When is YA Not YA?: Contemporary Realistic Fiction for Young Adults / *Laurence Steven*

The Countess and Me. Paul Kropp. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2002. 144 pp. $19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55041-680-4.

Earthly Astonishments. Marthe Jocelyn. Tundra, 2003. 179 pp. $9.99 paper. ISBN 0-88776-628-5.

Haida Quest. Mary Razzell. Harbour, 2002. 144 pp. $8.95 paper. ISBN 1-55017-249-2.

The Lottery. Beth Goobie. Orca, 2002. 272 pp. $19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55143-238-2.

Parvana's Journey. Deborah Ellis. Groundwood, 2002. 199 pp. $7.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-519-9.

Pegeen and the Pilgrim. Lyn Cook. 1957. Tundra, 2002. 288 pp. $9.99 paper. ISBN 0-88776-593-9.

Ricky. Eric Walters. HarperTrophy Canada, 2002. 168 pp. $15.99 paper. ISBN 0-00-639195-8.

Starbuck Valley Winter. Roderick Haig-Brown. 1944. Harbour, 2002. 272 pp. $14.95 paper. ISBN 1-55017-247-6.

Tribes. Arthur Slade. HarperTrophy Canada, 2002. 134 pp. $15.99 paper. ISBN 0-00-639170-2.

True Confessions of a Heartless Girl. Martha Brooks. Groundwood, 2002. 210 pp. $12.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-476-1.

Realistic fiction for teens since the 1960s has seen a dramatic increase in what the 1970s called the "problem novel" subgenre and what since the 1980s has been a new genre called Young Adult or YA fiction. According to Steven VanderStaay, "development of autonomous thought is the principal 'rite' at the heart of YA fiction. Generally, it is followed by autonomous action, based on that thought, that enables the protagonist(s) to solve a problem thrust upon them by the adult world and achieve self-reliance" (49). Autonomous thought, autonomous action, and self-reliance are by no means solely the province of YA novels, obviously. L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) treats these issues as well, yet we would not normally include Montgomery in the company of Judy Blume, Louise Rennison, Brian Doyle, Beth Goobie, or Martha Brooks. The difference, to my mind, is caught by VanderStaay's observation that a problem is "thrust upon [YA protagonists] by the adult world." The conflict built into that statement captures the familiarly agonistic relationship between the YA teen and the monolithic environment she or he inhabits. The teens in YA fiction become selves by resisting assimilation to a Borg-like system of conventional values, usually represented by parents or other adult authority figures, and by a school world that serves as the boot camp for assimila-

tion. The roots of the genre in the 1950s and 1960s anti-establishment counterculture are not hard to see: the archetype is Holden Caulfield.

Yet YA fiction doesn't have the final word on the autonomous self. Anne Shirley develops an autonomous personality in spades and is often "in trouble" with the adult world over it. But she does not resist adult authority fundamentally, and her decision to forego university to stay with Marilla at the end of the novel is far from submissive assimilation to the system. It is an autonomous, self-reliant action displaying a fully adult maturity.

The ten novels under review here can be roughly divided half into the YA camp (Brooks, Goobie, Razzell, Slade, and Kropp) and half into the Green Gables camp, for lack of a better term (Ellis, Jocelyn, Haig-Brown, Cook, and Walters). This division is indicative of a substantial debate about the place of teens and teen reading in Canada. Do young people gain self-identity by discovering (perhaps with the help of books) their own coherence in the face of a monolithic (or monolithically fragmented) adult culture, or do young people become selves by remembering, recognizing, and enacting a coherence that the larger human world has bequeathed to them (perhaps through books), despite its current appearances? Let's start with YA, the first option.

In 2002, Martha Brooks won the Governor General's award and the Canadian Library Association Young Adult Canadian Book Award for *True Confessions of a Heartless Girl*. The awards are deserved, but on the strength of the plot alone, we might wonder why. Noreen, the protagonist, is seventeen and her boyfriend Wesley is a few years older. Noreen's situation is sad but not wholly unusual: she comes from a fractured family and has built up a rind of thick skin which deflects incoming gestures, whether rough or gentle, sincere or fake. On the rebound from one boyfriend, she meets and almost immediately moves in with Wesley. Before long she's pregnant. Rather than tell Wesley, she steals his money and his truck and ends up in Lynda's down-at-heels café in the small prairie town of Pembina Lake. There a motley cast of characters takes her in until she can find her feet. As she does so, they do as well.

