

Teamwork and Overcoming Fears in the Next Generation of Canadian Books
for Children / Margaret Steffler

Underdog. Eric Walters. Orca, 2004. 167 pp. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 1-55143-302-8.

Murder at the Winter Games. Screech Owls 18. Roy MacGregor. McClelland and Stewart, 2004. 123 pp. \$6.99 paper. ISBN 0-7710-5647-8.

Newton and the Giant. Michael McGowan. Illus. Shelagh McNulty. HarperTrophy Canada, 2003. 203 pp. \$15.99 paper. ISBN 0-00-639257-1.

Monster in the Mountains. A Dylan Maples Adventure. Shane Peacock. Puffin Canada, 2003. 207 pp. \$18.00 paper. ISBN 0-14-331222-7.

The Mariner's Curse. John Lunn. Tundra, 2004. 205 pp. \$12.99 paper. ISBN 0-88776-672-2.

In a 1985 CANSCAIP profile of Elizabeth Waterston and Mary Rubio, two of the founding editors of *Canadian Children's Literature*, Jo Ellen Bogart summarizes a discussion about the function of book reviews within *CCL*. Bogart tells us that, according to Waterston and Rubio, the book review should firstly "make the public aware of the existence of a book" (Greenwood 111), secondly "entertain the reader" (Greenwood 112), and finally, through promoting and criticizing, "make the next generation of books better" (Waterston; qtd. in Greenwood 112). In 2004, 29 years after the appearance of the first issue of *CCL* in 1975, we are indeed immersed in that "next generation of books."

The books under review here, written by male authors about male protagonists, attempt to appeal to reluctant junior readers of approximately nine to twelve years of age. These books try too hard at times, revealing an approach that panders to the targeted audience. An awareness of such an approach can weigh heavily on a reader who is trying to respond to plot, character, and setting but who is repeatedly and unwillingly drawn back to transparent signs of authorial intention, which often manifests itself in unnecessary exaggerations, particularly where humour and suspense are concerned. Nevertheless, the appeal to the junior reader is present and is highly effective when it is the least self-consciously portrayed — in other words, when these authors allow themselves to look beyond the specific audience of junior readers whom they are perhaps too anxiously and deliberately engaging in the act of reading.

Underdog is the seventh in Eric Walters's basketball series, while *Murder at the Winter Games* is the eighteenth book in Roy MacGregor's popular *Screech Owl* series about a hockey team from Tamarack. An "Orca Young Reader," *Underdog* explores race, class, and discrimination in the realistic setting of Mississauga. Narrated by Nick, the book provides enough background and explanation for the non-series reader to feel comfortable jumping in for this novel alone or at this point in the series. Readers will feel the delight of recognition upon discovering familiar basketball terms and alternative names for the game, such as "hoops." When Ashton, a black player from "the complex," joins the team, the lessons learned in the context of sports — and by extension in life itself — stress team playing and tolerance. Elements of the unexpected render the novel's morals memorable rather than heavy.

Nick luckily hits on the right answer for Coach Barkley — “The lesson is . . . is . . . that a ball can be thrown faster than anybody can carry it, so a pass is faster than dribbling” (100). Nick’s answer is connected with the coach’s challenge or “trick” preceding it and his instructions following it: “What I want to see is b-ball, not me-ball” (103). The connections ensure that the coach’s point makes an impact on the readers’ as well as the characters’ minds. Non-racist Nick is caught out when he admits his fear of Jamal, based on appearance; Nick notes that Jamal “had a shaved head and a large tattoo on his arm and he looked mean” (131). Although Nick does not buy Ashton’s explanation that he is afraid of Jamal “because he is black and you think all black guys carry weapons” (Walters 134), Nick’s surprise when he discovers Jamal’s identity suggests his susceptibility to assumptions and stereotypes. As Nick faces his unacknowledged prejudice and fear, so Ashton begins to come to terms with his unwarranted feelings of persecution as well as the defensive attitude that accompanies such feelings. Both realizations contribute to the team play that is at the heart of this novel. Although not a particularly challenging novel, *Underdog* is successful in that it encourages readers to examine race and discrimination in an open and honest manner.

