

# Apocalypse Maybe: The Making of the *First Time* Anthology

Charles Montpetit

It was the poet, the artist, who discovered love, created the lover, made sex everything that it is beyond a function. *It was the Mr. Sumners who have made it an obscenity.*

— Jane Heap, co-publisher of *The Little Review*, after John Sumner got the periodical banned in 1920 (DeGrazia 14)

In 1992, I wrote a *CCL* article in which I took potshots at the reasons that are most often invoked for getting a book banned. I was asked to do this because I had personally encountered a fair share of comments about whether certain books could be put in teenager's hands. This in turn was due to my editing the Québec/Amérique anthology *La Première Fois* — a collection of true stories for adolescents about first sexual experiences.

Since then, however, I found out that censorship is not always the ultimate problem connected with such a project. Jittery unease can take many forms, and even the best of us will let out a little light prejudice when confronted with the subject. For instance, when I proudly mention that the first print run of *La Première Fois* sold out in record time, most people just smile and reply (all together now, I know you're thinking it too): "Of course it did! It's about SEX!"

The assumption here seems to be that anything with sex in it constitutes some sort of surefire ticket to Easy Street. Oh, it may be accurate in many circles, but I hope you will forgive me if I don't share the cynics' sweeping views on the matter. Maybe the people I was talking to weren't paying attention, but I did say these were stories for *adolescents*. And in the world of children's literature, sexually explicit scenes are usually not a good career move. To put it bluntly, writers and publishers alike tend to consider that the scariest slogan ever devised about AIDS also applies to children's book sales:

Sex = Death.
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I myself am a bit guilty of thinking along those lines. When I first thought of working on a book about true sexual encounters, it was because I believed it could provide amusing, down-to-earth counterpoints to those infamous *Penthouse* letters, which always seem to take place on a different planet — and of course, I immediately gave the project an R rating. It took me years to realize that I would make an even better point if I focused on *first* sexual experiences, for these were the ones which most needed demystification. But if I narrowed things down to this concept, didn't it change the target audience? Just who could most

benefit from reading about this, if not the adolescents who were about to embark on a similar adventure?

I won't launch once again into an enumeration of the reasons which justify this approach.<sup>1</sup> Suffice it to say that when teenagers lack information about an issue they're on the verge of tackling personally, the gap should be corrected at their level, not in books they won't be allowed to read for many years. And since the information that *is* made available to them is either watered down or alarmist, it's easy to understand how quickly they can get bored or turned off. Sure, STD warnings are necessary, but as studies upon studies have revealed during the last few years, teenagers mostly want to know about the *human* side of the experience: after all, isn't it the very aspect that we adults find interesting, too?

Yet I couldn't just list the glorious, not-so-glorious and very subjective ingredients of a first sexual encounter: as they vary enormously from one person to the next, no universal rule can ever be taught in this area. Many different testimonies were needed, and each of them had to re-create the setting, the moods and the atmosphere as they were perceived by the protagonists at the time, plus enough background documentation to explain where everyone was coming from. In other words, I had to find witnesses who were comfortable with the telling of complete *stories*. And if these stories were mainly intended for teenage audiences, then I had better turn to people who were familiar with children's literature.

There you are, no way around it. After eight years of toying with an adult book concept, I'd suddenly realized that I should have been recruiting *children's* writers. From that point on, it only took me two days to find a bunch of authors who were interested in working on the project. Almost immediately, three major publishers simultaneously offered to handle the anthology, sight unseen. And nine months later — no metaphor intended — the first copies of *La Première Fois* were rolling off the presses.

It felt like hard work at the time, but now that I look back on it, I know I've been exceptionally lucky. Aside from one author dropping out when the rest of the team didn't vote for his publisher, *La Première Fois* had breezed through the obstacle course without a single glitch — and dammit, that just hadn't been *normal*. I had anticipated tremendous difficulties in getting this idea across, and I never got my fight. It wasn't fair.

Then I decided to do an *English-Canadian* version.

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The invitation to potential contributors read something like this:

In 1991, sixteen Quebec authors realized that modern teens still had a very unrealistic view of sex, for most movies, romance novels and backstreet banter tended to distort real life beyond recognition. In order to complement the sex education courses' focus on 'plumbing' matters, they came up with heartfelt accounts of the events and emotions involved in *real* first sexual encounters, whether these were positive or negative, funny or dramatic, successful or not.

*La Première Fois* was both a critical and a popular success. Press coverage was phenomenal, and in 1992, the International Youth Library in Munich included the anthology in its annual *White Raven*

selection (the world's best books for young people).

