Reviews / Comptes rendus

Traveling Girls: Writing the Haves and Have-Nots of Late Modernity in Young Adult Fiction / *Sarah Brophy*

Mud City. Deborah Ellis. Groundwood, 2003. 164 pp. $7.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-542-3.

A Singing Bird Will Come: Naomi in Hong Kong. Karmel Schreyer. Great Plains, 2002. 148 pp. $12.95 paper. 1-894283-30-9.

Getting a Life. Jocelyn Shipley. Sumach, 2002. 223 pp. $9.95 paper. ISBN 1-894549-18-X.

More Than You Can Chew. Marnelle Tokio. Tundra, 2003. 234 pp. $14.99 paper. ISBN 0-88776-639-0.

Adam and Eve and Pinch-Me. Julie Johnston. 1994. Tundra, 2003. 220 pp. $12.99 paper. ISBN 0-88776-648-X.

Hero of Lesser Causes. Julie Johnston. 1992. Tundra, 2003. 222 pp. $12.99 paper. ISBN 0-88776-649-8.

First romance, friendship, difficult relationships with parents, absent parents, body image: these are the well-worn concerns of young adult fiction centered in female consciousness. Not surprisingly, the body, femininity, sexuality, and relationships with parents and peers are central preoccupations in recent young adult fiction published in Canada featuring adolescent female protagonists. A noteworthy co-eval trend, though, is the linking up of the adolescent femininity in these books to another kind of worldliness: an emergent political and geographical awareness. Girls in these novels can be read — and need to be read critically — as figures that encode cultural anxiety and that intensify the pressures and paradoxes of late modernity in the process of seeking to mitigate them. Catherine Driscoll argues in her recent book *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory* (2003) that the girl is a "figure for late modern culture," specifically a figure of psychological and cultural transition (108). Adolescence in general assumes a signal importance for late modern culture in that it is thought of as the "crucible" of subjectivity, the loosely-defined period in which our sense of agency either comes into being or

does not. According to Driscoll, *feminine* adolescence — associated with consumption, with labour on and disciplining of the self, and with changes in fashion and language use — both exemplifies and brings into crisis our normative models of the process of coming to subjectivity (50). My specific focus here is on literary representations of female adolescent consciousness. I want to read them in the broader frame suggested by Driscoll's analysis by looking at the predominant articulation of the adolescent girl as a traveler. As tourists in Zygmunt Bauman's sense, the adolescent girls imagined in these novels produce and secure their lightly-worn identities by measuring themselves against "vagabonds," who serve as alter egos against which the tourist's self "may shine" (93). Bauman suggests that the "hub of postmodern life strategy is not making identity stand — but the avoidance of being fixed" (89). The tourist, then, constructs an identity that can be easily and quickly shed in order to encounter other places and people as though inside "a bubble with tightly controlled osmosis"; the tourist's flexibility, Bauman suggests, produces a sense of control and freedom from obligation that forms an appropriate metaphor for subjectivity in our time (89). But some of us do not choose to be on the move and in fact are forced: "if the tourists move because they find the world irresistibly attractive, the vagabonds move because they find the world unbearably inhospitable" (92). Here, I will consider the adolescent girl traveler in recent Canadian young adult fiction as a figure of ambivalence — of partial, even reluctant, geopolitical consciousness — in order to interpret these fictions in terms of how, in different degrees, they invest in, expose, and interrogate the tourist-vagabond opposition and the social hierarchies it implies.

Deborah Ellis's *Mud City* is the third novel in her *Breadwinner* trilogy. The first two novels in the series are set in Afghanistan in the late days of Taliban rule (*The Breadwinner* [2000] and *Parvana's Journey* [2002]). The third volume tells the story of fourteen-year-old Shauzia who, like her friend Parvana (protagonist of the first two books in the series) before her, worked on the streets of Kabul dressed as a boy in order to support her family. Now, Shauzia, having travelled to a refugee camp in northern Pakistan with the determined teacher-activist Mrs. Weera, rebels against the scarcity and sacrifice demanded by collective life in the Widows' Compound of the camp. Shauzia dreams of travelling to the sea and of one day meeting Parvana in France. Responding to Shauzia's demand that Mrs. Weera stop "treating her like a child," the teacher responds,

> All right, I will. As an adult, make your choice. If you decided to stay here, you stay without complaint. You will contribute your time and talents to the best of your ability, without expecting money, because you'll understand that there isn't any. If you decide that life here is not for you, you know where the main gate of the camp is. We have enough problems helping those who want our help. (21)

Initiating the novel's action, then, is a querying of the category of childhood itself. In Mrs. Weera's assessment, Shauzia cannot expect to reside in the camp without contributing to the good of the whole. This statement flies in the face of the notions of childhood labour (the legacy of Euro-American post-Enlightenment conceptions of the child) as categorically "wrong" that have become entrenched in human rights discourses.[1] Instead, it repositions all members of a community across the age spectrum as having material obligations to the good of the group that in turn struggles

to offer them community and protection. Having endured isolation, indifference, hunger, and violence on the streets of Peshawar, where her dog, Jasper, is the recipient of more attention and food than she is, Shauzia returns to the camp where, after breaking her leg in a botched effort to gain access to more food for the women's camp, she decides to dress as a boy in order to accompany Mrs. Weera, who is taking a brigade of nurses across the border into Afghanistan so that they can offer medical care to refugees fleeing the bombing of the autumn of 2001.

