

THE BIG PICTURE

Criss Cross

written and illus. by Lynne Rae Perkins

Novels with a specific plot may be the easiest to describe, but they're not necessarily the best books. Sometimes a title manages to address some of the aspects of life that are most difficult to describe yet important to experience. And if you're Lynne Rae Perkins, you can remain comfortingly, invitingly accessible even as you explore abstract notions such as the possibilities within us, the possibilities between us, and our openness to both.

That's the underlying theme in this chronicle of a neighborhood's summer, where a set of young teens turn to thoughts of change: Debbie wishes "something different would happen. Something good. To me," while her old friend Hector contemplates the future: "He felt himself changing, but into what?" Hector takes guitar lessons in the hope of capturing some charismatic magic and conceives a crush on a cute classmate; Debbie hangs out with her friend Patty, loses a necklace with her name on it, yearns for hunky Dan, and ends up helping an old lady around the house, which leads to an entry-level romance with the old lady's grandson. Throughout, kids hang out together in configurations that hold a flickering undercurrent of meaning and that might start to mean other things; moments sometimes reach their potential of significance and sometimes slide by, making way for other possibilities.

Occasional references suggest a setting of a few decades ago, but this is hardly a historical novel: it's set any time when kids can hang around together and look at one another anew as they grow. The narrative ripples fluidly into occasional structural variations such as dialogues or side-by-side columns of simultaneous experience, and there's a recurring *Midsummer Night's Dream* allusion (Debbie fixes on Dan because he's the first thing she sees as she awakens to the world, while Dan hovers between staying, conceptually, a donkey and turning into something better) that will slide by most readers but tickle the knowing few. Perkins' thumbnail art, sketches, and interpolated snapshots function sometimes as diagram, sometimes as editorial comment, sometimes as illustration, and add to the dimensionality of the experience. The book's feeling remains uncomplicated, though, with such variations merely a meander through interesting territory to look at things a different way. Perkins is the mistress pluperfect of plain speech that conveys ethereal concepts ("Debbie had been separated from her moorings and there was a spongy piece of her left open to the universe in whatever form it might take"), and she brilliantly captures the adolescent-level Zen that thoughtful kids bring to their assessment of the world (and of which adults often have lost the habit). This isn't a book so bogged down in the ineffable as to be uneventful, however; there's Debbie's romance and heroic intervention when her old lady falls ill, her necklace's wandering trip around town, Hector's increasing absorption and skill in songwriting.

Mostly, though, this is a book that masters replication of the way life incorporates events into a larger context rather than consisting of them, and the unforced, leisurely rhythm allows the richness of the individual characters' thoughts and experiences to predominate over plot points.

Ultimately, *Criss Cross* reassures as it explores. By focusing on the crucial questions of early adolescence (Can I be in reality the person I imagine being? Do we connect with one another?) it grants them significance; by answering them gently with a tacit "sometimes" it allows for the possibility of such achievements at another time even if young readers (and the rest of us) don't always manage them now. And it's good to hear that "mistakes would have to be made. Maybe a lot of mistakes. It was okay. They can't hear me, but I want to tell them it's okay, they're doing just fine." It's a glorious thing, "waking up on a midsummer night." Or any time. (Imprint information appears on p. 36.)