Since this issue is not limited to Quebec, we'd now like to put out a pan-Canadian edition entitled *The First Time*, with new stories from all over the country.

Please note that the tales, while true, do not have to be the authors' own. And whether they are or not, writers will be able to use first- or third-person narratives indiscriminately. Since all the characters' names must also be changed, it will be impossible to know which stories are autobiographical, if any. The introduction will make this clear.

More than just an anthology, *The First Time* will be an indispensable documentary for the upcoming generation. But this doesn't mean that our characters must be perfect role models for teenagers. *Au contraire*, if we're to create credible alternatives to fictional encounters, then mistakes, poor timing and biases should be discussed along with the joys and the surprises of the experience.

The rules are simple:

- *No crushes, puppy loves or fantasies.* The definition of a 'first time' is left to each individual, but it must be a significant part of one's sexual awakening.

- *No fiction, rumours or composites.* Artistic licence is allowed to avoid pedestrian details, but salient facts must be true. Stories can be adapted for the 1990s if the point isn't altered.

- *Self-censorship must be low.* Euphemisms and 'fading to black' are not required, but absolute frankness is not a necessity either. The way one would speak with intimate friends is best.

There is no deadline, and no one is expected to write on spec. To ensure enough variety, however, we'd appreciate receiving short outlines and author's bios as early as possible. Proposals will be considered on an ongoing basis.

[Encl.: sample reviews of *La Première Fois*. A list of interested contributors will follow.]

Now, I'm no fool, but I do suffer from occasional bouts of optimism. For one thing, I feel at home just about anywhere in Canada, and I don't happen to think that there are many basic differences between French and English mentalities. So when people kept telling me, on both sides of the language barrier, that the success of *La Première Fois* had probably been due to the break-all-the-rules distinct/weirdo nature of Quebec, I couldn't help but laugh. True, the average Montrealer does tend to be kookier than, say, the average Torontonians, but "conservative" Ontario has a lot more in-school condom dispensers than "open-minded" Quebec. So who's to say what these labels are supposed to mean, really?

Name familiarity, however, was a totally different issue. Not many children's writers are acquainted with both of our Solitudes, so there was a chance that the above invitation, coming as it did from someone whom no one had ever heard of outside Quebec, would not inspire the same trust as my phone calls to my francophone colleagues had in the case of *La Première Fois*.

Then again, a road-tested project is usually easier to sell than a theoretical one. And I had just won a Governor General's Award for one of my novels, so I waved that around a bit in my cover letter, hoping for signs of recognition.

I also met with the nice people at CANSCAIP, who recommended dozens of writers I might want to contact, and the friendly staff of the Children's Book Centre added their own suggestions to the list, making it close to a hundred names long. Still, I didn't want to turn anyone down after having aroused their interest, so I decided to start by sending out twenty invitations to the most likely prospects.

Then I tried twenty more.

Then thirty more, including letters to mainstream writers who had been at least marginally involved in children's literature at one point in their career, from

Margaret Atwood to David Suzuki.

Then I turned to *every* other writer on my list, made impassioned phone calls, posted public notices in three professional newsletters, and sent repeat invitations to all the authors who had remained silent up to that point.

The answers I got weren't exactly encouraging:

No thanks.

Sorry, hasn't happened yet.

It's just not the right thing for me to be writing now.

My experiences would not qualify for your book.

My first time was not write-worthy by any criterion.

I see no benefit in exposing [teenagers] to my personal life.

The writing hours are fully committed through 1993 and 1994.

My usual public — age 9-12 — might read it, and they're too young.

Perhaps someday when my kids are all grown up and my wife has left me.

I'll *talk* directly to [teens] about any topic they're interested in, but I find that I'm reluctant to commit my own experiences to writing.

I believe that fiction is a much better vehicle for honesty about sex and romance, given its veneer of imagined reality, than non-fiction can ever be.

The first kiss, the first broken heart, the first heavy petting, the first illicit affair and any number of other sexual "firsts" are probably more memorable and more interesting.

To be fair, most of the writers also expressed a lot of sympathy, even if they couldn't personally take part in the project. Words like "fascinating," "fabulous," "splendid," "wonderful" and "much needed" kept cropping up — unfortunately followed by the word "but." If it hadn't been for a trickle of support from a few reputable authors, I'd have thought this was an idea whose time had not yet come.

(At this point, I should apologize in advance for insisting heavily on the writers' standing and achievements. It may seem like collective bragging, but let's face it: with a subject like this, we need all the credibility we can muster.)

First among those who came forward was Alberta Authors' Association Award-winner **Mary Blakeslee**. She only wrote two words —

Sounds great!

