


Dear Diary,

Today, I got a package in the mail from Canadian Children’s Literature/Littérature canadienne pour la jeunesse (CCL/LCJ), an established Canadian journal recently relocated from Guelph University to the University of Winnipeg. The package contained twelve children’s books. My assignment is to read them for a review article I agreed to write on the representation of gender in contemporary Canadian children’s literature. I am imagining the best summer ever: swinging in my hammock, sipping ice-cold lemonade, and reading young adult novels. I love my job.

Dear Diary,

After a summer reading adolescent and children’s fiction—lesbians involved in the porn industry, girls getting tattoos, sexual abuse, war, boys gambling, boys quitting school to play in rock bands, various kids in conflict with the law—I need to write my review article, but I’m now more in need of a quiet summer vacation. Turns out, my summer reading wasn’t nearly as relaxing as I expected.

Not only was my reading mind-altering, but changes have also occurred at CCL/LCJ. After much discussion with the editorial board and other stakeholders, the journal has decided to change its name to reflect the broadening of its horizons to engage children’s literatures and cultures not exclusively Canadian or print media. By the time I manage to finish my article, it will be coming out in the inaugural issue of Jeunesse.

❤

Roberta Seelinger Trites literally wrote the book on young adult fiction, casting her astutely critical eye on the problems of the teenage problem novel. In Disturbing the Universe, Trites argues that T. S. Eliot’s famous question, “Do I dare disturb the universe?” lies at the heart of adolescents’ quest for discovering the power they have to affect their world. Trites states uncategorically: “Young Adult novels are about power” (3). She explains: “... although it [young adult literature] affirms modernity’s belief in the
power of the individual . . . it very self-consciously problematizes the relationship of the individual to the institutions that construct her or his subjectivity” (20). While I am uneasy about Trites’s generalization about all young adult fiction, her point is well taken: young adult fiction is often about the individual’s troubling relationship to the norms of the greater society, and the outcome of such books usually highlights the power of the individual to transform his or her world.

Perhaps one of the significant regulatory regimes that causes conflict in children’s and young adult fiction, although not particularly singled out by Trites, is gender. In Undoing Gender, Judith Butler sheds a clear light on the complicated manner in which gender manifests:

If gender is a kind of doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one’s knowing and without one’s willing, it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical. On the contrary, it is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint. Moreover, one does not “do” one’s gender alone. One is always “doing” with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary. What I call my “own” gender appears perhaps at times as something that I author or, indeed, own. But the terms that make up one’s own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author (and that radically contests the notion of authorship itself). (1)

Unlike Trites, who discusses possibilities for achieving agency (see page 124 for example), Butler does not regard the individual as able to achieve agency or power. Rather, Butler argues that agency and transformative power are inevitable as gender constantly needs to be rearticulated and those re-articulations can only result in change. She explains her concept of agency: “the ‘I’ that I am finds itself at once constituted by norms and dependent on them but also endeavours to live in ways that maintain a critical and transformative relation to them” (3). She suggests that one way of transforming norms is by critique, which “is understood as an interrogation of the terms by which life is constrained in order to open up the possibility of different modes of living” (4). She explains further: “The critique of gender norms must be situated within the context of lives as they are lived and must be guided by the question of what maximizes the possibility for a liveable life, what minimizes the possibility of an unbearable life or, indeed, social or literal death” (8).

Butler offers an intriguing lens through which to view the struggles in adolescent problem fiction.¹ The conflict for the characters in these novels often centres on their need simply to have a liveable life, to survive successfully in their particular cultural matrix. Moreover, Butler’s gender theory encourages a reading
What is striking in the young people’s fiction and non-fiction that I read was the attempt to rewrite the script, to transform norms of all kinds, but particularly gender norms. Two books published by Lorimer overtly challenge readers to examine gender constructions and societal expectations; these slender picture books potentially enact what Butler refers to as critique, the cultural intervention through which transformation is possible. *Girlness: Deal with it Body and Soul*, by Diane Peters, and *Guyness: Deal with it Body and Soul*, by Steve Pitt, both attempt to teach young readers to recognize and resist conformity to dominant contemporary gender norms. This type of didactic workbook is laudable, not only because the books are filled with lovely illustrations, by Steve Murray, of adolescents of all races and levels of ability and types. It presents quizzes—“Are you your own girl?”—explanations—“What is guyness?”—and common myths. I can see how it might be productive in a classroom setting. And yet, misgivings about both books’ effectiveness slip out unbidden. What is it about the myth busting that also serves to re-entrench stereotypes?

