

The Gender Zones

Boys' Own: An Anthology of Canadian Fiction for Young Readers. Ed. Tim Wynne-Jones. Viking, 2001. 298 pp. \$26.00 cloth. ISBN 0-67-089304-8. Puffin Canada, 2002. \$18.00 paper. ISBN 0-14-130941-5. *Girls' Own: An Anthology of Canadian Fiction for Young Readers.* Ed. Sarah Ellis. Viking, 2001. 348 pp. \$26.00 cloth. ISBN 0-67-089344-7. Puffin Canada, 2002. \$18.00 paper. ISBN 0-14-130993-8.

The cover illustrations of these two companion anthologies of short stories for young readers depict pre-teenage boys and girls engaging differently in the act of reading. The boys on the cover of Tim Wynne-Jones's *Boys' Own* run together across a field, each with a hardcover volume under his arm, as though they are searching for a space in which to read. In contrast, the girls on the cover of Sarah Ellis's *Girls' Own* face different ways and are lost in separate imaginative worlds; the girl depicted in the foreground has looked up from her open book as though pausing in her reading to reflect on the words before her. Perhaps she is attempting to consider her role as the implied reader of a text or is trying to negotiate the text's projected images and messages about gender, race, class, nation, and sexual identity — images and messages that she is likely not actively encouraged to reflect upon or resist.

It should not be surprising that these covers are designed to attract real boys and girls into experiencing this engagement with reading themselves. The stories in both books are well chosen for this purpose: each volume contains twenty stories or novel excerpts, all of which have been published between 1985 and 2000 by authors as diverse as William Bell, Rick Book, Brian Doyle, Deborah Ellis, Monica Hughes, Thomas King, Joy Kogawa, Jean Little, R.P. MacIntyre, Kit Pearson, Nazneen Sadiq, Cora Taylor, W.D. Valgardson, Ian Wallace, Jordan Wheeler, and Diana Wiener; stories by Julie Johnston, Joan Clark, and editors Ellis and Wynne-Jones appear in both volumes. Although some of the novel excerpts are less successful as self-contained stories, most of the selections work because they depict with sympathy and humour the trials, tribulations, and rites of passage of a variety of boys and girls. As is the case with many real boys and girls, the boy and girl characters in these 40 stories are not always the protagonist of their own life story but are observers and participators in larger dynamics of family, school, and friends.

And yet, it is worth considering what dominant models and images of masculinity and femininity are projected onto younger boy and girl readers by these anthologies overall, given that the mutual exclusion of "Boys' Own" and "Girls' Own"

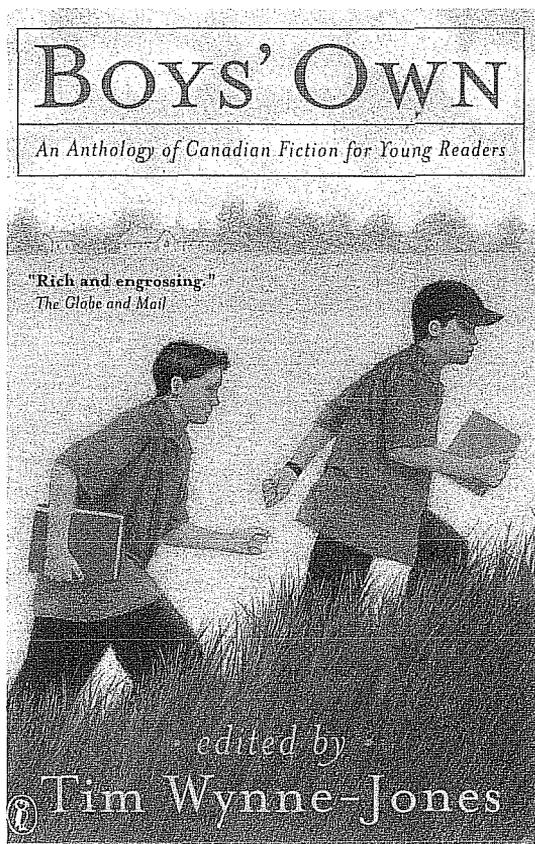


Image 1: James Bentley, *Boys' Own: An Anthology of Canadian Fiction for Young Readers*, ed. Tim Wynne-Jones (2001)

