O Canada, Ain't I A Usanian?
Dear Canada and Dear America as *Historia*

—Nancy Huse

First, A Personal Narrative Of My Own About These Books

My children's literature student, a history major interested in teaching at the Middle School level, held the small book in her hands, its bookmark ribbon trailing through her fingers. "I want to write a paper about fake diaries," she said. "My history professor told me about these books. They're better history than real diaries." When I frowned, the young woman added that of course a fake diary should be supplemented with real diaries and other documents, but that it would give child readers a more accurate account of the past than period writing would. While I know that narrative is the basic etymology of *historia*, and that literature's etymology acknowledges documents—letters, law, diaries—this paradoxical merging of fiction and fact had usually been *my* course topic, not one imported from the history department. That's why I frowned.

For several years I have been writing about children's books as themselves documents, materials especially relevant to the women's studies' aim to "write women back into history." Teaching a course on women's life writing, I have argued for the importance of personal narratives as a way of coming to truth. So, my student had my ear. Why were these *Dear America* books passing muster in the history department, while I was busy arranging library visits so that my class could read real diaries preserved in Augustana's Mississippi Valley archive?

Recalling Isobel Armstrong's claim that we depend on play to escape determinism and transform categories (40), I want to argue in a personal way the public value of books that combine narrative fiction, expository prose, and creative nonfiction or life writing to express what is meant by the imagined address to a nation state that provides the name for this Scholastic series. The tone I take in this essay results from impatience with academic discourses that talk about paradox and metaphor without acknowledging one's

own need to speak in paradox and metaphor. Academic discourse arguing a thesis about a literary text often seems far removed from the playfulness being described. To keep playfulness present in my prose, I acknowledge that, on a "strictly rational" plane (if there is such a thing), it's silly to think of fictional girl diarists as interpreters of nation states. Interpreters of nation states write treatises. Yet Charlotte Perkins Gilman uses a fictional girl diarist to delineate a theory of power—a topic we continue to "play" with in framing and reframing our national narratives, our global selves. She has her teen-aged "Benigna Machiavelli" sort out private and public in the 1915 story of that name. Her story is funny, yet chillingly true. The convention of the fictional girl diarist, in Gilman's prose, invites readers to let go of determinisms about gender and age, to reshape categories like authority or heredity. So my playfulness with tone is one I see as essential to my own work. My stance here is one I've described as a matter of "working across class and race and gender lines, of advocating with passion alternative views of the world, and noticing a writer's aberrational moves as part of our descriptive and interpretive codes" (Huse, "Elephants," 196). Dear Reader, as the girl diarist sometimes says, we share a life; let us see how "Canada" and "America" are operant terms in this process.

The Title Of This Review

This teaching paradox, this liberal arts lesson, is my apologia for hearty praise of the little fake diaries, at least those I have examined. I have my assumptions about women and history. They are implicit in the title I've given this review essay. My particular agenda resembles one Martha Nussbaum claims in *The Fragility of Goodness* as she links drama with philosophy: "to try to show in my writing the full range of my responses to the texts and to evoke similar responses in the reader" (17). I shouldn't have to cite Nussbaum or anyone else to defend the use of the personal voice in academic writing, but reading the pages of many journals of children's literature I find it a rarely used strategy, an "endangered discourse" in this field (Huse 189). Readers who have ever felt alien in their native land can find something to think about in my title, and those who have not known this kind of exile can wonder if they ever will.

My responses, personal and political, are signalled in the title's opening words. "'O Canada!'" seems to parallel "America the Beautiful" as an anthem of admiration and yearning in national culture. But I see "'O Canada!'" as a motif in my own citizenship, and I am an "American." Roughly half the U.S. population—perhaps more—rues the reelection of George W. Bush in 2004. While jokes about emigrating (if Canada would have us) are common in my e-mail lists and social networks, the more serious applica-

tion of the Canadian anthem was represented in an e-mailed map of "The United States of Canada" shortly after last year's presidential and congressional elections. This map coloured Canada blue, and attached peninsulas of the East and West U.S. coasts and part of the Midwest to its territory. The rest of North America was colored red, and labelled "Jesusland." The obvious falseness of the dichotomy between "red states" and "blue states" in the United States doesn't resonate as powerfully as the satiric image. There, on that made-up map, would be space for negotiations and disputes in which people actually listen to one another—so the dream of my title's "O Canada!" goes. For now, I am culturally aligned with my imagined and experienced Canada. Once, having dinner with Canadian colleagues in Toronto, I wanted the group to leave a 20% gratuity for the wait staff. That is normal in the States, I explained, because these workers depend on tips for most of their income. I concluded with a little plaint, "They have no health insurance." Raised eyebrows preceded the retort that Canada is different. *Vive la. Count your blessings*.

