

EVERYDAY HEROES

Absolutely invincible. William Bell. General Paperbacks, 1991. 198 pp. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 1-7736-7291-5.

This novel, originally titled *The Cripples' Club* defines the plight of four young people of mixed cultural backgrounds who also have some severe disabilities. In a reversal of Franz Kafka's classic *Metamorphosis*, Bell lets his readers see that handicaps can be more perceived than real, and that the truly "crippled" may not be who we think they are.

The story is told through the eyes of George, the only one of four central characters, all disabled teenagers, who has no physical handicap. But George, a young Asian refugee, has experienced so many horrors that his mind is virtually blank; he can't remember anything, and he is branded as slow. His life turns around, however, when he saves the life of a crippled schoolmate being terrorized by bullies. Their friendship grows to include two girls, one deaf, the other blind.

Bell, an Orillia, Ontario high-school teacher, writes with the assuredness of someone who knows his teen-and pre-teen audience, and his characters, well. He has evidently listened with a perpetually sympathetic but admiring ear to his students' most secret conversations; he knows their hopes and fears – and how to express and exorcise them.

Although there is too much emphasis on motorcycles and martial arts, in general, this is a well-balanced, thought-provoking novel. The essential story remains one of exuberant "outward bound" style adventure, and of overcoming personal limitations. *Absolutely invincible* should be required reading for young people in about grades seven and eight, given rising evidence of racially-motivated violence and prejudice in our high schools.

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PICK-UP STICKS AND THE POLITICS OF DIRT

Pick-up sticks. Sarah Ellis. Greenwood, 1991. 160 pp., \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-146-0.

Pick-up sticks, the third novel by Vancouver author Sarah Ellis, is an important book. It won a 1991 Governor General's award, a tangible sign of the status she deserves. Besides being a novelist, Sarah Ellis is a librarian and critic.

She knows books. I've always admired her critical capacity to state clearly the issues at the heart of any text she discusses, and then be generous in her assessment. A lovely habit in a reader, one I try to emulate in my reading of her work.

Sarah Ellis conveys the details of contemporary urban life with anthropological precision. She is brilliant at making us focus on the bits and tatters of landscape that usually float invisibly by. When we look with Polly, the thirteen-year-old heroine of *Pick-up sticks*, at the ads for "Advanced Rolfling" and "Vivation Therapy (Formerly Integrative Rebirthing)" on the notice board of the library where she works part-time, we see the bizarreness of the signs we usually ignore. Ellis also makes us focus on the faces we otherwise tend to shun, or on the faces of adolescence we'd rather forget or not acknowledge. There is Polly's neighbour Ernie, a developmentally handicapped man who joyfully participates as he watches reruns of "The Beverly Hillbillies." There is the old lady with the tea cosy hat who belongs to the co-op crowd.

And there is Polly's friend, Vanessa, who has a crush on her high-school English teacher. Vanessa wears a purple ski mask as a disguise on the day she spends gazing at his house. Here, Ellis's use of the purple ski mask deftly transforms the common episode of the adolescent crush into something that reveals its simultaneously comic and embarrassing qualities. But this is where I run into problems with the book. The image overbalances.

Polly makes an art project mask out of faces cut from magazines. The mask becomes a weighty Symbol of False Faced Bourgeois Society. It becomes a reflection of the morality Polly learns to reject in the characters of: her uncle Roger, a businessman of the camel-hair coat and cellular car-phone variety who lives in a house lifted from the pages of *Better Homes and Gardens*; his suitably decorative wife, Barbie (I'm tempted to add the "doll"); and worst of all, his daughter Stephanie, The Bored Teenager, a member of an increasingly common urban phenomenon, The Middle Class Gang who steal from the poor and prey on the downtrodden.

Polly chooses to stay with Roger and his family for a time (while her mother tries to find an apartment for them she can afford on her earnings as a stained-glass artist) and taste some of the physical comfort and convenience money can buy. But Polly only realizes money can't buy happiness when a nightmare ride with her cousin Stephanie and her terrorist gang drives the lesson home.

What worries me is the way *Pick-up sticks* divides on binary lines. Is it better to live in a messy apartment with spaghetti sauce "slowly blipping, decorating the wall with a fine red spray," than in a big house with a "clean and tidy kitchen, eating microwave heat-in-a-bag cannelloni"? Although the plot of *Pick up sticks* does not turn only on dinner, the distinctions between cheap, messy spaghetti sauce and upmarket clean cannelloni tend towards the oppositional forms of structuralist anthropology.

What I long for in *Pick-up sticks* is the kind of barometric sensitivity to childhood friendship Ellis demonstrates in *Neighbours*, her second novel.

There the struggle between wanting to be part of the in-crowd and wanting to be kind is played out more delicately. Maybe what I really long for is Sarah Ellis's next novel, so I can find her anthropological precision threaded with her apprehension of the subtleties of human relationships.

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KORMAN'S CACHET

Macdonald Hall goes Hollywood. Gordon Korman. Scholastic-TAB, 1991. 218 pp., \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-590-43940-5; **Radio fifth grade** Gordon Korman. Scholastic-TAB, 1989. 179 pp., \$3.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-41927-7.

Macdonald Hall goes Hollywood, the latest book in the Bruno and Boots series, will not disappoint Gordon Korman fans. Bruno, envious of the young movie star Jordie Jones, is determined to get a part in the movie *Academy blues* being filmed at Macdonald Hall. The plot follows his attempts to get into the movie as well as Jordie Jones' vying with Bruno for the limelight in the Macdonald Hall academy of fame.

The critical reader marvels that Korman has been able to sustain interest through six books in this series. After all, readers can anticipate the stock happenings and the almost predictable jokes and puns. While employing clichéd and predictable material is disastrous for most writers of children's fiction, Korman makes this material his stylistic hallmark. Consider, for instance, that his main characters are composites of caricature and individuality, his humour relies on the devices of vaudeville and slapstick comedy, and his boarding school setting is reminiscent of Victorian times. Yet it is Korman's fusion of character, situation and setting which is primarily responsible for the success of his books. Nor is their appeal confined to an exclusive readership between the ages of ten and fifteen. Most readers of any age will be able to see aspects of themselves in many of the characters. And while children love these books, adults will approve their underlying philosophy, stressing conscientiousness, humanitarianism, and a kind of live-and-let live attitude toward others. Bruno and Boots may be the terror of the school, but they endear themselves not only to the headmaster's wife, but to "the Fish," the headmaster himself. They are not specimens of the proverbial bad boy type who will play hooky at the least provocation, for academic achievement and keeping up the standards of the school which they attend are always high on their list of priorities (indeed, a strong sense of school spirit at Macdonald Hall unites the young characters).