

FAMILY COMPACT VALUES

Rebellion: A Novel of Upper Canada. Marianne Brandis. "Suitably Embellished with Scratchboard Illustrations by Gerard Brender à Brandis." The Porcupine's Quill, 1996. 284 pp. \$16.95 paper. ISBN 0-88984-175-6.

The fact that the thirteen- and fourteen-year-old de Grassi sisters worked for the government as spies and messengers in December 1837, when armed rebellion momentarily brought confusion to Toronto, gives Marianne Brandis opportune material for her latest work of young-adult historical fiction. Cornelia and Charlotte de Grassi, along with several other lesser-known historical characters, figure prominently in the novel, where famous or infamous players in the events — William Lyon Mackenzie, Colonel Fitzgibbon, Archdeacon Strachan — also appear. While conscientiously researched history opens up the grounds, an engaging fiction conducts the tour through this telling exhibition of our past, presented as the means by which a young immigrant gains a better sense of who he is and who he may become. Fourteen-year-old Adam Wheeler, shipped from England like a "parcel" in the care of irresponsible Uncle Ted (who soon slopes off to join the rebels), emerges from his experiences not only assured of his human individuality, but naturalized as a not uncommon Canadian type, balancing both sides of Tory and radical schemes while leaning towards the established order of things.

As in her "Emma" trilogy and *Fire Ship*, Brandis convincingly evokes the topography, texture and rhythms of ordinary life in the Toronto region of old. Adam's various journeys to and from the Don Mills, where he finds employment with the paper manufacturers Eastwood and Skinner (like Helliwell's brewery nearby, historically verifiable), take him across a terrain and a culture interesting to recover. Recovery of the ordinary is integral to *Rebellion's* treatment of political crisis, which, as Adam observes, "stir[s] up people's normal lives" and forces those faced with the possibility of having to kill or of being killed to think about what they believe in. If Adam sees that extraordinary events exert such pressure, he remains convinced nevertheless that they involve neither monsters nor mailed heroes on one side or another, but "just ordinary folk" in their everyday dress.

The redcoats, of course, have all been sent to quell unrest in Lower Canada, leaving an untrained militia to skirmish with the rebel army, no army but a shifty "bunch of men like Uncle Ted." Yet both groups can shoot to kill, as Adam, from his vantage point on both sides of the ragged line, discovers to his horror, and mere "kids" like himself and the venturesome de Grassi sisters can find themselves in mortal danger. Taking up the second half of the novel, the rebellion gives Adam a crash course in the politics of power and its human repercussions. Though he recognizes, sometimes with self-despising anger, that power resides with the rich and privileged in Upper Canada as in England, Adam none the less is encouraged to believe that class divisions are less strictly drawn in his new country (even the imperfectly democratic de Grassi sisters regard him as a fellow human being) and that, having found a community and work he likes, he has a future undreamt of in the hard land left behind.

Because the rebels are typified in Uncle Ted — a breezy fellow imperceptive people take to, but repeatedly judged “lazy and unreliable” by Adam and the narrator — Adam’s rejection of their cause is as much personal as political. Making the political personal is a prerogative, no doubt, of historical fiction, but Uncle Ted is so heavily deployed as a foil for Adam’s self-formation that he operates more as strategic counter than embodied character, and so gives very political *ad hominem* support to Adam’s perception that the Mackenzie rebellion, a magnet for idlers looking for “easy pickings,” achieves nothing but “unhappiness and muddle.” Since historical fiction for young adults seems obliged to arrange the past as a context for the successful maturation of its teenage protagonists, didactic purpose inevitably tidies up the imaginative reclamation of history, imposing certain ideological constraints. But if *Rebellion* ties Adam’s individuation to a modified acceptance of Tory rule, it provides as well a scrupulously imagined setting to authenticate his solidly Upper Canadian coming of age.

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CHINESE CANADIAN FATHERS AND SONS

Golden Girl and Other Stories. Gillian Chan. Kids Can Press Ltd., 1994. 119 pp. \$4.95 paper. ISBN 1-55074-219-1. **Breakaway.** Paul Yee. Groundwood/Douglas and McIntyre, 1994. 144 pp. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-201-7.

In Gillian Chan’s *Golden Girl and Other Stories* and Paul Yee’s *Breakaway* both authors examine the relationships which exist between Chinese-Canadian fathers and sons. The conflicts which develop because of the different cultural values of the two generations described in these books are compounded by other difficulties which confront both the teenagers and their parents.

Chan’s impressive first work of young adult fiction explores the theme of bullying through five interconnected tales which take place in the small Ontario town of Elmwood. Although all five short stories contain strong plots and convincing passages of dialogue in which adolescents are bullied by fellow classmates or by adults, perhaps the most complex and interesting characters of the collection are to be found in “Small Town Napoleon.”

Andy Li’s father, Dr. Vincent Li, spent a difficult childhood in Hong Kong attempting to qualify for university while growing up in poverty. Now that Vincent has successfully established himself as a doctor in Elmwood he is enraged to learn that his son is wasting his time performing the lead role of Napoleon in the school’s musical, “Animal Farm,” rather than concentrating on his studies. At a particularly gripping moment in the story, Andy, who has defied his father by continuing to act in the play, is waiting back stage in the dark for the curtain to rise on opening night. Instead of thinking about the play, however,