

response to her aunt's offer of hot chocolate is spot-on age fifteen: "I'm dying for some." Like many fifteen-year-olds, Adrien feels that the rest of the world is fake: "The whole place was a scam. If she reached out and actually touched someone, the person would probably dissolve into mist and fade away."

Adrien meets Paul, a psychic boy convinced that he, too, will die young, and they fall in love. Here Goobie is very frank about sex and, through Adrien's roommate Darcy, offers sensible advice: "Feelings are strong, but you've still got a mind. You can take it in stages. Have fun with it. Play."

Adrien is haunted by a cabinful of spirits who have died in a boating accident that implicated Aunt Erin. The spirits are just a shade too exuberant for my taste. The ending of the book brings together the plots connected with Aunt Erin, Paul, and the bully Conner. It's too pat and sentimental, jarring somewhat with the edginess of the rest of the book. Perhaps that's the reaction of a cynical adult, though. Fifteen is a lot more optimistic despite the tough posing.

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Starting Over: A New Country, A New Life

A Bushel of Light. Troon Harrison. Stoddart Kids, 2000. 224 pp. \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-7737-6140-3. *A Group of One*. Rachna Gilmore. Henry Holt for Young Readers, 2001. 184 pp. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-8050-6475-3. *If I Just Had Two Wings*. Virginia Frances Schwartz. Stoddart Kids, 2001. 221 pp. \$10.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-3302-7. *We Followed the Stars to Canada*. Debi van de Wiel. Illus. Bruce J. Brown. Nimbus, 2000. 64 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 1-55109-342-1.

The immigrant experience is familiar to many Canadians. These four engaging novels all tell about or examine the experience of changing countries and cultures with the hope of capturing a brighter future. In *A Bushel of Light*, a young orphaned twin named Maggie is forced to travel from a British seacoast town to work as a Barnardo "Home child" on an Ontario farm early in the last century. In the case of Phoebe, in *If I Just Had Two Wings*, freedom from slavery during the time of the American Civil War drives her to flee to Canada along the underground railway. For Canadian-born Tara Mehta, coming to grips with racism in her twenty-first-century Ottawa high school while trying to accept her family's cultural ties to India connects her to her family's immigrant past in *A Group of One*. In *We Followed the Stars to Canada*, the Donkers family set sail for farm life in Nova Scotia, away from war-torn, crowded Holland in 1950. All four books address important family issues, such as the loss of family members through death, slavery, and immigration; cultural differences within the family as well as within the community; giving up personal freedom in support of a principle; taking on responsibility; and cooperation between generations.

When Maggie's parents die one after the other, she and her twin sister go to live with their mother's brother, his wife, and their brood of children. When their relatives are not able to keep them, one twin is sent to an elderly aunt's and the other to Canada. Maggie learns about betrayal and loss at the tender age of eight.

However, she demonstrates through her steadfast loyalty to her twin and her faith in “doing the right thing” that her early moral grounding helps her achieve her goals. She shows great gentleness and tenacity for one so young. She is expected to work from dawn until dusk when she arrives on the farm. By the age of fourteen, when the novel begins, she has learned a great deal and has adapted to her new country. The setting involves a rural Ontario that no longer exists but one that Harrison brings to life. Readers will see that Maggie is a typical teenager who experiences bouts of moodiness, a budding romance, independence, self-doubts, and pride in her accomplishments. The story hinges on the idea of fitting in and finding opportunities in the new world. The writing has evocative description as well as believable and fanciful characters. One in particular is an eccentric British gentleman who “saves” Maggie and takes her to a local Barnardo home where she is reunited with her long-lost twin. The story ends on a fairytale note which conveys the message that if you are a good person and work hard, you will be rewarded.