And it's because they do that Brooks's novel outstrips the children's literature competition. In fact, it's something of a stretch to call this book a YA novel. Noreen and Wesley are simply the youngest of a number of hurting, lonely people who need emotional recuperation. I suppose what enables *True Confessions* to remain just inside the YA stable is the focus on the heartless adolescent Noreen as she finds a heart. She has to be gentled, almost the way a wild horse needs to be, and in providing the gentling the walking wounded adults around her come back to life. What's interesting is that as the adults emerge from their shells, they command more and more of our attention and Noreen's antics begin to appear childish by comparison. Perhaps this is as it should be, but it reveals that Brooks's interests as a writer (by comparison with her 1997 YA classic *Bone Dance*) are tending toward the concerns of adult characters. Stylistically she is by far the best writer of the group under review here. Her touch is light, delicate, and precise. Without undo nudges, winks, or prods for the reader, Brooks refracts conventional renderings of plot, setting, and character through the prism of poetic imagery and metaphor into a gradually enveloping symbolic significance.

Sporting her author's thanks to "Roger Waters for *The Wall* and Robert Cormier for *The Chocolate War*," Beth Goobie's *The Lottery* has no such audience ambiguities. It fits the YA designation most clearly among this group of novels. Fifteen-year-old

Sal Hanson is the Saskatoon Collegiate Shadow Council's lottery winner, becoming victim of the year. Her task is to deliver "duties" to other poor schmucks that Shadow Council wants to humiliate. Anyone seen fraternizing with the lottery winner will be punished. With this system the Council has terrorized the school for years. Sal, of course, has to learn to stand up to the Council; in doing so she also learns that there are costs to becoming a real person as opposed to just another brick in the wall. As well as the central problem of victimization and shunning facing Sal, Goobie adds in a number of other victims that make regular appearances in "problem" novels. There is the brilliant but weird autistic student, the stock-in-trade fat girl, and the witty guy in the wheelchair. In addition, Sal is suffering from stomach pain due to free-floating guilt related to a repressed memory of her involvement in her father's death in a car accident years earlier.

Goobie orchestrates all of this handily, using the "wall" metaphor to unify the various strands. As the walls come down for Sal, she breathes the fresh air of independence. And yet, but for her boyfriend Brydan and her brother Dusty, she is alone in her newfound freedom, still shunned by the rest of the school and her former "friends." This, of course, is the quintessential YA lesson: finally, you're on your own to make your life. Goobie's Sal puts it this way: "In a system, you didn't think or choose, you just tried to fit in. . . . But, she was finally realizing, it was *her* perspective that mattered the most. Ultimately, it was her own fear or desire that would lock her in or allow her to open to the utter possibility of herself" (253). The implication here — that if we are victimized it is because we do it to ourselves — is disturbing. The understanding of the autonomous self revealed in *The Lottery* shows no appreciation that selves are embedded in and reciprocate in defining cultures that are dynamic networks of relationships; in other words, they are not simply monolithic systems. Interestingly — and rather ironically considering the setting in a school — the adult world of teachers and parents is virtually non-existent in the novel. Sal has to give birth to herself. There is no nurturing to be had elsewhere.

Mary Razzel's *Haida Quest* has a number of affinities with Brooks's novel, but it is a distinctly lesser achievement. After her irresponsible hippie mom leaves her with her Polish grandmother, Lucy Tyla undertakes a quest to find her father, Tom Haley, an established Haida woodcarver. The quest, of course, is also to discover who she is and where she belongs. Along the way she encounters a number of stock YA conventions: infatuation with a superficial boyfriend, a subsequent pregnancy, peer ostracism, racism, wisdom from elders. She finally finds her father and is helped in overcoming his suspicion by her Haida grandfather who is sure she has found her rightful place. At a traditional potlatch she and her baby are given Haida names. The difficulty with *Haida Quest* is that it all happens too easily. Despite all the ostensibly world-shaking changes in Lucy's life, we never really get a sense from the first-person narration that Lucy's world has been rocked. We float along with the plot, on the surface of genuine feeling. We are *told* big things are happening, but we don't see or feel them with the necessary force. Unlike Goobie, Razzell ostensibly wants to show us that self-identity is bestowed by our relationship with a culture. Yet she does little more than make that assertion.