More action and more history inform the pages of MacGregor’s *Murder at the Winter Games* than the text of *Underdog*, although the actual plot involving the team players may be too far-fetched for some, and there are gaps and questions for readers who are not familiar with the series overall. The setting at the E Center in Salt Lake City, Utah, will resonate with young Canadian readers and hockey players who are knowledgeable about the recent history of the sport, specifically the 2002 Winter Games. Nish’s burial of an object at centre ice (not a loonie in imitation of Trent Evans) provides not merely an effective conclusion to the novel but an apt and moving closure that brings together the competitive sport of hockey and the novel’s mysterious kidnapping and murder. The Screech Owls’ rescue of Brody Prince of the Hollywood Stars team provides a fast pace and suspense, while Nish’s gross-out Olympics supplies the novel’s humour. Many readers, however, will find their interest focused on the tunnels beneath Salt Lake City and their use by bootleggers during prohibition. Although the tunnels provide a fascinating world beneath the city, one that will definitely catch the imagination of young readers, it is finally the familiarity of the smooth surface of the ice that persists after the book is finished. Travis comments with an emotional clarity that, “on the ice, time was frozen” and that “the game seemed to him like another world, another dimension, where life was protected from everything else” (81). MacGregor, through Travis, is articulate about the intensity and nature of hockey’s attraction and the importance of team play, which ultimately are the themes that the book and the series try to convey.

Newton and the Giant, Michael McGowan’s first novel, begins with the main character escaping from a sport rather than embracing it. Newton has just scored on his own net in soccer and is being punished by his quadruplet brothers for his careless mistake. He manages to escape from soccer and the quadruplets by entering the world of the Merriwatts and Liveds, where he is befriended by Herbert the giant. A fantasy adventure with some very humorous sections, the book is uneven and contains a number of characters and settings that become confusing and even tiresome. The confrontation between the Merriwatts and Liveds, when it finally does occur, seems drawn out. Nevertheless, the main characters are well developed and Commander Joe, an action figure, is particularly engaging and memo-

rable, partly because of his miniature size but also because, unlike Newton, he is efficient and gets things done. It becomes a relief when Commander Joe enters the action and moves the plot along. There are successful mythic and fairy tale moments, such as when Newton uses the Icarus-like wings he has designed and built and when he gorges himself, Hansel and Gretel style, on a cabin of food until "every last fiber in his body froze. Nothing moved. It was as if he had turned into a human Popsicle" (105). Movement in and out of portals and from one place to another is of some interest, but the lengthy journey may fail to hold readers' attention throughout.

Shane Peacock's *Monster in the Mountains*, set in Harrison Hot Springs, is the fourth Dylan Maples adventure. As in *Newton and the Giant*, there are movements through holes and openings to other worlds, as well as allusions to myth and fairy tale. The epigraph to the novel, taken from *Through the Looking Glass*, promotes the belief in "impossible things" and alerts readers to the Lewis Carroll quality of the movement and the worlds reached through those movements. If we have any doubt, the name of Dylan's new friend reminds us of the familiar rabbit hole: "Alice pulled on the stump. It lifted up in her hands with ease. She peered down into the black hole underneath" (69). Similarly, the place and name "Hell's Gate" later in the novel suggest an underworld and quest that reach deeper than the "wonderland" trip of the earlier downward journey. On the journey into "Hell's Gate," Dylan faces the psychological fears that haunt him, which consist of leftover trauma from the previous book in the series, set in the Badlands of Alberta. *Monster in the Mountains* is a tightly-structured narrative that uses the elements of Farini, the sasquatch, and the British Columbia landscape to connect events and build suspense. The action becomes ludicrously impossible as the novel reaches its climax, but there have been numerous clues, such as Alice Emily Carr's name, that the world and action being described are far from real. This is a book about facing fears and believing in dreams. It is also a book that advocates wondering about nature and respecting it rather than controlling, capturing, or taming it. The chapter titles lead Dylan and the reader through the psychological stages of facing and conquering the terror within. The distinction between "upper" and "lower" worlds, used in the first and final chapter titles, carries many associations — geographical, psychological, moral, and literary, to name a few — that will keep readers thinking. Peacock's novel is highly entertaining and very satisfying. Its description of the B.C. landscape is accurate and evocative, while the treatment of the landscape's creature, the sasquatch, is careful and balanced.

