



**Abandonment and Invisible Children in
Contemporary Canadian Young Adult Fiction**
—Abbie Ventura

Armstrong, Luanne. *I'll Be Home Soon*. Vancouver: Ronsdale, 2012. 194 pp. \$11.95 pb. ISBN 978-1-55380-180-1. Print.

Goobie, Beth. *Jason's Why*. Markham: Red Deer, 2013. 80 pp. \$8.95 pb. ISBN 978-0-88995-484-7. Print.

Tanaka, Shelley. *Nobody Knows*. Toronto: Groundwood, 2012. 144 pp. \$16.95 hc. ISBN 978-1-55498-118-2. Print.

Adderson, Caroline. *Middle of Nowhere*. Toronto: Groundwood, 2012. 216 pp. \$9.95 pb. ISBN 978-1-55498-132-8. Print.

Since the 1980s, children's and young adult novels have treated the subject of child abuse in its myriad forms with more realistic detail than before, prompting scholars and reviewers to debate the relevance and appropriateness of these topics and themes. Indeed, the issue of realism seems to be the most contested point in the depiction of physical and sexual abuse in novels for young readers. In particular, the four books under review here examine both a type of abuse and a type of childhood that are not as common in such texts: child

abandonment and invisible childhood, respectively. Three of the four texts portray child protagonists living outside the system after being deserted by their parents, with only one depicting in detail the role of social services agencies for at-risk children (called "Child Social Services" or "Children's Aid Society" or "Family and Children's Services" in some Canadian communities but not identified by name in any of these texts) in assisting them. While these are not dystopian novels, they share with the genre of dystopian fiction

for young people the ethical convention of hopeful endings, which, as Kay Sambell notes, are necessary because of “the perceived responsibility to point young readers actively toward a better world” (164). All four books under review here grapple with the problem of having highly realistic trauma be followed by unrealistic conclusions, prompting us to ask whether they are meant to be fictive representations of the multiplicity of childhood and adolescence or whether they offer bibliotherapy for particular groups of young people who have experienced these issues themselves. In many ways, these texts do not reveal any awareness of this tension, and so they serve two distinct aims: on the one hand, to create realistic and traumatic lives in their pages, and on the other, to wrap things up quickly and easily with little emotional or social fallout by the end of the narrative. While this twofold critique is the larger concern of my review, I also observe the trope of the bad mother shared among these four texts and interrogate the ideological implications of linking child abuse exclusively to portrayals of non-normative femininity. The texts also reveal a shared distrust of the role these agencies play for homeless children, as their characters either avoid this type of assistance deliberately or remain wary of it. While there is not enough of a textual pattern to establish this as a trend, further exploration into these types of novels may reveal a critique of the relationship between such agencies and homeless children.

Caroline Adderson’s *Middle of Nowhere* tells the story of sixth grader Curtis, his five-and-a-half-year-old brother Artie, and their desperation to withhold from their teachers, the landlord, and the police the fact that their mother has disappeared. Through Curtis’s recollections, the reader learns that his mother had disappeared years before, following a boyfriend and leaving Curtis behind. Curtis was placed in the care of a social services agency, and when his mother finally returned home, she was pregnant with Artie and was awarded custody of Curtis. Curtis lives under the fear of his mother disappearing again; the book grapples with his emotional tug-of-war in believing she will come back and accepting her as a “bad mother” figure who has left them permanently. In the early days of their abandonment, Curtis is able to keep himself and his brother fed and is able to maintain a seemingly regular schedule so as not to alert teachers. An elderly neighbour, Mrs. Burt, also marginalized by her family members in their desire to institutionalize her, notices the plight of the boys and takes it upon herself to assist them, first with money, meals, and a place to sleep and hide as adults become suspicious, and later in the form of a retreat to a cabin in the woods to avoid the police who have been searching for them. It is at this point that the realistic trauma of a young child who has been abandoned is tempered by an unlikely solution to their dire situation. Mrs. Burt, recovering from a broken hip, is able to drive the boys out of the

