

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,

and the teens in these books are finding out just how hard it is to be noticeably different. Himani Bannerji's Sujita is South Asian, Lyn Cook's Elin is Finnish, Ann Alma's Josie is East German; all three girls initially feel their difference from what they perceive as mainstream Canadians. The three sisters in Norah McClintock's book have the same mother but three different fathers, each from a different ethnic background, and all three girls are grappling with different adolescent difficulties. The heroine Maya in Kathryn Ellis's book based on the popular Degrassi television series is confined to a wheelchair because of spina bifida; Bryna in Mitzi Dale's book has lost her mother and the idyllic travelling life she had shared with her father; and Sammie Franklin in Alison Lohans' book has lost her father and the emotional and financial security he had offered the family. Each author attempts to show how difference can strengthen; each shows how her protagonist can find her place in a larger community without abandoning the values of the family.

Both Mitzi Dale's *Bryna Means Courage* and Alison Lohans's *Foghorn Passage* succeed in showing girls accommodating themselves to the differences they feel as they discover a world away from home. These protagonists are both sixteen, and have developed talents that help them act with individuality and integrity. Tough-talking Bryna succeeds most spectacularly in getting away: she rides off to California on a Harley that she reconditioned herself. Bryna narrates her own story, and while she is funny, topical, and occasionally irreverent, she is primarily an entertaining rather than an inspiring character. When her father marries a woman she doesn't respect, Bryna simply runs away. She maintains no close emotional relationships in the novel, and never works to resolve any of her difficulties. Bryna may be brave, but she also seems cold and indifferent.

Sammie in *Foghorn Passage* by Alison Lohans is the most realistic and touching protagonist in this group of novels. She feels different from her orchestra friends because she is grieving for her father and having to adjust to living in reduced circumstances. She works through her grief by reaching out to another young musician, an attractive young man (not a love interest!) who has just been paralysed in a car accident. Lohans has an excellent sense of the emotional upheavals of the two teenage girls in Sammie's family, and gives the story a moving and realistic conclusion in a resolution that does not offer a happy ending to all concerned. She has also created an authentic orchestral atmosphere, capturing the anxiety and excitement that goes with playing with a group of dedicated young musicians.

Lyn Cook's Elin in *The Bells of Finland Street* has the smallest circle of distance from her family. Ten-year-old Elin is having difficulty finding friends and establishing herself in Canada where Finns are different, but when her grandfather visits from Finland and encourages her in her skating, she can reaffirm her Finnish family by embracing Canada. Cook's book stresses tradition and family values; contemporary environmental values are most noticeably lacking. It was first published in 1950, and is full of praise for the

industrial processes that scarred the Sudbury landscape. Despite its ideological distance from Canada in the 1990s, the book is nevertheless engaging, in part because of that very distance. The book itself mirrors young Elin's optimistic determination in its evocation of what is now a distant place and time; the plot turns on the values of multiculturalism in the community and of devotion within the family.

Like Elin, Josie, the eleven-year-old protagonist in Ann Alma's *Skateway to Freedom*, is a skater, who uses the activity as both a link to her family and as a way out of the family boundaries to a greater sense of accomplishment and autonomy. Josie's situation is more distressing than Elin's. She and her family, as refugees from East Germany before the fall of the Berlin Wall, are in many ways ambivalent new Canadians. Her creator Ann Alma, unlike the idealizing Lyn Cook, portrays Canada and Canadians, not Josie and her family, as different. This gives her book both a humorous and an informative edge, as in this passage where Josie reflects on her impressions of Canada before she arrived there: "Children flew to school in airplanes. They had homework machines called computers, and they had black boxes they carried around on the street so they could hear their music all the time" (9).

Once she has arrived in Canada, Josie's notions of the difference of Canadians is most telling of the material prosperity Canadians take for granted: Josie "had never seen a toilet seat with a lid. The toilet paper was soft, not rough like at home.... In East Germany they had one small mirror, as big as a plate, that hung by the kitchen sink. They had only two showers, no tubs, to share with all the families on their floor in the apartment block. And of course the toilets, to be shared by everyone, were in a separate room down the hall" (49). This kind of detail enhances the authenticity of the book, and increases the reader's sympathy with the immigrant to Canada, who has to make countless little adjustments to bridge the difference.

The gap is more difficult to bridge when the young person is marked by perceived difference of race or physical condition. When the world is as hostile as it is towards people of colour or people in wheelchairs, it becomes even harder for the adolescent to establish a foothold away from home. Both Himani Bannerji's Sujita in *Coloured Pictures* and Kathryn Ellis's title character in *Maya* overcome these barriers: Sujita fights against growing racism in her community, and Maya succeeds in getting both a job and a boyfriend despite her wheelchair.

Unfortunately, both of these authors sacrifice character development and plot in favour of the message. Bannerji's book may be attractive to South Asian young people who will be happy to read of children who eat chapatis and admire a movie star named Amitabhi Bachchan. However, their best interests will not be served by this book, which is poorly edited and factually erroneous, most egregiously in the account of the Ku Klux Klan's activities in Saskatchewan.

Ellis's *Maya* educates not just about physical disability, but about sexual

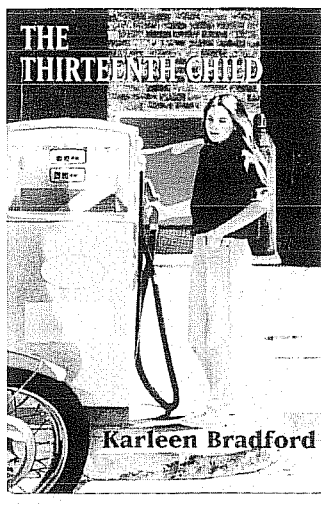
harassment as well. The book is good on these facts, but weak in terms of developing a character who has much integrity: Maya acts mostly by reacting, and her goals of a job and a boyfriend show her to be not all that different from other girls. Her search for a spot away from home is hampered by her overly protective parents, but her choices and actions are unexceptional. Without the wheelchair, she could be any fictional female dreaming of the perfect boy. The circumstances regarding sexual harassment on the job are informative, but the book is a light read, perhaps just what Degrossi watchers would like.

The sisters in Norah McClintock's *The Stepfather Game* are different because of their unusual family; the title refers to their mother's search for a man who will become a stepfather to this various group of girls. Too many issues are at work in this story: McClintock tackles racism, rebellion, anorexia, and over-achievement, all the while making sure each girl and the mother find a male companion by the end of the book. Juggling so many characters and situations makes too many demands on the reader, and the ending is rather pat. The girls in this book are also rather passive protagonists. Rather than stepping boldly away into independence, they tend to react to situations, and seem lonely and detached. There's not enough home in them to hold them together, and their main drive to get away is realized through a male.

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ESCAPE INTO DANGEROUS WATERS

Thirteenth child. Karleen Bradford. HarperCollins, 1994. 224 pp, \$17.00, \$10.00 cloth, paper. ISBN 0-00-224367-9; ISBN 0-00-647943-X.



Lying at the heart of this story is the question: "Is your life a trap to be escaped or a problem to be solved?" It opens with an array of characters all trying to escape. Kate, the protagonist, indulges in romantic fantasies; Steve, her father, drinks heavily and beats his wife to dull his sense of guilt; and her mother retreats into sloth and T.V. Her friend, Barney, desperately tries to defy his father's unrealistic demands, and Mike, the mysterious new youth in town, has run away from home.

We see the growth in Kate's understanding of her situation through the changes in her fantasies and writings. Instead of creating highly artificial scenarios, she begins to write "almost unconsciously," and unknowingly creates a de-