

in our real lives." As brandt knows, "Teaching poetics without politics is fairly useless."

These five books are like wildflowers in a meadow, resplendent with riches, verbal and visual and visceral, treasure troves in which poetry and art and music are connected in order to explore themes of politics, heritage, ecology, and living poetically in the world. All students and teachers will be challenged and enriched by these books.

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Five Problem Solvers

Fred's Dream Cat. Marie-Danielle Croteau. Illus. Bruno St-Aubin. Trans. Sarah Cummins. Formac, 1995. 61 pp. \$5.95 paper, boards. ISBN 0-88780-304-0, 0-88780-305-9. *Maddie in Danger.* Louise Leblanc. Illus. Marie-Louise Gay. Trans. Sarah Cummins. Formac, 1995. 62 pp. \$5.95 paper, boards. ISBN 0-88780-306-7, 0-88780-307-5. *Mooch Forever.* Gilles Gauthier. Illus. Pierre-André Derome. Trans. Sarah Cummins. Formac, 1995. 60 pp. \$5.95 paper, boards. ISBN 0-88780-308-3, 0-88780-309-1. *My Homework Is in the Mail.* Becky Citra. Illus. Karen Harrison. Scholastic Canada, 1995. 82 pp. \$4.99 paper. ISBN 0-590-24446-9. *Video Rivals.* Sonia Sarfati. Illus. Pierre Durand. Trans. Sarah Cummins. Formac, 1995. 59 pp. \$5.95 paper, boards. ISBN 0-88780-314-8, 0-88780-315-6.

Each of these five early chapter books focuses on a young person faced with a problem of major proportions. These problems range from learning to face loneliness in a new situation to dealing with strict and unsympathetic parents.

Parents are an issue in *Maddie in Danger* and *Fred's Dream Cat*, although the respective authors, Louise Leblanc and Marie-Danielle Croteau do not succeed equally well in their efforts. The children in Leblanc's tale, Maddie, Alexander, and Julian, are not allowed to watch *The Exterminator* on television, due to its violent content. We follow Maddie as she arranges a way to view the video, challenges the "leader" of her gang at school for his place in the sun, and discovers that real violence is threatening one of her classmates. With violence threading through the storyline, events are tightly woven and keep the reader interested. Nevertheless, certain aspects of the narrative seem exaggerated and do not fit harmoniously with others. In contrast, Croteau's telling of Fred's efforts to overcome parental resistance to the adoption of a cat is constructed with skill and grace. Fred plans, plots, and schemes. With each attempt he is certain his parents, finding him irresistible, will give in. He even gets his friend William involved and, for a time, contemplates recruiting some hapless baby mice from the farm where William and his father live. Fred is desperate in his desire for a companion animal and the reader finds him infinitely human, humane, and endearing as he struggles to realize his dream. Croteau's style is lively and engaging. *Fred's Dream Cat* is a pleasure to read.

In the volumes by Citra, Gauthier, and Sarfati, we encounter protagonists grappling with the loneliness of new situations. Once again, in this group of stories not all the authors have met with the same degree of success.

Samantha's parents in *My Homework Is in the Mail* have decided to get away from it all to the extent that Sam must go to school by correspondence. Her lessons will be sent to a teacher for evaluation. The reader responds sympathetically to Sam who, because of her sense of loss of school and friends, finds it impossible to embrace this adventure enthusiastically. Author Becky Citra explores a number of important issues. Isolated as she is at first, Sam wonders how an event or possession can have any value without the gaze of her peers. Later, when she meets the twins, Dana and Donny, rivalry and distrust take over. Self-validation is purchased at the heavy price of taunts and lies. As the narrative progresses, Sam starts to judge for herself. She begins to find that she can learn from and appreciate her new circumstances.

