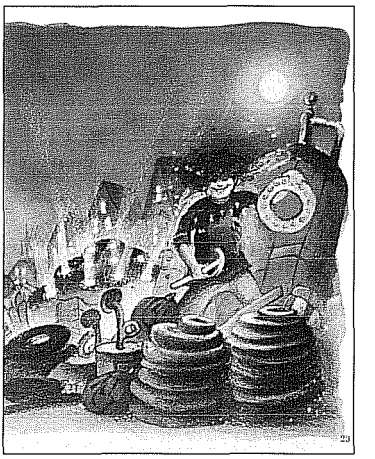
HARNESSING THE POWERS OF IMAGINATION

**Junk-pile Jennifer**. John F. Green. Illus. Maryann Kovalski. North Winds Press, 1991. 32 pp., $12.95 cloth. ISBN 0-590-73873-9; **Jess was the brave one**. Jean Little. Illus. Janet Wilson. Viking/Penguin Books, 1991. Unpag., $18.99 cloth. ISBN 0-670-83495-5.



John F. Green links imagination to ingenuity in *Junk-pile Jennifer*. Adults are virtually ineffective in this world of unabashed fantasy. They don't understand the possibilities, and run away or give up when confronted with problems. Children must improvise, using only their imaginations, to find solutions.

In Green's unpredictable world, the child rules. Jennifer loves junk, while her parents can't see any reason for her endless collecting. Rather than get rid of her junk, Jennifer moves into the backyard with it. Her actions help empower the child reader.

Green's characters have faced literary fantasies before, such as a dragon (*There's a dragon in my closet*) or one-eyed giant (*Alice and the birthday giant*). This time, he turns to modern life for the complication. Jennifer's television hero, Captain Astroblast, crashes into her junk-pile.

Unlike Green, Jean Little relies on adult authority in *Jess was the brave one*, her second picture-book. Her conflict-resolution storytelling leads children into the responsible adult world. Initially, Jess's physical bravery earns the praise in a series of comparisons that seem made from an adult perspective. As the title predicts, Claire finally proves herself. However, her conflict is not with adults, but with other, bigger children. As Jess's physical bravery conveniently evaporates, Claire invents fantasy characters to scare the bullies off.

Adults can feel comfortable with this somewhat contrived conflict-resolution. While the parents portrayed in the book don't appreciate Claire's imagination, parents reading it easily see her "weakness" as a more adult problem-solving tool. Even her imaginary protectors originate in bedtime stories about brave adults, told by her grandfather.

Janet Wilson's illustrations help readers stretch to believe stories alone will scare away older bullies. Her almost photographic eye for lighting creates atmosphere and a sense of reality. For example, the sisters watch a scary move, outlined as if by on-camera flash (cover). Wilson makes Claire's fantasy characters more effective by allowing them to appear hazily on the page, as in *Daniel's dog*.

In contrast, illustrator Maryann Kovalski uses cartoon images whose breezy colours match the exaggerated comedy of the text. Her intense night scenes make junk seem almost alluring. This is Green and Kovalski's second book together (*Alice and the birthday giant*, 1989). Her flexible style helps the reader suspend disbelief as the child characters develop solutions adults seem unable or unwilling to try.

While Little consciously deals with social and personal problems, Green sneaks in these levels of meaning as subtext.

Little assumes children want a place in the adult world; Green draws adults into the child's fantasy world instead.

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## AN EXIT OR; RESISTANCE, REBELLION AND LIFE

**The rose tree.** Mary Walkin Keane. Lester Publishing, 1992. $16.95 paper. ISBN 1-895555-15-9.

Mary Walkin Keane's first novel, *The rose tree*, is about a woman's desperate struggle to find meaning among the absurdities of growing up rural Irish Catholic. The book is a deeply felt, skillfully rendered statement of faith in the individual. It is also a very good story that is being marketed for adults, but is equally suitable for adolescents.

The story is told by Roisin McGovern, a middle-aged Dublin teacher who grew up in a tiny Irish seaside village. The life Roisin knew in the 1950s and 1960s is so unbearable that escape from the memories is imperative. Roisin is searching for an exit.

Roisin tells her story with humour, but many of her early experiences are unhappy. Her teacher and fellow pupils are merciless to "eejit" Ben Thompson, a shy, inarticulate, artistic boy whose father is rumoured to have committed suicide. The beautiful mother of Roisin is unremittingly unkind to her "platterpuss" daughter. The man of Roisin's heart is also cruel. She is still coming to terms with getting pregnant by him as a teenager and giving up the baby. Thus the story.

As Roisin's tragicomedy progresses, the anti-heroine herself is usually in the wrong. She's off "for a quick look at the loonies." Or she is shouting at "mammy's pet," Fionnuala Fitzgerald: "Fitzgerald's bread would kill a man dead,/Especially a man with a baldy head." Or she is expelled from school.

Yet each failure is compensated for by a spontaneous act of compassion. As when, a decade after taunting Fionnuala, Roisin comforts the now dying schoolmate tenderly. Indeed, Roisin is a most loving person: her whole story is an act of love. Furthermore, Roisin is actually heroic, because she finally does