maintain strict control over her eating patterns. However, though it is undoubtedly important to demonstrate how unglamorous a condition bulimia is, Carson deviates from the otherwise tightly unified text in a segment about Amanda's encounter with a depraved individual in a dark alley. Amanda describes how her attacker passes child pornography under a public bathroom door after she locks him out. This section seems strangely out of place, introducing in much too cursory a fashion a rather sordid sub-plot.

With the exception of her questionable depiction of both Amanda's parents and the medical profession as utterly obtuse, Carson very cleverly weaves all of the psychological and sociological contributing factors of bulimia into the monologue without having it sound clinical or artificial. In so doing, she gently opens the doors of self-recognition for those audience members who may themselves be suffering from a comparable disorder.

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Unmasking the Bully and other Schoolyard Games

I met a Bully on the Hill. Martha Brooks and Maureen Hunter. Scirocco Drama, J. Gordon Shillingford Publishing Inc., 1995. 52 pp., $9.95 paper. ISBN 0-896239-02-1. ***Not So Dumb: Four Plays for Young People.*** John Lazarus. Coach House Press, 1993. 205 pp. $16.95 paper. ISBN 0-88910-453-0.

When eight-year-old J.J., the new kid at school, denies she is being tormented by Raymond the schoolyard bully, her perceptive comrade-in-arms, David, challenges her frightened silence with this well-observed harasser's catalogue:

> 'Right—nothing. Nothing Number One: he calls you names. Nothing Number Two: he terrorizes you. Nothing Number Three: he makes you sick at your stomach so you never want to come to school. Am I getting close? Nothing Number Four: he extorts money from you.' (30)

Martha Brooks and Maureen Hunter's play *I met a Bully on the Hill,* is a perceptive and compassionate exploration of the archetypal conflict between the playground bully and his quarry. First produced by Prairie Theatre Exchange in Winnipeg as part of its 1986-87 school tour, the socially realistic one-act play directly reflects the culture and concerns of its elementary school audiences; adults are on the periphery in this depiction of a child's world.

At some point most young children find themselves in J.J.'s shoes. With a light, humorous hand, *I met a Bully on the Hill* offers several practical solutions to bullying. Brooks's and Hunter's characters are complex and sympathetically drawn. As the play's gruff nine-year-old antagonist with a blood sense for his peers' Achilles tendons, Raymond presents a manipulative, angry exterior which masks a frightened child; he lives in mortal terror of the dark and of his sadistic older sister. The playwrights have created an engaging triumvirate of co-conspirators who join forces to defuse Raymond's destructive offensives: "Jonquil

Josephine," the bright, sensitive, and gregarious new kid who dons her namesake daffodil yellow as a talisman; David, the sardonic eight-year-old musician who spouts jazz trivia and idolizes Wynton Marsalis; and Karla, the tough girl with the warm heart, who outstrips her contemporaries in strength and stature.

When J.J. arrives at urban Buena Vista School fresh from an idyllic upbringing in the country, she is ripe for Raymond's picking: small for her age, though well-endowed with pluck and a strong moral sense, she is inclined to think the best of people; having lost her father at a young age, she keenly misses her grandfather's warmth and wisdom and the wonders of the pastoral world she has had to leave behind. When Raymond heartlessly squashes her prized Swallowtail caterpillar, J.J. chastises the big kid and then kicks him in the shins, thereby unleashing his ire. Like the proverbial ogre under the bridge, Raymond haunts the hill between the school and J.J.'s new house, charging the little girl a heavy toll payable in quarters, homework rendered, and tears. When David and Karla (who have bested Raymond in the past with brain and brawn respectively) uncover J.J.'s plight, they pool their resources to knock the wind out of his sails. What begins with a harmless prank leads to harsher punishment. Despite J.J.'s protestations that Raymond is "just a little kid" (47), Karla and David sabotage the bully and leave him hand-cuffed to the bridge as night falls. Cornered, Raymond finally lets his mask slip: "Don't leave me here. Please! Don't go. Okay? (*Fights tears.*) I'm scared. I mean I'm really scared of the dark. J.J." (45)

It is J.J.'s compassion (spurred on by her grandfather's wise words) which ultimately transforms Raymond from tormentor into "nothing but a pack of playing-cards." Though kindness rather than cruelty prevails, *I met a Bully on the Hill* is neither preachy nor condescending to its young audience; Brooks and Hunter demonstrate how each child must find his/her own means of dealing with the bully. In the play's realistic resolution, Raymond is not magically transformed into an ally, merely reduced to what he really is, an unhappy nine-year-old who knows when he has been beaten.

Bullies in a variety of guises also figure on- and off-stage in John Lazarus's engaging dramatic quartet *Not So Dumb — Four Plays for Young People*. *Schoolyard Games*, *Not So Dumb*, *Night Light*, and *Secrets* depict several phases in the uneasy metamorphosis of four young protagonists from children into teenagers, as they grapple with bullies, confront childhood fears, and dodge exclusive cliques along the ever-evolving schoolyard gauntlet. Written between 1981 and 1992 for performance by Vancouver's highly acclaimed Green Thumb Theatre for Young People, the published texts also include an historically rich and insightful introduction by Canadian playwright Dennis Foon, who in his role as founding artistic director and dramaturge at Green Thumb Theatre and colleague to Lazarus directed the premiere productions of the first three theatrical works.

