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 counsellor, 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-

lems of a teenager, and Holeman's first-person narrative allows the reader to see through Mercy's eyes. Parent-child roles are reversed in the household and Mercy is the one who buys groceries and toilet paper, using the money she earns from her part-time job. Living in poverty, though, seems the least of Mercy's problems. Her mother Pearl suffers from depression that intensifies as the novel progresses, and Mercy must come to terms with her mother's mental illness. As well, the return of her aunt's boyfriend, of whom she is so afraid she can only call him "B," is a constant threat for Mercy. Mercy's fear of rape is clear in the subtext of the novel, but this fear is complicated by her aunt's affection for B as well as by the family's financial dependence on him. The eleven-and-up intended audience that the publisher suggests may not be mature enough to handle the complicated issues raised in the novel.

The appearance of the "Queen of Cups" card in Aunt Moo's tarot card readings foreshadows the arrival of Mercy's never-before-seen grandmother, who serves as Mercy's first female role model. Grandma's arrival is just in time to take control of the chaos of Mercy's home life. Mercy's difficulties seem to supersede a preoccupation with boys, and this is a refreshing and encouraging change from a theme common in novels directed towards young women.

For the most part, Mercy is a capable, strong, and intelligent young woman, who copes with life's obstacles as best she can. Quoting Tennyson's poetry and Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Mercy challenges the young reader with her advanced vocabulary and references to literature. Her multiple ear piercings and short, dyed black hair are her deliberate attempt to take control of her life, to avoid being held "prisoner" (4). The need for Grandma's intervention teaches Mercy that she need not take on such serious problems — a valuable lesson for all.

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Two Novels about Coming to Grips with One's Problems

The Runaways. Kristin Butcher. Kids Can, 1997. 168 pp. $16.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55074-413-5. ***No Fixed Address***. Maureen Bayless. Scholastic Canada, 1997. 180 pp. $4.99 paper. ISBN 0-590-12378-5.

Kristin Butcher's *The Runaways* and Maureen Bayless's *No Fixed Address* explore the lives of characters who try to escape from their troubles instead of dealing with them. Both novels offer engaging stories and characters with whom readers can identify. Within this framework, the stories deal with several serious issues such as step-parents, death, and street life.

In Butcher's *The Runaways*, Nick finds it difficult to accept either his stepfather Cole or his mother's new baby. He regards them as threats to the family he had known after his mother had divorced his birth father. Unable to cope with the changes in his life, Nick takes refuge at the McIntyre mansion, where another