



## Reading the Writing on the Wall

—Lisa Grekul

- Chapman, Brenda. *Running Scared*. Toronto: Napoleon, 2004. 122 pp. \$8.95 pb. ISBN 1-894917-6.
- Diersch, Sandra. *Ceiling Stars*. Toronto: Lorimer, 2004. 141 pp. \$6.95 pb. ISBN 1-55028-834-2.
- Fearnley, Fran, ed. *I Wrote on All Four Walls: Teens Speak Out on Violence*. Toronto: Annick, 2004. 143 pp. \$12.95 pb. ISBN 1-55037-756-6.
- Givner, Joan. *Ellen Fremedon*. Toronto: Groundwood, 2004. 219 pp. \$18.95 hc. ISBN 0-88899-557-1.
- Kirk, Heather. *A Drop of Rain*. Toronto: Napoleon, 2004. 215 pp. \$9.95 pb. ISBN 1-894917-10-3.
- Kyi, Tanya Lloyd. *My Time as Caz Hazard*. Victoria: Orca, 2004. 103 pp. \$9.95 pb. ISBN 1-55143-319-2.
- Mac, Carrie. *Charmed*. Victoria: Orca, 2004. 107 pp. \$9.95 pb. ISBN 1-55143-321-4.
- . *The Beckoners*. Victoria: Orca, 2004. 217 pp. \$19.95 hc. ISBN 1-55143-309-5.
- Musgrave, Susan, ed. *Perfectly Secret: The Hidden Lives of Seven Teen Girls*. Toronto: Annick, 2004. 94 pp. \$10.95 pb. ISBN 1-55037-864-3.
- Polak, Monique. *Flip Turn*. Toronto: Lorimer, 2004. 102 pp. \$8.95 pb. ISBN 1-55028-818-0.
- Schindler, Nina. *An Order of Amelie, Hold the Fries*. Toronto: Annick, 2004. \$10.95 pb. ISBN 1-55037-860-0.
- Shiple, Jocelyn. *Cross My Heart*. Toronto: Sumach, 2004. 126 pp. no price, pb. ISBN 1-894549-32-5.
- Tullson, Diane. *Blue Highway*. Markham, ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2004. 192 pp. \$12.95 pb. ISBN 1-55005-124-5.
- Weber, Lori. *Klepto*. Toronto: Lorimer, 2004. 160 pp. \$6.95 pb. ISBN 1-55028-836-9.

Midway through *I Wrote on All Four Walls*, Fran Fearnley's collection of nine candid first-person accounts of teenagers' experiences growing up with violence, "Kevin" describes being bullied as child, running with the wrong crowd, experimenting with drugs, and attempting suicide several times. Arrested twice (once for carrying a duffle bag full of weapons, once for being on school property when he was banned from it), Kevin explains his reaction to being incarcerated a second time in the chillingly matter-of-fact tone that characterizes the voices of all the teens who speak out in this book: "I started banging my head against the wall," he says. "I cut open my forehead with my fingernail. I just kept going like this. I wrote on all four walls, 'I want to die'" (100).

Kevin's story is arguably the most serious instance of adolescent trauma that appears in Fearnley's text, and the most disturbing. Equally disturbing, though, is the extent to which his feelings of isolation and alienation resonate beyond their immediate context and become emblematic of teenaged characters'—especially teenaged girl characters'—experiences in recent Canadian young adult fiction. In the majority of the texts under review, written for and about young women, the usual adolescent angst associated with leaving childhood and entering adulthood is compounded by the hard-hitting social issues (domestic violence, bullying, rape, mental illness, prostitution) with which the protagonists are forced to

deal. As if growing up (coping with puberty, longing for a boyfriend, seeking acceptance among peers) weren't tough enough, many of the characters must also grapple with serious individual, familial, and societal problems without the guidance of parents, teachers, or sometimes even friends. In the narratives on which I'm focusing, little support exists for young characters who are struggling to come to terms with issues that would overwhelm the most "adult" of characters (and readers). Each book explores, to some extent, the notion that adolescent voices are neither heard nor validated. Kevin's desperate attempt to reach out to someone—anyone—is mirrored in various ways through virtually all of the books in this group. Such mirroring, however, raises a number of questions about who exactly these texts should reach and what the texts have to offer to young adult readers. Do these books—which are primarily realist novels—reflect the reality of coming of age in contemporary Canadian society? Or do they reproduce familiar patterns of teenage anxiety that are often present in young adult fiction, patterns which encourage young people to believe that teachers and parents don't care? If these texts reflect the realities of day-to-day life for young adults in Canada, then teenagers who are themselves facing issues without adequate support networks will perhaps find comfort in learning that they're not alone; others who have not experienced similar problems may become more

sensitive to peers who haven't been as lucky. But insofar as these books collectively construct a largely dysfunctional world, they offer no imaginative escape for teen readers who may be seeking relief from the harsh realities of their day-to-day lives. By normalizing dysfunction, moreover, the texts run the risk of creating what they depict. And precisely because these texts are aimed at an audience of teenaged readers (girls for the most part), rather than adult readers, the authors' messages about the dark aspects of teen life in Canada are unlikely to reach parents and educators, those who most urgently need to see the "writing on the wall."

