

Pre-Teen Reality Check

Do You Want Fries with That? Martyn Godfrey. Scholastic Canada, 1996. 154 pp. paper. ISBN 0-590-24699-2. *Why Just Me?* Martyn Godfrey., Scholastic Canada, 1996. 146 pp. ISBN 0-590-24919-3 Ltd., Richmond Hill.

Martin Godfrey's novels, *Do You Want Fries with That?* and *Why Just Me?* are written for a pre-teen, female readership. Both books use the first-person accounts of twelve-year-old girls to tell their stories. This is a compelling technique, and draws the reader into the intimate details of the day-to-day lives of girls on the brink of young adulthood. As with so many young peoples' books, the stories capture the increasingly common reality of single-parent families. Each of these stories centres on the girl's relationship with her father. In *Do You Want Fries with That?*, Brittany and her best friend have travelled from Toronto to Florida for Brittany's annual visit with her father. It is highlighted by a trip to Disney World, where the girls will visit a live studio show with their teen idol. In *Why just me?*, Shannon pours her concerns about impending puberty onto the pages of her language arts journal. She is also negotiating a relationship with her mother who now lives in the US with her new husband, and seems to have little time for her daughter.

Both books deal with serious relationship issues, coming of age, adjusting to personal and family changes. There are funny and entertaining sections, as well as some suspense and a few surprises. Despite all of these positive attributes, the writing is uneven, particularly in *Do You Want Fries with That?*. The young female characters do not always sound authentic, the vocabulary fluctuates between believable adolescent banter, and sometimes jarring adult talk, which feels preachy and moralistic. Further, the girls, while occasionally showing some spunk and independent thinking, are distressingly stereotypical. In *Fries*, they are "ga-ga" over an adolescent male TV star, while in *Why Just Me?* Shannon finds herself going to endless hockey games to watch her boyfriend play, when she has no interest in the game. While the stories do a good job of delving into complicated relationships with separated parents, they still revolve mainly around infatuations with boys. The novels do not acknowledge the rich and varied lives of contemporary Canadian girls. Girls, too, play sports, and participate in countless other activities and organizations.

Why Just Me? is the stronger book of the two. It has some good introspective moments as Shannon writes in her journal about her first bra, waiting for her first period, and yearning for a mother who cares about these major events in her daughter's life. If the purpose of novels for young teens is to reflect back to them their everyday lives, *Why Just Me?* does a better job of that, while *Do You Want Fries with That?* indulges in the fantasy of meeting a male teen star face to face. These books, however, do not challenge the reader to think critically about issues in their lives, or to look beyond fairly narrow, stereotypical confines. While some girls will find Godfrey's books entertaining, they are light fare for the more sophisticated and adventurous adoles-

cent reader. The books provide the occasional poignant glimpse into the complexities of young people's lives, but the reader is left wanting more depth.

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Silence: Hiding a Father's Abuse

Of Things Not Seen. Don Aker. Gemini Books Stoddart, 1995. 197 pp. \$5.99 paper. ISBN 0-7736-7435-7. *Brad's Universe.* Mary Woodbury. Orca, 1998. 191 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 1-55143-120-3.

In the young adult novels, *Of Things Not Seen* and *Brad's Universe*, Don Aker and Mary Woodbury write about teenage boys who have abusive fathers. Each of the narratives, which focus almost entirely on the boys' perspectives, revolve around single-child families where the father has either left and then been replaced by a stepfather or, in the case of *Brad's Universe*, where the father has been in and out of jail. In Aker's novel, the abuse is blatant as the protagonist, sixteen-year-old Ben, spends every waking moment trying to avoid both his stepfather's violent beatings and the imminent discovery of the abuse. The sexual abuse in Woodbury's novel is more subversive as it occurred in a past that neither of fourteen-year-old Brad's parents want him to know about.

The problems of hiding the abuse and not revealing the past are key themes in both novels. In *Of Things Not Seen*, Don Aker deals explicitly with how terrifying and invasive physical abuse can be. He uses his characters to reiterate and refute common arguments that are a part of the abuse-victim mentality: when Ben's mother states that the stepfather's abuse is only a result of his love "Ben sneer[s]. 'Look at those marks on your face! That's not love! Not anything like it!'" (144). Though Aker stereotypically situates the abuse within a poor family where money is figured as one of the primary solutions to ending the abuse, he does challenge this class distinction by making one of the wealthiest of Ben's classmates, someone that Ben envies throughout the novel, also the victim of fatherly abuse. Thus, Aker points out that having money does not end abuse. In fact, the only solution that Aker provides to escape the abuse is exposing it — breaking the silence — especially to the police.

The sexual abuse in *Brad's Universe* is figured more as an elusive element that, when revealed, will serve to order Brad's world. Brad himself is not abused by his father. Woodbury's narrative maintains the suspense of