

PIGGYBACK ON THE ROAD TO AVONLEA

Sara's Homecoming. Heather Conkie. HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 1992. 123 pp., \$4.50 paper. ISBN 0-00-647154-4; **Aunt Hetty's Ordeal.** Gail Hamilton. HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 1992. 123 pp., \$4.50 paper. ISBN 0-00-647155-2; **Of Corsets and Secrets and True, True Love.** Fiona McHugh. HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 1992. 123 pp., \$4.50 paper. ISBN 0-00-647156-0; **Old Quarrels, Old Love.** Heather Conkie. HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 1992. 123 pp., \$4.50 paper. ISBN 0-00-647393-8.

Television makes no secret of its reliance on a formula of action and thrills-per-minute. But that formula is certainly no secret to success for the Road to Avonlea, a series of novels adapted from the Sullivan Films productions (and even more distantly adapted from the novels of Lucy Maud Montgomery).

Readers who have developed a liking for these characters through familiarity with the television program will find these books no surprise. Those who expect the strong, independent characters and rich storylines of Montgomery's work will find these characters and plotlines sadly wanting.

While the plotlines no doubt contain enough twists and botch-ups for entertaining television action, they often push the novels into the realm of the ridiculous. Many of the situations that no doubt create light television entertainment detract from the story, and overshadow more serious themes which could have been explored in print. In *Sara's Homecoming*, for example, being kidnapped and shot at by gypsies eclipses Sara's reaction to her father's unexpected death. Unrelated incidents (from setting a cannery on fire to being physically stuck in a bathtub) keep the plot moving in *Aunt Hetty's Ordeal*—supposed to be a story about teaching an “unlettered lad” to read and thus escape the poverty to which he is apparently doomed.

In *Old Quarrels, Old Love*, Hetty kicks a motorcar during an outdoor wedding reception, and sends it rolling down a hill scattering dishes, cakes and people in its wake. While the scene may make entertaining viewing on television, combined with an appropriate musical score, in print it only serves to highlight Hetty's selfishness and complete lack of charm. Luckily, one cares no more about the cardboard characters injured in these incidents than those perpetrating them.

Some attention is paid to the life and language of this period. Descriptions of the countryside, weddings, courtships, country fairs and one-room school-houses abound, although lacking in telling detail. Idiosyncratic oaths, clichés and antiquated terms like “rapscallion” (#14, p. 96, 117) are also thrown in to give the books a period feel.

Period costumes are shown in cover photographs and on four pages of photographs interrupting the middle of each book. Many of these are “mugs” or tableaux which do little to explain the action, and seem out of order in *Old Quarrels, Old Love*. They don't even serve a function in introducing readers to

Canadian actors, since their names do not appear in the captions.

Moralizing themes seem aimed in the direction of pre-teen readers: literacy, or the importance of family. The sentiment and nostalgia dripping from the slim 120-page volumes makes one wonder if the real target audience isn't an older generation of reader-viewers. Spinsters and widows are main characters in three of these four books, involved in romances which are very safe for modern censors, but probably not too appealing to modern youth.

With all the books available to today's readers, it is unfortunate that this series will no doubt piggyback the television program's success to command a disproportionate audience share.

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FEELING DIFFERENT

Foghorn Passage. Alison Lohans. Stoddart Publishing Company, 1992. 215 pp., \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-7737-5496-2; **Bryna Means Courage.** Mitzi Dale. Greenwood Books/Douglas & McIntyre Ltd., 1993. 139 pp., \$7.95. ISBN 0-88899-174-6; **Skateway to Freedom.** Ann Alma. Orca Book Publishers, 1993. 150 pp., \$6.95. ISBN 0-920501-89-3; **The Bells on Finland Street.** Lyn Cook. Scholastic Canada, 1950, 1991. 183 pp., \$7.95. ISBN 0-590-74049-0; **Maya** (a Degrassi book). Kathryn Ellis. James Lorimer & Company, Publishers, 1992. 150 pp., \$4.95. ISBN 1-55028-361-8; **The Stepfather Game.** Norah McClintock. Scholastic Canada, 1990. 190 pp., \$3.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-73659-0; **Coloured Pictures.** Himani Bannerji. Illus. S. Sasso. Sister Vision Press, 1991. 78 pp., \$6.95. ISBN 0-920813-86-0.

Novels for girls and young women often have a psychological agenda: they are intended to aid the adolescent in her inevitable emotional split from her family. Readers find in them a literary version of their own journeys, and can find comfort and instruction as well. All the protagonists in these novels feel the tension between home and away, between family and friends, between themselves as dependent children and independent adolescents. This tension is clear in the way that almost all the books begin: the initial scene in nearly every book is *away*; the girl is with her friends, at school, or somewhere she can begin to work on her independent identity. The next scene is then *home*, where the girl re-establishes her ties with her family over a meal. This idealized illusion of family unity is usually tested or destroyed as the young girl grows, while the attractions of *away* become more compelling. Each of these authors is guiding her young protagonist through the difficult, wrenching process of separation from parents.

The separation process is complicated in these books by the added burden of perceived *difference*. Teens yearn to be as much like their peers as they can be,