Bad Boys and Binaries: Mary Harker on Diana Wieler's *Bad Boy*

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Résumé: Dans le présent article, P. Nodelman conteste les conclusions que Mary Harker propose dans son analyse du roman *Bad Boy* de Diana Wieler, parue dans la revue *CCL*. D'une part, l'auteur concède que le comportement du héros, A.J., s'inscrit en faux contre les stéréotypes de l'hétérosexualité; d'autre part, il démontre que le second personnage principal, Tully, conforte la vision traditionnelle de l'homosexualité masculine. Sous des apparences contestataires et modernistes, le roman respecte les dichotomies de la morale occidentale et sanctionne la représentation classique de l'homosexualité masculine.

Summary: A response to an earlier *CCL* article, Mary Harker's "Tweaking the Canon: Diana Wieler's *Bad Boy*," this article challenges the idea that Wieler succeeded in her attempt to "contest the dominant, monologic male discourse of the Bad Boy tradition." While *Bad Boy* challenges conventional ideas about heterosexual masculinity in its portrayal of one of its central characters, A.J., it seems to confirm other conventional ideas — ones about homosexual masculinity — in terms of its portrayal of its other central character, Tully. Wieler's choice of counterpointing Tully's story with A.J.'s in a surprisingly intricate and detailed way ends up implying that homosexual behaviour is always other than and opposite to heterosexual behaviour, in just about every way imaginable. In indulging in this kind of traditional thinking by means of binary oppositions, the novel supports many stereotypical (and surely inaccurate) ideas about the meaning and nature of male homosexuality — stereotypes that are unfortunately still all too current in our culture.

What follows is primarily a response to Mary Harker's essay "Tweaking the Canon: Diana Wieler's *Bad Boy*," which appeared in *CCL*'s recent special issue on boys and men. I felt the need to explore my response to what Harker wrote about Wieler's intriguing novel because I found her ideas about the novel so completely right, and somehow, also, unpersuasive — incomplete. I agree with Harker's thesis — that Wieler's intent in *Bad Boy* "goes beyond the mere status quo" (24) in terms of conceptions of maleness, and that Wieler most significantly wants "to contest the dominant, monologic male discourse of the Bad Boy tradition" (29). But surprisingly, Harker takes it for granted that Wieler's purpose is in itself monological — that Wieler had this one thing on her mind and that she did exactly what she set out to do. Personally, I find *Bad Boy* more complex than that, and in some important ways, a lot more conventional in its expression of ideas about masculinity than Harker wants to suggest — and therefore, I'm afraid, a lot less healthy.

Harker's reading centres on the ways in which the hockey player A.J. comes to terms with his discovery of his best friend Tully's homosexuality, and on how the discovery opens up a space for alternate social codes — for the explorations of other ways of understanding and of being male. But in considering all this, Harker has surprisingly little to say about Tully — about the ways in which

Wieler depicts *him* and *his* alternate way of being male. According to Harker, "Wieler emphasizes distinctness when the action is occasionally focalized through" Tully (27). But the "occasionally" is a little dismissive (and a bit of an understatement), and Harker's insistence on "distinctness" neglects to notice how Tully might not be so distinct after all.

My own actual experience of male homosexual sex is as nonexistent as Wieler's inevitably must be — not necessarily something I'm proud of, but in this context, in which personal bias might well be a factor, I somehow feel obligated to own up to it. I'm not gay. Nevertheless, I've certainly read enough novels and seen enough movies about gay males — as understood, usually, from a straight point of view — to notice how much Tully shares with some common and surely distorted fictional stereotypes of homosexuality.

In understating Tully's presence in the novel, Harker creates the impression that Wieler has replicated a common failing of novels for children and young adults about intolerance. These novels often focus less on the problems of marginalized children who are being subjected to prejudice than they do on the problems of mainstream children who have to deal with prejudice directed at minoritized others. In Paula Fox's *Slave Dancer*, for instance, a white boy hijacked onto a slave ship learns to deal with his new knowledge of cruelty to black Africans; and in Lois Lowry's *Number the Stars*, a Christian girl protects her Jewish friend from Nazis in Denmark in World War II. These novels imply a white, Christian, middle-class (and in the case of *Bad Boy*, perhaps, heterosexual?) reader, in the process of learning the right tolerant liberal values and responsibilities towards less fortunate (but still marginalized) others. And that silences the voices and feelings of people who are actually oppressed — as Fox silences blacks and Lowry Jews, and as Harker more or less silences Tully's important contributions to the novel in her reading of it. But the reading is inaccurate. In fact, Wieler *doesn't* silence the minority voice. She provides Tully's point of view as well as A.J.'s. The problem is not silence, but what is being said.