In *Klepto*, Lori Weber introduces us to Kat, an over-achieving ninth-grader whose world has been turned upside-down by her older sister, Hannah. The plotline of this novel is propelled by news that Hannah, whose acting-out landed her in a group home for troubled teens, is on the road to reform and will soon be allowed to come home. Narrated by Kat, the story becomes an extended rumination on her ambivalent feelings about Hannah's imminent return. On the one hand, Kat wants her family members to go back to the way they used to be before Hannah started drinking and using drugs, before she got pregnant and had an abortion. At the same time, however, Kat has been too hurt—by her parents as well as her sister—to believe that a return to innocence is possible. Hannah's downward spiral involved lashing out repeatedly at

Kat, both physically and verbally. As a result, their parents' fervent preparations for Hannah's return feel like a betrayal. Kat concludes that her sister's well-being is unjustly being given more importance than her own. "Doesn't anyone realize," she asks, "that Hannah was sent away to be punished? I don't get why everyone now needs to bend over backwards to welcome her home. That's what you're supposed to do for heroes, not criminals!" (63). Not surprisingly, perhaps, in the light of the fact that Kat sees her parents reward Hannah for her rebellion and rule-breaking, Kat herself turns to shoplifting as an attention-seeking strategy (albeit unconsciously). The mall becomes her escape and refuge, a place that seems "coated in some magic substance that keeps it totally immune to the dirt people carry in from the outside world" (16). Nor is it surprising that, as the day of Hannah's return approaches, Kat's stealing becomes more frequent and increasingly reckless. Though her best friend Anita (who faces her own family problems—she is adopted and wants to find her birth mother) and her close friend-cum-boyfriend Andy (a sensible and sensitive boy who volunteers his free time nursing injured birds back to health) voice their concerns about Kat's behavior, the shoplifting escalates toward an inevitable climax: Kat is caught.

Weber's realistic rendering of Kat's character is the strongest feature of *Klepto*. That Kat has a special talent for writing is key; her "writerly" nature makes

her a keen observer of the world and people around her, able to make astute commentary on the ironic aspects of both. She notes, for example, her mother's desperate attempts to make their home "neat and impeccable"—everything, Kat says, "that our family isn't" (12). She says, too, "[i]t's ironic that I'm sad because a family member is returning home, and Anita is sad because she wants to find one" (58). That she isn't able to recognize the greatest irony of all—namely that she is turning into the sister she loathes—makes her not only a believable adolescent but also a believable human being. And, as the conclusion to the novel illustrates, this story is ultimately about the human connection between the two sisters. Tellingly, it is Hannah, not Kat's parents, who comes to her rescue after she is detained by mall security.

Effectively mobilizing the bird motif she has set up in the story, Weber scripts a moving reconciliation scene in which Kat comes to the realization that Hannah needs the kind of care Andy gives to his birds and she also begins to see the mall as her own cage. In a poem that she writes, after learning about how awful Hannah's time in the group home was, Kat says, "[a]

*mistake will cage you / like a broken bird*" (157). The two girls' new understanding of each other's bird-like fragilities and their desire to protect each other make for an ostensibly happy ending. Just as Kat, however, kept quiet about Hannah's abuse, so too will Hannah keep Kat's shoplifting a secret. The underlying message here is as much about adults being left out

of the picture as it is about teens helping and empowering other teens—which suggests a less than picture-perfect outcome for the family as a whole.

A similar subtext of detachment between teenagers and their parents runs through two novels by Carrie Mac, *Charmed* and *The Beckoners*, though in these narratives the generational rift is exacerbated by the presence of socio-economically disadvantaged single mothers with questionable parenting

skills. It bears mentioning that the parents in *Klepto* are a stable, educated, middle-class couple—a fact that isn't lost on Kat, who wonders why "some kids just turn out rotten, in spite of their families" (66). In both *Charmed* and *The Beckoners*, the protagonists' "rotten" home lives become the root cause of their serious problems.