Sonia Sarfati's *Video Rivals* is built around a situation similar to that found in *My Homework Is in the Mail*. Raphael has recently moved and is attending a new and bigger school. His plans to become video-game champion in order to make new friends are thwarted by Damian, a classmate of questionable character. Damian's sabotage of Raphael's video-game player forces Raphael to think of some uniquely creative ways to keep his fingers nimble and in shape for the championship games. *Video Rivals* is fun to read, but the storyline is not as tight as that in *My Homework Is in the Mail*. Consequently, the reader remains distant from Raphael in contrast with the sympathy and recognition Samantha is able to evoke. Certain events of *Video Rivals* are not well integrated into the story line or remain unexplained. Myriam, Raphael's only new friend, offers us an example of this problem when she refers to her brother Steve as a bit of a hoodlum. Readers may find this comment somewhat strange since in addition to the help Steve offers his sister, he also advises Raphael not to steal from Damian for revenge. Perhaps the epithet "hoodlum" seems appropriate to Sarfati because she has Steve riding a motorcycle. When Myriam wins the video-game championship, it is suggested that she did so because she was coached by her brother. Is there a certain sexism behind this comment? The author may feel exonerated by her inclusion of Raphael's aunt Charlie, or Charlotte, an electronics technician who discovers why her nephew's video-game player refuses to function.

Of the five books considered here, the most ambitious undertaking and by far the most impressive and successful is *Mooch Forever*. Gilles Gauthier has taken on the formidable task of dealing with the unimaginable, the loss of a beloved animal and the pain and isolation that result from such a loss. Through Carl, his protagonist, Gauthier presents in a straightforward manner the closeness, love and devotion shared by people and animals. "I love Mooch as much as I love Judy, my mom. I do. It sounds funny, but it's true. Anyway, I don't believe there is that much difference between animals and humans." (21)

Carl's friend Gary offers his little dog Dumpling to help ease Carl's pain. Carl realizes what a wonderful friend Gary is to do this, but he also sees that

Dumpling knows he is Gary's dog. The arrangement would never work. Instead, Carl offers Gary the dubious favour of helping to train Dumpling. With gentle sensitivity, Gauthier relates Carl's slow, difficult adjustment to his devastating loss. Judy helps her son to appreciate the love and joy he shared with Mooch, explaining that nothing can take that away from him. She suggests that through the creative process of writing Mooch's story, Carl will enable Mooch to live forever.

In this group of early chapter books, those that are less successful include elements that do not appear to flow naturally from the circumstances established by the author. On the other hand, those narratives in which events evolve smoothly offer engaging and rewarding reading experiences.

All five volumes are enriched by the illustrations that accompany the text. Pierre-André Derome's images of *Mooch Forever* are particularly creative and evocative.

This reviewer was disappointed to find proofing errors in both *Video Rivals* and *Mooch Forever*. Because these volumes have been written and published with young readers in mind, better care should be taken in their preparation.

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Ordinary Magic

Roses for Gita. Rachna Gilmore. Illus. Alice Priestley. Second Story, 1996. Unpag. \$5.95 paper, \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 0-929005-86-4. *The Harvest Queen.* Joanne Robertson. Illus. Karen Rezuch. Red Deer College P, 1996. 32 pp. \$17.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88995-134-9. *River My Friend.* William Bell. Illus. Ken Campbell. Orca, 1996. 32 pp. \$16.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55143-084-3.

Each of these recent picture books offers young readers a hint of something extraordinary. Relationships — between generations and between humans and the natural world — are pivotal in all three stories, and shifts in these relationships mark turning points in the characters' lives. Although supernatural magic is hinted at in one of the books, it is the more ordinary magic of everyday life that proves most potent.

Roses for Gita, a sequel to *Lights for Gita*, involves a young immigrant girl's quest to feel at home in her new country. She misses her grandmother Naniji terribly, and wants to plant a garden just like the one Naniji grows in India. Mr. Flinch, the old man next door, seems at first a fierce enemy until Gita hears him playing the violin in his garden and suddenly understands that his bluster hides a more sensitive nature. Gita's gift of wind chimes seals their friendship, and Mr. Flinch promises to help her plant the First Rose in their new