

# “Anatomy by Braille”:<sup>1</sup> An Annotated Bibliography of Canadian Young Adult Literature about Emerging Sexuality

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**Résumé:** Même si, dans le domaine de la littérature de jeunesse, l'on ne peut signaler aucune poursuite judiciaire invoquant la nouvelle loi sur la pornographie enfantine (section 163 du Code criminel canadien), il n'en reste pas moins vrai que celle-ci pourrait mettre en cause le libre accès à plusieurs romans pour adolescents. Dans cette optique, l'auteur examine un échantillonnage d'oeuvres récentes et déjà célèbres qui traitent de la sexualité des adolescents; elle conclut que les scènes dites explicites sont essentielles à la structure, au sens et à la compréhension de chacun des romans répertoriés.

**Summary:** No Canadian literature for young adults seems to have been recently challenged under Canada's obscenity law (Section 163 of the Canadian Criminal Code). As teenagers are interested in their developing human sexuality, many of the novels directed to them do contain sexually explicit material. The intersection of young adult reading interests, the values of some adults connected with teens and the emphasis on community standards in Section 163, gives rise to a tension that could result in potential challenges to materials. A sample of award winning and otherwise notable Canadian young adult novels which contain some sexually implicit content is presented. Without exception the inclusion of this material was found to be an important part of each work that helped to further the theme.

In an article in *School Libraries in Canada*, Kevin Major points out that “Sex and strong language play no greater or lesser part in my work than they do in real life. The truth is both are preoccupations of adolescents as are their family life, school, their relationships with their friends” (16). It is not surprising that young adults like to read about sex or that young adult authors think it is important and appropriate to explore this theme in their writing. When does this work unduly exploit sex and thus become obscene?<sup>2</sup> There is no clear answer. When I searched the library, book trade and general periodical literature of the last ten years, I did not find information about any Canadian novel for young adults that had been challenged in court under Section 163 of the *Canadian Criminal Code*, the part that deals with “Offenses Tending to Corrupt Morals.” Concern tended to focus on adolescent use of readily available, largely American, adult materials including videos, comic books, and magazines like *Playboy* and *Hustler*, as well as the lyrics of some popular teenage music.<sup>3</sup> Still, it is easy to understand how tension arises, given both young adult reading interests and the somewhat vague definition of obscene material offered in Canadian law.<sup>4</sup> The interpretation of Section 163 is, of course, sensitive to shifts in community-based acceptance of explicit material.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, young adults are still minors under the law and there are concerns, although these are not strongly supported by research, that

they could, simply because of their age, be adversely affected by exposure to sexually explicit material, even to material that is not considered to be legally obscene for adult audiences.<sup>6</sup> Finally, as reflected in challenges to young adult novels with sexual content,<sup>7</sup> some individuals, including parents and educators, may find such works objectionable because of their personal values.

The following bibliography consists of a sample of materials which include some sexually explicit content. It is not comprehensive. Works intended primarily for an adult audience, such as Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, have been excluded. It was difficult to identify relevant titles. Authoritative subject access to contemporary Canadian young adult fiction is scarce and, even if it did exist, would be unlikely to index this type of content. I used a number of sources to identify prospective titles including the Canadian Children's Book Centre's *Our Choice* lists from 1984/85 through 1994, lists of award winners, and guides to the literature.<sup>8</sup> Works were included if they were prominent [award winning or by a well-known author] or if they helped to show the diversity of topics dealt with in Canadian YA literature that includes sexual content. All titles except *Bird at the Window* were still in print at the time this bibliography was compiled.

As you look through the titles, you will notice that they represent some of our most respected young adult authors, that they come from diverse regions of Canada, and that they have been written by both men and women with both male and female protagonists. While the annotations focus on the sexual aspects of each work, they also describe the general nature of the novel to give some sense of the appropriateness and relative importance of this content within the book. Without exception, I found the inclusion of teenage sexuality to be an important part of the novels. It helped to develop the theme of each work and it was treated both realistically and sensitively. Given the high quality of these works and the interest of young readers in this topic, this bibliography might better be described as an introduction to the treatment of human sexuality in Canadian literature for young adults. I might add that there was nothing particularly Canadian about the sexual scenes described in these works other than that, depending on the season, the back seats of the cars tended to be colder and, of course, some of them took place in French.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

**Brett, Catherine.** *S.P. Likes A.D.* Toronto: Women's Press, 1989.

Ninth grader Stephanie Powell struggles with her emerging sexuality. She finds herself strongly attracted to classmate Anne Delaney and is confused and intrigued by these lesbian feelings. Stephanie has won a contest to create a large sculpture for her school. During the process of designing and crafting the sculpture she encounters situations which allow her to explore her ambivalent sexual orientation. A long-term lesbian couple loan their studio and personal assistance. Stephanie discovers her art teacher is gay. Interactions with friends

and family expose her to both condemning and accepting attitudes towards homosexuality. Actual sexual contact in this novel does not go beyond an accidental arm brushing between the two girls. The description of Stephanie's response is quite erotic. I include this novel in this bibliography because of the recent problems associated with the importing of gay and lesbian literature for adults.<sup>9</sup> Well written and published by a prominent press, this novel is important because it is one of only a few young adult titles dealing with the theme of sexual orientation.

