The Biggest Question of Our Day

The Freak. Carol Matas. Key Porter, 1997. 128 pp. $8.95 paper. ISBN 1-55013-852-9.

The press release tells me that Carol Matas, well known for her fiction on the Holocaust, has turned, in *The Freak,* to "a new writing genre with her new YA thriller." The back cover, similar in focus and tone to the press release, tells me that *The Freak* is "a thrilling adventure story." Neither press release, nor back cover, mentions that the narrator of *The Freak,* fifteen-year-old Jade, concentrates her narrative on the events that occur between Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, or that the "something terrible" (according to the back cover) that she foresees is the bombing of a Winnipeg synagogue.

Jade is somewhat jaded in her Judaism, more comfortable with the logical rules of math and science than with religion, but these rules do not help her account for the psychic abilities that she suddenly develops after nearly dying of meningitis. Rather than name Jade as Jewish or the subject, the nature of Judaism in a post-Holocaust world, Key Porter's publicity emphasizes the personal tensions and social crises that arise when Jade suddenly knows all her friends' secrets. What is evident in this avoidance of naming the subject in *The Freak* is that Matas is simply exploring a different way of writing about the Holocaust, and possibly a far more effective way of getting young adult readers to think about some key issues in Holocaust fiction: the relationship between free will and fate; the question of knowledge (could Europe's Jews have avoided extermination if they had had advance knowledge?); the nature and possibility of faith after the Holocaust.

The one family member who believes in Jade's powers is her grandmother, Baba, who tells her that her great-great grandmother could also foretell the future. Baba also tells Jade that this ability seems to skip a generation (the generation that was destroyed?). Jade's new boyfriend, Jon, offers the Hindu belief in reincarnation as an alternate way of explaining what is happening to her: "Maybe in your last life you fought in the resistance against the Nazis!" Jade replies with "a lame joke" that the anti-Semite whom Jon's father is trying to extradite to Austria may have murdered her in a past life. Certainly this blend of Judaism and Hindu faith is unconventional, but given the difficulty of writing about the Holocaust so that young adults seriously consider the issues it raises, Matas's approach results in far more than a YA thriller. Reincarnation becomes a way of imagining rewriting the Holocaust, not in the way anti-Semitic hate literature does, by denying that the Holocaust ever happened, but by imagining the power of a heroine who can change history, even if that only means preventing the bombing of one synagogue. Like the best Holocaust literature for children, *The Freak* is better in the questions it asks about the Holocaust than the explanations it provides for that event, something that the text itself recognizes when the English teacher admits that his "explanation is probably too simple anyway." As Jade strug-

gles to come to terms with her new powers, she asks her Baba, "how can you believe in God after the Holocaust?" and Baba responds, "that is the biggest question of our day for Jews. But I say that God didn't make the Holocaust. Hitler and those that collaborated with him made it happen. They made those choices."

Adrienne Kertzer teaches at the University of Calgary. Her recent work explores the nature of the lessons in Holocaust literature for children.

Reverse Discrimination

Fitting In. Sharon Kirsh. Second Story, 1995. 191 pp. ISBN 0-929005-74-0.

How to make young readers aware of the suffering brought on by racial and religious discrimination is the heavy challenge tackled by Sharon Kirsh in her novel for young adults. *Fitting In* is a bittersweet title, for the story concerns young people, who though snug in the familiarity of their orthodox lifestyle, do not fit the norm of the community in which they live. The narrative, which unfolds through the length of a school-year, is a rite-of-passage story, not in the usual sexual-awakening mode but rather through a newfound awareness of the power of prejudice.

The story is told by Mollie, a girl not yet fully adolescent, who belongs to a group of some thousand Jews living in the much larger Christian community of a seaside town just "large enough to be called a city." In a series of rich vignettes, Kirsh shows us at once what it feels like to enter adolescence and to grow up Jewish in an alien world. Kirsh is at her best in her portrayal of adolescence. Like young people everywhere, her protagonists are addicted to the telephone and talk to their friends on the line "till their throats are sore." They haunt the local shopping-plaza, mainly because, as Mollie explains, "there it's so dark and understated, so adult, that it feels like we're discovering a lost planet." Like most children brought up in religious households, they display a pretend offhandedness towards the practices of their religion. Mollie and her friends refer to their Hebrew school as "Hebe," while "Junior Congregation," the religious service for the young on the Sabbath, is to them "Junior Cong." They nickname their teachers: Mrs. Evans, the dreaded homeroom teacher at their public school, is known as "Mrs. EE, otherwise known as The Evil Eye," while their harsh Hebrew teacher, the Reverend Bloom, is "Bloomers" to them all.

Adolescence is also a time when we discover the meaning of friendship, and Kirsh displays a sure hand in depicting the intensity of feelings which mark the early ways of friendship. "Naomi is my best friend," Mollie