

How One Boy Handles “Emotional Knowledge”

Stones. William Bell. Doubleday, 2001. 210 pp. \$16.95 paper. ISBN 0-385-65829-X. Young adult.

As in his novel *Zack*, a Mr. Christie’s Book Award winner, in *Stones* William Bell probes the pioneer past of Ontario. Again, he brings to light sordid details about nineteenth-century racism and the living conditions of black immigrants. This material contributes much of interest to *Stones*. More importantly, though, it provides a counterpoint to the main theme of the novel: its protagonist’s growing consciousness of his unique identity, experienced as his feeling alien to the Orillia high school scene. The key element in Garnet’s coming to terms with his distinctiveness is the balancing of the rationality imparted by the traditional education system with a newfound respect for intuition.

Along with the historical lore, which is not so much factual as emotional, considering that several pitiable ghosts appear, Bell presents Garnet’s relationships with his parents and with his classmate Raphaella. Bell’s writing is always spell-binding. He continually surprises the reader, often with humour; the characters and events certainly come alive. For just one example: in his English class, which is debating the proposition that “love at first sight is a hoax” in connection with studying *Romeo and Juliet*, Garnet is given the task of arguing in favour of this point. For such a firm believer in rationality, this task should be easy, he thinks, and Garnet is “ready to slay [his listeners] with logic.” He delivers a well-reasoned proof that “love at first sight is a hoax.” After he speaks, it is a new student’s turn. Raphaella, who has just moved from another school, is already in the classroom buzz called “weird.” She gracefully and confidently proposes that there are other ways of knowing besides rationality, what she calls “spontaneous insight” and “emotional knowledge.” The boys in the class dismiss Raphaella’s contention as a “girl thing.” Out of the hubbub of arguing that ensues, emerges the final sentence of the chapter; it is Garnet: “Even before she finished talking, I had fallen in love with her.”

Stones goes on to explore Garnet’s and Raphaella’s affection in the circumstances of their families, the school, the Orillia community, and the local historical — and supernatural — background. The novel appeals in many ways: it is a love story, a coming-of-age story, and a ghost story. William Bell handles these intricacies masterfully. *Stones* is humorous and poignant, an irresistibly good read.

Thomas M.F. Gerry is a professor of English (Canadian Literature) at Laurentian University. He is the author of Canadian and U.S. Women of Letters (1993).

Mining and Maturing in Newfoundland

Whose Side are You On? Betty Fitzpatrick Dorion. Ed. Bob Currie. Coteau, 2001. 192 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 1-55050-179-8. Ages 11 and up.

In *Whose Side are You On?*, Betty Fitzpatrick Dorion dramatizes by means of several layers of painful situations an adolescent boy’s striving for independence and his

welcoming of personal responsibility for his decisions and actions. Growing up in 1975 in a fluorspar mining town on the Newfoundland coast, fourteen-year-old Ron faces difficulties within his family, at school, in romance, and, tying all of his problems together, at the local mine, where there is an intense labour dispute. A more vivid depiction of a young man's sense of insecurity — this side of World War I — is hard to imagine.

At the beginning, it is mostly because Ron is the narrator that readers will probably sympathize with him. Dorion portrays him as being mean to his young brother, hostile towards his dying father, a smart aleck "just getting by" in school, and generally selfish. Besides setting a formidable challenge for the writer, to present such a tough-to-like character as the novel's protagonist actually intensifies the reader's appreciation of one of Ron's major insights: how difficult it is to produce positive change. *Whose Side are You On?* is no Disneyesque tale of miraculous transformation; still, significant changes in Ron's outlook do occur as he grows up.

Many readers will be able to enter imaginatively into the situations which are catalysts for Ron's more mature perspective. Through a class project on the history of their town's labour relations, for instance, Ron gains a less black-and-white understanding of the bitter manager/worker split — the reference in the book's title — which defines many of the townspeople's social interactions. His partner on the project is Jackie, a young woman who reaches out to Ron, placing confidence in him, which in turn actually does give him confidence. Jackie's grandfather, who, like Ron's father, is dying of silicosis from his work as a miner, tells the young researchers about the mine's history; in so doing, he contributes a human, highly emotional dimension to what had seemed to Ron a lifeless topic. In the descriptions of Jackie's and Ron's relationship there are hints of romantic attraction, but this feature is secondary to their sharing of respect and sympathy for Jackie's grandfather, and their sense of how it is vitally important for them to present their project to their classmates. Readers will appreciate, I think, Dorion's wisdom in showing two young people building a connection rather than relying on love to make everything right, or some such cliché.

Similarly, to viewers of the excellent film on much the same subject, *Margaret's Museum*, readers will be led to feel the loyalties and pride of a group of exploited people, as well as the temptation to get out, which they face, even though in many ways they have nowhere to go. Dorion skilfully plays off the developments of adolescence with the novel's larger setting, creating deeply felt insights for readers of *Whose Side are You On?*.

Thomas M.F. Gerry is a professor of English (Canadian Literature) at Laurentian University. He is the author of Canadian and U.S. Women of Letters (1993).

Widening Spirals: A Mennonite Girl Grows Up

Willow Creek Summer. Kathleen Wiebe. Ed. Barbara Sapergia. Coteau, 2000. 200 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 1-55050-169-0. Ages 12 and up.

Because this novel is so deftly written, its multi-levelled complexity is not necessar-