

Facing Up to a Time of Change

Angels in the Snow. Wenda Young. Coteau, 1998. 291 pp. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 1-55050-131-3.

Nicole is seven when her mother leaves. After that, she concentrates on keeping things the same, and she succeeds until age fourteen when another major loss re-opens the wounds — Scarlett, the cat that had been her mother's, dies. Suddenly there is change all around her: Dad announces an engagement, and her mother resurfaces with an invitation to visit her in Japan. While there are no bad guys in Wenda Young's *Angels in the Snow* (only people weighed down by the problems life throws at them), angels abound, from loving grandparents, to caring neighbours and a sensitive new young friend, to the wise woman/fairy god-mother (Mrs. Angelo) who appears at the airport: it is Mrs. Angelo who arms Nicky with probably the most important message of her life, that we may not be responsible for the events around us, but we can control how we react these events.

In Japan, Nicky finally will have the opportunity to challenge her mother with the burning question — why did you leave? — and, now as a young adult, to understand her mother on more mature terms. Further, the device of bringing Nicole from Nova Scotia to Japan as a tourist allows Young to introduce young readers to a new country and a new culture. Nicky rolls out her futon at night and puts it away in a cupboard in the morning (mind you, "rolling out" is probably her mother's creativity: they fold); she visits a mountain *onsen* (hot spring) complete with snow monkeys who have made it their personal hot-tub; she learns that the Japanese downplay their own achievements ("I'm not a very good student," a new friend says), and that they manage to adhere simultaneously to two different philosophies, Shintoism and Buddhism. As Nicky shares her mother's life, she is also introduced to the transient world of *gaijin* (off-island people) teachers. Last, but not least, she has a sexual awakening with an adult crush on Nate, her mother's much younger lover.

Nicky, with her ability to adapt, to incorporate practical lessons of life, and to enjoy differences in cultures, is a model, a modern Pollyanna. (She's not all good, though; when Nate abandons Mom to go back to university in New Zealand, Nicky is pleased: Mom will experience the pain that she had inflicted on her daughter and her husband.) *Angels in the Snow* is packed with event and accurate detail, both of Nova Scotia and Japan. My one quibble is that the only truly rounded (and therefore truly interesting) character is Mom/Joanna, who has made a difficult decision to choose freedom and has had to live with the consequences. Everyone else in the book seems designed to represent an idea, a problem, a solution. As such, solutions sometimes come too easily.

Nevertheless, this is a quibble I have as an adult reader; juvenile readers will be caught up in the issues which reflect their world, and, as Nicky adopts attitudes that help her navigate unwelcome change, will recognize viable solutions. Young empowers her readers, and offers realistic hope.

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