Face Off  
by Maureen Ulrich  

Swampy Jo  
by Jennifer Rouse Barbeau  

The Storm on the Lake  
by Brenda Fontaine  

Reviewed by Donna Gamache

Face Off is the second novel in a trilogy by Saskatchewan writer Maureen Ulrich about Jessie McIntyre, a hockey-playing teen from Estevan. Although the new novel is complete on its own, people who plan to read both should read them in order. The stories are suited for middle teens.

In the first novel, Power Plays, fourteen-year-old Jessie had moved from Saskatoon to Estevan, where she found it hard to fit into grade nine. She was bullied at school and on the Internet and – after she started playing hockey for the Estevan Xtreme – on the ice as well. Eventually she made friends and stood up to the bullies, and even gained a boyfriend, Mark, a hockey-playing grade eleven student.

Face Off picks up where the first novel ended. It is almost the end of Jessie’s first school year in Estevan. Now fifteen, she is busy with softball games and exams. She looks forward to summer, to next fall’s start of hockey season and the Midget girls’ league that is being formed. Then Mark informs her that he will spend the summer in Calgary with his father. She also learns that her hockey coach, Mark’s uncle and father of Jessie’s friend, Tara, is being transferred. Jessie reacts by overdrinking at a party and making out with another friend, Jodi. When pictures of the two circulate on the Internet, she must deal with the resulting razzing and bullying. It’s not a great summer.

Jessie’s first year in high school, with its added pressures, begins, and soon hockey season is underway. But nothing is the way Jessie had hoped. Mark has a new, older girlfriend; the Xtreme have lost some key players; and the coaches aren’t very good. Some team members are intent only on hogging the ice time and getting rid of their coaches. Jessie must deal with dressing-room cat fights and getting over Mark. She must face bullies, both girls and boys, and figure out how to help some of her friends, as well as her own little sister, with major problems of their own.

Teen girls who enjoy hockey will like this book. Those who aren’t so sports-minded may feel that some of the hockey games include too much play-by-play detail – but there are other issues to intrigue them. The author includes many other themes of interest to middle teens: teenage problems with alcohol, including binge drinking; self-mutilation (cutting); Internet and school bullying; over-controlling parents; teen violence; and having a parent who is gay.
I enjoyed this book, with its many underlying themes. I did find that there were a lot of characters to keep straight, and wondered if a few could have been left unnamed or perhaps omitted altogether.

Ulrich is obviously knowledgeable about hockey and teen issues. Her first book was nominated for three Saskatchewan Book Awards, and this one may well receive some, too. Ulrich is working on the third novel in the series.

_Swampy Joe_, by Ontario writer Jennifer Rouse Barbeau, is also for middle teen readers, due to its mature themes. Told in the first person, it is the story of Sarah Joanne Bradley, nicknamed Swampy Jo.

Swampy Jo, who is fourteen at the start of the story, lives in a very dysfunctional family environment. She, her mother and brother, nine-year-old Joseph, have lived in nine different places in the past nine years – since her parents’ marriage suddenly ended. This year they’ve moved in with their mother’s sister, Aunt Cassie, and her snarky daughter Madison. It’s early September and they’ve missed the first week of classes – the first year of high school for Swampy Jo who, despite moving around so much, is a top-notch student. However, she’s a loner and has always found it hard to make friends. Madison resents them moving in and does her best to keep people from liking her cousin. She particularly tries to keep Swampy Jo away from her boyfriend Paul, who is known as Pockets. But Pockets and Swampy Jo seem to be mysteriously linked, for – according to Aunt Cassie – they both have on their palms the very rare sign of the Mystic Cross.

As the story progresses, so do Swampy Jo’s problems. Her mother suffers a mental breakdown and is hospitalized for months. Joseph goes to live with his father, but the man doesn’t want Swampy Jo so she stays with Aunt Cassie. Meanwhile Madison becomes increasingly nasty, and we learn that Aunt Cassie also has problems that led to her obsession with cleaning. Swampy Jo is obsessed with diet and exercise, as well as with trying to solve the puzzle of what caused her family’s breakup. She wants to simultaneously disappear and control her life. She reacts to all the stress by eating practically nothing. The one person who notices her anorexia and tries to help is the guidance counsellor, Mr. Habbernashy.

The book’s ending, while somewhat more optimistic than the rest of the book, is realistic – not a fairy-tale ending, but at least we are left with the hope that things will work out for the Bradley family. There are a lot of dark issues, but basically it’s a story of hope.

I felt there were almost too many teenage problems in the subject matter of this book. Besides mental illness and eating disorders, other topics and problems introduced include: booze and drugs; learning difficulties and illiteracy; low self-concept; parental sexual abuse and incest; repressed childhood memories; and teenage suicide. Other topics dealt with are palmistry, the supernatural and religious superstitions.

Teenagers, especially girls, will relate to the issues and problems faced by Swampy Jo.

Author Jennifer Rouse Barbeau lives in the northern Ontario town of Sturgeon Falls. This is her debut novel.

A book for much younger readers is _The Storm on the Lake_ by Brenda Fontaine, a teacher at the Resource Centre at Norway House. This book is the second in the Babs’ Adventures Series, which depicts life as it was in the early 1950s for an aboriginal family living in the Norway House/Warren’s Landing region in northern Manitoba.

The first novel in the series, _The Stranger at the Creek_, introduced eight-year-old Babs Thompson and her nine-year-old brother James. It included details of their life at home and in the
summer fishing camp, as well as an encounter with a mysterious stranger who had been living in the wilderness as a hermit for twenty years.

The new adventure, set in 1953, opens with the children, now aged nine and ten, preparing for a trip on the S.S. Keenora. With their mother and grandmother, they travel from Warren’s Landing at the north end of Lake Winnipeg south down the lake to Selkirk, where they are met by Grandma’s sister, Auntie Violet, whom she hasn’t seen in many years. Then they continue on to Winnipeg for a few days’ visit – a totally new experience for children from the north – before returning again on the S.S. Keenora. On the return journey, a terrible storm strikes, tossing everyone out of their berths and onto the floor with the luggage.

Although classed as an adventure series, the book reads more like a slice-of-life story, depicting how northern families lived and travelled about. Readers will learn how goods were brought to the northern communities by boat, and how older children travelled south each August to attend residential schools. Interesting facts are included about the tramway at Grand Rapids, built in 1877 by the Hudson’s Bay Company to move goods and boats around the impassable rapids. There is also interesting information about the S.S. Keenora and how it came to ply the waters of Lake Winnipeg. Unfortunately these details tend to slow down the plot and give the story an essay-like feel in places.

I appreciate reading a story with children from northern Manitoba – we need these books – but I wish the author had made the story more exciting, with greater suspense and more action. There are several moments that could have been more effectively dramatized, such as when the family almost misses the boat at Grand Rapids, their visit to some of the big stores in Winnipeg, and the big storm. At times the writing becomes a trifle preachy.

The book needed more editing and proofreading. There are many inconsistencies and errors in the use of punctuation and numbers, as well as several places where the language seems too adult for young children, e.g., “The women declined their offer” (55). A map showing the locations of the protagonists’ various stops would have been a good additional feature. ♦

Donna Firby Gamache is a writer/retired teacher from MacGregor, Manitoba. Her newest work is Sarah: A New Beginning, a novel for children, loosely based on the coming of her great-grandparents to Canada in 1891.

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