

Susan Griffith is a well-respected travel writer who does thorough research for her topics. She divides information sources into British and North American, which makes for easy reference. This resource also includes tax information, a directory of gap year programs, expeditions, various types of work available, courses, *au pair* work, Web site: www.vacationwork.co.uk

The Year Out Group

www.yearoutgroup.org

This is a comprehensive British web site that discusses all "year-out" possibilities by focusing on providing comprehensive information and promoting "well-structured year-out programmes" that span from a few weeks to a year.³

Book Reviews

Stealing Home Mantel, Paul



Little Brown and Company, 2004
Age Range 10 to 14
135 pages

³ Lonely Planet's *The Gap Year Book*. 2003. Lonely Planet Pty Publications. p. 221.

Stealing Home is the story of a student exchange told from the home team's perspective. Joey's family is taking in a boy from Nicaragua for a whole year and fourteen year old Joey is very concerned about the potential negative impact this visitor will have on his life. Once Jesus arrives though, Joey finds things aren't all that bad, that is until Jesus upstages him as the star of the baseball team.

Stealing Home is an easy read, with a straightforward plot, predictable conflict and simple resolution. The central concepts of the book, adolescent lack of self-confidence and the need to be accepted by your peers are clearly defined and easy to follow. They are also universal which as demonstrated by both Joey and his Nicaraguan brother Jesus. Besides these two central characters, the secondary players are fairly standard and easy to identify. There's the school bully, the pretty girl, the goofy best friend and the super athlete. The story is told explicitly so that it develops logically and simply. Even the setting is kept generic to make it feel familiar to kids from almost any neighbourhood across North America.

Joey is an average fourteen-year-old boy struggling to fit in with friends at school and to make an impression on the baseball field. He fears that this new kid from Nicaragua will make him stick out from the crowd in all kinds of embarrassing ways. With Jesus' arrival, Joey begins to appreciate that a culture exchange of this kind has meaning both for the boy who is visiting as well as for the host family. He recognizes his own good fortune for the first time and he is happy to share with this newcomer.

Unfortunately the book gives hardly any mention of Jesus' home country, or his life and family there. This book is part of the Matt Christopher series which is popular for the fast-paced sports action it provides. The very best descriptive paragraphs of the book are all about the baseball action not about cultural exchange.

Touch the Dragon **Connelly, Karen**

Turnstone Press 1992
Age Range 15 to 18
206 pages

Based on actual diary entries and letters, *Touch the Dragon* recounts the author's yearlong stay in Chiang Mai, Thailand through the Rotary Ambassadorial Scholarship when she was 16 years old. When Karen Connelly first sets out on her adventure, she is confident that she will embrace the culture of her new home, but her self-assurance wanes when she comes face to face with the poor living conditions of her host country and the unexpected restrictions placed on her independence.

Soon after her arrival in Thailand, Karen discovers that language and cultural barriers, not to mention homesickness, are much more difficult obstacles to overcome than she had anticipated. Karen tells her story so naturally and with such honesty that the reader is constantly wavering between wanting to comfort the poor girl and giggling at her naiveté. *Touch the Dragon* is completely enjoyable for its youthful idealism, enthusiasm, honesty and sensitivity. The descriptive passages

are full of romantic emotion, written as only a sixteen-year-old could write.



During the course of her stay, the author becomes totally engaged by the tropical landscape and the colourful personalities and she learns to respect and love her new home. Instead of wanting to transplant her Canadian ideals, Karen learns to appreciate the Thai culture and traditions even though they place restrictions on her that she would never endure at home.

If you were not considering a trip before you read this book, or were the type of tourist who never leaves the resort, *Touch the Dragon* will send you running for your atlas and searching out a more authentic travel experience.

The Breadwinner **Ellis, Deborah**

Groundwood Books/ Douglas and
McIntyre 2000
Ages 10 to 14
166 pages