Mud City, perhaps even more than the first two books in Ellis's series, endeavours to reflect and cultivate a particular kind of worldliness. On the whole, it is very successful in raising a complex set of questions about childhood, femininity, and geopolitical struggles. Ellis has been criticized for appropriating the voices of Afghan girls and women in her fiction,[2] and there is a distinct possibility that the novels might be consumed by North American middle-class readers as confirmation of our "freedom," as reassurance of "our rank in the postmodern social hierarchy" (Bauman 93). I do think, however, that *Mud City* attempts to unsettle such a reading and is perhaps responding to the attention the first two novels have received. Specifically, its plot raises questions as to whether a simple faith in the remedial powers of North American material largesse may be more than inadequate, suggesting that it might be counterproductive, even dangerous. When Shauzia is imprisoned after an altercation outside a fast-food restaurant where she is asking passers-by for small change, an American family living in Peshawar (and working on an engineering project) pays her bail and brings her to their home, with its gate and garden, where they offer food, clothing, and comfort. The food is welcome, so much so that Shauzia hoards it, collecting anything she can take from the table to a secret pile under her mattress. Then, when the family leaves her alone one afternoon, she extends their charity to every needy person who passes on the street, of whom there are many, effectively clearing the house of food and most useful, portable material things. The American family responds with bafflement and anger when they arrive home to discover the missing goods and the food that is rotting under Shauzia's bed. They decide that she is no longer welcome to stay with them, and return her to the Widows' Compound. While engaging with Shauzia's distress, the novel locates this episode firmly in the social world, refusing to offer a purely psychological explanation for her behaviour or to cast her as a pitiable, innocent "child" in need of protection. Symbolically, expulsion from the American family's domestic space brings attention to her problematic status, just as the rotting food highlights how arbitrary food distribution by Western powers is and makes us aware of the disconnect between people who need food and when, where, and under what conditions it is made available by agents of charity. The hoarding is an effect of the fact that Shauzia is itinerant; she is given food and shelter for the moment, but she has no sustainable way of supporting herself and is unmoored, at this point, from a meaningful community. Could this pointed indictment of charity be read as an expression of qualms about literary representation as another kind of rescue mission? Even if the connection that I am suggesting reflects my own desire to see this kind of self-consciousness at work in *Mud City*, I do feel confident in anticipating that this turn of events in the novel would press any reader to reflect on the issues of sustainable access to food, water, shelter, and community, in a broader, more critical, and systematic way.

Reading other books published contemporaneously in a comparative way helps to bring into focus the degree of political engagement, challenge, and strategy that

characterizes Ellis's work. By contrast, Karmel Shreyer's *A Singing Bird Will Come: Naomi in Hong Kong* is perfectly contented with its "Canadian" perspective and constructs Hong Kong, both geographically and humanly, as a static backdrop for Naomi's individual development. Upon their arrival, Naomi and her mother are greeted by a teacher named May Wong, who responds to Naomi's wonder at the dimensions of the airport terminal by saying "Yes, this airport is the biggest in the world — for now. But we are always outdoing ourselves here in Asia" (8). No joke. Throughout *A Singing Bird*, Naomi and her mother typify a tourist mentality (we hear far more about their holiday excursions, meals, and shopping trips than we do about the world of school, which furnishes their ostensible reason for being in Hong Kong), as does the narration itself, indicated by the fact that the chapter epigraphs are taken from sources such as *The Hong Kong Tourist Authority* and *Star Signs, Love Signs* by the Mystical Madame Li. In this book, "Asia" exemplifies an ambitious modernity and a retrograde disregard for human life, particularly the lives of girl children and single mothers; the "Asia" they encounter terrifies and entrances Naomi and her mother while also reinforcing their sense of superiority. Naomi's befriending of a pregnant sixteen-year-old named Grace at an orphanage where she and her mother volunteer is presented as an "adventure" that Naomi experiences, and very little account — or even speculation — is given of Grace's feelings, perceptions, and choices (137). The narrative ends with the marriage of Naomi's mother, Sara, to a British resident of Hong Kong and their adoption of an abandoned Chinese baby girl, Mei-Mei, presented as if this choice could remedy, in miniature, the complex social issue of orphaning and abandonment.

