

clearly more interested in conveying a mood than in illustrating a story accurately. They are painters, not illustrators.

Both books, then, offer accomplished texts interesting in themselves, and accomplished pictures evocative by themselves. But since they are texts that need no illustration, and visual art that isn't all that interested in storytelling, the result of their combination is loose and sloppy—and, given the artistry of all four participants, surprisingly artless.

In other words: these are two bad picture books by four good artists. And they are bad exactly because of the participants' artistry.

And yet it is exactly such books that publishers are prone to produce when they strive for quality. What these books make clear, then, is this: the "art" of picture books is not the same as art in general. Good writers are not necessarily good picture book text writers, and good visual artists are not necessarily good picture book illustrators. The picture book is an art form with its own special demands. It requires special knowledge from writers, from illustrators—and perhaps most significantly, from publishers. Publishers above all need to learn to resist the understandable but wrongheaded temptation to fill their catalogues with bad but presumably saleable books by talented artists—artists whose names, while marketably well-known, are well-known for quite other kinds of work.

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SOMETIMES IT'S THE DIFFERENCE THAT COUNTS

Listen to Me, Grace Kelly. Sandy Frances Duncan. Kids Can Press, 1990. 261 pp., \$4.95 paper. ISBN 1-55074-012-1; **On My Own.** Mitzi Dale. Douglas & McIntyre, 1991. 158 pp., \$7.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-145-2; **More than Money.** Sylvia McNicoll. Nelson Canada, 1990. 127 pp., paper. ISBN 0-17-603058-1.

A glance at some of the successful Young Adult novels of the past decade, such as Kevin Major's *Eating between the Lines*, Marilyn Halverson's *Cowboys Don't Cry* and William Bell's *Crabbe*, seems to suggest that often what sets one book apart from the rest is its degree of difference—some stylistic innovation perhaps and sense of authorial daring-do, some newly broken thematic ground, the introduction of an unfamiliar lifestyle, or simply a refreshingly new way of looking at a familiar situation.

Three recent Young Adult novels—Sandy Frances Duncan's *Listen to Me, Grace Kelly*, Mitzi Dale's *On My Own*, and Sylvia McNicoll's *More than Money*—seem to substantiate this view. Two of them contain that necessary

dimension of “difference” and, as a result, are good reads. They linger in the mind of the reader long after the last page is turned. The third, however, has no dimension of difference and unfortunately slips into the ranks of the hum-drum and the non-memorable.

In spite of being very different, the three novels do have certain similarities. First-person viewpoint is, of course, an obvious one. So is the glib, fast-paced dialogue. And though the protagonists are several years apart in age (Duncan’s Jessica Crawford is twelve, Dale’s Kim Taylor has finished grade 11 so is now probably sixteen, McNicoll’s Melissa is fourteen), all three are remarkably similar in their tendency toward introspection and concentration on self, which, of course, is one of the ever-present dangers of first-person writing. They are also similar in their presentation of current teenage problems. There are major differences, however, and it is the differences which are important.

What moves Dale’s *On My Own* from the ranks of just another teen novel to being a “good read” is its setting. Kim doesn’t just announce to her parents at the end of grade 11 that she is quitting school and moving from her steel-working home town to sample the excitement of big city living in Toronto—something lots of teenagers do every year. She announces she is leaving for the deliberate purpose of proving herself in the hostile, difficult world of the stand-up comic. It is a world which is fascinating and relatively unfamiliar to most teenagers, and despite a slow start which might discourage some readers, Dale succeeds in bringing this world to life with graphic description, realistic emotion and great humour.

Sandy Frances Duncan’s *Listen to Me, Grace Kelly* is also successful because Duncan has had the courage to be even more different. Stylistically the use of a private imaginary confidante is not original. William Bell did it earlier in *Dear Bruce Springsteen*. In fact, Bell’s book may have influenced Duncan. But Duncan also dares to be original by breaking new thematic ground for teen novels. Her heroine, Jessica, struggles to find her way through the maze of growing up, faced not only with the usual adolescent problems of insecurity, confusion and a minimal sense of self-worth, but she is also burdened with disturbing memories and an unexplained sense of guilt. As the novel unfolds, these memories are revealed to be linked to a father she remembers only vaguely, but who suffered from Alzheimer’s disease and who was guilty of possible child abuse. It is a sensitive subject but Duncan handles it with subtlety and a surprisingly light touch. She is not quite so successful in the scenes where Jessica and her friend Lynn plumb the mysteries of kissing and feminine hygiene, or in the “stallion” scene with the stable boy Harv. All of these seem a bit forced and contrived, as if Duncan included them more as red-herrings to distract attention from the real subject matter of the story than as essential elements in characterization. But apart from these scenes, the novel is sensitive and moving and will linger in the mind of the reader long after it has been finished.

Sylvia McNicoll’s *More than Money*, on the other hand, is missing that

element of difference. It is set in the familiar world of baby-sitting and despite a momentary increase in interest when Natalie gets lost in the park, it presents nothing about baby-sitting that differs in any way from what every teenage baby-sitter experiences regularly. Moreover, the protagonist's major personal problem (having to wear braces) seems hardly of sufficient importance to base a book on. At least not today. Perhaps when McNicoll was a girl and had to wear braces it was an horrendous experience, but for modern young people corrective dentistry has become so common that Melissa's emotional over-reaction seems unrealistic. The novel has some glib, fast-paced dialogue, but the story is plot-driven rather than character-driven. Also, it presents nothing original or provocative, and, as a result, will probably be forgotten by most readers even before the last page is finished.

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EVERYBODY NEEDS A FRIEND

See You Later, Alligator. Norma M. Charles. Illus. Yvonne Cathcart. Scholastic Canada Ltd., 1991. 32 pp., \$4.95. ISBN 0-590-73670-1; **Paper Nights.** Pierre Filion and Gilles Tibo. Illus. Gilles Tibo. Annick Press, 1992. 32 pp., \$15.95. ISBN 1-55037-225-4; **The Story of Little Quack.** Betty Gibson. Illus. Kady MacDonald Denton. Kids Can Press, 1990. 32 pp., \$11.95. ISBN 0-921103-97-2.

See You Later, Alligator is about an alligator and a crocodile who might have made up the familiar farewell rhymes that generations of children have enjoyed. They are best friends until one shows off a new pair of shoes, which the other bests with beautiful shoes and striped socks. The game continues in an upward direction, and the rhyming farewells cease. The story would be stronger if one of the characters noticed that the game of one-upmanship is spoiling their friendship, but it is the sun that teaches them the lesson. The text is rhythmical and fun to read. The exotic jungle background enhances the friendship theme because it is crowded with exuberant creatures playing together. The colours are as bright as parrot feathers, and the only white spaces are the whites of the eyes.

In *Paper Nights*, a small boy named Pikolo spends his evenings cutting out fanciful creatures from coloured paper to keep himself company. When he cuts out a little man from his most beautiful paper, the cut-out promptly leads Pikolo into the closet and down a long, dark tunnel to a fantastic land made entirely of paper. This story lacks originality. The tunnel, the hurrying character, the concern about being late, and the dream are all elements which remind one of *Alice in Wonderland*. The story also needs more action and stronger verbs. One wants to know more about what Pikolo did and less about what Pikolo thought