In the *Guyness* myth section, from a larger section entitled “Guyness 101” so that it purports to teach Guyness, the reader learns the myths: “Housework is women’s work,” “Guys are not as sensitive as girls,” “Guys are hard-wired to be tough,” and so on (12–13). It relates the myths to debunk them, yet the myth itself screams in large type, while the retraction is small and understated. If the reader has never before encountered these myths, he or she is, in this moment, learning them: an unnerving conundrum.
In the attempt to establish a new norm, then, these books offer a re-inscription of normativity in the very moment that they attempt to challenge it. In both books, the writers indicate that the media also shape views of what is normal and attractive. “Violence is natural for guys,” the media suggest, according to *Guyness* (25); similarly, the media insist that “Girls must be very thin to be attractive” (*Girlness*, 19). In order to counter society’s gender prescriptions, both *Guyness* and *Girlness* offer a list of dos and don’ts that, while empowering for the teen, also feels rather prescriptive. “Do be proud of who you are and how you define femininity for yourself,” says *Girlness*; but, it warns, “don’t change the way you dress or what you like to do just to please others” (25). *Guyness* offers similar advice: “Do your own thing, if need be” or “Don’t stay silent” (27). Many sections of the books provide important information. In *Girlness*, for example, one page explains how a girl can protect herself from gender discrimination: by knowing her rights, speaking up, getting support, and respecting herself (24). It is fascinating that the advice offered to boys for the same section is different: have confidence, make a joke, do some research, talk to an older guy, and...
challenge stereotypes (24). I want to support these books, but I cannot help but agree with John Stephens when he argues that books with this type of overt ideological message tend to create resistant readers. In writing about Peter Hollindale’s work on ideology, Stephens explains:

Books which openly advocate “progressive” or “enlightened” ideas belong to this category. Hollindale suggests that there are problems of representation for writers here in that explicit advocacy tends to provoke reader resistance to the message, and at the same time it concedes that the advocated value or behaviour is still a minority social practice, whereas the ideal behaviour can be in effect muted if presented as though it were normal social practice. (9)

Even the illustrations on the covers invoke a certain sombre mood, indicating the dreary weight of gender identity. Each book sports an illustration of a young person of the gender in question. The illustration depicts the adolescent from the shoulders up, looking into a mirror. The positioning of the character with his or her back to the reader encourages
And critical readers are very necessary. I received ten adolescent novels for review. Of those, seven recount the adventures of a female protagonist, all but one from a first-person narrator. All seven writers are female. The remaining three novels are first-person narratives with a male protagonist: two by men, one by a woman. While I admit that the selection of recently published Canadian fiction sent to me is hardly a scientific sample, I would still argue that the disparity tells a story, conveys an implicit ideology, to use John Stephens’s words. The ideology is this: girls are readers, and they want to read about girls.

In order to examine the assumptions about girlness and guyness in these adolescent novels, I will explore them through the lens of Trites’s understanding of the adolescent’s struggle to define him- or herself against normative culture. On the one hand, each of the novels explores the protagonist’s empowerment, which might lead to the assumption that his or her specific gendered identity emerges as effective and positive. On the other hand, reading for gender alone results in a disturbing realization that boys have a good reason for not reading, as Perry Nodelman has pointed out (14): adolescent fiction represents them as being a problem.

