

SPUD DOES OTTAWA—AGAIN

Spud in Winter. Brian Doyle. Greenwood Books/Douglas and McIntyre Ltd., 1995. 140 pp., \$8.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-224-6.

As in its companion novel, *Spud Sweetgrass*, *Spud in Winter* is a mystery story, blending humour and a recognizable Canadian setting to provide a convincing, realistic context in which Doyle probes contemporary social themes and issues. Spud's first-person narrative particularly underscores the speciousness and pitfalls of making assumptions and generalizations based on appearances and ethnicity — a social tendency at the very roots of racial prejudice.

Spud and his soul-mate and girlfriend, Connie Pan, are of mixed-blood. Doyle eschews the obvious ploy of making Spud and Connie victims of overt racial prejudice, and instead crafts an unobtrusive celebration of tolerance and diversity by dramatizing their culturally-based personalities. Spud finds the courage and wisdom required to meet the challenges forced on him by the chance witnessing of a gangland murder on the chilled streets of the nation's capital by drawing on his rich Native heritage. For her part, Connie Pan encourages Spud, even while she is preoccupied for much of the novel in organizing a grand skating party on the Rideau Canal for recent young immigrants to the country from all corners of the world.

The remaining characters in the novel are either “supporting” in the most literal sense, such as Spud's mother and his insightful teacher, Mr. Sullivan (who himself happens to be of Native descent), or comic caricatures. An example of the latter is Spud's close friend, Dink the Thinker, an engaging “nerd-dweeb” who gives every sign he will live up to his ambition to win the Nobel Prize for science in 2025. Spud's neanderthal classmates, Fabio and Roddy, who are respectively obsessed with popping steroids and with fashioning imitation phalluses out of the nearest available material (Doyle does not shy away from contemporary adolescent realities) are similar typed characters. The latter pair come across as somewhat beyond belief — even in a modern city high school.

While the humorous tone both offers a welcome balance to the novel's serious themes and anticipates a favourable resolution to Spud's dilemma, the transitions between the humorous and serious scenes are often jarring. The egregious variations on the “name-game” are overdone, and while the climax on the Rideau is quintessentially neat, it is predictable to the point of contrivance. Finally, in a work in which the primary themes celebrate tolerance and resistance to racial stereotyping, it is notable the villain of the piece is an Italian mafiosa. On balance however, *Spud in Winter* successfully integrates wit and humour, a measured conversational style with moments of intimacy and self-revelation, and a believable setting to underscore Doyle's social contemporary themes.

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