centres the novel on a *group* of ten young people who must stick together to survive the prison-camp environment of their urban "designated area," to which they expect to be confined for life as the completely dispossessed unemployed. Thus the reader gets to know them as a group first, although individual distinguishing characteristics come through very quickly. However, this concentration on group rather than individual has a distancing effect, an unusual and perhaps initially disturbing experience for readers.

This effect is somewhat ameliorated by Hughes's use of a first-person narrator. Through Lisse's eyes, we draw closer to the other characters in the group, although we do not really get to know the narrator well until towards the end of the novel as she is as much a reporter of both events and characters as she is a character herself. This technique, unusual as it may be, is totally appropriate for the kind of world Hughes has created in this novel. It also emphasizes some themes such as the importance of co-operation of all kinds, the dangers of technology out of control, the centrality of hope to survival. Through the individuals in the group, and their reactions to their situation and experiences, the reader draws very close to both the reality and the emotional effect of the world Hughes is portraying in the novel. And herein lies the power of this disturbing, provocative and ultimately fascinating work.

J.R. Wytenbroek *is an instructor of English and Interdisciplinary Studies at Malaspina College, Nanaimo, B.C. She teaches and has published papers on children's literature, particularly young adult science fiction and fantasy.*

EXPLORING POSSIBLE FRONTIERS

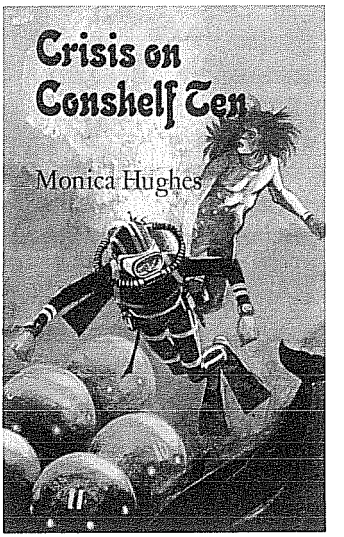
Crisis on Conshelf Ten. Monica Hughes. Mammoth, (1977) 1991. 144 pp., $4.95 paper. ISBN 0-7497-0894-8; **Earthdark**. Monica Hughes. Mammoth, (1977) 1991. 122 pp., $4.95 paper. ISBN 0-7497-0404-7.

What do living under the ocean and on the Moon have in common? Weightlessness. And they are both frontiers that science has been exploring for some years.

This two-book series begins in *Crisis on Conshelf Ten* as fifteen-year-old Kepler, the first child born on Moon, takes his first trip to the earth with his father, Moon's governor. When he can't adapt to the earth's terrible gravity, Kepler (named after a Moon crater) is given the opportunity to stay with his relatives on Conshelf Ten, an experimental community under the ocean. He learns to scuba dive from his cousin's friend Hilary, a red-headed beauty with an attitude problem, and off they go while his father negotiates, on the corrupt and polluted earth, for full partner status for Moon at the United Nations.

Earthdark is a more evenly-developed story. Kepler finds it hard to re-enter Moon's rather Zen environment of highly-focused work and simple living after his adventures on earth. He now finds his pre-selected betrothed, Ann, as controlled and uninteresting as the plastic alloy buildings—and he looks for a

little excitement.



Each book has a main plot which shows Kepler getting himself in and out of trouble, and a sub-plot of innocent romance. Through her plots, Hughes offers solutions to earth's ecological problems and slips her readers a host of scientific facts, including, for example, the names of moon craters and how light works in a vacuum. She orients her readers to these worlds with familiar pictures like beds of kelp that become forests on the ocean floor, and the crater where the Russians landed on the moon in 1966. However, *Crisis on Conshelf Ten*, in particular, seems to have been written more to explore technology and to resolve ecology issues than to watch a character change through his experiences.

Some of Kepler's observations create a real and delightful world, particularly in *Crisis on Conshelf Ten*. Here, Kepler takes his first exploration trip under the sea:

> Jon turned off the light. For a moment darkness crowded in and I put out my hand to steady myself against a rock. Then my eyes adjusted and slowly I became aware that the quality of the light was changing, that far overhead, in that other world, the sun was rising on a new day.

On the other hand, dialogue often slips out of character, and sometimes it becomes simply a vehicle for information. This is a greater problem in *Crisis on Conshelf Ten*. Here, for example, Kepler remembers a conversation with his cousin:

> What had Jon said? 'The continental shelves almost equal in area to the whole of Africa, and just one acre of properly prepared ground can produce a harvest of fifteen thousand pounds of shellfish protein. You can raise four thousand tons of seaweed per square mile.' No need for famine now.

Pretty heady words for a fifteen-year-old.

Perhaps in *Earthdark* Hughes has less information she wants to pass on—in the first book she notes that the story is based on ongoing experiments and seriously discussed possibility—or perhaps it is just Hughes's surer hand two years later, but dialogue generally seems more true to character. By this second book also, Hughes takes a stronger stand on equality of the sexes.

Crisis on Conshelf Ten has the uneven plot of more pulpy science fiction, which lurches from hopeless dilemma to life-threatening crisis rather than building through character and motivation. At the end, while the "bad guys" listen to reason at the very last possible breathless moment, and Kepler notes that he came as a boy and leaves as a man, it's a somewhat unconvincing wrap-up.

In *Earthdark*, the plot builds, each step developing out of the need to get to

the bottom of a larger issue that drives the whole plot. Unfortunately, there is no character building of anyone but Kepler, with a reasonable sketching in of Ann towards the end. In *Crisis on Conshelf Ten* Hughes gives us a more rounded cast of characters that are at least sketched in—Aunty Janet took two years to hook a rug to soften her family's sterile living unit.

On the whole, Hughes builds solid worlds in both these books, particularly through details noted in passing about the food, clothing, routines, safety precautions and other matters that bring the places to life. The ideas in both novels are intriguing, and the plots move along well enough that they are fun and exciting to read. The second novel, *Earthdark*, definitely shows a more developed writing ability. However, each book is only just over a hundred pages, and it's worth reading them together.

Gwen Davies *is a consultant and adult educator in clear language and design. She is a grandmother, aunt and active community member, and also writes young adult and adult fiction.*

THE ALIEN WITHIN

The golden Aquarians. Monica Hughes. HarperCollins, 1994. 192 pp., $16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-00224253-2.

Monica Hughes has created another monster in her most recent futuristic work, and, as is her wont, this creature is all the more frightening because he is human. Colonel Angus Elliott, a realistic amalgam of George Patton, Kurtz and Dr Strangelove, is the *non pareil* of Terraformers, a "planet-maker" who transforms planets into "habitable" environments and in the process destroys whatever life forms exist thereon.

The Colonel hasn't been home for years, home being Lethbridge, Alberta, where his teenage son, Walter, lives with the Colonel's caring sister, Gloria. One day Walter gets the call from his father, whom he hasn't seen for years, and is transported to the planet Aqua to join him in order that he might be made into a man. In short, the Colonel wants to remake his poetry-loving, piano-playing sissy son in the same way that he remakes planets. Happily, appearances to the contrary, Walter is made of stronger stuff than his father thinks. Despite being physically beaten by the Colonel (and by his school-mates), his inherent kindness, good sense, and concern for life wins out in the end. Along with his female companion Solveig, whose mother is the sympathetic and caring doctor on Aqua, Walter, in the face