

ing the unusual experiences and perspectives that inspire the characters and readers to look more carefully and openly at the complexities of relationships and identity.

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The Liar Tells the Truth

The McIntyre Liar. David Bly. Tree Frog Press, 1993. 222 pp. \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-88967-069-2.

Smart aleck kid takes the car out for a joyride, smashes it up. Punishment: sent away for the summer to a ranch where he learns about real work and grows up a little. Sounds like a cliché of a plot, doesn't it? Well it is. But any cliché can be taken up and made into something true and real, and in the hands of an intelligent writer like David Bly, this cliché has become a memorable, funny, wise novel.

This is an epistolary novel, a series of letters written by Kevin Winslow to his friend at home in Calgary, detailing his doings on the McIntyre ranch where he has been sent into exile. Well, exile is how he sees it at first, as he rails in arrogant superiority about his fellow-workers and whines incessantly about his lot. But with a deft touch Bly manages to convey the uncertainty behind Kevin's bluster. When he tries to be patronizing to the other farm hands, they either undercut him with their own wit or graciously sidestep his awkward jabs. Luckily, Kevin is smart enough to be aware of this, and of course he begins to learn as he begins to pay attention.

Notably lacking in sentimentality, the great strength of this novel is its characterization. As Kevin — who quickly earns the nickname "Muskrat" after a muddy accident — learns more about the others who work with him on the ranch, he finds all his preconceptions falling to pieces in his hands. There is a murderer with a melancholy cloud of guilt hovering over him, a harmonica-playing Hutterite who has forsaken his past, and a troubled genius called Windy who, as Kevin says, "knows everything there is to know except what's useful." Windy is the most interesting character in the book, a fount of information both arcane and in fact, very often useful. He encourages Kevin to carry on with a miniature in-house newspaper, the "McIntyre Liar" of the title, and becomes his best reader. But Windy, who in fact suffers more from a surfeit of sanity than any insanity, is not destined for happiness, and when he must leave the ranch, a genuine pall of sadness falls over the book, and Kevin begins to feel "scared of what life can do to you" (184).

Bly's range is wide and his voice usually true. While Kevin's ingenu-

ousness wore a little thin in places, still I both laughed out loud and grew a little teary while reading this book. It's a long novel, but a satisfying one. Like a long summer spent working hard on a ranch, but growing stronger and healthier every day, reading *The McIntyre Liar* is a tonic.

Melody Collins is the author of The Magic Within, and is currently working on a new novel.

Facing Fears in Virtual Reality

The Faces of Fear. Monica Hughes. HarperCollins, 1997. 166 pp. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-00-224560-4.

The connections between Virtual Reality and ordinary reality are of vital concern in this near-future fiction by Monica Hughes.

Joan Sandow still suffers from nightmares about the terrible car accident that left her legs paralyzed and killed her mother. Unable to face the stares of other kids, Joan has quit school and stays at home, cared for by professionals but isolated in her misery. Her father Max is grieving too, but has allowed his daughter to build a cocoon around herself. Joan is desperately unhappy until she turns to cyberspace for her social life. In the world of the Internet she is no longer Joan but Joanna, a "warrior" persona with no physical limitations. There she meets the boy Whizkid, and their friendship soon involves playing Virtual Reality games, the most important of which is a new experimental game designed in the lab of MaxCom Industries, Max's software company.

In this near-future world, Virtual Reality includes sensory as well as visual effects. Thus, when plugged into the VR world, Joan/Joanna has the ability to walk and run. The game's four episodes involve a search for four "artifacts" which will save Earth from destruction. Aside from the normal challenges of the quest, the two young people also face the vengeful spirit of Jason, one of the game's designers, who has inserted frightening episodes in revenge for Joan's past insult. However, Joan and her friend know only that the game depends on cooperation, determination, courage and mutual trust.

The playing of the game alternates with glimpses of the characters' real lives, which are never easy. Whizkid (a.k.a. Steve) comes from a poor neighbourhood, and Joan faces the daily trials of being wheelchair-bound. Yet as the game progresses, both Joan and Steve learn to face their fears, and at the end are able to meet and interact in real life as themselves.

Despite a couple of unfortunate stereotypes (the unkempt computer nerd Jason and Whizkid's abusive baseball coach) the characters here are