It isn't as though I would willingly surrender my U.S. passport, my mobility and self-interest as a citizen. But calling myself an "American" can't ring as true for me as my dinner companions' calling themselves "Canadian." In Europe, other children's literature colleagues once introduced me as a USAnian. In Latin America, too, I have not been introduced as an "American," but as a teacher from the United States. Trying to find a national noun for my citizenship is difficult, futile, just as Sojourner Truth's question "Ain't I a woman?" has no substance; though a national myth in itself, this question—according to historian Nell Painter—never crossed the abolitionist's lips. The "truth" is slippery, whether about The United States of Canada or about women's "actual" words. We are in the realm of story, *historia*.

Women's Life Writing And The Production Of Meaning

How easily, though, *historia* can hold hands with *hysteria*. There is something important about that, because the boundlessness, the permeable borders, the creation of new languages common to hysteria (Hunter 93), are like the impulse to remap the red and blue states.

My experience with Canadian literature is common among second-wave feminist critics in the U.S.; Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro, Margaret Atwood were of the company of Virginia Woolf and Tillie Olsen in the pages of my syllabi for a long time. Of late, other canons of women writers, the memoirists and biographers, the critics of colonization, have gained place. The diary, the journal, the letter—these are the reciprocity of story and reality in women's writing, the "hysteria" of those who recognize untold stories.

Personal narratives like diaries seem to be sociograms, important to national cultures Kertzer 172, but also key to writing women's lives in a North America of anglophone shaping. With the current rage for life writing, a genre has taken on formulaic patterns. Like a good western, diaries are—in children's literature at least—delivering the goods. The goods particular to the genre include the portability of ideas across national borders and space for negotiation and dispute within the minds of writers and readers.

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In this series of *Dear* books, "diaries" are the heritage of girls. I have noticed the Scholastic boy series, *My Name Is America*, presented as journals rather than diaries, huddled in a corner of a shelf at the local library, while the girl series multiply. Moreover, within the artful structure of *Dear Canada* and *Dear America*, a tripled narration makes—well, history. And literature. Each invented girl diarist explores and constructs her world. Then documents are presented by the author as academic narrator, showing that the world explored and constructed comes from records we have. The pleasure for readers like me—caught in the momentum of nonfiction as "the" genre of our times—only intensifies when the author next tells the story of her own life as it inspired the search for the documents, the mapping of their meaning in the coherent voice of the girl she created from the fragmented past. Each small book offers three stories, then, that can coalesce or remain separate, as the reader determines—just as "Canada" and "America" can merge or stand alone in this review. Readers can "choose their own adventure," riffling back and forth between the sections as I do on rereading, or settling down to experience each as an entire narrative.

The Willful Reader Chooses A Text Set For Analysis

The set of books I read from the two nations represents the individual yet social choices this particular reader makes. To keep some focus on a time period, and thus continue to pass for some kind of academic, I looked for titles from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Then I followed up on interests I have in a few authors, notably Jean Little among the Canadians and Susan Bartolotti among the Americans, and what I saw as common subject matter spanning the Boundary Waters. The railroad; immigration; the Great War; the vote. Then there were my own questions—how would Bernardo children, whom I had heard of in TV documentaries and thought about in relation to Anne of Green Gables, be depicted? What about the coal fields where my mother was born? How is African American experience shaping this se-

ries? These questions came up as I perused the lists and the library shelves, in contrast to the topics suggested by my general sketch of the era. I also greeted with a Garrison Keillor grin the narrative about a failed colony in the cold center of the hemisphere, Minnesota; its less-than-wholesome origins contradicted Lake Woebegone. These search processes netted four Canadian books, and five American—I kept the imbalance because I could not dispense with any of the volumes I gathered. Perhaps this was ethnocentric on my part, but there was a personal urgency in some "American" choices, while the Canadian selections had been made from greater emotional distance. The books tumbled about in my reading time and on my desk until I plotted their common features. I tried to stifle the echo of Virginia Woolf—"As a woman I have no country"—that stays with me from the seventies, but I could not. I saw commonality, not difference, in the national "lives of girls and women."

