

lems of a teenager, and Holeman's first-person narrative allows the reader to see through Mercy's eyes. Parent-child roles are reversed in the household and Mercy is the one who buys groceries and toilet paper, using the money she earns from her part-time job. Living in poverty, though, seems the least of Mercy's problems. Her mother Pearl suffers from depression that intensifies as the novel progresses, and Mercy must come to terms with her mother's mental illness. As well, the return of her aunt's boyfriend, of whom she is so afraid she can only call him "B," is a constant threat for Mercy. Mercy's fear of rape is clear in the subtext of the novel, but this fear is complicated by her aunt's affection for B as well as by the family's financial dependence on him. The eleven-and-up intended audience that the publisher suggests may not be mature enough to handle the complicated issues raised in the novel.

The appearance of the "Queen of Cups" card in Aunt Moo's tarot card readings foreshadows the arrival of Mercy's never-before-seen grandmother, who serves as Mercy's first female role model. Grandma's arrival is just in time to take control of the chaos of Mercy's home life. Mercy's difficulties seem to supersede a preoccupation with boys, and this is a refreshing and encouraging change from a theme common in novels directed towards young women.

For the most part, Mercy is a capable, strong, and intelligent young woman, who copes with life's obstacles as best she can. Quoting Tennyson's poetry and Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Mercy challenges the young reader with her advanced vocabulary and references to literature. Her multiple ear piercings and short, dyed black hair are her deliberate attempt to take control of her life, to avoid being held "prisoner" (4). The need for Grandma's intervention teaches Mercy that she need not take on such serious problems — a valuable lesson for all.

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Two Novels about Coming to Grips with One's Problems

The Runaways. Kristin Butcher. Kids Can, 1997. 168 pp. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55074-413-5. *No Fixed Address*. Maureen Bayless. Scholastic Canada, 1997. 180 pp. \$4.99 paper. ISBN 0-590-12378-5.

Kristin Butcher's *The Runaways* and Maureen Bayless's *No Fixed Address* explore the lives of characters who try to escape from their troubles instead of dealing with them. Both novels offer engaging stories and characters with whom readers can identify. Within this framework, the stories deal with several serious issues such as step-parents, death, and street life.

In Butcher's *The Runaways*, Nick finds it difficult to accept either his stepfather Cole or his mother's new baby. He regards them as threats to the family he had known after his mother had divorced his birth father. Unable to cope with the changes in his life, Nick takes refuge at the McIntyre mansion, where another

character, Luther, is also taking refuge from his problems. Luther blames himself for the deaths of his wife Stephanie and son Matthew, and takes refuge by accepting a life on the streets and the anonymity that comes with it. Nick's arrival disrupts the anonymity that Luther has previously enjoyed, but the gradual friendship that develops helps each of them face their problems.

Notable strengths of Butcher's novel include realistic dialogue as well as skilful plot development that depicts how the growing friendship between Nick and Luther parallels Nick's growing acceptance of Cole and his mother's baby. Nick's relationship with Luther is cleverly woven with the issue of street life. Luther is the direct catalyst for Nick's growing awareness about street people and, indirectly, also the catalyst for the positive relationship between Nick and Cole. Nick's project on street people gets Cole interested, and their relationship develops from their shared attitudes that it is important to portray these people's lives accurately, as well as to help them deal with their problems.

Butcher gives her readers a more balanced representation of street people's lives by drawing characters who do not fit the stereotypical street person profile. Nick's mother stereotypes street people as "thieves, murderers, perverts, and child molesters," (63), and "[d]runks. Drug addicts. Dope dealers" (63). A homeless man whom Nick meets appears crazy and dangerous, thereby seeming to confirm these stereotypes. However, this initial impression of the Captain is debunked later by Mac's explanation that the Captain had lost his wife and never fully recovered from the traumatic event (86-87). Similarly, Luther counters the stereotype of runaways — he is strong-willed, humorous, educated and a famous author, the opposite of what people usually conceive of street people to be.

