Shared Characteristics of Boys and Men in Recent Canadian Children's Fiction

—Benjamin Lefebvre

Wynne-Jones, Tim. *A Thief in the House of Memory*. Toronto: Groundwood, 2004. 180 pp. $13.95 pb. ISBN 0-88899-574-1.

Poulsen, David A. *Last Sam's Cage*. Toronto: Key Porter, 2004. 222 pp. $15.95 pb. ISBN 1-55263-611-9.

Sherrard, Valerie. *Sam's Light*. Toronto: Boardwalk/ Dundurn, 2004. 216 pp. $12.99 pb. ISBN 1-55002-535-X.

Leavitt, Martine. *Heck Superhero*. Calgary: Red Deer, 2004. 144 pp. $22.95 hc. ISBN 0-88995-300-7.

Cumyn, Alan. *After Sylvia*. Toronto: Groundwood, 2004. 200 pp. $18.95 hc. ISBN 0-88899-612-8.

Walters, Eric. *Camp 30*. Toronto: Viking Canada, 2004. 214 pp. $22.00 hc. ISBN 0-670-04486-5.

Swan, Bill. *Corner Kick*. Sports Stories 66. Toronto: James Lorimer, 2004. 115 pp. $8.95 pb. ISBN 1-55028-816-4.

Nicholson, Lorna Schultz. *Interference*. Sports Stories 68. Toronto: James Lorimer, 2004. 94 pp. $8.95 pb. ISBN 1-55028-822-9.

Rayner, Robert. *Just for Kicks*. Sports Stories 69. Toronto: James Lorimer, 2004. 118 pp. $8.95 pb. ISBN 1-55028-824-5.

Gunnery, Sylvia. *Out of Bounds*. Sports Stories 70. Toronto: James Lorimer, 2004. 98 pp. $8.95 pb. ISBN 1-55028-826-1.

Polak, Monique. *No More Pranks*. Orca Soundings. Victoria, BC: Orca, 2004. 100 pp. $9.95 pb. ISBN 1-55143-315-X.

Walters, Eric. *Grind*. Orca Soundings. Victoria, BC: Orca, 2004. 100 pp. $9.95 pb. ISBN 1-55143-317–6.

In the introduction to their collection of essays *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley explain that their volume "is about stories: stories we tell to children, stories we tell about children, stories we tell about ourselves as children" (ix). These "stories," which they also refer to as "dominant narratives," reveal a paradox between two ongoing and overlapping assumptions about children and sexuality: that "children are (and should stay) innocent of sexual desires and intentions" and that they "are also officially, tacitly, assumed to be heterosexual" (ix). Their volume focuses on the particular dominant narrative of compulsory heterosexuality as it pertains to the pressures of normative gender roles offered to children, but their comments about the power of the storyteller can be applied to a wider range of dominant narratives that coexist in tandem: "Who tells the story matters because the storyteller defines what can exist in the field of representation" (x). In other words, the fact that writers of stories for younger readers are nearly always adults implies a form of power that is crucial to understanding how ideology is transmitted in this literature. "If writing is an act of world making," they posit, then "writing about the child is doubly so: not only do writers control the terms of the worlds they represent, they also invent, over and over again, the very idea of inventing humanity, of training it and watching it evolve" (xiii). This present review article is likewise about two overlapping sets of stories: the "dominant narratives" that circulate culturally about what it means to be a child and the stories that English-speaking authors in Canada write to enlighten, inspire, and entertain younger readers.

This discussion occurs at the heels of my tenure as *CCL/LCJ*'s Assistant Editor and Administrator throughout the journal's last three years at the University of Guelph. One of my favourite tasks as Administrator of the journal was to open packages of review books sent to us by publishers and to decide how to get these books reviewed. In early 2003, Marie C. Davis and I decided to adopt a new review format and to solicit from children's literature specialists review articles that considered a range of texts within a category or genre. Some of these review articles were longer than others—Perry Nodelman's review of seventy-nine picture books is the longest item published in *CCL/LCJ* since the journal's inception—but they all had something in common: by considering a range of texts at a time, these review articles helped us make sense of the books' overall ideological function and cultural production, in addition to their individual literary and aesthetic value. For instance, Nodelman notes that, while the majority of the seventy-nine picture books are well done individually, as a group they are "depressingly similar to each other" and to numerous picture books produced over the last century, both in Canada and elsewhere ("As

Canadian" 96). These reviews also revealed recurring trends in the larger industry of English-language children's publishing in Canada, not only in terms of how books are put together, but also how their authors, editors, illustrators, and designers imagine what it means (or could mean) to be a child. Davis and I were fascinated by the trends these reviewers unearthed and hoped our readers would share that fascination.

