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ESCAPE FROM NEW JERSEY

A semester in the life of a garbage bag. Gordon Korman. Scholastic, 1987. 257 pp. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-590-40694-9.

The garbage bag of the title is one Raymond Jardine, a spectacularly unlucky eleventh grader, whose sole obsession in life is gaining one of the coveted six spots on a high school trip to the Greek island of Theamelpos. (The alternative is spending the summer working in his uncle's fish-gutting plant in New Jersey.) For reasons far too involved to explain, success in a poetry project for his English class becomes the key to getting there, and Jardine's partner, the hitherto perfectly normal Sean Delancey, gradually finds his life being taken over by the other's obsession--which results (among other things) in Sean's eighty-eight year old grandfather impersonating the obscure (and deceased) Canadian poet on whom they have decided to work. Other characters include Ashley Bach, the stunningly beautiful health food fanatic for whom Sean hopelessly yearns; Steve "Cementhead" Semenski, the moronic muscleman who is the object of Ashley's affections; and a younger sister whom Sean refers to as "Genghis Khan in training". The real villain of the piece, however, is SAGGEN: DeWitt High School's experimental power-plant--thirty-three million dollars' worth of state-of-the-art technology, whose only minor drawback is that it doesn't work.

With his last three titles, Korman has moved from being a writer of children's books into Young Adult territory, and while his lunatic comic inventiveness remains much in evidence, it is accompanied by a perceptive eye for the quirks of adolescent behaviour. Paradoxically, however, the very accuracy of this portrayal of teenage jealousies, antagonisms, image-consciousness creates certain problems. Korman's earlier books depend for much of their effect on his use of a closed environment--school, in the MacDonald Hall books, summer camp in *I want to go home*--which serves to isolate the characters from a larger social context, while allowing Korman's distinctive brand of comedy to develop its own logic and momentum. Here, however, while the main focus is on the life of DeWitt High School, the social context is broader, embracing family life and events beyond the institution. There is a greater realism, too, in some of the characterization: Sean's pangs of jealousy are convincingly rendered, as are some of the antagonisms between characters--to the extent that it sometimes makes Korman's comic invention seem *too* contrived. In the less

realistic world of his earlier fiction, of course, this was never a problem; here, however, the comedy and the observation almost seem to be pulling in different directions. The pacing, too, is affected: more complex than his earlier novels, with more characters, and more aspects of experience to interweave, it moves as a result more slowly, and never quite succeeds in creating the momentum required for the suspension of disbelief which Korman's farcical invention demands. While the climactic self-destruction of SAGGEN is well done, the final resolution, which sends Jardine and Sean to Theamelpos after all, is a little too artificial. And it is surely a miscalculation to make the obsessive Jardine in love with Ashley too, detracting as it does from the fanatical single-mindedness which makes his partnership with the far more normal Sean so comical.

Nevertheless, if the parts do not add up to as satisfying a whole as is the case in some of Korman's other books, this is perhaps an inevitable consequence of what is clearly a process of the author extending his range. It will be interesting to see where he goes from here--and in the meantime, there is much in *A semester in the life of a garbage bag* to enjoy. There is, as always, some splendid slapstick; the poetry of Gavin Gunhold (the obscure Canadian bard) is consistently ludicrous, as is his impersonation by the grandfather, who turns out to be an accomplished yo-yo virtuoso; and there is also the character of Leland Fenster. . . (Leland Fenster is so supercool that he communicates only in a personal dialect so hip as to be totally incomprehensible--except possibly to a Martian: "Affirm, baby, that vub zipped my thinkometer!") Gordon Korman's comic imagination remains as fertile as ever.

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FANTASQUE ET FANTASTIQUE

Fend-le-vent. Les Bonhommes jaunes. Serge Wilson. Saint-Lambert, Héritage, 1986. 125 pp. 5,95\$ broché. ISBN 2-7625-3032-6.

A première vue, le dernier ouvrage de Serge Wilson, *Les Bonhommes jaunes*, semble réussir ce que peu de livres pour enfants peuvent se permettre: un renversement général des signes. En effet, dès le chapitre inaugural, le récit se désarticule et se donne pour ce qu'il est, une vaste supercherie. L'ineffable et tonitruante Madame Riendeau, terrifiée par l'apparition d'extra-terrestres, troublera la quiétude du camping "La Falaise d'argent" pour rien, car voici que surgissent trois galopins, dont le dernier "fait montre d'une grande ingéniosité dans la fabrication de son personnage de croque-mitaine interplanétaire". Suit,