

Later another villain tells the Wicked Ogre he cannot punish the bully: "You can't do that, you're not in his story."

A book like *Kirstine and the villains* indicates through contrast what is lacking in many of the Jeanpac books. They are too often pale imitations of a juvenile fiction that is already too plentiful. A Canadian setting is not sufficient reason to choose these books over their American and British competitors. Even an eight-year-old can appreciate imagination, style, and wit. That we are now capable of writing the same dull stories as other countries is no reason to be proud. Jeans are, after all, American and once we put them on, it's almost impossible to tell us apart.

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A WINNER WRITES ABOUT WINNING

Journey through a shadow, Jaylene Butchart. Seal Books, McClelland & Stewart-Bantam Ltd., 1983. 63 pp. \$2.50 paper. ISBN 0-7704-1825-2.

This book captured the 1982 Young Canadian Writers Award which, explains Classic Bookshops' President Brian Melzack in the foreword, "grew out of a desire on the part of Classic Bookshops to say thank you to Canada and Canadians for the support they have given us over the years." To celebrate the opening of their hundredth store, Classic initiated the award, observing that the "future of Canadian culture lies in the hands of the young . . ." Of the over 600 manuscripts submitted, *Journey through a shadow* took the prize.

It would be at the least philistine to cavil at concrete encouragement for young writers. And there is clearly no arguing with the premise that old writers must be succeeded by young ones; or that young writers need both practice and exposure. True, too, that without readers, writers would not receive support in the form of awards or readership. So certainly it is to be hoped that competitions such as this serve to encourage the young writer, and in corollary, that they do not simply create in every school kid the idea that he or she is a writer.

But whether or not the gratitude of a commercial bookseller towards the clients who augment his coffers is analogous to a sensitive and challenging literary appreciation on the part of that sponsoring agency is perhaps another question. Perhaps. We do not know if the criteria for the award were literary or commercial; were the judges charged with searching out fine new blood for the Canadian literary stable, or were they scouting budding producers of books that sell well? The two goals are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but they

often turn out that way in practice.

Which brings us to the book in question. It is always a tricky business to review a book by a novice writer. Are the finest of critical filters to be used in scanning the work's flaws and accomplishments? Young writers cannot be expected to have achieved the polish, the experience, the vision or the sheer craftsmanship of their veteran seniors. Is the featherweight to be pitted against the giants on the grounds that you've got to be tough to survive, kid, so you might as well be judged with the best from the start? If so, I fear that a lot of good — not great, perhaps, but very *good* — young writers won't be around to keep us turning the pages a few years down the road. Alternatively, if we adopt a special, diluted scale, "training values" for assessing the work of young writers, perhaps the best we have the right to expect from such pampering is a pallid product when the writer reaches maturity in his or her work. One answer to the dilemma is a two-fold (hopefully not two-faced) review: remarks addressed to the reader, in dispassionate assessment of the article before us on the table; and remarks addressed to the writer, in the spirit of encouraging (in this case) her to go on from here, not to be satisfied at having earned one award, but to set this book aside and practice, practice, practice.

Journey through a shadow is built around a simple formula. A young boy, Jamie, is faced with the stresses of having his life uprooted. His parents have died in a car accident (have you noticed that a number of adolescent novels feature parental deaths as a catalyst for the plot?), and as a result he has had to leave his home, his school and his friends. He is now in the eighth grade, in a new school, living with his older brother, Russ, and his young wife, Pat. Pat and Russ have problems of their own, friction in the marriage and economic troubles among them. There isn't a lot of time for young Jamie. All the fun has gone from Jamie's life, and he doesn't even enjoy success in his social or academic life any more; in this school it isn't smart to get good marks, and smart kids are not popular. No matter what Jamie tries, he isn't accepted by the powerful members of his class, and at the outset of the story he is dreadfully alone, submerged in his own sense of failure, loss and inability to overcome the odds. "I guess I just wasn't cut out to be very good at anything."

From this low point, the novel concentrates on Jamie's climb, step by step, to the personal success of accepting himself and standing up for what he believes in. His initial misery is brought to a focus through the agency of the class bully, Don Bohert. Bohert is a foil to Jamie's self-pity, and serves ultimately to galvanize him to action, through a series of encounters which escalate in violence and seriousness until Jamie takes a stand and overcomes Bohert. (Incidentally, he also wins the pretty girl in the process, *pro forma*). The evolution of this climax to the story begins with Jamie's befriending a mongrel pup. Through the pup he renews his family ties with Russ and Pat. This nourishes him for the second step out of himself: he meets Lianne, a girl from his school, who also has a dog. She is a benign counterpart to Jamie, and a good model for

his growth: she is also not very popular at school because she is shy. But she is a winner at sports, and brings the school many medals. She is quiet and confident. And she's pretty.

Jamie and Lianne commence a friendship which further encourages his will to succeed. He begins, bit by bit, to act more in terms of the philosophy his brother offers him. It is perhaps a little sententious, and in its platitude lies an error in logic which equates one's self with good grades; but the spirit is useful: "It's more important to be true to yourself than to be popular," cautions Russ in his concern over Jamie's trying to be one of the guys by getting low marks. The highlight of these changes is the construction of Jamie's history project, a complicated and delicate balsamwood model. The various threads of his life at this point are drawn together in the completion of the model. He learns the pleasure of working with his brother. He learns the affection generated from working with a friend. On the grimmer side, he takes the measure of his own continued will to fail as he allows Bohert to smash the model without making a stand to defend his work. Jamie fails the project, loses Lianne's friendship ("you wouldn't even *try*"), and reaches a point of crisis.

The dog is the means of breaking the knot and resolving the crisis. When bully Bohert attacks the pup, Jamie is finally catapulted into action. Blinded by fury, and in the grand style of his literary predecessors (Nice Guys all, who become animals when Driven Beyond), he literally hospitalizes Bohert with his kicks and blows. When the dust settles, the story unravels quietly to its conclusion: everyone learns how Bohert ruined the model, and as a result, Lianne talks to Jamie again. Russ understands. Pat understands. The dog and Bohert understand too. And Jamie understands that he has won. Even better, he has mercy for Bohert. Pity even, because he sees Bohert as a victim too . . . suffering from the sting of a harsh father, and choosing to bully rather than to show that he hurts. So all is balanced in the end, and the equation is complete.

If the plot and its evolution are perhaps cliché (boy-meets-dog; dog-helps-boy; etc), we should remember that author Butchart does a creditable job of working her way through the forms she uses. She is practicing, in a time-honoured manner: copying the methods and techniques she sees around her. And if we hope to see Jaylene Butchart's writing mature into something more original, she has to master the forms first. In the process, she will come in due time to a freshness of phrasing (leaving behind such old chestnuts as ". . . I felt like a puppet dangling at the end of a string"). She will exercise tighter control in tone, and she will, like Dumbo abandoning the feather, let the clichés and platitudes fall from her work. At that point, the forms she has practiced will be, properly, foundations on which she can build her own unique fictions.

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