

common themes with Dorion's first, prize-winning novel, *Melanie Bluelake's Dream*. Both feature a single-parent family, a girl's closeness to her grandmother, the importance of place and home, developing friendships and self-identity, and an appreciation of nature. *Bay Girl* serves a different purpose as well — young readers will learn of the traditions and values of a unique Newfoundland culture. They will find an authentic and highly readable story celebrating outdoor life, the joy of learning and the spirit of community. A personal friend, raised in such an outpost, and whose roots extend through generations of fishermen, voiced her approval appropriately: "a 'take-me-home' story, I loved it."

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### A Story for Bird Lovers

*Miracle at Willowcreek*. Annette LeBox. Illus. Kasia Charko. Second Story, 1998. 285 pp. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 1-896764-04-5.

This is the first novel of teacher and environmentalist Annette LeBox, who has already published two picture books for children. The novel encourages young people (ages eight to twelve) to learn about and protect our natural environment. It will appeal, however, to all "people who love trees and birds and wild flowers and the mossy scent of a marsh." These are the words of twelve-year-old Tess whose grandfather has just died and who has moved with her mother to his property — Willowcreek Farm — near a marsh in British Columbia. The area is home to many water birds, including the spectacular sandhill cranes. The author tells us that the crane is "a powerful spirit for girls" and this proves to be true for Tess.

Mourning the loss of her grandfather and trying to adjust to her new life, Tess is drawn to the marsh and the elusive cranes. Her interest soon leads her to Clara, an older woman, who lives nearby with her pet crane Tabi, and is known as the "bird woman." Tess and her new friends from school are soon bird watching with Clara and join in her plan to raise a baby crane to help preserve the species.

The story heats up when a group of developers makes a bid to build a golf course and hotel on the nesting site of the sandhill cranes. The hatching of Clara's crane egg and the mysterious death of Tabi are woven into the plot and lead to the book's rather miraculous ending. In fact, the ending is not quite plausible as everything falls into place a little too smoothly and all conflicts are resolved, including the ongoing tension between Tess and her mother. This doesn't really detract from the story, but perhaps makes it a little less realistic.

The author's own real-life involvement in preserving the marshlands around her home in British Columbia shines through her writing. The birds and their behaviour and habitat are eloquently described. The marshlands often become a metaphor for Tess's own feelings. "A marsh rain was like loneliness: too fine to see, but you could feel it."

The book is illustrated by Kasia Charko. A pair of sandhill cranes dance on the cover and soft black-and-white illustrations inside capture the misty beauty of the wetlands. The author includes two glossaries, one of terms used in the story and another which details the features and behaviour of various birds. For example, the call of the bittern is described as “a distinctive *oank-a-lunk* ... like someone working a dry pump.” This is a very apt description for anyone who has actually had the pleasure of hearing the bird.

Despite the miraculous ending, the book is a captivating and informative read.

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### Two Equestrian Novels

*Rebel of Dark Creek.* Nikki Tate. Sono Nis, 1997. 152 pp. \$5.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55039-076-7. *Dancer.* Shelley Peterson. The Porcupine’s Quill, 1996. 196 pp. \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88984-177-2.

*Rebel of Dark Creek* is the first novel of Niki Tate’s riding series, *Stablemates*. The novel is an action-packed page turner kids will love. The main character Jessa, is a typical grade-six girl who loves horses and wants to have one of her own. However, as many young people discover, the equestrian sport is an expensive undertaking even if one receives a “free lease” as Jessa does. Board, food, tack, clothing, medicine, and farrier bills are all attached to such a gift. Tate does a good job of presenting the economic realities, and Jessa’s willingness to work at the stable in exchange for free board seems a realistic solution to the financial problem.

Students who field-tested the novel appreciated Jessa’s average “girl-next-door” characterization, but felt that Jessa and Rachel were presented in too black-and-white terms: Jessa is portrayed fairly positively as the sweet little poor girl whereas Rachel is depicted as the rich snob. My students thought this an unfair stereotype since they feel that a person’s economic status doesn’t necessarily determine her inner self.

Furthermore, the novel contains a couple of details that stretch one’s credulity. While Tate does an excellent job of building suspense at the bridge scene and the description of the panicked horse is well written, I wonder if a horse could escape such an ordeal without a scratch as Rachel’s horse manages to do. In addition, we are told that Jessa is a novice rider and we are given hints that her previous experiences with jumping were less than successful. Therefore, after one week of intensive lessons, it’s highly unlikely that Jessa would place in the ribbons in a class of eighteen competitors.

My students commented that their favourite character was Jessa’s best friend, Cheryl, whose spirited flair for drama appealed to them. They also would’ve