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The narrator of *Charmed* is Izzy, whose story (apparently set in Prince George, although the community is never named) opens with her mother leaving town for six months to work as a cook up north. Izzy is left in the care of her mother's new, unemployed, unreliable boyfriend, Rob. Izzy's dad, a "manic-depressive freak" (10) is out of the picture entirely. When Rob starts spending nights away from home and refuses to give her money for basic necessities like food and tampons, Izzy begins to steal money from him. She also starts hanging out with Cody Dillon (a high-school dropout with a "bad ass" reputation), and, after being kicked out of her house, she moves in with him. Before long, Izzy is smoking pot and having sex with Cody—and feeling vaguely threatened by the crowd he moves with. But when she turns to her mother for help, her mother isn't there, physically or emotionally. In a phone call from up north, Izzy is told that she can't live with Rob until she's paid him back the two hundred dollars that she stole. "This is your mess," are her mother's words. "You got to clean it up this time" (47). The mess becomes overwhelming for Izzy as she is drawn into a seedy world of drug trafficking and prostitution. Believing that she and Cody are in love, and that she is helping him pay back a large debt to his dealer, Izzy becomes a sex slave, repeatedly raped and beaten. "I don't want to think about how many times I've been locked in that smelly room," she says, "with

creepy men and that enormous bed" (91). Eventually, other girls who are locked in the house make Izzy see that her relationship with Cody was a sham from the start, and they help her escape. Eventually, too, Izzy's mother realizes that she failed her daughter and offers a feeble string of apologies.

But while Mac's conclusion attempts to suggest that Izzy will heal with the help of her mother, *Charmed*, not unlike *Klepto*, more significantly affirms the notion that parents cannot (or choose not to) see into the worlds of their teenaged children, much less make those worlds better for them. We're meant to believe that Izzy comes around to feeling "normal" again by working with her mother as a kitchen apprentice in a logging camp, surrounded by the "smell of cedar, the calm lapping of the water in the sheltered harbor, [and] the mist climbing the mountains" (107). This return to nature, though, makes for a trite, not entirely satisfying, resolution; beneath its surface lies the brute reality of Izzy's decision to quit school and follow in her mother's footsteps, which raises questions about what exactly will change in this family, what exactly Izzy's future holds for her.

Part of the problem with the conclusion—and indeed with the book as a whole—is its brevity and simplicity. *Charmed* belongs to the Orca Soundings series of books designed for "reluctant" readers, but in her effort to make the novel accessible, Mac intensifies the pace of the story. The narrative moves

too quickly, passing over dramatic moments (Izzy's realization that Cody doesn't love her, Izzy's mother's discovery of what's happened to her daughter) that require more elaboration. The story and the serious issue it confronts deserve a broader canvas.

Mac's second novel, which explores bullying among teenaged girls, covers similar terrain to that of *Charmed* in terms of unstable family dynamics. Zoe, the main character in *The Beckoners*, is raised by Alice, an often-absent mother, whose neglect contributes, at least in part, to her daughter's problems at school. As Alice drifts from town to town, job to job, and man to man, Zoe is repeatedly uprooted. That Alice has a drinking problem and a two-year-old child (Cassy) whom she frequently leaves in Zoe's care only makes Zoe's life more difficult.

Worse still, when the family moves to Abbotsford, Zoe is introduced to a gang of ultra-tough girls (The Beckoners, led by Rebecca "Beck" Wilson) who wield power over the entire school through acts of violence, intimidation, and humiliation. Their primary target is April, nicknamed "Dog" because she goes everywhere with her canine companion, Shadow. The novel's opening scene sets the stage for the bullying that recurs in this story: the Beckoners, cheered on by "half the school," force April to eat a box of dog biscuits (2). As the narrative unfolds, however, Zoe's position *vis-à-vis* the Beckoners becomes the focal point of the novel. Forced to choose between the

"cruel backstabbing place the Beckoners infested" or the "equally terrible wasteland of the bullied," Zoe doesn't want to become a "real Beckoner" but nonetheless finds herself "sinking deeper into that bitch place, that pick-on-the-little-guy place, that ugly and competitive bullying place" (44). Unable to take a stand against the Beckoners, she is initiated into the group through a formal "branding" ceremony. After Zoe witnesses one Beckoner's boyfriend rape another Beckoner at a party, she tries to withdraw from the gang, choosing instead to hang out with a loose fraternity of misfits—including April, Simon and his boyfriend Teo, and Leaf, a grade-twelve boy who manages to escape the politics of adolescence (according to his older sister, he's an "untouchable and perfect" teenage "oasis" [109]). Walking away from the Beckoners, however, isn't easy. Zoe must endure a de-initiation ceremony—the girls slice open her scar—that leaves her with thirty stitches.

