

• FICTION •



Against the Odds

by Marjolijn Hof
translation by Johanna W. Prins and Johanna H. Prins
Groundwood Books, 2009
ISBN 978-0-88899-935-1
\$18.95, 124 pp, ages 9 – 13
www.groundwoodbooks.com

Daddy is going away. He is a doctor and goes to help other people. He can be in danger in far away war zones. In this simply but beautifully written story, Kiki wants to understand what her father's choice means and, since

she can't persuade him to stay home, how she can respond. Her mother explains that "the odds" make it unlikely that anything bad will happen to him when he is away. But then something does happen. Her father goes missing and she and her mother and grandmother must wait anxiously for news. Kiki, however, cannot just wait. She wants to change the odds somehow. She calculates that the odds are against a girl losing both a pet and a father. But what does this mean she might do to save her father? She faces a moral issue that writer Marjolijn Hof treats with the seriousness it merits but also with grace and humour. There is no moralizing; we feel for Kiki's dilemma and share her very real fears. *Against the Odds* has been translated into at least nine languages and won several awards. It will appeal to a wide range of readers and invites discussion and reflection.



Bank Job

James Heneghan and Norma Charles
Orca Book Publishers, 2009
ISBN 978-1-55143-855-9
\$9.95, 165 pp, ages 13-15
www.orcabook.com

Four foster children live happily in the home of Janice and Joseph Hardy. Nell Ford and Tom Okada are thirteen, Billy Galloway is fourteen and Lisa Connors is nine. The story centres around the oldest three children who try to come up with a plan for some urgently needed

cash. Social Services have given the Hardys six months to complete very expensive renovations to their home, or two of the children will have to leave. The children feel they are a real family and will do whatever it takes to keep them all together. Nell comes up with the idea that the three oldest are the Three Musketeers who will fight to save the Hardys and Lisa. They will be "all for one and one for all." Billy comes up with the idea on just how they can do that—rob banks! Tom is not convinced this is a good idea, and it unnerves Nell every time they commit a robbery. Just how long can they do this? And what will Janice and Joseph Hardy do if they find out what is going on?

This novel reveals much about foster homes—the good ones and the bad ones. A judge wonders why foster homes with excellent reputations do not receive more financial support. The reader is also exposed to Vancouver's downtown eastside, "where the drunks and the drug addicts and the homeless people hung out," as Nell and Tom help Billy to cope with his dying, alcoholic father. Despite the children's good intentions, they learn that crime does not pay and that it can really hurt the ones you love. But they also learn that trust, honesty and real, unconditional love will keep a family together no matter what happens.

James Heneghan has won several book awards. His YA historical novel *Wish Me Luck* was nominated for a Governor General's Award. Norma Charles was winner of the Chocolate Lily Award in 2005, and has been short listed for the Sheila A. Egoff Award. A story in a Vancouver newspaper about three teenagers robbing banks prompted the writing of this novel.



Salt

by Maurice Gee
Orca Book Publishers, 2009
ISBN 978-1-55469-209-5
\$18.00, 252 pp, ages 13+
www.orcabook.com

Maurice Gee, one of New Zealand's most acclaimed writers, creates a world that is both mysterious and entirely familiar. Hari and Pearl come from very different lives in that world but are bonded by common purposes and a powerful ability to communicate with their thoughts.

Using that power, they fight the injustices of an oppressive and cruel regime and seek peaceful lives for themselves and their people. Hari must rescue his father who has been sent to his death in the place called Deep Salt. Pearl, aided by her mysteriously talented maid, Tealeaf, must escape an arranged marriage with a tyrant. There are scenes of brutality, scenes of generosity and kindness, and scenes of selfless courage. The story is fast-paced, the themes important, the characters complex. This is a book that will appeal for its storytelling skill but also warrants thoughtful reflection on the use of force and the abuse of power and on how good can triumph over evil, even when evil cannot be entirely eliminated. As another reviewer put it, "Salt is a stunning mix of action and ideas."

"Salt" is the first in a trilogy and readers can be enticed into the second book by the opening chapter printed at the end of this first book



Summer Of Fire

by Karen Bass
Coteau Books, 2009
ISBN 978-1-55050-415-6
\$12.95, 267 pp, ages 14 – 16
www.coteaubooks.com

The format of this novel is a parallel story of two girls, both living in Hamburg, but in different times.

