The Japanese-Canadian Experience in World War II

War of the Eagles. Eric Walters. Orca, 1998. 224 pp. $15.95 cloth, $8.95 paper.
ISBN 1-55143-118-1, 1-55143-099-1.

The historical backdrop for Eric Walters's novel *War of the Eagles* is World
War II, and Walters uses that context to explore issues of racism, national-
ism, cultural diversity, and identity. Set in the Prince Rupert area in BC, the
novel focuses on the friendship between two boys: one, Tadashi, of Japa-
nese descent, and the narrator, Jed, of Tsimshian and English descent. The
novel provides a poignant and powerful rendering of the events leading up
to the internment and evacuation of Japanese-Canadians. Walters is deal-
ing with sensitive material here, and for the most part, I think he is success-
ful in creating a novel that illustrates to young readers the painful experi-
ence of internment, as well the extent to which racism is embedded in no-
tions of Canadian nationality.

   One of the things that worries me a bit about this book is the rather
tricky territory on which Walters treads when he is probing the issue of
cultural difference. The book does, without question, perform the important
work of pointing out that diverse cultural practices need to be respected, but
at times it verges on oversimplifying those practices in ways that might
perpetuate rather than challenge stereotypes.

   It is the complexity of Jed's character development, and the ways in
which the social issues in the novel are played out through that develop-
ment, that in the final analysis make this novel worth reading. Jed's rejec-
tion of his mother's Tsimshian identity in favour of his father's English
heritage indicates his desire to be a member of the ethnic majority, and to
avoid the sting of the racial slurs that are sometimes hurled at him. His own
brief slip into shouting racial slurs against the Japanese-Canadian boy,
Toshio, indicates how confused Jed is about racial identity, and demon-
strates how easily even those with the best of intentions, even Jed, whose
best friend is of Japanese descent, can be guilty of racism. Jed immediately
realizes what a terrible mistake he has made, and seeks forgiveness, but he
has difficulty finding the opportunity, since the very next day the
Japanese-Canadian children are removed from the school. Having the one
event follow the other is an effective narrative strategy; Jed's childish slurs
of the previous day are not, of course, the cause of the removal of the chil-
dren from the school. In juxtaposing the two events, however, Walters shows
us that in a way they are related; he places both events on a continuum of
racist assumptions that enable the larger horrors facing Japanese-Canadians
at the time.

   While Jed takes responsibility for his own racial slurs, the novel
evades the issue of responsibility for the wide-scale abuses of the
Japanese-Canadians during and after the war. Jed's mother tells him that
"Sometimes things are so big, we can't control them. Things just happen and
we can't make them un-happen" (137). While it is not really within the pa-

rameters of this novel to explore the complex set of events that led up to the mistreatment of Japanese-Canadians like Tadashi and his family, it seems to me that it is important for young readers to know that although it is certainly true that sometimes things happen on a scale so large it is difficult to stop them, it is a mistake to believe that "things just happen." Perhaps a foreword or afterword that provided more details about the history of Japanese-Canadians on the west coast, as well as a reference to the formal apology and compensation offered to Japanese-Canadians by the federal government in 1988, would have provided a needed sense of the political and social forces, and the people behind them, that led to the tragic events described in the novel.

Gillian Siddall is an assistant professor in the Department of English at Lakehead University. She teaches Canadian literature and literary theory.

Spider's Web: Not for Netizens

Spider's Web. Sharon Stewart. Red Deer College P, 1998. 143 pp. $9.95 paper. ISBN 0-88995-177-2.

I admit I enjoyed reading this book, and many young teen readers may also enjoy it. *Spider's Web* does not overly whitewash the experience of growing up, and it provides situations that meet parental requirements — no sex, no drugs, no loud music — yet may still appear hip to some younger readers. If these are your criteria for selecting youth literature look no further.

Spider's Web suffers somewhat in the cultural and technological domains. Spider's mom Joanna *Webber* is marrying Andrew Craven, a geeky computer industry giant who has both a son and a personality that Spider has to learn to appreciate, after she gets over her mother's perceived betrayal for remarrying. Mom has a career, but her happiness seems to be predicated on *finding a man*. While this is a legitimate choice, the two other strong female characters are also problematic. Mia Par is Mr. Craven's Manila-born executive secretary who functions as Spider's nanny through the novel, and is obviously miffed about not getting her man. The black female detective, Les Johnson, who eventually arrests the hacker who stalks Spider through the story, is conspicuously token. These are roles that reinforce stereotypes, rather then explode them. Equally disconcerting is Spider's wariness of foreign things; she never eats garlic at home (but knows what a *barista* is), and is troubled by the names of European cars, yet shops at Le Château and wears Docs. Such inconsistencies are rampant. The sentiments and attitudes would have been progressive in the '70s, but lag somewhat in the '90s.