Tweaking the canon: Diana Wieler's Bad Boys

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Résumé: *Mary J. Harker analyse de près le roman de Diana Weiler,* Bad Boy, *publié en 1989. Ce récit remet en question les pratiques de la "concurrence virile" et du "machisme hétérosexuel"; il les subvertit de l'intérieur en insérant un discours homosexuel secret dans la trame narrative, qui finit par relativiser le discours hétérosexuel triomphaliste et miner ainsi de l'intérieur l'hégémonie de la masculinité traditionnelle.*

One quiet recess of canonical security recently has been disturbed by Diana Wieler's novel, *Bad Boy*. While a parvenue to the long-established Bad Boy genre, *Bad Boy* uses a portrayal of male sexuality to subvert that genre and the authority of the male-dominated canonical tradition that underlies it. In this manner, Wieler's feminine perspective of the Bad Boy can be seen to problematize the formation of genre, disclosing its ideological rather than merely formulaic or descriptive determinants.

The "Bad Boy Book" was first recognized as a particular literary subgenre by W.D. Howells in his review of Thomas Bailey Aldrich's *Story of a Bad Boy*. Howells saw Aldrich as unique in his "telling the story of a boy's life, with so great desire to show what a boy's life is, and so little purpose of teaching what it should be."[1] From the opening of his novel, it is clear that Aldrich intended his story to counter the plethora of "Good Boy Books"[2] about clean, mannerly, churchgoing, and industrious young Sunday school exemplars:

> This is the Story of a Bad Boy. Well, not such a very bad, but a pretty bad boy; and I ought to know, for I am, or rather was, that boy myself. (3)

These opening words also help define the "amazingly heterogeneous collection of writings—sentimental autobiography, juvenile romance, quasi-sociological documentary, comic slapstick, literary burlesque" comprising the subgenre that generally manifests a common "reverence for boyhood, an autobiographical flavor, a setting in the past, and a code of behavior alien to most adults" (Gribben 15). But while the Bad Boy is at odds with the adult world, he is not truly vile or evil; he has, in the words of one literary historian, "a heart of gold" (Kent 106). Judith Fetterley elaborates: "The Bad Boy is not really bad, only 'mischievous,' and it is clear that when he grows up he will be a pillar of the community" (299). That the Bad Boy presents no real threat to the adult status quo is also apparent in the two unchanging conceptual bases of all boy-books: boys as "natural

savages" must recapitulate the "evolutionary stages of savagery and barbarism into civilization," and since character or personality is "given, static," the boy does not mature or change dynamically—"at best he learns to see" (Cody 100).

For more than half a century, the subgenre of the Bad Boy book was enormously popular, petering out in the early 1920s with Booth Tarkington's *Penrod* series.[3] Young readers today—and possibly the writers of modern Bad Boy stories—have probably never heard of these early Bad Boys, let alone read any of their books—except two, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* And it is in these stories of Mark Twain that the tradition of the Bad Boy novel lives on. While scholars such as Fetterley consider *Tom Sawyer* to be "a paradigm of the Bad Boy convention" (299), *Huckleberry Finn* is undoubtedly the chief vector of the Bad Boy tradition.

Huckleberry Finn, "repeatedly cited and recited, translated, taught and imitated, and thoroughly enmeshed in the network of intertextuality" (Smith 1343), illustrates the process of institutionalization and canonization described by Barbara Herrnstein Smith; it also demonstrates the concomitant process of creating the culture in which its value is produced. Smith describes this process:

> ... the value of a literary work is continuously produced and re-produced by the very acts of implicit and explicit evaluation that are frequently invoked as "reflecting" its values and therefore as being evidence of it. In other words, what are commonly taken to be the *signs* of literary value are, in effect, also its *springs.* (1343)

Therefore, Nancy Walker is only partially right when she concludes that "virtually all readings of the novel ... reflect its origins in a male-dominated culture" (70). More than this, the readings themselves also testify to the male-dominated culture informing them. From Lyon Phelps' early assertion that "*Huckleberry Finn* is America" (160) to De Voto's insistence that it embodies the manliness of the western frontier, to Hemingway's boast that "all modern American literature comes from it" (22-23), to Lionel Trilling's and T.S. Eliot's male cosmology of the "river-god," the novel has been firmly secured by masculine universals. But, following Smith's "complex evaluative feedback loop" (1339), the Bad Boy book was written specifically to a male audience. Aldrich, again, sets the pattern in the first chapter of *The Story of a Bad Boy*:

