

## MINI-REVIEWS

**The Night Hazel Came to Town.** John Ibbitson. Maxwell Macmillan Canada, 1993. 148 pp., \$15.55, \$10.35 cloth, paper. ISBN 0-02-954098-4; 0-02-954209-X.

At seventeen, Lee Kendall leaves his widowed father in a small northern Ontario town to make his way in Toronto. Through quick observation, nerve, and the ability to take advantage of chance, he lands a job as copy boy on the *Toronto Telegram*. Largely through his friendship with Murphy, a skilled but alcoholic reporter, he is soon involved in gathering and reporting news: a domestic assault, the landing and attempted abduction by *Telegram* reporters of Marilyn Bell after her swim across Lake Ontario, and even a hanging. Finally, in Hurricane Hazel, he helps save a man's life in the swollen Humber River. At the book's end Lee has become a regular reporter, a job he will obviously do well.

The book is well and clearly written, with convincing pictures of Toronto in 1954 and life in a busy newspaper office. Episodes quickly follow each other, and the reader is kept eager for more. Though the hero's opportunities probably arise more frequently than they would in real life, and the speech of the reporters is obviously "cleaned up" (a necessity for this kind of book today), life is generally viewed with a clear, cold, sometimes disturbing eye. The reporters do not see the hanging (the punishment for a killing which would certainly be considered manslaughter today), but hear the accused being dragged, screaming, to the gallows. Some drownings during the hurricane (more than fifty actually occurred) are described in unsentimental detail.

Treatment of character is brief but effective. Lee's father, a reserved but helpful presence in northern Ontario, is well aware that his son is finding his own way. Lee just as quietly returns his affection. A bitter-sweet romantic episode — Lee's love for and loss of Angela, a would-be actress, nine years his senior — is handled subtly, with humour and feeling. Like many other young-adult novels, this is a story of a young person's growth, but done with a strong attachment to reality.

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**Dead Water Zone.** Kenneth Oppel. Kids Can Press Ltd., 1992. 170 pages, \$4.95 paper. ISBN 1-55074-092-X.

There's no doubt Kenneth Oppel knows how to keep the action moving and the suspense building. *Dead Water Zone* is what we all would recognize as a page-turner. And although the story is directed at the juvenile market, with a sixteen-year-old protagonist and a supporting cast of good guys and bad guys (almost all teens as well) the author succeeds in maintaining a style and voice that does not talk down. The result is good action fiction that is as appealing to an adult as to the teens for whom it was written. In fact, except for the parade of teen characters

and the obvious underplaying of sex in the plot, there is little to distinguish this book from adult pulp fiction. And that should be a concern. Yes, teens read adult pulp fiction. But I believe that those who write for teens specifically have a responsibility to offer an alternative to what is already out there for the asking. Kids get plenty of guns, knives, crime, and male-dominated power plots. They also know all the moves that Opiel relies on: last minute reprieves; betrayals by brothers and friends; villains who come back to life; and a favourite, the ultimate bad guy who is not really human so okay to hate: "... bundles of thin transparent tubing twined around the creature's arms and legs, chest and neck, pricking into the flesh. A clear liquid oozed through the tubes, circulating and recirculating, and he knew there was not an ounce of blood in this thing's body — only dead water" (127). We've seen it in Schwarzenegger movies. We've read it in Stephen King. It's effective, but it's not new.

And there's the dilemma in this book. The writing is strong, the plotting, although predictable, is effective. But in the end, Opiel takes real issues and trivializes them with commercial packaging. The complexities of brotherly love, searches for personal perfection, the need to be needed — these are all central to the characters and the motives that carry the plot forward. But they become secondary to the surface action of the story.

When Paul, the boy from suburbia who finds himself adrift on the darker side in Watertown, surprises himself and his new friend, Monica, by expertly setting fire to a boat, she asks him "How d'you know stuff like this?" He answers: "TV" (107). If *Dead Water Zone* has a familiar feel, a comfortable fit that invites a reader to ride along without thinking about the underlying issues, we know why.

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**There Was an Old Man: A Collection of Limericks.** Edward Lear. Illus. Michèle Lemieux. Kids Can Press, 1994. Unpag., \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55074-213-2.

To many readers Edward Lear is hardly more than a minor erratum in the continental drift of literature, an oddity that rolled out of the way as the mass moved by. He left us "The Owl and the Pussycat," which everyone knows vaguely, and a lot of strange limericks with very odd drawings. The fact is that this lonely man, a fine landscape and botanical artist, left a legacy of language that shows no sign of disappearing. Nonsense scarcely existed in literature before Lear, and it has been a major ingredient in writing for children ever since.

One worries at the prospect of a new interpretation of Lear. Odd as his drawings are, they are oddly correct for what he wrote. Michèle Lemieux, a fine Canadian artist, has taken Lear on in her *There Was an Old Man: A Collection of Limericks*. He has risen with distinction to the occasion. Her style, of course, employs techniques which Lear could not have accessed in mid-Victorian England — colour, for instance, which would have been considered altogether