Feminists will be pleased, as I was, to find that the wisest old bat is female and that Marina is every bit as believable and interesting as Shade. Opal makes his creatures not only alive but beings capable of learning from their mistakes, growing wiser, changed by what they go through together. Far too often, in a book so full of breakneck chases and last-minute escapes, depth of character is sadly lacking. Oppel takes time to let his bats ponder, comfort and encourage each other, listen to others, question themselves and remain acutely aware of the world in which they disport themselves, as well as struggle to survive.

This is an author to follow further. It has been said that we, in Canada, have trouble writing great fantasy because our history is too short; we have not had time to develop our legendary past and our folk culture and so must always write derivatively. How can we possibly manage without a Standing Stone to our names? When Susan Cooper herself managed successfully to bring a boggart from Scotland to Toronto, he was too homesick to stay. Welwyn Wilton Katz, Michael Bedard, Janet Lunn, Margaret Buffie and others have worked valiantly to overcome this difficulty in their different ways. Yet, even though we may not have been here long, our bats surely flit back into prehistory. How clever of Kenneth Oppel to have thought of this and gone questing with them. They also have many of the advantages Tolkien discovered when he came up with his hobbits. Shade and Marina belong to a tribe of small, vulnerable, furry, strangely gifted, underestimated and, at least in Kenneth Opal's sure hands, endearing and worthy beings. They deserve a quest to match that Bilbo Baggins so reluctantly set out on long ago.

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Friendship and Difference

The Dragon's Egg. Alison Baird. Illus. Frances Tyrrell. Scholastic, 1994. 140 pp. $5.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-24181-8. ***A Friend Like Zilla***. Rachna Gilmore. Illus. Alice Priestley. Second Story Press, 1995. 133 pp. $5.95 paper. ISBN 0-929005-71-6. ***The Onlyhouse***. Teresa Toten. Red Deer College Press, 1995. 128 pp. $8.95 paper. ISBN 0-88995-137-3.

Although one novel is a fantasy and the other two realistic works, and there are striking differences in style and approach, all three of these first novels concern pre-adolescent girls, between nine and eleven, who enter a new environment and experience problems with friendship. That one friend is a Chinese dragon while the other two are, respectively, a tough girl and a developmentally delayed seventeen-year-old, makes relatively little difference to the problems at the centre of the stories: those of choosing wisely, accepting the unusual, standing up for oneself and not giving in to bullying, and dealing with parents who are concerned but who may not understand.

The issue of difference and acceptance is at the centre of all of these novels. Each girl has an unusual name which causes difficulties: Chinese Ai Lien in *The*

Dragon's Egg and Croatian Lucija (Lucy) of *The Onlyhouse* are mocked by their new schoolmates for their ethnic-sounding names; both Nobby of *A Friend Like Zilla* and her new friend Zilla use nicknames rather than their real names, Zenobia and Azalea. Deeper differences arise around the issue of intelligence. Both Ai Lien and Lucy risk ostracism because of their academic success, particularly Ai Lien who has "skipped" a grade and been sent to a new school where everyone is older than she. Zilla is fortunate in that she has been treated with love and respect both within her family and at school, and Nobby quickly appreciates that despite Zilla's slowness in some areas and inability to read, she has many other skills, and is much more fun as a playmate than Nobby expected a seventeen-year-old could be. Her family holiday at Zilla's Prince Edward Island farm is spoilt by the arrival of Nobby's supercilious uncle, who makes Zilla self-conscious and uneasy. Devastated by a contemptuous remark she overhears, Zilla withdraws entirely from the visitors, and the infuriated Nobby is not at first able to hear her mother's explanation of how Uncle Chad's insensitive behaviour stems from his own childhood experience of being a lonely misfit. Developing sensitivity to other people's insecurities as well as one's own is shown by all three authors as an important element in the process of maturing. In *The Onlyhouse* it is Lucy's sympathy for the down-trodden Jenny which finally enables her to recognise her friend Jackie for what she is — manipulative and mean-spirited, and to break free of the thrall in which Jackie's popularity and sophistication has held her.