> My name is Tom Bailey; what is yours, gentle reader? I take for granted that it is neither Wiggins nor Spriggins, and that we shall get on famously together, and be capital friends forever. (6)

Although Twain, in his Preface to *Tom Sawyer*, claims to be writing for "the entertainment of boys and girls," a private letter explains his rationale, both literary and entrepreneurial, in exclusively male terms:

> I conceive that the right way to write a story for boys is to write so that it will not only interest boys *but will also strongly interest any man who has ever been a boy.* That immensely *enlarges the audience.* [Twain's emphasis] (Bigelow 2: 566)

Perhaps with this intent of enlarging his male audience, Twain left out a preface to *Huckleberry Finn.*

Diana Wieler's *Bad Boy* shadows Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and the Bad Boy genre which extends behind it, interrupting the restrictive dialogue of males speaking to males, and undermining the male control of the canonical tradition that circumscribes it. Wieler discards the autobiographical convention of the Bad Boy novel entirely. She could have adopted a male *nom de plume*, but she chose instead an oblique, indirect narration that occasionally slips into free indirect discourse. While she focalizes the narration primarily through the Bad Boy, A.J., she discourages the detached and adjudicative response of *Huckleberry Finn*'s reader who must compensate for Huck's lack of moral self-awareness. Wieler is interested mainly in empathy, not sympathy; the values of her realistic textworld, created chiefly for the male adolescent reader, must feel like self-evident common sense, general reality. In this she is not unlike many writers for young adults, but her intent here goes beyond mere endorsement of the status quo.

A.J. is the ostensible Bad Boy in Wieler's story. He has the requisite orphan or almost-orphan status of all Bad Boys;[4] there is even a slight likeness between Huck's Pap and A.J.'s divorced, humourless black-haired father. Like all Bad Boys, A.J. has a school-boy crush, in his case, on his best friend's sister, Summer, and he regularly beats up bullies and hypocritical goody-goodies, including his Uncle Mike. Most Bad Boys belong to a boy-gang; A.J.'s is the Cyclones Triple A hockey team. It is here as the brawling "Bad Boy" defenceman that he earns the anti-heroic title that brings him popularity among his classmates and fame in his home town of Moose Jaw. As A.J. pounds an opposing winger, "the whole world was the rhythm of his arms and the love song descending from the stands" (115). A.J.'s ice battles are not meant merely to reflect the socially endemic violence manifest in "parents who break into fist fights in the stands" (47). A.J. is also a spectacular example of "the sanctioned rebel" of the Bad Boy tradition. The Bad Boy's naughtiness never seriously threatens society because he "does not hold any values which are at root different from those of the community" (Fetterley 301). His "rebellion," then, can be readily—immediately in this case—assimilated and endorsed.

The values that the Bad Boy and his society collaborate to affirm are made more obvious in Wieler's particular attenuation and updating of the genre. For probable reasons of nineteenth-century decorum, the early Bad Boy heroes never contend with the problems of pubescence. "Tom and Huck," as Stone explains, "were conceived as children of indefinite years, whose presexual innocence absolved Twain from confronting certain problems of maturity" (76). Wieler, by contrast, opens the genre to concerns of what Janet Batsleer *et al.* term "masculine romance," an amorphous collection of popular fiction comprising detective stories, spy stories, westerns, and war stories that "articulate[s] as a dominant concern the values and codes of masculinity" (80). Specifically, the conception of masculinity in "a masculine romance" is constituted by two concepts: competitiveness or gamesmanship, and normative heterosexuality—

the registration of the latter being especially important to establish the authority of the hero (75-80).[5] In the opening moments of *Bad Boy*, therefore, Wieler signals the reader that A.J., eyeing "Pink Satin," is to be viewed as the appropriate hero. The author also brings the male adolescent reader empathetically alongside A.J. in his anxious desire to fit in and win social acceptance. Shy, insecure, self-defined as "marginal" (15), A.J. puts himself through intense weight training in order to win a place on the Cyclones hockey team. And once having won that place, he endures exhausting practices, does hundreds of "manmakers," plays hard, beats up opponents on the cue of his coach, joins in the obligatory locker room humour, and generally relishes the team camaraderie and solidarity: "Here in this place, with these guys, he was part of something" (90).

