

The book is illustrated by Kasia Charko. A pair of sandhill cranes dance on the cover and soft black-and-white illustrations inside capture the misty beauty of the wetlands. The author includes two glossaries, one of terms used in the story and another which details the features and behaviour of various birds. For example, the call of the bittern is described as “a distinctive *oank-a-lunk* ... like someone working a dry pump.” This is a very apt description for anyone who has actually had the pleasure of hearing the bird.

Despite the miraculous ending, the book is a captivating and informative read.

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### Two Equestrian Novels

*Rebel of Dark Creek.* Nikki Tate. Sono Nis, 1997. 152 pp. \$5.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55039-076-7. *Dancer.* Shelley Peterson. The Porcupine’s Quill, 1996. 196 pp. \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88984-177-2.

*Rebel of Dark Creek* is the first novel of Niki Tate’s riding series, *Stablemates*. The novel is an action-packed page turner kids will love. The main character Jessa, is a typical grade-six girl who loves horses and wants to have one of her own. However, as many young people discover, the equestrian sport is an expensive undertaking even if one receives a “free lease” as Jessa does. Board, food, tack, clothing, medicine, and farrier bills are all attached to such a gift. Tate does a good job of presenting the economic realities, and Jessa’s willingness to work at the stable in exchange for free board seems a realistic solution to the financial problem.

Students who field-tested the novel appreciated Jessa’s average “girl-next-door” characterization, but felt that Jessa and Rachel were presented in too black-and-white terms: Jessa is portrayed fairly positively as the sweet little poor girl whereas Rachel is depicted as the rich snob. My students thought this an unfair stereotype since they feel that a person’s economic status doesn’t necessarily determine her inner self.

Furthermore, the novel contains a couple of details that stretch one’s credulity. While Tate does an excellent job of building suspense at the bridge scene and the description of the panicked horse is well written, I wonder if a horse could escape such an ordeal without a scratch as Rachel’s horse manages to do. In addition, we are told that Jessa is a novice rider and we are given hints that her previous experiences with jumping were less than successful. Therefore, after one week of intensive lessons, it’s highly unlikely that Jessa would place in the ribbons in a class of eighteen competitors.

My students commented that their favourite character was Jessa’s best friend, Cheryl, whose spirited flair for drama appealed to them. They also would’ve

liked to have found out more about Rachel to help understand her better.

*Rebel of Dark Creek* is a good read then, which students in the junior grades will enjoy.

*Dancer*, by Shelley Peterson, is a more complex novel both in plot and characterization and, as a result, will be enjoyed by a slightly older audience who will appreciate Peterson's handling of sensitive issues such as grief, depression, alcoholism and marital discord. The novel's epic saga between good and evil is rivetting as wealthy, villainous Samuel Owens instructs his hired hands to acquire Dancer at any cost. This quickly escalates to sabotaging Mousie's initial ride in front of the queen, sedating and then disguising Dancer and attempting to give Dancer a lethal injection — all to satisfy the whims of his spoiled niece Sara.

My students were intrigued by Mousie and Sandy's friendship, which slowly progresses to a sweet romance. However, they felt that the romance theme was carried a bit too far when the parents, Christine and Rory, fall in love as well.

Students who ride will be satisfied by *Dancer's* detailed descriptions of competition sites, both in the ring and the stable. Many will also love the thrilling fox-hunting scenes in England.

Students felt that Mousie was a well-rounded character and appreciated seeing her insecure, vulnerable side as well as the strength which allows her to overcome various obstacles, including dealing with the death of her father. However, one student did point out that Dancer seems to act as a substitute father figure to Mousie.

Some students enjoyed the fantasy elements of the novel — the riding crop which acts as a talisman, the dream of the beautiful blond horsewoman and finally the appearance of Mousie's father. Others, however, felt that these details were intrusive and took away from an otherwise realistic story. These criticisms aside, *Dancer* is a wonderful story whose classic cover alone will attract many readers. The tasteful sketches at the end of each chapter also add a lovely touch. Peterson's inclusion of horse terminology at the end of the novel is wise for readers new to the genre.

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*Tamara L Williams's first novel, Glory Ride, was recently published by Lorimer. Tamara is a teacher in Muskoka and a competitive event rider.*

### Unlocking the Creative: Sarah Withrow's *Bat Summer*

*Bat Summer*. Sarah Withrow. Groundwood/Douglas and McIntyre, 1998. 160 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-352-8.

Winner of the Groundwood Twentieth Anniversary First Novel for Children Contest, *Bat Summer*, by Sarah Withrow, explores the creative mind of Lucy, a lonely thirteen-year-old girl who thinks she is a bat. Lucy is the thematic centre of the novel, but twelve-year-old Terence is the narrator of this story. Left bored and