John Lunn's *The Mariner's Curse* is also a novel about facing fears. Like Dylan Maples, Lunn's protagonist is guided by an outgoing girl, in this case Lucy. Rory Dugan is haunted by the drowning of Ian, his younger brother, for which he feels responsible. On the ship, the *Sea Lion*, Rory meets Morgan Hewitt, an ancient mariner figure who is also suffering guilt for his role in the drowning death of a young boy. Confronting one another repeatedly and abruptly, Rory and Morgan participate together, although not willingly or consciously, in the working out of their internal demons, each character eventually providing what the other one needs. Along with the ancient or cursed mariner, this novel also contains an archetypal stepfather, a Jekyll-and-Hyde phenomenon and a forced view through a demon's eyes. Lunn deals effectively with the archetypal human longing for control and the necessity of relinquishing that control along with the guilt that accompanies it. The characters are powerfully familiar, as are the emotions associated with them, and

the process and struggle required to purge those emotions. The description of the *Sea Lion* and the allusions to the *Titanic* will likely retain the interest of readers, although the detail of the hydraulics and the control panel could have been either more fully explained or made less prominent. Rory is eventually saved from the extreme and prolonged torment experienced by Morgan when he faces Morgan and thus conquers his own fears. The final confrontation is gripping not only because of its suspense but also because of its epic and mythic struggle, which brings to mind similar physical and psychological confrontations.

British writer Nina Bawden refers to "the dark wood that Dante writes of at the beginning of *The Divine Comedy*, the dark wood that we all remember from childhood and still visit in dreams" (75). Rory Dugan and Dylan Maples journey through such a dark wood as they are forced to confront their fears. The young reader of these novels, like the young reader envisioned by Bawden, knows "that the dark wood is himself, the mysterious world of his unconscious mind and that, like the brave knights of old, he has to get through it" (75). Peacock and Lunn are ambitious in their attempts to convey and connect the darkness of the physical landscape with the inner psychological darkness of the main characters. The sasquatch of the mountains and the ancient mariner of the sea provide the link between the overpowering landscape and the inner fears. The mythic struggles depicted in these two novels are indeed memorable, as are the forested mountains and the stormy ocean on which the struggles occur. The humorous, adventurous and realistic struggles of the other three novels under review do not have as much psychological force as *Monster in the Mountains* and *The Mariner's Curse*, but they certainly succeed in engaging young readers.

Works Cited

- Bawden, Nina. "Through the Dark Wood." *Innocence and Experience: Essays and Conversations on Children's Literature*. Ed. Barbara Harrison and Gregory Maguire. New York: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard, 1987. 66-75.
- Bogart, Jo Ellen. "Elizabeth Waterston and Mary Rubio." *Presenting Children's Authors, Illustrators and Performers*. Ed. Barbara Greenwood. Markham, ON: Pembroke, 1990. 108-14.

Margaret Steffler is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English Literature at Trent University.

Goddess and Heroine / Bert Almon

Inanna: From the Myths of Ancient Sumer. Kim Echlin. Illus. Linda Wolfsgruber. Groundwood, 2003. 72 pp. \$22.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-496-6.

See Saw Saskatchewan: More Playful Poems from Coast to Coast. Robert Heidbreder. Illus. Scot Ritchie. Kids Can, 2003. 32 pp. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55337-392-8.