

DINNY CULICAN

Maureen Pople, *The Other Side of the Family*. U.Q.P. 1986. 168 pp. \$7.95

Donna Sharp, *Blue Days*. U.Q.P. 1986. 104 pp. \$7.95.

James Preston, *The Sky Between the Trees*. U.Q.P. 1986. 104 pp. \$7.95.

The three titles reviewed here come from a new series, Young Adult Fiction, put out by the University of Queensland Press. Aimed at the 13 to 17 year old reader, the series is specifically designed to fill the gap that has existed between under teenage children's literature and adult fiction.

They have been commissioned by U.Q.P. from authors who are already well known names in Australian fiction and from new writers, and the series may indeed offer an attractive format and opportunity for novices inspired to write for this age group. At the recommended retail prices of \$14.95 for the hardback edition, \$7.95 for paperback, they are unfortunately moderately expensive.

The titles reviewed here are the paperback editions. Book design is promising: clear type and impressionistic cover — designs by illustrators Cynthia Breusch and Christopher McVinish are immediately attractive. Text length is manageable and sensible, ranging from 98 to 188 pages. Not surprisingly, the three books share similar themes on adolescents growing up and learning to cope with their world. All three central characters make their way along the rather bumpy road to self-knowledge. They learn to accept that parents and other adult figures in their lives have expectations of the teenagers which they cannot, and need not, always struggle to fulfil. Each of the three books offers teenage readers some positive hope for their future and, in a matter of fact and often humorous way, allows for human foibles and differences.

Set in a small township in New South Wales in the early years of World War II, Maureen Pople's *The Other Side of the Family* has an authentic ring that may well be the result of the author's own childhood experiences and memories.

Kathleen Tucker is a 15 year old evacuee from War-scarred London, sent for safety to her maternal grandparents in Sydney. When Grandpa Dawson (who plots the daily progress of the war with coloured pins on a gigantic pinboard in their Kirribilli flat) learns of the threat of Japanese midgeet submarines in Sydney Harbour, Kathleen is once again sent off to safety, this time to stay in the small country town of Parson's Creek with the legendary, rich Grandmother Tucker. It is this 'other side of the family' which raises many questions for Kathleen: Why is her

grandmother's 'mansion' a multi-coloured brick cottage? Why does she have forty-nine gnomes in her garden? Why are the entire contents of Charles Hope's library in Kathleen's bedroom? Why does her Grandfather Tucker's name not appear on the town's war memorial? Kathleen solves some of the mysteries and paradoxes of her family history by separating truth from fiction. After many false starts, she learns to relate to adult company on her own terms — to Charles Hope and Roger, to people who remembered her father and could talk to her about him as he was as a young man, to the often taciturn but surprising Grandma Tucker, to the terrified Mrs. Bellini. She makes friends of her own age in Tom and Roberto. Kathleen's difficulties are not peculiar to that era of Australian history, although the story of the White Rose Cafe and its name change, and of Roberto's missing father presents a vivid and genuine wartime scenario. They are those problems that beset all teenagers facing family and peer group pressure in their search for an independent identity.

In Donna Sharp's first person narrative she has told a convincing story of a teenager's experience of grief and loss. Following the sudden death of her father, Marie Lucas faces a painful adjustment to a totally changed existence. She experiences a growing communication gap between herself and others, with her schoolmates (Where does she fit? Is she one of the 'trendies' or the 'straights?'), with Dennis Page, with her best friend Jen, even between herself and her mother who begs her 'Let's have a cup of tea and talk'. But Marie is unable to talk or even cry about her father's death. It is only near the novel's end that she is able to talk over how she is feeling with Joey. In the process of working through her grief, Marie comes to recognise that the 'Inside' person whom her father thought was 'pretty wonderful', has every right to be 'different' and this gives her the courage to stand up for her principles and to protect others weaker than herself, such as Joey, from hurtful treatment by their peers. She learns whom to trust and how to handle superficial popularity and betrayal with both wit and common sense.

This simple but moving story adds to the growing literature available to teenagers who have to face grief and loss, for example, Jane Gardam's — *The Summer After The Funeral*, William Maybe's — *Game of Dark*, Katherine Paterson's — *Bridge to Terabithia*. Although in no sense written as, or intended for, bibliotherapy, such books do help to deal with death, and perceptive librarians, parents and teachers would do well to be aware of how valuable they can be. *Blue Days* has been short listed by the Children's Book Council in the Older Readers category.

In *The Sky Between the Trees* Preston tells the story of the boyhood of Peter McLaren who grew up in turn-of-the-century Gippsland, to become Victorian State, then Australian and finally World Champion Axeman. It is a story of determination and courage, written in basic, simple language and narrated in the first person, almost as if the boy is recounting his own experiences. From the time that the boy feels the first thrill of swinging the axe and of watching the brawny axemen compete in local country sports contests, all the time learning his craft, he dreams that he will one day be world champion. His father's early encouragement turns to opposition after bush fire and crop failure threaten the McLaren family's precarious livelihood. Peter has to work like a man now and his woodchopping ambitions have to be set aside with other childish things. The family tragedy that could have been averted, had Peter been given his way, adds a terrible irony. But the dreams are eventually fulfilled. The family does win through sorrow to triumph and happiness. Peter's success as a champion becomes legendary and he travels far from his native Gippsland to compete in all the countries of the world.

ANNA BOCK

WHO WANTS TO BE A GUARDIAN ANGEL?

Manfred Jurgensen, *A Difficult Love*. Brisbane: Phoenix Press, 1987. pp. 231. Hardback \$24.95, paper \$19.95.

In his recently published novel *A Difficult Love* Manfred Jurgensen deals with the experiences of a German migrant living in Queensland. The socio-cultural theme is interwoven with a triangular love story in which the women represent partial aspects of both the new and the old country. The title has a double meaning: it refers to the women and the land. The female characters therefore are to a certain extent allegorical: they represent Australia and Germany, as well as themselves.

The double meaning determines the form of the novel. Over most of its length it contains reflections on people and venues which are linked together loosely, like a diary without dates. There is no clear distinction between time of action and narrative time, but the novel generally follows a synchron—horizontal line: the course of events evolves gradually through the reminiscences of the narrator. That principle is interrupted in the first half of the second part, where reports from outsiders