

UNICORNS, BICYCLES, COWS AND PARENTING

Fiona and the Flying Unicorns, Sandy Watson. Illus. Terry Stafford. Orca Book Publishers Ltd., 1991. 101 pp., \$7.95 paper. ISBN 0-920501-68-0; **Fiona & the Prince of Wheels**. Sandy Watson. Illus. Terry Stafford. Orca Book Publishers Ltd., 1992. 120 pp., \$7.95 paper. ISBN 0-920501-77-X; **There's a Cow in My Swimming Pool**. Martyn Godfrey. Illus. Frank O'Keefe. Scholastic Canada Ltd., 1991. 136 pp. \$3.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-74045-8.

Fiona and the Flying Unicorns, aimed at ages 7-10, is about nine-year-old Fiona Malloy's search for a suitable subject for a school science project following her principal's refusal to accept a project on unicorns. As Fiona dashes about creating more problems than she solves, parental savvy and supervision is sadly lacking. Fiona's problems accelerate during a babysitting jaunt with her four-year old neighbour Stanley when she and her older brother, Everett, have a run-in with the cranky farmer, Mr. Banducci and with school bullies, Bradley and Shane Newcomb.

Although building sites *are* dangerous play areas for young children, much of the action seems rather contrived. Stanley must be air-lifted up out of deep, muddy puddles. Untidily piled building materials fall down injuring Everett's foot, followed by a retreat from heavy rain through an open basement window, which becomes a prison of sorts. Stanley, encouraged by Fiona, climbs out of a "stuck" window, jumps down off a roof over a back door, landing down onto a conveniently placed sandpile, then runs for help. Everett is lifted, face down on an orchard ladder, up out of the basement window by Banducci and the Newcomb boys. When the ladder "snaps in two," Fiona and Bradley "unstick" the upstairs' window, jumping down just as Stanley did earlier. Predictably, Bradley and Fiona, who've become friends during their shared escapade and confidences, team up to do their science project on paper planes together, using the word "unicorn" in the title. This book ends on a cheery note with "order" restored, no questions asked, and the parental blinkers still firmly in place.

Fiona & the Prince of Wheels is in the mystery genre. Fiona, who smashes up her friend's new bike while on a trial run, has matured since her earlier appearance in the series—especially in the area of responsibility toward the property of others. Her father, Reverend Malloy, is more interested in correct rhetoric than in responsible solutions, pointing out that Fiona should have made a formal apology to her friend, Taralin. The characterization of the parents as trendy, and not-at-home (either physically or mentally) serves to allow, or oblige, the characters to solve their own problems or mysteries.

Fiona is perceptive and sensitive, especially in the moving incident when she explains P.C.'s lack of physical mobility to Stanley. Watson's interest in motion and mobility such as flying unicorns, paper airplanes, jumping off roofs, and glider pilots, dealt with earlier in *Fiona and the Flying Unicorns*, is also evident here. Watson has created a fascinating character in P.C. whose inventive mind

and optimistic attitude allows him to minimize his physical disabilities. Various themes, bike theft rings, physical disability and the history of wheels are effectively woven into the structure of this novel. P.C.'s expertise with gadgetry such as pulleys and wheels allows the children to triumph over the bike thieves. There is a touching analogy between the "spare parts" put together by Bradley enabling him to win the contest and those so cheerfully used by P.C. to achieve his own victory over his need for mobility. Watson's book is unforgettable, capable of nurturing compassion and greater understanding in the minds of young readers.

You know that Martin Godfrey's problem novel, *There's a Cow in My Swimming Pool*, is funny right from the first glance at Frank O'Keeffe's hilarious cover. Twelve-year-old Nicole Peters is trying to come to terms with her father's death, the marriage of her mother to her fifth grade teacher, Barry Manning, and her own emotional development. The characters are likeable and believable, and the storyline is built in a flawless fashion. The result is a highly amusing, informative book which includes a discussion of other serious subjects—the bewildering anger Nicole experiences over the death of her father, her rebellion toward her new stepdad, health concerns over a stubborn grandfather, the birthing of a calf followed by a funny discussion of the sex habits of humans and cows—all handled with a mix of humour, originality and truthfulness. The conclusion is emotionally moving, completely honest in its lack of false promises, yet still full of warmth and gentle humour.

Perhaps the most believable part of Godfrey's novel is the effect parenting has upon character motivation. Nicole, feeling betrayed and angry over her father's death following a drinking spree, resists her mother's marriage because of her fear that this marriage could break up. In the Fiona books, the parenting attitude results in the Malloys' self-absorbed, false view of Fiona as a "Baby Bear, Princess, Babycakes" character, impelling Fiona to act independently. P.C.'s actively involved, loving, though not overwhelming, father wins hands down, in his awareness and appreciation of a son, who is well-balanced emotionally, even physically sound, despite his disabilities.

In Godfrey's novel, Nicole and Brent, blessed in the beginning with one stable parent each, both appear to have a solid sense of self, resulting in sound motivation, a believable storyline, and a positive learning experience for young readers.

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