Reviews

Writing from the Outside: Representations of the Outsider in Recent Canadian Fiction for Adolescents

—Damian Tryon, Gurleen Khosa, Ryan Klimchuk, Lovejot Mann, Kieran McVicker, Sol Moon, and Will Stewart

Crook, Connie Brummel. *No Small Victory*. Markham: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 2010. 320 pp. $12.95 pb. ISBN 9781554551699. Print.

Foon, Dennis. *Double or Nothing*. Rev. ed. Richmond Hill: Annick, 2011. 214 pp. $12.95 pb. ISBN 9781554513482. Print.

Rainfield, Cheryl. *Hunted*. Markham: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 2012. 320 pp. $12.95 pb. ISBN 9781554552269. Print.

Ravel, Edeet. *Held*. Richmond Hill: Annick, 2011. 248 pp. $12.95 pb. ISBN 9781554512829. Print.

Yee, Paul. *The Secret Keepers*. Vancouver: Tradewind, 2011. 128 pp. $12.95 pb. ISBN 9781896580968. Print.

Introduction

This collaborative review represents many firsts: this is the first time that I have co-authored a text with my students; this is the first time that my students have co-authored a text with their teacher; this is the first time that my students have undertaken an academic endeavour of this scope without receiving a formal grade; and this is the first time that my students or I have

been published in an academic journal.

I teach Grade 11 and 12 English Language Arts at Kildonan-East Collegiate in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Kildonan-East Collegiate is a vocational high school that offers academic and vocational courses to its diverse student body. The Grade 12 students with whom I am co-authoring this review—Ryan, Gurleen, Kieran, Lovejot, Sol, and Will—participate in unique and specialized learning experiences that are both academic and vocational. Some take first-year university Calculus, some train in specific trades in which they may earn Level I apprenticeship, some participate in an advanced chemistry and biology program that combines academics with work experience related to medicine and/or science, and they all study Advanced Placement Literature and Composition with me.

The following review combines seven voices that have been fused together to achieve two goals. First, we aim to communicate our experience of choosing, reading, discussing, and writing about recent young adult novels. Second, we aim to review these novels through the lens of a theme relevant to adolescent experience: we decided to unpack how these recent novels conceptualize, construct, and represent the notion of the outsider. What follows from this point in our writing is our attempt to present a collective, collaborative, and unified voice. This is not an easy feat. For the remainder of the review, we use the plural pronoun "we" to represent our multiple voices. Initially, our repeated use of "we" felt awkward and somewhat artificial, but as the pronoun grew on us we decided to move forward. In terms of our individual work, we read the novels and wrote literary essays in which we developed and argued a thesis relating to the outsider. Collectively and over a longer period of time than our individual work lasted, we made two trips to the University of Winnipeg, where we selected novels and determined the focus for both our essays and the final review through informal and planned discussions, including discussions responding to critical theory excerpts and a variety of questions about reading young adult novels in the classroom. Finally, we participated in various editing processes, both individually and collectively, and as we then assembled our words, slowly, the review began to emerge.

Entering (This Project) from the Outside

The experience of writing for an academic and professorial audience is pressure-filled. Simply put, we have never (yet) written for the kind of audience that we imagine makes up the intended audience of *Jeunesse*, and it is, appropriately, the discourse of imagination that became a central focus of our thinking about the bigger questions for this review. Interestingly, while this project offered us a unique degree of autonomy, especially compared to the scope and feel of some of our high-school work, in many ways this project reaffirmed our position in the relationship between

adult and adolescent. Our work on this review (still) situates us (back) in the role where the adult sets the expectations and shapes the parameters. It is akin to what we will develop further in the review: the idea that adult narratives, whether they are the predictable, pragmatic narratives of instruction or the aesthetic narratives of fiction, teach us how to be young adults in the moment and to navigate our transition to the adult world simultaneously. We state this not to sound dire. In fact, we are comfortable with this position, as it extends our regular learning where adults prompt us to think more critically, write more clearly, and engage more judiciously. This project is our chance to contribute our emerging voice to the ongoing discussion of young adult fiction, fiction written for us.