And so, when I received two heavy boxes of books from *CCL/LCJ*'s new headquarters at the University of Winnipeg, my interest was in gauging what these novels *together* reveal *as a genre of texts*—more specifically, the English-language boys' book in Canada in 2004. How do these books imagine how real boys are or should be? How do they interact with "dominant narratives" surrounding not only gender and sexuality (obvious starting points given the recurring polarization of "boys' books" and "girls' books"), but also race, class, ethnicity, religion, locale, language, and nation? What motifs, themes, plot structures, and ideological attitudes recur again and again, what possibilities or alternatives remain elusive or missing? In what follows, I explore the assumptions these books make about how "real" boys act, talk, think, and perceive the world around them, as well as ponder moments of resistance to these dominant narratives. What remains equally telling are the possibilities that remain overlooked in these books, but that hover above the genre as absent presences: for instance, as Davis points out in her editorial to the final issue of *CCL/LCJ* published at the University of Guelph, "Past, Present, Future," Canada's official policies of multiculturalism are never quite in sync with the range of characters found in the fiction published for its citizens (10).

To structure this discussion, I propose to situate these novels in the context of current trends in Canadian children's literature scholarship, as revealed in the pages of *CCL/LCJ*. Guest editors of recent special issues published at Guelph have posited important questions about the possibilities of diversity and the examination of sameness and difference in Canadian fiction for child and adolescent readers. For example, in her editorial to a issue on "Transgressing Gender Norms in Canadian Young Adult Fiction," Joanne Findon asks whether writers for young people make sufficient attempts "to offer imaginative possibilities for gendered behaviour" for the real adolescents who read and engage with these texts: are "masculine" and "feminine" defined in rigid opposition to each other, Findon wonders, or is there sufficient room for characters who, in a variety of ways, resist these polar opposites (6)? Findon's comments suggest that a continued proliferation of gendered binaries is especially damaging to adolescent readers who fall somewhere between the two extremes, and so, instead of confirming such norms, adolescent fiction

ought to become—or ought to become—a space for exploration and reflection upon tensions and norms that circulate culturally to become internalized as natural and unavoidable. In other words, despite the assumption that adolescent literature reflects or mirrors adolescence as it somehow really is, we should focus on how young adult fiction shapes the attitudes of adolescent readers. Authors are probably not setting out to brainwash their readers into internalizing debilitating dominant narratives, even though there is a history of that strategy in literature of all kinds. (Any novel that ends with the "fallen" woman or the gay man dying as a punishment for transgressing normative ideologies is a prime example of this.) It is also too simplistic to point to a direct cause-and-effect relation between any one book and any one reader. Wary of trying to prove the authorial intent behind the ideology of a text, I prefer instead to theorize about what messages are encoded and how they *might* be decoded by readers.

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The relevance of Findon's remarks becomes even clearer when placed alongside the theme of Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer's issue of *CCL/LCJ* on "Shared Characteristics of 'Mainstream' Canadian Children's Fiction." As Reimer reports in her editorial, the articles in the issue respond to a list of characteristics compiled as a result of their undergraduate teaching of Canadian children's fiction. The goal is to explore "how knowledge is created in our discipline, first by considering the similarities and differences among a group of texts and then by an ongoing process of reconsidering and recontextualizing what is already known" (6). This earlier list ("Teaching" 32-35) is not meant to be exhaustive or authoritative, Reimer warns, but a provisional template for measuring additional texts. Reimer adds that she and Nodelman decided to place the term "mainstream" between quotation marks, both in their 2000 article and in their 2003 journal issue, to indicate their "uneasiness" about this term's implications: recalling their 2000 article, Reimer notes her fear that the fact that "mainstream" texts are most often written by white Canadians would lead to a reinforcement of a binary whereby "mainstream" would become inextricable from "white." Nevertheless, the question of inclusion/exclusion and the relationship with the

"mainstream" is also explored in bibliographical overviews of texts that feature characters of specific minority groups: gay men and lesbians (Rothbauer), East-Asian Canadians (Ko and McKenzie), Jewish Canadians (Saltman), and Aboriginal Canadians (DePasquale and Wolf). These bibliographies are joined by recent studies of discourses of assimilation and "tolerance" by Nodelman ("Monochromatic"), Kerry Mallan, and Adrienne Kertzer, an important discussion that continues in Claude Romney's study, in this issue, of multicultural discourse in recent Québécois children's fiction.