In Jocelyn Shipley's *Getting a Life*, the tourist-vagabond opposition takes the form of a contrast, indeed an unbridgeable gulf, between white teenagers of different social classes. The main character, Carly, finds in her short-term neighbours — occupants of a run-down apartment across the street — a foil for her own trials. Carly lives with her unaffectionate, strict, responsible upper-middle class grandmother who, she discovers in the course of the novel, was primarily responsible for having Carly's mother hospitalized for severe postpartum depression. The spectre of her mother's mental illness and the seeming coldness of the actions of the grandmother and the father, is exorcized through the interactions with her neighbour, Dawn, who seems hip at first but later trashy, and Dawn's two little sisters, Skye and Amber, who are presented as malnourished and under-stimulated "victims" of irresponsible single-mother parenting. While there is a good deal of complexity in the portrait we are given of the decisions and events leading to the death of Carly's mother in the psychiatric hospital, ultimately bad motherhood is placed in the realm of the psychological (and hence the incarcerable) and not in the realm of the social, where different kinds of motherhood might be sufficient, with adequate social and psychological supports. The fiction ends with the resolution of Carly's relationship with her grandmother and the disappearance of Dawn, Skye, and Amber, and their mother as they flee the law after the two little girls nearly die in a building fire. In *Getting a Life*, a certain set of middle-class values is made to triumph over the fecklessness of the itinerant poor and the "mad." That the lot of the vagabond is this "repulsive" and "abhorrent" makes the normative situation seem more "bearable" despite its disciplinary strictures and trade-offs (Bauman 94).

The protagonist of Marnelle Tokio's *More Than You Can Chew* is Marty Black, who at age eighteen is hospitalized for an eating disorder (in fact, she is both anorexic and bulimic). This book points to an etiology of eating disorders far more

complicated than the negative effects of the "beauty myth," but the account is nonetheless familiar in that it is individualized and oedipalized: sex and parents seem to be at the root of Marty's refusal of food. There is no questioning of consumption as a good in itself; the novel is lush with descriptions of hamburgers, eggs Benedict, and mashed potatoes. In this novel, healthy, normal young adulthood, specifically young womanhood, involves learningto accept this abundance uncritically, just as it involves lessening one's expectations for closeness with one's parents. Marty is represented as a tough survivor, while those she leaves behind at the treatment centre are not yet (and maybe will not ever be) able to accept the deep contradictions of Western consumer culture, which, as Susan Bordo has argued, asks people — but women and girls especially — to consume without restraint but, in turn, to embody a masculine self-discipline, that is, the "ideal of a well-managed self" (201). Of course, it is risky to suggest a political reading of eating disorders in the first place, since, as Bordo notes, the protest against contradictory expectations actually intensifies some of the most disempowering requirements that have defined femininity — self-effacement and "symbolic allegiance" to patriarchal values (208). Overall, *More Than You Can Chew* strikes me as a account that is particularly reluctant to see any meanings in the disorders it describes beyond individual psychology.

Julie Johnston's *Hero of Lesser Causes* and *Adam and Eve and Pinch-Me* (both Governor-General's Award winning novels from the early 1990s, republished in 2003) are not explicitly framed as political statements, but they do enact particular textual effects — specifically the cultivation of uncertainty — that align them with Deborah Ellis's strategies in *Mud City* for unsettling hierarchies of social value. Set in the summer of 1946, *Hero of Lesser Causes* revolves around the responses of Keely Connor's family and community to her brother Patrick's being stricken with polio. While Patrick begins very gradually to engage with the world again, Keely deals with the difficulty of negotiating the pressures of her home life and her desire for a social life. What I find intriguing and valuable about this book is that it shows a picture of lives entwined as they develop, without antagonism or aggression, and with a gentle impulse to satirical self-analysis, as is evident in Keely's assessment of her more dramatic interventions (which range from attempting to discover Patrick's nurse's missing fiancé, to a dramatic toilette, intended to be glamourous and sophisticated, that results in the shaving of her eyebrows and shearing of her hair). Like *More Than You Can Chew*, Johnston's *Adam and Eve and Pinch-Me* is a first-person, diary-like account. Here, the narrator is Sara Moone, a fifteen-year-old who is anticipating her sixteenth birthday as the moment when she can choose to leave the foster-care system. Having lived in several foster homes after her adoptive parents died in a house fire when she was just a few years old, Sara comes to live with the Huddingtons in the Ottawa valley. The Huddingtons are a warm and engaging, if unpolished, pair of substitute parents, and Sara begins to settle into the first foster home that has really felt like a home; she also begins to venture into the world in a broader way, landing her first jobs, working in a café and working as a typist for a visiting writer. Simultaneously, her birth mother seeks her out, and this novel has the daring to offer an ambiguous ending: Sara does not embrace her birth mother and the book ends by indicating the likelihood that Sara will stay with the just-widowed Mrs. Huddington and young foster-brother, Josh, even though she might now legally leave. This is a story, then, that emphasizes how the opening up of hearts creates possibilities for meaningful, sustaining bonds to emerge and treats

fantasies of reunion with thoughtful skepticism.

