Editorial: Lists, Secrets, Property, and Fears

The articles in this special issue of *Canadian Children's Literature* are all responses to a list of shared characteristics of "mainstream" Canadian children's literature appended to a *CCL* article on teaching Canadian children's literature that I wrote jointly with Perry Nodelman in 2000. Developed through the dialogue between two classes and two instructors, the list was important to us pedagogically as a demonstration of how knowledge is created in our discipline, first by considering the similarities and differences among a group of texts and then by an ongoing process of reconsidering and recontextualizing what is already known. Because it was developed on the basis of a small number of books, we understood that our list could not be considered either comprehensive or complete as an account of common characteristics of Canadian children's literature. But, for that very reason, we hoped that fellow scholars might join the conversation and point to additional matters that should be considered in any attempt to characterize this literature — or any literature. A call for papers on such questions invited them to do so. The four essays published here have taken up the invitation in quite different ways.

Grace Ko and Pamela J. McKenzie's response was to develop another list, one of East-Asian-Canadian fiction for children. Their list cuts across "mainstream" and "non-mainstream" texts, including work published by large and small presses, fiction written by Asian and non-Asian authors, narratives adapted from traditional tales and narratives featuring contemporary East-Asian characters. They confirm the importance to this group of Canadian texts of "outsider" protagonists who turn to adults other than parents to help them solve problems, gain information and knowledge, and define home — all matters mentioned in the 2000 list. In making their annotated list available to teachers and scholars, Ko and McKenzie express a confidence that access to a list of literature of and by a specific ethnocultural group will help to build the sensitivity, appreciation, and understanding of differences officially valued in contemporary multicultural Canada.

Adrienne Kertzer's response, to the contrary, is one of anxiety about the way in which developing a list of characteristics of "mainstream" literature tends to mask the tensions and complexities of specific texts. Using a group of Holocaust novels as her example, Kertzer argues that a focus on general categories such as plot or thematic structures diverts readers from

struggling with the difficult details and the traumas of history. Her own method is to provide a close reading of four novels with a focus on the situations of enunciation in them as well as on the choices writers and narrators make about what knowledge is shareable with children and what cannot be known or must remain secret.

The 2000 list identified a recurrent stylistic habit in Canadian children's literature of switches between two contexts. Perry Nodelman investigates a specific instance of this style, the narrative technique of double focalization, which uses the alternating perceptions of two characters to tell a story. Although Nodelman finds many examples of double focalization in Canadian children's literature, he discovers, in extending his analysis of this technique, that what appears to be dialogic discourse is often subsumed by a monologic narrative voice or a convergent resolution. In several of the novels he considers here, that resolution assumes ideas of private property and ownership that are fundamental to a capitalist system.

Finally, Rosemary Ross Johnston notes that many of the characteristics listed are not unique to Canadian children's literature and could also be seen as true of Australian children's literature. Focusing on the observations about fear and ambivalence in the list, she finds, however, that the inflections of the two national literatures are significantly different. If Canadian texts can be said to be preoccupied by divisions and borders, Australian texts register uneasiness about remoteness, what she also calls "far awayness."

The essays, then, recontextualize the provisional list of characteristics of "mainstream" Canadian children's literature by multiplication, challenge, extension, and comparison. In complicating the list in these ways, the writers appear to have found a few of the observations most productive to their thinking. The status of characters as outsiders, the relation of child characters to their parents and to other adults, questions of secrecy and knowledge, questions of what constitutes home and who can claim or achieve home, representations of fear and ways of managing fear, and the narrative switches between contexts and focalizations are identified in various of these essays as important subjects in the study of Canadian — as well as non-Canadian — children's texts. In addition, these essays as a group point to a widespread concern mentioned only in passing in the list developed by our classes, a concern with ideas of history. The 2000 list linked an interest in history in the books with the stylistic habit of switching between contexts: "The two contexts usually oppose the past and the present in some way, with resolutions often valuing letting the past go or moving beyond it" (35). The writers featured here find that ideas of history inform the texts they are considering in various ways. Many of the protagonists of the novels Ko and McKenzie list have lived through "significant historical events," as they note. Traumatic historical events are the background of all of the Holocaust novels Kertzer discusses; the narrative situations she de-

scribes also perform particular relations between generations and assume different ideas about the operations of time and memory. Nodelman specifically studies the representation of past and present as articulated by the 2000 list. He notes that, while claiming a safe place is often the end or the conclusion in the fiction he analyzes, such a claim depends on an ownership established prior to and outside the beginning of the narratives. Johnson identifies "being held accountable for the actions of past generations" as an overt fear in Australian children's literature, a concern she suggests is characteristic of postcolonial literatures, including those of Canada.

In an obvious way, of course, texts written by adults and addressed to children are always written to the present from the past in the hope of shaping the future. And, because narratives typically are set in the past tense, they are also in an obvious way about the past. But, on the evidence of these essays, the particular ways in which the pressures of history — and the attempts to disavow history — are registered by Canadian children's texts would be worth exploring further.

Finally, these essays replicate the uneasiness we and our classes felt in naming some texts "mainstream" and some "non-mainstream," as our instinct to enclose these descriptors in quotation marks suggests. As Nodelman and I described it in the 2000 article, the "mainstream" seemed to us to be made up of award-winning novels or novels by writers who had previously won major awards, to be published by a handful of central Canadian publishing houses, and to be written by white Canadians. But there are clear dangers in using such loose linkages to form an analytical category. One is the performative function of such analysis: once inscribed, a category can be reinscribed and instituted through repeated use, so that, for example, "mainstream" might come to always and only mean "white Canadians." And once made "real" in this way, frames can make it more difficult to see work that breaks new ground or organizes its terms differently. For these reasons, Anne Rusnak and I chose to use a stricter category — all award-winning novels over a period of twenty years — for our subsequent comparative study of the representations of home. A group of twelve researchers, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, is now working to explore further the theoretical nuances of the idea of home in Canadian children's literature and to define other groupings of texts to study. But the ongoing difficulty of how we recognize and name the texts with "symbolic capital," to use Pierre Bourdieu's term, remains.

It seems possible that changes in the Canadian children's publishing industry since Nodelman and I completed the work described in the 2000 article have reshaped the industry in ways that make the categorization of texts as "mainstream" or "non-mainstream" irrelevant. The small and shrinking field of Canadian children's publishing might mean that all books

published here are not mainstream, that "mainstream" is more accurately used to describe books published elsewhere, particularly the many books from the U.S. that flood Canadian markets. Or, perhaps the imperatives of the multicultural curricula of Canadian schools mean that books published by small presses and featuring the stories of multiple ethnic and national groups can comfortably be seen as part of mainstream Canadian culture. As scholars of Canadian children's literature, we need either to find new ways of designating the texts with "symbolic capital" in Canada or to interrogate further why the nomenclature of "mainstream" and "non-mainstream" so unsettles us.

Works Cited

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