CAPITALIZING ON THE DRAMA OF CONVENTIONS

The race. Carol Matas. HarperCollins, 1991. 155 pp., $16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-00-223743-1.

It's a clever structural device, and one that could have easily backfired in less-skilled hands. Carol Matas opens *The race*, her compulsively readable story of fourteen-year-old Ali Green, as Ali's plane touches down in Calgary for the first day of a Liberal leadership convention. The novel wraps up, but for a brief epilogue, four days later as the convention concludes its business—having narrowly elected Ali's mother as leader. The action—and there's lot of it—is fast-paced and compelling. Matas neatly capitalizes on the built-in tension and momentum of a high-powered competition for political power. She manages also to inform her readers, ever so casually and unobtrusively, about the intricacies of the Canadian political process. These details could have hijacked the narrative or overwhelmed Ali's character; they don't. *The race* could have been yet another classroom lesson unimaginatively disguised as a novel; it isn't.

There is danger, too, in compressing a novel's action into a mere four days: characters can experience, learn, and mature only so much in a long weekend. Matas does not sacrifice verisimilitude, however, or falter in her dead-on treatment of fourteen-year-old concerns (how to deal with a "zit" that "will soon rival the Rockies in size;" how to remain cool while falling in love for the first time). Ali comes to a few new realizations in the course of the novel, but not unconvincingly: she may find politics a little more interesting by the end of the novel, but not nearly so involving as the son of her mother's chief rival.

Ali's one moment of rapid, painful maturation comes as she realizes, sadly, that "[e]verything used to seem so clear, so black and white. It doesn't anymore" (116). Matas creates a world shaped largely by wealth and influence, and she is relentless in her treatment of the news media: "This is something I'm learning about the media," Ali says. "They can really slant a story the way they want" (55). While this could be little more than a dose of political cynicism, 1990s style, Matas is careful to provide her audience with a means of defense: read critically and carefully. (This applies even to her own text. Ali's first-person narrative, with its characteristically teenage naïvete and self-absorption, is as unreliable as any journalist's report.) And although Ali comes to understand that life really is about making choices—the central event of the novel forces her to wrestle with some pretty complex ethical issues—Matas highlights the empowering edge of that weighty responsibility: individuals *have* choices. That means that individuals, even fourteen-year-old girls who are slightly insecure, can make a difference. And that they should.

Marie Campbell *is Managing Editor and Editor of Books for Young People at* Quill and quire *magazine. She recently completed a Master's thesis on L.M. Montgomery at the University of Guelph.*