

Growing Up and the Work of Teen Narrative

Alice, I Think. Susan Juby. Thistledown, 2000. 222 pp. \$14.95 paper. ISBN 1-894345-12-6. *Graveyard Girl*. Wendy A. Lewis. Red Deer, 2000. 190 pp. \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-88995-202-7. *Leslie's Journal*. Allan Stratton. Annick, 2000. 200 pp. \$9.95 paper. ISBN 1-55037-664-0.

In any given room of "grownups," most people will say without hesitation that they would never wish to endure adolescence again. The rites of passage that must be navigated to maturity invoke perils that are singularly terrifying — intense feelings and behaviours notable for their force and mutability. "When adolescence is over, who we are and what we might become are not as open to change. We are never as flexible again," writes the child development theorist and psychoanalyst Louise J. Kaplan in *No Voice Is Ever Wholly Lost* (100). Indeed, says Kaplan, the depressive moods, heartbreak, nostalgia, and grief that distinguish adolescence betray an inner emotional struggle akin to mourning, as the developing child struggles to let go of the bittersweet innocence of early life. The adolescent looks forward to acquiring the sexual powers of an adult, but she recoils from the frightening moral responsibilities of living without the dependencies of childhood. Passionate longings heighten her awareness of social injustice, yet obsessive musings impede her ability to act to improve the lot of humanity. Slowly, her idealizations of the past are transformed into adult social ideas. However much she may mourn the past, the adolescent is inclined to advance and keep thrusting toward a future. She must find out who she really is, and so she fervently engages parents, friends, lovers, and peers in this work. Parents are now considered from a new perspective, complete with tragic dimensions in which they are no longer omnipotent, saintly, or heroic. In order to move forward, the adolescent must loosen her moorings from childhood and cast out to a perilous, unknown sea. The familiar markers are now gone, and until the new self is made, a variety of new idealized figures are embraced as role models: the superheroes of bedroom walls and rock music, fashionable heroes and heroines who are ruthless, glamorous, wealthy, powerful, and seductive, some even embodying the very instincts she struggles against. Adolescence is a time of revolution, with all of the violence, tumult, and unpredictability entailed — a time for experiencing feelings of annihilation, loneliness, despair, hopelessness, intoxication, chaos, and even madness (Kaplan 85-88).

The opening pages of Allan Stratton's *Leslie's Journal* do not at first prompt us

to feel as though we have stumbled upon the sacrosanct space of adolescent revolution. A plausible picture of a rebellious teen going through the troubling marital break-up of her parents animates the journal Leslie must keep in English class. Before long, however, a more distressing story of date rape and violence comes out. All is not well in this adolescent girl's world, and her relationships rapidly spiral out of control even whilst the protagonist learns reluctantly to accept interference from the steady and reliable aegis of school, family, and law authorities. *Leslie's Journal* may serve as a narrative aid for teens reflecting on the nature of love and hate in dating and may also inspire the confidence to seek help in working out the brutal dilemmas of violence when it emerges in peer relationships. The book will engage adolescent readers who desire independence and yet who feel simultaneously the need for parents to be there in those moments when ugly secrets make unbearable the process of mourning the loss of childhood on their own.

Alice, I Think by Susan Juby similarly places us in contact with the anti-social aspects of the adolescent scene. Alice, whom we come to know through journal confidences, is an individual becoming autonomous as a total personality. In her derelict, narcissistic behaviour, conjured through her wildly sharp-written observations and guarded reproaches, the adolescent is a potential revolutionary able to sublimate her difficulties into the perfectly social act of revolutionary writing. The new social order for which Alice strives lies in the future and is an ideal one. What matters in this world are the things teens most care about: fashion ("metallic pink barrettes," "stretch pants and horn-rimmed glasses and a cardigan. . . . It was amazing" [36-37]), "life experiences" ("People who date regularly must die young" [74]), little brothers ("I think MacGregor is just so great" [45]), stupid or boring counselors ("Death Lord Bob . . . I was in no mood to help him out" [37]), mothers ("She has been deep into her granola routine — meditating, playing sucky new-age music, and drinking gallons of Wandering Serenity tea" [33]), and other such objects that make thinkable for the adolescent the uniqueness of relationships between human beings and being a person in the world. In 1960, D.W. Winnicott advanced the term "use of an object" where he talked about the venting of destructive impulses in youth and how an object must be able to survive the developing child's destructive attacks if it is to be placed in the sphere of external reality (Rudnytsky xii). Juby's adolescent Alice gives readers a very funny and smart glimpse into the smothering confines of adolescence punctuated by the aggressive, mercurial opening up of undaunted and enterprising female consciousness.