The question of inclusion and exclusion is also considered in Carole H. Carpenter's guest-edited issue on "Remembrances of Childhood" (*CCL/LCJ* 111–112) Borrowing from Peter Hollindale's study *Signs of Childness in Children's Books*, Carpenter asks how adults' remembrances of their own childhoods inform how they write for children, noting that these remembrances are a filtered summary of a wide range of feelings, memories, hopes, and fears: "To write for children of or through memories, then," Carpenter posits, "necessarily demands a self-conscious confrontation with one's childness" (6). Without necessarily equating "childness" with autobiography, it is worth considering the extent to which writers for children use their own childness, their own slippery memories of what it could mean to be a child, as a starting point in their fiction.

And so, in light of the important points raised by Bruhm and Hurley, Findon, Nodelman and Reimer, and Carpenter, where are we? Overall, if we consider these books to be "mainstream" (in the sense that they are designed to appeal to as wide a readership as possible), the range of possibilities for boy characters—and thus, to a point, for boy readers—is not vast. Many of these books insist on clear distinctions between protagonists and antagonists, on "good" versus "bad," and rely on conventions of plot structure and character development that reinforce such distinctions. Many of the boy protagonists in these novels persist in seeing themselves as rescuers of damsels in distress, even when those in distress happen to be themselves or fellow males around them. Moreover, not only are nearly all the characters in these novels white, middle-class, and tacitly heterosexual, but they nearly all experience anxiety about the ways that they are boys. In other words, if these novels are in fact the product of their authors' "childness," then many of these authors, male and female alike, recall much anxiety surrounding normative boy behaviour.

Set in small-town Ontario in summer 1942, Eric Walters's *Camp 30* opens with twelve-year-old George and his older brother Jack delivering newspapers one morning and reflecting on all the unbelievable adventures that occurred in the previous novel, *Camp*

X. Unfortunately, the fact that they are "sworn to secrecy under the Official Secrets Act" (6) prevents them from mentioning many details of their last adventure, a problem for readers (including this one) who haven't read the previous book. Just as their lives are returning to normal, their Camp X informant tracks them down to announce that the organization has intercepted a cryptic message from Nazi spies that possibly involves them. Because "these people mean business" (20), the Camp X officials decide to relocate the boys and their mother while they attempt to investigate the source of the message, and so they provide the boys' unsuspecting mother a job at a POW camp that contains some of the "highest-ranking German officers" (26). Predictably, the boys begin visiting their mother at work and eventually get a part-time job that grants them unlimited access to the grounds. When the head of Camp X proposes that George and Jack go under cover and spy on a German soldier they've befriended, Jack agrees without question (131), but George insists on knowing what's expected of him before he agrees (132). Rationalizing that their father, a soldier somewhere in Africa, has no choice when sent into battle, the two soldiers-in-embryo accept their assignment without further consideration of possible consequences (137).

Since the genre of boys' adventure stories guarantees that the brothers will survive the adventure unharmed, it is precisely George's uncertainty and anxiety about this adventure that causes most of the suspense in the narrative, which relies on a number of stereotypes and binary oppositions. As they deliver newspapers together at the beginning of the novel, George admires Jack's throwing expertise with his left hand (his right wrist still in a cast since the end of the previous book), but this activity becomes a source of gendered anxiety for George when Jack accuses him of "throw[ing] like a girl" (1), taunts him as a mama's boy, and suggests that his name should be "Georgia" (2). Jack, two years older than George, is an aggressive and manipulative bully who is constantly praised for acting like a "real" boy, even though these actions frequently involve physical violence, unquestioned acquiescence to male authority, and refusal to consider possible negative consequences. George, on the other hand, is ridiculed for thinking too much, and, even at the end of the novel, Jack still teases George for crying. Meanwhile, they escape parental supervision, a common convention of popular fiction: with their father fighting overseas, they decide there is "no point in worrying" their mother (21). In fact, throughout the novel's climactic episode, her migraine medicine renders her literally unconscious that her young children are out all night and that their lives are seriously in danger. It is debatable whether present-day younger readers will know enough of the social history of the Second World War to be

able to contextualize comments about "stinking Nazis" (28, 39) and the suspicion surrounding "heavy foreign accents" (15); thankfully, a conversation with an old storekeeper makes the boys learn to distinguish Nazis from all German soldiers. Moreover, as a result of their interaction with the German prisoner they befriend, their perception of "stinking Nazis" and their insistence on clear distinctions between "us" (Canada/good) and "them" (Germany/evil) is softened and replaced by a more knowledgeable appreciation of the individuality of the prisoners: they are still the enemy, but, by learning to humanize that enemy, George learns (several times) to appreciate that the prisoners miss their families just as much as his father, fighting in Africa, misses them (59-60, 82, 206).

