Canadian publishing scene today.

***Robin Baird Lewis**, an established children's book illustrator (**Red is Best**, et al.), innoculates herself regularly with heavy doses of P.G. Wodehouse and Hunter S. Thompson.*

Learning to Swim

Stella, Star of the Sea. Marie Louise Gay. Groundwood/Douglas and McIntyre, 1999. 32 pp. $15.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-337-4.

This beautiful book is discovered, like one perfect shell, with a shock of pleasure. Deceptively simple prose and sly humour spin a timeless tale of siblings at the seashore. Young or old, readers have all been a Stella trying to share something loved with someone loved; or a Sam, overwhelmed by the world's complexity.

The text's comforting message is both concrete and metaphorical. Stella says star(fish) fell from the sky; when Sam points out they might have drowned, Stella explains "they learned to swim." Sam will follow suit, in the water and in life.

Whimsical illustrations employ a horizon line which suggests the immensity of the world viewed from a child's perspective. Shimmering colours hold the promise of a perfect summer's day.

***Troon Harrison** teaches creative writing and is the author of eight picture books and a YA novel.*

Harper Winslow's Inspirational Writing

A Fly Named Alfred. Don Trembath. Orca, 1997. 144 pp. $7.95 paper. ISBN 1-55143-083-5. ***A Beautiful Place on Yonge Street***. Don Trembath. Orca, 1998. 192 pp. $7.95 paper. ISBN 1-55143-121-1.

"Learn from me. Let my story inspire you": A pompous young writer speaks these words in Don Trembath's newest novel, *A Beautiful Place on Yonge Street*.

While the narrator, the sardonic Harper Winslow, rolls his eyes at the orator, the reader can apply these words to Harper as he tells his story in this and the preceding novel, *A Fly Named Alfred*, the second and third novel in a trilogy recounting the misadventures of the adolescent hero. At first glance, Harper Winslow is hardly a disenfranchised youth. He is a white, upper-middle-class male from the outskirts of Edmonton. His father is a doctor and town councillor, while his mother runs a clothing boutique. Yet, between the lines, the often-sarcastic Harper reveals a different story altogether. Neglected by his ambitious parents, threatened by his schoolmates, plagued with low self-esteem, Harper's only friend is a man who behaves strangely, particularly when he has not been taking his medication (*Fly* 127). Harper is alienated, unable to communicate with his parents or peers. He does find a voice and a way of communicating, however, most evident in the narration of his own story. By giving Harper the gift of writing, Trembath overturns the stories of disconnection with tales of empowerment and connection. An endearing character, Harper Winslow battles his problems and actively creates his own identity by writing.

These two novels reveal stories of abuse indirectly through the sarcastic humour of the hero. That Harper might have little self-esteem is hardly surprising given the relationship with his parents. While confronting overt abuse and threats on the schoolyard, Harper faces more insidious threats at home in the form of neglect and verbal abuse: "My mom and dad were out — surprise, surprise — so I was home alone" (*Fly* 9). His sarcasm allows the reader to see what Harper will not reveal directly: the ongoing nature of his aloneness. Harper faces his parents' indifference when he appears with a bloody nose from an altercation: "Dad told me to watch where I'm going, and Mom told me to get the 'Stain-Away' because I was wearing a new white T-shirt" (*Fly* 35). Just as detrimental to this adolescent's sense of self is the continuous verbal criticism from his father: "'I'm pretty skinny,' Harper explains, 'so Dad says, everyday'" (*Fly* 27). Likewise, Harper is the butt of his father's jokes: "He told everyone we saw over the holidays that I had shaved for the first time in my life, and that I would do it again next Christmas whether I needed to or not" (*Beautiful* 47). Too busy with her own concerns to pay heed to her son, his mother is no better. Nor does he find refuge in his much-older siblings. Harper retells his brother's version of their past: "I remember when I was a kid, and you were a teenager, and you used to pound the crap out of me all the time" (*Beautiful* 117). In *A Fly*, a schoolmate, Tommy, forcibly enlists Harper to uncover the real identity of "Alfred," the author of the column, "Fly on the Wall," in the school newspaper. Of course, Alfred is Harper. With serious threats and no easy resolution — if Harper reveals his authorship then he will also face punishment as Alfred — this novel confronts issues of abuse head on by showing that Tommy is motivated to antagonize by his parents' misguided responses to him. Harper feels sympathy for Tommy, realizing that the youth is afraid of his own father.

Because Harper is telling his own story, he avoids direct confronta-

tion with pain through his humour and sarcasm. However, the undertone of abuse illuminates the positive connections that Harper's writing creates. The central focus for the narrative action in *A Fly*, Harper's column brings him to an understanding of, and perhaps a friendship with, Tommy. In *A Beautiful Place*, Harper meets his first love, Sunny, at a youth writer's camp, showing that writing is a site of connection. Indeed, Harper's writing teacher, in *A Fly*, encourages Harper to write notes to his father to facilitate communication. Likewise, in *A Beautiful Place*, Harper explains that "writing is the one thing that keeps me connected to my parents" (10).

Moreover, writing is a way of understanding and creating one's identity, both novels suggest. Harper realizes that he has been hiding behind the identity of Alfred in *A Fly*, and the novel ends with his real identity about to be revealed. In *A Beautiful Place*, Harper's relationship with Sunny, facilitated by his writing, leads to better relationships with his family, highlighting this adolescent's continual progression. In both novels, the most powerful signifier of Harper's developing identity is that he is his own narrator. At one point in *A Fly*, Harper exclaims, "I'm no author, believe me" (90). This metafictional moment, one of many, is ironic. Harper is indeed the author, of his own story, and, ultimately, of his own life — an empowering message for us all.

Trembath leaves the conflicts mainly unresolved, the questions unanswered: will students guess Alfred's identity? Will Sunny and Harper's relationship survive separation? This lack of resolution underscores the vitality of these two novels. They attempt not to solve but to negotiate conflict. Harper's tales are inspirational learning tools. Readers might learn the valuable lesson with Harper: one can handle, but not necessarily solve, life's problems. Of course, by refusing to invoke closure, Trembath also encourages the reader to anticipate the next adventures of this tragicomic hero. And we do.

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Teen Pain: Relationships and Growing Up

One Thing That's True. Cheryl Foggo. Kids Can, 1997. 128 pp. $16.95. ISBN 1-55074-411-9. ***Carving My Name***. Mary-Kate McDonald. Thistledown, 1998. 137 pp. ISBN 1-895449-83-9.

It's hard enough to relate to teenagers once one has reached adulthood, let alone write convincingly from a teenager's perspective. Yet both Mary-Kate