

Ellis has created a book that reads like silk shining in the sun. Yet the delicate literary threads holding it together have been spun into a super strong fabric. Ellis's stories challenge young readers. Each tale begins quickly, fills out with details, deftly and tensely intimated. Then it ends so quickly that the reader feels breathless. The reader excitedly unwinds the strands of the story, and cleverly divines that the topic of the story is not what it might appear to be, but is really about aliens, computers, cults, the occult and the like. The reader wonders, "have I just read what I think I read?" "Was Mr. Potato Head a story about a boy in a cult, or about ESP between brother and sisters?" Savouring the possibilities and eager for more, the reader rushes to turn the page.

Perhaps the next tale will be a story on the topic of fairies. What teen reader would want to admit to reading a story about fairies? But the movie of teenage life flickers and flits so well into Ellis's writing that the author can explore any topic. Ellis's secret seems to lie in her realistic depiction of her heroes' day-to-day life. Her teens hate their siblings, get their licences, surf the net and so on. Readers become charmed by the humorous and authentic protagonists. They follow the hero so closely that when reality suddenly slips for the central character, the reader, too, falls into another world. Take, for example, the story "Happen." The hero leads a regular life, goes to school and has a boyfriend, Alan, who once confused the word "testicle" for "tentacle" in biology class. However, one day she stumbles through a hedge and finds herself feeling as though her "brain had tilted slightly." She discovers she has come into a garden, perhaps a land of fairies, and so has the reader. No teenaged reader would follow such a plot line if it weren't for the fact that Ellis treats her readers with respect: her writing is accessible yet highly sophisticated.

Ellis's bright patches of setting, characterization, language and plot swirl in my mind even upon reading the book for the second time, six months after the first reading. However, merely describing her writing holds you from it. My job as a reviewer will have been successful if I have enticed you to introduce the young reader in your life to *Back of Beyond*. I would invite you to take a peek at this book yourself. Look forward, dear reader, to being refreshed, entertained and delighted.

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From Winnipeg to Fairyland

A Completely Different Place. Perry Nodelman. Greenwood/Douglas & McIntyre, 1996. 191 pp. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-268-8.

This light-hearted fantasy by the Manitoba English professor and literary critic Perry Nodelman draws on many elements from traditional fairy tale and fantasy classics to tell its story of a Winnipeg boy swept into another world —

"a completely different place." Like Alice in Wonderland, he experiences uncomfortable sensations of rapidly shrinking and growing, and sees humans transformed into animals; like Gulliver, he is humiliated by being the size of a doll in a world of large people, comically inconvenienced by his own body and its functions, and repelled by his close-up look at the human body expanded to gigantic dimensions. In its blending of fairy lore and ordinary contemporary Canadian life, *A Completely Different Place* recalls other recent Canadian work for young adults by, for example, Sarah Ellis and Tim Wynne-Jones. Nodelman helps his readers see the connections to traditional lore by appending an "Historical Note" referring to Keightly's *Fairy Mythology* of 1880 for an earlier account of the magical objects his own hero experiments with, and to Katherine Briggs's *Encyclopedia of Fairies* for a parallel story of a human girl who is lured off to become housekeeper and babysitter to a handsome stranger from the other world. In the text of the novel itself, however, Nodelman avoids using the word "fairy" (highly suspect to the young adolescent readership at whom the book is aimed), and refers instead to the "Strangers" from the "completely different place" who can enter our world, interact with us, and — dangerously — call us, like the young people in this story, to enter into their own world. The plot of this novel thus uses the traditional story of abduction into and rescue from Fairyland, given a modern context and told in the slangy, irreverent voice of young Johnny Nesbit.

Johnny's encounters with the fairies of Strangers were the subject of an earlier novel also; in *The Same Place but Different* Johnny set out to rescue his little sister, whom the Strangers had stolen and replaced with a changeling. While most of the sequel stands on its own, the final four chapters are packed with references to characters and events from the first book, and the elaborate explanations and sudden introduction of these characters and motives make the conclusion overly-complicated. Some of the material seems to be passed over too hastily. More might have been made, for example, of the legendary figure of Thomas Rhymer, human lover of the fairy queen, while in Liam, a Stranger whose compassion enables him to become human, Nodelman gives merely a perfunctory nod to a motif which would seem to demand more depth and feeling.

Unlike the fantasies of Ellis and Wynne-Jones, however, this is not a novel which uses fairy lore to make any serious exploration of contemporary young people's feeling and experience. Instead, it is a romp, with Johnny's cheeky language and good-hearted naivete giving rise to frequent chuckles. Cheryl, Johnny's kind-hearted classmate, is the unwitting human lured into fairyland whom Johnny must rescue this time around; although his previous experience makes him more knowledgeable about what is really going on in this world of magic and illusion, silly mistakes and courageous gestures are about equally divided between the two characters. The action is fast-paced, and absurd situations abound, beginning with the opening as Johnny wakes to find himself naked, in a frilly pink bedroom, being stared at through the window by a gigantic eyeball. Johnny's first-person narrative has energy, and an engaging candour: "He was skinny, that kid, unbelievably skinny. Compared to him, even I looked like a Mr. Canada Finalist. Well, maybe not a finalist." (152) Readers who take their fantasy seriously may be bothered by the flippancy of

A Completely Different Place, and by inconsistencies such as Johnny on page 99 saying that they don't read the signs out loud, because doing so sets the magic to work, but on page 103 reading one aloud, with no effect. Other readers, however, may delight in the giddy pace of the action, the sardonic humour of Johnny's narrative, and in the deployment of traditional fairy tale material in a new context.

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An Entertaining Flight into Fantasy and Freedom

The Invisible Day. Marthe Jocelyn. Illus. Abby Carter. Tundra Books, 1997. 134 pp. \$14.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-412-6.

"Even though I am almost eleven years old, my mother is stuck to me like glue." Thus begins this entertaining first novel about a young girl yearning for freedom — and then having to cope with it. When Billie (real name Isobel) stumbles across a mysterious powder which makes her invisible, she gleefully gets herself into situations which any young reader would relish: doing what she pleases, eavesdropping, being in the boy's washroom, making faces at adults, playing tricks on her worst enemy. But Billie soon encounters as many problems as joys, which propel the story along to its final satisfying conclusion.

Jocelyn is a fine writer. Her use of first person, humour and believable dialogue ring true, giving a solid, funny, kid's-eye view of home and school. The secondary characters are just as believable: Billie's overprotective mother, her loyal friend Hubert, and her nemesis, the snooty Alyssa. The setting, New York City — that place where safety and freedom are always an issue — is wonderfully detailed, whether fruit market or film set, candy store or subway. The book is episodic, moving swiftly in 24 easy-to-read chapters, with an appealing layout. Abby Carter's line drawings deftly convey the sense and tone of the story. (An invisible protagonist must be a daunting challenge for any illustrator!)

Fantasy is a difficult genre, and for the most part Jocelyn handles it well. In a few places the logic wears a little thin, but this is a minor quibble. When Billie is invisible, everything she holds disappears (66) — but not telephone receivers, door handles, subway poles or other convenient exceptions. It is also a handy coincidence that Billie's teacher, that day, is replaced by a substitute. Jody, the teenage genius who created the vanishing powder, is in the story only to help undo the spell. Would readers want to find out more about what happens to her?

In an epilogue tacked on after the final chapter, Billie carefully makes amends for every single piece of mischief done. Presumably this is to mollify the politically correct. (Will Curious George now have new volumes added, to atone for all the mayhem he's caused?)