We began the process of writing this review by contemplating the following guiding question: how do we *imagine* ourselves as the intended audience of these texts? In many respects, prior to this project, we never really imagined ourselves as intended audiences of any text. This was an unexpected realization for us. Before we began work on this review, we chose novels based on a variety of factors, such as the engaging nature of the plot or the struggles of the characters or even the degree of difficulty relative to what we had recently read, or more likely, been assigned and then read reluctantly. Now, we recognize that we are in a novel position, one that feels more like fiction in its own right relative to our academic experience, as finally we undertake critical engagement with young adult novels.

Upon reflection, we never really consciously considered our position with respect to the term "imagined audience." We have wrestled with the premise before, in our own writing over the years. In our composition work at school, teachers instruct us to write for an ideal audience that suits an appropriate context, whether the writing is narrative, descriptive, or expository; this is an exercise of pure imagination par excellence, as it is our teacher and perhaps our peers who actually read our work. In theory, we are well trained to imagine others as an audience despite the inherent difficulty in the exercise. This review, then, reverses our position since we must now imagine ourselves as the intended audience and we have to identify ourselves in the heart of the genre—young adult fiction—whose very name determines us as its audience. So as this review reverses the situation and as we occupy the subjective position of the imagined audience, the opportunity to respond somewhat formally from this insider and privileged position is as liberating as it is unusual.

To understand more fully the discourse of imagination, we turned to critical theory, which was a new experience. As you may expect, we certainly do not think that we are the imagined audience for texts like these. We read a chapter in Charles Taylor's *Modern Social Imaginaries* in which his definition of the social imaginary helped us by adding a level of complexity to

how we define and position ourselves—our imagined selves—in relation to the young adult novels. Taylor argues that ordinary people imagine themselves and develop notions of their social contexts through "images, stories, and legends" (25). His definition speaks to our reading and writing experiences within the communities of our classrooms and also as part of the various communities of readers and writers to which we belong outside of school. Taylor writes that a social imaginary must "incorporate a sense of the normal expectations we have of each other, the kind of common understanding that enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life" (24). The kind of "common understanding" with which we read and initially responded to these novels resulted in a commonality that produced the collective act of writing the review. These novels brought us together because they specifically focused on us as a group linked by age instead of as a group linked by interests or ethnicity or gender. Our focus became more apparent after we knew that we would move outside normal expectations in our work; we knew that we would need to reimagine ourselves as students and scholars, as this work is not part of what Taylor calls the "common repertory" (26) typically available to high school students, as co-authoring a review with peers and our teacher would suggest. Furthermore, Taylor's explanation allowed us to reimagine ourselves in relation to adults who, either through the simple practice of providing novels for us or the more complex practice of assigning novels to us or as authors writing novels for us, set expectations for us to meet along with "the deeper normative notions and images that underlie [their] expectations" (23). Thus, we were able to consider and then think more critically of the power that adults—parents, teachers, and authors—have to shape the subjectivity of young adults.

The experience of reading and writing about novels intended for us is unique in our school experience. The required reading on our English course syllabus this year is, as we think you would expect, primarily canonical literature. While we can only speculate, we do not think that the words of Sophocles or Shakespeare were written for seventeen-year-olds, yet teachers continue to select works by canonical authors for much of the required reading in high school; they must think that we are the imagined audience for their works simply because we fill the seats in English classrooms. Our novels for this project contained more accessible narrative structures and diction while they dealt with less graphic moments of violence and sex: *Heart of Darkness* or *The Diviners* or *The Road* these texts are not.

Ironically, it is with the seriousness of our experience with these canonical authors and texts that we found and developed the voice to question seriously traditional syllabi that respect the canon faithfully and to pose new questions about our position as imagined audience for both the young adult novels for the review and our assigned reading in class. For the former, we

questioned and discussed our relationship as the imagined audience for the texts we reviewed, the results of which we reveal, to a degree, later in this review. Additionally, these questions have morphed into valuable critiques of the texts teachers require us to read in the classroom; this is where we have seen our questions taken up by our peers as well, and we welcome and embrace the discussion and the level of engagement with which we and our peers unpack these new questions for old texts. For example, for our upcoming literary essay on *The Diviners*, some of us are currently considering how Margaret Laurence represents the relationship between young adults and adults, and our essays will work through how the relationships work to construct Morag's subjectivity over the course of the novel, from Morag as an adolescent to Morag as a mother. We can, through our essay, begin to see in a more refined way the manner in which *The Diviners* represents and shapes young adults in the text. In this way, these critical skills that we use to analyze canonical novels open the door for us to move forward to produce serious and scholarly work in response to these young adult novels, and the result is that we have produced a blend between literary review, a genre in which we rarely write, and literary essay, a more common assignment for us.

