

High school sequel scores all A's again

By CARA NISSMAN

High school is all about perceptions. Along the cramped, acrid hallways, you invariably find your beef-for-brains jocks, egalitarian over-achievers, gloomy goths and socially inept nerds. So it would be simple to say that in Megan McCafferty's "Second Helpings" (Three Rivers, \$10.95), what you see is what you get. But unlike in many books of the teenage-angst genre, the qualities of the characters in this tale are more than skin deep.

Here, Jessica Darling returns for her senior year at Pineville High as irreverent and self-deprecating as she was in McCafferty's 2001 debut, "Sloppy Firsts."

Contending with college application woes, boy traumas and the continuing absence of her best friend, Hope Weaver, whose family moved away from New Jersey after her brother died of a heroin overdose, Jessica quits competing for a heroin overdose, Jessica quits competing for the school's cross-country team and writing for the school's cross-country team and writing for the school's paper, *The Sea-gull's Voice*.

Deserting the team tests her tenuous connections with her dad and her place among the caty Clueless Two and other members of the senior

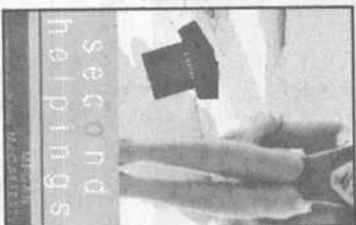
"Second Helpings" by Megan McCafferty
(Three Rivers, \$10.95).

class. But Jessica is plagued mainly by her continuing obsession with a dark former Dreg (stoner), whose insightful observations rival her own.

When mysterious e-mails begin circulating with rumors regarding members of her class, everybody thinks Jessica is the writer. But Jessica's too busy fretting over whether she should apply to Columbia University in the wake of 9/11 so she can "bust out of the snow globe" to spur gossip about who's hoping to lose his virginity after the prom.

McCafferty tells the story from Jessica's perspective in the form of hilariously sardonic diary entries with cutting descriptions (a tanning junkie is a "Bain de Solumatic"). And she structures the book around the months of the school year. Every month begins with a satisfying self-aware letter from Jessica to her far-flung friend, Hope, offering up insights into her trials and triumphs.

Although the solution to the cryptic e-mails question will prove predictable to attentive readers, the book remains compelling through



the end, when its focus changes from college applications and high school dalliances to an emphasis upon trust, forgiveness and the courage to go after one's goals. Jessica's inner conflict over whether to risk studying in New York City rings as true as her palpable hormonal yearnings and her pithy retorts to ditzy classmates. The author aptly portrays teens' turmoil and tenacity in the face of imminent adulthood.

McCafferty's debut novel became a crossover hit, equally touching teenagers and adults nostalgic about their youth. There's no reason this witty sequel, with an even more exhilarating and genuine take on teendom, shouldn't also reach the head of the class.

Cara Nissman, at cnissman@bostonherald.com, is the Herald's teen reporter.