Also a sequel is Alan Cumyn's comedy *After Sylvia*, which follows *The Secret Life of Owen Skye*. Owen, the middle child in a nuclear family of three boys, vies for the presidency of his class, continues to be obsessed with the memory of a beloved girl who moved away (to the point of naming a stray dog Sylvester in her honour), and tries his best to endure the calamity of his household and his father's temper, sadistic teasing, and practical jokes that usually capitalize on Owen's insecurities. Although initially he is convinced that he has "no special skill" (28), his adventures help him to nurture his own talents. Compared to *Camp 30*, Cumyn's novel relies less on dialogue to move the plot along and more on introspection and reflection. Even when he is swinging from a drainpipe on the second storey of his house in the initial chapter (as well as in the cover illustration), Owen avoids focusing on the fact that he needs to be rescued by fantasizing about rescuing Sylvia, whom he already plans to one day marry(22). Although this early scene immediately dismantles Owen's fantasy as rescuer, he continues to pine after the absent Sylvia. Later, Owen's brothers become determined to get even with their two stepcousins, Eleanor and Sadie, for getting the three brothers into trouble with their temperamental father. But, while Andy longs to hear Eleanor "screaming for help" (127) so that he can enact his natural role as rescuer, the narrative cleverly undercuts Andy's assumptions about the distinction between rescuers and rescued: Eleanor refuses to be motivated by Andy's taunting (125-26) and all five of the young people are lost together in the woods (127-36). Although Eleanor and Sadie do expect to be eventually rescued by the adult men, this assumption is undercut as well: after discovering a visual marker in the woods, the five manage to find their own way home in silence (136).

The undercutting of male-centred assumptions about rescuers and rescued, a minor but recurring thread in *After Sylvia*, becomes the central concern in *Heck Superhero*, the latest novel by science fiction author Martine Leavitt (formerly known as Martine

Bates). But, while her most recent novels, particularly *Tom Finder*, mark a departure from the science fiction genre, *Heck Superhero* weaves threads of those conventions into its realism. It begins with a seemingly straightforward proposition:

> Question: How do you rescue a mom from hypertime?
> Answer: You have to be a superhero. (9)

What we have, then, is a sophisticated dismantling of the superhero myth…

And yet the entire novel deconstructs that simple avowal. Thirteen-year-old Heck, budding artist and superhero-in-embryo, ponders his options when his mother, who frequently becomes unable to deal with the pressures of everyday reality (12), announces that she won't be coming home for a few days. Heck uses motifs of superhero stories as a defence mechanism to help him make sense of this situation: by casting himself in the role of superhero and imagining his mother as caught in a "hyperzone," he avoids having to confront the reality of her abandonment. In other words, both mother and son prove unable to deal with reality, but they avoid that reality in their own ways. Heck refuses to ask for help because, like the brothers in *Camp 30*, he doesn't want to worry his mother or get her into trouble (17, 32). But, unlike Walters's protagonists, Heck realizes he can't afford to get *himself* in trouble either: that might cause well-meaning adults to want to talk to his mother, which would "push him closer to the dimension of Your Mom Is Gone for Good" (61). Instead, he uses the irrational to rationalize what has happened and to devise a "superplan" (13): if he performs enough good deeds, he reasons, he will come closer to achieving his goal as superhero and will then be able to (actively) figure out how to access the hyperzone and rescue his (passive) mother.

Heck sees performing good deeds as "the only way to change the reality you were in right now, the only way to make everything okay" (52). Although he acknowledges that "The superhero thing, it's just this weird game I play" (82), part of the novel's appeal is that this "game" becomes central to the world created by the text, given that Heck's imagination spills into the third-person limited narrative. While Heck tries to downplay his hunger, his recurring toothache, and his mounting panic, those elements are omnipresent in this imagined world: Heck cannot completely imagine them away. What we have, then, is a sophisticated dismantling of the superhero myth that both Heck and his mother depend on. It is only when Heck faints from the trauma of his friend's suicide that he is forced to receive the help he has so far refused:

he is taken to the hospital, where he and his mother are reunited and an officer and a nurse announce to Heck's mother that he is half-starved (137-39). Having finally realized the extent to which the superhero myth is destructive to both of them, Heck breaks free of his created hypertime and forces them both to face reality: "I'm not a hero. I'm just a kid" (140). Ultimately, though, *Heck Superhero* confirms the superhero myth while simultaneously problematizing it. Heck convinces his mother that they need help to manage their life together, but, by being the one to actively break through the imagined hypertime, it is Heck, nevertheless, who rescues both himself and his mother.

