Between Brothers. Irene Morck. Stoddart Publishing Co., 1992. 195 pp., $9.95 paper. ISBN 0-7737-5530-6. **BLT**. Catherine Dunphy. James Lorimer & Co., 1992 (Degrassi Series #20). 164 pp., $4.95 paper. ISBN 1-55028-372-3, 1-55037-100-2 cloth. **In Such a Place**. Lynne Fairbridge. Doubleday Canada, 1992. 143 pp., $13.50 paper. ISBN 0-385-25374-5. **Snake**. Susin Nielsen. James Lorimer & Co., 1991 (Degrassi Series #18). 196 pp., $4.95 paper. ISBN 1-55028-368-5, 1-55028-370-7 cloth. **Stranger on the Run**. Marilyn Halvorson. Stoddart Publishing Co., 1992. 191 pp., $9.95 paper. ISBN 0-7737-5532-2. **Wrong Time, Wrong Place**. Lesley Choyce. Formac Publishing Ltd., 1991. 115 pp., $16.95, $8.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 0-88780-099-8, 0-88780-098-X.

While each of these six novels varies broadly in terms of plot, they all grapple with one particular central theme: that of *belonging*. The problem of belonging is a question which never goes away for most of us, but for the books' respective heroes, it at times paralyses them. Each young man must discover, for example, to which "group" he most owes allegiance, by asking himself tough questions: Who truly loves him? How much of him and his past will someone be willing to accept? With whom does he feel the greatest kinship? Belonging also often carries ethical implications—several of the boys ask the question: To what group can I belong in good conscience, and what can I do to change my group for the better? They work to effect positive change within their own groups, attempting to undo various injustices, great or small, as the case may be. Ultimately, each in his own way confronts and overcomes the barriers which keep him from fulfilling relationships with other people.

Some of the books, however, are much better than others. The least convincing story is Irene Morck's *Between Brothers*. While its premise has potential—two rival brothers, one who is their father's obvious favourite, forced to spend time together with their father on a horse-back expedition in the Rockies—the central character, Greg, is simply neither likable nor realistic. Perhaps this is because, compared with the other books which contain heroes with a great deal going on in their heads, Greg produces nary a worthwhile thought throughout the whole trip. As well, his personality is largely eclipsed by the two other young people on the trip: Holly, and his brother Michael, who *do* have profound and interesting thoughts with some frequency.

Greg is wholly consumed with being cool—which entails running with a good-looking, shallow crowd at home in Calgary. In fact, the "problem" to which he devotes most energy worrying about is that he will be stuck in the mountains and be forced to miss a big party to which he had been looking forward. Unfortunately, given the magnitude of some of the problems confronted by the young men in the other books, Greg's dilemma pales into pointless frivolity. In fact, this reader had so little sympathy for Greg and his unfolding drama that the book's resolution invoked an *I-told-you-so* response, rather than

the preferred catharsis.

Much more engaging is Marilyn Halvorson's *Stranger on the Run*. Steve is a former streetkid trying to make a fresh start on a life in which he has made serious errors. On the run from both the police and the underworld, he is unable to trust anyone, even though he would love to have someone understand his situation. Even when he is taken in by two no-nonsense ranchers who give him a home of sorts, he must remain aloof. The resulting suspense and occasional dramatic irony would, I suspect, be very appealing to young readers. As well, the description of his new life cattle ranching, set against a wild Southern Alberta winter is well done; Halvorson captures the rugged beauty of the landscape and manages to convey the feeling of gritty hard work one ought to find on a ranch during calving season.

The other characters are as engaging (if not more) than Steve. Jesse, the native ranch-hand, is a strong mysterious figure who not only saves Steve's life, but operates as his role-model, representing as he does the eventual triumph of good over evil in one's own life, if one is willing to work hard for it.

The one thing about *Stranger on the Run* which bothered me at times was Steve's narrative voice. When he speaks of painful events in the past (there are a lot of them), he sounds positively "hard-boiled," *à la* Mike Hammer:

> I wasn't out long. A couple of punches in the face woke me up fast, but even though my mind was up and running again my body totally refused to move. With the two biggest guys kneeling on me there weren't a whole lot of moves I could make anyway. So I just lay there listening to their voices .... (16)

All in all, this style is more humorous than unconvincing, coming as it does from a nineteen-year old.

