

Smyth, Fiona. *The Never Weres*. Toronto: Annick Press, 2011. Print.

What would life be like for humanity's final generation, those who would always be the youngest people on Earth, born just before a "barren virus" has rendered humans infertile? This question underpins the pre-teen sci-fi mystery *The Never Weres*, the first graphic novel from Toronto-based Fiona Smyth, veteran painter, cartoonist, and illustrator. Smyth's exploration of the daily lives of teenagers Xian, Mia, and Jesse is a fresh extrapolation of the dystopian "world without children," popularly identified with P.D. James' *Children of Men*. Smyth interweaves her heroes' world — from which parents are variously absent — with classic science fiction tropes such as robotics, genetics, and virtual online communities.

Most pressingly, the ethical and practical implications of human cloning are central to the mystery as it unfolds. Smyth handles the issue evenly and rightly represents it as controversial. By focusing on a missing girl's possible involvement with long-ago experiments, Smyth effectively provokes reflection about cloning's impacts on human relationships. However, she has simplified the relevant ideas to the extent that readers may not be challenged much by them.

The layouts of *The Never Weres* are at times confusing and may hinder readers' progress. The book's visual style conveys Smyth's vision of a bleak, crowded, deteriorating Toronto somewhat better than it captures her spirited protagonists. Overall, despite some weaknesses, *The Never Weres* wraps a worthwhile science-positive message within an engaging mystery adventure.

Recommended with reservations: 2 out of 4 stars

Reviewer: Sarah Polkinghorne