*Our Choice*, 1990.

**Choyce, Lesley.** *Good Idea Gone Bad*. Halifax: Formac Publishing, 1993.

Mick, Dariana and Alex form a band whose "raunchy music and even raunchier lyrics could be heard on any number of headsets all over Halifax and in the far distant parts of Dartmouth" (74). Adult characters in the novel are particularly concerned about the lyrics of their smash hit, "The Condom Song," publicly performed for the first time at an audition for a school dance gig. The lyrics, which encourage the practise of safe sex, are included in the text. This book explores, among other themes, the frequently-made link between obscenity and rock music. Readers will be intrigued by the protagonists' agonizing commitment to well thought out ideals and enjoy the novel's lively description of the teenage music scene.

*Our Choice*, 1994.

**Gravel, François.** *Deux heures et demie avant Jasmine*. Montreal: Éditions du Boréal, 1991.

———. *Waiting for Jasmine*, Translated from the French by Sheila Fischman. Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre (Groundwood), 1993.

Nothing actually happens in this award-winning French Canadian novel: Raymond talks into his younger sister's Fisher Price tape recorder as he waits, condoms nearby, for the date with his girlfriend when he is to lose his virginity. This novel offers a compelling description of adolescent male sexuality.

Governor General's Literary Award for Children's Literature, French Text, 1991. *Our Choice*, 1994.

**Major, Kevin.** *Thirty-Six Exposures*. NY: Delacorte, 1984.

Major's award-winning works are routinely under seige for all sorts of reasons, including sexually graphic scenes. Michael masturbates in *Hold Fast*. Chris thinks about sleeping with a couple of hookers in *Far From Shore*. Major really gets down to business in *Thirty-Six Exposures*. Lorne, an amateur photographer, convinces his group to submit their history project as a series of photographs. A lot more than pictures gets exposed in this novel. Lorne makes out with his

girlfriend (numerous times with a heavy emphasis on zippers being undone), sees his best friend go all the way on a double date, views a stag movie, and has a box of condoms discovered by his mother. Major's writing is very realistic. Rather than just alluding to these activities, he describes them concretely. This faithfulness to reality is probably what makes these works so relevant to readers. While sexuality is a strong, recurring theme throughout most of Major's work, it is usually only one of several related to the lives of his protagonists. *Thirty-Six Exposures* is actually about a young man's struggle for independence and personal identity as he reaches the end of adolescence in his final year of high school. The sexual scenes are just a few of many meaningful events Lorne undergoes in the book, including the tragic death of his best friend and his decision to pursue a university education.

**Nielsen, Susin.** *Snake* [A Degrassi book]. Toronto: Lorimer, 1991.

The Degrassi Books, based on the Degrassi Junior High / Degrassi High television series, centre around social issues facing young adults today. Unlike the squeaky clean series novels produced by Paul Kropp with school and school library audiences in mind, the Degrassi books take more risks. For example, *Snake* deals with a grade nine boy's worries about his sexual orientation. Snake, the protagonist, although not a star athlete like his older brother, has just made the Junior Boy's Basketball team. The brother, now away at college, announces to his family that he is gay. Snake begins to worry that he may be gay too. There is one mildly graphic scene with a teammate in the showers after a practice. Real-life problem books like the Degrassi series are bound to contain the type of material that is likely to be objectionable to some.

*Our Choice*, 1992.

**Plante, Raymond.** *Le Dernier des raisins*. Montreal: Éditions Québec/Amerique, 1986.

———. *The Big Loser*. Translated from the French by Alan Brown. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1989.

The protagonist never goes all the way to act on his impulses but freely admits "sex, sex, nothing but sex! I'm a bit obsessed with it, I'll admit" (51). Fifteen-year-old François is a teenage consumer of pornography. His mother discovers issues of *Hustler*, *Penthouse* and *Playboy* which he has stolen from the neighbourhood newsstand. He and a couple of friends switch an X-rated movie for a horror film at a co-ed Halloween party. This behaviour is presented as an ordinary part of a teenage boy's life. A delightful and funny story of a boy's first love, which relates the crazy and heartwarming antics employed by the hero as he tries to win the heart of his beloved over the course of a school year.

Canada Council Children's Literature Prize, French Text, 1985. Nominated for the 1988 Honor List, IBBY. *Our Choice*, 1990.