**Struggling Against Normativity**

Despite the inequality in numbers between the boy and girl books, each young adult novel depicts a conflict between a teen and normative culture, as
Trites would suggest, even if the normative culture is, in some instances, non-normative. Each protagonist faces pressure to conform to a particular path or belief system. For one cluster of books, the character wants to fit in with his or her peers. Sarah Withrow’s *What Gloria Wants* is a rather tepid tale of Gloria’s desire to keep her boyfriend and the ensuing conflict with her girlfriend. What Gloria learns, of course, is that the girlfriend is much more important than the no-good boyfriend. The boyfriend operates as an authority akin to a different country to which Gloria seeks access: “I am in Boyfriend Country, and I don’t know the customs or the language” (135). While she returns to the girlfriend and the world of Barbies at the end of the novel, creating a lovely message about the importance of female friendship, the novel creates the sense that the future belongs to Boyfriend Country and that Gloria is simply postponing the inevitable. The girls burn their Barbies in the last chapter to symbolize leaving childhood behind. A similar story is Teresa Totem’s *Me and the Blondes*, in which the main character, Sophie, wants to fit in with the popular girls, who are inevitably blonde. Sophie’s background is not a typical suburban one, however;
her mother is a flamboyant Bulgarian immigrant and her father has been imprisoned for murder. She longs for normalcy. Sophie learns that none of her normal blonde girlfriends are normal: one is bulimic, for example; another, adopted. Just as she accepts their peculiarities, they can accept hers. In *All In*, by Monique Polak, Todd desires acceptance from Rick, the new kid in the elite school they attend: “Rick’s got the life,” Todd exclaims (22). Rick also leads him into a world of gambling, which results in Todd dealing counterfeit money to pay his gambling debts. Todd also gambles for money to impress his “hot” and wealthy girlfriend. The novel concludes with Todd stepping back from these individuals and the lifestyle, and admitting his culpability to the police. In Lori Weber’s *Tattoo Heaven*, the best friend and the boyfriend pressure Jackie to lighten up over her parents’ divorce, an event that Jackie finds understandably devastating. Only through her father’s girlfriend, a tattoo artist who gives Jackie a tattoo, and the girl across the street who is afflicted with cancer, both arguably outside of normative culture, does Jackie find the freedom to be herself.

Two novels that depict their protagonists attempting to conform to a non-normative culture are *The Blue Helmet*, by William Bell, and *Mosh Pit*, by Kristyn Dunnion. In these novels, rather than confronting the repressive culture of mainstream society represented by their normal friends and parents, the characters need to embrace a more mainstream ethic by rejecting their non-normative peers. In *The Blue Helmet*, Lee finds himself engaged in illegal activity as a means to prove himself to the powerful gang in his community. He wants gang acceptance. After his arrest and move, he finds acceptance through his aunt and an eccentric mentally ill neighbour. Similarly, *Mosh Pit*’s Simone is in love with her best friend Cherry, so much so that she finds herself spinning wildly out of control in order to stay in contact with her selfish, drug-addled “friend.” Simone ends up in the porn industry and at parties where she feels unsafe. She pulls away from Cherry in a climactic moment in which she rescues not only a dog but also a baby from Cherry’s boyfriend. The novel ends with Simone promising the dog that they will find a place “where you can run off leash for as long as you want,” emphasizing her new freedom from the “restraints” that the friendship with Cherry imposed (270).

Another cluster of novels does not pit the character against her peers, but instead suggests that the individual needs to fight against her own perceptions or internalized ideology. In each of these novels, the character represents normative culture to some degree. In Jacqueline Guest’s *At Risk*, Tia works with girls in trouble with the law; she thus represents mainstream culture, as her job requires her to socialize her teenage protege properly. But Tia is also distinctly non-conformist: “She’d been a loner, but not by
choice. She hadn’t fit in. After all, there weren’t many black Canadian farm kids in rural schools, and she’d stuck out” (10). While Guest’s novel reads a bit like a Harlequin in that the third-person narrative begins with the quietly feisty heroine and the strong male hero—the narrative sets the reader up to expect the two to become romantically involved—the interesting twist is that the handsome hero turns out to be the bad guy; he has been framing the troubled youth for stealing money that he himself has taken. Tia and Sage, the teen she mentors, must band together to fight the traditional Harlequin-style hero. In Joan Givner’s quirky Ellen Fremedon, Journalist, the young heroine, Ellen, is a budding journalist and, in that professional choice, embodies normative culture. Ellen learns that the surface does not always reflect reality: her family’s very perfect nanny turns out to be on the lam, for instance, and the next-door neighbour whom Ellen interviews is a reclusive writer who never usually grants interviews. In Beth Goobie’s intelligent and beautiful Hello, Groin, Dylan crashes into a powerful example of repressive mainstream culture: censorship. She makes a display for the school library of book titles pasted over the outlines of male and female bodies. Her selection of the lesbian-themed Foxfire for the groin of the female form is censored by the Principal of the school, particularly because Dylan cannot defend her choice. While this narrative may seem to be a rather straightforward representation of a teen in conflict with normative culture, it is not. What Dylan learns is that her own internal censorship is the trouble: she has acted as her own normative restraint. Once she accepts her lesbian desire for her best friend and can explain to the Principal the reasons for her choice—reasons that have little to do with lesbianism and much to do with female empowerment—the censorship is revoked.

