

LIVING TO TELL THE TALE: SURVIVAL GUIDES FOR
ADOLESCENT READERS



Can you promise me spring? Alison Lohans Pirot. Scholastic-TAB, 1986. 176 pp. \$3.50 paper. ISBN 0-590-71616-6;

We're friends, aren't we? Sylvia Gunnery. Scholastic-TAB, 1986. 160 pp. \$3.50 paper. ISBN 0-590-71619-0.



Fiction for young adults typically takes as its subject the struggle for survival and for independence. Usually, too, the lesson learned is that more freedom brings with it more responsibility. In Alison Lohans Pirot's *Can you promise me spring?* and in Sylvia Gunnery's *We're friends, aren't we?*, this theme takes a twist. Each novel confronts not only the protagonist's struggle for survival, but also her ability to face the possibility of someone else's death.

In Pirot's novel, sixteen-year-old Lori learns that her younger brother has Hodgkin's disease. Pirot's depiction of Jamie's illness, his suffering, his reactions to the horrors of its treatment, and his family's stunned attempts to carry on an ordinary life is realistic, unsentimental, and accurate in its assessment of the characters' emotions.

The story, told from Lori's point of view, develops in the midst of her other concerns: her increasing maturity as she gets her first job; her growing attraction to Cam, a friend whose grandfather is also dying of cancer; and her own sense of her brother's illness. This first-person narrative achieves a good distance: we are close enough to Jamie to be moved by his suffering and far enough away not to be engulfed by it.

The method of narration works less well when Lori discloses her changing attitude towards Cam. The heroine occasionally *tells* the reader about her new state of mind: "My shy new feelings for [Cam] made me wonder if I was being ridiculous, but the memory of those few times of intense sharing had a way of slicing right through all the turmoil and showing me something startlingly new and clear."

Despite the problems of dealing with the delicate subject of a young girl's first love, Pirot manages to write a novel sensitive to real feelings, and is able to assert the continuity of family life in the face of crisis. The lack of sensationalism and the dedication to exploring nuances of character development are shown most completely in the surprising relief of the novel's conclusion, its release of tension, its affirmation of the characters' ability to go on with life.

Sylvia Gunnery's *We're friends, aren't we?* is a much better book than the blurb on the back cover suggests: "Elizabeth has it all. She is bright and beautiful and secretly going steady with Cass. Why can't her parents see past his motorcycle and his dark good looks and just trust her?" While such a description leads the reader to expect something quite banal, the novel offers a well-written study of relationships, their pressures as well as their pleasures. Elizabeth and Cass and their ostensible love interest fade into the background and the real focus of the work is the friendship between Woody and Elizabeth. This friendship sadly taken for granted in the turmoil of more romantic ties, is doomed from the start, since Gunnery shows the reader in the novel's opening how Woody is destined to die.

The strength of the book is its realistic, funny, lively, dialogue revealing individual differences among the adolescent characters, and capturing the anxious mood of a high school class on the verge of graduation. The characters, however, with the exception of Woody, seem rather dimly drawn. Cass, in particular, is, for Elizabeth's parents, a stereotypical example of the toughguy adolescent, wearing a black leather jacket, and living on the wrong side of town. For Elizabeth, he seems little more than the stereotypical dark romantic hero, misunderstood and misjudged. Elizabeth herself, too insensitive to appreciate Woody's friendly devotion, is variously seen as a wilful girl sneaking out with her forbidden boyfriend behind her parents' backs, and as a serious student winning a scholarship enabling her to go to university and perhaps become a judge. Throughout the story, there is only a very loose connection between Elizabeth's rebellious love for Cass in spite of her parents' disapproval and her rather exploitative use of Woody's friendship.

The novel means to explore the proper bounds and expectations of friendship. It achieves its end more effectively in its record of the characters' dialogue than in its rather contrived plot. Gunnery's ear for natural dialogue and her sense of the diversity of adolescent experience mitigate the flaws in her conception of the story.

Both novels offer the reader a study of the survival tactics needed to get on with life when someone close is threatened by death.

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APPLE-PIE BEDS AND WATER BOMBS

The daring game, Kit Pearson. Viking Kestrel, 1986. 225pp. \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 0-670-80751-6.

I was reminded of the words which form the title of my review while reading from Kit Pearson's story about a Canadian boarding school for