As with *Charmed*, one of the most troubling aspects of *The Beckoners* is the extent to which the teenaged characters are forced to deal with trauma on their own. The adults in both novels turn a blind eye to their children's suffering. Part of the problem, for April at least, is that she doesn't talk to her parents about the bullying that goes on at school. But Zoe's repeated cries for help from her mother fall on deaf ears. Alice is so busy sorting out her own problems, she doesn't notice the branding scar on her daughter's arm;

when Zoe approaches her mother, after witnessing the rape, Alice refuses to listen (“I will not hear this right now,” she says [85]); and Zoe’s desire to change school fails to raise the red flags that it should. Alice says, “you’re staying put and that’s that” (92). It takes April’s hospitalization to make the adults stand up and take notice, but the teenagers themselves are the ones who ultimately bring down the Beckoners by orchestrating April’s mock suicide and forcing the gang to turn themselves in to the police. What sets this novel apart from *Charmed* is the author’s more developed insight into both the main character’s psyche and her world. Again, though, while the conclusion may seem empowering for the teens in this story who find their own solution to the bullying, their parents’ unwillingness and/or inability to protect their children makes for troubling commentary on the extent to which these kids are on their own. Given the dramatic chasm between the teenagers and the adults in this book—the extreme degree to which the parents are disengaged and disinterested in their children’s lives—readers are left to wonder if the social commentary in this book is an accurate portrayal of teen life, or if it delivers an entertaining, “pro-teen” narrative at the expense of realism.

The issue of bullying is examined again in *My Time as Caz Hazard*, by Tanya Lloyd Kyi, though this novel also covers a number of other social problems that teens face, including learning disabilities, divorce,

foster care, and suicide. The story is narrated by Caz, who discovers just before entering grade ten that she is dyslexic and that her parents are splitting up. Forced to go to a new school and attend classes with other special education students (“speds”), Caz meets Amanda, the mean-spirited ringleader of the speds. Both Amanda and another sped, Dodie, have been pulled out of broken homes and placed in foster care, but this shared experience fails to create a bond between the two girls: on the contrary, Amanda picks on Dodie (just as the Beckoners pick on April); and, not unlike Zoe in Mac’s novel, Caz struggles with her desire to be accepted by Amanda and her sympathy for Dodie. Being a sped, Caz explains, is “bad enough”; having to be in class with Dodie exacerbates the speds’ status as misfits and outsiders. “Did she have to dress like a sped?” Caz wonders. “Did she have to smile at me every morning like a puppy dog, hoping I would pet her?” (54). Because picking on Dodie makes her feel powerful—“wide-awake,” she says, and “smarter than anyone else” (56)—Caz understands Amanda’s cruelty, for a while at least. But when Dodie fails to appear at school for several days after Amanda is particularly vicious toward her, Caz starts to feel guilty for not stopping the bullying. And when news reaches the school that Dodie has killed herself, Caz’s guilt grows: “[w]hat if this is our fault?” she asks Amanda (97).

Reading through *My Life as Caz Hazard*, several

connections to other texts come to the fore. Caz is a talented artist (the narrators in *Klepto* and *The Beckoners* are talented writers), and at least one adult in Caz's world, her teacher Ms. Samuels, is savvy to the problems her students face (Ms. Samuels finds her equivalent in the English teachers who appear in *Klepto* and *The Beckoners*, and the principal of Izzy's school in *Charmed*). The narrator-as-artist works well in stories such as these because she is more keenly aware of and sensitive to the feelings of those around her. In *Kyi's* novel, however, as in the others, there is no teacher-as-saviour or, for that matter, parent-as-listener. Caz's parents are fixated on their separation, not on their daughter's learning disability or her difficulties fitting into a new school. Although Ms. Samuels offers understanding and forgiveness—"Dodie's been troubled for a long time," she says to Caz, "[t]his isn't your fault" (101)—it is another teenager who becomes the voice of hope at the end of this story. Rob, a sped who rarely speaks, says, "You're not so bad. I think you're good underneath" (103). Ultimately, this novel is about teens redeeming teens.

The problem with *My Life as Caz Hazard* is that, as with *Charmed*, the text gives a profoundly serious adolescent issue too little narrative attention. Dodie's

actual suicide, one imagines, should elicit a more intense emotional response from readers than April's faked suicide, yet the conclusion of *The Beckoners* is far more moving. We don't learn enough about Caz or Dodie or Amanda to fully engage with their respective predicaments. The real strength of *The Beckoners* is that Mac's characters are so



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meticulously and complexly realized that readers are likely to come away from the novel wondering, as well they should, just how the bullying problem can be solved. *Kyi's* novel leads readers to believe that Dodie could have been resilient, and Caz and Amanda could have been nicer. None of these characters is round or memorable enough to provoke the kind of serious consideration of the issue that *The Beckoners* does.