Valerie Sherrard's *Sam's Light* also walks the fine line between restricting the possibilities for boy behaviour and breaking out of such restrictions. Cole's story begins with a piece of intergenerational advice that is specifically male: "My grandfather used to say that you never really knew a man until you worked for him" (7). This first line evokes male authority and hierarchy (an employer is necessarily male, it seems, as is the "you" to whom this chestnut of wisdom is offered), at the same time as it makes clear the admiration Cole has for his grandfather, who teaches him about responsibility, fairness, and the importance of a man's word. These clearly are lessons that Cole, a young adolescent, is meant to internalize and take with him on his journey to adulthood; consequently, young adolescent readers are likewise meant to learn these lessons as they identify with him as first-person narrator. Cole's grandfather is also the most stable family presence in his young life: he has difficulty relating to his ineffectual father, his absentminded mother (who tears herself away from her soap operas only long enough to torment him about girls), and his bratty, manipulative younger sister (who makes Ramona Quimby look like Mary Ingalls). But, while Cole does mature throughout the novel, he starts off already possessing a fine sense of responsibility: conscious enough of his family's limited financial resources to know his parents can't afford to buy him the new bicycle he wants, he decides to get a summer job to pay for it himself. When a gruff hardware store owner hires him on, Cole learns more than he expected about the value of hard work, the responsibility of choosing right over wrong, and the importance of nurturing solid friendships that are based on communication and mutual respect.

Cole learns to recognize the destructiveness of his relationship with his best friend Wayne, whom Cole simultaneously envies and fears. Although Cole admires Wayne's "devious" scheming to weasel out of doing domestic chores around the house (25-26), he reports that Wayne repeatedly "call[s] me a girl" (56) if he hesitates to participate in Wayne's "fun" (55). The novel's equation of being male with destructive adventure (all of Wayne's ideas are bad) and being

female with weakness, hesitation, and resistance to this behaviour recalls Jack's linking of George's hesitation with gender deficiency in *Camp 30*. The novel relies on the regulatory device of Wayne's name-calling again and again (60, 94, 120, 144, 149). Cole eventually realizes for himself how destructive Wayne's influence on him is and ends the friendship, but these recurring comments are never explicitly acknowledged or overturned. And so, what remains normal and normative for Cole is that being a girl—or, worse, being *perceived* as a girl—is something insulting: indeed, whenever Cole makes any references to girls in his first-person narration, they are pejorative (17, 21-22, 109, 131).

Clear lines between men and women are drawn throughout the novel. For instance, after Cole and Wayne return home drunk after one adventure, Cole's father drives him to his wise and preachy grandfather, who lectures Cole about making responsible choices drawing on the biblical story of Daniel in King Nebuchadnezzar's court (74-76). The female half of their nuclear family is barred from this excursion: as his father tells Cole's sister, "You and Mommy can make some girl plans for the day" (70). Cole has no problem accepting his grandfather's authority and vowing to never drink again, but his mother's directive that he call his employer with an apology is depicted as a form of nagging: his mother stands by him as he dials, ignoring his request that he be allowed to make the call privately (77). Like Heck's mother in *Heck Superhero*, Cole's mother has trouble drawing lines between reality and fiction: she frequently discusses soap opera characters as if they were real people, with a "glazed look" on her face (47). Jessie, Cole's younger sister, seems to be following in their mother's footsteps in her obsessive relationship with her doll, Penelope, whom she uses to manipulate people: "But, Cole…,Penelope *needs* ice cream!" (158).

Cole's romance with Rhonda somewhat complicates these gendered representations. Rhonda defies all of Cole's (largely negative) assumptions about what it can mean to be a girl. In fact, it is Rhonda and not Cole who calls to suggest they go out to a movie (117), which makes Cole "guess she's okay for a girl" (118), and when their first date doesn't end up as well as he'd hoped, it takes him a while to realize that he could pick up the phone to call her if she won't call him. He is used to being the passive "girl" in his relationship with Wayne, but, finally, he asserts his male initiative and asks Rhonda to be his girlfriend. And so, as with many of the books discussed here, *Sam's Light* tries to undercut, but ultimately reaffirms, taken-for-granted assumptions about male prerogative. Although Rhonda is a well-developed character with strength and personality, Cole presents her as an aberration of what it means (or should mean) to be a girl. As he explains to Sam, "She's different

from other girls I know. Rhonda's real natural or something, not always going on foolish about dumb things, like clothes and rock stars and nail polish and stuff. She's fun, too" (181). But his relationship with Rhonda remains incomplete: after all, "A guy needs another guy to hang out with, someone he can talk to about stuff that matters" (195). Rhonda's bewitching qualities make her an impossible candidate for the role of confidante.

