

'Oh, I'm sure there are all kinds of rumours about my poor husband. He's a minister, you know. He no longer preaches, but his mind still churns dreadfully. He has a mental illness, Laura, and it can't be helped. It's a terrible thing to live with, for him and for me as well.' (35)

Some of Coady's descriptions are troublesome. For example, to describe a weary Montgomery resting from gardening, she says: "She plopped down onto her knees beside the back step" (50).

Yet despite the press of biographical details, the unlikely confessionism, the oddly jarring descriptors, Mary Frances Coady has written an interesting story. For the young reader, *Lucy Maud and Me* offers a quick and readable view of Montgomery's suffering and her triumphs. The scenes in Montgomery's library are worth reading. The wartime frame story about Laura's family is good.

Perhaps the best praise for the book is that I wanted it to have been true. The story made me want to believe that Montgomery desperately but generously shared glimpses of her past with a very young girl whose kindness and youth brought comfort as they reminded her of so many of her own heroines and memories.

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### It's a Mystery

*The Enchanted Horses.* Chrystine Brouillet. Ragweed, 1996. 99 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 0-921556-63-2. *No Orchids for Andrea.* Chrystine Brouillet. Ragweed, 1996. 87 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 0-921556-62-4. *Aliens in the Basement.* Suzan Reid. Scholastic Canada, 1997. 83 pp. \$4.50 paper. ISBN 0-590-12392-0. *A Ghost in the Attic.* Suzan Reid. Scholastic Canada, 1998. 105 pp. \$4.99 paper. ISBN 0-590-03867-2.

Young readers adore mystery novels and prefer a dash of magic and fantasy added to the mixture for spice. These uncomplicated and pleasant stories serve as a respite from the realities of today. These youngsters are undemanding and willing to accept desperate plots, unbelievable incidents and assorted inconsistencies. Still, as educators we must look carefully at this vast output and choose the best.

Chrystine Brouillet, a young Quebec author, writes for both children and adults and has won many awards for her body of work. Several young adult books have been successfully translated into English. With this background of quality, one would expect well-plotted, exciting novels. The excitement is there, but the detail is blurred. A strength of her novels is the appealing pair of detectives, Andrea and Arthur. Our apprentice investigators are best friends and equals and treat each other with affection and respect.

In *The Enchanted Horses*, Andrea and Arthur (an Arthurian name perfectly suited to the mythology inherent in the book) visit their friend Eliza and prepare to share her life on a horse farm. Her uncle Edward has arrived from Paris to race his magnificent white stallion, Pegasus. The horse wins but is accused of being doped and eventually is kidnapped. A melange of missing horses, accidents and a mysterious neighbour, the odd Mr. Lemnir, is mixed together in a feverish way. Mr. Lemnir is crudely drawn as an unctuous sybarite with a penchant for young girls with blond braids. Indeed, his desire is to create a unicorn with a blend of Eliza's hair, animal horns and other substances. However, magic is more effective when tied into everyday life by strands of logic.

Nuggets of historical information are scattered throughout the text and provide an interesting underpinning that strengthens the work tremendously. The beauty of language, the terms Chimaera and Pegasus, the meaning of the Latin expression *lege, lege, relege, ora, labora et invenies* (Read, read, re-read, pray, work and you shall), a useful prescription for any student, is well-presented. One discovers what a divinatory plate is, about the Museum of the Middle Ages at Cluny, and why four is a lucky number. Word skills and a broader understanding and awareness are encouraged.

Our young heroes apply their investigative skills to the solution of the mystery, but something appears to be lost in the translation. A tighter, more polished presentation would be more effective. There is a hint of creative imagination in the ending with the possibility of a little horn growing on one of Mr. Lemnir's creatures, and a frisson of suspense, but the prose is awkward and the situations too familiar and trite.