**Porter, Helen Fogwell.** *January, February, June or July: A Novel.* St. John's: Breakwater Books, 1988.

This is the story of Heather Novak's first teenage love affair. Heather and Frank never have intercourse, although heavy petting does lead to pregnancy, which Heather ends with an abortion. The sexual activity is described realistically and in detail as are, more importantly, Heather's feelings and responses to these experiences. This is a serious coming-of-age story that uses the protagonist's movement to adult sexuality as one vehicle for growth.

Young Adult Canadian Book Award, 1989. *Our Choice*, 1990

**Razzell, Mary.** *Snow Apples.* Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1984.

Set in coastal British Columbia at the end of the second world war, *Snow Apples* tells the story of sixteen-year-old Sheila Brary's passage to adulthood. Sheila is confronted with the constraints of her gender. Her mother expects her to quit school, work to support the family and marry as quickly as possible to control and protect her emerging female sexuality. This novel includes a few explicit descriptions of sexual encounters with boyfriends and adult men (an employer and a neighbour). Sheila becomes pregnant. Alone, she goes through a self-induced abortion which is graphically described. This is a powerful, well-written story.

*Our Choice*, 1985/86.

**Stacey, Cherylyn.** *I'll Tell You Tuesday If I Last That Long.* Edmonton: Tree Frog Press, 1989.

This is a story of early adolescence. Fourteen-year-old Vicky confronts a number of problems such as her mother's remarriage and being dragged into teenage activities which are not very attractive to her. These include dates with Blake, a popular boy who cannot remember her name and does not care because he is only interested in one thing, leading to a lot of backseat wrestling scenes. Many young teenage girls will find their experience of emerging sexuality mirrored in Vicky's.

*Our Choice*, 1990.

**Truss, Jan.** *Bird at the Window.* Toronto: Macmillan, 1974.

Angela's first sexual relationship with good, steady Gordy is not very satisfactory simply because she does not love him. When she discovers that she is pregnant, she seems to try to ignore this. She continues with a plan to travel to Europe. She does not have an abortion but uses every opportunity to try to induce a miscarriage and eventually has a child which dies shortly after birth. Returning to her home in Alberta, she becomes engaged to Gordy. At the last minute she

decides not to marry him but to pursue what is important to her rather than what is expected of her. Sexual encounters and attempts to auto abort are graphically described, lending realism to a serious novel about the role of love and relationships in young women's lives.

Search-for-a-new-Alberta-Novelist Award, 1972.

#### NOTES

- 1 This phrase was taken from Cherylyn Stacey's *I'll Tell You Tuesday If I Last That Long*. Edmonton: Tree Frog Press, 1989: 92-93.
- 2 For an accessible overview of Canada's obscenity/pornography legislation see "Offenses Tending To Corrupt Morals," 232-238 in *Martin's Annual Criminal Code 1995*, Aurora, ON: Canada Law Book, 1995.
- 3 See, for example, "Police seizures chill the comic book trade," *Quill and Quire* 57, 6 (June 1991): 13 and "Sons and lovers: In the realm of sex and today's teenage boys," *Toronto Life Fashion* 27, 12 (Summer 1993): 118-120+.
- 4 Neither the author of this article nor *CCL* nor any member of its editorial staff maintain that any of the works cited in this article are actually obscene according to the provisions of Section 163 of the *Canadian Criminal Code*.
- 5 For an overview of the history of and current issues associated with obscenity legislation in Canada see James R. Robertson's *Pornography*, Current Issue Revue 84-E3 of the Research Branch of the Library of Parliament, Ottawa, 1993.
- 6 For an excellent discussion of children and pornography in both Canada and the United States see "Pornography and child protection" (175-197) in Gordon Hawkins and Franklin E. Zimring's *Pornography in a Free Society*, Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- 7 For an overview of the topic of challenges to Canadian materials for children and young adults see *CCL* 68 (1992), a thematic issue on censorship. Challenges to at least one of the items included in this bibliography, Kevin Major's *Hold Fast*, are described in Hugh Bennet's article "The top shelf: The censorship of Canadian children's and young adult literature in the schools."
- 8 Including Fay Blostein's *Connections: Paperback Reading for Young Adults*, Toronto: OLA, 1988; Sharon Spredemann Dreyer's *Bookfinder 4*, Circle Pines, Minn.: AGS, 1989; Michele Landsberg's *Guide to Children's Books*, Markham: Penguin, 1985; and Jon C. Stott and Raymond E. Jones *Canadian Books for Children: A Guide to the Authors and Illustrators*, Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988.
- 9 For an overview of a well-known Canadian example of community and government sensitivity to gay and lesbian literature see "Delayed court proceedings frustrating — Little Sisters" in *Feliciter* 40, 1 (January 1994): 31, 44.

#### WORKS CITED

Major, Kevin. "Challenged materials: An author's perspective." *School Libraries in Canada* 4, 3 (Spring 1984): 15-16.

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