David A. Poulsen departs from this ambivalence in *Last Sam's Cage* by focusing on the survival attempts of fifteen-year-old Eddie Slater, who runs away from home because he is just as powerless within a patriarchal system as his mother. His abusive stepfather beats both of them, and Eddie knows that, if he stays, he literally won't survive much longer. Hiding out in the Calgary Zoo, he attempts not only to survive but to confront his own trauma, both by writing about it in his journal and by narrating his own history to inanimate objects or animals who can't pity him or ask nosy questions. As he tells an audience of caged tigers, Steve hit him for the first time when Eddie tried to interfere in Steve's treatment of Eddie's mother: "I jumped in to save her like I was Clint Eastwood or somebody. I didn't help much, maybe made things worse" (25). Unlike Heck, who persists in seeing himself as his mother's saviour until he is hospitalized as a consequence of her ongoing neglect, Eddie has known for a long time that he can't manage to be a hero to his mother.

A significant innovation in this novel is the introduction of Charlie Chen, one of the only characters of colour in all the books under review here. Eddie has difficulty figuring Charlie out: as with Sherrard's Cole and Wayne, Eddie both likes and is intimidated by Charlie, in part because of rumours of Charlie's ties with "one of the Asian gangs that hung out a few blocks north of Chinatown" (37). As it turns out, however, Charlie isn't at home when Eddie stops by and is never mentioned again in the story, making his "presence" more of an absence. Instead, Eddie finds Charlie's sister, Linda, "a total hottie in grade nine" whom Eddie doesn't dare ask out because he's sure she'd say no. But Linda, like Rhonda in *Sam's Light*, turns out to not be so negatively girly after all: contrary to Eddie's expectation, she prefers action movies to "chick flicks," which she finds "so unbelievable. And stupid" (43).

Another important innovation in this novel is the fact that Eddie has already been labelled a young offender. Rather than make a "good" protagonist gradually recognize how "bad" his best friend is, Poulsen transforms this dynamic, not by demonizing the "bad" boy but by humanizing him: as Eddie writes about his past escapades, it becomes clear that his motivation for these actions was multifaceted. As he muses, "there was something about knowing we were breaking the law that was…very cool" (60; el-

lipsis in original). Eddie also recognizes his perverse pleasure in the risk of igniting Steve's anger: when he and his friends are caught hijacking a car, Steve attacks Eddie not only with his belt but also with his giant belt buckle (59). Eddie's circumstances force him to take some serious risks. He can't afford to get caught because running away from home violates the terms of his probation, but he needs to steal in order to survive. The novel achieves a balance between perceptive introspection and fast-paced action that seems much more threatening than the risks taken by the boys of *Camp 30*. Even though Eddie proves unable to defend himself from his stepfather, part of his anger toward his mother concerns her passivity when faced with Steve's abuse: he can remember "his mother sitting—maybe with her hands over her ears to keep out the sound of his pain—*letting it happen*" (198). In keeping with their inability to break free of the abusive prison that Steve has created for them, they are only safe once Steve chooses to leave the household. Although Eddie echoes some of Cole's negative terms for women—he refers to "this gorgeous twenty-two-year-old blond babe" (20), "chicks taking their clothes off" (21), "chick appeal" and "chick problems" (85), as well as to a "babe-fest"(85)—at least this terminology does not lead to misogynist statements about women in general, as it did in Sherrard's book, and, at one point, Eddie uses the phrase "great-looking women" (70) instead. Perhaps this difference stems from the fact that, while Cole believes that his passivity is negative, Eddie is more conflicted about his. Despite his anger toward his mother, he does find some forms of passivity comforting, as in his recollection of a camping trip with his late father: "Having my dad looking after me like that was the safest feeling there could be" (162). Moreover, in the climactic scene of the novel, Eddie is saved from two bullies by someone who proves to be an even stronger, scarier bully—Jack Simm, a man Eddie has befriended with past secrets of his own. Eddie actively decides to clean up his act and return home to his mother, but this active decision happens as a direct consequence of Jack saving this lad in distress.