— but what a relief this was for my tattered soul. She'd actually checked the "yes" box on my answer card! She thought the project made enough sense to get involved!

Other supporters like Leacock medalist **W.P. Kinsella** eventually shone through, but on the other hand, many writers who did show some initial interest came up blank and eventually bowed out. It made for rough sailing, especially since backup volunteers weren't banging at our door.

The decision certainly wasn't easy for everyone. Canadian Authors' Association laureate Budge Wilson initially phoned in from Nova Scotia to turn the offer down but, ironically enough, ended up on the other side of the fence after hearing how bleak the situation sounded. Metcalf and Christie award-winner **Brian Doyle** wrestled with the assignment for a few months, pulled out regretfully, then returned a year later with a completely different angle. Golden State Bank-

honoured poet **George Swede**, triple P.E.I. prize-winner **Deirdre Kessler** and Sheila Egoff laureate **Julie Lawson** all had to undertake extensive rewrites in order to get their stories right. And **Bilson**, **Metcalf** and CAA award-winner **Martyn Godfrey**, who had originally declined to participate, went through several changes of heart before he could bring himself to release his contribution. My hat goes off to all of these people: as a contributor myself, I know how hard it was to walk the line between explicit and tasteful, and I'm sure I made things even tougher by providing pages and pages of picky, paranoid and overly nervous editorial comments ("Are you sure that softball-sized breasts don't qualify as 'big' on a fifteen-year-old?").

I'm also deeply indebted to Regina cartoonist **Leanne Franson** and Toronto writer **Christopher Paw** for providing thoughtful lesbian and gay testimonies; to Edmonton author **Lyle Weis** for his down-to-earth account of an extramarital affair; to Jamaican-born nurse **Linda Brissett** for her enlightening look at different cultural standards and little-known physical risks; to sex education consultant **Jill Golick** for an hilarious piece on the art of masturbation; to Vancouver correspondent **Martin Stephens** for difficult reflections on the issue of incest survival; and to teenage YTV writing contest finalist **Linda Valenta** for her portrait of an encounter that wasn't a week old when she joined the team. None of these themes are easy to tackle in the best of circumstances; to do it in style, for a project the likes of which had never been attempted in the English language, now that required guts.

Yes, I know: the above list does make for a pretty explosive combination, and you'd be forgiven for thinking that we were pushing the envelope beyond the acceptable range. After all, **Geraldo**, **Oprah**, **Shirley** and their peers have steadfastly fed us similar diets in their ongoing pursuit of sensationalism. The net result is that we now think of Anything-with-sex-in-it, not just as the aforementioned money machine (whether this is true or not), but as a shameless appeal to the prurient interest, a tawdry tactic which cheapens both proponent and recipients ... and a downright dangerous approach when children are involved.

That last point was driven home by our very government. Halfway through our recruiting process, the feds passed Bill C-128, a law nominally aimed at child pornography, but drafted so broadly as to prohibit all visual or written material describing the sex life of anyone under the age of 18 (*Criminal Code* 163.1). Never mind that in Canada, the age of consent for intercourse is usually fourteen — or twelve, if your partner is less than two years your senior. It may have been legal for eighth-graders to make love with one another, but on June 23, 1993, it suddenly became a criminal offence to *portray* them in the midst of such activities.

Now what kind of a law is that? For one thing, it does absolutely nothing to stop *actual* cases of child molestation.<sup>2</sup> As for literary representations of teen sex, it makes no distinction between pro or con, real of fictitious, abusive or consensual. It does allow material which has artistic merit or serves educational purposes, but this is left for the police to decide, not the public or the artistic community — and with all due respect for our customs and law enforcement

officers, the past few years have been rather enlightening as to their capacity to apply vague moral guidelines with any consistency.

Besides, the 1993 trial of Toronto painter Eli Langer clearly showed that, even if the charges are eventually dropped, this does not protect you from being arrested, having to stand trial and getting your work confiscated or destroyed in the first place (Book and Periodical Council, VIII-11). Obviously, this must have had a chilling effect on current and potential *First Time* contributors.

Nevertheless, all of the above authors not only stuck to their guns, but even though I'd said they could wait until a publisher had shown interest in the proposal, *they all decided to write their stories without further ado*. I won't pretend it was a miracle, but since many participants felt that this could affect their entire career, it did appear to be a quietly heroic thing to do.

Okay, sex *has* often been used in unsavoury fashions, and I'm quite willing to admit that, taken out of context, the sketchy outlines provided herein may not convey the full power and artistic value of the stories they represent. Yet this could just as well apply to Shakespearean dramas, tales from the Bible or any number of modern masterpieces if they were summarized solely in terms of their provocative content, or on the basis of isolated excerpts. I therefore urge outraged members of the public not to form an opinion until they have looked at the collection in its proper context.