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The book selection process was somewhat random, but in that randomness we had fun and experienced autonomy, a feeling that typically is not present in our book selection experience at school. We selected books based on the information we gleaned from the covers and from the paratextual information. We read without having a set of predetermined questions about the content despite knowing that we would review and analyze aspects of the novels. Upon completing the novels, we fleshed out possibilities that were common to all of our reading experiences, so that our reviews would be linked thematically and thus become somewhat unified. The idea of the outsider seemed

to us the most common thematic link, and one about which we could develop an argument. Our literary essays developed theses that unpacked how each young adult text represents the outsider in its narrative.

After our essays were complete, we thought further about these novels, in part by returning to the original question that asked us to imagine ourselves as the intended audience. But now, we imagined ourselves reviewers and critics as well, and we also returned to thinking about ourselves as represented by these novels. Finally, we concluded that, to a degree, we are outsiders too, and our answers inevitably led us to write about how these novels represent outsiders in plots, settings, and conflicts that delineate yet at the same time question the stability of the boundaries that determine, separate, and sometimes even redeem the outsider.

Reviews

Connie Brummel Crook's *No Small Victory* is set in rural Ontario in the 1930s. The dire financial circumstances of 1936 force Bonnie and her parents to move from their family farm to a more affordable rural property far away from the comforts of family and friends. Bonnie is overwhelmed with her newly found knowledge about debt, a topic that invades even the supposedly secure space of the family table "every night after supper" (1). It is Bonnie's experience at school, however, that shifts the conflict of the novel from a domestic setting to the school setting. Ultimately, Bonnie overcomes conflicts that arise at her new school—from trouble with bullies, disengagement from her teacher, overcoming sickness, and battles with students from another town—to emerge successfully from a scheme to aid her parents with the economic realities of the farm.

Bonnie navigates the boundaries that separate outsider from insider, shifting between the roles with apparent ease, compared to the other characters in the novels we review. The novel begins with Bonnie struggling to make sense of "something called a *debt*" (1). It is her parents' debt, of course, not hers, but the stigma of being the child whose family's poverty forces them to move into the house that no one in the community would dare live in after the previous owners were fatally affected by consumption establishes Bonnie as an immediate outsider. She is outside a healthy space, forced to reside in a diseased home, and this dubious distinction initially isolates Bonnie at school. It is at school that she endures jeers and name-calling that eventually turn into physical violence. The one-room school situates all the students in the same space—as there are no alternate classrooms for those who do not fit it, as there are today—and it facilitates Bonnie's move from her outsider position to that of an insider. When a head lice epidemic breaks out in the school, all the students are forced to undergo scalp checks at the doctor's in a neighbouring community. Bonnie and her classmates are jeered at and taunted by the children at

the local school as they pass through the town. Bonnie uses her poetic abilities to compose insults for the Lang kids to use against the bullies, thus establishing Bonnie not only as one of the kids, but as one who makes her underdog status vanish. *No Small Victory* shows that existing as an outsider is only temporary, as Bonnie's timely actions throughout the novel resolve the problematic positions and predicaments of characters that occupy outsider status.

Kip Breaker is the first-person narrator in Dennis Foon's *Double or Nothing*, a novel that reveals the personal and social ills associated with gambling addiction and the publicly operated locations—the casino and the horse racetrack—that facilitate so-called legitimate entertainment. Kip, a student whom his teachers "idolize" (9) because of his natural ability to succeed in school, moves on from beating his friends at noon-hour poker in the cafeteria to high-stakes games of chance that eventually cost him more than he ever thought possible. On a dare—a bet, really—Kip meets Magic Girl, whose real name is Joey. This chance meeting provides Kip with two possibilities as the novel progresses: the stability of a potentially loving romantic relationship or the highly addictive world of serious gambling. Joey's father is King Hewitt, a famous magician, and Kip, whose own father died from working too much, becomes awed by King's magic on the stage and his magic at the racetrack and the casino. Kip soon finds that he is balancing his romantic relationship with Joey and his secret gambling relationship with her father. This triangle becomes more complicated as it becomes more secretive, but as Joey reveals to Kip the seriousness of her father's compulsion, Kip must choose between Joey or her father, between a healthy relationship and a destructive one.

