

tion with pain through his humour and sarcasm. However, the undertone of abuse illuminates the positive connections that Harper's writing creates. The central focus for the narrative action in *A Fly*, Harper's column brings him to an understanding of, and perhaps a friendship with, Tommy. In *A Beautiful Place*, Harper meets his first love, Sunny, at a youth writer's camp, showing that writing is a site of connection. Indeed, Harper's writing teacher, in *A Fly*, encourages Harper to write notes to his father to facilitate communication. Likewise, in *A Beautiful Place*, Harper explains that "writing is the one thing that keeps me connected to my parents" (10).

Moreover, writing is a way of understanding and creating one's identity, both novels suggest. Harper realizes that he has been hiding behind the identity of Alfred in *A Fly*, and the novel ends with his real identity about to be revealed. In *A Beautiful Place*, Harper's relationship with Sunny, facilitated by his writing, leads to better relationships with his family, highlighting this adolescent's continual progression. In both novels, the most powerful signifier of Harper's developing identity is that he is his own narrator. At one point in *A Fly*, Harper exclaims, "I'm no author, believe me" (90). This metafictional moment, one of many, is ironic. Harper is indeed the author, of his own story, and, ultimately, of his own life — an empowering message for us all.

Trembath leaves the conflicts mainly unresolved, the questions unanswered: will students guess Alfred's identity? Will Sunny and Harper's relationship survive separation? This lack of resolution underscores the vitality of these two novels. They attempt not to solve but to negotiate conflict. Harper's tales are inspirational learning tools. Readers might learn the valuable lesson with Harper: one can handle, but not necessarily solve, life's problems. Of course, by refusing to invoke closure, Trembath also encourages the reader to anticipate the next adventures of this tragicomic hero. And we do.

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Teen Pain: Relationships and Growing Up

One Thing That's True. Cheryl Foggo. Kids Can, 1997. 128 pp. \$16.95. ISBN 1-55074-411-9. *Carving My Name*. Mary-Kate McDonald. Thistle-down, 1998. 137 pp. ISBN 1-895449-83-9.

It's hard enough to relate to teenagers once one has reached adulthood, let alone write convincingly from a teenager's perspective. Yet both Mary-Kate

McDonald and Cheryl Foggo do just that in their respective books.

Foggo's is a story of a thirteen-year-old girl, while McDonald's is a collection of stories about teenagers at various stages. Both are written in the first person for the most part, both are about relationships, and both are on the whole from the perspective of girls who live in western Canada. Out of nine stories in McDonald's collection, eight are written in the first person and seven figure girls' voices.

One Thing That's True's thirteen-year-old is on that cusp of having just finished junior high but not started high school, so life is complicated. As well, she and her family are black and her parents add racism to their problems. Life gets more confusing when her parents reveal that her brother isn't their birth son, and his convict birth father wants to meet him. Her self-image is subsequently challenged as she moves from being a kid to becoming a teenager.

The first and the last stories in *Carving My Name* are written from two different boys' perspectives, one seventeen years old, the other fourteen. The rest are written from the viewpoint of girls who range from about eleven years old to seventeen. All of them deal with an immediate problem concerning a relationship, and all of them have as a common thread teens who come from a non-traditional family. Four focus on a problem with a friend or lover, and the others have to do with family problems, which are usually provoked by a father who is either physically or emotionally "not there."

One Thing That's True is a good fast-paced read. Foggo sets the story up like a bit of a mystery, with hints throughout such as "... as if she knew what was going to happen" (23). The thirteen-year-old's voice is authentic, although a little wiser than perhaps most thirteen-year-olds' would be, but then as her grandmother says, she is the strength of the family (112) so a little more wisdom coming from her isn't so out of place. Foggo manages to keep the girl sounding authentic throughout the book.

McDonald doesn't quite reach the same smoothness for a couple of reasons. One is in her choice of names for her teens. Edgar, Maybelle, Lucy and George don't seem like '90s kids' names, and there is nothing to suggest in their respective stories that they aren't about '90s teens. Another reason is that some of these teens are incredibly articulate. In "Four Mile Road" the protagonist talks to her best friend without a hitch for almost two pages, in analytical detail, even though she is suffering a good deal of anguish at the time. A little fumbling or word searching would have added some authenticity. However, McDonald redeems herself by admirably conveying the terrible emotional pain each of her stories express. They are a sharp reminder of the horrible difficulty of being a teenager.

Both books convincingly bring back that un-nostalgic feeling of how bad the teen years can be, although *One Thing That's True* does have a happy ending. In *Carving My Name* the stories generally have some resolution but

they aren't really happy. However, when you're a teen life isn't always happy anyway, is it?

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Trouble in Teendom

Stranger at Bay. Don Aker. Stoddart Kids, 1997. 246 pp. \$5.99 paper. ISBN 0-7736-7468-3. *What They Don't Know*. Anita Horrocks. Stoddart Kids, 1998. 240 pp. \$9.99 paper. ISBN 0-7737-6001-6. *Angels Turn Their Backs*. Margaret Buffie. Kids Can, 1998. 239 pp. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55074-415-1 (bound), 1-55074-417-8 (pbk.)

Three recent young adult novels, *Stranger at Bay* by Don Aker, *What They Don't Know* by Anita Horrocks, and *Angels Turn Their Backs* by Margaret Buffie each approach serious ethical and/or emotional problems of their teenage protagonists with a vigorous honesty. Aker's hero has to choose between stealing drugs from his father and telling the cops the truth that will implicate him; Horrocks's narrator focuses on the rage her little sister experiences when she learns the truth about her paternity; and Buffie's protagonist battles both the fear of insanity and her actual illness, agoraphobia.

All the young adults suffer the impact of a realignment of their parents' conjugal affairs. Aker's book involves the effect of a father's remarriage, job loss, and relocation on fourteen-year-old Randy who is still suffering the trauma of his mother's abandonment of him as a child. Similarly, the sisters in Horrocks's story must adjust to their father's remarriage after their mother chooses a career incompatible with child-rearing. Buffie's book, with the mother as custodial parent, traces the consequences on fourteen-year-old Addy of a marriage break-up subsequent to the mother's relocation for her career. The adults in each book proclaim repeatedly the importance of cooperation and communication in building a successful family unit. The teens, however, experience agonies about who gets membership in the new configuration. Who has the right or obligation to belong to that "happy family who works things out together"? This conflict accounts for parents and children continually misjudging each other's value systems throughout the novels. In the end, all three authors come down firmly on the side of the parents, believing, it seems, that it is more productive to define the family according to current cultural mores rather than to right the teen's injured sense of truth and justice at the base of the conflict. Practical or cynical? Apparently it depends on which side of the generation divide you see from.