Unfortunately, I'm afraid that I'm being too optimistic once again, for history has proven time after time that this is exactly what censors never do. So, defensive as this may sound, I'd like to make sure everything is crystal-clear before I move on.

As the guidelines to *The First Time* pointed out, the anthology was created to broaden the way one looks at relationships, not to reduce them to their lowest common denominator. We're dealing with complete relationships here, from the very first glances to the aftermaths, and the entire spectrum of intermediate happenstances is being marvelled at. Unlike other depictions, our accounts do not bashfully stop at the bedroom door, but neither do they linger inside for a longer period than is necessary. In crude word-counting terms, we're talking about an average of one or two explicit paragraphs out of every 20-page story: not much to shake a stick at, unless you happen to be the type of person who, like C-128's drafters, want certain scenes to be struck from existence, even though they deal with very legal things to do — or very legal body parts to own.

Enough of that. The time had come to seek out a publisher, and it was with complete confidence in the quality, the appeal and the importance of this product that I approached the companies which seemed most likely to lend us an ear. Each package included an overview of the project's objectives, a sample story, the contributors' track records, and the synopses of our sixteen tales. Not wanting to turn anyone down after having aroused their interest, I decided to start by sending out six proposals to the most likely prospects.

Then I tried eight more.

Then fourteen more, plus phone calls and repeat letters to all the publishers

who had remained silent up to that point.

All in all, no less than 27 companies turned the project down, from large firms like McClelland & Stewart to small presses like Pottersfield and Thistle-down. And that number doesn't even include companies that team members weren't too fond of, or inappropriate choices such as nature-oriented publishers, local-interest ventures and strictly educational enterprises. I certainly wasn't aiming for a rejection record, though I did take dubious comfort in knowing that Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms* had been sent back 25 times before it finally got through.

It's not as if *The First Time* didn't reach the editors' desks. Even in the cases where the services of an agent are usually indicated, enough interest was initially expressed to demonstrate that the project had landed in receptive hands. But while the concept seems to have launched lengthy discussions almost everywhere, the end results were invariably similar:

I apologize for the inordinate amount of time we have taken to consider your proposal. This is certainly an intriguing idea, and very attractively presented. Unfortunately, our feeling is that it is really not right for our present publishing program. I wish you every success finding an enthusiastic publisher.

We have discussed this very interesting project in detail with both the editorial and sales departments. Unfortunately, we have had to conclude that [we are] not familiar enough with the target market to do justice to the book. I hope that you do find a publisher who can help you.

Sorry for the delay with this but I wanted to give some of the other editors around here a read of the material you sent. Our basic consensus is that the idea is very appealing but the actual stories don't work for us. I do, however, wish you all the luck in finding the right house.

Random House passed it on to me after [their] reading. It's a good idea, but it did not seem quite right for our list at this time. Best of luck in placing the project with another publisher.

I'm sorry for the delay in making a decision regarding publication. Both the editor and the publisher have now reviewed your proposal, and I'm afraid they've decided this project wouldn't be appropriate for our list. Perhaps Greenwood would be interested.

While *The First Time* sounds like a very interesting project, I don't think it's right for Greenwood's list. Best of luck placing it elsewhere.

As you know, we [were] very seriously interested. I have discussed your plans in our editorial meeting, and, despite our being more fully informed, we have decided that this is a project we should simply pass on. I wish you better fortune with another publisher.

Here's all the material back ... which depresses me no end (and, no doubt, you even more). Good luck — not all publishers can be totally stupid!

I find your proposal very intriguing, which in part explains why I have held on to it for so long. However, after careful consideration, it is too much of a financial risk for us. We wish you the best in finding an appropriate publisher.

Please accept our apologies for the delay. We were intrigued by the project and discussed it at length in several editorial meetings. In the end, however, we decided with regret to expend our energies elsewhere. All very best wishes for the success of the English edition.

It sounds like a worthwhile project. This is one of the occasions when we regret being limited to our [illustrated books] specialty. We sent a letter to our distributor, who occasionally publish an attractive project themselves. They have not replied as yet, and I thought it only fair to return your outline. Good luck with this!

We thought long and hard about the project because, as you know, we were quite intrigued by the idea. Unfortunately, the stories seemed either too bland for the trade market or too risqué for the educational market. In order for this anthology to work, we feel it would have to be better geared towards one market or the other. We wish you every success with it.

I liked it but ... although we considered your proposal seriously, we felt that we could not get support for it from our educational wing. We wish you every success in placing it with

another publisher.

