

Suzan Reid writes with a light touch and an appealing innocence. When schools have sophisticated bullies and the concept of “cool” rules, it is good to know that there is normal, reassuring mischief. In Reid’s books friendships are simple and the horrors of school are outside the classroom. Indeed, they are imaginary and accompanied by fun and humour and just the right soupçon of fear. Reid brings her expertise as a teacher to her work and creates a believable school scenario. Mr. Turkle, the janitor, plays an ongoing role, as he would in a real school, and one sees his constant efforts in maintaining a healthy school structure and environment.

Again we have a boy and girl, Matt and Jaime, as the closest of friends, with Jaime as the enthusiastic but careless innovator. In *Aliens in the Basement*, Jaime, lured by stories of mysterious happenings in the basement, finds jars of possible aliens and decides to investigate. After all, anyone at the school could be an alien, particularly the teachers. There are strange happenings, a mysterious van, and odd tapping to be explored. They proceed in an amusing way to track down the truth and sensibly study Morse code to see if it is an alien code. In the last chapter “Everything fits into place,” and all loose ends are tied together pleasantly.

A Ghost in the Attic is a delightful sequel. Jaime falls for a familiar gambit — a ghost in the window. There is an exciting and escalating hunt for the elusive ghost in which they find out a great deal about the history of Fulton Street School. There is a tin box of treasure filled with newspaper clippings where names such as Joe Louis and King George VI are completely unfamiliar — how fleeting fame is. And, of course, up in the attic there are tidy solutions to all questions. The illustration in soft greys is a perfect complement to the story. Jaime and Matt are endearingly drawn and Mr. Turkle is macho and strong. The series would suit youngsters who want an uncomplicated mystery with lively situations and a light touch. At this school, everything is possible and exciting.

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Comedy's Continuum

Something Fishy at Macdonald Hall. Gordon Korman. Scholastic, 1995. 198 pp. \$5.99 paper. ISBN 0-590-51447-4. *Move Over, Einstein!* Margaret Springer. Illus. Biz Hull. Puffin Books (Penguin), 1997. 122 pp. \$7.99 paper. ISBN 0-14-037799-9. *Dahling, If You Luv Me, Would You Please, Please Smile?* Rukhsana Khan. Stoddart Kids, 1999. 206 pp. \$9.95. ISBN 0-7737-6016-4.

When *Dahling If You Luv Me's* Zainab adapts an episode from Islamic history for presentation in an eighth-grade play, she is well aware that historical struggles do not end “in a neat and tidy way” (177). And while Zainab’s comedic ending har-

nesses historical narrative into the service of a powerful moral fable that affects her and her classmates, Rukhsana Khan's conclusion reminds us that the history of the junior high classroom resists simple resolutions of conflict and difference. And this blend of humour, optimism, and complexity — I will use a dramatic term, "problem comedy" — distinguishes her work from the psychologically complex but rosily-resolved *Move Over, Einstein!* and the unchallenging ending to Gordon Korman's funny but toothless fiction *Something Fishy at Macdonald Hall*. Khan's is the best of these texts not because it is most realistic, but because it is the most consistent and creative in maximizing the possibilities of its genre.

With *Something Fishy at Macdonald Hall* (1995), Gordon Korman brings back both the popular but now-mellowed duo Bruno and Boots and a successful formula: a collection of delicious pranks and escapades, a safe and good natured school filled with stereotypical characters, and a plot that resolves itself to the betterment of the Hall. Traditionally, Korman's fiction has succeeded by blending innovation and repetition, new pranks and predictable characters. It will never be confused with actual young adult life nor credited with a nuanced treatment of its emotional burdens. But in such classics as *The War With Mr. Wizzle* and *Go Jump in the Pool!*, Korman has delighted both young readers and their educators by pairing a welcome subversion of adult authority with a (paradoxically) squeaky-clean atmosphere. When Bruno and Boots climb up to the girls' room in the finishing school next door, they come seeking nothing but cookies and conversation. And at the inclusive Hall, a nerd like Elmer can rub shoulders with a jock like Boots, all without the cruelty and derision common to young adult life. Even in disobedience, they have the best interests of the school (its future, its facilities) at heart. But make no mistake — the charm of these novels is still the thrill of disobedience and the fear of being caught.

In many ways Korman stages a successful comeback, proving himself a skilful manipulator of plot and inventing some great pranks, such as rerouting highway traffic through school property and dressing up the statue of John A. Macdonald in scuba gear. But don't call in the usual suspects, for Bruno and Boots have turned from pranksters to police in this novel, as they chase a phantom trickster who has upstaged the notorious duo. Is this phantom menace (with apologies to the summer blockbuster) Boots's cocky kid brother Edward, the girls from the school next door, or the lovestruck nerd Elmer Drimsdale? None of the above. But the discovery of the real phantom — Mrs. Sturgeon, the headmaster's wife, who devises her pranks to resurrect her husband's waning passion for authority — reveals that the young don't hold a monopoly on practical jokes. By blurring the line between controlling adults and the youth who try to outwit them, and by exposing authority's dependence upon the mischief it sets out to contain, Korman complicates his fictional world, but does so at the expense of the successful and dynamic opposition between youth and adults that energized his previous efforts. Yes — the answer to this whodunit is both surprising and clever, but the real question is the one posed by Edward O'Neal, through whose disappointed eyes we first encounter the new and tamer face of Macdonald Hall: are Bruno and Boots really over the hill?