In Arthur Slade's *Tribes*, the problem is the reverse. Percy Montmount narrates his own story in which he observes and writes detailed notes and articles on the various groups in his high school in an anthropological fashion. Initially the participant-observer stance leads to a wry humour, as he and his friend Elissa put the typical school cliques under the microscope. As the novel proceeds, however, Percy

becomes obsessive, and what was quirky behaviour becomes distinctly antisocial. Far from undergoing a YA rite of passage and achieving autonomous thought, by the end Percy is on the verge of a mental collapse. Why? Because he has repressed the memory that his anthropologist dad who had never been home much finally left his mom for a younger woman. Rather than face the abandonment, Percy "remembers" his dad's death in the field and takes on the anthropologist role in his place. Finally he can't hold it all together and he shatters. The difficulty here is that while on the one hand there is no "Shadow Council" as in Goobie's novel to warrant the satiric treatment Percy/Slade subjects the school to, on the other hand, the motivation for Percy's dissociation seems weak to say the least. Similarly, Slade gratuitously lampoons Percy's tofu-eating, psychic-reading, shaman-consulting mom, when in fact she seems genuinely worried about and concerned for her weird son. I get the sense that Slade got caught up by the humorous notion of viewing the school groups scientifically and then didn't have the interest in providing a fuller justifying world.

In Paul Kropp's *The Countess and Me*, thirteen-year-old Jordan Bellemare is "an outsider. A loner. A pasty-faced, freckled kid with an eight-buck haircut who just didn't seem to fit in" (18-19). If you think you've encountered this formula before, you're right. Kropp empties the tool-kit of YA conventions: a lonely new kid in town, a preoccupied single parent, a pesky little sister, a half-Native sympathetic smart girl acting as the voice of conscience, an eccentric elderly person who needs help and trusts the "young man," a gang from the wrong side of the tracks, a rowdy party, some tentative sexual expression, the peer pressure that forces the protagonist to cheat the old lady to gain entrance to the gang, the moral awakening, the contrition, the confession, and finally the recognition that "Stupidity can be dangerous" (142). Unfortunately for authors and readers, stupidity can also be boring. Even if the circumstances of Jordan's suburban grey existence are realistic, we still have to be interested in them to be drawn into his world. Kropp needs to hook us and he doesn't. Even the cursed crystal skull that looms large in the plot remains a special effect from the prop room rather than an organic symbol in the story.

Let's turn now to the other option, the one I called the Green Gables camp. Here the young protagonists come to self-awareness through growing up into — and therefore inevitably modifying — a human world that precedes them; they don't have to make it out of themselves.

Both Deborah Ellis's *Parvana's Journey* and Marthe Jocelyn's *Earthly Astonishments* do hook us. Each book features a resilient female protagonist who through no fault of her own experiences the world from an angle very different than usual. *Parvana's Journey*, winner of the 2002 Ruth Schwartz Children's Book Award, is Ellis's sequel to her much-hailed *The Breadwinner* (2000) and is also set in war-torn Afghanistan on the eve of the fall of the Taliban. It begins with thirteen-year-old Parvana, who is forced to disguise herself as a boy in order to earn survival money after her father's death, and it then follows her on her journey to find her mother and siblings. The journey involves brief sojourns with other families and the gradual gathering of other waifs to her indomitable spirit. When Parvana, the one-legged boy Asif, the traumatized little girl Leila, and the dehydrated baby Hassan finally struggle into a refugee camp, they have survived bombing, starvation, fatigue, death of loved ones, and an almost constant disorientation. Only Parvana's virtually unflagging sense that she *will* find her mother and that the world *does* have meaning keeps them going. To some extent, we readers are thrown into a situation simi-

lar to that of the children clinging to Parvana: the experiences Ellis recounts are so harrowing, the emotional barrage so relentless, that without a strong central personality grounded in common sense to provide perspective, the disorientation could overpower a coherent reading. (A case in point drawn from adult fiction is Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird* [1965].) Ellis walks a tightrope between documentary realism and character fiction and manages to keep her balance.

In *Earthly Astonishments*, Jocelyn introduces us to Josephine, a Small Person (the name is preferred to "midget," which was coined by P.T. Barnum) who becomes a member of the Museum of Earthly Astonishments in order to avoid virtual slavery and thus to survive in the world of late nineteenth-century New York City. Similarly to Ellis's Parvana, Josephine's unshakable will not only enables her to survive in an initially desolate setting but acts as a catalyst for change by making her the centre of a new "family" of "attractions" who resolve to escape from their exploitive situation and determine their own destinies. In this story about physically big (read: normal-sized) and little people, Jocelyn manages an interesting transformation of our perspective. As the novel proceeds and we come to know Josephine and her "family," we tend to forget their physical differences. Consequently, the powerful and controlling characters who initially loomed so large shrink in moral stature into two-dimensional purblind villains.