The Onlyhouse is the most complex and interesting of these three novels, not only in its handling of the central character and her relationships but also in its use of language. Both Toten and Gilmore write in the first person and attempt, with mixed success, to recreate an authentic colloquial voice for their narrators, but Toten's novel is the only one of the three which gives the sense of really being inside the girls's consciousness and conveying the way she experiences the events of the story. The dedication suggests that this novel may be partially autobiographical, as does the engaging portrait of Lucy's widowed mother, whose fractured English and unfashionable garb never distract Lucy from her warmth and worth. An autobiographical element may account for the period setting of the novel, in the late 1960s, for which otherwise there does not seem to be any particular point; the location, Toronto, is effectively used, particularly in scenes in the Jewish Market, but, apart from some details of clothing, the time period seems irrelevant. The jacket blurb compares Toten's novel to the work of Brian Doyle, and indeed there is often a similar wit and energy in her writing, notably in Lucy's deadpan accounts of religious practices. Like Doyle, Toten is implicitly on the side of life-affirming vulgarity rather than beige, Anglo-Saxon good taste, although — interestingly — in the end Lucy rejects the brassy non-conformist, Jackie, for the kindly Girl Guide, Emily. Lucy's fascination with Jackie recalls a similar relationship in Kit Pearson's *The Daring Game*, where a newcomer to the school is taken in hand by a troubled but charismatic "bad girl" whose dares draw the members of her clique into increasingly dangerous ventures. Toten's resolution is more conventional that Pearson's, and perhaps a little too tidy; nonetheless, the neediness underlying Jackie's bravado is well evoked, without any editorialising or preaching.

In *A Friend Like Zilla* Gilmore also attempts to give young readers a sense of the complexities of human relationships and behaviour. Nobby's anger and

contempt for her arrogant uncles are contrasted to the generous spirit of Zilla, who also gets angry but doesn't hold a grudge, and focuses on simple human realities rather than Nobby's vengeful fantasies. The resolution of the story points the moral — of Zilla's different but real intelligence — rather heavily: after having dismissed Zilla as retarded and an unfit companion for his niece, Uncle Chad gets lost in a storm, breaks his ankle, and is rescued by Zilla. The irony of the situation is not allowed to pass unremarked, and the story ends in general apologies and good feeling. While the friendship between Nobby and Zilla is convincingly created, the novel would be stronger if its didactic impulse were better concealed.

A tinge of didacticism also colours the fantasy of *The Dragon's Egg*, a story in the E. Nesbit tradition about friendship between a child and a magical being which enters her everyday world. Ai Lien's companionship with a newly-hatched dragon compensates for her loneliness and unhappiness at school, where she is persecuted by a bully; eventually, however, the dragon intimidates the bully, Ai Lien starts to make a few human friends, and the dragon departs. Baird works quite a lot of information about Chinese culture into her story, and there are some humorous moments as Ai Lien struggles to keep the presence of the rapidly-growing dragon a secret, even from her parents. Neither the fantastic nor the realistic elements of the book are particularly memorable, however, and the flat prose style gives no sense of magical possibilities.

All three of these new Canadian children's novelists identify well with the concerns and interests of the age group for whom they are writing, and are topical in their themes without giving any feeling of writing to a formula. While the adults in all three books are well-intentioned and mostly sympathetic, they remain in the background, leaving the children responsible for working out their friendships and strengthening their own sense of identity in the process. Toten, however, is the one author who has the art to stay in the background herself, showing rather than telling her readers how a particular child experiences friendship.

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Three Chapter Books Leave Room For Improvement

The Magdalen Islands Mystery. Jean-Pierre Guillet. Trans. Patricia Claxton. Illus. Huguette Marquis. Quintin Publishers, 1994. 96 pp. $5.95 paper. ISBN 2-89435-014-7. ***The Lost Locket***. Carol Matas. Scholastic Canada Ltd., 1994. 71 pp. $3.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-74587-5. ***A Fine Day for Drool***. Sharon Siamon. James Lorimer & Company, 1994. 128 pp. $8.95 paper. ISBN 1-55028-460-6.

In the sequel to *The Cliff Case*, young ecologist Will is vacationing with his sister when he is accused of stealing a rare plover's egg. Trying to solve the mystery of the egg's disappearance, the kids stow away on the thief's plane and discover her secret — a sanctuary for endangered birds. This minor mystery carries a worthy ecological message, although Will's momentous discovery of live passenger pigeons is unlikely to mean much to young readers. The writing is somewhat