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NOT A PROBLEM: WILLIAM BELL'S *NO SIGNATURE*

No signature. William Bell. Doubleday Canada, 1992. 171 pp., paper. \$14.00. ISBN 0-385-25379-6.

When is a problem novel not a problem novel? That is an important question, because more and more authors of young adult literature are addressing some of the very complex problems and issues facing young people in our society. But then, many writers for children and young adults have always dealt with the problems facing young people. Francis Hodgson Burnett deals with the physical and emotional results of neglect in the classic *The secret garden*. And what is L.M. Montgomery's *Emily of New Moon* if not a book about the problems of an orphan adjusting to life in a home where she is not wanted and where emotional abuse is the order of the day? So what classifies a book as primarily a "problem" novel, rather than just a novel? Surely the answer lies in the focus of the book. If the characters are the focus, as they are with Burnett and Montgomery, and some of the authors writing today, then no matter how many problems are presented, the book lies outside that limited and limiting designation.

William Bell's latest novel is, therefore, *not* a "problem" novel. It deals with adult illiteracy, gays, racism, classism, abandonment of a child by his father and divorce, but it still manages to focus on the protagonist, the very real teenage narrator, Wick (Steven) Chandler.

Bell immediately engages the reader with his character by using first person narration. Furthermore, Bell sets the reader up for a series of very clever "replays" as Wick calls them, or flashbacks, that fill us in on what has happened in Wick's life up to the time of the narration. About half-way through the novel, when Wick has dealt with his past so that it no longer haunts him, the replays stop. This innovative technique effectively gives the reader insights into Wick's past without being distracting or irritating, despite the fact that there is a replay in almost every chapter for approximately half of the novel.

Wick himself is an utterly believable young adult. He is unsure, confused, angry, hurt and loving in all the right proportions. His anger with his father for abandoning him swiftly turns to rage at his mother when he learns that it was she who, by using a bitter blackmail, forced his father to go. His sense of betrayal

and his fear when he discovers that his best friend is gay slowly turns to shame as he realizes his own betrayal of that friend. He grows more flexible as he comes to terms with his father's illiteracy, a flexibility which changes his attitudes towards a number of things. Everything about Wick, from his tone, his actions, his attitudes, his diction to his feelings, is utterly convincing and realistic.

Through Wick, then, Bell presents the themes of the book: understanding, tolerance. This novel gives a penetrating glimpse of the vagaries and viciousness of human beings in their dealings with one another, but also of the compassion and understanding possible. It is a sharp book: challenging, demanding and intense, deeply moving without being sentimental in the least. *No signature* is, quite simply, a superb novel, with something to offer to any young person, yet also something important to say to adults.

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TO DREAM OF MAKING

The worker in sandalwood. Marjorie Pickthall. Illus. Frances Tyrrell. Lester Publishing Ltd., 1991. \$18.95 cloth. ISBN 1-895555-10-8 32pp; **The potter.** Jacolyn Caton. Illus. Stephen McCallum. Coteau Books, 1992. 36 pp., \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55050-037-6.

Opening *The worker in sandalwood* with its cabinet-like cover and end papers is entering a world poised between fiction and (arti)fact, dream and reality, coincidence, miracle and skepticism; the world of the sandalwood cabinet, as the first full-page illustration in this book so beautifully demonstrates, is both central to the story and shrouded by mysterious shadow. Hyacinthe, apprentice to a cruel and drunken wood-carver, Monsieur Oreillard, claims a young Christ visited him on Christmas Eve to comfort him and miraculously to finish carving the cabinet; whether he has merely dreamt this is never clear.

"The sun, not yet risen, set its first beams upon the delicate mist of frost afloat beneath the trees, and so all the world was aflame with splendid gold"—this line articulates with a rare subtlety the paradoxical meeting of divine and human, of static finity and infinite flux so pervasive in both text and illustration, and is perhaps the best indication of how well this new version serves Pickthall's old. Her story, first published in 1914 and collected in *Angel shoes and other stories* (1923) reads "sent his beams." That missing "n" (intentional or not) sparks my imagination; the elbow rubbing of "risen, set" pleads for a finer attention to (solid) frost embodied as moist and vaporous mist "afloat beneath"—this is language speaking of the oxymoronic nature of the ordinary, of the blurring of laws and states that compose everyday life in a world which just might brush up