

tion, McMahan uses highly decorative language, rich in imagery, to describe eccentric characters in far-fetched situations. At first glance, his use of bizarre characters and occurrences may seem excessive, yet some of the most outrageous passages prove to be the story's greatest strengths. A vivid description of "whipped liver perogies for only 99 cents a serving" (44) at a highway diner will make any young reader more nauseated than the sight of a photograph alone.

While the far-fetched content forces imaginative minds to work extra hard, it also adds to the high comic appeal of *Buddy Concrackle's Amazing Adventures*. Even though the Concrackles find themselves in a variety of strange situations, they are consistently besieged by one odd-ball in particular: enter Ear Drums MacLeod, a quiltsman whose penchant for tedious anecdotes and off-key bagpipe performances is sure to test the patience of any family, including the free-spirited Concrackles.

Besides their comic charm, McMahan's eccentric characters also play a subversive role in showing the author's disdain for a conservative and intolerant American society. Buddy's father must remove the propeller off his hat when crossing into the United States as any peculiar tendencies are sure to rouse the suspicions of border officials. Buddy's father also purchases "the Spirit of the Fourth of July" kite, and after its various firecrackers and mini-rockets are shot off, the Concrackle family awaits "the splendidous exploding conclusion to this aeronautic display of patriotism!" (90). Yet when the kite misfires only to have "a small black clump" (90) remain, readers are reminded of the folly that surrounds such popularized displays of American patriotism.

Despite embedding his own political agenda in the text, McMahan still knows how to use material that will stimulate young imaginative minds. To dismiss *Buddy Concrackle's Amazing Adventures* as overindulgent, far-fetched writing proves short-sighted. Given McMahan's effort to foster an imaginative engagement with text among young readers, his decorative style seems quite appropriate.

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More than Surviving

Jess and the Runaway Grandpa. Mary Woodbury. Coteau, 1997. 208 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 1-55050-113-5.

Mary Woodbury's previous juvenile novels include *The Invisible Polly McDoodle* and *Where in the World is Jenny Parker?* (1989). Like its predecessors, *Jess and the Runaway Grandpa* is a story of adventure and action featuring a strong female protagonist forced to face her deepest fears and to exercise all her ingenuity. The rather dark opening brings together the principle cast of Jess Baines's life at the funeral of her cat. Present are her mother, Naomi, whom Jess has mothered after her divorce; Brian, her ex-friend, now alienated from her by the gender politics of junior high; Sonny, Brian's distant father; and substitute grandparents, the Mathers, who are

struggling with the advance of Ernie's Alzheimer's disease.

Jess attempts to define her changing relationships with her mother and Brian and to understand Ernie's illness. She receives mixed messages as to whether she is child or adult and alternates uneasily between these roles. Heavily foreshadowed, her greatest fears are strongly sketched in the opening chapters. Still haunted by the desertion of her father, she carries a makeshift "survival kit" in her school bag and has hideous nightmares about being swept down a raging river, which seems to represent loss of control. Seeing Ernie, who has been forbidden to drive, setting off in his camper, Jess accompanies him and is soon stranded in the Northern Alberta wilderness on the banks of the Athabasca river. She must care for herself and Ernie while coping with a bear, a spring storm, and Ernie's Alzheimer's. Ernie is drawn with heartbreaking verisimilitude — a once proud, capable, and loving man losing his memory and self with chaotic speed. The pity as well as the anger, fear, and denial his deterioration awaken in those who care for him is powerfully achieved. Eventually, Jess is forced to take Ernie down the raging river to safety in a flimsy dingy.

The second half of the novel alternates between detailed and tautly suspenseful accounts of Jess's struggles and the rescue effort. No longer seen through the lens of Jess's hostility, Brian becomes a sympathetic and capable character as he struggles to come to terms with the new social realities of adolescence and to forge a relationship with his father, while hoping it is not too late for him to reinvent his relationships with Jess and Ernie. When Jess and Ernie are rescued, new insights and resolutions are achieved by all the characters and Jess feels that she has conquered her fears and learned that life is "about more than surviving."

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From the Forests of Fairy Tale and Fable

Gogol's Coat. Cary Fagan. Illus. Regolo Ricci. Tundra, 1998. 32 pp. cloth \$17.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-429-0. *Lady Kaguya's Secret: A Japanese Tale*. Illus. Jirina Marton. Annick, 1997. 48 pp. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-441-9. *The Parrot*. Illus. Laszlo & Raffaella Gal. Groundwood, 1997. 32 pp. \$16.95. ISBN 0-88899-287-4. *The Walking Stick*. Maxine Trottier. Illus. Annouchka Gravel Galouchko. Stoddart Kids, 1998. 24 pp. \$18.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-3101-6.

For Canadian children, these four picture books open a window on an exotic world of strangeness or otherness. All four are handsome books, executed with loving attention to detail. Two are retellings of traditional folk tales. *The Parrot* is based on a classic Italian folk tale about the power of storytelling itself while *Lady Kaguya's Secret* adapts a 1000-year-old Japanese tale of forbidden love between a mortal and an immortal. *Gogol's Coat* reworks Nikolai Gogol's famous short story "The Over-