necessarily reinforces a binary gender ideology that assumes that boys and girls have (or ought to have) separate sets of feelings, motivations, structures, responses, and needs. Whether gender is seen as an essential set of characteristics or a series of cultural constructs or a combination of the two, it is necessary to examine the images and messages found in these stories to evaluate how "gender" is packaged and presented to younger readers — in other words, how the characters in each volume become metonymic of an ideal "boyiness" and "girliness" that real boys and girls are invited to embrace as part of their development toward gendered adults. Such an examination of this constructed ideal should begin with a closer look at the readers depicted on both covers, all of whom are white and middle-class: the boys act while the girls react; the girls escape through reading, whereas the boys escape physically. Although it is also worth wondering whether these images of boys and girls (or images of boyiness and girliness) are in fact meant to appeal to the *parents* of younger readers — those who are perhaps more likely than younger readers to buy these collections — more to the point is that this active/reactive binary found here anticipates what kinds of boys and girls will appear in the texts themselves.

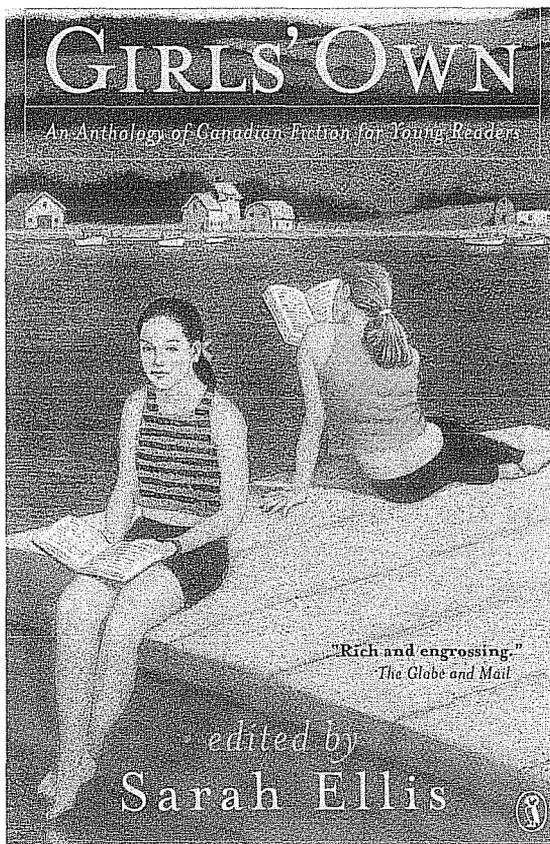


Image 2: James Bentley, *Girls' Own: An Anthology of Canadian Fiction for Young Readers*, ed. Sarah Ellis (2001)

In her editorial to this special issue of *Canadian Children's Literature* focusing on the transgression of gender norms in Canadian young adult fiction, Joanne Findon wonders about the range of "imaginative possibilities for gendered behaviour" currently available in the works within that genre. More specifically, she seeks to explore two key points: whether gay and lesbian characters are at all present in this corpus of texts and whether these texts still construct "masculine" and "feminine" in rigid and stereotypical ways (6). Findon's first point is developed further in Paulette Rothbauer's overview of Canadian texts for younger readers that feature, either in positive or negative ways, gay or lesbian characters: as Rothbauer notes, the decision to include or to absent gay and lesbian characters is a political one, directly linked to the reinforcement of or the challenge to the dominant ideology that presents heterosexuality as normal and normative (12-13). In these two anthologies, the question of the presence or absence of gay and lesbian characters is very easily answered: there are none. To consequently damn these two volumes for this absence may be legitimate, but I suggest that such a criticism is too easy for several reasons. Besides the fact that, as Rothbauer further points out, the sample

of positive representations of gay and lesbian characters in Canadian young adult fiction is not exactly extensive (and thus this absence is in no way restricted to these two volumes), such a criticism would create another reductive binary, one between gay and heterosexual. And so, while it is certainly true that none of the characters in these two books are explicitly gay or lesbian, it must also be emphasized that the majority of these characters — particularly in Wynne-Jones's anthology — are not shown expressing sexual and/or romantic interest for members of the opposite sex either. If evaluated against a dictionary definition that considers heterosexuality to be "sexual desire or behavior directed toward persons of the opposite sex," then most of these characters are not technically heterosexual.