Del, is a 16-year-old from Edmonton. Her parents have sent her to Hamburg, Germany for the summer with the hope that Cassandra and Mathias, Del's sister and brother-in-law, can straighten out Del's somewhat rebellious behaviour. Unfortunately, Del sees the visit as a prison sentence and the sisters clash almost immediately. Cassandra and Mathias rent the top floor apartment of Luise Konrad's house. Luise has just translated her grandmother's diary into English and asks Del to read it, "to make sure the English is correct." Garda's story puts Del into an emotional turmoil. Her life becomes even more complicated when she becomes involved with Luise's nephew, Felix. Conflicts with Cassandra and Felix result in Del running away where she experiences a few potentially dangerous situations and risks losing everything important.

Garda, the teenage girl in the diary, lives in Heidelberg during the Second World War. Her mother is a very enthusiastic member of the Nazi Women's Auxiliary. Garda becomes pregnant after she is raped by a member of the Hitler Youth. Her mother blames Garda and sends her to Hamburg to have the baby and then give it up. But Garda decides to keep her baby. As the British bomb Hamburg, Garda does everything she can to protect her baby.

This novel is not only about the problems and issues that can affect many teenagers, no matter the era in which they live; Karen Bass also shows us the war, and events in Germany, through the perspective of a young German girl. There are many incidents throughout the story that could spark interesting class discussions. I found this novel a compelling read.

Reviewers

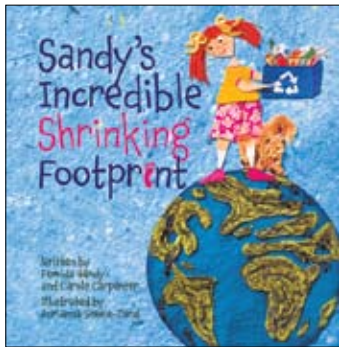
Diana Mumford worked as a teacher and teacher-librarian for twenty years before switching to her present career as an editor.

Julie Rank teaches grade nine in Corner Brook, NL. She is always on the lookout for books that will appeal to her 14-year-old students.

Wendy Strachan shared her love of reading and wonderful writing with her students for over thirty years and taught them to love to write themselves.

Interested in reviewing? Contact: dmumford@CanadianTeacherMagazine.com

• PICTURE BOOKS •



Sandy's Incredible Shrinking Footprint

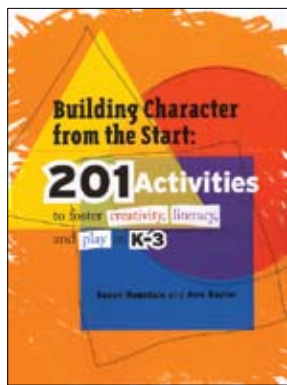
by Femida Handy and Carole Carpenter
illustrated by Adrianna Steele-Card
Second Story Press, 2010
ISBN 978-1-897187-69-2
\$15.95, hardcover, colour illustrations, ages 5 – 9
www.secondstorypress.ca

This charming picture book tells the story of how Sandy learns the meaning of “footprint” in the ecological sense, and determines to shrink her own footprint by reusing, recycling and reducing.

Her teacher is a woman Sandy encounters on the beach near her grandparents’ home. At first Sandy is afraid of the Garbage Lady who roams the beach picking up junk, but then she realizes that they share a disgust at the mess that other people have left behind, and they work together to clean it up. Sandy is inspired by the woman’s gentle lesson, and she returns to her parents and grandparents full of enthusiasm and ideas for how they could all shrink their footprints.

The illustrations are collages of natural and recycled materials, which could inspire the integration of art and science units in the classroom. An author’s note at the end of the story lists twelve suggestions for ways that readers can shrink their own footprints.

