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Betsy Byars' Slice of 'American Pie'

Lois R. Kuznets

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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I am looking forward to hearing and seeing Betsy Byars at the Eighth Annual ChLA Conference in Minneapolis. Not only am I, naturally, interested in whatever she has to say about children's literature, but I am, frankly, curious to find out whether Byars, in person, presents some of the same contrast between book and cover that I sense when I read her biographical blurbs or look at her picture on the dust covers of her novels.

Why, I wonder, does she choose usually to write about mobile, fragmented American families when she, herself, seems clearly to have led a stable and settled existence, married with four children, in a West Virginia community not far from the North Carolina region where she was born and brought up? More whimsically, I wonder, too, how someone who seems never to have changed her conservative page-boy hair style is so willing to be experimental in both form and substance of her books.

In preparation for writing this review, I read as many of the some eighteen Byars' children's books as I could get my hands on (several for the first time, I must admit). I am not given to such grand accolades as British Signal editor, Nancy Chambers, tosses off, ". . . Betsy Byars goes on being one of the ten best writers for children in the world." ("Bookends," Signal, January 1980, p. 57) Still, I was impressed by both the quantity and quality of Byars' books since her first, Clementine (1962), a humorous and delicately controlled depiction of a young boy's projection of self on a dragon-shaped stuffed sock (of all things!)

Whatever its variety, the corpus of Byars' work seems generally to

exhibit several characteristically American traits: 1) She often depicts "the call of the wild," the fascination that rural field, forest, stream, animal and bird exert on most Americans, even those from modern urban areas; 2) She expresses the fascination with mass-produced objects and entertainment that is similarly a part of our "culture," with a lower-case "c"; 3) She is concerned with bringing to the attention of her readers the consciousness of creatures (both animal and human) that are inarticulate, naturally or unnaturally, and often maimed and vulnerable; 4) She is interested in the role that a combination of imaginative playfulness and self-deprecating, "Woody Allen" type humor has in the growth and development of her typical young protagonists. These traits, combined with the contemporary American sensitivity to the breakdown of the nuclear family, seem to me to be exhibited to a greater or lesser extent in most of Byars' novels.

Her Newbery Medal winner, The Summer of the Swans, (1970), is perhaps the best known of these, but is not, I think, typical of her best work. The Summer of the Swans is distinguished from the usual tale of "ugly duckling into swan," by the perceptive portrayal of a retarded child, Charlie, younger brother of Sara, the developing adolescent protagonist. But some of Byars' strengths are muted in this book. Novels like The Midnight Fox (1968), The House of Wings, (1972) and The Winged Colt of Casa Mia (1973), displayed Byars' talents to better advantage. Male, rather than female protagonists, seem to be Byars' forte in characterization through thought and speech patterns. Byars' success in the depiction of animals non-anthropomorphically, which has been clear since her early Rama the Gypsy Cat (1966), is fully evident in the latter three books where all three protagonists have relationships with vulnerable wild creatures. These creatures are not merely symbolic, as the swans are in The Summer of the Swans. They are real to **[End Page 31]** begin with, have relationships with the protagonists, and gradually acquire symbolic meaning in the characters' lives. Their presence gives a richness and depth to the depiction of the character's development; Sara's relationship to Charlie is perhaps meant to do the same, but does not work quite so well because it is overshadowed by teen-age romance.

Byars' fictional children rarely appear in the habitat of conventional nuclear families; they have been deserted, or...

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