Graveyard Girl by Wendy A. Lewis is a series of short stories purportedly linked thematically by the common memory, revisited by each protagonist, of an event from high school — a mock "Royal Wedding" in which each boy or girl played a role. A year after graduation, each participant narrates a personal reflection that sets into tension the idealism and romance of youth and the harsher realities of adult maturity. The structure doesn't work. The strong desires that assert themselves in the chaos of adolescence end up feeling misrecognized, forgotten, constrained, or waylaid in the painful accommodations that must be made by the characters to home and school life in the adventure of growing up. Within this scenario, the adolescent need for articulation and direction, as well as the use books provide through aesthetic and moral energy to help individuals figure out the world and affirm their humanity, just does not happen. *Graveyard Girl* may perhaps excite the interest of a small readership of adolescents caught up in the "romance" of "the Royal Wedding," but overall the book falls short of offering the kinds of magical

operations (through sustained psychological, ethical, or aesthetic depth) that would give the book real staying power. While some of the stories in *Graveyard Girl* are strongly delineated (and inclusive, including meditations on same-sex love, racism, youth sexuality, pregnancy, assault, poverty, drug use, Columbine, the Internet), the book as a whole lacks cohesiveness. The Royal Wedding of Diana and Charles is ancient history to modern teens, and while Lewis's enchantment with Princess Diana is clear, its deployment as a symbolic device lacks sufficient subtlety to stay engraved on a reader's heart. While providing some charged moments of insight, the book does not sound like an honest contemporary teen voice, perhaps because the author has so obviously proscribed her own self-expression over teen culture of the present.

The most stressful junctures of a developing child's life include crises, painful situations, or embarrassing, shame-laden, tragic issues. Good books bring these episodes into the open, making them public, therefore giving adolescents permission to talk about them. Especially noteworthy within the triad of books reviewed here is the way in which the first-time Canadian authors have all utilized the journal and the first-person narrative form as a powerful means of presenting young adolescent protagonists as developing, intelligent persons. Stratton's Leslie is memorable for her straightforward, brave, and honest telling of a treacherous tale. While a victim, the protagonist is even more significantly the author of her own recovery and destiny. Similarly, Juby's Alice engages us with an extremely sophisticated, "deconstructed" Alice, a regular Canadian whiz kid of a British Columbia Interior "Wonderland" whose future may better reside in Derridean deconstruction than Napster nostalgia. Lewis makes us think about memory and its haunting, redemptive strains, and how dialogue with the voices of adolescence makes living a life worthwhile. Taken together, the books encourage and help adolescents grow beyond the loss of childhood to a new strength of spirit and achievement.

Works Cited

- Kaplan, Louise J. *No Voice is Ever Wholly Lost*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995.
Rudnytsky, Peter L., ed. *Transitional Objects and Potential Spaces: Literary Uses of D.W. Winnicott*. New York: Columbia UP, 1993.
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For Love of Puns and Opera

The Great Poochini. Gary Clement. Greenwood, 1999. Unpag. \$16.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-331-5.

Some consider puns a lesser form of humour, but for those of us they tickle, this unusual picture book forms a wonderfully witty collection on the unlikely theme of dogs that sing opera. But who is the implied reader?