

## *Editorial: Transgressing Gender Norms in Canadian Young Adult Fiction*

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In March 2000, a depressed fourteen-year-old boy committed suicide by jumping off the Patullo Bridge in Surrey, British Columbia. He had been bullied at school, and his peers had labelled him a homosexual. Although his grief-stricken family denied that Hamad really was gay, at that point his actual sexual orientation was irrelevant. The crucial factor was his school-mates's *perception* that he was gay. In some subtle way, whether he realized it or not, Hamad had transgressed the invisible boundaries that contain "normal" heterosexual behaviour as defined by his teenage peers. But how did those "norms" come to be so rigidly defined? Did he and his school-mates have no imaginative models whatsoever for behaviour outside of those "norms"?

News of this tragic incident prompted me to wonder whether we who write for young people (and particularly for young adults) are doing enough to offer imaginative possibilities for gendered behaviour in the books we write. Are we still constructing the categories of "masculine" and "feminine" in rigid and stereotypical ways? Is it more difficult or less acceptable for a male character to be tender and nurturing than for a female to be strong and heroic? Do young people, both gay and straight, see options or imaginative spaces for themselves in our literature? Are gay and lesbian characters present at all — and, if they are, are they still represented as marginalized, as "other"?

These questions were the starting point for this special issue on transgressing gender norms. So — how *are* we doing? It seems that there is both good news and bad news on the gender front. The bad news is that, although there are numerous books with gay and lesbian characters or characters who otherwise resist gender stereotypes, rarely are these characters the protagonists of their own stories. Even more rarely are they allowed to *tell* their own stories in their own voices. The good news is that a number of recent books *do* explore issues of gender in ways that challenge old and rigid attitudes. Paulette Rothbauer's survey of Canadian young adult books with lesbian and gay characters shows that there is cause for both hope and disappointment and that writers of young adult fiction need to offer wider possibilities for an audience that often perceives our books as completely irrelevant to their lives. Judith Franzak's examination of two collections of postmodern fairy tales suggests that challenging gender norms is indeed a difficult business, but that the fairy tale, with its overdetermined male/female binaries, is one of the best forums for interrogating old

stereotypes. Theresa L. Cowan's careful study of two Canadian short stories demonstrates how preconceived notions about "gay" and "straight" can be powerfully challenged when the issues are placed in the minds and mouths of the questioning young people themselves. Finally, M. Sean Saunders's richly-nuanced reading of the representation of Marwen as a heroic female in Martine Bates's *Marmawell* trilogy exposes the dangers of reading gender too hastily or too simplistically.

How are we doing? We've made a start down the road, but we haven't travelled far enough. Challenging entrenched gender stereotypes requires courage and imagination on the part of writers and publishers alike. We all need to heed the words of one of Rothbauer's teen respondents: "Show me the possibilities!"

*Joanne Findon*