Richard Scarsbrook’s fun Featherless Bipeds similarly shakes up notions of what normative culture might be. While the traditional trajectory, taken by the protagonist’s parents, is to finish one’s education and get married and perhaps have one’s creative dreams die by the wayside, Dak Sifter refuses to follow this path. Against his father’s warning about pursuing an “immature fantasy” (97), Dak drops out of school to pursue his music career and gets the successful trophy girl. While this story seems to be encouraging youth to follow the non-traditional path, Dak readjusts his goal when he discovers his fiancée bedding one of his bandmates. He makes the right choice by ending up with the traditional childhood sweetheart, who has joined their band. The message is clear: stray from the beaten path, but not too far.

**Disturbing the Universe?**

Perhaps one of the key differences between adolescent novels and adult novels about adolescents is, as Trites suggests, the adolescent’s successful bid for power. These ten novels present problems successfully
resolved by and for the protagonists, and they also create deeply moral messages. All of the novels but one, *At Risk*, were written in the first person; this narrative perspective highlights the voice and the power of the often-disenfranchised adolescent. The individual is telling his or her own story, and is, thus, actively engaged in self-construction.

While the novels are frequently about the young person coming to understand and/or transform him- or herself, the individual also manages to have a startling effect on the external world. Todd from *All In* explains, “I’m starting—just starting—to know who I am,” as he admits his guilt to the police (166). Todd’s realization that his gambling and involvement in counterfeiting is leading his friend Lewis down the same path is a turning point for his ultimate acceptance of responsibility. In *The Blue Helmet*, Lee learns from an ex-soldier with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder that violence breeds violence; more importantly, Lee provides non-judgmental friendship for his mentally ill neighbour and finds a father figure in return. *Hello, Groin*’s Dylan unlearns self-censorship; in the process of doing so, however, she also creates an artistic school display that galvanizes debate and educates her peers and teachers. *Tattoo Heaven*’s Jackie helps to bring better health to her cancer-stricken neighbour by way of a temporary tattoo and forbidden walks. In *Mosh Pit*, Simone rescues a baby and a puppy on her path to self-discovery. Ellen Fremedon achieves fame through her exclusive interview with the famous writer Nina Kay in *Ellen Fremedon, Journalist*. Sophie’s peculiarities encourage her friends to reveal their own unique qualities in *Me and the Blondes*. Tia’s belief in Sage enables the girl to change her life in *At Risk*. In *Featherless Bipeds*, the reverberations of the character’s individual growth is, perhaps, most striking. Because Dak takes a chance by dropping out of university to pursue his music career full time, his parents learn from him. He thinks:

> When Mom gets home, I hope she paints some more. When Dad sits down at his desk, he will find that somebody has pulled his yellowing novel from its hiding place and placed it there in front of his creaky old office chair. And hopefully, while Mom is dabbing paint on a canvas, and I’m hours away banging out a rhythm on my drums, Dad will start writing again. (102)

The father does, of course, start writing, and publishes his novel, suggesting that Dak is an inspiration to his parents. Trites appears to be very correct. She writes:

> That so many narratives written for adolescents systematically depict teenagers engaged in power-repression dynamics indicates to me that the genre carries embedded within it a tacit understanding that adolescents are potentially quite—well—
Adolescent fiction shows that teens have the ability to affect their surroundings; the characters are, literally, role models, both for other characters within the world of their novel and, potentially, for the reader. But Trites’s argument holds up only for the overt ideology of these novels made so very clear through their laudable messages about teen empowerment. What about the implicit ideological impact? What is being said without being said?

