

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

a large family. The two meet after Neil has a strange visitation in the night from a boy who seems to be his dead twin, Jasper. The two then try to solve the mysteries that arise as they pursue the leads left by the uncanny visitor.

The book is fascinatingly complex without becoming convoluted. Nothing is what it seems, and the further Neil and Fleur go, the deeper the mystery becomes. Excitement pants from every page. The pace is nonstop and yet never once does the book become confusing or really frightening. The young people are pushed from one adventure into another, often by the semi-human hunters that pursue them for a good part of the novel, yet nothing seems contrived or too convenient. Bow accomplishes this coherence through her masterful creation of her two primary characters.

Neil and Fleur are as real as any two characters in a book can be. They are easily intrigued, easily provoked into taking risks and difficult to frighten. They act and react to the deepening mystery around them exactly as two modern young people faced with something, yet horribly real, would — with initial cynicism, then defiance and determination to see the adventure through. They are also different enough from each other to be convincing. Fleur is brave, even reckless, yet has a problem with acute claustrophobia. Neil is more cautious, and yet he often leads them on, driven by his curiosity about his “dead” twin. Both are likeable and fallible. And through these characters Bow keeps the plot clear as they discuss what they think is happening to them.

Neil and Fleur also struggle with moral dilemmas. Neil, particularly, must make some difficult decisions which have major consequences not just for him but for others, such as whether or not to save the trapped Charlotte while risking his own and Fleur’s lives in the process. He eventually makes the right decisions, but the fact that Bow shows how difficult those choices are to make engages the reader with the character, but also provokes the reader to think about what he or she would do in a similar situation. Like all really good fantasy writers, Bow gives her readers a new perspective on the world through her characters and context.

This book is a superb example of what can be done in young adult fiction. It is also an example of why Canadian young adult books are held in high esteem all over the world. However, there is a good chance children will not read this book. The cover artwork is completely wrong for a young adult book. It is clever and “arty,” so “arty” that no child, not even a sophisticated reader, would look twice at it. What a shame. For inside that totally inappropriate cover lies an excellent novel for young adults.

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