city and to the woods, where they manage to make her family's cabin livable after decades of absence. They build an outhouse, she teaches them to swim and fish, and they buy in bulk in order to avoid having to go into town for the summer. The story becomes something different here, a meditation on Mrs. Burt's past and her need to redeem, through Curtis and Artie, both her bad mothering experiences and the death of her son years earlier. As the summer progresses, Mrs. Burt's emotional and psychological instability becomes the central focus of the narrative, and the reader learns that she has not only been hiding the boys deliberately in order to keep them but also has been wearing the same scented lotion as their mother to encourage them to trust her and to see her as their new mother. In the last few chapters of the book, it is revealed that Curtis and Artie's mother did not abandon them but had been struck by a car and fallen into a coma; when she awoke, she asked the police about her sons. When Mrs. Burt learns this, she does not tell the police the boys are at her home but instead takes them further away to the lake, believing she can do a better job than the boys' mother and that she is a better solution than a social services agency. The boys are eventually reunited with their mother, however, their trust in her restored, and it appears as though no charges will be pressed against Mrs. Burt. While the early part of the novel touches on the social and emotional realities of poverty and abandonment, the novel quickly becomes something else entirely, a shift

that I believe can be attributed to a publishing industry that is still hesitant to allow fully realistic novels—and endings—on this topic.

Beth Goobie's *Jason's Why* follows this trend of a quickly found happy ending after implausible events. In this novella, the mother of nine-year-old Jason places him in a social services agency after she cannot handle his emotional outbursts any longer. Only seventy-two pages in length, the story tackles an incredible amount of trauma in the week Jason is at the group home: a mother abandoning her child, the memories of a father beating his child, a psychologically unstable mother abusing her son emotionally, and a child grappling with the reality of living in a group home and the emotional turmoil of a difficult childhood. Unfortunately, these many events bog the story down, and little to no attention is spent parsing them out. Perhaps the best example of bibliotherapy of the four books under review here, *Jason's Why* lacks character and plot development, favouring instead the inclusion but not the exploration of realistic traumas that some children suffer. Despite its realism, the book likewise has a rushed ending, where both Jason and his mother have major breakthroughs and begin the work of repairing and rebuilding their relationship. While the author brings realism to the events of the book from her own experience working in group homes for children and adolescents, the constrictions of such a brief novella do not give room for a more in-depth exploration of these important topics.



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Luanne Armstrong's *I'll Be Home Soon* tells the story of thirteen-year-old Regan after her mother disappears. Like the boys of *Middle of Nowhere*, Regan initially is able to care for herself from her apartment but eventually must leave when her teacher and the landlord become suspicious. Like Curtis and Artie, Regan has a strong aversion to the assistance of social services agencies, but without a neighbour to help her, she begins to live on the streets as she searches for her mother, believing that to be the long-term solution to her condition of homelessness. While formulaic in plot, the novel gives careful attention to the underbelly of this type of existence and how a teenager can project an identity of normalcy to the world. The novel, in its realism, starts to suggest that Regan's mother is dead as more time passes and police officers do little to investigate. In this way, the novel is starker than the previous two, but it, too, falls quickly in line with the trend of offering and maintaining hope by the last pages. In a plot involving organized crime, drugs, and sex trafficking, Regan not only learns of her mother's kidnapped location but also manages to enter the building and save her mother and the other women before the drug lab explodes. The novel ends with Regan and her mother recovering and back in an apartment together but hints at Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and sleepless nights for both of them. In this way, Armstrong tempers somewhat the implausibility of the final rescue events with the reality of living with trauma.

