

sympathize with such suspicion given that Samantha had earlier decided "if nothing adventurous happened, she'd invent something" (70). It is only when all three see another cougar and Samantha scares it off by a very impressive screaming that they start to believe her and change their view of her. Although the book occasionally reads like a textbook in wildlife control, *Cougar Cove* works because Lawson maintains the separateness of animal and human life. Samantha does not make a pet of the cougar. Like the crabs she explores on the beach, she grows a new shell in the course of her vacation as she learns to experience and respect the difference of life on the island, and the difference between her expectations of the vacation and its reality. Like Samantha, readers are left with the memory of a haunting cougar cry, something humans may not understand but may be lucky enough to hear.

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Ethical Freedom in the "Real World"

Why Did the Underwear Cross the Road? Gordon Korman. Scholastic, 1994. 115 pp. \$4.50 paper. ISBN 0-590-47502-9. *Past Tense*. Ken Roberts. Douglas & McIntyre, 1994. 112 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-214-9. *The Tuesday Cafe*. Don Trembath. Orca, 1996. 127 pp. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 1-55143-074-6.

It is hard to maintain a sense of perspective, confidence, and humour in an increasingly violent and unstable world. There are children's authors, however, who attempt to redress the balance on a literary level in favour of a more positive attitude of respect, understanding, compassion, and humanity. Gordon Korman's *Why Did the Underwear Cross the Road?*, Ken Roberts' *Past Tense*, and Don Trembath's *The Tuesday Cafe* provide a striking counterbalance for negativity. Each of these humorous and well-written books tries to foster a sane philosophy in which personal freedom is always balanced by a strong sense of social responsibility.

At first glance, the three novels seem to differ in terms of tone, character, and plot. Korman's story is about a group of misfits — Justin, Jessica, and Margaret — whose bungled attempts to win a fourth-grade "Good Deed Contest" get them into trouble with teachers, neighbours, and the local police department. Roberts' *Past Tense* is an equally light-hearted story about a boy named Maxwell Derbin, who is frequently embarrassed by his unconventional uncle's flamboyant disregard for public opinion. The central character of *The Tuesday Cafe*, Harper Winslow, is a delinquent whose feelings of loneliness and insignificance compel him to set fire to a garbage can at school. His punishment involves community service and an injunction to write an essay entitled "How I Plan To Turn My Life Around."

Despite their differences, the books share a concern with introducing young readers to serious and "adult" issues such as crime, punishment, death,

compassion, understanding, individuality, and responsibility. In Korman's *Why Did the Underwear Cross the Road?*, Justin Zeckendorf is teamed up with Jessica Zander and Margaret Zachary in a "Good Deed Contest." Justin is so desperate to win the prize that he tries to accomplish only one good deed — catching the car thieves who are at large in his town. He devotes most of his efforts to this pursuit, but with few results. And every time Justin and his group do attempt to help someone, they end up causing more trouble for themselves, as well as "negative points" on their teacher's score chart (13). When the group's score hits -30, Justin is discouraged. But as his mother points out, "This isn't about winning ... [it's] about trying" (89). Slowly, the group begins to recover lost points by washing cars. Through sheer luck, Justin and his group identify the car thieves, and win the contest by a margin of one point (100-102, 107). Korman's ending may be slightly far-fetched, but the "moral" of the story is accessible to young readers: sincere effort in everyday challenges is worth more than pursuing unrealistic goals, and a Machiavellian approach to life does not necessarily merit success.

