

BRENDAN DONNELLY AWARD WINNER

Hal. Mary Blakeslee. Stoddart, 1991. 153 pp., \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-7737-5449-0.

Mary Blakeslee, author of the *Lemon Street gang* series, *Holy Joe*, and many more, has won the first Brendan Donnelly Award for children's literature for her most recent young adult novel, *Hal*. This fast-paced, gripping, and tightly structured novel features a precocious seventeen-year-old boy Hal, who is blind. He faces the challenge of entering a "regular" high-school setting, after boarding in a school for the blind since age seven.

Subplots form an intricate part of the text. Conflicts with his brother Pete, his parents' overprotectiveness, years of buried misunderstanding, and Hal's own sense of pride which gets him into trouble with his school peers, weave a realistic and dynamic account of the problems with which Hal must come to grips in a predominantly eye-seeing world. He learns that everybody needs someone, and that he can share every aspect of himself – including his blindness.

Overall, Blakeslee is subtle and poignant. At times, however, the points being made are too obvious and laboured. Though Pete's empathy for his brother is meant to be uplifting, Pete's understanding of a blind person proves surprisingly limited and unsophisticated; for instance, in one conversation he likens the trials of a paraplegic to Hal's blindness. Equally baffling are a high-school friend's (Nancy's) instructions to Hal about counting steps to get to a bus stop or to cross a street. Surely schools for the blind teach their students a basic knowledge of how to manoeuvre in the "outside" world. In addition, though the dialogue is generally swift, it is at times jarring. "Everybody knows Gross Gord," says Nancy at one point, "...he thinks he's hot spit...but basically he's a real pain in the big toe." Perhaps more up-to-date phrases used by today's high-school students would have been more convincing, and would have brought, in particular, Nancy's hard-to-take-wholesome character more to life. Nevertheless, *Hal* merits a good read for its gentle, sardonic humour, its vivid drawing of setting, and for its characters who, for the most part, develop.

Sheila O'Hearn is a freelance writer with a bi-weekly children's book-review column for the Wellington Advertiser. She is also assistant librarian at the Ferguson Public Library, Children's Services.