• TEACHER’S RESOURCES •



Building Character from the Start 201 Activities to foster creativity, literacy, and play in K – 3

by Susan Ragsdale and Ann Saylor
Search Institute Press, 2009
ISBN 978-157482-269-4
\$29.95, 150 pp, includes CD-ROM of reproducible pages
www.searchinstitute.org

This resource for primary school teachers is based on forty developmental assets identified by the Search Institute in Minneapolis, MN as being critical for children’s well-being and success in school. The

authors have compiled a great many creative activities that use play, movement, art, crafts and literature to help children grow and learn. Unit One is a set of creative drawing and colouring activities, formatted on reproducible pages with notations to indicate corresponding assets and titles of picture books that work well with the activities. Unit Two is an annotated list of favourite picture books divided into two sections: the first for titles appropriate for use with K – Grade 1 students, and the second for readers in Grades 2 – 3. For each title a brief plot summary is provided, followed by discussion questions and related activities. Unit Three contains more than seventy games, also with notations referencing assets and book titles, and “Let’s Talk” and “Explore More” suggestions for extending each game. This resource is clearly and simply formatted with consistent headings throughout, making it easy to access the content, and the thorough cross-referencing and indexing make it easy to build lesson plans that build on particular assets or themes. I believe that novice teachers will find this book to be a great gift of useable ideas from more senior colleagues, and experienced teachers will appreciate how the authors have pulled together and presented some great tried-and-true activities to help children grow and engage with others in a healthy, self-fulfilling way.

• DVD •



Tying Your Own Shoes

a documentary film by Shira Avni
National Film Board of Canada, 2009
\$69.95, 16 min 11 sec (total footage: 42 min 50 sec)
colour, ages 8+
www.nfb.ca

The title “Tying Your Own Shoes” is a reference to a comment made by one of the participants in the making of this film—she said that when she was born with Down syndrome, her parents were afraid that she wouldn’t ever be able to tie her own shoes (clearly, this fear was unfounded). Using narration and animation, the film illustrates the stories of four adult artists whose lives have been influenced by Down syndrome. Unlike other films that have explored the syndrome, this film allows the four participants to tell their stories with their own words and illustrations—it is an exploration of life *by* Petra (age 36), Matthew (age 22), Katherine (age 22) and Daninah (age 41), rather than *about* them. This simple shift in perspective makes the film a moving portrait of four people who, although they perceive themselves as being unusual and having special needs, have flourished and found fulfillment as functioning adults and artists. They show that their hopes and fears for life are no different from those of other people, and they express their pride in their own abilities and accomplishments. In the film we hear the four participants talking about various issues in their lives and see images that they created and animated for this production. In recognition that clarity of speech is a problem with the narrators, and to facilitate the viewer’s understanding of their words, the narration is subtitled (in the narrators’ handwriting) throughout. This film will increase the audience’s understanding of Down syndrome and help to break down barriers often imposed on people with special needs. It could be used to educate children or adults about Down syndrome, to introduce discussion about ability/disability, diversity, acceptance and inclusion and to promote empathy. A study guide is available.

Extras on the DVD: a second track of the film is overlaid with commentary from the film-maker, giving insight into the project and how the four participants were chosen; another animated film by Shira Avni entitled *John and Michael*.



Finding Farley

written and directed by Leanne Allison
National Film Board of Canada, 2009
62 min. DVD, ages 13+
www.nfb.ca

Fascinated by Farley Mowat’s books and the land he writes about, Leanne Allison and Karsten Heuer take their 2-year-old son and dog on a wilderness canoe expedition to trace the routes of Mowat’s travels and to visit the landscapes in which he lived and wrote about in *Born Naked*, *Owls in the Family*, *Never Cry Wolf*, *People of the Deer*, *The Boat Who Wouldn’t Float* and *A Whale for the Killing*. Their 5000 kilometre trip begins in Calgary Alberta, takes them east and north to the shore of Hudson Bay and then south and east again to the Maritimes to meet Mowat at his summer home in Nova Scotia. Paddling and portaging their canoe, driving a hastily (and cheaply) purchased van, traveling on a train and sailing on a homebuilt sailboat, they encounter many of the animals that Mowat featured in his books and suffer the same challenges of wilderness travel. Despite hardships (bugs and wet feet, for example), the small family feels a deep connection with the land and with Mowat’s writing, rereading his books and corresponding with him during the trip.

This isn’t a fast paced and exciting account of adventure, but more a retrospective and thoughtful account of the experiences and reflections of the family’s experience. At 62 minutes, I suspect it may not hold the interest of all younger audiences, but certainly will be of interest to Farley Mowat fans and wilderness adventurers among older students and teachers.