

Lighter than the Cover Art, but Darker than Usual

City of the Dead. Sharon Stewart. Red Deer, 2001. 231 pp. \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-88995-229-9.

Half the stories in this collection of ten tales of the supernatural by Sharon Stewart involve those great passions of twenty-first-century teenagers, computers and technology. In two such stories, computers serve as villains: a computer infects household appliances so that they take on predatory behaviours in "Trojan Horse," whereas "Lucky Seven" retells, with surprising effectiveness, the classic Mephistopheles and Doctor Faustus tale when Tiffany meets on an Internet site a darkly handsome man in bright red sweats who offers her for no money anything she wants in the world. Tiffany unwittingly displays her true character and in the dénouement the reader sees how each of her requests correspond to one of the Seven Deadly Sins. In two other pieces (less satisfyingly crafted, unfortunately), technology promotes peace: a recently deceased young man contacts a teenage girl by cell phone to deliver a message to his grieving seven-year-old sister, and in another, a computer virus escapes cyberspace to influence the mood of real time politicians and promote world peace. One of the more effective stories in this group, "Dingbat," presents a teenager struggling to find a place and acceptance in her new school after her family relocates. A filament of intelligent memory residing in her computer becomes her imaginary friend until her confidence and interpersonal skills strengthen, whereupon this companion weakens and ultimately disappears.

The remaining five stories involve themes equally appealing to the YA reader, with two concerning the change of the male protagonist into an animal form. With the onset of puberty, Cade gradually changes into a wolf, and in "Hooked," the enchantment of the beautiful pool under the waterfall lures Jamie to its depths. Both boys face their crisis without strong links to their fathers, but in "Cade" the protagonist finally meets and bonds with his, while the affluent, high-achieving father in "Hooked" betrays his son in scenes written with deft insight. While the title, derived from the last story of the book, does not speak directly to the themes of the majority of the stories, death is certainly the focus of the opening tale. "Dog Days" takes as its premise that Anubis, the Jackal god of ancient Egypt, serves as the harbinger of death to individuals in a little town in Canada. Anubis also takes the form of Osiris, the Egyptian god of death and of the underworld, who has taken up a lucrative practice as mortician and funeral director. The terrified protagonist protects his life with all the superstitious precautions he can devise, but he does not tell any adults.

Some of the tales that have engaging premises do not hold up in their resolution of the conflict. One such is "The Village," in which a fourteen-year-old protagonist feels alienated from his family and longs for the world of his grandparents as symbolized in a dilapidated, old-fashioned village the family traditionally sets out as a Christmas decoration. In time-shift fantasy tradition, Andrew's longing allows him to enter this desired world. An unintended but truly terrifying aspect of this story occurs two days later when the reader realizes, in a scene of the family putting away the decorations, that nobody has yet missed Andrew. His disappearance goes unnoticed!

But along with the reading pleasures these tales afford runs a worry. In tales of the supernatural there can be no delicious shudder unless the reader either understands the true workings of the world based on both science and practical observation or has a strong understanding of a religion that establishes specific parameters for supernatural occurrences. Should we question whether families and schools in the twenty-first century have accomplished either task? Should we ask ourselves what core values popular culture actually gives children?

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A Potpourri of Angst

Up All Night. Ed. R.P. MacIntyre. Thistledown, 2001. 156 pp. \$15.95 paper. ISBN 1-894345-27-4.

This collection of short fiction for the YA audience contains fourteen of the best stories from Thistledown Press's most recent short story competition. The tales run the full gamut of themes typically found in coming-of-age stories with a story of the supernatural, a literary fairy tale, a legend, a sentimental dog story, three pregnant teenagers, two miserable beer parties, and some pretty gritty realism. Many stories handle the insensitivity of a teen's family, with "You Can Call Me Al" being at the top of my personal list of favourites. In a deftly written opening paragraph we see the teenage protagonist draw the personalities of her parents in a few well-placed brush strokes. Gradually, the class and cultural intolerance of their well-meaning insularity unfolds to ruin the hopes and dreams of a gauche young man from an impoverished background. The conflict is real, with the fifteen-year-old first feeling revulsion toward her Ukrainian cousin, turning to an aching empathy in the final scenes. The story is honest in its characterization and plot as well as its heartbreak.

Class conflict is well handled in several stories. It appears in contemporary dress in an upscale high school in "The Way Skin Grows," whereas "Snow and Apples" is set in the Middle Ages. The "Beast" in the latter story is a young but deformed peasant who is initially enamored with the runaway "Beauty," a spoiled nobleman's daughter, with readers being left to their own conclusions about interior vs. exterior beauty. Unfortunately, in the former story the reader is left to conclude the entire denouement, a leap too great in my view.

I question whether two of the stories, in fact, qualify as YA material, a genre that targets the middle and high school audience. Typically adults and small children exist only as backdrop in YA fiction. The protagonist of "The Piano Lesson" is eighteen, but in first-year university, while the protagonist of "Penance" can be guessed to be about six (since the older sister is nine). In this genre, the reader usually hears the voice of a teenage narrator telling the tale in first person; how-