a difficult divorce in which one of the parents is immature and self-centred. If Coren had read carefully, he would have seen that the abducting father, far from being evil, is just an over-grown child given to temper tantrums, and that the root of his behaviour is his over-indulgent mother (32). He is further exonerated by his daughter's recognition that she herself is like him, and by his admission of blame at the end.

The story is told by Debbie, the oldest of the three children, and her voice is that of the generic adolescent narrator found in far too many young adult novels: a mix of flat, teenage idiom intended to create verisimilitude and adult cliches that appear to be the best the author can do by way of depth:

> Mom isn't perfect. Lord knows, if you were going to rate her impatience on a scale of one to ten, she'd be an eleven-and-a-half.... Anyway, even if Mom isn't perfect, us kids are first in her life. It's a very safe feeling, knowing that.
>
> Paige yawned and stretched beside me. A bird trilled as though its heart would burst with joy. (102)

The page-turner plot has plenty of uncomplicated action. The tension begins on page one ("The hair on the back of my neck prickled as I listened to that long silence.") and is kept up by near-escapes and near-disasters, but it's impossible to feel that the children are ever in real danger. The last four pages wrap up the action neatly and provide a dollop of condensed character development to assure the reader that this particular family problem is solved: "Maybe Dad was growing up. I guess we all grew up a lot that horrible summer" (135)

There is humour in the back seat bickering of the children during the long car trip, and the old man who gives them shelter is an interesting addition — he is running away from *his* children. On a scale of one to ten, this novel would be a six-and-a-half.

Anna E. Altmann teaches children's literature in the School of Library and Information Studies at the University of Alberta.

The Dreamer in the Dream

Awake and Dreaming. Kit Pearson. Viking/Penguin, 1996. 228 pp. $19.99 cloth. ISBN 0-670-86954-6.

"You seem so much like me as a child. I recognized your *yearning* so much" (197). So says the ghost author within the story. It is this essential concept, a child's yearning, that pulls the reader into this fantastic, yet realistic, story. It is a story about a nine-year-old reader who encounters a ghost, a writer, and shows how their lonely worlds merge and free them from their separate despair.

This is a story about today's world incorporating universal themes of alienation, family conflict, and the triumph of love and the imagination. The moving force is ideals, as revealed through literature and realised in the real world. Books and imagination are the protagonist's only comfort in her grey world of urban poverty.

It is not surprising that this idea of the importance of books and imagination plays such an important part of the story, given Pearson's background as a librarian. It is subtly done. And the echo from one generation to the next, between Theo and the ghost, is nicely incorporated — like the passing of a torch. As well, we see that wealth or parental literacy do not necessarily impact on a child's literacy or imagination. This is an important message for children.

As the readers, we are as willing as young Theo is to believe the fantasy of her dream world. Her poverty and fear of being abandoned by her unreliable mother have her dreaming for a miracle and the magic happens. She yearns to be part of a perfect family and her daydream merges with the ghost's fiction. Like Theo, we know that the happy family who adopts her, with no questions asked, cannot be real, but we do not ask too many questions lest the spell be broken. The disappointment is palpable when the dream proves an illusion.

The lesson to be learned is a valuable one. Reality may not be as satisfying as fantasy, but it has its rewards. The yearning for love, success, and security is felt by all. When Theo encounters the real family she met through her dream, she learns this lesson. The story closes on a hopeful note, lifting Theo and her mother out of their initial despair. This is a very satisfying read, a story that does not judge the characters. The fantastic element makes it intriguing and keeps it from being melodramatic.

Judith Carson, a professor of English and Communications at Seneca College in North York, Ontario, teaches children's literature and writing, as well as reviewing books.

A Problem Novel with an Uncharacteristic Problem

Step by Step. Ginny Russell. Beach Holme Publishers, 1996. 108 pp. $8.95 paper. ISBN 0-88878-364-7.

Ginny Russell assumes a laudable task in this problem novel, the demonstration of how fourteen-year-old Kim Jamieson comes to terms with her mother's accidental death. Having researched this particular problem in Jill Krementz's *How It Feels When a Parent Dies*, Russell would show Kim dealing with grief "step by step" until she is able once again to face life with a sense of positive anticipation or, in the words of her deceased mother, with the recognition that "the real world is full of great things and wonderful people, if you can spot them. And don't forget to roll with the punches."

Like many other recent problem novels, this one examines a central concern, the death of a mother, in the context of a plethora of other problems — drug abuse, alcoholism, smoking, runaway street kids. But one of the great attractions of problem novels for young readers has always been the creation of a compelling character, one just like them who speaks directly to them in an individualized and yet universalized adolescent dialect, whether it be the blasphemous idiom of Salinger's Holden Caulfield, or the flat locutions of Blume's Davey Wexler. It is in this very important dimension that *Step by Step* falters. The voices of Kim Jamieson and her friends Suzy, Buzz and Mike fail to convey who