The conflict that explodes from the Kip-King-Joey triangle reveals a theme in the novel, illustrating the power addiction has to push one away while pulling another close. Despite Kip's initial interest in both romantic and peer relationships, the plot turns when Kip chooses a relationship that is neither; he chooses the father over the daughter, the adult over the peer. Kip assumes the status of an outsider because his gambling desires overcome his romantic ones. In his apparent confusion, he decides to make time for a "date with King" (65) that prevents him from spending time with his misfit friends. Kip rejects his comfortable status among his friends for the hypnotic allure of the casino, with its "shining silver, reflecting mirrors, and dazzling lights" (89). In some respects, King and Kip establish and develop a non-sexual but nonetheless perverse relationship that affirms his outsider status. Foon's novel concludes with a broke, but not broken, Kip redeeming himself through legitimate work, and the novel hints at the possibility that Kip will, in the future, survive and thrive in a socially acceptable form of gambling: the stock market.

In *Hunted*, Cheryl Rainfield uses tropes recognizable

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from dystopian fiction to enter contemporary public discussions about various forms of discrimination. Paranormals ("Paras" for short) possess telepathic and telekinaesthetic powers that they possess from birth. To use Lady Gaga's words, they are born this way. The government and like-minded citizens, however, treat Paras as a threat to civil and cultural security. Signs that flash anti-Para slogans like "BE A GOOD CITIZEN! REPORT PARA BEHAVIOR" (4) and "PARAS ARE UNNATURAL!" (5) are reminiscent of the propaganda-filled pages of George Orwell's *1984*. The novel opens with Caitlyn, a Para, and her mother seeking refuge in a new community that they hope will be reasonably safe for Paras. While they struggle to remain undetected from Normals, who make up the government and dominant culture, they must also guard against detection from Paratroopers, Normals who work as agents of the government, and Government Paras, captured Paras who have been coerced into working as agents of the government. Caitlyn's brother, presumed dead like her father who died fighting for Para rights and freedoms, (re)appears as a Government Para and forces Caitlyn to consider more carefully her moves to remain undetected. The high school is the setting for much of the novel, and Caitlyn experiences varying degrees of all-too-familiar prejudices as she navigates her safety and reinvents her relationship with her brother.

This novel tackles the notion of the outsider in multiple registers. In the most dominant register, Rainfield uses a first-person narrative, thus privileging Caitlyn's perspective and creating a narrative opening to help young adult readers to empathize with her. As a minority and an outsider forced to

pass as a member of the dominant group, Caitlyn finds comfort and acceptance among only a few peers. The fact that Caitlyn passes as a Normal forces the other Normals to examine their own circumstances relative to the Paras, and in doing so, the other Normals experience a more heightened awareness of the Paras' plight. It is Caitlyn, then, who acts as an agent to strip away prejudiced attitudes held by other characters. Ultimately, the novel uses the high school as a site to determine who belongs inside and who is relegated to the outside of various social and legal strata; the result is a novel that shows that teenagers can be agents of change in the world, but only in a space legislated and controlled by adults.

Edeet Ravel breaks several conventional narrative expectations in *Held*, a novel about an American teenage girl who is abducted and held hostage while on vacation in Greece. Seventeen-year-old Chloe Mills is having a typically great time in Greece until she is kidnapped by a couple who hold her hostage in an abandoned warehouse. The male hostage taker regularly visits and tells her she is being held for a prisoner exchange. At first, Chloe fears for her life and is, as might be expected, unresponsive toward her hostage taker. After a few days, however, loneliness gets the best of her and she begins to look forward to the visits from him. In fact, she even becomes attracted to him and claims to be in love with him. Although she knows nothing about him—his history, his interests, or his name—she feels an immense love toward him. When the hostage takers' demands are met after four long months, Chloe is upset to leave. The thought of freedom, her friends and family, and the real world frightens her, but it is the thought of separation from her hostage taker that is unbearable to her. When she finally returns to the United States, agents working her case ask her to write an account of her experience. She claims that she does not remember anything, but she secretly writes a detailed account for herself that the agents eventually discover and seize. We read Chloe's account in a way that positions us as ones who discover and seize her narrative as well.

