arrived with computers. Minerva is instantly in thrall to her computer when she realizes magical success through it. Her preoccupation with it jeopardizes her friendship with Sophie; she must weigh her relationship with a machine against her relationship with a person. The machine is easier to control, more predictable, more fun at times. Yet Sophie matters more.

The fear people have of computers is dealt with sensitively. Minerva's mother hates the machines that "spy" on her and the other cashiers, reporting what they do to the manager. Children reading the book will understand better the apprehension felt by those whose jobs are threatened through the use of technology. Yet they will also see, as Minerva does, where the responsibility lies — not with the computers but with the people who program them and use the results inhumanly.

The way Minerva solves her mother's problem and later foils the villain who attempts to defraud the school board keeps her the pivotal figure in the novel. Yet the unlikely but endearing gang who rally to help her will warm the hearts of kids. The plot is far-fetched, at this point, and its resolution is outrageous. If the reader wants fun though, this is the book of her or his dreams.

One final "minority group" which is included in this novel should not be left unmentioned. Dedicated readers! Sophie is reading her way through Dickens. When she gives Minerva a synopsis of the plot of *Oliver Twist*, Minerva, shocked, inquires, "Soph, does your dad know you read stuff like that?" Well said, Minerva Wright. Well read, Sophie Michaloff. Well written, Claire Mackay! **Jean Little**, the author of *Lost and found and many other award-winning books*, has two new novels underway.