To apply the term "young adult" to fiction suggests, significantly, not just a level of reading competency but a complex textual negotiation of what might be called a *regulated* worldliness. The framing of the category highlights that the novels promise to ease the transitions adolescence entails, to smooth and highlight certain pathways toward adulthood, and to cultivate certain ways of being in and reflecting on the world. All the books reviewed here reflect a sense of female adolescence as culturally problematic: what constitutes agency in this period of transition? What, if anything, guarantees that girls will become responsible adults? Some novels seem rife with anxiety about these questions and respond by depoliticizing their protagonists' struggles and relationships; moreover, they tend to reinforce certain kinds of class-based trajectories and individual accomplishments as constituting liveable lives, measured against the threat of being or becoming homeless, unwanted, unprotected. Yet, other fictions examined here take homelessness — perhaps a fundamental homelessness, the lack of guarantees we all face, but also particular forms of homelessness that girls might experience — as a starting point and attempt to theorize, from that point of view, what a meaningful, liveable home life or community might look like. Addressing worldly problems by centring their fictions in the consciousnesses of young female protagonists, girls who *live* social differences of various kinds and actively reflect on their situations, Julie Johnson's and Deborah Ellis's novels largely succeed in rendering young adulthood as a morally and politically uncertain terrain, one that is not, however, without possibilities for meaningful growth and connection with others. Unlike many contemporary young adult fictions about travelling girls, they refuse the option of providing caricatured portraits of misfortune for their protagonists to fashion themselves against, and instead represent girls' transitions to the responsibilities of adulthood as a volatile, chancy, and on-going process, a process that cannot and should not be secured by the pitting of tourists against vagabonds.

Notes

1 David Jefferess argues that "differences among children are elided" in human rights discourse and that "the protection of the child is a self-consolidating project for the (Western) adult" (78). He criticizes the anti-child labour movement as driven not by a "concern for the rights of the child" (people under eighteen) but by "the right to be a 'child,'" defined as freedom from work, a definition that neglects to recognize that in many cultural contexts the work of people under eighteen is vital to family and community survival (84).

2 When reviewing *The Breadwinner,* Uma Krishnaswami notes that "Eleven-year-old Parvana has the makings of a compelling protagonist, yet there are times when her world view seems more akin to that of her young American readers than to an Afghani girl's. The story moves along competently, the plot is tidily resolved, yet many questions present themselves. Where is Islamic practice in the lives of these people? No mosques, no calls to prayer, no religious observances? The shariah, Muslim law so severely interpreted and applied by the Taliban, isn't mentioned once, not even in the glossary. This reviewer sensed in the narration a self-consciousness about both subject and audience, that got in the way of what might have been a rich and textured tale."

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Something Wicked This Way Plods: Fantasizing the Banality of Evil / *Hilary Turner*

The Princess Pawn. Maggie L. Wood. Sumach, 2003. 299 pp. $10.95 paper. ISBN 1-894549-29-5.

Dance of the Stones. The Summer of Magic Quartet 2. Andrea Spalding. Orca, 2003. 174 pp. $9.95 paper. ISBN 1-55143-268-4.

The Shining World. The Notherland Journeys 2. Kathleen McDonnell. Second Story, 2003. 233 pp. $8.95 paper. ISBN 1-896764-79-7.

The Sacred Seal. The Goodfellow Chronicles 1. J.C. Mills. Key Porter, 2001. 304 pp. $14.95 paper. ISBN 1-55263-328-4.

The Messengers. The Goodfellow Chronicles 2. J.C. Mills. Key Porter, 2003. 294 pp. $15.95 paper. ISBN 1-55263-551-1.

The Book of Dreams. The Chronicles of Faerie 4. O.R. Melling. Penguin, 2003. 538 pp. $17.00 paper. ISBN 0-14-100434-7.

The Dirt Eaters. The Longlight Legacy 1. Dennis Foon. Annick, 2003. 312 pp. $19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-807-4.

In the most ambitious (and perhaps the most original) of these recent fantasy novels, the climactic confrontation between good and evil is somewhat dampened by the protagonist's discovery that malevolence is not really very interesting: "This was not the imaginary evil so often depicted in the world as epic and exciting. This