Setting Sandra Diersch's *Ceiling Stars* next to Diane Tullson's *The Blue Highway*, a similar dynamic emerges. Unlike *The Beckoners* and *My Life as Caz Hazard*, these novels address two different issues: Diersch takes on bipolar disorder, while Tullson examines drinking and driving. But the authors' treatments of the issues are what really set these books apart. As with *The Beckoners*, the issue in Tullson's novel is almost secondary to its rich cast of characters: *The Blue Highway*, simply put, is



character-driven; *Ceiling Stars*, like *My Life as Caz Hazard*, is issue driven.

*Ceiling Stars* is narrated by Christine, a bright grade-twelve student and aspiring writer whose best friend Danelle is an outgoing, confident, but highly volatile aspiring actress. The novel takes its title from the glowing yellow stickers that Danelle places on her own and Christine's bedroom ceilings—so that, in Danelle's words, "when they're glowing, you can think of me in my room and it'll be like we're closer. It would be a cementing of our friendship" (13). As the narrative progresses and Danelle's behaviour becomes more and more unpredictable and dangerous, the friendship gradually comes undone. She climbs the roof of her house, walks on train tracks, and shoplifts. One of the side issues in this text (which allows Diersch to write Christine's parents out of the story) is her younger sister Kate's rebellion. But Danelle's extreme highs and lows, and Christine's determination to figure them out, are what drive the plot as Danelle runs away, attempts suicide, seeks then rejects the advice of a therapist, and eventually (on grad night, after attempting to bungee jump off the Lions Gate Bridge) needs to be hospitalized.

Three key scenes hearken back to the title of the book. Frustrated that Danelle won't take her pills, Christine rips off the ceiling stars, "anger driving [her] along, faster and faster and faster" (119); months

later, she finds and crumples one of the "innocent" stars (138); then, in the final passage of the novel, Christine receives a letter from Danelle that includes her phone number surrounded by a "circle of tiny fluorescent stars" (141). I'm not sure if the ceiling star motif is enough, though, to transform this novel into something more than a bipolar information manual, the bottom-line of which is that teens suffering from this mental illness need professional help. Christine cannot save Danelle. Christine's support comes from her friends and, to a very limited extent, from her school counsellor (who embodies once again the figure of the ambivalent adult), but Danelle has to seek medical help herself; only after she has done so can she establish genuine relationships with others.

In *The Blue Highway*, Tullson succeeds where other writers falter by including the issue of teens drinking and driving in her novel, but not allowing the issue to take over the narrative. Put another way, this book is about much more than the problem it explores. Set in a typical small town where teens spend their free time drinking, driving around, and going to bush parties, *The Blue Highway* is narrated by Truth, and focuses on her relationships with four friends, all of whom work at the local pizza joint. The main characters are Skye (Truth's best friend), Ryan (the boy Truth likes), Vale (the school Barbie-doll), and Marc (a college boy whose dad owns the pizzeria). Tullson is adept at texturing the story with details which illustrate

that, while the town may be typical, the people who live in it aren't. Truth's mother, who is obsessed with renovations, paints their house a shade of brown called "Shania's Abdomen" (40); her father comes back limping from a team-building retreat for work that has required him to walk on coals (76); and Vale's mother is "alternately employed" as a professional contest entrant (24). As for the teens: Vale may be gorgeous and may seem popular, but she's actually friendless and insecure; Truth and Skye may appear to be best friends, but their friendship is complicated by an incident that occurred when the girls were eight. Truth was hit by a truck and nearly died, and Skye is credited with saving her; ever since, Truth has felt as though she's living in her best friend's shadow, in a kind of eternal debt to the girl who always seems to be saving her.

Fundamentally, this novel is an exploration of the friendship between Truth and Skye, which explodes near the end of the story when all of the teenaged characters are hurt (and two die) in a car crash (echoing Truth's near-death experience as a child). The problem isn't only *that* alcohol is involved but also *why* it is involved. Is Truth to blame for getting drunk at the bush party and getting into a car with intoxicated college men? Is Skye to blame for following and trying to save her? Is Skye really the saviour, or is she to blame for stealing Ryan and causing Truth to get drunk in the first place? In the

aftermath of the accident, Truth—with the support of her parents, a plot detail that also makes this novel stand out—struggles to come to terms with her drinking, her guilt, and her grief over the lives that were lost in the accident. The message here isn't a simple, didactic "don't drink and drive." What makes this novel so refreshingly complex is the extent to which all of those who walk away from the accident are forced to re-examine themselves, their personal/familial histories, and their relationships with others.