The novel initially places Chloe in a sympathetic situation despite it being a situation with which most teens cannot identify. As the victim of a kidnapping, Chloe is clearly the outsider, but *Held* grapples with the notion of the outsider by representing Chloe's emotional predicaments as much as her physical predicaments. Young adults can identify with this extreme example, because sometimes we pursue and develop relationships even if we know the outcome might not be positive. Accordingly, Chloe occupies a unique kind of outsider position, as readers may resort to imagining that their predicament is akin to hers. For instance, while in captivity, Chloe bonds with a stuffed monkey, a gift from the hostage taker, which she keeps "clutched" (132) to her body. This intense act signifies her desire to re-establish normative feelings and assume the role of one

who protects instead of being one in need of protection. Her behaviour and desires, however, move her from her outsider position as an isolated hostage to feeling emotionally connected to her hostage taker. Throughout the novel, she thus complicates the boundaries that determine outsider status.

The title of Paul Yee's *The Secret Keepers* implies an immediate division between those who know and those who do not. Yee begins his novel of the complexities of family life in San Francisco during the time of the earthquake that wreaked havoc on the city in 1906. Jackson Leung and his brother Lincoln operate a nickelodeon, but the earthquake and Lincoln's subsequent death halt their "great plans for the business" (11). Jackson's familial and commercial loss is not his only problem; he has the uncanny ability to see ghosts, and the public awareness of these ghosts—those of his brother and another young girl—could ruin his livelihood. Jackson enlists the help of the Temple Keeper to make "an anti-ghost charm" (39) so that the ghosts will vanish from his theatre, from his sight, and from his knowledge. Jackson figures that once the ghosts disappear, his life has a chance to return to normal.

Yee's novel represents the outsider as a subject who struggles against the pressures imposed by an immediate and identifiable ethnic community as well as the dominant urban culture. Community pressures, however, force Jackson to hide aspects of his personality. Not only must Jackson hide his ability to see ghosts for fear of being alienated from his community, but he affirms his status as an outsider by working in the opium den, thus establishing himself as one who works and can function outside the law. The den itself also situates the Chinese American community as outsiders contrasted to the "normal" culture of the urban centre that is turn-of-the-century San Francisco. There is a sense that the users in the den are contained geographically, like the "old Chinese labourer[s]" (55) who spend time in the opium den in the security of the shadows provided by its darkness. The den is a haven for people who occupy no stable place in the city or with their families; the people who retreat to the den "live on the street" (63). Jackson works in the den because he must provide for his family, therefore complicating his own ethics and his own understanding of being either a part of or apart from his community. This aspect of the plot contributes to the narrative as a whole in its representation of those characters who hold secrets and how those secrets determine their degree of outsider status in the novel.

Concluding Thoughts

As we leave high school to pursue our further studies and then eventually to begin our careers, we wonder if the practices that make up the typical high-school English courses as we know them will remain or if they will evolve to a point where more high-school students are critically reading and studying literature that authors

craft for them. We have demonstrated that students can both enjoy narratives imagined for them and apply critical thinking and analytical skills that produce scholarship about these texts. If teachers recognize and value the premise of the "imagined audience" for the genre of young adult literature—and we certainly do—then we think secondary institutions, particularly high-school English departments, need to rethink the amount of canonical literature they require their students to read; after all, when we students read and study more young adult literature in the classroom and beyond, we move from the imagined audience to the *real* audience. Teachers must encourage students to read young adult literature with the same fervour as they embrace and promote canonical texts. Teachers should not relegate young adult novels to the place of mere "option" for reading after the serious reading has been completed. Teachers should create a climate where students can read, study, and do serious work with young adult novels. We did.

Work Cited

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