A Grid Of Girlhood, Here And There

My sample of nine books set between 1868 America (*The Great Railroad Race*) and 1926 Canada *(A Prairie Wide as the Sea*) includes girl diarists from eleven to fifteen who receive a book to write in from one of their two middle-class parents or another relative. A single exception is the motherless girl in Poland who buys her diary from a Gypsy shortly before her father forces her into an arranged marriage to a widowed coal miner (*A Coal Miner's Bride*). Another half-orphan receives her book from a minister father who, with his new wife, has been adding a new baby each year to the original family (*Land of the Buffalo Bones*). In most of the other texts, the mother, aunt, or grandmother of the girl supplies the book. The girls' texts, based on research by the authors, include references to novels and other reading, as well as examples of poems, games, and songs in the style of the era. Each diary covers a year in which the girl develops powers of observation and understanding in family relationships and in the widening contexts of town, business, or school. Most girls want, have, or worry about another girl, the best friend who sometimes has a more exciting year—marrying a Native American in *Land of the Buffalo Bones*, sheltering a lost brother who is a Bernardo child like herself in *Orphan at My Door*, or becoming a military nurse in *A Time for Courage*. Most diarists grow closer to a significant parent or sibling: in *Color Me Dark* a sister's darker skin is central to a girl's understanding of the Great Migration and of a new home in Chicago, while in *Brothers Far From Home* a mystery about a soldier brother and the deep grief of their father forge bonds for a middle child who was the "odd man out" in a large family. In the books about the railroad, each girl encounters the role of the Chinese workers and the race of big business to achieve

a goal. The American girl in *The Great Railroad Race* has to camp out with her journalist father for a time, and the Canadian girl in *A Ribbon of Shining Steel* nearly dies in an explosion. Other crises rooted in history include a mother jailed for suffrage work in *A Time for Courage* and British immigrant fathers fired from their jobs in the Minnesota of *Land of the Buffalo Bones* and the Saskatchewan of *A Prairie Wide as the Sea*.

Beyond these topical points, the diaries develop themes of female language, incorporating references to novels that parallel the diarists' circumstances. *Little Women*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Anne of Green Gables* are reading selections. *Children of the Backwoods* is important to the Saskatchewan girl, and the preference for such fictions is consistent; the girls do not read fairy tales or Bible stories in these books. Instead, they find ways to tell stories of relationships that involve moving from separateness in late childhood to successful, but not sacrificial, integration as puberty approaches or is experienced. In Jean Little's two books, diaries are places where private thoughts survive, where "writing down what really happened" is the mother-given task, or where the chance to be blatant—"I hate my sister"— evolves into a subtle role in a brother's life. Patricia McKissack's diarist is spare of words but fond of numbers, and she equates problem solving with her place in the world. The mothers are not always able to help the girls in their quests for balance between private and public; several are absent by reason of death, overwork, marital strain, politics or pregnancy-related illness. The diaries in a sense replace Alcott's Marmee and Montgomery's Marilla as sounding boards. This convention seems consistent across the national borders, and the historical crises of war, racism, economic migration and redefinition of gender roles are occurring in "Dear Canada" and "Dear America" at once.

Sex-Gender Across The Borders

Brought up to believe that Canada is closer to its European origins than America—each nation indulging in different kinds of tea parties, as it were—but currently echoing Michael Moore's "Dude, where is my country?", I see the girl-life in these books pushing away at silences based on the sex-gender system. Each diary has its moments of questioning the gendered strata of power. Examples of questioned hierarchies include the hard-nosed snob brother in *Orphan at My Door*, whose father takes him in hand when it is nearly too late; the father in *Brothers Far From Home*, whose sermons are not supportive of war and whose grief over a death incapacitates him; the untruthful father whose stories mislead a colony in *Land of Buffalo Bones*; and the father who must lend his influence to the cause of female suffrage when Woodrow Wilson is impervious to women's protest actions. More quietly and rarely, the narra-

tives suggest challenges to normative heterosexuality; the domestic partnership of women, the lack of fairness in arranged marriage, and the slow awakening of sexual passion hint at alternatives. Most notable among these moves is Marion Dane Bauer's life story enveloping *Land of the Buffalo Bones*, where she names her woman partner and talks of their exploring the Minnesota landscape of the book. The diarist in this volume is the one whose journey away from depending on her insensitive father most articulates the criticism of both gendered hierarchies and patriarchal marriage as norm.

