

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

quaint, with a strong flavour of Blyton writing for the tinies (a car goes "Vrrrooomm!", a plane "Whoo!"). Characters are inconsistent: Will, "the adventure-lover" (20) cries and screams at the first sign of danger. Given Claxton's credentials, we must conclude the weaknesses are the author's. Frequent sketches add interest and convey most of the tension.

Against her mother's wishes, Matas's Roz wears an heirloom locket to school where it is promptly stolen by the school bully, leaving Roz to figure out how to retrieve it before she gets into trouble at home. Language is competently used and dialogue is believable. Interesting new words (conundrum, ogle, flabbergasted) are blended in. The story moves forward crisply. Family dynamics are well drawn; readers will easily identify with Roz's resentment of her parents' indulgence of her younger brother, her distress at having to follow through with the karate lessons she begged for but now dreads, and her efforts to conceal her disobedience in order to avoid punishment. Less believable is the ultimate confrontation at which Roz suddenly masters her elusive karate skills and vanquishes the bully.

Siamon revisits Northern Ontario's Pickle Lake for a humorous tale about excavations at a fur-trade fort, a perilous canoe trip, bumbling horse thieves, and a galumphing red setter. Josie Moon and Kiff Kokatow are back, still bickering but pulling together in trouble. They come across as real kids readers will wish they knew. This is good adventure fare for younger readers, with swift pacing and lots of excitement. Inconsistencies mar an otherwise recommended effort: an illustration shows Kiff with shirt on while the text says it's off; "Smoke" is a mare who raises "his" head and stamps "his" hoof. There is a useful afterword about the trading forts used by the voyageurs.

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Having Fun with Pushy Parents and Their Little Geniuses

The Fabulous Song. Don Gillmor. Illus. Marie-Louise Gay. Stoddart Publishing, 1996. Unpag. \$17.95 laminated boards. ISBN 0-7737-28600.

It's no surprise that this stunning book was nominated for the Governor General's Award. Although its nomination was in the "text" category, the pictures are as vibrant as the text is witty. The text is an unusual pleasure to read out loud. Nothing twists up your tongue or runs you short of breath. But you do have to stop to laugh at some of the jokes. The illustrations, by the way, do what illustrations should: they extend and amplify the humour in the text. Each page has its own internal rhythm, and as soon as you finish reading it, you don't reach to turn the page — you stop to look more at the illustrations because it takes a long time to find all the inventiveness in them.

The story is about one young Frederic Pipkin, whose music-loving family names him Frederic for "Frederic Chopin," hoping he will live up to his name. When people tell his mom he's a "beautiful baby," his mother chimes back, "and musical, too." Gillmor tells us, "Actually, Frederic wasn't a beautiful baby. He