If Harker had considered in more detail what Wieler shows us of Tully's thoughts, she might have expressed less confidence about her assertion that Wieler is intent on subverting the conventions of the traditional "Bad Boy" genre, as found in books like Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. True, the aggressively masculine A.J. learns to transcend the Bad Boy image the sports world wants to impose on him as an aggressive hockey player. But as Harker herself says, A.J. isn't the only Bad Boy in the novel. Tully, a boy bad enough in terms of conventional morality to be not only gay but also sexually active, is, exactly, the mischief-maker with the heart of gold ascribed to the Bad Boy of fictional tradition in the quotations from Thomas Kent and Edwin H. Cody with which Harker begins her essay.

Quoting Cody, furthermore, Harker says that, "since character or personality is 'given, static,' the boy does not mature or change dynamically — 'at best he learns to see' " (23). She claims that Wieler subverts this idea, as she clearly does in her portrayal of A.J. Yet Tully ends the novel as he began it, a free spirit dancing in joy despite the society that condemns his sexual orientation and

attempts to repress him. (He dances, furthermore, with a typical Bad Boy's playful imaginativeness, to the noiseless music of an imaginary guitar.)

So Tully is a spirit of eternally delightful and apparently unchanging boyishness. And it's clear that, as in the Bad Boy novels of tradition, we're intended to *admire* him. In his willingness to be so independent of convention and so boyishly playful, he represents a desirable alternative to the uptight machismo that A.J. is learning to see beyond as the novel progresses . But that he is being admired in this way is not necessarily so admirable an act on the part of the novelist.

In explicating this aspect of the novel, Harker might have referred to another relevant tradition of ideas about boys: the one represented by James Barrie's *Peter Pan*, whose refusal to grow up represents, not merely a defiance of social convention, but a somewhat unnerving rejection of everything usually considered responsible or mature. To be a Peter Pan is to be a force of nature, literally Pan-like, absolutely committed to egocentricity and self-absorption, absolutely unconcerned about the feelings or needs of others when they vary from one's own.

In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests that Barrie's particular celebration of eternal boyishness represents a wish-fulfilling escape from women and heterosexual desire. The eternally boyish hero of Barrie's adult autobiographical novels *Sentimental Tommy* and *Tommy and Grizel* "is treated throughout each of these astonishingly acute and self-hating novels both as man with a specific, crippling moral and psychological defect [the inability to feel desire for a woman who desires him] and as the very type of the great creative artist" (195). Wieler suggests something surprisingly similar, albeit without any hatred on her part or self-hatred on the part of her character. Tully happily both lacks desire for women *and* is a highly imaginative free spirit, destined to be a boy forever.

Indeed, Wieler suggests, as Barrie did, that the two automatically go together. Tully says that he first realized he was gay at the age of seven when he understood that his parents' boring normal life would never be his. A.J., astonished, thinks, "This didn't have anything to do with sex" (175) — but in this novel, curiously, it does: to be gay here is merely to fulfil one's destiny as an eternally irresponsible and immature free spirit, to not be suburban or "normal" or, therefore, heterosexual.

This is, of course, a stereotype. Not all the gay men of my acquaintance are unconventional or free-spirited. Some even live in suburbs and have accountants (or *are* accountants). Some worry enough to have ulcers. But the plot of *Bad Boy* ignores such possibilities. At the end of the novel, A.J., the heterosexual hero, becomes admirable by learning to change and by maturing, becoming an adult. But Tully, the homosexual hero, remains admirable by refusing to change — by remaining primitive, natural, unsocialized, boyish. He is admired not because he represents maturity, but because he seems inherently incapable of maturing.

Furthermore, Tully is one of only two homosexual characters in the novel — and the other one is shown to be a rather nasty sadist. For the many young readers who don't know much more about homosexuality than this novel shows them, these two portrayals establish a very narrow range of possible ways of being gay: you can be eternally boyish and immature like Tully, or you can be sadistic and vile, like

Tully's nasty friend Derek. While as much an enemy to conventional morality as Tully — and therefore fulfilling Wieler's general characterization of homosexuality — Derek expresses his disdain for convention in terms of despicable treatment of others. He is the eternally irresponsible Bad Boy as Hitler.

In fact, the novel operates throughout in terms of very rigid sets of either/ors: binary oppositions. The title clearly intends to represent ambiguously either or both of the two different Bad Boys whose point of view the novel shows us. Further, there are clear counterpoints between the events of the alternating narrations, as the boys experience different events with surprising similarities to each other. For instance, in two consecutive episodes, Tully and A.J. have confrontations with their fathers; and in two consecutive episodes, A.J. gets violent on the ice after he says, "Don't touch me!" (115) and Tully experiences sadomasochistic sex after someone touches him and he says "Don't" (117). It's clear we're expected to notice the counterpoints and make the comparisons — read the homosexual in the light of the heterosexual, and vice versa.