Monique Polak's *Flip Turn*, Brenda Chapman's *Running Scared*, and Joan Givner's *Ellen Fremedon*, all written for a junior audience of readers, are refreshing as well, in large part because the hardest-hitting teen issues (prostitution, suicide, bullying, mental illness) are missing from these novels. None, though, strays too far from the issue-laden tendencies of older teen fiction: *Flip Turn* and *Running Scared* draw attention to dysfunctional families, and environmental issues play a central role in *Ellen Fremedon*.

The narrator of *Flip Turn*, Victoria, is a competitive swimmer with a seemingly ideal home life who realizes early in the story that her family isn't as "picture perfect" as it seems (13). Although she and her parents live in a big house, complete with a nanny, her mother is depressed, her father is a workaholic, and Victoria spends all of her time at the pool. A picture of the family, she says, would feature "[me] in my bathing cap and goggles, looking totally

confused; Mom would have that washcloth on her forehead, and Dad, well that's easy—he'd be on his cell phone" (13). When her mother disappears and her father drops hints that "[s]he's done this kind of thing before—" (48), Victoria channels her energy into uncovering the family secret that has been hidden from her: does her mother have a lover? She learns that, years ago, her mother was a lifeguard in Vancouver and failed to save a little boy from drowning; each year, near and on the anniversary of his death, she is overcome by guilt. (Victoria's strongest competitor in and out of the pool, a Ukrainian girl, is similarly affected by her mother's past. Svetlana, whose mother was a swimmer in Ukraine, is burdened with the enormous pressure of fulfilling her mother's dreams.) Throughout the story, Victoria makes thoughtful connections between swimming and life: when she boldly confronts her father about their impoverished relationship, she makes steps toward keeping the family afloat; and the return of her mother near the end of the novel, just as Victoria is contemplating not swimming in an important competition becomes the turning point at which her mother redeems herself by metaphorically saving her daughter from drowning. With her mother's support and encouragement, Victoria decides to compete.

*Running Scared* could use a central, unifying motif like swimming to give it more coherence and shape. Not unlike *Flip Turn*, Chapman's novel has elements

of a detective story, but it lacks the narrative nuances that characterize Polak's writing. Jennifer, the narrator, witnesses a hit-and-run, recognizes that the vehicle involved is her father's, and then spends the major portion of the novel trying to figure out if her father was driving. The plot thickens as Jennifer is followed, and starts receiving prank calls and threatening letters. She wonders if her Uncle Phil could be behind it all, or perhaps her friend Pete, who seems to know too much. Not telling anyone about what she saw has serious consequences for her younger sister and her best friend, both of whom are harmed by the culprit who wants to send a message to Jennifer. All's well that ends well, however, as the driver of the car is found—it's not her father—and, indeed, as her father comes back to town, promising to turn his life around (and perhaps to get back together with Jennifer's mother). The lesson to be learned, it seems, is that, if she had told someone in an authority position about the hit-and-run, no one would have been harmed. Yet this novel reaffirms the familiar notion that kids keep secrets for a reason: having lost her father once, to divorce, she doesn't want to risk losing him again; and she can't confide in her mother, an on-call nurse who often leaves Jennifer and her sister alone.

*Ellen Fremedon* has detective elements and a mysterious disappearance in common with *Flip Turn* and *Running Scared*, but the similarities end there. Givner's narrator, far and away the most delightful

and charming of any I've recently encountered, is a would-be writer who actually writes a novel—the autobiographical novel we read—and her commentary on the process of writing makes for hilarious insight into the workings of a mind that is “[e]ven years, eleven and a half months” old (12). Ellen’s father, a philosophy professor who specializes in logic, has taught his daughter well: she proceeds logically, introducing characters first, then plot. “I’ve done the introduction and the characters,” she tells Larry, the town librarian, “and I was just about to start in on the plot.” When he asks if she’s “doing them all separately,” she says, “[l]ibrarians might know where to find books, but they don’t seem to know what’s inside them” (51)! The main crisis on which Ellen focuses is the proposed new housing development and its potentially negative impact on her town’s water supply, though she weaves other issues—her irritatingly precocious twin sisters, her worries about the health of her mother, who has multiple sclerosis, and her concerns about how much money her family has—into the story, albeit unwittingly. After the family starts a petition to fight the housing development, they receive anonymous threats, and after the twins (who are aspiring amateur detectives) discover the



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identity of the person behind the threats, they wind up disappearing. All of this is good fodder for Ellen’s story, but her metafictional interruptions of it are what transform the novel into something more than a cute whodunit with an environmental spin. *Ellen Fremedon* offers us a glimpse into the consciousness of a creative and complicated kid as she begins to come

of age as a young woman and a writer. Her conversations with her parents about poetic license and anxiety of authorship—indeed, the very fact that she talks to her parents—make Givner’s novel exceptional, in both senses of the word. Readers should be thrilled by Ellen’s idea, near the end of the book, of writing a series.

