

The Left Atrium

Berries for brains

Catch a falling star

Gayle Grass; illustrated by Coral Nault
Iris the Dragon Inc., Lombardy (ON); 2001
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We all need an escape every so often: a good malt scotch, an episode of *Seinfeld*, a little lazy jazz — where there's a will, there'll always be a way. It could be said that the richest avenue for this purpose, though, is the complete and utter surrender to a good story, the best of them taking us away time and time again. Whether they be fairy tales, biographies or big screen melodramas, the boldest of the lot resist the trend to sanitize their message. That's why I was so taken by *Shrek*, an animated film about a large green ogre whose life is turned upside down. A fairy tale with a twist, its main theme is that things are often not as they seem, and it parodies stereotypes at every turn. "You're supposed to sweep me off my feet," frets the disgruntled princess to the not-so-knightly Shrek. A dissident fable for the thinking mind, it never resorts to condescension in order to make a point.

It's too bad the same couldn't be said for *Catch a Falling Star*, a new "made-to-order" fairy tale about mental illness in children. Though clearly a book with its heart in the right place, it assumes very little intelligence on the part of the child. In it, a young boy (Fish) is supposedly in the early stages of mental illness because he sometimes can't concentrate at school. Iris the Dragon befriends him, they go fishing together, and Fish talks about his worries. "Our brains can get sick, Fish," Iris tells him. "Did you know that picking berries is good for your brain?" she asks. No,

replies a confused Fish, asking how that could help. "It exercises your brain parts ... picking them all sorts of ways, first with your right hand and then with your left" The boy depicted looks somewhere between 8 and 14 — a tad too old for Romper Room antics.

Other problems are evident in this book. Of great concern is that it takes common experiences — restlessness, frustration and confusion — and renders them "the early stages of mental illness." An idea that would have most North Americans on their way to the crazy house, it raises serious doubts



about how we define mental health. This book would have you believe there is a state of "normality" free of worry, stress or "unjustified" feelings. It also adds weight to the view that mental illness is increasing — but whether or not this is indeed true is a matter of much debate. Some would argue that the real problem lies in a growing range of human behaviour finding its way to the DSM (social anxiety disorder is a case

in point). With 2 to 4 million of North American kids now on psychotropics, this no doubt merits critical study.

Integral to well-being is the interpretation of experience: mental health is bred by values we instill. That's why books on the subject should know their place, particularly in educating young minds. A shift in perspective is called for here. What would it mean if, instead of a "symptom," anxiety became evidence of a desire to do better? Dag Hammarskjöld once said, "Bless your uneasiness, as a sign there is still life within you." Kids with spunk can get anxious pretty easily when something's bothering them. Without a way to ground that energy (think spinning wheels on a jeep without dirt) anxiety tends to turn on itself. Fish is under stress, and he's asking a lot of questions. Do we treat him as "sick" or hail him as "driven"? Shouldn't we be more concerned with kids who don't question? At least Fish gives a damn.

Yet, with all his gumption, his efforts are hardly met. Reassurance abounds and berries are picked, but at no point is Fish counselled on self-reliance — to the contrary. "Sometimes we can't solve our problems on our own," Iris tells Fish, without first helping him to do just that. Instead, we hear vague reference to "special people" at clinics he can "stay at for a while," and off he goes. Are we talking about psych wards, here?! *For kids who can't concentrate at school?!*

Catch a Falling Star is the first in the Iris the Dragon series on mental health problems in children. One can only hope that, in coming instalments, the details of "prevention" are taken more seriously. Professed to be part of the book's purpose, we hear almost nothing about it. Staff and parents talk ways to keep his brain healthy, but we are not privy to what this entails. And that is the book's most significant flaw: it fails to inform us

in places it should. The author seems more concerned with “disassociat[ing] the topic from the real world” and with starting a “Dear Iris” fan club (the press package includes a letter-writing form).

On a similar note, it seems that a sizable effort went into rounding up praise or least the suggestion of such. Endorsements come from a number of sources, but words ring hollow with

bloated predictions. Some have logos, while others are listed with stars. What is it, exactly, that they are backing? A children’s Dear Abby in Iris the Dragon? Medicated “risk management”? Berries for brains?

It’s worth noting that the title of this book comes from the claim that, in legend, dragons must keep the stars from falling. Pity, since for as long as I can

remember, falling stars meant imminent good fortune. Iris the Dragon would have you throw them back in the sky, perhaps in the same way she’d have all children perfect: always attentive, never worried and easily controlled.

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