A Disturbed and Gendered Universe

If, as Judith Butler would argue, gender is a dominant regulatory regime, then where is gender in these books? Quite unlike Girlness and Guyness, these novels do not engage in a direct critique of gender constructions. Gender remains an implicit assumption, creating an implicit ideology that is, as Stephens argues, extremely powerful because it presents specific gender roles as simply the way things are, as common sense, and thus encourages the reader to accept them uncritically. The manner in which the novels are marketed, for example, demonstrates a clear demarcation between the sexes. Two of the novels targeted toward girls sport pink covers: Me and the Blondes and What Gloria Wants. Pink flowers surround the sleuthing Ellen on the cover of Ellen Fremedon, Journalist. What Gloria Wants is not only pink, but it also depicts a heavily made-up girl looking out at the reader through a keyhole (Figure 3). The promise to the reader is that we can uncover Gloria’s sexy secrets, as tedious as they turn out to be. On the cover, then, the girl appears as the object, rather than the subject, of her own narrative. Two of the boy books have a black-and-white photo on the cover: Featherless Bipeds depicts drums...
and *All In* shows an angry boy looking through a house of cards. The blue color of the other boy book, *The Blue Helmet*, is fitting for the title (a reference to NATO peacekeepers’ helmets) but also for the targeted gender. The covers of the other girl books showcase female faces or torsos, all clearly identifying the desired gender of the reader. In my mind, the troubling message is not the gendered marketing. It is not even how females still might fall into traditional roles as insipid girls in love with boys who do not deserve them, as Gloria does and as Tia does in *At Risk* (not particularly troublesome because Tia’s novel overturns reader expectations in a way that empowers the female characters and Gloria learns that her friend will always be there for her). Rather, the troublesome element emerges in the content of the novels: what do the girls do, and what do the boys do? Who are they? What is being assumed about “girlness” and “guyness”?

Regardless of how the books are marketed, the girls are a fine, feisty bunch. The writers convey the importance of the heroines’ relationships with other females, even when some female friendships need to be cast aside, creating a message of female-centred empowerment. Ellen Fremedon starts a newspaper with her best friend, an endeavour that brings her in touch with the famous but reclusive woman writer, Nina Kay. Gloria postpones having a romantic relationship with a boy to prolong her somewhat problematic childhood friendship (*What Gloria Wants*). Sophie focuses her energy on fostering positive female friendships as a means to acceptance and popularity (*Me and the Blondes*). Indeed, Sophie’s over-the-top immigrant mother turns out to be the key to acceptance, as she charms everyone who encounters her. While Jackie finds some solace in her growing friendship with her father’s girlfriend, her main support lies in her bedridden neighbour, Theresa (*Tattoo Heaven*). Tia nurtures her female ward as a youth worker (*At Risk*). In this novel, the young wards fight amongst themselves, often over boys, revealing a stereotype of female behaviour. In contrast, Tia and Sage band together to defend themselves from the boy. Dylan falls in love with her female best friend, and when Joc reciprocates, she comes to terms with her sexual desire (*Hello, Groin*). Similarly, Simone in *Mosh Pit* is in love with her best friend, but she must learn to walk away; importantly, she meets another female love interest who enables her to get over her addiction to Cherry. While romantic interest in boys takes centre stage in only two novels (*At Risk* and *What Gloria Wants*), the girls learn that the boys have selfish intentions, itself a troubling message to which I will return. Moreover, these girls tend to embody the kind of power that Trites suggests is inherent to adolescence: they are self-starting journalists, starter basketball players, youth workers, and good students. Even the more troubled girls, such as Simone in *Mosh Pit*, end up rewriting the scripts. While she gets involved in the
porn industry, wrestling in her lingerie with best friend Cherry, she does so from real desire to be wrestling with Cherry. In this way, Dunnion offers an interesting gloss on sexual desire and porn. While same-sex romance might easily be represented as supporting prevailing gender binaries, I do not see this in either Dunnion’s or Goobie’s books. Instead, they tap into a stereotype of the lesbian in love with the straight girl. Simone must learn that Cherry uses her sexuality to string Simone along. In Goobie’s book, Dylan’s love for her supposedly straight best friend is ultimately reciprocated, a fresh perspective on an old stereotype.