It would be more fruitful, I would suggest, to consider how the characters in these two books *perform* masculinity and femininity, a process theorized in Judith Butler's oft-quoted seminal works *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993). In other words, when reading the mainstream possibilities (to borrow Rothbauer's phrase) that these collections describe and proscribe onto their respective groups of boy and girl readers, what range of actions, behaviours, attitudes, emotions, or expressions are contained under the rubrics of male and female, masculine and feminine, boys' own and girls' own, boyness and girlness? Wynne-Jones states in his introduction to *Boys' Own* that his selection of texts reflects his notion of what it means to be a boy: "a boy is, typically, brave and scared, full of stuttering self-confidence one moment and as wobbly as a first bike-ride the next. Boys are thoughtful and reckless, amiable and gross, noisy and withdrawn, smart and, sometimes, thick as a brick!" (vii). And yet, the range of possibilities suggested by this comment becomes negated in Wynne-Jones's preconceptions of what "might appeal especially to boys" (viii) that affected his reading of possible texts for inclusion in this volume:

. . . I found myself thinking, as I read, about all those traditional, noble, boyish heroes and themes: Robinson Crusoe cast ashore, Sir Percival questing for the Holy Grail, Huck Finn hightailing it out of town. I thought about what goes down in the Boy Zone: champs and bullies, strangers in a strange land, the lure of danger, getting lost in the wild, catching the big one, scoring the winning goal, scaring the pants off your brother. (viii-ix)

Accordingly, the boys in this anthology fight in combat, encounter bullies (one character even gets shot by a bully), play hockey, win tennis championships, earn money, get lost on the subway and in the wilderness, learn to use their wits, negotiate difficult relationships with siblings/parents/grandparents, and come to the rescue of the marginalized and the oppressed. In many of the stories, a test of courage is closely linked to the protagonist's masculinity, or, to put it differently, to his ability to be a man. Thus, the "boy zone" is less a metaphysical or a geographical space but rather an ideological one: it is this ideology, then, one that proscribes these behaviours and motivations onto real boys, that these books reveal as normal and normative. In short, prerogative, privilege, and power are all boys' own.

Whether such actions are assumed to be synonymous with male heterosexuality and whether any alternatives or challenges to this dominant model — including effeminacy, sensitivity, and non-aggression — are indicators of homosexuality is beside the point. The bottom line is that none of the characters in this collection

challenge these rigid norms. Again and again, the protagonists take for granted the way in which masculinity is defined by their environment; not only is there no room in the boy zone for any alternative boy, but any alternative for a boy is not shown to exist. Fred Dickinson, the sixteen-year-old protagonist in the excerpt from Julie Johnston's novel *The Only Outcast*, is the closest we get to a character who chafes under this rigid configuration: as Wynne-Jones explains in his introduction to this story, "He's having trouble living up to his father's expectations of him; he's a bit of a runt, unsure of himself, a stutterer" (1). To escape from his father, Fred is spending the summer of 1904 with his extended family in the country, where he thinks about his future as a man and agonizes over the mythical consequences of excessive masturbation. Even here, he cannot escape his father's reminders of his less-than-ideal masculinity: his father's letter hopes that "you are all behaving in a mannerly fashion and not causing your relatives any undue anxiety" and that "Frederick is taking advantage of the outdoor life to build his character and to strengthen his nerves" (7). For Fred, being a man means being a responsible adult, one who will not succumb to any emotion that takes him out of the realm of "proper" maleness. Unfortunately, this chapter from Johnston's novel does not explore this tension further and instead moves away from Fred as protagonist to Fred as audience of oral storytelling; his grandfather tells spine-tingling stories about past supernatural events that challenge the boys to repress the appearance of being afraid.

