

SURVIVING A DOUBLE LIFE

The doll, Cora Taylor. Prairie Books, 1987, 128 pp. paper. ISBN 0-88833-231-9.

Through a lively and convincing treatment of time travel that calls to mind some of C.S. Lewis' Narnia books, *The doll* explores how a ten-year-old comes to terms with illness, divorce, and mortality.

Meg Thompson has been ill with rheumatic fever and is convalescing in her grandmother's home on the Saskatchewan prairie. She has more than her sickness on her mind: she has guessed that her parents' marriage is collapsing and she is waiting for them to tell her. She is upset, anxious, and emotionally isolated.

Enter Jessie, also known as the Invalid Doll. Jessie has been in the family since they settled in Saskatchewan. Holding her is a ritual treat for young invalids.

But there's something weird about Jessie. Old Possum, Grandma Cameron's portly and placid cat, goes wild in Jessie's presence. Grandma herself recalls that Jessie used to make her feel odd. Meg is fascinated by the doll, but finds her eyes cold and disturbing.

No wonder. Each time Meg falls asleep holding Jessie, she wakes up more than a hundred years earlier as Morag, the daughter of a family of her ancestors bound for a prairie homestead. As Morag she is part of a warm, supportive family, and she has exciting days with them that leave her so weary that she can scarcely lift her head in her "other" life. Grandma Cameron and her parents grow more and more worried about her failure to convalesce. This situation has its comic side, but the comedy is sharply edged: it points up the stress of a double life.

The time travel is made plausible by Meg's illness, which distorts her sense of what is real and what is dream. Behind this lurks the larger issue of how we identify our own reality: "What if Meg was only part of a dream? A dream Morag was dreaming. . . . The thought was too big to hold in her mind. She couldn't bear it" (36).

It is not an unusual train of thought for a sensitive child; still less so for one made hypersensitive by illness and worry. This important theme of identity is focussed in a single scene that turns on a beautifully integrated structural parallel. Meg is weary from her repeated journeys back and forth in time; she resents the mysterious hold Jessie has on her. Crossing a river on a raft, she almost drops the doll into the water. At once she panics: she realizes that she *needs* Jessie and the double life Jessie symbolizes. She articulates the pain of her impossible situation this way: "I can't keep moving back and forth, being two people all my life!"

How to live two lives authentically: this is the dilemma of the child of divorce, and indeed Meg soon makes it plain to her parents. Her dream-adventure has shown her how emotionally and physically exhausting such a life will be. Yet she is loved dearly by both her parents, just as she is loved by both families in her two lives. Choice is intolerable, for she loves them all in return.

Jessie, the enigmatic catalyst of the novel, brings her to this awareness and beyond it through the convention of the ordeal. Meg's experiences as Morag help her to confront and deal with the conflicts she suffers as Meg. The journey into the past is creative. Meg discovers that she *will* be able to live one life--her own. The journeys back in time cease. Jessie's mysterious powers subside. Old Possum relaxes. Meg grows well and strong.

The serenity is bought by a sacrifice, however, and like any quester after knowledge Meg is irrevocably changed by what she experiences. The supernatural mechanics of how Meg became Morag and got back to being Meg are wisely left to our imagination, throwing the profound implications of how the past lives on in us all into sharper relief.

What finally makes this novel so satisfying is its firm assertion of the love, security, and stability that warm Meg's life even as she faces a series of crises. There is nothing cloying about *The doll*. Like the Narnia stories, it establishes that courageous living creates love. This is a worthy theme.

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LES ENFANTS "HEUREUX" PEUVENT SOUFFRIR, EUX AUSSI

Le secret de Dominique. Jean Gervais. Illus. Claudette Castilloux. Montréal, Boréal Jeunesse, 1987. 43 pp. 0.00\$ broché. ISBN 2-89052-220-2.

Les adultes sont bien oublieux, qui promènent gravement leurs lourds soucis et regrettent l'insouciance de leur jeunesse. Comme si chaque âge n'avait pas son lot de peines! C'est donc fort à propos que le petit livre de Jean Gervais, *Le secret de Dominique*, attire notre attention sur un des drames qui empoisonnent la vie de certains enfants.

Le récit de Jean Gervais ne se fait remarquer ni par le mystère ni par la poésie du sujet. Dès la troisième page, nous connaissons le secret de Dominique: il fait pipi au lit. Pourquoi revêtir des prestiges du livre pour la jeunesse un sujet si prosaïque, si dégoûtant même, il faut bien le dire? Sans doute, dans le dessein, en suscitant la sympathie, de mieux éclairer le lecteur, aussi