Harker points out some of the counterpoints in her discussion of how the language of hockey as reported by Wieler sounds suspiciously like men having sex with each other — and therefore, like the interwoven scenes describing Tully's sex life. It'd be interesting to consider the hockey scenes in terms of the relationships between the homosexual and the homosocial proposed by Sedgwick in *Between Men*. Wieler's novel offers classic descriptions of males arriving at the "proper" form of homosociality, or socially-approved nonsexual bonding with other males, by aggressively dismissing the possibility of homosexual attraction — by becoming, indeed, as homophobic as Wieler's hockey players.

Sedgwick suggests that homosocial bonding happens most frequently in classic fiction at climactic moments in which two men meet and reconcile over the body of a dead woman, earlier contested between the two men as a possession, and most often, killed by one of them. Such moments sum up what Sedgwick sees as the traditional purpose that the relationships between men and women have served in the past — to confirm and cement the more important relationships men have with each other. Something weirdly similar happens at the climactic moment of *Bad Boy*. In *Bad Boy*, the woman, Tully's sister, doesn't die—but she is nearly raped by A.J. Furthermore, she is raped as a sort of substitute for Tully, whom A.J. believes he feels desire for; and A.J. so fears and hates feeling the desire that he imagines the rape of the sister as a sadistic punishment of Tully: "'Do you get the message, Tulsa Brown?' ... He wanted to press an imprint of himself on her, on her skin" (170). In this way, even more weirdly, A.J.'s unwanted rape replicates the desired but patently sadistic sexual advances of Tully's sexual partner Derek — which Wieler presents without disapproving comment, presumably as normal homosexual activity. The implication is that what's aggressive and brutal for normal heterosexuals is actually okay fun for those "different" homosexuals.

In any case, the binaries are clearly worked out, and clearly opposite. And since Tully's story represents the homosexual as opposed to the heterosexual as

represented by A.J.'s story, everything that happens to him inevitably seems to come to stand for homosexual behaviour in general. Anyone who believed that it did (and it would seem logical that a young reader interested in a book of this sort would do just that) would have to reach a number of unfortunate conclusions.

First: A.J. feels tremendous rage, which he learns to hold in most of the time but releases in outbursts of violence. He is, in other words, typically "masculine" as traditionally understood — a savage who needs to learn how to control his savagery until the appropriate time for expressing it, in battle (or on the rink). But Tully is the opposite: open, expressive, uncontrolled always — and never, therefore, a victim of his own pent-up rage. Homosexuality is, therefore, essentially a form of eternal self-expression, of hedonism and irresponsibility. (Tully does manage control at one important moment, as he rejects A.J.'s declaration of love; more about that later.)

Second: A.J. is focused, too focused — he sees only how the world relates to himself immediately. He is therefore an extreme but still recognizable representation of conventional goal-oriented behaviour — the kind that supposedly wins men (and maybe also women?) success in our world. Wieler insists that A.J. needs to widen his focus, to learn to view the big picture in order to find a saner way of understanding his place in the world as a whole; only when he enlarges his focus, and becomes both less intensely goal-oriented and less intensely "macho," does he have success in hockey and in his relationship with a girl. Once more, then, Wieler does what Harker suggests: question conventional assumptions about both success and maleness. Indeed, she ties the two together.

Once more, also, however, Tully is exactly opposite to A.J. He is so *un*focused that he wants to totally lose concentration: he has a history of drug abuse, of giving in to the vague pleasure of numbness to normal experience. He apparently needs to learn some focus, develop some goals—but then, Wieler leaves us with that final picture of him remaining triumphantly unfocused. Since Tully is gay and A.J. straight, the unsophisticated implied reader I've been postulating really has no choice but to assume that Tully's lack of focus — his desire to resign from clear perception and enjoy pleasant numbness — is an innate part of his sexual orientation, an aspect of homosexuality that, once more, opposes it to heterosexuality. Homosexuality is essentially—guess what?—a form of hedonism and irresponsibility.

Third: In his life as an aggressively masculine hockey player, A.J. loves to inflict pain, and is a sadist. When he tries to express the same aggressiveness sexually, with Tully's sister, he is clearly shown to be at fault for doing so. Male heterosexuality, then, is not to be perceived as perhaps most people once did — as a form of aggression; this is what A.J. is in the process of learning. But in Tully's sex scenes, we see him as a masochist, being aroused by his partner's sadistic aggression. Homosexuality, apparently, preserves ideas of the masculine and the feminine now outmoded and unacceptable in heterosexuality. A homosexual is either someone who is as aggressive sexually as heterosexual males once were, or someone who passively receives and is aroused by the aggressiveness of that traditional male sexuality, as convention once assumed women are. Once

more, homosexuality, as Wieler envisages it, is peculiarly static and unchanging, while heterosexuality grows and evolves and becomes more mature and humane.