Phoebe’s parents are very much alive and an important presence in Schwartz’s novel, and, like Maggie’s parents, they instill strong, loving values in her. Phoebe also rises to the occasion when times get tough. The disappearance of Phoebe’s siblings, one by one, provides her with the impetus to take her chances and to chart her own life by running to Canada on the mysterious “underground railway” even though she knows that her parents will grieve for their loss. At the beginning of the story she is a guileless child, but by the end she is a knowledgeable, somewhat worldly young woman. She escapes with another slave with two young daughters in tow. This friend initiates their flight and becomes a role model for Phoebe, but by the time they reach Canada, their roles have reversed. Like Maggie, Phoebe is tested physically, emotionally, and psychologically. She, too, finds strength and guidance in the values taught to her by her parents. Phoebe’s freedom is her respite from her harsh life as a slave and the flame of hope that spurts her on during the grueling trip north: “Phoebe willed herself to sleep, to settle into dreams. But all morning long, she heard the whispers of slave catchers in her ears like secrets that could not be told” (144). The action and description are realistic and the more gruesome facts of slavery are revealed without resorting to sensationalism.

Racism is also a theme in *A Group of One*. Teenaged Tara is constantly reminded that she is “different” by the insensitive questions of a teacher: “Hey, Tara, kiddo, what’s your language?” (3). When she says “English,” he presses for her “mother tongue.” Because she is brown-skinned, the teacher assumes that she must speak another language at home, which is inaccurate. Tara knows how to stand up to this racism because her mother has provided her with a strong role model. But when her grandmother visits from India, she is dismayed that Tara and her sisters do not know the language of their grandparents and blames her son and his wife for this failing, which she interprets as their shame of their heritage. Tara sees her grandmother as an outsider and her parents as hypocrites when they are unfailingly polite to the critical old lady. The rebellious teenager finds common ground with her tough grandmother, who reveals a rebellious past and her own fight against racism. By using her grandmother’s story for a school report she finds out which of her school friends are truly inclusive and accepting. She meets a boy who has a strong relationship with his grandfather and learns from him that loving a grandparent does not mean having to defend their history. The author has a gift for capturing teenaged female angst, fears, stubbornness, and attitudes in a book with strong characters and a story that will open up many important current issues.

We Followed the Stars to Canada is a straightforward account of a Dutch farm family's decision to emigrate to Canada after World War II. The family is portrayed as very democratic and optimistic. The story does not centre on any of the children but rather shows the family working as a unit: although it is the father's idea to emigrate to Canada, he asks the family for their approval. Young readers are given a glimpse of wartime events through the father's storytelling, which shows the bravery, toughness, and tolerance of some Dutch people during those dangerous times. Readers will also get a surprising picture of rural Canadian life in the early 1950s, which did not have indoor plumbing or electricity. This historical record would be suitable for young readers who need illustrations to help them understand the written events. Much of the action and behaviour is explained so that the reader does not have to imagine it.

All four books show young readers that each historical period offers similar challenges and that people from all backgrounds share similar values of loyalty, honesty, bravery, a longing to belong, and a need to feel safe and secure. Finally, children like to read about child characters who are empowered, who overcome life's difficulties, and who show them "how it can be": these books offer all this.

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Plagues and Boogeymen

A Company of Fools. Deborah Ellis. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2002. 180 pp. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55041-719-3.

Deborah Ellis's new novel, set in the Abbey of St. Luc near Paris in the fateful year the Plague arrived in northern France, is the "chronicle" account of the adventures of the quiet Henri and his rowdy urbanite choirboy companion, Micah. Upon Micah's arrival at the Abbey at the very beginning of the novel, he soon begins to cause havoc within the Abbey wall: he is loud, obnoxious, and dirty, everything Henri is not. Unlike his choir brethren, Micah does not aspire to heavenly things, but he can sing better than any of them. The other boys tease and taunt Micah, who would rather sing the bawdy street songs his troubadour father had taught him than the hallowed *Te Deum*. A poor orphan himself, Henri finds himself paired with Micah by the choirmaster, and they quickly become close friends.

An abrupt meeting with a traveler from southern France lodging at the guest-house, who tells of the Plague and its arrival in Marseille, interrupts the boys' quiet life. Although the boys initially believe they are safe from this "boogeyman" within the sacred precinct of St. Luc, jesting with one another on the veracity of the evil lurking outside the abbey walls, they soon see for themselves the morbid effects of the Black Death during a procession into the very heart of nearby Paris, where they see the *danse macabre* and corpses in the city streets. Some of the abbey's brothers and a few choirboys, including Micah and Henri, form a small troubadour group called "A Company of Fools" to lighten the spirits of those suffering in the city. While visiting the Hôtel Dieu hospital, Micah sings for a young girl who miracu-