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Principals and Other Schoolyard Bullies

Nick Fonda
Baraka Press (September 2011)
Softcover $19.95 (188pp)
978-1-926824-07-9

We think of childhood as a time to be carefree and happy. Instead, it's often a difficult period during which mysterious judgments are handed down by the adults who rule the world of school and home.

This is the case in the stories included in Nick Fonda's second book. Here he both entertains readers and requires them to think by examining children who are constantly threatened by the very adults who are charged with their safekeeping. An extreme example can be found in "Sugden," in which an elderly woman remembers a semester from her high school days when a teacher may have attempted to murder a student. Only slightly more benign moments of teacher aggression are evident in "The Other Mulroney," wherein a teacher gives obvious preferred treatment to her own daughter.

Characters outside the classroom also prove to be negligent, harmful, and otherwise inadequate. In "The Sour Taste of Revenge," an emergency room administrator is surprised to see the neighborhood bully from her childhood across her desk. She's thrown into a memory of his cruelty and its repercussions in the lives of her family and considers the value of gaining revenge all these years later. In "The Sleigh," a young boy deals with the harshness of living with unsympathetic relatives after his mother dies and his father disappears. Childhood is not for the weak, Fonda seems to be saying.

Fonda's stories are deceptive in their simplicity; readers will be lulled by his perfectly crafted, streamlined prose, while images of cruelty and betrayal sneak up in surprise. Having taught both in the UK and in Canada, where his stories are set, Fonda brings a wealth of empirical research to his plots. It's obvious he's examined the schoolyard world from many different perspectives. It's his poet's ear, however, that brings a delicate lightness to his work that contrasts wonderfully with the dark subject matter. For example, to describe a child's hideout, Fonda writes, "Little lozenges of sunlight speckled the part of the sandy, dirt floor closest to the trellis."

It's not the setting or even the events in these stories that make readers shudder, it's the familiarity of the characters under attack. We can see ourselves in every one. Fonda manages to get to the heart of a social problem in an entertaining, thought-provoking book that is both a pleasure to read and a call to awareness.
ANDI DIEHN (September 6, 2011)

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