

Just as our enjoyment of the farce in these novels depends on our appreciation of or sympathy for the main character — the level-headed Jane Peeler or the easy-going, constantly surprised but non-judgmental Frogger — so the portrayal of the dog Benny Bensky becomes central to that book's success. Seamlessly, Mary Borsky grafts an identifiably human perspective on doggy propensities. When not so metaphorically "in the doghouse" for his lack of obedience training, Benny repents in terms that echo our own resolutions, particularly at this time of the year:

I will never eat food from the sidewalk, he quickly decided, as he gulped them down. *Not unless it is a helping of perfectly fresh french fries or a head-down ice cream*, he added, slurping down a strawberry cone a little further down the path. *Or say, soft and chewy bubble gum, nicely melted on the sidewalk*, he told himself, coming upon a wad of sticky pink bubble gum. (57-58)

While the protagonists in these situation comedies are delineated in just enough detail to engage our albeit detached and mildly amused sympathy, the surrounding characters are either caricatures like Jane Peeler's hard-nosed grandmother or figures exaggerated or simplified like the fussy, indignant mother Sarah Troth. And the villains, such as Mr. Gobohm or Viola Pin — well, they remain delightfully abominable projections from childhood nightmare in all its juicy improbability.

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Past and Present: The Appeal of Mystery

Stained Glass. Michael Bedard. Tundra, 2001. 312 pp. \$22.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-552-1. Ages 11 and up.

The children in Charles Endicott's family are named Emily, Elizabeth, and Albert — clearly, Charles's parents have a taste for old-fashioned names. Indeed, the appeal of Michael Bedard's *Stained Glass* lies in its ability to evoke the hard, alien strangeness of the past. Opening with a passage quoted from a twelfth-century treatise on glass-making, the novel begins at St. Bart's, a church never explicitly identified as Roman Catholic, which features a statue of the martyred apostle: "The statue depicted him holding the long hooked knife of his martyrdom in one hand, with the slack pelt of his skin draped over the other arm" (14). Such grisly details belong, as Bedard acknowledges, to a pre-Vatican II Catholicism that has been largely relegated to basement chambers, where Mr. Berkeley, the church custodian, tends discarded relics and neglected saints.

The eerie and sometimes grotesque fascination of mediaeval Catholicism lends an air of mystery and exoticism to the early pages of Bedard's novel. A stained glass window shatters, and among the shards of ruby-tinted glass, Charles discovers a young girl, evidently homeless, dazed and disoriented. Over the course of the following day, he attempts to help her find her way home by wandering with her across his hometown of Caledon. At the same time, old Mr. Berkeley patiently fits

together the broken pieces of medaeval glass as if they were parts of an enormous and ancient jigsaw puzzle. His task resembles the reader's activity of piecing together the disparate clues Bedard scatters through the novel as to the origin of the homeless girl, Ambriel, who may be a ghost, an angel, or perhaps even a visitor from the past. Certainly for Ambriel, modern-day Caledon seems strange and alarming. As the two children wander from place to place, Bedard describes the city as if it were itself a stained glass window, criss-crossed with streets and railroad tracks that pull together the odd, mismatched pieces of the city: TV repair shops, greasy spoon diners, abandoned factories, tree-filled ravines, trendy shops and galleries, and sidewalk cafés. The challenge Bedard faces (and never fully meets) is to make the modern city as fascinating in its way as the incense-filled shadows of St. Bart's.

Stained Glass loses some of its momentum as Charles and Ambriel uncover the memories that will help readers to answer the questions raised in the early chapters of the novel. The sense of mystery evoked by Ambriel's strange appearance and by the unexplained absence of Charles's father and sister is not balanced by an equally satisfying sense of discovery as the novel draws to a close. Eventually, as Charles confronts his memories of the past, his family's history is fully explained. By contrast, Ambriel's identity remains obscure — she finds her way home, but readers must decide for themselves whether "home" is heaven, the past, or perhaps some alternate dimension. Neither the ambiguity of Ambriel's identity nor the prosaic facts of Charles's father's death can measure up to the initial sense of expectation that the novel creates. The answers, when they come, seem anti-climactic, as if to suggest that the mystery itself is more alluring than its solution.

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Finding Their Place

The Carved Box. Gillian Chan. Kids Can, 2001. 232 pp. \$16.95 cloth, \$6.95 paper. ISBN 1-55074-895-5, 1-55337-016-3. Ages 10-14. *Mary Ann Alice*. Brian Doyle. Groundwood, 2001. 168 pp. \$19.95 cloth, \$12.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-453-2, 0-88899-454-0. Ages 9-13.

The Carved Box is the story of a boy and his dog. Callum Murdoch is an orphaned immigrant, and "Dog" is a magic dog. Dog becomes Callum's friend and guardian while he struggles to find his place on his uncle's homestead in rural Ontario. The work uses its historical setting effectively; the narrative is relatively straightforward, with a strong focus on Callum's thoughts and experiences.

The Carved Box is a serious book, but this solemnity weakens the credibility of the two protagonists. It is difficult to believe that even an extraordinarily bookish adolescent boy could remain as sullenly devoid of interest in his surroundings as young Callum. His self-indulgence becomes frustrating, although it must be sustained until the moral conclusion. Dog's magic reinforces the text's moral message and provides a very hazy connection with Native spirituality, but it diverts focus