A.J.'s friend and model is another less apparent Bad Boy, Tulsa Brown, who plays Tom Sawyer to A.J.'s Huck. Just as Huckleberry, the commonplace nobody, admires the "style" and "character" of Tom Sawyer whom he considers "well brung up" (292), the shy and insecure A.J. is awed by Tully's natural athletic prowess and finesse with girls. And while Tom masterminds the gang's escapades and Jim's escape from the Phelps' farm, Tully arranges dates, get-togethers, and dancing partners for A.J. Away from the press of hockey and parents and dating girls, A.J. and Tully have a close, sympathetic friendship. Its locus is Tully's 1969 red Mustang. For A.J., as it was for Huck, "telling was hard," but, "staring out the windshield at the passing prairie, [he] could feel himself unwinding as he talked.... The passenger seat of the Mustang was a little cubicle of air where he could say what he thought, without thinking" (19). The closeness, easy familiarity, and freedom afforded by the Mustang is in many respects like the raft society enjoyed by Huck and Jim: "You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft ... for what you want, above all things, on a raft, is for everybody to be satisfied, and feel right and kind towards the others" (155; 165).[6]

But just as this idyllic raft world and the ecstatic freedom it implies cannot be assimilated into the society that is reaffirmed in *Huckleberry Finn*'s conclusion, the ideal fellowship that A.J. and Tully share cruising in the Mustang is only remembered by A.J.; it is never reproduced in all the uncomfortable, crowded, missed, or aborted rides throughout the story. In a sense, the raft and the Mustang societies are purely elegiac; they crystallize a certain wistful nostalgia, what Stone calls "the mystery, security of boyhood recollected long after" (78) that he sees as the thinly disguised theme of all Bad Boy stories. What is presented in *Bad Boy* as the immediate destroyer of the idyll of the Mustang, however, is A.J.'s discovery of Tully with his lover in a gay hangout.

Leslie Fiedler explains the problem posed by overt homosexuality:

> [It] threatens to compromise an essential part of American sentimental life: the camaraderie of the locker-room and ball park, the good fellowship of the poker game and fishing trip, a kind of passionless passion, at once gross and delicate, homoerotic in the gay's sense, possessing an innocence above suspicion. (665)

But it is not just this "passionless passion" that overt homosexuality would

usurp, it is the prevailing and powerful text of heterosexual machismo circumscribing and limiting Fiedler's myth of homoeroticism. This pervasive masculine text is often the only one available. A.J., for example, mediates his world through this text; thus "there were no words connected to the picture" he saw of Tully arm-in-arm with Derek Lavalle in the hangout (70). And when Tully finally tries to explain to A.J. how, at age seven, he knew he was different, it is in the negative terms of a picture in which he does not belong:

> 'It was like a photograph somehow, Mom and Dad and the house and the garden, all pressed into this picture. And sitting there on my bike, I just knew that I didn't fit there. It wasn't ever going to be my picture, not even when I grew up.' (175)

A.J. is understandably stunned: "Seven. This wasn't what he'd expected. This didn't have anything to do with sex" (175).

Like Tom Sawyer, whose behavior is entirely modelled on social or literary standards, Tully understands very well how to play the game, how "to slide into the acceptable rut" (36). He dates the much sought after Andrea, plays the glamorous winger and locker room personality equally well, and covers his homosexual adventures with hetero bravura:

> A.J. shrugged ... 'You going to catch hell for not getting home?'
> ... 'Supremely,' he said.
> 'Was it worth it?'
> Tully looked at him and winked. A.J. shook his head, grinning in spite of himself. (24)

In his own words, he is "Prince Charming" (178) living a life "full of lies and little deceits" (38). The first words A.J. applies to his friend (in a free, indirect discourse glinting with irony) are "Tulsa Brown [is] an illusion" (9).

For A.J., Tully has given the lie to everything he was living; he has turned the world upside down (112). Flinching from unforgivable betrayal, he tries to push Tully metaphorically out of his world: "let him loose, the queer bastard. He's lucky I don't kill him" (84). But Tully's presence remains in A.J.'s life, like a ghost on the "creaky stairway" (108) outside his bedroom. Ironically, it is only after A.J. learns about his friend's homosexuality that A.J. begins to acquire the social recognition he craves. His "Bad Boy" title is bestowed with double irony when, at Coach Landau's bidding, he "'go[es] on a date with Mr. Fleury'," "take[s] him out" of the game (96). A.J. is not without misgiving about being a "goon" (100), but his need for social sanction is now more acute than ever:

> Insurance, he thought. For the day he couldn't bear to think about—the day somebody else found out about Tulsa Brown and the dirt flew that A.J. Brandiosa had been friends with a queer. Or worse. (102-103)

And so he enjoys the roar of the crowd that "almost lift[s] him out of his skates" (134), reluctantly swaps girl stories with Treejack and Doerkson—"At least he's a normal jerk" (128)—and lets the indigenous bric-a-brac and jokes about "faggot skates" (102) and liking or not liking girls (136) bounce off him.

