# *Reviews / Comptes rendus*

## *Books / Livres*

### A Sense of Hope

*Uncle Ronald.* Brian Doyle. Groundwood/Douglas & McIntyre, 1996. 138 pp. $9.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-267-X.

The young male heroes in the books of well-known Ottawa author Brian Doyle struggle to grow up in the midst of racial prejudice, poverty, missing fathers, environmental damage, troubles at school and, in this novel (the writer's seventh), violence on many levels, from child and wife abuse to cruelty to animals and sudden death. This sounds like a heavy agenda, but there is often a comic-book zaniness in Doyle's writing that lightens the atmosphere and suggests that the conditions of life, however terrible, are nonetheless ultimately manageable.

The narrator of *Uncle Ronald* is, he tells us, one hundred and twelve years old, and the story he tells is about his own boyhood, when he was sent by his mother to stay with his uncle in order to escape the brutal beatings of his father. In a small village north of Ottawa, Mickey meets not only his uncle, a gentle giant of a man who demonstrates that size and strength can be peacefully employed, but also a number of colourful characters who provide the comic-book atmosphere. These range from the identical twin O'Malley sisters (suspected of braining a bailiff with a chamber-pot and then shooting him dead), to the prolific McCooey family ("Mean Bone McCooey, who fights all the time ... Mouthwash McCooey, who swears all the time ... Tommy Twelve Toes McCooey, who has six toes on each foot and can outrun a deer") to Even Steven, the village gossip, who longs to be a hero and is shown by Uncle Ronald how to become one through peaceful and legal means. The village is under siege by an armed force of government tax collectors, and the antics of the inhabitants, who lack the wherewithal to pay their taxes, provide the undercurrent of comic violence that is the counterpart to the very real violence of Mickey's home life.

By combining realism with comic violence Doyle takes a certain risk. In the hands of a less skilful writer young readers might be disinclined to recognize the difference and decide to take none of it seriously. But most children are adept at separating the two, and Doyle relies successfully on their abilities as well as his own fine writing. Thus, both Mickey's moments of stark fear and the pervasive sense of dread that dominates his life (he sees his father lurking threateningly in every corner) are memorably realized. One such moment occurs when Uncle Ronald is showing Mickey how to harness Second Chance Lance, the horse he had rescued from its cruel owner through an act of heroic strength. The reader may have momentarily forgotten Mickey's brutal beatings with his father's belt, but even while absorbed in the task at hand, Mickey has

not: he recalls, "I never thought I would ever like the feel of belts and buckles." The constant fear under which abused children live, affecting them both emotionally and physically (as in Mickey's chronic bed-wetting) is forcefully driven home at moments like this.

The book ends with two suspenseful scenes, the first fraught with the threat of violence that fails to materialize, and the second depicting violence of an unexpected kind. The accidental death of Mickey's father effectively demonstrates that uncontrolled rage is self-destructive, and in the end we expect Mickey and his mother to move into a happier future. Doyle's books are aimed at readers in the nine-to-twelve group; older children might enjoy the story, but, sadly, one feels they would be unlikely to accept either the happy ending or the saving presence of a loving adult as realistic possibilities in situations such as this. It might be argued that Mickey is an uncomfortably passive victim in this story, but by the end it is clear that he has quietly absorbed the lessons in non-violence exemplified by Uncle Ronald. And perhaps his inability to help himself is the most realistic reminder of all: the vicious cycle of an abused child becoming in turn an abusing parent can best be broken by the sympathetic teaching of nurturing adults.

Doyle's writing is both rich and economical in creating a vivid sense of place and time, in this case Ottawa and rural Ontario in the late nineteenth century. But this book is mainly remarkable for the warmth and compassion, never descending into sentimentality, with which it treats Mickey and his troubles. While it should appeal to a wide audience because the liveliness of the story is not sacrificed to the lessons that support it, I can't think of a better book for a child who needs a sense of comfort and hope for the future.

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## Too Many Blankets

***The Town That Floated Away.*** Sandra Birdsell. Illus. Helen Flook. HarperCollins, 1997. 164 pp. $16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-00-224545-0.

This playful novel by Sandra Birdsell, best known for her adult fiction (including *The Missing Child*, nominated for a Governor General's Award), began as a radio play (now available as a CD) and has recently won the Saskatchewan Children's Literature Award.

Because I am not a child, I cannot say that this book appeals to all children; I can say that, on my first reading, I completely enjoyed the book, identifying with both the child heroine and her parents. The adult in me, though, kept intruding. I was aching to analyse, to find meanings. Is this an allegory? Is this about Canada? I tried reading it as a satire. However, I couldn't help but remember my own homesickness as a child, a severe homesickness that I experienced whenever I was away from home. I had to wonder what kind of reader Birdsell had in mind.