Korman's book is the least "didactic" of the three novels being examined here, and yet he explores what could be considered "mature" issues of sincerity, honesty, punishment, and reward. Ken Roberts' *Past Tense*, however, manages to combine humour with an even more profound examination of "real life" problems such as disease, death, and personal integrity. Maxwell Derbin, the central character of the story, must face life as a fatherless boy. Uncle Chuck, an independent talk show segment producer, has become for Max a surrogate father, a source of slightly off-the-wall wisdom, and a friend. It is from Uncle Chuck that Max learns about the importance of balancing honesty with compassion in his dealings with other people. According to Uncle Chuck, honesty is crucial, but sometimes "misdirection" is necessary to spare someone's feelings and still maintain an honest code of ethics: "Mind you, not lying without hurting people's feelings is hard work" (14, 27, 29). Max is dubious about this worldview, but learns to juggle personal freedom and integrity with a respect for others. For instance, Mr. Cluff — an old friend of Uncle Chuck and Max's father — is dying from cancer. Uncle Chuck disguises himself as a female clown named Elspeth and performs magic tricks for Mr. Cluff — while Mr. Cluff is in the bathroom. Max and the rest of his family are appalled at what he perceives as Uncle Chuck's insensitivity; Uncle Chuck, on the other hand, stands firm against disapproval and argues that Mr. Cluff needs new experiences (104-5). Mr. Cluff may be dying from cancer, but he is still a living, thinking, and feeling person. Mr. Cluff has a disease; he has not become his disease. Max learns that even though disease and death are often unavoidable, human beings can find (and share) joy, freedom, and dignity through compassion and creativity (110).

The Tuesday Cafe, like *Past Tense*, has a strong undercurrent of seriousness that is never entirely eclipsed by its author's sense of humour. Harper Winslow, the budding young arsonist, joins the Tuesday Cafe, a small writing group in Edmonton, in preparation for writing his essay for the juvenile court judge. The Tuesday Cafe is a class for adults with "special needs, learning disabilities, or those wanting to improve their literacy skills" (31-2). At first, Harper's feelings about the Tuesday Cafe are ambivalent. But he learns that

there are different kinds of intelligence, creative ability, and ways of living. He realizes that people should not be judged inferior simply because they do not appear to be “normal” in behaviour, thought, or speech. Indeed, in the process of learning to accept differences in others, Harper is accepted for who he is by the other members of the class. In an open, non-judgmental environment, Harper’s creative and writing abilities improve, and he becomes more honest about his own faults, prejudices, and fears. In his essay, Harper faces issues such as social responsibility, effective communication, parental authority, goal-setting, and personal freedom (112-20). But the essence of Harper’s essay — and, indeed, the main thrust of Trembath’s novel — is the importance of taking control of one’s own life. Ironically, Harper learns this lesson from the people he previously underestimated — the members of the Tuesday Cafe: “I started to realize that life changes for people, and I can control how it will change for me” (118). By being open-minded, by listening to what other people have to say, and by being honest to himself and others, Harper attains a higher level of maturity — and humanity.

Korman, Roberts, and Trembath strive to emphasize values that are in danger of becoming obsolete in the often cynical and pessimistic climate of today’s society. Personal integrity and freedom, respect for the rights of other human beings, and social responsibility are lofty concepts that are difficult to maintain in a far from perfect world. Indeed, achieving personal freedom while at the same time remaining acutely aware of one’s obligations to society is a challenging task, demanding introspection, honesty, and a good sense of balance. But as Isabelle Holland’s character Justin McLeod emphasizes to another confused boy in *The Man Without a Face* (1972), “Just don’t expect to be free from the consequences of what you do, while you’re doing what you want” (87). With any luck, this cautionary note will not be lost upon the young readers of Korman, Roberts, and Trembath.

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Revisionist Fairy Tales for Contemporary Young Readers

The Gypsy Princess. Phoebe Gilman. North Wind P, 1995. 30 pp. \$15.95 cloth. ISBN 0-00-224398-9. *Princess Stinky-Toes and the Brave Frog Robert*. Leslie Elizabeth Watts. HarperCollins, 1995. 32 pp. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 0-00-224398-9.

Cinnamon, the gypsy girl who for a short while becomes a princess, belongs to the new variety of heroines that resist being co-opted by the traditional fairy tale’s concept of happiness. While she does at first yield to the seductive vision of the aristocratic existence appearing in her crystal ball, the actual experience of stepping into that world does not constitute the usual happy ending, but her temporary downfall and loss of identity and freedom. Upon accepting an invitation to leave her gypsy community to join a typical princess in her palace