

BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS: ADOLESCENT NOVELS

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In reading the new 1978 adolescent novels, I was struck by the number of adolescent main characters who are preoccupied with their own personal problems. They are not interested in the social and political issues that tormented the characters of adolescent novels of the late sixties and early seventies. What many of them are interested in is their relationship with parents and other "elders."

The positive note in this is that some writers are attempting to create elders who are interesting. While the elders of many adolescent novels have been no more than Ozzie and Harriet backdrops, the elders in these novels are developed to the point that the adolescent-elders relationships are complex.

These adolescent-elder relationships are the central focus of some of this year's more noteworthy titles.

In Betty Miles' Looking On (Knopf, 1978; 192 pp.; \$6.95), Rosalie, who lives with her mother, following her parents' divorce, is having difficulties adjusting to change in herself and life without her father and brother. She becomes entranced by the seemingly glamorous life of a young couple who live next door in a mobile home. She spends more and more time with the couple ignoring her friends and mother, only to discover that the couple's

life isn't all glamor. She sees them bickering over finances and household responsibilities and learns that her own friendships are more meaningful than the couple's pizza parties.

Although this book has a didactic bent, I liked the authenticity of Miles' portrayal of the young couple's life as well as Rosalie's own illusions about their life, illusions derived from the glamorous surface images of television ads and celebrity magazines. Miles contrasts these illusions against some cold economic realities -- the old appearance versus reality theme updated to the inflationary 1970's.

The Empty Chair (Harper, 1978; 243 pp.; \$7.89) is a strong first novel by Canadian writer Bess Kaplan about an eleven-year-old girl's highly emotional experiences with her mother's death and her father's remarriage. The quality of the novel lies in the authenticity of the first person narrator. After her mother dies and her aunts begin to encourage her father to remarry, the girl envisions her mother as an angry spirit who is seeking to prevent a remarriage. When her father does remarry, she clings to this vision and refuses to cooperate with her new step-mother. However, as her step-mother is slowly able to dispell her fears, she learns to accept and love her, a shift that is deftly portrayed through the change in the girl's perspective. In terms of literary quality, this is one of this year's better selections.

In another novel that portrays an adolescent-elder relation-

ship, Queen of Hearts by Vera and Bill Cleaver (Lippincott, 1978; 158 pp; \$8.95), a twelve-year old girl attempts to cope with her ailing grandmother, a petulant, outspoken, hardy woman who refuses to leave her house and move into a nursing home, even after she has a stroke. This grandmother is relatively well-developed so that it is possible to understand that the girl is both devoted to her yet infuriated by her behavior.

After the grandmother's stroke, the girl's parents bring in relatives to tend her, but they fail because they only baby her. The girl then takes over and is able to restore the grandmother's self-dignity by getting her to do things she did well in the past.

While the ambiguities of an adolescent's love/hate relationship with a grandparent will ring true for adolescent readers, the novel strains in attempting to say so much about "old age" problems. The girl's psychological insights about her grandmother are a bit too perceptive for any 12 year old.

In Richard Peck's Father Figure (Viking, 1978; 192 pp.; \$8.95), a seventeen-year-old narrator, Jim, peers into a very contemporary adult world of love, hate, divorce, suicide, wealth and poverty. He and his divorced mother live in a protected, upper class world in New York City. After Jim's mother commits suicide, he and his brother must move to Florida to live with their father, who had left their mother when Jim was nine. Jim doesn't get along with his father, but with the help of his father's girlfriend, a spunky,

"down-to-earth" waitress, he learns to develop a mutual trust with his father.

As a brash, outspoken moralist, Jim has some perceptive insights into an often confused, often hypocritical adult world in which both elders and children seek out each other's love.

M. E. Kerr's Gentlehands (Harper, 1978; 183 pp.; \$6.49) also portrays the moral conflicts among and between generations. In a small resort town, high school age Buddy witnesses the clash between the values of his lower middle class parents and the values of his somewhat shallow girlfriend's wealthy parents. Juxtaposed against these two camps is Buddy's estranged but accommodating grandfather, Grandpa Trenker, who, while he is wealthy, has the cultural interests his girlfriend's parents lack. These three forces begin to pull Buddy apart, as later in the book, he is shocked to learn that Grandpa Trenker was actually a brutal officer in a German concentration camp. Although the ending may be a bit confusing to some readers, Kerr doesn't settle for easy moralizing, but pulls a back to an ironic stance -- none of the characters emerge from this socio-drama as superior.. This book should challenge young readers with tough value questions.