

lavished on McCurdy by his contemporaries. This sets it apart from much aviation literature: the plain diction focuses attention away from the text and towards the events themselves, allowing the reader to experience vicariously the excitement that flying generated in its early days. We sense the emotions of the thousands who flocked to air shows before 1914, drawn by the wonder of seeing a human ascend into the heavens (and perhaps also by a morbid desire to see him crash to the earth). We appreciate the sheer inventiveness of McCurdy and his fellow designers, who crafted rickety flying machines out of materials that could be found in most Canadian farmhouses. And we see the intense curiosity of these inventors, who responded to every setback with the question, "What would happen if...?"

The book works so well, not simply because it is clearly written for children (a glossary is added to define the various technical terms used) and full of engaging characters, but because it returns us to a time when flight generated powerful emotions. In the 1930s, aviation pioneers like McCurdy were heroes to a whole generation of youngsters, who saw in flying the potential to improve the human condition. Harding's evocative portrait rekindles that same optimism of an era when many believed that flight could, so to speak, elevate humanity to a higher plane.

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Lessons in the Past: Women's History in Fiction

Janey's Choice. Bernice Thurman Hunter. Scholastic Canada, 1998. 198 pp. \$5.99 paper. ISBN 0-590-12497-8. *Wings to Fly*. Celia Barker Lottridge. Illus. Mary Jane Gerber. Groundwood/Douglas & McIntyre, 1997. 209 pp. \$15.95, \$9.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 0-88899-293-9, 0-88899-280-7.

Historical fiction ideally illuminates both the past and the present so that readers can contrast their modern lives with those led by previous generations. Young people, especially girls aged eight-twelve, will be able to engage in this process while reading *Janey's Choice* and *Wings to Fly*. Reflecting on the stories in these books can show them how opportunities for girls have changed over the last few decades, and can encourage them to strive for their own goals. Of course, young readers care more about the story than the feminist message that slides in sideways. A tight, well-told story like the one in *Wings to Fly* captivates the reader while offering instruction on the lives of girls and women on the Alberta frontier in 1918.

Everything is just right in this novel about Josie Ferrier, a spunky,

imaginative girl who is beginning to discover the nature of women's choices and their dreams of success. The details of women's work, particularly its variety, are accurate and compelling. For instance, Josie's teacher, Miss Barnett, could "build a coal fire to keep the school warm, referee a hockey game, catch ornery horses and even help the children stay calm and cheerful when an early snowstorm threatened to keep them overnight" (33). Miss Barnett is a good teacher because she uses her skills with pride. Josie's mother considers herself a "good farm wife" even though she says, "Surely there are more important things to do than get up at three in the morning to make bread. I have enough money on hand to buy bread from the baker for the threshing crew and I will'" (62). In such an atmosphere of female competence and self-assertion, Josie doesn't hesitate to butcher twelve turkeys to help feed their neighbours suffering from the flu epidemic. She also rides alone to town to pick up parcels, and helps organize a tea party for a dispirited neighbour. Despite her ability to manage farm life, Josie dreams of flying an airplane, and eventually receives a letter from her role model, pilot Katherine Stinson.

Josie sorts out her goals and aspirations against a beautifully detailed backdrop of pioneer Alberta. The descriptions of the landscape, light, and weather are exactly right, as are the historical details, such as the dissolving and dripping of a sod roof in a rainstorm. Lottridge seamlessly integrates her historical research into the strands of the plot that weave the story of a mystery and an account of a developing friendship. *Wings to Fly*, with its pleasant illustrations, satisfies on many levels.

Janey's Choice is not so rewarding. This story of interpersonal dynamics, set in 1931, concentrates on the troubles and divisions in a family whose children were separated after the death of their mother. Janey Phair, the youngest child, calls both Winnipeg and Toronto home because she had lived with an aunt and uncle in Winnipeg after her mother died, while her siblings stayed with their father in Toronto. This novel finds her back with her father and siblings after the death of her aunt. However, she soon yearns for her home in Winnipeg. Both she and her brother Harry move between households as they try to find a comfortable place in the absence of a mother. All this travelling seems gratuitous, however. Hunter does not address the social and geographical distinctions between the two cities, even though the title refers to Janey's choice of where she would like to live. Janey finally chooses to live with her father and siblings in Toronto.

The novel's plot then shifts to work out how a new stepmother, Mrs. Flowers, will become integrated into the family and how Janey's sister, Amy, will approach the change to her role as housekeeper. By the end of the novel, Amy is free to go to Kingston Normal School while her new stepmother takes over the domestic duties. Because of the portrayal of Amy's life as a household drudge, this novel does address girls' aspirations. The female characters discuss changing opportunities for women, but the novel does not give a sense of variety and possibility in women's lives. Amy is only free to leave the housekeeping behind because her father's new wife is willing to take it on.

The story has a strong oral flavour and is told primarily in dialogue. As a result, the descriptions of a particular place and time are lacking. Details of setting are likely correct but seem unauthentic because they are stuck onto a plot that doesn't require them. The least convincing details are the letters that Janey and Harry write: they are far more narrative and evocative than real children's letters, which tend to stick to a recitation of events. The book also has a serious editing error. In the midst of a conversation between Janey and her friend Norma, Mrs. Flowers arrives, and the conversation takes a disconcerting jump — something is obviously missing. The engaged reader will be able to zip along undeterred, however, as the story continues, informal and chatty, but not offering the same substance for thought as *Wings to Fly*.

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Bread and Butter, and Chocolate

Project Disaster. Sylvia McNicoll. Illus. Brian Boyd. Scholastic, 1990. 90 pp. \$4.50 paper. ISBN 0-590-73742-2. *Starshine on TV*. Ellen Schwartz. Polestar, 1996. 136 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 1-896095-13-5. *Crazy for Chocolate*. Frieda Wishinsky. Illus. Jock McRae. Scholastic, 1998. 68 pp. \$4.99 paper. ISBN 0-590-12397-1.

Sibling jealousy, school projects, relations with parents and grandparents, day-to-day ups and downs, and the need to be "special" — these are the bread-and-butter topics of children's leisure reading, if the proliferation of inexpensive paperback series that feature child heroes in contemporary domestic settings is anything to go by. Typically, the story begins with the child's difficulties in school or at home, continues with a description of a number of minor, often comic disasters, and concludes with the newly-enlightened child achieving success and enhanced self-esteem. Sylvia McNicoll's *Project Disaster* follows this pattern of events in the life of Neil Boisvert whose mother (in hospital for most of the book's duration) has just presented the family with a new baby. During her absence, Neil has to contend with his own less-than-stellar performance at school, the intrusions of his pesky little sister, Tara (suffering from her own insecurities and competing with Neil for the attention of a much-loved grandfather), and his longing for a pet dog which, his father insists, will only become reality if his school marks improve. When his school project on pets turns into a disaster, Neil seeks consolation behind the wheel of his grandfather's treasured red Firebird, with results that narrowly avert tragedy. McNicoll has written a number of children's books,