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Family Tree #3: Best Kept Secret

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Book Review
Family Tree #3: Best Kept Secret

Francie lives in a safe neighborhood in New Jersey in the 1980s, but her experience with a potential kidnapper causes her to become fearful and paranoid. She feels guilty when a peer goes missing, believing it could have been Francie herself who met the same fate. Then Francie discovers her parents will be divorced, and she tries to distract herself by becoming the perfect daughter, friend, and student. Francie also experiences from a distance the troubled relationship between her mother, Dana, and grandmother, Abby, who both starred in the previous two books in the series. Growing up is not easy, but with her family's support, Francie makes it through.

Best Kept Secret revolves around the traumatizing event of Francie nearly being kidnapped. The message to readers is not encouraging: Francie never summons enough courage to confide in her parents. Readers do not see her choosing to trust; they watch her being suffocated by fear, even at the end of the book when she becomes a parent. While this aspect of the plot is weak, the book does portray other challenges that Francie faces bravely: overcoming childhood dyslexia, accepting her parents' divorce and father's remarriage, dealing with her great-aunt's cancer and death, adjusting to her uncle with disabilities moving in with them, seeing the error in her great-grandfather's prejudice, and moving away to attend college. Once again, Ann M. Martin expertly guides middle-grade readers through these problems common to today's world.