*No Orchids for Andrea* continues with the same cast and they are an appealing pair, with Arthur providing substance and support for Andrea's sparks of inspiration. Andrea has a brilliant idea – she will grow orchids to raise money for her absent father's birthday present. They decide to go to the Botanical Garden for a talk on orchids. This is an intellectual and delightfully refreshing situation for a young adult novel where the more usual venue is a mall. They discover a flower world rife with skulduggery, intense rivalries and the deadly search for the Black Pearl orchid. Once again, Brouillet uses unusual orchid information and an absorbing creation story about the birth of orchids to provide a framework of fact to strengthen the narrative.

The author attempts to deepen the characterization and broaden the focus, for nothing is quite what it seems to be. Unfortunately, the complexities are confusing, and the characters are too shallow and stereotyped to withstand development.

Mikis, a friend from another story, is particularly unsuccessful as he steps awkwardly into the plot. His friend Nancy is seriously ill, and her illness jars the light story. Of more concern, Mikis is a thief who repeats his acts and whose lack of moral edge is never really addressed. Even more problematic is the depiction of the young man with the scar slashed along his face, a thoroughly trite mystery convention. And it is unpleasant and unnecessary to hear him referred to as "Scarface" by our intrepid heroes, who should know better. These moral lapses are unacceptable. More precision of thought and ethical care are required. The black-and-white illustration supports the text with wry humour, but these are secondary purchases.

Suzan Reid writes with a light touch and an appealing innocence. When schools have sophisticated bullies and the concept of “cool” rules, it is good to know that there is normal, reassuring mischief. In Reid’s books friendships are simple and the horrors of school are outside the classroom. Indeed, they are imaginary and accompanied by fun and humour and just the right soupçon of fear. Reid brings her expertise as a teacher to her work and creates a believable school scenario. Mr. Turkle, the janitor, plays an ongoing role, as he would in a real school, and one sees his constant efforts in maintaining a healthy school structure and environment.

Again we have a boy and girl, Matt and Jaime, as the closest of friends, with Jaime as the enthusiastic but careless innovator. In *Aliens in the Basement*, Jaime, lured by stories of mysterious happenings in the basement, finds jars of possible aliens and decides to investigate. After all, anyone at the school could be an alien, particularly the teachers. There are strange happenings, a mysterious van, and odd tapping to be explored. They proceed in an amusing way to track down the truth and sensibly study Morse code to see if it is an alien code. In the last chapter “Everything fits into place,” and all loose ends are tied together pleasantly.

*A Ghost in the Attic* is a delightful sequel. Jaime falls for a familiar gambit — a ghost in the window. There is an exciting and escalating hunt for the elusive ghost in which they find out a great deal about the history of Fulton Street School. There is a tin box of treasure filled with newspaper clippings where names such as Joe Louis and King George VI are completely unfamiliar — how fleeting fame is. And, of course, up in the attic there are tidy solutions to all questions. The illustration in soft greys is a perfect complement to the story. Jaime and Matt are endearingly drawn and Mr. Turkle is macho and strong. The series would suit youngsters who want an uncomplicated mystery with lively situations and a light touch. At this school, everything is possible and exciting.

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### Comedy's Continuum

*Something Fishy at Macdonald Hall.* Gordon Korman. Scholastic, 1995. 198 pp. \$5.99 paper. ISBN 0-590-51447-4. *Move Over, Einstein!* Margaret Springer. Illus. Biz Hull. Puffin Books (Penguin), 1997. 122 pp. \$7.99 paper. ISBN 0-14-037799-9. *Dahling, If You Luv Me, Would You Please, Please Smile?* Rukhsana Khan. Stoddart Kids, 1999. 206 pp. \$9.95. ISBN 0-7737-6016-4.

When *Dahling If You Luv Me's* Zainab adapts an episode from Islamic history for presentation in an eighth-grade play, she is well aware that historical struggles do not end “in a neat and tidy way” (177). And while Zainab’s comedic ending har-