

Three Short Plays about Belonging

Plays of Belonging — *Three Plays by Rex Deverell*. Rex Deverell. Illus. Shelton Deverell, Playwrights Canada P, 1997. 149 pp. \$16.95. ISBN 0-88754-531-9.

As the title suggests, *Plays of Belonging* is an anthology of three plays for young people penned by veteran playwright Rex Deverell. Taken together, these plays represent a cross section of Mr. Deverell's work over the first half of the 1990s with *Weird Kid* prefacing the decade, premiering in 1988, *Video Games* premiering in 1991, and *Belonging* bringing up the anchor in 1995. This collection provides the reader with three eminently producible one acts: all suited to the economies of touring; small casts; limited special effects; one setting per play, the easier to be folded up and ferried about the countryside in the back of a van. For those interested in discovering new works to produce in schools, this alone would justify the price of the text, but the anthology provides the reader with a rarer pleasure — a bit of a mini-retrospective through which one may get some insight into the direction of and development of the author.

Deverell has been active on the theatre scene for some time now — he set the record for greatest number of years as playwright in residence in a Canadian theatre at the Globe during the years 1975 to 1990. (He has since moved to Toronto where he's continued his writing.) A good portion of his career has been spent thinking about and working on plays for young people. The plays in this collection, like so many others in this genre, address a specific concern. *Video Wars* examines the concern that video games desensitize young people to the very real hurt and pain which occur in the wars that are so glamorously portrayed at video arcades. *Weird Kid* examines the situation of the child who is ostracized by her peers, and *Belonging* focuses on the isolation a gifted child may feel in the classroom. Each story is wrapped around individuals who are, for one reason or another, alienated from their peers and, by extension, from society, and each relies on discussion and mediation — words — to arrive at a reconciliation.

The danger in writing plays about concerns is that they have a tendency to feel preachy, and this collection isn't entirely free from this. The piece most inclined in this direction is *Weird Kid* in which the characters who have contributed to the alienation of a troubled child reach an epiphany regarding their role in this individual's abuse through the theatrical device of a mock trial. The device never really succeeds because one feels that the children staging the mock trial are working too hard to prove their own complicity in the alienation of the disaffected troubled youth, and their epiphany, when it comes, feels equally forced. *Video Wars* manages to steer clear of preachiness by focusing more closely on the relationship between Nick, the child fascinated by and drawn to the power and thrill of video games, and Kim, a child who, having lived through a war experience, is repelled by the recreation and recreationalization of his war experience.

It's in *Belonging* that Deverell really finds his footing, however. The most recent offering of the three, *Belonging* is fresh, simple and clearly drawn. The protagonist of this piece, Jody, a small child with a formidable literary gift, is shunned by her classmates precisely because of her brilliance. Here the writer has crafted a neat marriage between content and form as the power of words is not only discussed explicitly within the confines of the struggle between characters, but is

demonstrated implicitly in the moving reconciliation at the end of the piece when the characters reveal their fears through the use of poetry. Deverell clearly believes that words and language genuinely matter and can effect change, whether they be the arguments a group of children use in a mock trial, or the thoughts children craft into poetry to express their fears. In *Belonging* he appears to have developed a greater faith in the words — a faith that bears dividends in this simple, moving tale of poetry and friendship.

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Stories to Dream By

What If ...? Amazing Stories. Selected by Monica Hughes. Tundra, 1998. 199 pp. \$7.99 paper. ISBN 0-88776-458-4.

Monica Hughes, the elder statesperson of Canadian juvenile SF and Fantasy, has used her long reach to draw together a cross-section of fourteen fantastic stories by some of Canada's finest writers of speculative fiction for young people, as well as two SF poems which frame the collection. On the basis of this selection, readers discover that Canada produces a good number of solidly competent writers in this realm, a few that stray into tired themes and style, and some who are just first-rate yarn-spinners. Some stories are more or less hard SF (plausible impossibilities based on space travel or scientific extrapolation); here we have such pieces as "Lukas 19" by Jean-Louis Trudel, about what it's like to grow up as the clone of a famous musician, and "The Book of Days" by Lesley Choyce, about an intergalactic fisherman. Others are largely fantasy (secondary worlds with their own logic), like Edo van Belkom's "The Stone Scepter," about a young, impetuous wannabe magician, or Eileen Kernaghan's "The Road to Shambhala," about saving a magic snow leopard. Most stories, however, are hybrids of these two genres, or hybrids with traditional realism. They gain their effects from the crossover of the logic of the one into the other.

Perhaps the finest story in the collection is "Eternity Leave" by Tim Wynne-Jones. The story of Amber Lightstone discovering her calling in life delicately weaves together a number of thematic strands: the love of writing, inter-generational friendship, the specialness of oddness, second sight, the power of the imagination, and alien visitation. The tone is languid and suggestive, reminiscent of Ray Bradbury's *Dandelion Wine* or *The October Country*. Here's a bit:

There was a harvest moon and, in the cornfields, the propane guns were firing at regular intervals to scare off the raccoons. *Boom, boom.* You get used to it,