

Saltless Series

Starshine at Camp Crescent Moon. Ellen Schwartz. Polestar, 1994. 142 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 0-919591-02-7. *The Big Race*. Sylvia McNicoll. Illus. Susan Gardos. Scholastic, 1996 (Shooting Star Series). 87 pp. \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-24908-8. *Quincy Rumpel and the Mystifying Experience*. Betty Waterton. Groundwood/Douglas & McIntyre, 1994. 85 pp. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-199-1. *The Great Pebble Creek Bike Race*. Kathy Stinson. Illus. Frances Clancy. James Lorimer & Company, 1994. 106 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 1-55028-442-8.

Booksellers like to tap into the dependable market of eight-to-ten-year-old readers who thrive on predictability. These readers derive satisfaction from the literary safety-net provided in middle-of-the-road books. Books in this category promise a character who is interesting, but not too eccentric; who goes on adventures that are scary or wacky, but never too weird or dangerous. Once a developing novel reader has latched onto such a writer, publishers can count on selling a sequel, or perhaps even an entire series, by the same author.

Starshine at Camp Crescent Moon, *The Big Race*, *Quincy Rumpel and the Mystifying Experience* and *The Great Pebble Creek Bike Race* fit this niche in the book market. These four books are sequels, or part of a series of books, that do not astonish the reader, but provide reasonable and sturdy reading fodder. Nothing too challenging happens that might deter readers on their road to independent novel reading. Nothing too magnificent occurs either.

The most memorable moments in these stories come when unique characters face odd situations. *Starshine at Camp Crescent Moon* stands out from the other books in this area. Readers know from the first "Starshine" book that Ellen Schwartz's hero collects spiders. This junior arachnologist regards her stay at Camp Crescent Moon as an opportunity to pursue a rare species. It also gives Starshine the chance to discover, through some hilarious escapades, that friends *can* accept what one fears might be socially debilitating differences, such as an interest in spiders. Through comic details as simple as pebbles in belly buttons, Schwartz has crafted an easy-read winner.

The title seems to be the biggest handicap in Sylvia McNicoll's *The Big Race*. There *is* no big race. True, the students in Mrs. Leduc's class occasionally race the snails they raise as part of a science project, but titling the book "*The Big Race*" misleadingly places too much importance to this part of the plot. Rather, the story narrows in on the competition between Neil and Robin, especially as it pertains to baseball. Neil can't stand having the girl he nicknames "Rotten Apple" best him in baseball or anything else. The serviceable plot and characters work together to make *The Big Race* a smooth and pleasant read for developing, independent readers.

Quincy of *Quincy Rumpel and the Mystifying Experience* leaves Nova Scotia to go on an adventure with her whole family. Their visit to their great-grandmother in Ontario turns into a madcap search for the missing octogenarian. From parrots and balloons to mistaken identities, author Betty Waterton has a whole list of weird and wonderful things for Quincy to go through before she gets to the ultimate "mystifying" experience at Niagara Falls. Along the way, Waterton provides some tongue-in-cheek fun for her readers.

Although writing sequels, authors McNicoll, Schwartz and Waterton have created books that stand on their own. Reading Kathy Stinson's *The Great Pebble Creek Bike Race*, one can't forget that this story is a sequel. The author refers once too often to instances that happened in the first book, which takes precious pages away from the bike race story. The plot revolves around a bike race and competition for friendship. Again, a boy vs. girl contest theme runs through the book; this time the girl has a hearing disability. The characters move stiffly and the comic levity that comes through in the other books is missing here. There are no delightful surprises, and a few disappointments.

These four books are a sampling of plot-driven books that are similar to tried-and-true series on prime time television. Although they are not of poor quality, it's doubtful that they will be remembered several seasons from now. However, my craving for a finer literary feast, and more salt with my series, is tempered with the realization that many young readers don't want "great" literature. Most days, they'll avoid dealing with such complexities by selecting a burger-and-fries book series, and it appears that these books are popular. One of the teen-aged girls at our house enthusiastically claims that *Starshine at Camp Crescent Moon* is one of her "favourite books ever!" Groundwood/Douglas & McIntyre's media release informs that Quincy Rumpel "is one of Canada's top-selling series for youngsters eight to ten." Perhaps, in our overly complicated world, many young readers need to sink into something straight-forward.

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Modes of Storytelling

PuddleDuck. Nancy Hundal. Illus. Stephen Taylor. HarperCollins, 1995. Unpag. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 0-00-224012-2.

PuddleDuck is a unique little story. Its impact has something to do with the power of childhood imagination and its confusion of the real with the make-believe. It has something to do with the ways of memory, with the distancing that makes all that remembering and nostalgia a part of storytelling. *PuddleDuck* begins on a note of longing: Bianca yearns for the return of her Puddleduck [sic], a stuffed animal she considers so real that her wish for it to be alive becomes a certainty in her own imagination when the toy mysteriously disappears. If the dominant mood of the book could be described as a colour, the lavender of the duck's feather aptly recalls all the childhood yearning and emotion that the story holds.

To make a story, experience must be distanced and idealised by that memory. And Hundal creates this distancing on the first page:

That one spring, Bianca knew that Puddleduck would come back. He had been gone a long time — since the summer before. But when she saw from her window the gray sheets of rain slicing through the clouds she knew her Puddleduck was coming too.