

the hospital, and the two girls become heroes for saving babies. Even their heroism does not bring approbation for their relationship, however. Sophie's Ukrainian brothers and Rebecca's Jewish uncles (her own age) constantly fight and prevent the girls from being able to express friendship openly. By the end of the novel, the two girls overcome this obstacle only by a *deus ex machina* of Polish bullies who beat up the Ukrainians. The Jewish kids come to the Ukrainians's defence, and all prejudices are forgiven except, of course, the new, shared one against the Polish boys.

Furthermore, each writer oversimplifies by creating a villain character, embodied in a little girl: Belinda in *Maybe Tomorrow*, and Rachel in *Rebecca*. The little villain is the watchdog in both novels, ensuring that the races/ethnicities do not mix. That the authors embody racism primarily in one character encourages the belief that racism is an anomaly, that the majority of us are relatively free of prejudice. A little more complexity of characterization would suggest that racism is not confined to bad people, such as Rachel and Belinda, but potentially exists in all of us.

That neither Weir nor Matas find ways for their heroines to negotiate for an acceptance of difference conveys a message of passivity. Matas comes closest in showing a way around racism by bringing the Jewish and Ukrainian children together, yet the girls did not create the resolution; it merely happened by chance. Both writers suggest that the best one can do in the face of prejudice is bide one's time — not a particularly empowering message for young adolescents. For all this, however, *Rebecca* is a fascinating and engaging book, well worth reading. I could not recommend *Maybe Tomorrow* so highly.

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Rites of Passage

Charlie Wilcox. Sharon E. McKay. Stoddart Kids, 2000. 221 pp. \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-7737-6093-8. *Lost in Spain*. John Wilson. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2000. 174 pp. \$19.95 cloth, \$11.95 paper. ISBN 1-55041-550-6, 1-55041-523-9.

For centuries, boys have gone away to war under the assumption that such a step marked their transformation into adults. In most cultures, battle was a rite of passage: no boy could truly be considered a man without having experienced combat. This process, in turn, has spawned a whole genre of literature. From the earliest oral traditions to twentieth-century novels like *All Quiet on the Western Front*, writers and storytellers have described the trials and tribulations of boys who became men through combat.

Charlie Wilcox and *Lost in Spain* sit firmly in the tradition of coming-of-age literature. McKay's title character is a Newfoundland boy who goes to World War I almost accidentally; hoping to prove his manhood by joining a sealing ship, he instead finds himself in England and, eventually, in the war zone. In *Lost in Spain*,

Ted Ryan embarks on his journey to the battlefields of the Spanish Civil War, with a purpose in mind, to locate his missing father and reunite his family. He has no thoughts of demonstrating his maturity, but he does so all the same.

But both books offer updated versions of the theme. Historically, it has been the very act of fighting which has transformed boy into man; spilling the blood of an enemy warrior (or indeed having one's own blood spilled) was what counted. However, since it would be considered in poor taste (especially given that the books are targeted towards young-adult readers) to put Charlie behind a bayonet or Ted in a machine-gun post, McKay and Wilson have given them humanitarian tasks. That the two lads reach the desired level of maturity by embarking on what are essentially missions of mercy demonstrates how old notions have been tailored to accord with modern sensibilities.

McKay's strongest suit is the descriptive skill that she has demonstrated in her many previous works. She was clearly most comfortable writing those sections of the book which are set in Newfoundland. She renders the port of Brigus so convincingly that one can almost smell the fresh cod and hear the call of seagulls. The description of St. John's and the hospital in which Charlie becomes part patient, part inmate, is just as effective. Her command of the diction, characters, and settings is so masterful that the novel is compelling in its immediacy and authenticity.

However, McKay is rather less sure of herself when the action moves to the battlefields of France. Because the writing is a little more tentative and her grasp of character and circumstance not quite so sure, the novel starts to lose some of its momentum. Particularly in the section that describes the battle at Beaumont Hamel, the dialogue becomes more forced and the scenes more stylized. Indeed, it is something of a relief when the story returns to Newfoundland at the novel's conclusion, and the magic is recaptured.

The great strength of Wilson's book, on the other hand, is not so much the colour and texture as the pacing. In contrast to *Charlie Wilcox*, in which the coming of age occurs over a period of years, *Lost in Spain* moves along at a breakneck pace, the book's main action spanning just over a week. Ted Ryan is forced to grow up very quickly, and Wilson nicely captures the combination of cocky confidence and inner turmoil which usually marks that process. In this case, everything is accentuated because the teenager has to cope with all the external challenges of wartime Spain in addition to the normal internal challenges of growing up. Under Wilson's hand, Ted Ryan is not an entirely likeable character, but then neither are most teenagers who are undergoing the process of coming of age.

Both books, it must be admitted, strain the reader's credulity on occasion. The notion that a boy could wander unimpeded around the rear areas of the Western Front is a little far-fetched, while the plot of *Lost in Spain* depends on a couple of coincidences that require one to suspend more than the usual amount of disbelief.

But on another level, the novels are entirely plausible. One does not have to look very deeply into Canadian military history, of any era, to find boy soldiers. The youngest Canadian to be killed in action during World War I was a mere lad of fourteen, about the same age as Charlie Wilcox and Ted Ryan when they began their odysseys. The real Charlie Wilcox, upon whose life McKay's novel is loosely

based, did not go to war as a young teenager. However, he certainly might well have done, and would likely have undergone the same coming of age that McKay and Wilson describe so effectively.

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O brave new world, that has such clones in it

Cloning Miranda. Carol Matas. Scholastic Canada, 1999. 138 pp. \$5.99 paper. ISBN 0-590-51458-X.

Carol Matas's *Cloning Miranda* is in some ways a modern Gothic, with a bewildered protagonist, baffling mysteries, hidden rooms, and a mysterious weeping child. Yet it is a thought-provoking text which, in foregrounding the ethical dilemmas clustered around the idea of the creating or replicating human life artificially, features an adolescent first-person narrator who must face a series of potentially devastating revelations. In discovering that many of the apparent truths upon which her life has been built are fabrications, she gains new insights into her self and finds an inner strength of which she was unaware.

Typically, children must eventually find out that their parents are fallible and therefore not the gods they might have appeared to be hitherto. Matas's *Miranda*, however, is shocked to discover that her parents' fallibility lies with them having tried to be God. In one of a number of allusions to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Matas's *Miranda* notes that Prospero, the parent of her namesake, uses "magic to make his daughter happy" (103). As she struggles to make sense of the new and strangely altered world of uncertainties in which she finds herself, *Miranda* is forced to reevaluate her relationship with parents whose anguish over the death of a previous child has resulted in them trying use the "magic" of science to make their daughter happy. It is not unusual, perhaps, for a sense of loss to result in obsessive concern for future offspring; however, the lengths to which *Miranda*'s parents have gone take the novel into territory both new and old. New, because the interplay of ethics and genetics has become particularly topical. Old, because fictions in which people use (or abuse) science to create life in a test tube go back to at least Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). However, while Huxley's tale ends badly for his two protagonists, *Cloning Miranda* does not, partly because *Miranda* surprises herself in discovering a strong sense of self.

This is a strongly moral novel. In challenging her parents' ethical blindness, *Miranda* draws on bonds of friendship, strengthens her belief in the importance of honesty in familial relationships, and gains insight into the importance of environment and experience in shaping the self. However, the story's moral considerations emerge from the story, rather than vice versa. *Miranda* complains at one point about worthy but "depressing books," focusing on "miserable families," which are