Move Over, Einstein! (1997) is psychologically complex in its representation of a young child's mind. Focalized through the insecure and, at times, inaccurate perspective of Tatiana Kumpf, a girl preparing a science fair project on snowflakes,

Springer's novel takes seriously irrational perceptions and perceived persecutions. Although this story's outcome is comedic, and presents a close and caring community of friends and family members, the tale leading to this outcome is rarely lighthearted. While the other children have the emotional leisure for humour and play, Tatiana doubts her abilities, her worth to her family, and her ability to finish anything important. Tatiana's dialogue with her friend Nicola reveals her isolation; she rarely listens and seems preoccupied with her own tasks and worries. Readers experience Tatiana's irrational fears, and understand her treatment of her classmates as rivals rather than as friends, yet Springer also broadens this perspective: the benevolent actions of others always exceed Tatiana's suspicion and ungratefulness. Amy, Nicola and William selflessly support her and finally, when Tatiana storms out on them and is hit by a car, they assemble and present her project for her. In the final chapter, her friends gather around the hospital bed to congratulate her and she is forced to accept their generosity. Illustrator Biz Hull also broadens our perspective on Tatiana's appearance when his illustrations jar against the text's description. The narrator begins in Tatiana's mind, describing her (as she has learned to think of herself) as having "a chunky frame" (1) but the illustrations of Tatiana alongside her "graceful" and "slender" friend Nicola reveal little difference between them.

Yet it would be unfair to Tatiana to conclude that her troubles are simply a product of her imagination. To echo a modern proverb, just because you're paranoid doesn't mean no one's out to get you. Tatiana's family feels real financial stress, and her mother is insensitive to projects that don't develop "feminine" virtues such as beauty and grace. Throughout most of the story, Tatiana's mother is unsympathetic to her interests, critical of her appearance, and hurtful to her self-esteem. And yet, by the end of *Move Over, Einstein!*, Mrs. Kumpf has become a pliant puppet of her daughter's changed attitude, and is transformed into a kind and sensitive woman. Tatiana's early pessimism could not defeat her friends' benevolence, but her social reintegration melts her mother's coldness faster than the sun melts snowflakes, and the result is a conclusion that floats eerily between fairy tale and reality, with her family's bedside relief generating too simple an atmosphere of goodwill to conclude an admirably complex book.

Rukhsana Khan's *Dahling, If You Luv Me* brings a comedic ending out of a troubling social environment, but here individual lessons never eclipse or absorb reality; they only help characters better cope with it and even change it in small yet significant ways. When asked to direct her class's play for a school competition, Zainab embarks upon a long struggle with her classmates, her family, and the creative process. Monopolized by an egotistical and vicious class tyrant named Kevin, the eighth grade is a hostile environment where those who don't submit themselves to Kevin's approval or refuse to buy the coveted status symbol — Lucky jeans — are subject to exclusion and derision. At home, her sister Layla makes the Muslim religion a torment, demanding that Zainab submit to her and using religious traditions and texts to control her younger sibling.

To this complex and troubled environment, Khan brings a religious message, mobilizing the resources of Islamic history to confront the values of Western consumerism and the problem of self-esteem. On the other hand, this book exposes religion's instrumental role in stifling the individuality and self-esteem of its

youngest members. Zainab and Layla's arguments are a textual battleground on which Zainab struggles to define herself through and against authoritative texts that threaten to cripple her emotional development. But when she rejects a Western fairy tale (The Emperor's New Clothes) in favour of a religious theme to perform in her class play, she is able to communicate a powerful message: that recognition of God can release us from the worship of others, their tyranny and our need for their approval. And this message liberates Zainab to be herself in a materialistic Western culture bereft of meaningful spirituality. Most importantly, Khan treats religious themes without closing her eyes to real conflict. In the touchy friendship between the Muslim Zainab and the Hindu Premini, Khan's answer to religious tension is a provisional one at best: the two girls agree on common ground, but also decide to be silent on points of religious controversy.

This is a gutsy book, both in its attempt to introduce religious subject matter and in its eyes-open approach to youth conflict. It deals with youth violence, sexual exploitation, and suicide, and does so without clichéd dialogue. The prose is a treat — it is simple and yet knowing. In one instance, Jenny — Zainab's friend and Kevin's sometime girlfriend — optimistically mentions that her mother hopes to meet a "nice man" at her nudist club. Zainab's words reveal, in an ironic moment, much more than she knows: "I didn't say anything. Not one word. My gut told me it was the right thing to do" (35). And Khan's most courageous decision may be her choice of conclusion. Like Shakespeare's *Measure For Measure*, often called a "problem comedy," this text presents its greatest malefactors as unrepentant. The vicious Kevin scowls through Khan's comic resolution, the love-starved Jenny remains half-enamoured with him, and the controlling Layla withholds her approval and her friendship from her younger sister. Though Zainab and her close friends are maturing, *Dahling, If You Luv Me* offers qualified optimism. Yes, a young adult can make a difference, but a change of attitude does not simply transform a world.

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Through Mercy's Eyes

Mercy's Birds. Linda Holeman. Tundra/McClelland and Stewart, 1998. 198 pp. \$7.99 paper. ISBN 0-88776-463-0.

Although Linda Holeman's young adult novel *Mercy's Birds* follows a traditional conflict-resolution plot line, the issues that are raised along the way are by no means traditional. Venturing beyond the now old-hat divorced parent theme, Holeman introduces Mercy, who lives with her never-married, unemployed mother, whom she calls by her first name, Pearl. As Mercy explains to her guidance counselor, the other woman she calls her guardian is not her "mother's partner" (8), but her aunt, Mo, an alcoholic who tells fortunes.

Mercy's problems go beyond what might be considered the typical prob-