

vivid accounts of Toronto landmarks — such as Centre Island — and the daily big-city bustle — such as on the subway — are plausibly presented. Al's experience as a new girl in a large, multicultural school is also well described. Ms. Pickles, the teacher, starts out as a caricature — which Al secretly sketches — with orange hair and huge round glasses at the top of a tall skinny body. Yet she proves to be observant and supportive, instantaneously interpreting Al's rather tortured drawings as an art therapist would. Given her important role, the subsequent description of her hair turning green seems extraneous and the humour crude.

At school, Al meets two important children who illustrate the theme of divorce: her young book buddy Roberto, and an unusual girl of her own age, Kim. Both emerging relationships are well depicted over the school-year and it is emotionally wrenching when Roberto is abducted by his father over a custody battle. Kim, who becomes Al's best friend, lives in an alternative family household consisting of her mother and her woman partner. In Al's own life, her father has a woman-friend who is divorced with a daughter who lives equally with both parents. In this way, several postmodern families are unobtrusively presented.

Importantly, Al develops a social conscience towards the poor and homeless. This dimension is sensitively described: in the course of the year Al finds a way to benefit some of the homeless she sees regularly, and she ultimately becomes an advocate of the rights of the poor. She does so despite her father's lack of support; yet she maturely finds a solution that allows her to perform her small acts of charity (giving food) while not engaging in conflict with her father.

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Scary and Serious Reads for Girls

The Body in the Basement. Norah McClintock. Scholastic, 1997. 208 pp. \$4.99 paper. ISBN 0-590-24983-5. *Grave Danger.* Gisela Tobien Sherman. Scholastic, 1997. 194 pp. \$4.99 paper. ISBN 0-590-12383-1.

In the current trend towards creepy reading for young people, it's nice to know that interesting story lines and solid writing haven't fallen by the wayside. While neither of these books qualifies as great literature, both are great reads, which is probably what a young teenage girl prefers anyway. There are some surprising parallels between the two books. Both feature heroines about sixteen years old, who have to draw on resources they didn't

know they had and both girls are believably plucky, even in the face of some nasty nineties realities. Like so many science fiction novels, the cover of *The Body in the Basement* might mislead a reader into thinking the book is a grisly tale of the undead. In fact, it is an almost unrelentingly dark story that begins with the discovery of the body of the mother that Tasha Scanlan thought deserted her five years ago. Tasha and her friend Jace must prove her father's innocence, despite her own doubts, given her parents' stormy relationship. The gloom of the book is mitigated by a budding romance between Tasha and Jace, which McClintock writes about with sensitivity and truth. For once, the detective work involved in clearing Tasha's father does not come easily, but is at first believably frustrating. If readers can keep the large cast of characters straight and forgive a somewhat melodramatic and overly neat ending, they'll be rewarded with the literary equivalent of pizza: quick to consume, fun while it lasts, but not overly memorable.

Much the same can be said of *Grave Danger*, which sets out the Gothic story of Cassie Denning and a vengeful ancestor. Cassie, too, must enlist her friends' aid to solve the mystery of the fun-loving but spiteful ghost who begins to endanger her life after she turns sixteen. Sherman accurately depicts the push-pull of family life as seen through adolescent eyes and paints a pleasantly spooky picture of the malicious ghost. Her only clangers come in dialogue such as "Lucky for you my Biology is better than your humour," or "An auspicious sign of what's to come," which would never emanate from a teenager's mouth. That said, *Grave Danger* is that most comforting of things, a real page-turner with an exciting story and dramatic climax. In a world where best-selling horror stories for young readers roll off an assembly line and into a chain of product marketing, it's reassuring to run across books featuring strong but realistic young heroines, Canadian locations, and well-drawn relationships.

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YA Fantasy: A Gripping Thriller

The Spiral Maze. Patricia Bow. ThistleDown Press, 1997. 191 pp. \$13.95 paper. ISBN 1-895449-68-5.

Ontario writer Patricia Bow is prolific. Since 1990 she has published six books. While prolific writers often produce books that are shallow or formulaic, Bow's latest book, *The Spiral Maze*, is neither. It is a gripping book that can best be described as a fantasy thriller. Set in a small town on the shores of Lake Huron, *The Spiral Maze* features two protagonists: Neil Gunn, a lonely and reserved thirteen-year-old boy, and Fleur Padgett, a boisterous girl from