Moreover, Butcher also avoids stereotyping the reasons that people live on the street. The causes of homelessness are diverse, and some people who visit the soup kitchen are not even homeless. As Mac tells Nick, "'A lot of 'em even have jobs. They just don't make enough to live on.... The House of Hope just kinda helps 'em over the rough spots'" (87). Butcher also uses concrete details to make street life immediate and real for her readers through sensory details such as the "sodden cigarette packages," "crumpled drink cans," and "crumbling checkerboard floor" (74, 80), as well as physical details for her characters such as the soup kitchen woman's "mouthful of crooked, yellow teeth" (80).

Stylistically, Butcher's novel is more dialogue-intensive and plot-driven than Bayless's novel. Yet, Butcher's characters are well-drawn. We get a sense of their backgrounds through details: for instance, we learn Cole lived on Kraft Dinners because he did not know how to cook, and we see a photo of Nick in a christening gown. The characters' relationships also develop believably without being rushed.

Like Butcher's novel, Bayless's *No Fixed Address* focuses on two characters and their troubles, and the relationship that develops between them. We see the story through Sabie, a homeless teen who is finding it difficult to accept her mother Monika's sudden death. Monika had been "the centre of Sabie's world" (18-19), keeping it alive. Monika's "imagination wasn't strong enough to cross over the barrier of death" (48) to continue the fantasies. To keep the presence of her mother alive, Sabie tries to follow her teachings about living on the street like a "Robinson

Crusoe" (14) and isolating herself from other people, with the exception of Parker, another street person whom her mother had known. However, as Sabie increasingly feels the loss of her mother, she finds her mother's teachings and romanticized fantasies about street life increasingly inadequate. Sabie subsequently befriends another character, Estelle, in an attempt to restore the sense of family that had been so strong when Monika was alive. Estelle, too, has experienced death first-hand through her son Morty, and has also secluded herself from those who have hurt her.

Sabie's and Estelle's relationship does not help them face their problems, as Luther's and Nick's did; it only serves, ironically, to isolate them further from their problems. Their relationship offers only a temporary refuge by recreating the sense of family and security that Sabie felt when Monika was alive, and that Estelle had also felt when Morty was still alive.

The Bayless book plot develops after Sabie meets Ann the Social Services worker. It seems odd that the resolution to Sabie's troubles comes from Ann, rather than from Estelle. When Sabie stayed with Estelle, she did start asking questions about Colin, her father, and the validity of Monika's views on life, but it is Ann's revelations about Colin that cause Sabie to consider the possibility that everything Monika had told her was a lie: "if Colin isn't who Monika said he was, then *she* wasn't who I thought she was" (165). Monika had told her that Colin had left her to marry someone else in Calgary, and Sabie had accepted this unquestioningly, up until Ann tells her about Colin's current circumstances. Eventually, Sabie comes to accept Monika's death and to accept Colin as a part of her life.

From the point where Sabie's doubts about her mother intensify, the book seems to progress too quickly to a happy conclusion in which Sabie is reconciled with Colin and his family. The resolution in Butcher's novel was more satisfying because the characters were given the time to develop more fully. It surprises the reader when Ann's relationship with Sabie appears in the last third of the book, and unexpectedly turns out to be a more influential relationship than that between Estelle and Sabie.

Despite these weaknesses, the story will engage readers particularly because of its strong characterization. Bayless does not challenge readers' perceptions of street people as Butcher does, but her story is still valuable because it is told from a homeless person's perspective. Bayless skilfully explores Sabie's psyche by charting her frustrations and various reactions to her circumstances, making the character come alive for her readers. Evocative imagery depicting the characters' physical features and settings add realism to the story. For example, Bayless describes Estelle's basement as follows: "Rusty tricycles and seatless bicycles. Lamps, boxes, torn chairs perched one atop another. Dolls, bears, games in broken boxes. Plastic bottles of cola, a whole mountain of paper-wrapped matzo cracker boxes" (23).

The message that comes out of these books is that people must face their problems, and that problems can be better resolved when people help each other.

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