The message about “guyness” is more troubling, and therefore I will focus on these novels in more detail. First off, as I mentioned, only three of the ten books had male heroes. Their stories are not about acceptance, support, or characters mapping out an identity for themselves in the larger world in the same way that the girls’ tales tend to be. Instead, the boys’ stories convey messages about a woundedness tied intrinsically to masculinity, about failures, and about serendipitous success. I am of two minds about the boy books. On the one hand, the images of masculinity convey a sense that “guyness” is indeed difficult and something to deal with, that gender constraints affect both girls and boys. On the other hand, I cannot help but feel that these writers are adding to a stereotype of masculinity as being an essence that lies somewhere just beyond culture. The message here is still that men have to be domesticated and that it is a difficult process. The girls’ books contribute to this message as well, by depicting selfish, insensitive, or criminal boyfriends (What Gloria Wants, Mosh Pit, At Risk) and ineffectual or absentee fathers (Tattoo Heaven, Mosh Pit, Me and the Blondes). The writers generally convey the sense that boys cannot be trusted, even in their very own narratives. This is disturbing indeed. It is also fascinating that the depiction of masculinity remains constant across three books that explore the lives of boys from three different socio-economic backgrounds.

Monique Polak’s All In sets up an ideal masculinity in the character of Rick, a new kid at Hilltop Academy who has a red Audi sports car, absentee parents, and lots of money. The grandson of a manufacturing tycoon, Todd struggles to maintain the appearance of wealth, following Rick into the world of gambling. When his not-so-popular friend Lewis gets involved in gambling, Todd’s superficial interest in Rick, and in his girlfriend Claire, collapses. Ultimately, Todd learns that the dazzling world of money and beautiful women is far too costly.

What a terrific message this might be, especially if I had read it in isolation from the other books. But this message is in conflict with another one. Todd has an extremely successful older brother who attends a prestigious American university (MIT). Todd finds it difficult to live up to his brother, so the reader can see
why the easy path to success through gambling might be a potent lure. The brother, Mark, returns home in shame, however, because he has been expelled for cheating. He, too, has felt the pressure to perform. Both young men, then, live in the shadow of an impossible masculine ideal of wealth and achievement. Mark’s expulsion, however, paves the way for Todd to confess to the police, and Todd’s confession relieves Mark. Lest one should conclude that this is a mutually supportive moment of two young men attempting to negotiate their way through an unattainable masculine ideal, Todd makes clear that the emotion is more selfish than that: “But when my eyes meet Mark’s, I see something besides sympathy. He’s relieved. Relieved I’ve made an even bigger mess than he has” (165). Not only is Mark out of school at the end of this novel, but Todd acknowledges that this will be his destiny as well: “I’ll probably get kicked out of Hilltop—and who knows if there’s another school in Montreal that’ll take me?” (166). This boy book ends in shame, the admission of crime, and inevitable expulsion. The novel encourages the reader to feel uplifted, of course, because Todd has finally made the right decision in confessing to the police, tellingly, against his father’s orders. In that moment, he is defying the patriarchal authority and, perhaps, opening the future to new possibilities. The message here could be a positive one because the novel dismantles the masculine ideal and shows Todd refusing to follow patriarchal dictates. But the writer does not map out the future for either boy; they have both failed, and the story ends with their eviction from mainstream society. By cheating and failing, Todd and his brother break their social contract. By not offering a hint of these young men’s recuperation back into society, Polak leaves them on the outskirts, outside acceptability, and perpetuates the notion that masculinity is that which is ultimately untameable.
While William Bell’s *The Blue Helmet* is complicated and topical, incorporating a moment in Canada’s complex history as peacekeepers into a narrative of a troubled young man’s coming of age, it also teeters on the edge of depicting men as untameable. A poor kid with a dead mother and a father who has too many jobs, Lee seeks a “family” with the local gang, which leads him into criminal activity. Lee has a propensity for violence: he’s been suspended from school for fighting, with the warning that next time he will be expelled, and he hit his girlfriend Beth when she indicated that she was no longer interested in him. He is arrested for a break and enter and sent to live with his aunt in Toronto. She sets him up as a delivery boy for her restaurant. Through this job, he meets different people and learns the importance of relationships. Significantly, he befriends a mentally ill man, Bruce Cutter. Cutter ends up committing suicide and leaving to Lee his house and all of his money, which turns out to be a lot because Cutter had been a successful computer software programmer. Through Cutter’s diaries, Lee discovers that Cutter was also a Canadian peacekeeping soldier in Croatia and that he witnessed the horrors of that mission, with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as the result. After inheriting the house and money and reading the diaries, Lee reassesses his life and choices. He returns to Hamilton to pay off his father’s debts (a metaphor for paying off a not-so-positive patriarchal legacy), to deal with the criminal charges against him, and to apologize to Beth, the girlfriend he hit in a rage. The novel ends with Lee and his father, reunited and renovating Cutter’s house.