Inspired by the travails of his own young daughters, in *Schoolyard Games* Lazarus explores the intricate triangular dynamics between ten-year-old Eleanor, her eight-year-old sister Binnie, and their nine-year-old friend Susan. The playground jungle-gym around which the three girls alternately frolic and collide serves as an apt metaphor for the psychological teeter-totter which the trio energetically ride. With the quicksilver speed of a round of "Double Dutch" the play shifts from harmony to discord and back again. As the self-centred, domi-

neering older sister anxious to shake her bouncy younger sibling, Eleanor dreams of a place on the school gymnastics team, an entrée to the older crowd, and boys. Her precocious little sister, Binnie, combines a quirky sense of humour and almost irrepressible high spirits with an uncanny knack for the profound observation. It is Binnie who so aptly defines the unwritten playground code to which she as the littlest is especially vulnerable as "the law of the jungle gym" (32). Susan, who struggles to play amicably with both sisters, ultimately serves as a balancing device between them. All three girls demonstrate a fundamental need to be accepted, especially by the big kids.

When Eleanor gets the chance to accompany the gym team to watch the "Provincials" tournament, she selfishly decides to exclude both younger girls from the outing. Like a "fairweather friend," she exploits Susan's admiration and shuns her kid sister while playing the role of know-it-all gymnastics tutor. When her pupil democratically tries to include Binnie in the proceedings, Eleanor's ensuing anger precipitates injury for Susan and misery for all three. In the end Susan and Binnie choose clemency rather than revenge for the oldest girl's transgressions. Though Lazarus only hints at the sources of Eleanor's antagonism in *Schoolyard Games*, he has certainly captured the exclusive "twosey" bully which I still recall with trepidation from my own childhood.

In his Chalmers and Jessie award-winning play, *Not So Dumb*, Lazarus explores a more insidious kind of collective bullying which children (and indeed adults) face when they differ from the crowd: social ostracism by one's peers. Two years older but just as spunky, Binnie reappears with her ten-year-old compatriot Rocky in Lazarus's imaginative exploration of the trials of the learning-disabled child. The dramatist accepted a commission to write the play from the Vancouver Association for Children and Adults with Learning Disabilities when he discovered that his bubbly eight-year-old heroine from *Schoolyard Games* embodied many of the traits of the classic dyslexic. Drawing on his own troubled childhood experiences as the gifted class "nerd," the playwright created Victor, the earnest, exceptionally bright and lonely classroom day monitor as both a foil and an unlikely kindred spirit for the alienated duo, Binnie and Rocky.

When Binnie and Rocky's beloved reading teacher, Mrs. Smith, also a one-time "L.D." (73), fails to show up for their bi-weekly tutorial, the curious youngsters decide to pillage her filing cabinet in search of their own confidential assessments. Hobbled by their dyslexia and dysgraphia however, neither child can decipher her comments. When Victor catches them red-handed, the trio conflict, compare notes on the relative perils of not fitting in, and ultimately coconspire to read and replace the files. In the process, Lazarus turns the concept of disability on its head, thereby revealing the special gifts inherent in all three children: Rocky's sharp intelligence, as evidenced by his swift decoding of the colour filing system, and his mechanical deftness in fixing Victor's tape-recorder; the cryptic wonder of Binnie's "mirror writing" — a process which baffles Victor when he tries his hand at it; and Victor's talents as literary interpreter and sleuth. *Not So Dumb* not only sheds light on the misunderstood world of the exceptional child, but it demonstrates to its young audiences that kinship can blossom in the most unexpected places.

In *Night Light*, Lazarus blends social realism with fantasy in his delightful

and insightful look at real and imaginary bullies. While ten-year-old Victor grapples by day with Farley, the soccer-ball-wielding, tough-talking schoolyard underachiever, his little sister Tara wrestles at bedtime with a terrifying reptilian, one-eyed monster, who emerges from the shadows of her dresser drawers. Like J.J. in *I met a Bully on the Hill*, Victor finds himself saddled with Farley's homework as a means to stave off the bully's physical onslaughts. Lazarus too lets Farley's mask slip in order to illuminate what makes him tick: the bully's worst fear, as Victor and Tara eventually discover, is failing to live up to the high academic standards set by his engineer father. Little Tara's night visitations are preceded by nightmarish images of "needles and threads" (118): their father has just been admitted to hospital for a routine hernia operation. With some comical empirical testing prompted by a book on children's fears, both Victor and Tara ultimately befriend their harassers. Armed with new insights into Farley's motivation, Victor evolves from scapegoat into amicable, if rigorous, tutor. When Tara realizes that her "creature" has feelings too, she takes him under her wing, agrees to draw his portrait, and begins to give him English lessons. Lazarus makes marvellous comic use of dramatic irony in his depiction of the scary monster who just wants to be loved. In *Night Light* (which also won a Jessie Award), neither Farley nor "Goodge" — as the Green Thumb monster was fondly dubbed — are what they appear to be. "Bullies," as Lazarus compassionately demonstrates, "are more scared than anybody" (131).

