What's Sacred in Children's Literature?: Hoogland's Response

• *Cornelia Hoogland* •

In my practice and scholarship of children's literature I value both literary discussion and criticism. Whether I am reading stories to five-year-old Sage, conducting a class at the University of Western Ontario, reading for pleasure or writing my own stories, for me enjoyment and criticism are intertwined. As a writer of poetry, children's stories, and plays for young audiences, I am no stranger to criticism. I have enough rejection slips and book reviews to paper my study. I am uninterested in unfairly discrediting Canadian writers — I'm in this business and know its difficulties. And as Iris Murdoch instructed, art is of the first order. But there's no sense in kidding ourselves. Important writers are those who are in dialogue with their society, or at least with their literary community. Given the marginalization of children's literature, most writers welcome informed discussion of their books. I'm surprised to learn that this does not seem true about a successful writer like W.W. Katz. Canadian writers of children's literature can play a central role in the ongoing discourse of our times, and many are doing so brilliantly.

Katz's antagonism toward informed discussion of her books appears in a *CCL* interview (*CCL*, summer, 1998, no. 90, vol. 24:2), conducted by M. Micros, entitled "My Books Are My Children: An Interview With Welwyn Wilton Katz." There both she and Micros discredit my academic inquiry. Let me start with the scholarship that seems to have prompted the interview. In my article, "Constellations of Identity in Canadian Young Adult Novels" (*CCL*, summer, 1997, no. 86, vol. 23:2) I explore, among other questions, how characters in three novels make decisions. What decisions do they make? What is the complexity of those decisions? How are the characters positioned in relation to their problems? Are the characters asked to choose between one option or another — that is, are the problems and their solutions presented as black and white? Or do the solutions (to problems centred on membership in such diverse activities as sports groups or native communities) uphold complexity and contradiction? This discussion is set in the context of what it means to be Canadian, and the pressures to choose iden-

tity along cultural and national lines. I ask whether there is among writers "an attempt to reveal the complexity and heterogeneity of our culture, to oppose hierarchical organization, and to expose racism and sexism where it occurs?" (29). To answer this question, I examine Katz's *False Face* and *Out of the Dark* and Diana Wieler's *Bad Boy*. Among much else, I argue, for example, that in *False Face* Katz raises the important topic of cultural continuity. While I applaud her for tackling complex subjects, I critique her treatment of the topic. The native reserve Katz creates dichotomizes native and white and perpetuates the idea of cultural purity. This creates a false impression of the inhabitants and the culture of the reserve. The two people that the main character Tom meets there clearly state that the reserve is available only to people who are 100 percent native, and thus unavailable to Tom who is métis. Tensions — racial, cultural — must co-exist if writers are to portray the complexities of situations and decision-making within those situations. As I stated in my article, "In creating a distinctly pure (albeit negative) environment, Katz disallows tensions which need to be voiced" (33). It's Katz's prerogative to create the reserve she imagines exists, but I believe that unless its tensions are voiced, readers lose the opportunity to face "the challenges to which native Canadians as well as non-native Canadians need to respond" (33). For most people, the days of a single-perspective, objective world are over. Writers must write out of a plurality of consciousness; that is, they must engage in literary discussion that sustains the contradictions and tensions that lie at the heart of relations between aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples if young Canadian readers are to gain such a consciousness. Call this notion my "post-modernist's attempt to deconstruct ... into political statements," "a politically correct social study," or simply "a whisper campaign ... started against this child [fictional Tom]," or what you will. The point is that in Katz's novel his reserve, and thus his native heritage, is denied Tom. He's expelled because he's white. This exclusive viewpoint goes unchallenged.

As part of my discussion of *Out of the Dark* I challenge Ben's unexpected change of heart that occurs in one paragraph, one thought process: "He embraces his father's heritage without reflection, after one hundred and seventy-five pages of reflection on why he should not do so. Unquestioning uniformity is as problematic here as it is in *False Face*" (36). Ben accepts not only his former enemies as friends, but also gives up his own pursuits such as Norse mythology, accepts the new home over the old, his father's preference in colour over his own. In this one-paragraph shift, belonging means assimilation. This is an unhelpful notion to present to young people who are trying to negotiate complex lives. For my discussion of the ways in which Wieler manages to keep a writerly eye on complexity and contradiction, please revisit my article, "Constellations of Identity" referenced above.