Again, the overt message is deeply positive: young men can change, violence can be overcome, and supportive relationships make a difference. Bell rewrites the central masculine ideology of violence, represented by gang culture and war. Violence leads to wounds—physical, certainly, but mostly emotional. The patriarchal figures in this novel are ineffectual and damaged because of the pressures of masculinity. The father is in emotional and financial ruin after the loss of his wife. Cutter suffers from mental illness brought about by war. What I find striking is the unanticipated luck of the protagonist, Lee. He happens upon a friendship with Cutter, which lands him a sizable inheritance and then changes his life. While the trope of the mentally ill soldier troubles the masculine ideal—similar to *All In*, it is an unachievable and pernicious standard—Lee still benefits from an inheritance passed down from a patriarchal figure, and a clearly masculine one at that. An interesting moment of apparently gratuitous homophobia highlights the continued need for an unambiguous “masculinity.” When Lee tells his father that he inherited money from a friend who is an older man, his father reacts quite negatively, assuming this money comes from a gay relationship. This reaction causes much hilarity,
as Lee is anything but gay, as his aunt points out. The purpose of this scene is to establish that, while Lee is revising the masculine scripts, he is staying within the acceptable parameters of patriarchal power. Moreover, Lee can use his new-found clout to resurrect his father. And the novel is still silent on his schooling, even while it has shown Lee to be interested in learning on his own. The implicit ideology, then, suggests that young men need not work too hard. Their patriarchal inheritance will fall to them naturally, and then, to be very good people, they can eradicate violence from their lives, apologize for past ills, and do good for others as well. Similar to Todd and Mark from *All In*, Lee still remains on the outside of the mainstream educational system.

Richard Scarsbrook's *Featherless Biped* is a delightful romp that includes Dak Sifter's song lyrics and the band's discography, and yet it, too, creates a problematic ideology about masculinity at the very same moment that it is actively engaged in rewriting the scripts. Dak Sifter, drummer for the up-and-coming Featherless Biped, is a good young man. We know this from an early moment when he rescues a young woman from certain rape, only to be stabbed himself in retribution by the young men who had accosted her. His stab wound interrupts his university career, but not his music. The Featherless Biped achieve fame, causing Dak to take a chance: he will drop out of university altogether in order to pursue his music.

In the background of these career choices are Dak's relationships with two different women, Zoe, his hometown sweetheart, and Janice, another successful musician. Needless to say, Dak reunites with Zoe, who unexpectedly sings for the band and brings them to new heights of fame, and the novel ends with Dak's parents as successful artists, the Featherless Biped well-known, and Dak and Zoe together. Dak also ends the novel the way he began it: he saves another woman from yet another violent attacker: the Downtown Rapist.