Being "safe" is everything (102 and throughout). When he does slip out of the Bad Boy image in which the Broncos have singularly cast him, and scores with an assist from Tully, he is accused of being a "lying faggot" by Tully's jealous lover (161). The ensuing brawl earns A.J. a suspension from the team and from his entire social and psychological context; A.J. is literally freezing in the dark (164). Mechanically, "like a piece of machinery" (164), he attempts to reinstate his macho Bad Boy image, at least in his own eyes, with a date rape of Summer—"this is how it was supposed to be," he tells himself (170). Then, minutes later he confesses to Tully what he construes as a homosexual attachment for him. Confused, insecure, "scared" (176), A.J. is swinging wildly inside the vacuum that once was a context he thought he knew how to read. Is he gay or not? How does he interpret the signs?

In the darkened room in Treejack's basement that "was suddenly as close and familiar as the front seat of the Mustang" (175), Tully, the great manipulator of social signifiers, gauges A.J.'s declaration on the basis of his own instinctual and personal knowledge: "... he knew it was wrong. Knowing A.J., knowing himself, it was completely wrong" (177). Underlying the fraternal closeness and familiarity of the Mustang society, there has been a fundamental difference from the very beginning. Tully: "'This is me, but it isn't you, A.J.'" (177). And the mature recognition of this difference inevitably destroys the boyhood idyll. Significantly, at the end of their conversation, A.J. hardly recognized Tully's "man's profile cut into the window light" (178).

The solution to A.J.'s difficulties lies not in becoming Tully's homosexual lover, but in accepting his difference. Huck can throw in his lot with a runaway slave, and "go to hell" for it, while the reader praises him out of anti-slavery sentiment and affirmation of the regulation camaraderie of the Bad Boy tradition. If Tully combines characteristics of both Tom Sawyer and the childlike Jim, he does not, to paraphrase Huck, possess a heterosexual heart. He is a version of the Bad Boy that remains deviant, unassimilated by the social consensus that embraces his antecedents. Wieler emphasizes Tully's distinctness when the action is occasionally focalized through him. The reader watches as he manoeuvres to rescue his tumbling "house of cards" (36) or drives with his male lover in the Mustang. During one of Tully's homosexual encounters, the key is remote from the semaphore of heterosexual machismo that informs the dominant discourse of A.J.: "There were three very nice minutes, three minutes that made his heart bang like a drum in his head and his throat" (35). These narrative sections not only compromise the coding and signification of the dominant text, but they also destroy its exclusiveness. A.J., accused by Tully as having "tunnel vision" (12), pleads for a simple, monologic world:

> Oh, Tul. If you could just get over it. Back on track. You've gotten out of other things. One mistake doesn't have to screw up your whole life. I'd never bring it up. I swear to God. And I'd be the friend I'm supposed to be. If you could just get over it. (113)

Several months later in Treejack's basement, A.J. still has difficulty with Tully's assertion that "there's nothing to forgive" (174).

Less threatening to the authority of the dominant text, but nonetheless disruptive, are the marginal commentaries of Summer, Tully's sister. Her disgust at "the infantile pursuit of machismo" (13) and "the vicious streak of infantile violence that is inherent to [the male] sex" (103) are the kinds of antitheses contained, allowed within the hegemony of the male text. But her question to A.J. is more probing:

> The *game* again!' ...
> Well, I'm sick to death of the *game*, A.J. God, how can you let it manipulate your whole life?' (139)

All social behaviour, with its elaborate, unquestioned rules, is more or less a kind of game. This is apparent in all the rules and rituals—not just for hockey, but for friendship and fighting, and getting dressed for a game, for "being sixteen and male" (33)—that riddle the text. Unless one is a complete "hermit," which A.J. in his confused and disillusioned state is close to becoming (184), one must play the game. Ironically, it is Summer, in something reminiscent of how Huck's Aunt Sally would "sivilize" him (362), who later cites the rules to A.J. of a particular social game. "'Civilized people ask other civilized people to dance, you know'" (188). And, in his new dark suit, he does. Like Huck, and all good-Bad Boys before him, A.J. never condemns the shibboleths of the social order. He has already—not without amused and ironic detachment—re-established his own particular Bad Boy codes of heterosexual machismo as he determinedly sits down beside Summer:

> 'You didn't!' Summer screeched when she saw him. 'You didn't bring Attila the Hun *here*. The mad slasher, the depraved defense—'
> A.J. took a deep breath and pulled up a chair right beside her.
> 'I know you love it, but try and control yourself, all right?' he said boldly. The half-dozen people at the table burst into laughter. Summer's jaw dropped, but then she snapped it shut. Her cheeks were pink for a long time. (188)

But unlike Huck, who respectfully assists Tom Sawyer's elaborate performance of social and literary models in the freeing of an already free Jim, A.J. is now considerably more wary of the whole fabric of signification. He is also more open to the possibility of alternate social codes. With his arm around Summer, A.J. watches Tully in his periwinkle-blue jacket:

> A.J. knew he would never air-guitar, but he couldn't help admiring what he saw. To be trapped in this room with people like Uncle Mike—people like *me*, A.J. thought with a pang—and to dance anyway, dance in joy, took an especially resilient human bring. (191)

Uncle Mike's comment about "'those gol-darned pansy coaches'" (189) is not the only text available now, and as such it seems considerably less powerful.

In many respects, Diana Wieler's highlighting of discrepant texts within her version of the Bad Boy story can be understood in terms of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism or polyphony. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*,

Bakhtin describes how each literary text registers its own hidden polemic. It "senses its own listener, reader, critic, and reflects in itself their anticipated objections, evaluations, points of view. In addition, it senses alongside itself another discourse, another style" (196). That the discourse of homosexuality lay within the dominant, "normal" heterosexual discourse of the Bad Boy book was pointed out long ago by Leslie Fiedler in his spectacular reading of *Huckleberry Finn* as the story of black-white homoeroticism. In order to contest the dominant, monologic male discourse of the Bad Boy tradition, Wieler has brought its obverse into the open, and in doing so has produced what Bakhtin conceived as a "rupture of the one-dimensional texts of bourgeois narrative, as a carnivalesque dispersal of the hegemonic order of dominant culture" (Jameson 285).

Wieler's splintering of a particular monologic and phallocentric text in *Bad Boy* also foregrounds the ideological component of genre. Traditional theories of genre have been largely descriptive and formulaic, mapping correspondences between *a priori* concepts and particular texts. Although his theory of genre was never systematically developed, Bakhtin is unique among genre theorists in his insistence upon a socio-historical perspective. Evelyn Cobley explains:

> In his opinion, every literary text manifests a polyphonic diversity of disparate generic features which reproduces, in more or less displaced ways, the ideological struggles from which the text as such had been generated in the first place. (337)

As a woman writer, Wieler must confront consciously or unconsciously the problem of how to subvert the male-dominated literary forms. Rather than generating an alternate Bad Girl story that would be defined and allowed in terms of a stable symbolism within the dominant Bad Boy genre, she appropriates an excluded male voice that lies buried within the genre itself in order to destabilize its characteristic monologic authority. By furnishing a text where "there were no words" (70), she attacks the consensus of masculinity that informs the genre at its most critical point of vulnerability. As such, her relativizing of the codes of signification within the genre, and her opening up the genre to a polyphony of different codes, become a covert form of feminist expression within a male canonical hegemony. For this reason, the indeterminate literary status of *Bad Boy* is significant if discourse for young people is to be accorded an infinitely widening and opening ground.

NOTES

1 *Atlantic Monthly*, January 1870, p. 124, qtd. in Crowley 384.

2 The mass-produced series by Jacob Abbott, *Horatio Alger, Jr.*, and various Sunday school authors were probably the immediate targets.

3 To mention some of the other popular titles: Charles Dudley Warner's *Being a Boy* (1878), George Wilbur Peck's *Peck's Bad Boy and Pa* (1883), William Dean Howell's *A Boy's Town* (1890), Hamlin Garland's *Boy Life on the Prairie* (1899), and Stephen Crane's *Whilomville Stories* (1900).

4 Gribben has summarized the common traits of Bad Boy stories. They are discussed *in tandem* here with Wieler's version.

5 Batsleer *et al.* base part of their theory on the work of Roger Bromley.
6 Although some scholars do not consider the raft chapters as part of the original Bad Boy genre, Twain nevertheless made them his own unique contribution to the tradition.

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