Jocelyn Shipley’s *Cross My Heart* is unlikely to elicit as positive a response from readers because the narrator of this short-story collection, Jill, isn’t quite as engaging as Ellen Fremedon. But Shipley’s book—a cycle of eight stories that take place in small-town Ontario during the 1960s—deserves praise for the ways in which it deviates from most young adult fiction, usually novels set in the present-day. While the theme of coming-of-age is present, to some extent, in every young adult book, Shipley provides a full picture of her narrator’s growing pains. Unlike many texts that tend to focus on a “year

in the life" or a "turning-point summer," *Cross My Heart* traces Jill's experiences over a period of several years. We see her change from a girl who is horrified by her first French kiss to a teenager, bewildered by her awakening sexuality, to a young woman with a steady boyfriend. The absence, in these stories, of the kinds of issues that dominate other teen fiction allows Shipley to focus more substantially on Jill's character. This is not to say that her world is without problems: her relative position of privilege as a highly intelligent daughter of loving, middle-class parents twice results in the loss of a good friend (once with Renata, who comes from a broken home, and again with Carol-Anne, who goes to a vocational, rather than an academic, school and, unlike Jill, sets her sights on marriage rather than a career). A recurring concern, which reflects the rise of feminism in the 1960s, is what girls should aspire to—careers, or marriage and motherhood. Grandma Pemberton encourages Jill and her two sisters to marry; their mother insists that they focus on their education and become independent. Jill's sister Nory, an oddball outsider who drops out of high school, with dreams of hitchhiking in Europe and changing her name to Oriana Opal (123), becomes the hippie element in the book. Her other sister Elissa, who gets married young, fulfills more traditional gender expectations. Her friend Bridget, who decides to enter a convent, models yet another female destiny. For Jill, the challenge is how to find

the right role for her. In the last story, after she comes to the important realization that she loves reading, she decides that, "instead of being a career girl when [she] finish[es] school, [she will] be a writer . . . [She will] live in Paris or London and produce profound collections of poems and significant novels" (116). In the end, though not as fully as *Ellen Fremedon*, *Cross My Heart* gestures toward the *kunstlerroman*. But Givner's more concentrated and substantial focus on Ellen's process of writing makes *Ellen Fremedon* the more interesting and more provocative read.

Heather Kirk's *A Drop of Rain*, with its polyphonic narrative structure, also departs from conventional teen novels: this is a story told in excerpts from journals kept by five main characters—Naomi, the sixteen-year old protagonist; her mother Eva; Eva's boyfriend Joe; Mary, Naomi's sixty-six-year-old friend; and Curtis, the boy Naomi likes. The generic experimentation is a welcome change from the other novels under review here, which are narrated by one character in the first-person, as is Kirk's examination of Polish history, during and after the Second World War. But as promising as the premise may be, the success of the novel is compromised by two serious flaws: the narrative voices are awkwardly rendered, and the plot very quickly becomes a textual vortex into which far too many issues are sucked, resulting in a severely over-burdened story. Part of the problem with the narrators has to do with the audience

for whom Kirk is writing. The adult voices often come across as juvenile, the adolescent voices are mannered. And because each narrator introduces a discrete series of concerns, *A Drop of Rain* feels like at least five novels in one. Eva is nursing her dying sister/surrogate mother, Hanna, a Holocaust survivor from Poland who has lived her life as a completely selfless friend of the poor, the sick, the unemployed, the dispossessed. Mary, a medical doctor from Poland who works as a janitor, is coming to terms with her childhood during the war and the mistreatment of immigrants in Canada. Joe is trying to sort out his feelings toward Eva, his ex-wife and sons, and his career. Curtis is a sensitive artist-type with a difficult home life—his mother’s boyfriend is abusive, his father is gay. Naomi has arguably the most to contend with: her dying aunt; her estranged father who lives in Poland; and her troubled friend Sarah, who becomes pregnant and contemplates suicide; not to mention the history of Poland, from the Holocaust to the Cold War to the rise of Solidarity. Poland is a topic readers may well be interested in, but Naomi’s discoveries about Polish history are lost in a depressing litany of issues, from breast cancer (Hanna and Mary have it) to HIV (Hanna “adopted” several young men who died of it) to euthanasia (Hanna wants it).