Declan Steeple, the sixteen-year-old protagonist of Tim Wynne-Jones's latest novel, *A Thief in the House of Memory*, is also a lad in distress, but rather than run away from home to escape an uncertain future, Dec returns to the site of his former home in an attempt to make sense of a past he doesn't understand. Although Dec and his family now live in a smaller house on the family property, he visits the mansion he lived in as a child, which he and his father abandoned after his unstable mother left several years earlier. In other words, the house they left behind has become a sort of museum of memories, and since nothing has been touched in several years, Dec can return to the site of his former bedroom with an odd form of

objectivity: "It was Dec's young life laid out for some imagined audience of curiosity seekers. It had nothing to do with him any more" (36). When Dec and his younger sister discover the body of a burglar who was crushed to death by a toppling bookcase, the inquest that follows forces Dec to drag his memories of his childhood at Steeple Hall—including his fleeting memories of his mother, whom Dec begins to realize felt trapped by her existence there—into the present and to confront them head-on, whether he's ready to do so or not. His visions of his younger self with his mother haunt him, forcing him to reconsider what he was told about the circumstances of her departure six years earlier.

Adding to the complications of making sense of the past through trying to solve the mystery of the dead intruder is that Declan is at a crossroads regarding his future. What he needs to solve is not a mystery in the traditional sense, with a clear culprit, motive, and crime scene; although the story includes all these elements, it is a series of lies and discrepant versions of truth that he needs to sift through for himself. By relying on his friends and by trying to address his father and stepmother as an adult, Declan learns how to settle the ghosts of his past and look toward his future. Strong visual images, elegant prose, and well-drawn characters make *A Thief in the House of Memory* an excellent novel, one that I highly recommend.

Finally, I turn to six books that are part of two umbrella series of theme-related novels, Sports Stories and Orca Soundings, designed for "reluctant readers." Series books tend to get dismissed in the field of children's and young adult fiction on the assumption that they are produced as mass-market commodities, with economics more of a motivating factor than literary merit. This is often somewhat accurate, but in terms of Nodelman and Reimer's question about shared characteristics of "mainstream" Canadian children's fiction (given that series books are generally the most conventional in terms of plot structure, character development, introspection, and language choice), the books in both series offer some surprises. The titles in the Orca Soundings series more closely resemble novellas, in the sense that they have a minimum of supporting characters, no major subplots, and a straightforward story arc that leads to a neater resolution than the novels by Poulsen and Wynne-Jones. Like *Camp 30*, they also focus more on action and dialogue than on long bouts of introspection. In Eric Walters's *Grind*, skateboarding freak Phil and his friends set up a website so that he can prove to his parents that skateboarding can be a lucrative business and not simply a waste of time, but, when his best friend is badly injured trying to perform a stunt, Phil learns—well, actually, he doesn't learn anything and decides to keep right on skateboarding. In Monique Polak's *No More Pranks*, Pete's parents are so

horrified by his latest prank that they send him off into the Quebec wilderness with bilingual French-Canadian relatives in an attempt to curb his destructive behaviour. Although Pete insists that pulling pranks is simply a part of his personality that he can't help, the title of the novel guarantees that he will be prank-free by the end of the story. Fortunately, thanks to his interaction with an oversensitive French-Canadian girl, Pete finally learns the error of his ways and makes his final prank one that will benefit his extended family by exposing the actions of a competing boatsman who threatens the area whales. Although the villain sounds an awful lot like one of the bad guys in an old episode of *Scooby-Doo* ("Darned kids. You won't get away with this!" [96]), the plan works and Pete vows that his pranking days are over. In attempting to reach reluctant readers within a very short page span, these books are perhaps wise to cut to the chase and keep the plot rolling, although previous titles in the series, such as Beth Goobie's *Sticks and Stones* and Kristin Butcher's *The Hemingway Tradition*, have been more successful in developing complex characters and plots.

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Having read a number of books in the Sports Stories series already, I began to wonder about some of the implications of publishing seventy titles featuring seventy protagonists in seventy different situations that follow roughly the same plot formula, something that could be referred to as the *Mighty Ducks* paradigm: an individual or a group of misfits discovers he/she/they is/are terrible at (enter name of sport here), but thanks to a new coach, a series of coincidences, and a change of attitude, he/she/they learn(s) the importance of teamwork and good sportsmanship and end(s) up winning whatever championship marks the end of the season. Given that many of the books in this series take the notion of "shared characteristics" to an extreme, I was pleasantly surprised to discover variations on that recurring plot structure. In Robert Rayner's *Just for Kicks*, a group of children enjoy playing soccer together for pleasure, but two overzealous new soccer coaches decide to raise the stakes of the games and force the kids to play more competitively in exchange for corporate sponsorships; when they see how competitive their parents become with each other and how little fun they're having, the kids decide to go on strike until their coaches let them play the way they want to. In Sylvia Gunnery's *Out of Bounds*, Jay finds himself