Stranger on the Run is second in a two-book series: while Steve makes definite progress here, his story ends as it began, for he must once again flee from those who are hunting for him. This story begs to be continued, so easily was this reader involved with the likable villain-turned-good-guy and his honest quest to resolve his problems and amend his past.

The problem of wealth, of being a socioeconomic outsider from the "wrong side of the tracks," is the subject of Catherine Dunphy's *BLT* (number 20 in the Degrassi Series). The book's hero, BLT, finds himself trying to form relationships with a high-living group of basketball players from Durfield High, a school in a wealthier part of town. His new friends appear to accept him, inviting him up to cottage weekends and out to nights on the town. However, his new-found lifestyle is costly and completely unrealistic in the long run: he is caught in the dreadful position of not knowing how genuinely real his friends are—would they still want him around if they knew he wasn't well off? His parents are working class and he himself is desperately searching for work; yet all the while, rather than admitting his problems and risk losing his "friends," he struggles to keep appearances up, pretending to spend money carelessly—and secretly agonising over his rapidly diminishing bank account.

BLT is finally able to confess his financial problems only after he actually commits a crime and greatly endangers a fellow team-mate in the process. Shocked at the extremes to which his desire to conform have driven him, he does what he can to reverse his evils. Even more difficult, however, is his decision to confess his troubles to his new friends. Through everything, our hero discovers the true meaning of friendship—that it does not come complete with a price tag. As well, he makes a further discovery: that love and romance—even with a charming, rich girl—is possible without the illusion of a fat wallet.

Snake is certainly the bravest book of the lot. The author, Susin Nielsen, does an admirable job of exploring some of the fears and realities of adolescent sexuality, specifically homosexuality, in this, the eighteenth novel in the Degrassi Series. When Snake's older brother, Glenn, announces that he is in love and about to move in with this "friend," Snake is not terribly alarmed. However, when Greg's new room-mate turns out to be another young man, Snake finds himself unable to face the situation at all gracefully. Worse, Snake's parents go so far as to banish their gay son from their family life altogether.

Snake is devastated, for Glenn is his beloved role-model and best friend. Not only is he now barred from seeing Glenn, he suddenly must do battle with a whole host of new and unsettling questions about himself. What if he were gay too? How would he know? After all, when Snake was growing up, he never enjoyed the rough games played by the boys, but loved to read or socialise with the girls instead. He had never been able to torment animals and insects like the other boys either. In fact, other people have even noticed his behaviour—his mother still refers to him as "The Sensitive One." And at fourteen, Snake has only ever been on one date, which was a disaster anyway. To make matters worse, some of the guys on his basketball team have started making fun of him as if he were in fact gay.

Thus Snake's happy young existence abruptly ends: he must single-handedly sort through his own questions about himself; struggle to understand the mysterious antagonism which drives his schoolmates to viciously attack a gay man; and break the barriers which prevent his shattered family from being whole again.

This is a lovely book, written with a deep empathy for the workings of the lonely adolescent mind. It approaches glibness only once—which makes the passage all the more incongruous. Snake asks Glenn if he is not afraid of getting AIDS. A very brief discussion follows:

> Condoms, Arch [Snake]. Don't they teach you in school that it isn't just a gay disease? When you start having sex, promise me you'll use condoms.
>
> I promise.
>
> Good, I've got to get to sleep now. I'm exhausted. (192)

I was rather surprised, as Glenn is the character with some of the most tender and insightful lines in the novel. Here, however, he seems to forget what else we all

get taught in school (and elsewhere): during a potential teaching moment, he reduces all of the good advice that may be given on the subject of relationships to a prophylactic ad. Nevertheless, *Snake* remains an inspiring work.

The final two novels explore the reality of racial/cultural tension and social injustice. *Wrong Time, Wrong Place*, by Lesley Choyce, presents us with a young man of mixed race—one parent is black and the other white. There are conflicts in his Halifax highschool between the black kids and the white kids. Yet, until he is branded as a rebel, as a trouble-maker typical to the black population, Corey has never really thought about what colour he was—he just assumed that he could remain neutral on the sidelines. Suddenly, he begins to notice that both students and faculty treat him and other black schoolmates very differently than they do the lighter-coloured students. He is not given the benefit of the doubt, or even allowed to explain himself, when he is implicated in crimes around campus.