Katz's objections to my article seem to be based on my politics, or what she describes as "the ammunition that goes with their own agenda"

(57). The Micros interview alludes to critics like me who deconstruct Katz's books into "political statements" and who, according to Micros, critique Katz's book into a "politically correct social study" (53). The criticisms against me are difficult to defend because they are unsupported generalizations. Terms such as "political" and "politically correct," applied to my work, are not defined in the interview, making the piece read more as invective than as analysis or exploration. Nevertheless, I will attempt to provide reasons for my objections to the content and form of the interview.

First, in the interview, Katz speaks persuasively about her use of point of view in her writing and in her critiquing of other books. However, while she claims this literary convention as her right and obviously her delight, she says that "most readers, and especially children, read a story from beginning to end, and as far as I know, don't interrupt themselves to think upon topics such as divorce, race, point of view, etc." (51). This approach to reading strikes me as anti-intellectual, condescending toward child readers, and frankly baffling. What does Katz think teachers do in language arts and English classes? Thinking about a novel's point of view is, as Katz claims for herself ("I thought long and hard about point of view" [56, 57]), one of the literary tools that provides reading and writing pleasure. Should only Katz appreciate, understand and manipulate point of view?

Second, I object to Katz collapsing motherhood and art, and claiming special status as a writer. Katz wants her readers and critics to have the same intense, motherly love for her characters that she has. An apparent remedy for critics like me is to "become Ben, to cry for him as I [Katz] did," "to forget for a brief space of time that she's [I'm] a professor teaching the book or a literary critic judging the book" (52). She accuses critics of defaming and unfairly attacking her child characters in the public press, of perpetuating whisper campaigns against them, of creating a portrait of the child characters as politically incorrect. If Ben and Tom are indeed fictional characters, such "attacks" are futile. I may not agree with something a literary character does, but my criticism is not of his actions, nor is it a value judgment of the artist. Rather, literary criticism is interested in the form as well as in the portrayal of context, characters, and the issues characters face.

Third, I object to Micros prompting Katz in her interview question. She says "you [Katz] are not doing a politically correct social study, you are writing a novel. It contains feeling, and sometimes the feelings of flawed individuals. It is unfortunate when readers and critics do not realize that" (51). Then, further on, she applauds Katz for saying that very thing. The example Micros offers of her classroom disturbs me with its comparison of students "jump[ing] up from the audience and interrupt[ing] him [the speaker] to the 'attack' of literary critics" (51). I am devoted to becoming a better reader and writer through public and private conversations with the books I read. I do not interrupt speakers, nor writers, nor other critics. I want

to hear what others have to say, fully anticipating that they want to hear my ideas. As I understand the situations of both scholarly writing and the classroom, the objective of critic and teacher is to encourage dialogue and to model civil disagreement, not to silence it.

Fourth, I object to Katz's and Micros's repeated implication that emotional responses to a work be divorced from intellectual consideration. Within reader-response theory, a feeling-response is one that provides important critical information to the reader. The position that both women take suggests that readers are not to read books differently from the ways their authors intended them to be read. Readers are not to do anything, it seems, but enjoy and appreciate. Katz insists that discussion of her books occur on a feeling level only, and furthermore, on the terms of "her" feelings.

Finally and most importantly, Katz acknowledges the sacredness of the native themes with which she deals in *False Face*, yet dismisses them when she says that "there is no way to let such issues into a book if you leave out everything that is sacred to somebody" (58). She says this while demanding special exemption from criticism for herself as a writer. (For example, she remarks on her suffering at the hands of critics when her fictional characters are "unfairly attacked or treated with disdain, or worse" ... "torn to pieces and bits of them taken to build some other person's theory about me [Katz]" [64].) It appears that for some Canadians fictional characters are sacred, while for others Canada's first and oldest cultural and spiritual traditions are sacred.

I conclude "Constellations of Identity" by saying that we need to "keep talking": "As creators of our symbolic systems we must use and interpret them in ways that reflect, in form and content, what we believe and value. Through comparison and contrast we come to know both others and ourselves, but the quality of our reflection on these differences will determine the depth of our understanding" (40). *CCL*, its writers and readers, need to keep the conversation going at a level of quality that, as Katz says, takes "children's literature ... seriously" (65).

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