playing on his opposing basketball team after a fire at his home forces him to change schools temporarily. His new team loses an important game against his former teammates, but, while everyone on both teams is angry at him for either being a traitor or for playing poorly, his new coach congratulates him on his determination to continue with basketball under the circumstances and for his continued effort to play his best. In Lorna Schultz Nicholson's *Interference*, Josh tries his best on his elite hockey team and attempts to burst free of the shadow of his older brother, also a hockey player and the object of all their father's attention. His best gradually becomes insufficient and, although he struggles to overcome his constant fatigue and inability to concentrate, he eventually collapses as a result of undiagnosed Type 1 diabetes. (Unfortunately, the blurb on the back cover gives the entire story away, as do most of the chapter titles that appear at the beginning of all four volumes reviewed here.) Finally, in Bill Swan's *Corner Kick*, the star of the school soccer team with a rather massive ego ("Michael excelled at everything" [11]) feels threatened when an even better soccer player joins his school and his team, but once they start to become friends, they learn to play together and take their team to new heights. The fact that the new boy is from the Middle East is important, if only because Zahir is the only non-white character who appears in any of the books under review here (with the exception of Charlie Chen's sister Linda in *Last Sam's Cage* and brief mentions of characters named Quan and Linh-Mai in *Just for Kicks*). It seems rather troubling that the only major exception to dominant whiteness in all of these books is a recent immigrant to Canada. Despite Michael's teacher's preachy lecture about how "Newcomers add richness" (39), it is perhaps not so surprising that one of Michael's friends refers to Zahir as "The new guy in your class. The one from another country" (52), since the inclusion of any diversity of any kind is so rare in these books overall that the specific origins of this particular newcomer are less relevant than the sheer novelty of difference. Moreover, Michael learns to befriend Zahir by exoticizing him: "Mixed in with Zahir's British accent, Michael could hear other traces from another land" (91).

So—where are we? As I ponder the ideological effect of these books overall, my praise and enthusiasm for some of these novels is overshadowed by repetitions and absences that I find troubling. Although these books are published in a country that purportedly prides itself on diversity of all kinds, there is a bare minimum of racial, ethnic, cultural, and sexual diversity in these books, a fact I find both disturbing and disappointing. The shared characteristics of these books confirm the "dominant narrative" about what it means to be a boy, who remains by default

white, middle-class, and heterosexual. I'm also concerned with the long list of passive, unstable, and dysfunctional mothers who appear in these texts and by some of the sexist and misogynist assumptions that the boy protagonists (and the books' authors, to a certain extent) take for granted as normal and normative. More than likely, these authors are simply trying to create boy characters as they believe boys really are—misogyny and all—which of course is part of what constitutes realistic fiction. But, by drawing on the same narrow pool of childness, these authors—who, as Bruhm and Hurley suggest, are in a position of absolute power over the ideas explored and resolved in their texts, and thus over their readers as well—end up reinforcing that being a boy means the same thing again and again. This seems especially true since non-normative boy behaviour is so rigidly policed and monitored in many of these stories. Findon's proposition, that fiction ought to be an *exploration* of the widest range of possibilities for real readers to ponder, is not met by these books as a group. While it may be laudable to present boys "as they really are," fiction is not actually reality: it is an implied reality, an invented world created through language to appear recognizable as real. And so, rather than regulate masculinity so rigidly, fiction for all children and adolescents might embrace a much wider range of protagonists and supporting characters—in terms of race, ethnicity, culture, religion, language, and sexuality, and in terms of what it means (or *can* mean, rather than *should* mean) to be a boy. Glen Huser's recent award-winning novel *Stitches* just does that, by focusing on a male protagonist whose talent and whose ambition to be a puppeteer make him reject the rigid expectations of masculinity imposed on him.

In her acknowledgements at the end of *Sam's Light* (which she dedicates to her son), Sherrard indicates her challenge in adopting the perspective of an adolescent boy (215) and offers a final dedication to "the young people who read, who reach a little deeper, and who connect with the voice of a story. You are on those pages and they belong to you" (216). In order to reach *all* readers of Canadian fiction for young people, authors need to broaden their memories of childness, to widen the shared characteristics of what it can mean to be a boy and to diversify the range of voices in their stories.

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