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,

including *The Big Race*, a sequel to *Project Disaster*. In the latter, she achieves a nice balance between having Neil recognize and take responsibility for his own shortcomings and at the same time giving him strong reassurance that he is loved and valued by his family.

Ellen Schwartz's *Starshine on TV* is intended for slightly older children and is the third in this series about a ten-year-old who has ambitions to be on television and a serious interest in spiders. She also has a pesky little sister who manages to steal the limelight, even getting the leading role in a TV commercial for which Starshine has auditioned. The plot is more complex than McNicoll's, as befits a book for more experienced readers, and it has a heavier agenda: Starshine's ambition to be on TV is shown to be misguided — she just doesn't have that kind of talent — but she has many other important qualities, including her determination to carry out an experiment to see which food helps her nephila, Goldy-legs, spin the strongest web. After a series of misadventures, Starshine learns to recognize what she is good at doing and where her real interests lie, and she learns too that her parents value her accomplishments just as much as those of her little sister.

Both of these books are entertaining and convey ideals that most of us would support in that they aim at helping children to grow into responsible, self-aware adults. At times, however, various social agendas seem to hang somewhat heavily on the plots, especially in Schwartz's book. Here the parents are environmentally-concerned artists who run a studio from their home. They are so attentive to their children, so affectionate and good-tempered, that one rather longs for them to have a few failings. Minor characters are determinedly multi-cultural (true also to a lesser degree of McNicoll's book); teachers and parents are concerned with liberating children from gender stereotypes. There is, of course, nothing wrong with these aims — quite the contrary — but one might wish for writing where they are subsumed within a more profound realization of character and incident. But perhaps that is beyond the requirements of this genre.

Frieda Wishinsky's *Crazy for Chocolate* focuses on one of the main themes of McNicoll's book: the ubiquitous school project. Anne has to complete a project on something she loves, and decides to write about chocolate. Library books make heavy reading, but a CD given to her by a strange new librarian turns out to have magic properties, and when Anne slides it into her computer, she finds herself on a more than virtual trip through history as onlooker and participant in the discovery and marketing of chocolate. Her adventures are lively and suspenseful; historical details are filled in painlessly for the reader, and at the end of the story, with Anne safely home again, we are given the actual project that she submits to her teacher (Grade: A). Unlike the previous two books, this one focuses on the external world rather than the child's emotional growth. Its agenda may be to encourage parents and children in the use of computer resources as well as more traditional sources of information. Parents faced with the supervision of their children's

school projects may well wish for a magic CD like Anne's to bring the research to life; failing that, they might find in this book some ideas and encouragement for a reluctant project writer.

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## Ginette Anfousse's Rosalie

***Rosalie's Catastrophes***. Ginette Anfousse. Illus. Marisol Sarrazin. Trans. Linda Gaboriau. Ragweed, 1994. 93 pp. $5.95 paper. ISBN 0-921556-47-0. ***Rosalie's Battles***. Ginette Anfousse. Illus. Marisol Sarrazin. Trans. Linda Gaboriau. Ragweed, 1995. 91 pp. $5.95 paper. ISBN 0-921556-50-0. ***Rosalie's Big Dream***. Ginette Anfousse. Illus. Marisol Sarrazin. Trans. Linda Gaboriau. Ragweed, 1995. 89 pp. $5.95 paper. ISBN 0-921556-50-0.

The lively and impulsive Rosalie is an orphan who lives with her seven aunts. *Rosalie's Catastrophes* introduces us to the heroine who complains "It's just not fair cause my seven aunts decided to be like seven mothers to me." Rosalie gradually comes to appreciate her loving family, in which each aunt fulfils a different parental role. Aunt Beatrice, for example, runs the household like a "traffic cop" while gentle Aunt Alice sneaks two molasses cookies into Rosalie's bedroom every night. The one-dimensional, slightly farcical descriptions of the aunts (reminiscent of adult characters in Robert Munsch's stories) make for many humorous moments in the book. I laughed out loud at the description of seven "mothers" interrupting the annual Christmas pageant with a standing ovation for Rosalie.

The hilarious moments which occur between Rosalie and her aunts in *Rosalie's Catastrophes* give way to a focus on Rosalie's relationships and dreams of future stardom in *Rosalie's Battles* and *Rosalie's Big Dream*. As in the first book, humorous situations arise from Rosalie's tendency to speak before thinking and her inexhaustible enthusiasm.

The light-hearted and upbeat nature of these books is reflected in Rosalie's frequent exclamation "Holy hopping horrors!" in response to her predicaments. However, a didactic tone is more evident in the sequels, where Rosalie learns about the evils of war and the importance of friendship. The illustrations in all three books accurately reflect the spirit and lively imagination of the heroine, especially the depiction of Rosalie's wild, wavy long hair which she calls her "Javanese Indian curls." While the two sequels do not completely live up to the quality of their predecessor, the complete series