The final novel included in this review, Shelley Tanaka's *Nobody Knows*, has the least hopeful ending of the four; this may be attributed to the fact that this is a novelization of the 2004 Japanese film that is based on the 1988 child abandonment case in Sugamo. In this narrative, Akira is left in charge of his three younger siblings while his mother leaves them for a man; she nevertheless sends money to pay

the bills with strict instructions that the three younger children are not to leave the apartment or be found out by the landlord. The text explores the difficulties of this unsupervised childhood, particularly when Akira's mother stops sending funds and the utilities are turned off. Akira resists involving social services agencies, perhaps an indictment of how little of a service it actually is given that it separates families and leaves children in a different state of being untethered. Akira begins slowly to resent the burden of this life and seeks normal activities of childhood, like playing baseball and video games with friends. His brief escape from the adult responsibilities of living as an invisible child leads to an even more traumatic reality, however—the death of his sister when playing unsupervised. As with the real-life and screen counterparts, the novel ends with this death; it is then that Akira and his remaining siblings receive money from their mother, who is unaware of her daughter's death. The siblings subsequently dispose of their sister's body and continue to live on in this state indefinitely. There is no silver lining to be found in this bleak ending, and in this way, the novel breaks from the trend of child abandonment novels ending on a note of hope. It is difficult to say if this is to Tanaka's credit for pioneering a new type of realism in children's and young adult parental desertion texts or if it is to keep the story in line with the film, which is intended for adult audiences. The fact that this is a true story is precisely what makes such narratives important: children do

live in these seemingly implausible ways, neglected, forgotten, abandoned, and made invisible by the system. What this true story highlights as well, though, is that the notion of a happy ending is implausible. This is perhaps the biggest problem with this specific genre of young adult fiction: these books are not allowed the implausible ending because of cultural predilections toward protecting child and adolescent subjects. The genre has evolved to a place where texts and authors are allowed thematic *gravitas*, but they are not awarded the same *gravitas* for their conclusions.

I also find it important to note that these texts all rely on the trope of the bad mother as a framing device to explain the abandonment of the child characters: Artie's mother has left before, for a man, and has children by two different men; Jason's mother is overwhelmed by the role of motherhood and is depicted as violently anti-nurturing and anti-feminine; Armstrong's novel intimates that Regan's mother is involved in prostitution; and Akira's mother is likewise abandoning her children for a man. While *Middle of Nowhere* and *I'll Be Home Soon* redeem these "bad" mothers by explaining their absences with a coma and with a kidnapping, the narratives advance the idea that the mother who is not nurturing is dangerous and will harm her children, either emotionally or psychologically. While the harm caused by these mothers is indeed quite real and these books are contributing positively to the

genre by portraying such harm, it is still dangerous to rely on such a strict dichotomy of what defines good and bad motherhood. These narratives perpetuate the dominant ideological construction of women, implying in the process that the mother with her own interests, the mother with sexual needs, and the mother with emotional struggles are all mothers who fail at motherhood. Because the explicit focus of these books is the abandonment plot, such gender constructions are implicitly transmitted and become secondary, and thus possibly go unquestioned by young readers and are accepted as truth.

To close, I would like to return to the larger generic concern of writing about child abuse generally and about child abandonment in particular. The three texts with happy endings utilize what U. C. Knoepfmacher outlines in his article "The Hansel and Gretel Syndrome: Survivorship Fantasies and Parental Desertion": "The fairy tale's ostensibly happy ending asks us to become as forgetful of the trauma of abandonment as the story's child protagonists" (171). In this way, if we are asked to be forgetful of the trauma, of the realism of a child being abandoned and neglected, then what higher

purpose do these texts serve? With the exception of Akira in *Nobody Knows*, the young protagonists manage to find redemption and a safer version of home by the end of each novel, ostensibly erasing the reality of what it means to be an abandoned child. In the context of the dual-aim function I discussed earlier, we must consider what this means for the two distinct audiences. For young readers who use these texts to learn about invisible childhoods, this type of ending minimizes reality and thus constructs such a life and subjectivity falsely. For young readers who have experienced these traumas and read the texts as bibliotherapy, the books fail to represent their lives adequately by suggesting that they can and will be "fixed." It is this idea of "fixed" that lends itself to the hierarchy of better versions of childhood, a dangerous image to perpetuate for children who do not return home to families. Despite these tensions and despite the fact that the books are still bound by publishing trends and notions of appropriateness for a teen audience by including the happily-ever-after ending, they do offer something that is largely absent from the YA genre, and for that they are important narratives.

Works Cited

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