

ousness wore a little thin in places, still I both laughed out loud and grew a little teary while reading this book. It's a long novel, but a satisfying one. Like a long summer spent working hard on a ranch, but growing stronger and healthier every day, reading *The McIntyre Liar* is a tonic.

Melody Collins is the author of The Magic Within, and is currently working on a new novel.

Facing Fears in Virtual Reality

The Faces of Fear. Monica Hughes. HarperCollins, 1997. 166 pp. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-00-224560-4.

The connections between Virtual Reality and ordinary reality are of vital concern in this near-future fiction by Monica Hughes.

Joan Sandow still suffers from nightmares about the terrible car accident that left her legs paralyzed and killed her mother. Unable to face the stares of other kids, Joan has quit school and stays at home, cared for by professionals but isolated in her misery. Her father Max is grieving too, but has allowed his daughter to build a cocoon around herself. Joan is desperately unhappy until she turns to cyberspace for her social life. In the world of the Internet she is no longer Joan but Joanna, a "warrior" persona with no physical limitations. There she meets the boy Whizkid, and their friendship soon involves playing Virtual Reality games, the most important of which is a new experimental game designed in the lab of MaxCom Industries, Max's software company.

In this near-future world, Virtual Reality includes sensory as well as visual effects. Thus, when plugged into the VR world, Joan/Joanna has the ability to walk and run. The game's four episodes involve a search for four "artifacts" which will save Earth from destruction. Aside from the normal challenges of the quest, the two young people also face the vengeful spirit of Jason, one of the game's designers, who has inserted frightening episodes in revenge for Joan's past insult. However, Joan and her friend know only that the game depends on cooperation, determination, courage and mutual trust.

The playing of the game alternates with glimpses of the characters' real lives, which are never easy. Whizkid (a.k.a. Steve) comes from a poor neighbourhood, and Joan faces the daily trials of being wheelchair-bound. Yet as the game progresses, both Joan and Steve learn to face their fears, and at the end are able to meet and interact in real life as themselves.

Despite a couple of unfortunate stereotypes (the unkempt computer nerd Jason and Whizkid's abusive baseball coach) the characters here are

generally well drawn. Some readers may wonder why, in a world where VR technology involves all the senses, there is no device that would enable Joan to walk in the real world. Despite such quibbles, *The Faces of Fear* is an exciting book which explores the very real fears that plague all teens. Although few have as much to deal with as Joan, most will be able to identify with her struggles. Joan cannot escape her disability, but she does find a friend who recognizes her heroic and beautiful self.

Joanne Findon is the author of The Dream of Aengus and Auld Lang Syne, both illustrated by Tolkien artist Ted Nasmith, as well as several short stories for young adults.

Good Sports and Good at Sports

Fast Break. Michael Coldwell. James Lorimer, 1995. 92 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 1-55028-514-9. **Lizzie's Soccer Showdown.** John Danakas. James Lorimer, 1994. 124 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 1-55023-464-9. **Riding Scared.** Marion Crook. James Lorimer, 1996. 94 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 1-55028-530-0. **Sink or Swim.** William Pasnak. James Lorimer, 1995. 89 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 1-55028-480-0. **A Stroke of Luck.** Kathryn Ellis. James Lorimer, 1995. 84 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 1-55028-506-8.

Lizzie is shy, tall, and skinny; she wears braces and isn't part of the "in" crowd. Dario Cavalito is terrified of the water. Angie is accused of trying to sabotage Paula's skating equipment. Jeff must deal with a new stepmother, a move to a new city, and problems with the school basketball team. Gillian, who is terrified of horses, is enrolled by her divorced father in an expensive riding school.

These are the "relevant," "timely" problems faced by the central characters — all twelve-years-old — of five novels in the Sports Stories series published by James Lorimer. These characters resolve their conflicts in part because of their involvement in sports. For example, in *A Stroke of Luck*, by Kathryn Ellis, Lizzie, learning that Paula has damaged her own equipment because she hates having to please her parents, helps the girl face her problems, acquires a new friend, and wins a scholarship that enables her to take the skating lessons her single-parent mother can't afford. And, in Michael Coldwell's *Fast Break* Jeff stands up to the team bullies when they torment his geeky friend, learns to like his stepmother, and finishes second in an important competition.

The five books, along with the other dozen or so titles in the series have been published, according to the publicity blurbs, because "Sports novels can get otherwise reluctant readers enthusiastic about books. The subject