

Review articles & reviews / Critiques et comptes rendus

EACH TIME HAS TO BE THE FIRST TIME

The materializing of Duncan McTavish. Heather Conkie. Based on the Sullivan Films adaptations of the novels of L.M. Montgomery. HarperCollins, 1991. (Road to Avonlea #4). 106 pp., \$4.50 paper. ISBN 0-00-647036-X; **Quarantine at Alexander Abraham's.** Fiona McHugh, from teleplay by Heather Conkie. HarperCollins, 1991. (Road to Avonlea #5). 124 pp., \$4.50 paper. ISBN 0-00-647038-6; **Conversions.** Gail Hamilton, from teleplay by Patricia Watson. HarperCollins, 1991. (Road to Avonlea #6). 123 pp., \$4.50 paper. ISBN 0-00-647041-6; **Aunt Abigail's beau.** Amy Jo Cooper, from teleplay by Heather Conkie. HarperCollins, 1991. (Road to Avonlea #7). 105 pp., \$4.50 paper. ISBN 0-00-647039-4; **Malcolm and the baby.** Heather Conkie, from teleplay by Heather Conkie. HarperCollins, 1991. (Road to Avonlea #8). 118 pp., \$4.50 paper. ISBN 0-00-647040-8; **Felicity's challenge.** Gail Hamilton, from teleplay by Lori Fleming. HarperCollins, 1991. (Road to Avonlea #9). 121 pp. \$4.50 paper. ISBN 0-00-647042-4.

I once watched a ten-year-old boy watch himself playing basketball. The teams were community league but the boy was something of a child star in his own little world. Used to knowing how he appeared to others from watching rushes, seeing himself in print, and catching his own commercials on prime time, this charming child leaped and slid and then waited exactly the right amount of time for the best stills. Whether or not he had the ball, he ran with all his might and then deliberately stumbled with vigour, his face and chest opening up to an imaginary camera at the right angle in case the director called for a close-up. Since his playing had nothing to do with getting the ball into the hoop, this particular manoeuvre brought the game nearly to a halt as his teammates looked on in bewilderment. But it had everything to do with how best to be viewed by the spectators, so he thought. His mother didn't think so; the next year he did karate.

The six novelettes I read in the Road to Avonlea series, numbers four through nine, seem to have the same problem. For an actor, getting the basketball in the hoop means you are constantly "doing something" to the other people on stage or on screen. For a storyteller, getting the basketball in the hoop means taking interesting characters through some sort of complication or change to a compelling resolution. The Avonlea books run into difficulty in both places.

Based on the award-winning TV series by Sullivan Films, each of these books opens with a description of setting faithful to the vision of a camera scanning the

details of the set. The characters are in place, waiting for the words "Take number ——," and the sound of the clapper. But the first paragraph of a good story can't start that way. The first sentence has to catch the reader's attention with a riveting idea or image, and, in the best stories, it also implies or foreshadows the main theme. In print, the accoutrements of daily life only rise above the banal if they somehow delineate a character the reader is beginning to care about.

If the book writer's first job is to somehow catch the reader in the first paragraph, a dispassionate camera scan is deadly. For example, storybook #5, "Quarantine at Alexander Abraham's" opens with a scene in which Sara and Aunt Olivia are standing in the general store choosing fabric for a dress, a scene which skews the focus to a detail which has no eventual significance to the story. Yet when the writer cleverly ties the opening fabric scene into the ending of the story, the reader tends to be grateful for this false sense of balance. If the scene was extraneous to the plot in the first place it should have been deleted entirely. The art of writing story from teleplay is not in covering everything the camera saw, but in creating action scenes, whether psychological or physical.

Teleplays are rooted in action; the very nature of performance demands that conflict be shown by "doing" activities. Yet, oddly enough, the storybooks tend to lapse into actionless telling and describing of events way off in the distance, say the TV set in the corner. And all too frequently when action occurs, it dilutes itself by not advancing the particular plot of the story.

In the successful performance, whether stage or screen, the actor amalgamates his/her own personality with the script character to create a believable human being; however, in the storybook versions we have here, the writers have condensed this complexity into stereotype. Some authors try to reproduce the screen character entirely, and in doing so, they gloss over the telling points of characterization which produce tension and movement within a story. In every case the situation (plot) is more interesting than the characters, who think, speak and move from one cliché to the next. #7, "Aunt Abigail's beau," reads like a training manual for fledgling romance novel readers. Take note, Harlequin.

Of the six storybooks I read, #4, "The materializing of Duncan McTavish" and #8, "Malcolm and the baby" contain the best-developed characters and are by far the most enjoyable reading. Is it coincidence that in both cases the teleplay and the storybook were written by the same person? I think not. In creating the successful original, the author had first created people who lived in her mind, so re-telling the story did not flatten the characters into caricature quite as much as in the other storybooks.

Series writers seem to feel obligated to give tons of background material, a convention of that medium, which contributes vastly to a static quality. It's as though somebody gave them a list of facts about each character which must be dispensed to the reader before page five. Even worse, sometimes the writer seems to think, "Rachel Lynde? Oh well, of course you all know who she is, but

if you don't, she's the sort of person that did this and such three weeks ago (or three novelettes ago)." But most appalling, some writers advertise future additions to the series (this happens twice in #4) by alluding to events yet to come in a jarring sort of flash forward not to be confused with its powerful cousin, foreshadowing.

Each story needs to be written as though it were the only one ever—none before it, none to come—with all explanatory material precisely selected for those details which build plot and characterization. Especially blighted with this flaw, Storybook #6, "Conversions," also contains a plethora of writer's gaffes from verb tense errors, to excessive use of passive voice, through to plain old awkward constructions, all heaped on top of a story-line ill-suited to pre-adolescent interests.

With overwhelming frequency, teleplays employ the convention of omniscient narrator. But in the Avonlea storybooks this voice doesn't work well. It's too heavy, too knowing. What if the stories had been told entirely through the pre-pubescent eyes of Sara and Felicity? At least we'd have the confusions of youth and inexperience, which, after all, is a greater part of the charm of the TV series. As it is, with some exceptions, the storybooks are insufferably predictable.

While the Road to Avonlea writers can profit from the discipline of other games, yet they must figure out what rules work for the short novel. Better look up a good karate teacher—master the discipline of the short story; in other words, no cameras or sound crew, no first and second Assistant Directors to keep things going, and above all, no TV screen to show you your characters. Truly "Each time has to be the first time" is more than an actor's rule; it's a storyteller's rule too.

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THE HEIGHTS ARE GLORIOUS, BUT NOT FOR THE FAINT-HEARTED

The keeper of the Isis light. Monica Hughes. Octopus, 1991. 136 pp., \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-7497-0405-5; **The guardian of Isis.** Monica Hughes. Octopus, 1992. 140 pp., \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-7497-0214-1; **The Isis pedlar.** Monica Hughes. Octopus, 1991. 121 pp., \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-7497-0215-X.

Monica Hughes's publishers call it the Isis trilogy, but of the three books recently re-issued more than ten years after their first publication, only *The keeper of the Isis light* is a truly self-contained story. In this book the protagonist is Olwen, the Earth girl physically altered by her robot, Guardian, to protect her from the dangers of living on the high-radiation world of Isis. Her resulting reptilian appearance, disguised for her first encounters with a colonizing expedition from Earth, eventually disgusts Mark London, one of the settlers.