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Beyond persistent trolling at gender hierarchies and rare nods to variations in domestic partnerships, these books refuse the sexual division of labour in numerous ways. Though households run on female labour and business ventures are the world of fathers and brothers, there are aunts who are New Women, mothers who are midwives, and one who runs a boarding house. It is in the epilogue section of each book, however, that the economic and ideological shifts in women's work lives stands out. Among the nine diarists, two become nurses, both remaining single and childless. The other girls grow up to be mothers or stepmothers, but most have occupations outside the home: a teacher, a journalist, a beekeeper and entrepreneur, an archaeologist, an activist. One in Canada and one in America have "traditional" large families, yet both of these become writers.

Moving The Narrative Ribbon

While the diaries are "fake," and hence little epistolary novellas as much as they are nonfiction, the modern mix of the imagined and the verifiable gives them settings of evidence and replicability dear to many readers' hearts, including my own. We can turn at any time to the "Historical Note" section to find photos, lists, songs, art, recipes, maps, timelines, cartoons, posters, headlines, and other realia. While I cannot be certain what girl readers of today would make of such documents—I do know children still want things to be "true"—I derive great satisfaction myself in moving the bookmark to back up what I read in the novellas. Even more, I am touched by the ways the books evoke my parents for me. My father, born in 1887 and migrating to Oregon with his Canadian mother, told my mischievous brother over and over that, without an education, "You won't have a Chinaman's chance." In *The Great Railroad Race*, a drawing of Chinese labourers in cliff-hanging baskets using explosives makes vividly clear what my father had seen with his own eyes. My mother was born in 1898 in Hazleton,

Pennsylvania, where her father worked in the mines (we think). Reading *Coal Miner's Bride* with its dangers and romance, I wonder about my grandmother, herself a coal miner's bride, who arrived here at fourteen from Germany. The books likewise acknowledge the lives my siblings built; *Brothers Far From Home* reminds me of the intense periods of waiting for one of them to be furloughed during the war that followed the war to end all wars. And as a personal connection, I also remember being a little girl who read encyclopedias and lives of presidents when she wasn't reading *Little Women*. So the historical sections seem to me the provocative, evocative nucleus of each volume.

Wrapping rather than concluding the whole text is a short "About the Author" narrative. Jean Little's *Orphan* novella includes a poem she wrote in childhood. Her *Brothers* is based on an uncle's war death. Likewise, Marion Dane Bauer is descended from the minister who forgot to tell his congregation what they would face on the open plains. Sarah Ellis wove her parents' stories into *A Prairie Wide as the Sea.* Patricia McKissack's grandfather and uncle survived the Chicago race riots.

Remapping Is Always Possible

Over and over, the layers of each volume fan into one another for me. No wonder history means story, literature means documents, and life writing means that women's history—and other important truths—can link us together. The various parts of the volumes protect themselves from my cynicism about commercial series, about propaganda and the class/race/gender structures we are called upon to understand and to alter. As a college teacher, when I see the proliferation of "fake diaries" in children's book publication, I say "Bring 'em on." The series I examine here is one measure of their worth, and I am sure that dissertations comparing several series, revealing other things to resist and to repeat, are well underway in the academic world. More importantly, I hope that I will hear fewer silences when I preview with my students what they know about current religious and economic issues. Yesterday a whole class said they had never heard of Catholic and Protestant conflict in Northern Ireland. Another told me systems cannot change. And yet there is a making of it new in the books my children's literature student introduced me to. The railroad, the labour movement, the Great Migration, the land grants, the protests, the wars, the economics of immigration—these public concerns determine the lives and voices of the little girl diarists of this series, as well as the historical notes and authors' stories. The girl in *Brothers Far from Home* receives *War and Peace* as a birthday gift from her reflective father, and he keeps his children at home on Orangemen's day. The diarist in *A Time for Courage* has the radical suffrage worker Alice Paul for a

friend. Unjust personnel policies almost cause divorce in *The Great Railroad Race*. Class differences keep Bernardo orphans in danger in *Orphan Far from Home*. Though my own political imagination seems fragile in the America of my advancing years, I am on the map Scholastic is selling.

Dear Reader, these books are not the same as *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, but my lived-through experience with them makes me hold them out to you. Your transaction of them will differ from mine, but you live in these times with me. Should you be far from viewing *historia* as evocative of hysteria, write your own paper. But do not forget my young student of history and literature, valuing narrative as argument and evidence, crossing borders we are sometimes afraid to cross with one another.

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