Ostracism, non-conformity and peer pressure are central issues in *Secrets*, the final play in the *Not So Dumb* anthology. The playgrounds, teasing, and childhood banter of Lazarus's earlier pieces are replaced with highschool parties, rumours, and rock music. Binnie, Rocky, Victor, and Susan return to the stage as worldly teenagers grappling with questions of sexuality, honesty, fidelity, and self-esteem. The play chronicles the disintegration of the teenage romance between childhood pals Binnie and Rocky, the unlikely but promising conjunction of Victor and Susan, and a step towards self-understanding for all four. *Secrets* is arguably the most dramatically complex in Lazarus's quartet: it uses dovetailed plots, theatrical asides, doubled roles, and, expressionistic masks which serve to differentiate his non-conformist protagonists from the antagonistic, trendy in-crowd who dominate the social scene.

Secrets, as Lazarus's resonant title suggests, is a play about hidden truths. Masked or not, in this complicated adolescent theatrical realm nobody is quite what he/she seems to be. Against the back-drop of a party at Victor's house, Victor, Susan, Binnie and Rocky reveal their innermost selves — warts and all — to the audience and eventually to each other. Both Victor and Susan are victims of the teenage rumour-mill: he is presumed to be gay; she has been labelled sexually promiscuous; both are actually virgins. Left to their own devices to talk and dance in Tara's bedroom, the two discover a genuine mutual attraction. Rocky and Binnie, on the other hand, have been sexually active together for some time. Not ready for monogamous commitment but afraid to hurt Binnie, Rocky has concealed a number of tacit sexual encounters from his doting, self-critical partner. When she finally discovers his infidelities, Binnie musters the necessary confidence to break up the relationship. "If we're gonna learn anything from this god-awful night," she confides later to Susan, "it's forget what they *say*. It's the

look in his eyes" (201). The first step towards happiness is this confusing adolescent world, Lazarus implies in *Secrets*, is to look beneath the surface when you choose your friends; the second is to have the courage to make your own decisions. As Susan succinctly puts it at the play's conclusion, "... let the cretins think whatever they want" (205).

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Reviews That Make Good Reading

The Squeeze-More-Inn. Elizabeth Ferber. Scholastic, 1995. 32 pp., $5.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-24444-2. ***Flood Fish.*** Robin Eversole Illus. Sheldon Greenberg. Crown, 1995. Unpag., $20.00 cloth. ISBN 0 517 59705-5. ***Zebo and the Dirty Planet.*** Kim Fernandes. Annick. 1991. $14.95., cloth. ISBN 1-55037-183-5. ***The Magic Ear.*** Laura Langston. Illus. Victor Bosson. Orca Books, 1995. Unpag., $14.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55143-035-5. ***Ten Mondays for Lots of Boxes.*** Sue Ann Alderson. Illus. Caddie T'Kenye. Ronsdale Press, 1995. Unpag. ISBN 0-921870 32-9. ***Is it OK If This Monster Stays for Lunch?*** Martyn Godfrey. Illus. Susan Wilkinson. Oxford University Press, 1992. Unpag., $7.95, paper. ISBN. 0-19-540882-9. ***Little Wynne's Giggly Thing.*** Laurel Dee Gugler. Illus. Russ Willms. Annick, 1995. Unpag., $5.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-406-0.

The following reviews are special. They are composed by people training to be teachers: people who will be responsible for choosing books for their own classrooms — for the children they will be teaching.

What the reviewers may lack in experience, they make up in expertise. They've spent an academic term preparing to write these critiques. As students in the "Access to Literacies" class I taught in the fall of 1995 in Faculty of Education at the University of New Brunswick, the reviewers learned both how to read children's books and how to read reviews. That's the knowledge they bring to their writing.

Within the picture book section of the course, the students examined a wide variety of books for children, ranging from the elegantly simple *The Cat on the Mat* by Brian Wildsmith (Oxford) to the philosophically complex *Zoom Upstream* by Tim Wynne-Jones with illustrations by Ken Nutt (Groundwood). The students acquired their critical language both through class discussions and through careful attention to several excellent theoretical resource guides, all published by The Thimble Press: *Tell Me: Children Reading, and Talk* by Aidan Chambers; *Looking at Pictures in Picturebooks* by Jane Doonan; and *How Texts Teach What Readers Learn* by Margaret Meek.

In a formal exercise I set, called "Access to Information," the students assess reviews of the kind published in guides — for parents and/or teachers — to children's books. They looked at books designed particularly to help teachers choose books for their classrooms: among them were *Choosing Children's Books*