

Teens, Fairies and Fantasy: Sarah Ellis's *Back of Beyond*

Back of Beyond. Sarah Ellis. Greenwood/Douglas & McIntyre, 1996. 159 pp. \$9.45 paper. ISBN 0-88899-269-6.

For the past year I have been writing a newspaper column in which I review books for children and young adults. I also have a quarterly publication which publishes the work of young writers. In the latter, I work closely with my child and teenage authors. I find them sensitive, intelligent and curious about the world of literature. Yet, as I consider the large number of books I have read aimed at readers ages ten to sixteen, I find myself making some troubling observations. Publishers seem to regard Young Adult readers as people interested only in light romance, competitive sports, shallow mysteries, and soggy social problems. In the pages of these books the skimpy portions of detail and characterization are covered with a supposedly more appealing and saleable sauce: plot. For the most part the result is hardly a satisfying meal. Children growing up on such pap would be foregoing a richer diet of creative and stimulating works.

Enter Sarah Ellis. The name defines my idea of *quality* Canadian children's literature today. In the first place, Ellis knows the field of children's literature from top to bottom. She graduated from the Centre for the Study of Children's Literature at Simmons College in Boston. She currently works in a children's library in Vancouver. She also reviews books for several publications including a regular column on Canadian children's books in *Horn Book* magazine. One wonders how she has time to write award-winning books. Yet, from day one her books have won prizes. Her first novel, *The Baby Project*, was awarded the Sheila A. Egoff Children's Book Prize; *Pick-Up Sticks* received the Governor General's Literary Award in 1991. But her new collection of short stories for young adults, *Back of Beyond*, should knock everyone's literary socks off. This book has won the Sheila A. Egoff Children's Literature Prize and was short-listed for the Ruth Schwartz Award. I hope that by the time this review is published she will have received more awards for this work of exceptional merit.

Ellis has created a book that reads like silk shining in the sun. Yet the delicate literary threads holding it together have been spun into a super strong fabric. Ellis's stories challenge young readers. Each tale begins quickly, fills out with details, deftly and tensely intimated. Then it ends so quickly that the reader feels breathless. The reader excitedly unwinds the strands of the story, and cleverly divines that the topic of the story is not what it might appear to be, but is really about aliens, computers, cults, the occult and the like. The reader wonders, "have I just read what I think I read?" "Was Mr. Potato Head a story about a boy in a cult, or about ESP between brother and sisters?" Savouring the possibilities and eager for more, the reader rushes to turn the page.

Perhaps the next tale will be a story on the topic of fairies. What teen reader would want to admit to reading a story about fairies? But the movie of teenage life flickers and flits so well into Ellis's writing that the author can explore any topic. Ellis's secret seems to lie in her realistic depiction of her heroes' day-to-day life. Her teens hate their siblings, get their licences, surf the net and so on. Readers become charmed by the humorous and authentic protagonists. They follow the hero so closely that when reality suddenly slips for the central character, the reader, too, falls into another world. Take, for example, the story "Happen." The hero leads a regular life, goes to school and has a boyfriend, Alan, who once confused the word "testicle" for "tentacle" in biology class. However, one day she stumbles through a hedge and finds herself feeling as though her "brain had tilted slightly." She discovers she has come into a garden, perhaps a land of fairies, and so has the reader. No teenaged reader would follow such a plot line if it weren't for the fact that Ellis treats her readers with respect: her writing is accessible yet highly sophisticated.

Ellis's bright patches of setting, characterization, language and plot swirl in my mind even upon reading the book for the second time, six months after the first reading. However, merely describing her writing holds you from it. My job as a reviewer will have been successful if I have enticed you to introduce the young reader in your life to *Back of Beyond*. I would invite you to take a peek at this book yourself. Look forward, dear reader, to being refreshed, entertained and delighted.

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From Winnipeg to Fairyland

A Completely Different Place. Perry Nodelman. Greenwood/Douglas & McIntyre, 1996. 191 pp. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-268-8.

This light-hearted fantasy by the Manitoba English professor and literary critic Perry Nodelman draws on many elements from traditional fairy tale and fantasy classics to tell its story of a Winnipeg boy swept into another world —