There is a somewhat wider range of female possibilities in Ellis's *Girls' Own*, but traditional assumptions about girlness prevail throughout the collection. The blurb on the back of the book promises that this is a "refreshingly modern take on a time-honoured tradition," "a book of stories that interprets who girls are and what sorts of tales will captivate them." Many of the girls follow patterns similar to those in Wynne-Jones's collection of boys: they encounter bullies (usually male), attempt to solve mysteries, negotiate difficult relationships with siblings/parents/grandparents, and stand up for themselves. Nevertheless, while the boys in Wynne-Jones's collection seek independence and self-sufficiency, many of the girls long to find a friend or to belong to a group. As well, much more frequently than their male counterparts who often achieve their goals or catch "the big one," the girls in this collection end their stories in stasis, with their main tensions unresolved.

There are a few explicit blurrings of gendered lines, but these occur in extreme circumstances, as in Deborah Ellis's story "The Breadwinner," about a young girl in Afghanistan who must dress as a boy to help the family survive under the Taliban, or they are oblique. In an excerpt from Joan Bodger's *Clever-Lazy*, a story that takes place "far away and on the other side of time" (20), the title protagonist amuses adults in her community by cooking for them and putting on plays. In the final play mentioned in this chapter, Bodger plays on the reader's expectations by describing the play from the point of view of Tinker, "a lonely young man who traveled the roads most of the year and who had no family of his own" (26):

There was an Emperor and an Empress, an easily-frightened princess, a dragon, an army (a rather small one), Daunted Knight and Proud Maiden. At first, Tinker thought that Proud Maiden was another knight, or perhaps a soldier, because she was dressed in armor and because she fought and ousted the dragon after Daunted Knight had failed. When he discovered she was a girl, he was quite sure that the knight would marry her if only she would become as docile and grateful as the princess. But that's not the

way the story turned out at all. Proud Maiden sent Daunted Knight away and decided to go on to other adventures by herself. (27)

Tinker is “unsettled” by this narrative of female self-sufficiency and resorts to a good girl/bad girl dichotomy: “How could a nice girl like you admire a girl like that? . . . I don’t think she’s really respectable” (27). When he explains that “Someone who is respectable does what is expected of her,” Clever-Lazy retorts: “But that’s why I like Proud Maiden best. She does the *unexpected*” (28). Given the mythological timeframe of the story and the fact that the Proud Maiden’s actions can occur only in the story within the story, this indirect challenge to the pervading image of woman as “docile and grateful” could be missed by younger readers who may not have yet learned to read between the lines.

To borrow the usage of Tinker in Bodger’s story, the girls and boys in these stories are all “respectable” because they all follow the gendered norms set out for them by their fictional environments. Therefore, what is most unsettling about these collections overall is less the presence of any of these stories individually but the recurring absence of a story that presents a viable alternative or a set of options in which real boys and girls can identify. Such a limited range of possibilities leads to two consequences for younger readers: those boys and girls who do not fit these narrow proscriptions for whatever reason — on the one hand, whether they are gay, lesbian, bisexual, bi-questioning, transgendered, or asexual; on the other hand, whether their levels of aggression, sensitivity, docility, imagination, action, reaction, testosterone, and estrogen are somehow not in perfect synch with their ostensible identity within binary gender ideology — will not be able to find fictional models in whom they can identify. As well, those boys and girls who do fit these models of boyness and girlness will not have the imaginative capacities to understand and support these real-life friends who do not. The one advantage of an explicit representation of an oppressed character is that even a younger reader can identify and understand that oppression, regardless of whether that oppression is ultimately challenged or redeemed. In the sheer absence of alternative boys and girls, real younger readers will be faced with the trauma that their individual form of boyness and girlness does not exist in the world. In short, they will never be selves; they will always be other.

Works Cited

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