

ner of the adolescent problem novel. But ageism, like the novel's more central theme of racism, is not worked out in any thematic way. McClintock skirts the issue of learning to understand the problems of the elderly; she consistently works against the expectation that the adolescent novel will involve its main characters with "isms." Her one complete indulgence in adolescent fiction is that each of her three heroines is more than aware of young men.

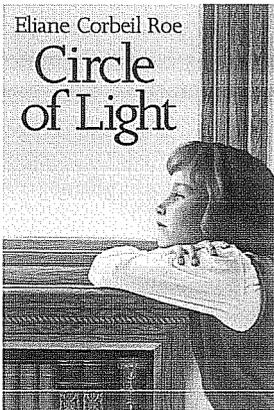
Generally, McClintock avoids the more obvious stylistic ploys for creating the texture of an adolescent world. She attempts to create the feel of the sixties through the language the adolescents use. But this amalgam of teenage slang is not overdone. Not done at all, however, and perhaps leaving something of a damaging hole in a novel with a period setting, are descriptions of popular clothes and music and movies and television shows – all the stuff of historical particularity, including cultural manifestations of and reactions to racism.

Sixty-four, sixty-five shrinks any sense of the historical period its title evokes, just as it avoids dealing with racism in sociological terms. What it gains by its focus on a small group of teenagers is something like the clarity of a morality play. What it surrenders is the richness of developing its theme against a more fully-elaborated background. After considering these trade-offs, however, I recommend *Sixty-four, sixty-five* as an interesting attempt to humanize an experience all too frequently deadened by fixation on theme.

Ronald Reichertz is an Associate Professor of English at McGill University.

A TIMELY CONTENDER

Circle of light. Eliane Corbeil Roe. Harper & Collins, 1989. 248 pp., \$15.95 cloth. ISBN 0-00-223498-X.



A serious contender for the Governor General's Literary Award, Elaine Corbeil Roe's semi-autobiographical first novel *Circle of light* marks an impressive debut. Rich, introspective and intense, it charts the self-growth of Lucy, the French-Canadian "brain" of her eighth-grade class, as she studies for a regional school championship in post-war Ontario. Initially, Lucy is spurred on to accept the challenge because she feels she cannot compete with another girl in attracting the handsome Gabriel's attention. But by the end, she has learned that a girl can be bright intellectually, academically ambitious and popular too. More importantly, by learning

to write therapeutically Lucy gradually comes to terms with two traumatic deaths in her family: that of her father and that of her brilliant older brother, the latter having died in World War II. By gaining inner peace, Lucy blossoms mentally and physically. The composition she was too afraid to write for the regional championship, because it was about receiving her father's final blessing of a kiss, becomes a story worthy to be published. Lucy thereby realizes that she has the ability to grant herself gifts, and not depend on others.

Circle of light is organically structured. Its unity comes partly from the compressed time frame from just before Christmas to the end of the school year. By beginning the story after the deaths have occurred, Roe effectively interjects the reader right into Lucy's family life with its straitened circumstances but loving atmosphere. Appropriately, unifying images of circles and light appear throughout.

The first description of the nuns' study is evocative: it is austere, immaculate and cool, but welcoming due to the table lamp's "circle of soft, warm light" (54). As she gains serenity and self-awareness, Lucy will reproduce this kind of room in her own home.

The character outlines are simplified; for instance, Gabriel is the most handsome boy, and Lucy's two friends are extreme contrasts: a rich, beautiful English girl and a poor, apparently ugly, French girl. Yet all the major female characters develop: Lucy's younger sister Jeanie, with whom she has a delicately drawn relationship, and her two girl-friends. Although the girls achieve different stages in their self-realization, all learn to express themselves in some way, to create or radiate a form of beauty. The sub-text provides a fine summary of French/English relations. There are admirable and unadmirable characters from both groups. Always the figures are based in palpable situations and act in believable ways.

One criticism: the print size is somewhat larger than would be expected for a pre-teen novel; as a result, some reviewers have extended the target readership to the mid-grades. I disagree. The content is quite complex and the emotions sometimes too bleakly intense for this group. Young people, especially girls, about to make the difficult transition to high-school, would most enjoy this honest, finely-written examination of coming into adolescence.

Jacqueline Reid-Walsh did her Ph.D. at McGill University. She has taught courses in children's literature and British literature.