

## What's in a Name?

*The 6th Grade Nickname Game.* Gordon Korman. Scholastic Canada, 1998. \$18.99 cloth. ISBN 0-590-03875-3. *Hope Springs a Leak.* Ted Staunton. Red Deer College P, 1998. 120 p. \$9.99 paper. ISBN 0-88995-174-8

While they differ slightly in intensity of characterization and reality of situation, the plots of these books follow similar episodic paths in which adults and kids collide with humorous results. Both novels raise questions related to theme: in one, it is if nicknames accurately encompass more or less what they imply, and, in the other, whether actions define character.

Korman's plot revolves around nicknames as Jeff, and his best pal Wiley, amuse themselves and classmates by assigning names to everyone around them by referring to distinctive personality quirks or some obvious behaviour pattern. Mr. Hughes, the new teacher who has difficulty leaving his football coaching out of the classroom, is noisy, exuberant, and larger than life. He becomes Mr. Huge, which fits both his personality and size. Jeff and Wiley's class become the Dim Bulbs as these students are not considered as bright as those in other classes, and Charles Rossi's habit of hiding in bushes and keeping tabs on everyone else's business wins him the name of Snoopy. Red-haired Cassandra, the bouncy new girl in the class who wears heavy boots and numerous pictorial skirts, gives the friends the most difficulty in assigning her a nickname. Her unconventionality makes her difficult to contain, but in the end the friends agree that "Carrot-top" best suits her. This makes everyone happy but seems a tame nickname for such a lively character. The boys, when challenged in their choice of names, argue that giving someone a name is no guarantee that it will stick. No one is more surprised than they are when they name Mike Smith "the Iceman," for he not only takes on the coolness the name implies, but wins the coveted Cassandra, too.

In Staunton's book, Sam, the sixth grader, attempts to give himself a nickname, yearning to be called "Truck" after his Maple Leaf hockey-player hero. Yet, doing nothing to deserve it, even his broad hints fall flat to everyone except his admirer, Amanda. Sam, like the legendary Walter Mitty, allows his imagination to enliven his image through dreams of performing impressive deeds, yet, in reality, when he attempts to impress, everything goes wrong. When Sam encounters the town's most famous citizen, J. Earl Goodenough, secretly quoting Shakespeare in the park, he wonders if this man is really the blustery curmudgeon that he appears to be. In this book, characters' names are playfully related to personality. J. Earl Goodenough certainly thinks of himself in the most positive of terms even though those around him find him otherwise. It is Sam who never seems to be quite "good enough." On the other hand, Miss Broom, the new teacher with her enthusiasm for sports and her all-too-many toothy grins, sweeps Sam and his best pal, Darryl, into a whirlwind of competition as each attempts to outdo the other for her affections.

If readers are looking for books which stretch imaginations with well-rounded characters, having tightly woven and challenging plots, they must look elsewhere. The value in these books is that they have a lot going on which leaves little time for readers to become bored. They also convey a zany sense of awkward situations and the absurdity of overblown characters, which most young people should enjoy. Even though the plots tend to be simplistic, with conflicts resolved in the end, they will be popular with the not-quite-teens for their simple language, humour, and fast-moving action.

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### Finding You, Finding me

*Sins of the Father.* Norah McClintock. Scholastic, 1998. 190 pp. \$5.99 paper. ISBN 0-590-12488-9. *Janey's Girl.* Gayle Friesen. Kids Can, 1998. 222 pp. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55074-461-5. *Drowning in Secrets.* Brenda Bellingham. Scholastic, 1998. 180 pp. \$5.99 paper. ISBN 0-590-12487-0.

The need to know our origins bears heavily on the human psyche. Parents in particular play a vital role in our development of a sense of self. For the protagonists of these young adult novels, the path to an independent adult identity has been blocked by unresolved questions about an absent mother or father. In McClintock's capably written mystery, fifteen-year-old Mick turns sleuth to prove that his father, incarcerated for most of Mick's childhood, was wrongly convicted of murder. The seemingly irrefutable evidence poses a tough puzzle and Mick's journey to the solution is sufficiently fraught to keep readers glued to the trail. What the author shows us about Mick himself is equally engrossing. His self-worth is defined by his father's reputation. His belief in his father's innocence is merely an uninformed legacy from his mother. He is the pawn of adults in his life, first his father who abruptly dumps him on an embittered, unwelcoming grandfather and disappears, and then a deceitful uncle. In a strange town where people hate his father and look unsmilingly at him, Mick is resentfully aware of being disenfranchised by his ignorance of the past; when he learns something which seems to confirm his father's guilt, it is a personal blow. So, when he stumbles on an inconsistency in the evidence, it is for his own sake as much as his father's that he is compelled to unearth the real murderer. In the end, with his father vindicated and a closer relationship growing between them, a newly confident Mick faces his forbidding grandfather.

Bellingham's tale is a delicious modern Gothic thriller in which the heroine's search for the past becomes a lethal threat to her future. Sixteen-