Fourth: That would seem to be contradicted towards the end of the novel, as both A.J. *and* Tully change enough to show some maturity. Both do it through acts of denial. A.J., typically heterosexual to begin with, learns to deny the socially-desirable role of enforcer, goon — Bad Boy. He gives up his aggressiveness, and learns to care more for his personal feelings than for the socially-approved behaviour that made him popular. Tully, however, has to give up something else — indeed, the exact opposite: not socially approved behaviour, but what he personally feels and desires, the opportunity to have sex with A.J.

We are told that Tully has deep, real feelings for A.J., that this declaration of love from A.J. is something he always wanted but felt to be hopeless; and the novel affirms that Tully is noble not to give in to his own desire or what is defined here as A.J.'s confusion. In the peculiar logic of the novel's binaries, it seems that Tully has nobly refused to "rape" A.J. (or as with Derek, be pleasantly raped by him?) as a counterpoint of A.J. attempting to rape Tully's sister. He understands beyond all the evidence that any homosexual activity for A.J., even sex he claims to want, would be a form of rape.

But the novel never implies even for a moment that A.J. might *not* be confused — that his attraction to Tully might be genuine. (If it were, I realize as I consider the possibility, it would probably render the novel unpublishable as a book for young people. Not only might Wieler have to describe what the two boys actually *did* together after announcing their mutual attraction, but the fact that both her protagonists were gay and happy would certainly define the book as publishable only for a small specialized market. We may be more liberated about homosexuality these days than we once were — but it's a sad fact that we're nowhere near *that* liberated yet.) The novel also never implies that there might be something peculiar in Tully's strange act of self-denial, so totally contrary to everything else in Tully's character — and as it turns out, only a momentary aberration, the opposite of what Wieler celebrates about Tully in the final scene. Would we so readily read Tully's refusal the same way if the two characters involved in this situation were of different sexes? Somehow I don't think so.

Consider: a girl whom a boy has always secretly loved suddenly and unexpectedly declares her love and offers herself to him; but he decides she really doesn't mean it and that their friendship is more important than romantic love and sexual satisfaction, and he rejects the offer. I suspect most people would see him as lacking self-confidence or being strangely inconsistent (or being a latent homosexual in denial?).

I conclude, therefore, that the novel is suggesting that it's good when homosexuals give up their opportunities for sex with willing partners, and probably not so good or so clearly healthy when heterosexuals do the same thing.

I tend to read this act of noble renunciation as a variation, and something of an advance, on a pattern traditional for some decades now in novels for young adults about gays: a character discovered to be gay must die before the novel ends, thus renouncing everything. A classic (and notorious) example is Isabelle

Holland's *The Man Without a Face*, in which the gay character dies even after he nobly refuses to give in to the young male protagonist's amorous advances. Here in *Bad Boy* only sex is renounced, and only with one particular partner — but it clearly *must* be renounced in order for readers to understand that Tully has matured. A.J. matures by learning to care less about social conventions and "normal" values, Tully by learning to care more; A.J. wins our praise by becoming less masculinely aggressive, Tully, presumably, by becoming less self-indulgently gay. (Or perhaps he is merely confirming that he is inherently masochistic — that he gets pleasure by depriving himself of pleasure?)

These are dangerous generalizations. I happily admit that Wieler doesn't actually make them. But the novel clearly allows them — even, in a way, demands them. For all of Harker's insistence that *Bad Boy* is opening up new ways of thinking about being male, its main characteristic is its structure of oppositions and counterpoints and, therefore, its adherence to the basic structures of traditional patriarchal thinking: the division of everything in the world we perceive into binary oppositions. In this novel, homosexuality is understood to be exactly opposite to heterosexuality in every way imaginable — just as femininity traditionally used to be understood as opposite to masculinity in every way imaginable. Both assumptions are clearly wrong.

It's not my intention to single out Wieler for attack. Quite the opposite. Her novel is subtle, complex, interesting, and brave enough to tackle hard topics. But what it describes so subtly and so bravely nevertheless represents current mainstream attitudes towards homosexuality, in all *their* subtlety and complexity (and wrongness). Like them, the novel expresses tolerance; and it does, as Harker suggests, open the door to different forms of being male. But it also, I believe, confirms some questionable and popular ideas about the nature of at least some of those other forms.

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