Sorry to be so slow in responding. There were some very positive elements to your project, but I don't think I can accept it. This is going to be a tough year and I'm feeling a bit more cautious than usual. Good luck with your search.

I'm so sorry I did not respond earlier to your request. It is a wonderful idea and I do know it was a spectacular success in Quebec [but] I think it will be difficult to get the idea published in English-speaking Canada except as an adult book. Good luck in finding a way ...

Kids Can's Charis Wahl is the only editor who called to discuss the situation at length. She was particularly miffed with the absurdity of it all: she had found the manuscripts most exciting, but hadn't been able to convince the people in the marketing department to follow suit. Since they didn't feel that the anthology matched the age of their predominant audience, she had gone so far as to suggest the creation of a new "Real World" or "Exploration" imprint for it. And when that didn't work, she even tried to get three *other* companies interested ... to no avail, alas.

She also discussed the project with a few of the publishers who'd already turned it down, and found that in spite of their remarks about editorial content, their refusal had also been marketing-based. Not only could there be no distribution via the lucrative school market, but *The First Time* couldn't even be fitted into an existing niche, and therefore couldn't be handled by the normal computer-defined channels of major bookstore chains — "ah, a children's science book, this goes on shelf 3B." The anthology required adaptability and a distinct sale strategy, and the decision-makers feared this was too much to ask from individual vendors. To paraphrase one of the rejection slips, why should they "expend their energies" on a worrisome scheme when there were plenty of trouble-free projects in the sea?

The situation seemed hopeless. I'd gotten my fight, but it was on the wrong front. Ideas can be challenged, but numbers and formulas mustn't be tampered with. (If you're a writer, try discussing various clauses of a contract with your publisher: you'll find that it's easy to change the parts that transfer total editorial control to the company, but the royalty percentages are usually carved in stone.)

I was ready to throw in the towel. If large firms are so set in their ways that they can't adapt to new markets, and small companies consider that this idea is "too much of a financial risk," then how in blazes was this book supposed to be born?

Enter Bob Tyrrell, May 26, 1994.

Thank you for sending the stories from *The First Time* anthology. I enjoyed reading them and feel that this is a very worthwhile project — though I am not 100% confident as to just what reaction it will provoke in English Canada. But I suppose that's what makes this business interesting! In any case, I would like to publish *The First Time*.

I am including a copy of our standard contract for your perusal. Let me know if you have any questions on it. I really look forward to working on this project with you.

By that point, I'd grown used to opening my mail with my heart in my mouth, so it took a while before my breathing returned to normal. Of course — a publisher from the *other* great Canadian weirdo province, what could be more appropriate?

With hindsight, it's easy to see that I should have thought about B.C.'s Orca

Books a long time before I did. Their track record is impeccable (they were named Publisher of the Year by the Canadian Booksellers Association in 1992), they've grown steadily since their inception (a rare sign of health in these troubled literary times) and they've put out an unusually high number of successes, from the Sheila Egoff Prize-winning *Siwiti* to the IODE, Howard-Gibbon and Governor General-honoured *Waiting for the Whales* — oh God, I'm doing the credibility thing again.

The best part is, they're also no strangers to controversy: Diane Carmel Léger's *Maxine's Tree*, which they published in 1990, is still widely recognized as a classic case of standing up to would-be book banners (in this case, the logging industry). The only reason I hadn't contacted them in the first round is that until recently, they'd stuck almost exclusively to B.C.-related matters. My sending them a proposal had been an awfully long shot, but I guess it sometimes pays to try unlikely venues.

So there's a happy ending to this saga after all. Then again, it may not be appropriate to call this an ending, for I'm writing this as we're entering the proofing stage — the books themselves aren't out yet. You'll have to decide for yourselves how the rest of the story goes, and I hope you'll keep me posted on further developments. I can't wait to find out how it all turns out.

'For God's sake, don't publish any more obscene literature!'

'How am I to know when it's obscene?'

'I'm sure I don't know. But don't do it!'

— Lawyer John Quinn to Margaret Anderson, after she published an excerpt of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1920 (DeGrazia 13)

## NOTES

- 1 Since the "Censorship" issue of *CCL* is out of print, I will gladly mail a copy of the article to anyone who sends me a stamped self-addressed envelope. Write to Charles Montpetit, 4282c Fullum, Montreal H2H 2J5.
- 2 In case you're wondering: there already are laws against sexual misconduct whenever children or teenagers are involved with an older person who is in a position of power or authority over them. Bill C-128, however, added nothing new to this legislation.

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**Charles Montpetit hasn't learned his lesson yet: on top of current fiction projects, he's now working on Australian, British and International Editions of The First Time.**