

Shrinking the Language

Patrice Newell

Sarah Brill

Glory

Spinifex, \$19.95pb, 157pp, 1 876756 25 X

Anna Ciddor

Runestone

Allen & Unwin, \$14.95pb, 192pp, 1 86508 689 4

Colin Thiele

Swan Song

Lothian, \$12.95pb, 192pp, 0 7344 0325 9

I AM ONE of those middle-aged, middle-class mums leafing listlessly through the new releases in the children's section of a large bookstore. Strangers to each other, we realise we're united in our concerns when one says out loud: 'All these books and so little choice. If it's not a famous fantasy, it's a dysfunctional family.' Some Christian parents worry about their children being overexposed to the supernatural realms of Harry Potter et al. While I share their concerns — but from a humanist/rationalist viewpoint — it's the latter category, the 'school of hard knocks' books, that worries me more.

Take *Glory*, Sarah Brill's first novel. By page seventeen, readers will have dined on anorexia and adoption worries, and been exposed to suicide. By the book's end, Brill's fifteen-year-old heroine has left home, got a job, lost the job, lost her virginity, experimented with a smorgasbord of drugs, shackled up with a loser, faced eviction and experienced homelessness. Little wonder that her 'glory' (i.e. self-esteem) goes up and down like a yo-yo. The language is didactic, in the present tense, third person, giving it the banality of reality television. 'Mandy says there's another party this weekend and she should come. She looks surprised. Mandy laughs. There's always another party and she is relieved.'

Who did Brill have in mind when she was writing the book? A mother of a child with anorexia? I doubt it. An anorexic victim like the central character? Unlikely, since the character doesn't read. A person looking for a birthday gift? You're kidding.

It's a commonplace to complain about all the violence on television, all those unreal reality programmes. But the flood of aggro and tragedy masquerading as children's/young adult literature should cause similar concern. I know the arguments for it. It's to free children from cotton-wool literature, and

prepare them for the harshness of the teenage world. But the genre seems to be feeding on itself, becoming ever tougher, like the escalating savagery in blockbuster movies. I doubt that parents want their children to see *this* much dysfunction. Many of the stories we came to love, from *Cinderella* to *A Little Princess*, from *Hansel and Gretel* to *Peter Pan*, have family disruption at their core, but they go on to show a world of possibilities and hope. The difference, increasingly, is that the world of Happy Ever After is being abandoned as hopelessly romantic and sentimental.

Sarah Brill

Once children grasp basic reading skills, move beyond chapter books, want more ideas in a text, and have read the full Harry Potter set four times, all Lemony Snicket and Emily Rodda titles, and ploughed through Tolkien, not to mention most of the classics, what should they read? Children's books increasingly focus on young adult themes that seem inappropriate for the pre-teen to early teenage group.

Harold Bloom's *Stories and Poems for Extremely Intelligent Children of All Ages* (2001) offers some guidance. He writes: 'I do not accept the category of "Children's Literature", which had some use and distinction a century ago, but now all too often is a mask for the dumping down that is destroying our literary culture.' If you regard yourself as a sort of radical parent who dares to be conservative — in the sense that you want your children to be inspired and protected rather than depressed and alarmed — you could do worse than follow his advice. But don't expect recent titles. Children's books, like all publications, have increasingly short shelf-lives. They're becoming as disposable as nappies. Books as television. Books so thin they are read after school and finished before dinner. They're not much more demanding than comic strips. They're not complex, heart-felt or transformational. And, worse, much of the language echoes the colloquialisms of the schoolyard. Honey, I've shrunk the language.

The books under review here cater for widely differing age groups. The difference is not dictated by language — the level of English in each could be handled by any competent nine-year-old — but by their subject matter. *Runestone*, the first in a series by Anna Ciddor, is set in Scandinavia during Viking times. Two babies are switched at birth, one has magic skills, the other doesn't. Neither fits in with their families. The mood is good-hearted and the Viking background provides colour rather than a history lesson.

Colin Thiele's *Swan Song* is a step back in time. His renowned *Storm Boy* (1963) involved a boy befriending a pelican in the Coorong. His latest, but one hopes not his last, novel has a boy nurture and befriend a black swan, once again in the Coorong. But the narrative is brought up to date by the addition of environmental issues, with a dad who's a ranger and by a mum who's the household leader overseeing her son's education when the local school closes. The book's simplicity is its strength. Its tone is quiet and thoughtful.

Thirty years ago, the teenage demographic was just being discovered. Corporations began manufacturing music, films, games, fashion and, yes, books to profit from it. Today, this age group is the focus of skilled marketing, aided and abetted by child psychologists and carefully targeted advertising campaigns. High school libraries are filled with teenage titles that are more likely to be depressing than transformational. Now the younger age groups are being neglected. Even worse, pressured into earlier pubescence.

I suspect there are many children and young adults who want reassuring narratives, where good wins out, where parents are on their side, where institutions are safe, where you can approach the world with optimism and trust. And I suspect that many of the parents wandering through bookshops want this kind of book as well.