In terms of form, Nina Schindler’s *An Order of Amelie, Hold the Fries*, like *A Drop of Rain*, moves away from the typical format of young adult fiction,

but, in terms of theme, the two texts couldn’t be more different. While Kirk’s novel is overrun with problems, *An Order of Amelie* tells a story that is virtually without conflict. The plot focuses on a high-school student, Tim, who accidentally finds the address of a slightly older girl, Amelie; they begin to correspond, they fall in love, and, once Amelie decides to drop her utterly dull boyfriend, they live happily ever after. What makes the story edgy and provocative isn’t the themes it explores or the characters it portrays, but its graphics and layout. With a playful twist on the epistolary novel, Schindler puts together a scrapbook of various notes, letters, emails, and cell-phone text messages that Tim and Amelie exchange. The visual is everything in this book, as the author documents romance in a multimedia age. The young lovers write on ticket stubs, newspaper clippings, and pages ripped from calendars, making this text more playful and fun than any other in this batch of young adult fiction. It bears mentioning, though, that Schindler comes from Germany, not Canada: her book was originally published in German, then translated by Robert Barrett. The lightheartedness and generic innovation that characterize Schindler’s writing seem to be missing from Canadian teen literature.

In stark contrast to the playfulness of *An Order Of Amelie*, *Perfectly Secret: The Hidden Lives of Seven Teen Girls*, edited by Susan Musgrave, and *I Wrote On All Four Walls: Teens Speak Out On Violence*,

edited by Fran Fearnley, immerse readers in the dark, often dangerous, worlds of teens for whom adolescence is painful in the extreme. Like the main characters in the novels by Carrie Mac, Tanya Lloyd Kyi, and Sandra Diersch, the teens who share their stories in Musgrave's and Fearnley's books must deal with serious problems, usually without the support of adults—indeed, sometimes adults cause the problems in the first place. But because these are non-fictional accounts of events that actually happened, readers will be, I think, more profoundly disturbed. Messed up lives are easier to read about when we know that they're fictional. The contributors to *Hidden Lives* (the full title of which is somewhat misleading, since the "Seven Teen Girls" are actually professional writers who write retrospectively about their adolescent lives) reveal secrets that involve rape, self-mutilation, suicide, and domestic violence. Cathy Stonehouse's description of her two selves, split by the sexual abuse she endured at the hands of her father, is especially chilling; Lorna Crozier's exploration of her father's alcoholism moved me to tears. *I Wrote On All Four Walls* is shockingly bleak, in no small part because the teens' voices in this text are candid and raw, unmediated by narrative tools or tricks. The list of issues that arise is long, and includes physical violence (at home and at school); sexual abuse and rape; drinking and drug use (some of the teens begin both at the age of eight); membership in gangs;

mental illness; cutting; suicide attempts; and living on the street. At many points, readers will need to set down the book and take a few deep breaths—when, for example, "Claire" talks about being left alone, at the age of three, with her older sister, who was "three or four" and, not knowing how to feed her little sister, "just chew[ed] up crackers and spit them into my mouth because I didn't have any teeth" (113); or when "Kevin" mentions his desperate attempt to take his own life in a holding cell by "[taking] a roll of toilet paper and [stuffing] it down [his] throat, piece by piece" (103).

The danger of accepting *I Wrote On All Four Walls* as a commentary on the lives of all teenagers in Canada is that, in its extreme depiction of teens in trouble, it suggests that parents, educators, and social services workers are letting down young people, *tout court*. Several of the teens in Fearnley's text mention going to teachers for help and receiving none; several need to leave home in order to leave their problems behind. As a result, the "Now What? Advice from an Expert" epilogue, written by Dr. Fred Matthews from Central Toronto Youth Services, reads like a naive response from an ill-informed adult: "taking a self-defense course (140) and "tell[ing] someone you trust" (141) seem like token pieces of advice. But given that, in virtually all of the texts addressed in this review, we encounter parents who don't care and teachers who turn the other cheek, adult readers must consider

whether the “writing on the wall” is alerting us to an alarming prevalence of serious adolescent problems, or whether that writing is catering to an audience of teen readers who are, or would be, resistant to stories about functional, supportive families. Books with less angst and fewer issues may well be truer to life

but less entertaining, and, hence, less publishable. We should be cautious, then, about the red flags that these texts seem to raise. The writing on the wall may be coloured by writers’ assumptions that young adult readers desire a textual world that is more dramatic than the real one.

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