

grant families in Canada. In this regard, the book is a must read not only for high school students, but also for university students in ethnic studies, Canadian studies, and other social science courses.

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The Secret under My Skin: An Island of Lost Souls

The Secret under My Skin. Janet McNaughton. HarperCollins, 2000. 240 pp. \$14.95 paper. ISBN 0-00-648522-7.

The Secret under My Skin depicts a world in the aftermath of a devastating eco-disaster. The rampant superstition and prejudice of the “Dark Times” of the twenty-second century are still a force in Terra Nova (Newfoundland) in 2368. A totalitarian Commission is in power, maintaining its authority by propagating irrational fears and hatreds through disinformation and the control and falsification of historical records. Relatively recently, “techies” (scientists, technologists and academics) have been used as scapegoats, resulting in the death of thousands in concentration camps during the “technocaust.” The novel’s narrator, fourteen-year-old Blay Raytee, lives and labours in a work-camp with many other orphaned children until she is chosen as an assistant by the lazy and selfish Marrella, an upper-class orphan who is being trained as a Bio-indicator (environment monitor) by pro-democracy activists William and Erica.

The text clearly reverberates with the echoes of various brutal regimes, including Stalinist Russia and Nazi-controlled Europe. Its literary antecedents are post-apocalyptic dystopias like Richard Jefferies’s *After London*, Aldous Huxley’s *Ape and Essence*, and Ronald Wright’s recent *A Scientific Romance*, as well as George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (“who controls the past controls the future ...”). Dystopias invariably use the future to attack or expose problems in the present — in this case the continuing degradation of the environment and the abuse, neglect, and exploitation of children. More generally, the novel indicates how fear, ignorance, and irrational prejudice can be orchestrated by those with power to help them keep that power — an important consideration in an era in which nationalism continues to be a potent force.

The novel does more than criticize, however. Blay exemplifies the joy of learning as she reads of Earth’s geological, botanical, and biological beginnings, and discovers relevance and personal meaning in poetry. She also encounters a feminist Weavers’ Guild — a forceful image of women working collectively for community and progress. Possibly McNaughton tries to squeeze in too much; Marrella’s attempts at channelling to “communicate with the Ancients” are inconclusive and confuse Blay if not the reader. But the theme that successfully holds the novel together is that of loss and recovery — for both society and individuals. Terra

Nova begins to reconstruct a viable democracy. Blay's search for identity — literally and psychologically — makes her just one of the lost souls in the text who need the people or information which will render them and the community more complete. *The Secret under My Skin* is a text with many parts; their sum is a well-written, absorbing, and thought-provoking whole. It is the winner of the twelfth Mr. Christie Award in the best books for young adults category (ages 12-18).

Alan West recently completed his doctorate at the University of Ottawa. While his dissertation was on selected British utopians and dystopians, one of his preferred subjects is children's literature.

Dark Places in Teenage Lives

The Dream Where the Losers Go. Beth Goobie. Roussan, 1999. 206 pp. \$8.95. ISBN 1-896184-62-6. *Changing Jareth*. Elizabeth Wennick. Polestar, 1999. 278 pp. \$8.95. ISBN 1-896095-97-6.

The Dream Where the Losers Go and *Changing Jareth* each confront difficult and dark places in teenagers' lives, dealing with issues such as sexual assault, incest, and abuse. In *The Dream Where the Losers Go*, Beth Goobie tells the story of deeply troubled Skey, a fifteen-year-old girl recovering from a suicide attempt and coming to terms with the violence that precipitated it. In *Changing Jareth*, Elizabeth Wennick's protagonist, Jareth, begins the story breaking and entering, on the verge of being expelled from school, and ends it a self-reflective, responsible quasi-adult, having survived the murder of his younger brother by his mother.

Both Goobie and Wennick treat their characters with compassion. Each author obviously hopes to capture teenage voices without imposing adult morals, and each seems determined not to whitewash adolescence into television-sitcom simplicity. On the whole, Goobie is more successful at this than Wennick. While both present appealing main characters, Wennick's Jareth is ultimately less convincing than Goobie's Skey. Similarly, Goobie draws her supporting characters with an intensity that renders them truly (and, perhaps for some parents, frighteningly) believable, whereas Wennick paints her characters of the "rebel with a heart of gold" garden variety. Jareth's inner monologue often runs in sharp contrast to his angry, dangerous choices, betraying adult values and certainties. For example, Jareth is a violent thief raised by an abusive alcoholic mother, yet he does not swear, does not drink, and, in the novel's most disconnected moment, behaves selflessly to stop a spoiled grade school kid from selling marijuana. While this is no doubt admirable, it is far from true to Jareth's self-destructive character (or, for that matter, to most teens' realities). One is not clear *why* Jareth changes towards novel's end, only that he does; as such, the novel undoubtedly offers young readers a role model, but one that is ultimately ineffectual and unrealistic.

One would not, however, call Goobie's Skey a typical role model. Goobie is not afraid to make her characters ambiguous. Compassionately written and dis-