

# One for the (young) ages - two, actually

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STILL THERE, CLARE

By Yvonne Prinz

Raincoast, 172 pages, \$10.95

NOT FAIR, CLARE

By Yvonne Prinz

Raincoast, 187 pages, \$10.95

One of the Holy Grails sought by publishers, writers and readers is the series: a magical brew of plot, character, setting, marketplace timing and some untold ingredient. When it works, it's a spark in a dry field that can ignite a reading frenzy. At its most potent, it was the Charles Dickens serials in the 19th century or the phenomenon of the Harry Potter books.

These days, there is an ever-growing number of series to choose from. Not all are destined to become classics like *The Borrowers*, *The Lord of the Rings* or even *The Bobbsey Twins*, but, depending on a child's age, mood and intent, there is something for most everyone, from the whimsical to the supernatural.

The new Clare series by Yvonne Prinz offers humorous, fun reads for girls 9 and up. Book one, *Still There, Clare* and book two, *Not Fair, Clare* arrived early this year. Book three, *Double Dare, Clare!*, is due later this year.

When Clare was growing up, her parents were both type-A lawyers,

and the fridge was filled with pizza boxes and Chinese takeout cartons. In Clare's own words: "The first eleven years of my life I went from 'Pooh Bear's Day Care' (aliens) to 'Appleby's After School Care' (fascists) to Noreen, the babysitter' (Satan). Sometimes my parents would forget whose turn it was to pick me up. ... They weren't horrible parents or anything, just really busy."

As an only child with working parents, Clare invents Elsa, an imaginary best friend. At the age of 12, when the series begins, the two are polar opposites. Clare is a loner with a dark, ironic sense of humour, who likes to wear torn jeans and a T-shirt, while bright and witty Elsa is outgoing and dresses in the latest fashion with matching accessories.

In *Still There, Clare*, we meet Clare when significant changes begin to occur. For one, Clare's mother has traded in her power suits to be a stay-at-home mom. And for another, Clare decides if she is ever going to make any real friends, she'll have to say goodbye to Elsa.

In both books, Yvonne Prinz develops loads of interesting characters. There's Aunt Rusty, a beautiful artist who dresses in black and drives a tiny red convertible; her latest painting is called Death, and the one before was titled Dying. Clare's mom asks Aunt Rusty not to smoke in front of Clare. But when they are out for a drive, Aunt Rusty promptly lights up and says, "If I ever catch you doing this, I'll kill you."

Clare's newfound best friend, Allison, lives in a self-contained, solar-heated biosphere. Her mom drives a van with bumper stickers that say "Think Green," "Recycle" and "The Grateful Dead," and there's something else. Here's the conversation with Allison:

*"What?" [Clare] said anxiously.*

*"Relax, I haven't been to prison, it's just that I'm a, a ... oh, this is so hard." She paused keeping me in suspense.*

*"A kleptomaniac?" I said.*

*"No."*

*"Pyromaniac?"*

*"No."*

*"Serial killer?"*

*"No, it's much worse," she said dramatically. "I'm a vegetarian."*

*"Oh darn," I said ... "How will it ever work? I'm a cannibal."*

One of the most outrageous characters is in *Not Fair, Clare*. She's a strange, wound-up little girl named Patience, who is anything but her namesake. On the day Patience moves in across the road, she darts onto the front lawn wearing a multicoloured clown's wig and performs three cartwheels and a messy back flip "faster than a Russian gymnast." Another time, while riding the bus, Clare looks out the window, and: "Patience is running next to the bus, wearing a red cape, a red helmet and red rubber boots with yellow ducks on them. ... On her face is the determined look of a super-hero. The bus pulls away from the curb and Patience picks up the pace, her little legs struggling to keep up. ... It occurs to me that this might be partially my fault since I gave her those super-hero comics to read."

There are plots and subplots and subsubplots. To mention a very few from the first two books, the imaginary friend, Elsa, takes off on a summer trip to Paris and occasionally pops back to offer advice and to update Clare on her jet-set life. Allison temporarily loses her way and becomes friends with Ginny Germain, the devious school snob. Aunt Rusty breaks up with the alluring gym teacher, Mr. Bianchini (a scar on his chin only makes him more interesting), and Clare tries out for the part of Lady Macbeth in the school play and discovers she is a natural actress.

The Clare series has momentum, and the publicity blurb from the publisher says that Yvonne Prinz has been approached for a television series. But that's a whole different Holy Grail.

*Joan Yolleck's first children's picture book will be in bookstores next year.*