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 superhuman 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-

ble. Mansel Robinson's "Hockey Nights in Canada," the most enigmatic contribution, implies strongly that Canadian small towns impose a stultifying Philistine ethos upon youngsters of average means; hockey is the principal way upward and outward for boys who excel at it. The narrator yearned to dance on skates, "But you didn't say that too loud around here. Those boys who wore figure skates were accidentally on purpose made to feel unwelcome...." Less clearly, the story seems to be making a larger comment about failures of will in both people who dream rather than dare and those who flare and fizzle.

A similar suggestion about small-town life emanates from "Things Happen," by Helen Mourre. Thirteen-year-old Binny, son of strait-laced parents, has nothing respectable to do in early July except chores and nothing to look forward to but church camp by a polluted lake. He falls back on the companionship of a light-fingered young ne'er-do-well, and their quest for excitement results in unintended disaster for a friendly, vulnerable, mildly raffish teacher. Mourre deftly implies that Binny's father, a disappointed man, self-righteously imposes the disaster on someone less guilty than he — though he does not realize it — of the behaviour he condemns.

L.J.M. Wadsworth's "The Boy Who Saw" is a touching but also oddly cheery fantasy built upon the grim reality that pallid people, life's losers, are often almost invisible to "normal" indifferent or casually cruel people around them. A goblin lurks in the wings of this story, about to collect such a person, the schoolboy Wilson. The goblin is "definitely wicked," says Wilson, yet it promises translation to a better place, one where Wilson is "needed." The goblin is ultimately less frightening than human society, wherein the boy's only reliable solace is a doughnut.

Separately or entwined, the twin longings to be fearlessly independent and to belong dominate most of the other stories. Bibliotherapy is evident in several. For instance, an unhappy adolescent girl goes to ugly extremes to consolidate her group membership in Megan K. Williams's "The Initiation," only to learn that she is as despised by the mean-minded group as the victim she hands over for torture. The protagonist of Ed Yatscoff's "Scarecrow" receives the same humiliating lesson from a trio who tantalize and then betray him.

The most overt bibliotherapy is in Bonnie Blake's "To Each His Song," an object lesson on the mindless cruelty of racism. Li Song, a visiting student from Japan, is a gravely charming, intelligent youngster. But he is shunned or targeted. The story has some quirky charm, especially in Li Song's culturally induced misinterpretations of Shakespeare. But the message over-rides art. Similarly, fantasy plays second fiddle to thesis in Margo McLoughlin's "Flying," an exemplum championing the talented who "fly" in the face of conformist mediocrity and envy. The only really funny story is Joanne Findon's "On the Road." Two fifteen-year-old Sarahs, ancestress and descendant, run away from home down the same road and meet in a time warp. E-mail letters and 1854 diary entries recount their mutually bewildering interchange. For once, a fictitious intrusion of present into past affects that past. And on top of the comedy, the reader enjoys knowing what the characters do not.

In sum, *Takes* is a pleasant, reasonably varied read. But I suspect that it will

be an assigned text more often than a freely chosen entertainment. The authors' desires to encourage and give moral reinforcement shine through with "uncool" earnestness. If, however, as modern orthodoxy maintains, the young strenuously prefer literature about people like themselves, then this collection should find receptive audiences, captive and even free, as a worthy adjunct to other fiction.

Frances Frazer is a retired professor of English with a particular interest in children's literature. She wrote the chapter on children's literature in the ***Literary History of Canada, Vol.4.***

The Art of Multicultural Living

Tiktala. Margaret Shaw-MacKinnon. Illus. Laszlo Gal. Stoddart, 1996. 32 pp. $17.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7737-29208. ***Big Boy.*** Tololwa M. Mollel. Illus. E.B. Lewis. Stoddart, 1995. 32 pp. $18.95 cloth. ISBN 07737-2851-1. ***Marisol and the Yellow Messenger.*** Emilie Smith-Ayala. Illus. Sami Suamalainen. Annick, 1994. Unpag. $14.95 cloth, $4.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-973-9, 1-55037-972-0. ***Freedom Child of the Sea.*** Richardo Keens-Douglas. Illus. Julia Gukova. Annick, 1994. Unpag. $16.95 cloth, $5.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-373-0, 1-55037-372-2.

Timely subject matter, such as multiculturalism in children's books, as in any book, is not enough without an impressive writing style to keep both the sentiments expressed and the educational value alive and flourishing. Four picture books excel above the commonplace, conveying complex ideas concretely, imaginatively, and without didacticism. The characters are able to hold up the burden of the messages convincingly and innovatively. The books go beyond the boundaries of the basic moral of the tale, and have the staying power to provoke a reader's thoughtfulness and wonder.