

There is no reason that the literary life of Sheila Brary should end after only two years. After all, the romance with the handsome young intern never was any more than promised. One assumes, hopes, that Mary Razzell will afford young adult readers at least a couple more episodes filled with her honest, uncloying view of the disappointments and the joys of real life.

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CHILDHOOD TRAUMA



Naomi's road, Joy Kogawa. Oxford University Press, 1986. 82 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 0-19-540547-1; **The valley of flowers**, Veronica Eddy Brock. Coteau Books, 1987. \$13.95, \$5.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 0-919926-75-4, 0-919926-74-6. **The empty chair**, Bess Kaplan. Western Producer Prairie Books, 1986. 172 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 0-88833-205-X.

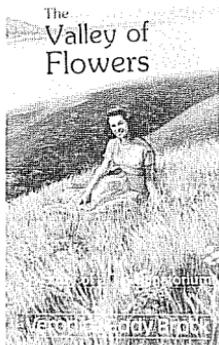
Although these three books are fictions, all are highly realistic accounts of childhood suffering. We are explicitly told at the end of *The valley of flowers* that it is based on experience; the voice and perspective of the protagonist, Sandy, seem identical with the author's, and the story of her four-year stay at a tuberculosis sanatorium during the 1940s reads like an autobiography. *Naomi's road*, based on Kogawa's adult novel, *Obasan*, tells the story of a Japanese-Canadian family's internment during the Second World War through the voice of a little girl who may be based on Kogawa's memories of herself as a child, but who emerges as a fictive creation quite separate from the adult author. This fictive quality is true as well of Rebecca, the 10-year-old narrator of *The empty chair*, a revised version of an adult novel published in 1975 about a Winnipeg girl in the 1930s whose mother dies and who must cope with her father's decision to remarry less than a year later. Interestingly, readers seem to me more likely to identify with the more imaginatively conceived protagonists of the latter two books rather than with the one most directly based on the author's personal memories.

Racism plays a part in all three books. It looms as the driving force behind Naomi's tragic story; at the personal level, little Mitzi tells Naomi

that Canada is not her country and that “you” (meaning the Japanese) will lose the war. Kogawa’s letter to the children reading her book points out how double-edged was Canada’s cruelty to its people of Japanese heritage: they were treated as if they were not Canadians, and they were taught to be ashamed of their history and culture. In *The empty chair*, Rebecca faces the anti-Semitism of her schoolmates as part of a generally antagonistic world, and while Sandy, in *The valley of flowers* isn’t the victim of prejudice, she learns about it by observing the experiences of the Metis children in the “san”. Rebecca and Sandy meet other kinds of cruelty — Rebecca from members of her own family, and Sandy from her doctors and nurses.

All three girls are powerless to change their situations. Naomi, only five at the beginning of her story, is overwhelmed by all the unanswered questions that surround her: why she must leave her home or why her mother cannot come back when the war begins. She turns nine near the end of the book, but, unlike her older brother, she tends not to express anger against the general injustice of her situation. The prevailing tones of the story are hurt, sorrow and timorous hope.

Rebecca is an angry nine-year-old at the beginning of *The empty chair*. She has only one real friend; her teacher is vindictive; even some members of her own family treat her with contempt. Her struggles to cope with the terrible pain of losing her mother and fighting against the acceptance of a step-mother are ultimately resolved by her recognition that the step-mother’s needs and fears are as great as hers. Like *Naomi’s road*, this book ends on a note of hope, but it is hope based on an older child’s conscious realization of hard facts, rather than on Naomi’s intuition that happiness lies ahead.



Sandy is much older — her story covers ages 16 to 20 — but she accepts treatment that seems quite outrageous to the reader. *The valley of flowers* is full of examples of obviously rough treatment by medical staff: two-and-a-half hour bronchoscopes with no anaesthetic; a move from the sanatorium to a hospital during a prairie winter in an unheated luggage car. There are no authorial comments on Sandy’s treatment, but the head doctor remarks that it seems a shame that she arrived with a dime-sized spot on her lung and left four-and-a-half years later missing seven ribs and one lung. Sandy’s defence against pain, fear, immobilization and sorrow over the deaths of

friends is primarily her persona as a wise-cracking teenager. She shows amazing courage and strength but no growth. The reader is left with a sense of futility — the story is undoubtedly true but there doesn’t seem to

be much point in telling it.

In contrast, the other two books do trace development. In *The empty chair*, change on the conscious level will be readily understood by a young reader; Kaplan is skillful in indicating the unconscious at work, as well,

The Empty Chair

Rebecca's happy world falls apart when tragedy strikes her family.



through dream incidents that Rebecca takes to mean that her dead mother is angry with her, but that she comes to understand as her working out the split in her own feelings. The younger girl's development in *Naomi's road* is more directly presented by a present-tense narration that changes in language and perspective as the child matures. In the earliest sections, she talks about the objects she sees at floor level and describes how her doll talks to her. Later she sees the world from a physically higher spot; her doll no longer talks to her, and she understands that it had done so previously only in her imagination. It is only when she is older that

she talks about the length of time in measurable terms. These changes make the narration of the story interesting to an adult reader, and will probably bind the young reader into a closer identification with Naomi. A dream sequence that occurs near the end of the story — Naomi's experience of hearing her parents' voices singing to her from a burning rose and a bowl of mushrooms presumably a ghostly visitation and a symbol of the death of Naomi's mother in Japan — may well baffle an eight-year-old reader. It may be that Kogawa wants that child to turn to an adult for help, and if so, let us hope that she is correct about the kind of response such an appeal will receive.

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A JOURNEY TO CONFIDENCE

A handful of time, Kit Pearson. Penguin Books, 1987. 186 pp. \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-670-81532-2.

Only "a handful of time" separates this new novel by Kit Pearson from her first, *The daring game* (1985), but the differences in quality are appreciable. Again we meet an adolescent girl from Toronto who feels at odds