

the reader returns repeatedly. It is superbly organized, ranging from the earliest human relationship with fire to the most up-to-date firefighting techniques and equipment. Boxed sections encapsulate answers to questions such as “What happens if you breathe smoke?” Every few pages offer startling nuggets of information — for example, that early fire hoses were made from ox intestines. Thoroughly and meticulously researched, the book provides a compendium of information about fire itself and the role of firefighters.

Gorrell reflects that she can imagine “(if I were a little younger and had much better eyesight) being a police officer” or a paramedic: “But I don’t understand how anyone can be a firefighter, and stand face to face with the age-old threat of fire — not just once in a while ... but as an ordinary day’s work.” The directness of this statement sets the tone for the book as a whole — cleanly written and endlessly informative.

The material here is so rich that it seems a pity that, well designed though it is, this edition is limited to black-and-white. I can envision a coffeetable-style book that would engross adult readers as completely as the age ten and up for which this edition of *Catching Fire* is designated.

The publishers describe Jane Drake’s *Mining* as filling “an educational need for information about one of Canada’s vital resources.” The text echoes the blandness of mining industry PR material. “In years past,” we are told, “only strong men had jobs in mines. Women were not allowed. Now machines do most of the work, operated by women, men and computers. For safety, miners work in groups ...” In this never-never land, not only is mining completely safe, but also a paragon of gender-parity.

Pat Cupples’s illustrations are the strongest feature of the book, especially the diagrammatic cross-sections beloved of technically-minded child-readers. Yet Cupples’s illustrations share the text’s relentless blandness; smiling children and parents visit beaming geologists and engineers. Miners blast and excavate wreathed in smiles. Even the picture of passengers on a cross-Canada flight shows cheery smiles on every face. Readers may be made rightly suspicious of the anodyne the book attempts to administer.

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Shaking on the Dust

Dust. Arthur Slade. HarperCollins, 2001. 168 pp. \$14.00 paper. ISBN 0-00-648593-6.

Since I am a prairie dweller and a reader of fiction for young adults, the title *Dust* immediately made me think of two things (well, three, if you count vacuuming). One was the drought that inflicted the Canadian west in the 1930s. The other was

Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, in which an invisible dust surrounding children represents a divine presence — something young people have and older people have lost and now want. To my surprise, Arthur Slade's *Dust* turned out to be about both these things.

Set in the dust bowl of southwestern Saskatchewan in the 1930s, *Dust* centres on a charismatic but villainous stranger who collects something much like Pullman's dust. As Slade's villain says, it is "our soul, perhaps.... Children have vast quantities of this dust, but gathering it is a tricky process" (119). The novel describes how the villain goes about attempting to gather it by stealing and mutilating children. At the same time, he tricks gullible adults into building a rainmaking machine that rids them not only of the physical dust that blights their crops and their lives but also of their awareness of their own negative memories and emotions. At the happy ending, the efforts of a young protagonist reunite some of the damaged children with their invisible dust souls and the damaged adults both with their lost memories and with the dust of their former surroundings.

The former sounds good, the latter not so good. Indeed, the strangest thing about this novel is that it proclaims the cessation of rain and growth and the return of the drought to be a good thing — perhaps simply because the imaginative structure of the novel, built so tightly around the central metaphor proclaimed in its title, demands that dust triumph.

Dust must triumph because it most centrally represents the inherent superiority of children to adults. Children have dust because they can imagine — believe in magic truths that adults are too "rational" to acknowledge. Adults have less dust — thus, diminished souls — and the villain, who has been alive and beyond childhood for centuries, must gather dust because he has no soul at all. There is something just a little unseemly about an adult author like Slade pandering to children this way — offering them a world in which people like him are inherently flawed and people like them are inherently superior.

Not, of course, that Slade is alone in this sort of celebration of the childlike at the expense of adults. It is a central feature of a lot of writing of young people and also a common theme in a range of Romantic and post-Romantic writing for adults that identifies the childlike with true wisdom — work by writers as diverse as William Wordsworth, W.O. Mitchell, and Ray Bradbury, the latter two of whom Slade acknowledges in the dedication of his book. Slade's debt to these writers — and to a range of writers for children and young adults, especially Pullman — is clear. *Dust* might be successfully characterized as Mitchell meets Bradbury or Pullman on the prairies.

I hasten to add that I intend that as praise, not criticism. Like most successful writers of fantasy, Slade is less an inventor of his own unique ideas than a clever gatherer and recycler of ideas that have worked for many others. If Slade's novel is deserving of its Governor General's Award as the best children's book novel of 2001 — and I believe it is — it is exactly because he has not managed to shake off the dust of the literary past.

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