

FLOWCHARTED FICTION

Wild dog summer. Jean Mills. Nelson Canada, 1990. 141 pp., \$5.25 paper. ISBN 0-17-603052-2.

Some works of fiction flow effortlessly through plot twists and character revelation. *Wild dog summer*, on the other hand, does not seem to flow so much as it seems to have been flowcharted. It's as if the author drew a neat line with an arrow leading from plot exposition A to conflict B, and while it may have looked good on paper, as a novel it is leaden and unimaginative.

Wild dog summer is so earnest, so well-intentioned, that it feels somewhat ungracious to point out its plodding prose and inability to create a convincing story. The recent death of our heroine BJ's brother in a drunk-driving accident sets up the central conflict between BJ's family and Craig, the boy who was driving the car. The general sense of unease is underlined by talk of wild dogs appearing near the Southern Ontario community where the book is set.

But good intentions do not a work of literature make, and before long we come to realize that in *Wild dog summer*, teenage reality or character believability are repeatedly ignored to fit the flowcharted plan. Despite the story ostensibly being told from BJ's point of view, the voice is clearly that of an adult. Expressions such as "chumming around" are obviously not those of a modern thirteen-year old, even one with the improbable privilege of having her own column in the community newspaper.

Perhaps the most blatant examples of the sacrifice of verisimilitude to plot contrivance are BJ's conversations with Craig (whom her mother refers to as "that murdering kid" in an embarrassing turn of phrase). To anyone with even the faintest recollection of their teenage years, the idea of a seventeen-year-old boy being caught dead talking to a thirteen-year-old girl, let alone taking her seriously, is so unrealistic as to call into question anything else the author has to say about adolescent behaviour.

We don't really get to know BJ; we're told what she's like, but we don't feel it, which is a shame, because the broad outlines of what could be a very likeable character are there—they're just never shaded in. The other characters are similarly two-dimensional—the grieving, angry parents; the boy-crazy friend; the kindly newspaper editor.

In keeping with such a cardboard cast, the writing is awkward and so deadily earnest that we are left feeling detached from the events of the book, because there have been no real people to engage our emotions. And after being asked to accept an insultingly simplistic turnaround in BJ's mother's feelings toward Craig, as well as a climactic fire so contrived as to be embarrassing, the young adolescent reader will have little respect left for this book.

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