

*Shimmerdogs*, Dianne Linden

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excerpt:

*Every time Mom wrote us she said we shouldn't worry, that she was safe from dangerous land mines that are buried in the ground and explode when you step on them and kill you, or at least take off your legs. Except Nellie said Mom wasn't really safe because land mines are everywhere in Bosnia and you can walk on one without knowing it. That got me worrying all over again so I made up a little poem to whisper when I was by myself.*

*I said, "She's on a mission far away, but she'll be back soon one day." I did it that way so I could think about Mom and Merit [his dog] at the same time. Also to make it rhyme. After we moved into Uncle Martin's, I found out that rhyming things helped me calm down. Sometimes I said the whole poem, but sometimes I just said, "Away, day," over and over again very fast.*

*It was a lot of work, worrying about both of them and saying the poem so much. It could make me dizzy or tired. But I had to keep saying it because if I didn't, sometimes a shadow zigzagged around in my mind, like it was trying to hurt me. I said the poem faster than ever when the shadow came.*

It is a very difficult task for an adult to get inside the mind of a young boy, especially a boy with as many hang-ups as Mike (Lester B. only to his mother and a few of his teachers) Hopkins, but Dianne Linden has done an incredibly convincing job of it. Mike is a kid who seems to me to be on the edge of autism, though the word is never mentioned. At any rate, he has a lot of worried questions and some pretty strange experiences for which he comes up with some pretty strange answers. At the pool for the annual pet swim that traditionally finishes off the outdoor swimming season, he is accidentally pushed into the water, nearly drowns, and feels that he has been summoned back to life by a silvery dog with opalescent eyes. This ties in with a book he comes across in the library which describes an ancient belief that dogs actually guard the gates of Death. Later he identifies his saviour dog with a stray he insists the family adopt, to whom he talks--no, with whom he converses!--and from whom he gets a lot of good philosophy, even if not exactly advice.

Mike could use a bit of help. His mother has determined to go to Bosnia with the reserve army, a story we have already heard from Mike's sister Nellie's point of view in [Peacekeepers](#). Mike and Nellie have to cope with moving to Edmonton to live with their uncle Martin, going to new schools, their mother's being far away and in danger, and Nellie's being attacked by school bullies. Of course, there are also some good bits. Inspired by Mike's stories of the school his mother is working to establish in Bosnia and one little boy there in particular, Mike's grade two class collects school supplies and does a wonderful class project on peacekeeping in Bosnia, highlighted by Mike's own Power Point presentation. Mike also makes friends with an old man and his dog who live across the street from Uncle Martin and who dishes out more philosophy, stories, and plain cookies ("without wrinkles" as Mike has very distinct dislikes in food, especially textures).

However, death haunts poor Mike. There was his own experience in the pool and the constant fear of his mother's death--which, thank goodness, doesn't happen! But his dog goes missing and has to be presumed dead, the Bosnian boy gets killed by a land mine, and Mr. Lapinski has a fatal heart attack. As one traumatic experience piles on another, it is no wonder that the "shadows" invaded his mind! As Mr Lapinski said, however, "Everything comes back again," and that includes Mike. This is a remarkable story that probes the depths of a child's psyche. As we see Mike from both inside and out, we can understand the frustrations of those around him who, having been blind to the build-up of his troubles, have little idea of what they can do to help once they have overwhelmed him. When a sympathetic army psychiatrist finally manages to free Mike to the point that he can write things down even though he is unable to talk, his mother reads what he has written, and although she cries, "she told me she wanted to know everything I felt like telling her from now on." Hope for the future, but an indictment of the past when he was so totally not listened to.

Despite Mike's age, what is certain is that this book is not written for Grade Two students. It is a plea to parents to pay attention; it is catharsis for children who may feel ignored. Above all, it is a story of a brave little boy in difficult circumstances coping as best he can. — Mary Thomas

**Recommended.**

Mary Thomas works in an elementary school library in Winnipeg, MB, where autism is one of the facts of life for some children.

**Subject Headings:**

**Dogs-Juvenile fiction.**

**Children and death-Juvenile fiction. Peacekeeping forces-Bosnia and Herzegovina-Juvenile fiction.**

**Grades 4-7 / Ages 9-12.**

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**Resource Links, Volume 14 Number 1, October 2008**

One day a year all the dogs in the small town of Beaumont, near Edmonton, are permitted to swim in the town pool. When Mike Hopkins accidentally falls into the pool, almost drowning, he wakes up convinced that he was brought back to life by a mythical dog with bright jewel-like eyes. This is the beginning of Mike's experiences with a seemingly spiritual world around him. Is it a fantasy, a myth or really happening?

Mike's mom is in the reserve forces in Edmonton and soon leaves for Bosnia on a peacekeeping mission. Mike and his sister

Nellie, now living with their Uncle Martin, fear for her safety. Land mines are killing many innocent civilians, which is a major concern. When the children are informed by their mom that dogs are being trained to detect the mines, they are very relieved. Mike's dog, Merit,

disappears one day and after endless searching, Mike, believing in spiritual dogs he calls 'shimmerdogs', is convinced that Merit is now on a mission to Bosnia to help the people there. When Mike's elderly neighbour tells his story of being rescued by a large, white 'shimmerdog', Mike's beliefs are strengthened further.

This novel not only emphasizes the effects of war on the children in Bosnia, but also the trauma to Mike and Nellie as they empathize with the children abroad, hearing stories first hand from their mother. Mike must also struggle with his thoughts on the spiritual world while Nellie faces bullying from her peers in junior high school. The author is dealing with strong issues from the eyes of a young child, thus the text is written in a simple, colloquial format with Mike as narrator. When introducing this novel to a school library collection, it would be valuable to 'book-talk' it to classes first, discussing the ideas it presents. — *Carolyn Cutt*

**Thematic Links: Peacekeeping; Bosnia; Dogs; Mythology; Spirits; Bullying**