

Because the rebels are typified in Uncle Ted — a breezy fellow imperceptive people take to, but repeatedly judged “lazy and unreliable” by Adam and the narrator — Adam’s rejection of their cause is as much personal as political. Making the political personal is a prerogative, no doubt, of historical fiction, but Uncle Ted is so heavily deployed as a foil for Adam’s self-formation that he operates more as strategic counter than embodied character, and so gives very political *ad hominem* support to Adam’s perception that the Mackenzie rebellion, a magnet for idlers looking for “easy pickings,” achieves nothing but “unhappiness and muddle.” Since historical fiction for young adults seems obliged to arrange the past as a context for the successful maturation of its teenage protagonists, didactic purpose inevitably tides up the imaginative reclamation of history, imposing certain ideological constraints. But if *Rebellion* ties Adam’s individuation to a modified acceptance of Tory rule, it provides as well a scrupulously imagined setting to authenticate his solidly Upper Canadian coming of age.

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CHINESE CANADIAN FATHERS AND SONS

Golden Girl and Other Stories. Gillian Chan. Kids Can Press Ltd., 1994. 119 pp. \$4.95 paper. ISBN 1-55074-219-1. **Breakaway.** Paul Yee. Groundwood/Douglas and McIntyre, 1994. 144 pp. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-201-7.

In Gillian Chan’s *Golden Girl and Other Stories* and Paul Yee’s *Breakaway* both authors examine the relationships which exist between Chinese-Canadian fathers and sons. The conflicts which develop because of the different cultural values of the two generations described in these books are compounded by other difficulties which confront both the teenagers and their parents.

Chan’s impressive first work of young adult fiction explores the theme of bullying through five interconnected tales which take place in the small Ontario town of Elmwood. Although all five short stories contain strong plots and convincing passages of dialogue in which adolescents are bullied by fellow classmates or by adults, perhaps the most complex and interesting characters of the collection are to be found in “Small Town Napoleon.”

Andy Li’s father, Dr. Vincent Li, spent a difficult childhood in Hong Kong attempting to qualify for university while growing up in poverty. Now that Vincent has successfully established himself as a doctor in Elmwood he is enraged to learn that his son is wasting his time performing the lead role of Napoleon in the school’s musical, “Animal Farm,” rather than concentrating on his studies. At a particularly gripping moment in the story, Andy, who has defied his father by continuing to act in the play, is waiting back stage in the dark for the curtain to rise on opening night. Instead of thinking about the play, however,

all that Andy can see in his mind's eye is Vincent violently threatening him. The juxtaposition of the pig, Napoleon, in Orwell's story with Vincent Li in Chan's story is particularly poignant, as, for example, Andy says to his father, "I am going tonight and tomorrow night, and I am going to be Napoleon, a pig who thinks he can control everyone and everything" (93).

Chan's stories can serve, among other things, as valuable vehicles for enabling adolescent readers to recognize and to confront bullying in their own schools and homes. My only reservation about Chan's book is that the connections between her stories are not always convincing. For example, when Anna Murphy, the beautiful, talented, and vain cheerleader and actress from "Golden Girl" appears in "Small Town Napoleon" as a kind and supportive friend to Andy, the transformation of her personality from selfish to considerate is difficult to believe.

Yee's *Breakaway* is a powerfully-written novel which chronicles the final days of Kwok-Ken Wong's high school career in 1932 Vancouver. Although the central theme of this book is racism, many of the same elements of father/son conflict which were present in Chan's book are paralleled in Yee's novel. For example, in Chan's story, Andy's father feels that his son's theatrical activities are an unnecessary distraction from his school work, while in *Breakaway* Kwok's father believes that both soccer and school interfere with Kwok's duties on the family farm.

Kwok is an excellent student and athlete who deserves to be given a scholarship to attend university, but is denied the opportunity because he is Chinese. Despite the book's title, *Breakaway* is not so much a story about Kwok's soccer-playing prowess as it is about how Kwok uses soccer to break away from the drudgery of his father's farm and from the racial oppression which restrict every aspect of his life, just as Andy, in Chan's story, uses the theatre to break away from his father's suffocating control over his life. By playing for Chinatown's soccer team, Kwok eventually seizes the opportunity, in a brutally unfair championship game, to challenge and defeat the white community that has repeatedly and cruelly tried to exclude him from his rightful place in society. Shortly thereafter, a series of hardships which afflict Kwok's father help the father and son to grow closer to one another and to respect each other, just as Andy and his father appear to understand each other better by the end of Chan's story.

Yee's vivid descriptions of Vancouver's Chinatown, Kwok's school, the soccer games, and the poverty-stricken Chinese farming community are full of memorable details which should help students to be transported to this important era in Canadian history. Yee's style and subject matter are reminiscent of the works of John Steinbeck and Maxine Hong Kingston as he describes Kwok gathering discarded food from the restaurants in Chinatown, trying to keep his sister from agreeing to an arranged marriage, helping a sow to give birth in a filthy pig pen, and fishing on the banks of the ghost-infested, flooding Fraser River.

Whether teachers choose to focus upon father/son relationships, racism, the Depression, the Sino-Japanese War, or the patriarchal oppression of Chinese Canadian women, Yee's latest book has much to teach young adult readers about

the courage of Canada's Chinese community during the 1930s. Both Gillian Chan and Paul Yee have identified themes which are relevant to today's adolescents and they have embodied those themes in fully-realized characters, passionate dialogue, evocative settings, and compelling narratives.

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A NOVEL THAT DELIVERS WHAT IT PROMISES

Amy's Promise. Bernice Thurman Hunter. Scholastic Canada Ltd., 1995. 200 pp. \$4.99 paper. ISBN 0-590-24621-6.

So many books relate stories that are linear in structure: a central problem, which is identified quickly, an orderly build-up, a climax, and a denouement. *Amy's Promise* follows this pattern too, but only to a point. The novel's striking feature is its portrayal of the daily struggles of a family, whose plight could go on conceivably in the same way for years. The author focuses not on the single big dramatic moment, but on the little rifts that change direction for this family, and give renewed and significant hope, as a result. While the characters seek respite from their trials, Hunter, refreshingly, also allows the characters to express and to own the hurt that accumulates over the years — the family cross to bear.

Told in the third person, *Amy's Promise* is appropriately a coming-of-age story, the setting of Toronto in the mid-1920s captured as naturally as any familiar modern-day setting. Its short chapters and selective diction encourage young teens (ages nine to thirteen) to keep reading with success, while the novel's compelling themes are challenging, thought-provoking, and as contemporary today as they were yesterday. The family problems are seen through the eyes of twelve-year-old Amy Phair, soon to turn thirteen. She wrestles with feelings concerning the death of her beloved mother, an alcoholic and neglectful father, an overburdened grandmother who depends heavily on Amy to help care for her three younger brothers, and the uprooting of the youngest sibling, Janey, at birth. She is sent to live with other relatives upon the death of the mother.

Amy grows up faster than most children her age as a result of her background. Her additional role as peacemaker is realistically and movingly portrayed as tension mounts between the father and grandmother. Amy's responsibilities leave her little time to develop a bond of friendship with her new companion Winnie, or to devote her time to playing the piano, for which she discovers she has a gift. Though she meets the demands of her family dutifully and with sincerity, she does, however, think for herself. The author's skill is in the ability to balance the child's genuine display of obedience and familial submission with her own growing neediness, confusion and anger. The tension that unfolds is her desire for a "normal" family and childhood pitted against the bittersweet love she possesses for her family just as they are. The result is a drama that is both heartfelt and convincing.