Roderick Haig-Brown's *Starbuck Valley Winter* won the Children's Book of the Year Award upon its first publication in 1943. Harbour Publishing has republished it as a "Junior Canadian Classic," and though it holds up very well, it is unlikely to regain a popular following. The story of sixteen-year-old Don Morgan who spends a winter season on the trapline in Starbuck Valley with his friend Tubby Miller in order to earn money for a fishing boat is a far cry from Brooks's heartless Noreen, Goobie's wall-breaker Sal, or the other YA protagonists we're likely to encounter in current fare for teens. While YA personalities tend to loom large, demanding the centre of our attention as they define themselves against the monolithic "wall," Don Morgan blends into his world as he learns its myriad ways. A large part of our fascination with the story is the detailed woodcraft for which Haig-Brown is famous. Minutiae about wildlife, trapping, hunting, canoeing, and prospecting fleshes out this tale of determination, survival, and skill. None of the detail is gratuitous, however. All passes through the crucible of Don's experience as he undergoes what is in essence a rite of passage to manhood. The challenges Don sets himself or by which he is confronted as well as the quiet satisfaction with which he achieves them are the marks of a growing maturity and wisdom. *Starbuck Valley Winter* does not indulge in YA inwardness; Don is too busy focusing on what he's got to deal with in the world around him.

Lyn Cook's *Pegeen and the Pilgrim* was first published in 1957. Tundra books republished it to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the Stratford Shakespearean Festival. Twelve-year-old Pegeen O'Hara helps her mother operate a boarding house in Stratford, Ontario and dreams of becoming an actress in the newly founded Stratford Festival. One of the boarders, Mr. B., is a Shakespeare devotee from Stratford, England who has come as a carpenter to help build the festival stage. He becomes Pegeen's mentor and friend as the year winds down to the opening of the festival. While the book will be wonderfully nostalgic for readers who remember it from their childhood, I don't expect it to garner a lot of new ones. It doesn't wear its age as well as *Starbuck Valley Winter*. Whereas the detailed world of Haig-Brown's book comes to life in Don's intense engagement with it, the information about Shake-

speare and the Stratford Festival in Cook's story remains largely because Pegeen is an observer only. Her excitement is palpable, her personality is fresh and vibrant, but it remains that the story is a linking of milestones in the Festival's development year and first season: project announcement, sod-turning, construction, auditions, arrival of actors, opening day, Pegeen's trip to a play, and the leave-taking of the pilgrim Mr. B. at the end of the season. The plot, such as it is, is thus not able to counteract the pressure of the traditional mores of the 1950s in which it is embedded, and the book ends up remaining a period piece.

Ricky, by Eric Walters, though set in the present, has qualities of a period piece as well. We're a long way from YA territory as Walters tells a warm-hearted story based on an episode in his own childhood. When their favourite teacher, Mr. Johnson, has his science class vandalized and his pet boa constrictor killed, twelve-year-old Ricky and his fourteen-year-old buddy Augie devise a plan to replace the snake. Under the cover of a scheme to have students donate for school team uniforms, they collect the over four hundred dollars necessary without tipping off Mr. Johnson. We accompany them to the pet store, through a search for the lost snake in Ricky's bedroom, through the alley where they face bullies, and onto the stage where they present the boa to the incredulous teacher. Although the story is a domestic/school adventure which stays safely and confidently within its genre boundaries, Walters is able to broaden the dimensions of the characters with telling touches. Mr. Johnson cries at the loss of his long-time pet and again in the replacement scene. He also worries about his effectiveness as a teacher, given that the vandals were clearly students who knew the classroom. Augie has failed a grade and covers his insecurity with bravado. Ricky has a hard time admitting to himself and others that his mother died when he was a very young. While they add some weight to the characters, these touches are not sustained enough to call into question the story's light, nostalgic atmosphere. In fact, the only false note is the present-day setting. Ricky and Augie seem so clearly of another time that the very occasional current references are jarring. Walters should have set it in the 1960s and indulged in period details the way Bernice Thurman Hunter did in her *Booky* books, discussed in an article earlier in this issue of *Canadian Children's Literature*.

Whether as readers we incline toward Young Adult (YA) or Green Gables (GG) realistic fiction, there is no doubt that in both groups Canadians are fortunate to have authors who engage our imaginations and make us see and feel that the world is, at least from time to time, just "like that."

Work Cited

VanderStaay, Steven. "Young-Adult Literature: A Writer Strikes the Genre." *English Journal* 81.4 (1992): 48-52.

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