

BOOKS FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL READING

Three by Cunningham

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Remarks from adults attending meetings about children's literature and my own reading, rather than any great enthusiasm from children in the school, has led to a review of three works by the author Julia Cunningham.

Dorp Dead (Pantheon, 1965) was the selection first brought to my attention. Comments from adults concerning the book were unfavorable. My own reaction to the book was a negative feeling when considering it for classroom circulation. The book breathes violence; not group violence that we are exposed to today through many media, but violent feelings and actions from adults directed at or surrounding a child. The credibility of an orphanage that would send a child into the home of a recluse is stretched further when it becomes obvious that Gilly has been sent to live with and work for a man who is bent on homicide. Appearances of the "Hunter" further confound the feasibility of the situation as this man confronts Gilly in a moment of emotional escape and exhibits a gun that he carries, but which is unloaded. If this is a message about the conditions or circumstances in life that lead adults to a one way out solution, the book would better be found on the adult shelves in libraries where people with more experiences could sort out the believable from the other degrees of fiction.

Attempting to further explore Julia Cunningham's message led me to the card catalog and from there to the shelves and a book about Gilly as a younger boy entitled Onion Journey (Pantheon, 1967). This encounter brought contact with a boy's search for understanding. Since the theme centers around an onion and its symbolism of life unfolding a layer at a time, I wonder, again, if a young audience can grasp the concepts put there without aid in interpreting. The surface story hinges on this premise of life unfolding and confronts the child with the need to understand.

One book remained on our shelves. I had my doubts about Macaroon (Pantheon, 1962) and found them groundless. Here is a girl, a story, an idea accepted by boys as well as girls. Erika is a believable imp of a girl with a problem of feeling unwanted, with outrageous physical responses to inner conflict,

and with a convincing ability to talk to the raccoon who seems so wise and who accompanies her through her troubles. Maybe it is well received by children because it so well follows the surface hardness of children and shows the gradual weakening to allow them to identify with the experience.

No doubt the reading of Macaroon would lead to encounters with the other books. I would recommend that emphasis be placed on the fact that the books are fictional, that Dorp Dead is not a suspense story in the sense of suspense/mystery stories as the children usually encounter them, and that there is an idea running under the surface in both Dorp Dead and Onion Journey. I would not recommend Dorp Dead for children who have insecure feelings about their relations with adults or for children who are not with their parents.