Deborah Stevenson, Editor



NEW BOOKS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

ABBOTT, HAILEY *The Bridesmaid*. Delacorte, 2005 266p

Library ed. ISBN 0-385-90249-2 \$17.99

Paper ed. ISBN 0-385-73220-1 \$7.95

R Gr. 7-10

As the daughters of very successful wedding planners, Abby and Carol have seen one too many VICs (Vomit-Inducing Couples) in their lifetimes; in fact, when Abby is seven and Carol is thirteen, they make a solemn vow never to get married and become like the hysterical brides they have come to loathe. No wonder that Abby feels so betrayed when Carol comes home from her Harvard graduation with fiancé Tucker in tow and begins a tortuous summer of wedding planning that is, in Abby's eyes, as bad as anything she's seen. Her parents, who have always been so in sync, begin to chafe at artistic differences (she wants an English garden theme and he wants a Candyland extravaganza) and end up not talking to each other, Abby learns that trying on dresses is a more intense aerobic workout than soccer, and Carol has morphed into Bridezilla extraordinaire. Meanwhile, Abby finally garners the romantic attention of Noah, the bakery boy she has been crushing on most of her young life, which complicates her decision to study abroad for a year in Italy with a famous soccer coach. Abbott handily realizes the alluring chaos of a thriving wedding business in all its layers of tacky pseudo-romance and gives Abby just the right degree of sardonic humor to face everything from iridescent plaid bridesmaid dresses to picking just the right brand of bubble goop for the happy couple's exit procession. Abby's cynicism is delicately tempered by her love for her sister and also by her own new romance, which doesn't exactly turn this feisty soccer player into a puddle of goo but does somewhat haze her perspective. With her keen ear for dialogue, lively, humorous plotting, and solid, multidimensional characters, Abbott is sure to be a hit with fans of Kate Brian, Sarah Dessen, and Meg Cabot. KC

Karate Kid, with the ghostly sports purgatory and redemption aspects of the former and wise-master elements of the latter. With soccer's rising prominence and popularity in the U.S., readers scrambling for soccer stories will be begging for this captivating tale with plenty of play-by-play. MH

PERKINS, LYNNE RAE *Criss Cross*. Greenwillow, 2005 [352p]

Library ed. ISBN 0-06-009273-4 \$16.89

Trade ed. ISBN 0-06-009272-6 \$15.99

Reviewed from galleys

R* Gr. 5-8

See this month's Big Picture, p. 3, for review.

PHAM, LEUYEN *Big Sister, Little Sister*; written and illus. by LeUyen Pham.

Hyperion, 2005 40p

ISBN 0-7868-5182-1 \$15.99

R 3-6 yrs

The narrator's big sister gets to do big-girl things—stay up late, get new clothes, try on lipstick—while little sister goes to bed early, wears hand-me-downs, and smears lipstick into a hopeless mess. Nevertheless, this isn't a tale of woe, since the little sister exults in her messiness and in her ability to paint, play the drums, and dance. Plus, she gets all the benefits of having a big sister: someone to tell her stories, comfort her when she's scared of the dark, and perform puppet shows for her when she's sick. Concise but packed with personality, the short sentences freely acknowledge the frustrations of being small but exude such an attitude of celebration that the overall message is one of contentment. The illustrations, executed in Japanese brush-pen and ink, colored digitally in blushes and browns, fairly spring off the page in their vivacity—figures dance and wriggle in nearly every scene, and even standing still they evince a touchable roundedness and dramatic variation of line thickness that give them humor and movement. Pair this jaunty book with Harper's *Me Too!* (BCCB 4/05) or Blumenthal's *Don't Let the Peas Touch!* (BCCB 11/04) for an exuberant storytime honoring sisterly differences. TC

PLACE, NICK *The Kazillion Wish*; illus. by Ross Collins. Chicken House/Scholastic, 2005 196p

ISBN 0-439-69215-6 \$15.95

R Gr. 3-5

Eleven-year-old Harlan and eight-year-old Ainsley Banana are increasingly distressed by their long-divorced dad's undadlike behavior: he listens to sad songs, sleeps in, fails to cook them breakfast, and complains to his friend that he's lonely, which they take rather personally because they, after all, are there for him. After thinking it over, Harlan decides that what Dad needs is an also-mom, a person that he can love the way he used to love their mother. When Ainsley captures a dandelion seed pod and insists it's a fairy wish pod instead, a frongle (not a fairy) appears, and their adventures begin. Because the children's wish is both large and noble, they must perform a quest to ensure its granting. Their helpers and hindrances include a creature named Zucchini Spacestation who travels by rainbow, a fierce Chocolion, two Martians, a boy who moves the stars, his superhero brother Lightning Rod, a.k.a. William, hordes of Zucchini's relatives, talking cats and dogs, the Princesses of Slumberland, and a menacing fishface army, among others. Shades of E. Nesbit play in this Australian import as the kids warily accept the intrusion of various fantastic characters into their lives and an avuncular narrator occasionally intrudes into the story; the characters themselves each have a zany