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Juvenile Fiction

Still There, Clare
Yvonne Prinz
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Soon-to-be thirteen-year-olds Clare and Elsa are inseparable, even though Clare is a T-shirted blue-jeans-wearer and Elsa is always impeccably clad in the latest fashion. Unlike Clare who sometimes is sarcastic and timid, Elsa is witty, worldly, and always confident —just the way Clare yearns to be. The trouble is, Clare created the imaginary Elsa to fill the loneliness and insecurity she feels living with two career-driven lawyer parents. When her mother chooses to stay at home and take up parenting and cooking, Clare decides she no longer needs Elsa: “I have to start thinking about my future. If you don’t leave now you might never leave and I’ll be this seventy-year-old woman walking around talking to myself.”

Elsa sees a trial separation as a better idea, and so she vanishes to Paris, France, a region Clare blindly points to on her globe. Clare does try to cope on her own, but frequently pens letters to Elsa explaining her difficult moments, like when the popular girls make fun of her or when her only friend Paul moves away.

Elsa’s occasional impromptu visits and the letters that Clare writes to her become shorter and less frequent as Clare gains confidence. When Clare meets Allison at the mother-daughter cancer run and again at the summer track meet, she finds a real friend who can take Elsa’s place of confidante and helpmate. In the final letter to Elsa, Clare writes, “you are everything that I am and I am everything that you are.”

The author accurately depicts the anxiety of a typical twelve-year-old girl: “My nose looked enormous and my ‘constellation’ (my mother’s word) of freckles looked more like an asteroid attack … my hair was a disaster, kind of a cross between a cocker spaniel and a hamster.” Prinz illustrates how fear does not disappear as one matures: “Is it possible that adulthood is even tougher and lonelier than childhood?”

The author, who also operates independent record stores in California, has published pieces in the East Bay Express and Elle magazine, among other publications. This is her first novel, the beginning of a series of books about the inimitable Clare, and plans are in the works

for a German edition, and a CBC TV series.

Clare's story will be a cannot-put-it-down hit with girls ages ten to twelve. Readers will easily see how Clare uses Elsa to express and understand apprehension about her changing body, her friendships, and the adult world. It is a clever and amusing read, and Clare finds that even when she's on her own, Elsa is "still there, Clare."

Linda Cooley