Through a fortuitous reunion with his Uncle Larry, a highly-respected member of the black community, he begins to make important discoveries about himself and his black heritage. Larry begins to tell him stories of another Halifax—Africville—of a thriving black community unlike anything else in Canada's history. And he hears of how it was taken away from those who lived there and loved it. Eventually, Corey learns that he can no longer pretend that there are no racial problems, or that he has no race. He comes to identify with the famous Africville citizens, some of whom were (and are) his relatives, and through this new-found pride in his heritage he discovers a new-found pride in himself. In the end, it is his skin colour which motivates him, for by his skin alone others have assigned him a particular social situation. He realises that he must face injustices himself, and embraces a form of social activism which begins by keeping the past, the truth, alive. "Remember Africville" is his new motto.

My favourite novel on the list is *In Such a Place*. In sending her white, Canadian protagonist to South Africa, Lynne Fairbridge provides a setting which challenges a multitude of assumptions. Mark is staying in a wealthy part of town, full of healthy, happy whites. All seems to be well—he can see little sign of South Africa's many problems which he had heard so much about at home. At school, however, he meets Sipho, a young black man from the townships who has seen a very different side of life than have his white class-mates. Through Sipho, Mark's feelings of ethical superiority—as well as a certain blindness—become apparent: Mark is righteously appalled at the injustices which have been perpetrated against Sipho, and the living conditions in the Townships. Mark carries his anger to class one day, ending up in a heated debate over freedom in South Africa, stating that where he comes from, everybody is free. When a classmate confronts him and asks whether he has ever been to an Indian Reserve, he is forced into silence. This is a pivotal point for Mark, as he discovers his own faulty reasoning and the processes which he (and all of us) go through in order

to maintain a comfortable worldview. He begins to ponder the role of the conscientious, ethical individual in society, seeking to discover what, in fact, one lone individual can do to fight against an entire unjust system.

Mark assumes that he is a pacifist before he arrives in South Africa. Suddenly, he is forced to confront that attitude, as it too was formed in the vacuum of his fortunate background. As he watches the trapped and frustrated Sipho resort to violence, he realises that he must find a third way, aside from bleeding-heart liberalism and outright terrorism, by which he may fight the system.

Sipho's three sisters and their lovely names—Beauty, Unity, and Faith—provide an allegorical framework for Mark's South African experience. South Africa's beauty is indeed what strikes him most vividly upon arrival. He is not prepared for such a visual paradise and, in a sense, this shocking beauty at first blocks out South Africa's horror. The next stage of his visit is his friendship with Sipho: in their own limited way, the two boys have achieved a form of unity which is a model for those around them. Finally, when little Faith is murdered by the army, Mark's own hope nearly dies along with her. Mark's answer to the question of one's role in striving for change against all odds finally comes, but only when he is able to regain faith in himself and a greater good for which he is working. Lynn Fairbridge's excellent creation juggles major sociological, social, and ethical concepts—and all in a most skilful manner.

The above books, while all featuring males in their leading roles, are certainly relevant for young readers of either sex. Each one deals with the many problems of adolescence. Emotionally inscrutable or absent parents, romantic difficulties, scholastic aspirations and disappointments, strife with authority figures—and, of course, the central difficulty of belonging—are all problems which are no respecters of gender.

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RÊVER DE L'IMPOSSIBLE

Simon au clair de lune. Gilles Tibo. Toundra, 1993, 24pp, 10,95 $ relié, 4,95$ broché. ISBN 0-88776-317-0

"Je m'appelle Simon et j'aime la lune. Elle est ronde comme un ballon et elle brille dans le ciel." Voilà Simon lancé à la poursuite d'une autre chimère! Il monte sur son cheval pour s'approcher de la lune. Oh! il lui manque un morceau. Sans doute est-il tombé dans le lac? Simon essaie d'attraper le morceau de lune avec son filet mais le lac est trop profond. La lune s'efface de plus en plus. Simon fait appel à son amie Marlène, à la Sorcière, à Pierrot. Ce dernier prend sa plume pour écrire un mot. Heureusement, la chandelle n'est par morte ... et la lune reviendra bientôt. Elle illuminera le ciel et Simon pourra fêter la pleine lune avec ses amis.

Si on compare "Simon au clair de lune" aux cinq albums précédents, il y a peu de surprises. Encore une fois (et c'est merveilleux), Simon aime! Quand il aime,