Again, the overt message here is laudable. A boy should take a chance and pursue his dreams. I am fascinated by the envelope structure of rape, however, which seems to be unconnected to the rest of the narrative. Dak is seriously wounded twice by rescuing a damsel in distress; the masculine ideal of being a knight in shining armour leaves a boy damaged? These are not his only wounds; he is wounded repeatedly throughout the narrative. The trope of rape, however, serves to highlight our protagonist as one of the good guys; he is distinctly not a rapist. In some ways, this heavy-handedness operates with the opposite effect. It might suggest that not being a rapist is the exception. It certainly constructs a world in which there are quite a number of alleyway rapists. Dak's wounds prevent him from pursuing an education, which seems to suggest that the masculine ideal, which inevitably leaves a male wounded, interferes with his participation in
mainstream culture. Most telling in these rape episodes are Dak’s interactions with the political women at the university, itself a telling motif for the extent to which the university is represented by women. His band’s lead singer, Lola, is a feminist, and Scarsbrook represents her and her friends as utterly ridiculous. When Lola castigates Dak for being racist, for instance, the reader is encouraged to regard Lola as unreasonable. Lola and Dak catch the Downtown Rapist together at the end of the novel. Even here, Lola and her peers are foolish. Lola explains her new women’s group: “We’re an organization that lobbies at the federal level for the rights of marginalized and minority women.” To which Dak responds: “Wow . . . that’s a broad mandate” (213). One of Lola’s friends takes offence, thinking that Dak is making a joke and calling women “broads.” Lola saves Dak from this ludicrous accusation by introducing him as the man who helped catch the rapist, which placates the friend. While the world that Scarsbrook creates is one that needs feminists—witness the rapists and the man who jumps on stage and tries to yank off Lola’s shirt, for example—he depicts the feminists as an incomprehensible and contradictory annoyance. All that the world needs, in Scarsbrook’s novel, is more men like Dak.

I am bothered by the motif of expulsion or dropping out of school that has been consistent across these three extremely different novels about boys. In the girl book Mosh Pit, Simone’s best friend Cherry drops out of school early on, which is symbolic of the downward spiral that casts her completely outside of mainstream culture. Tellingly, Cherry’s dropout counterculture is populated primarily by boys and men, many of them musicians. While Cherry is, tragically, destined for the gutter, the boy books suggest that boys do not need formal schooling for success; indeed their success arrives serendipitously. Even Todd’s gambling, while not particularly
successful, is clearly a matter of luck, like Lee’s inheritance and Dak’s fame. It is hardly a wonder that only three of the novels targeted boys. They are obviously not reading, lurking as they are on the margins of society in an attempt, or as a result of trying, to fulfill an unattainable masculine ideal.

**Attention Boys and Girls**

When I began this project, I assumed that my focus would be the girls, as it typically has been in my research. I was prepared for some outrage and dismay, and also for some damn good reading (which I got). I did not experience outrage and dismay, just a creeping discomfort about the boys. Theirs is a truly confusing world in which they are encouraged not to pursue a formal education, in which they do not have many healthy role models or supports, and in which the models they have and the standards they are encouraged to reach leave them wounded and damaged. The books that I read were engaging and insightful, and I would be concerned if my critical analysis of the gender roles might prevent educators from recommending them. Implicit ideology is inevitable; certainly my own, both overt and implicit, has necessarily coloured, shaped, and informed my reading of these books. As Butler would say, we simply need to be as conscious as possible about the norms we encounter in texts. Not only do the characters have the possibility for disturbing the universe, we readers do as well.

---

**Notes**

1 Young adult fiction is a large category that embraces a wide range of different genres, from fantasy to realistic. The novels that I am reviewing fall into the category of adolescent problem fiction or the teenage problem novel (I use these terms interchangeably), in that each novel explores, in a realistic manner, a problem or problems that a particular teenager faces. The two workbooks, *Guyness* and *Girlness*, are not fiction, so I will occasionally generalize and discuss young people’s fiction and non-fiction.
Laura Robinson is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at the Royal Military College. Her academic interests centre on gender and queer studies, particularly in Canadian and children’s literature. Focusing on the representation of girlhood, she has published articles on L. M. Montgomery, Ann-Marie MacDonald, and Margaret Atwood, among others. Her short fiction has appeared in Wascana Review, torquere, Frontiers, Her Circle, and EnterText.