

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.

I can only guess at how a child would read this text. I believe that children would easily respond to the humour and cartoon-like characters, the language play, the jokes and riddles, the depiction of adults as silly and often fallible, the portrayal of children as intelligent and adventurous. Children will also respond, deep down inside, to the main message of the book — that a child needs her parents in order to grow up and develop. If the family bond is split too soon, the child will shrink away, become a “morphan.”

Again the adult in me intrudes. Is this work about Canada? Birdsell’s real home town of Morris, Manitoba, which once floated away in a flood, forced Sandra into homesickness in Winnipeg. This helps us place the town. Furthermore, the town of Wellington, which floats away, is obviously English, while St. Boniface, which remains, is French: is this a reversal of the Quebec Separation issue? Why is the town floating North, the inhabitants disappearing under the ice and snow? Is this about the displacement of Native peoples?

Any allegorical significance eludes me in the end, but does lurk there, somewhere beneath the surface of the story, at least for the serious adult reader trying to use her “academic expertise.” What is important is that the foolish adults make the mistakes which lead to tragedy, that some foolish adults do not respect the intelligence and individuality of children, and that people can disappear if they lose their community and family. Virginia is not a super-human child, but an ordinary, intelligent one, who uses her brain to help bring her town back. She learns that having Preposterously Protective Parents “is like having too many blankets when you really only need one to keep you warm. And what’s so awful about that? It’s certainly better than not having any blankets at all ...” Underneath all those layers of blankets is a shrinking child, a child who *is* the significance of the story, for both the child and the adult reader.

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To See Ourselves

Takes: Stories for Young Adults. Ed. R.P. MacIntyre. Thistledown, 1996. 150 pp. \$12.95 paper. ISBN 1-895449-54-5.

Fiction with young protagonists should be “like good rock and roll ... slightly outrageous and raw,” according to R.P. MacIntyre in his Foreword to *Takes*, Thistledown Press’s latest short story collection for youthful readers. Several tales in the two earlier anthologies, *The Blue Jean Collection* (1992) and *Notes across the Aisle* (1995), both products of national story-writing competitions, fit his prescription. None do in *Takes*, a more homogeneous, polished, and restrained gathering.

Not that all of the fourteen stories in *Takes* lack dark, disturbing currents or whiffs of political incorrectness. Three in particular are disquietingly memora-