

“Canadian”? “Children’s”? “Literature”?

—Perry Nodelman



Readers who took the name of *CCL/LCJ* too literally might be surprised by some of the contents of this issue. Why does a journal that proclaims itself (in English) to be about Canadian children’s literature contain a series of pieces written by scholars around the world about recent theories that purport to account for much beyond literary texts and refers only occasionally to texts of children’s literature and even less occasionally to Canadian ones? Why, especially, is there an article about the merchandising of the decidedly un-childlike teenage sociological phenomenon of the prom that refers centrally to American magazines and websites? What does any of that have to do with being Canadian, or with children, or with literature?

The answer, I think, is: everything. There was never a time when Canadian children’s literature existed in isolation from other kinds of Canadian literature or from all the other kinds of literature,

including children’s literature, produced elsewhere, or from the wider context of economic and material conditions and social policies and values inside Canada and out. There was never a time when Canadian childhoods were not strongly influenced by ideologies of childhood developed elsewhere, or when Canadian young people did not read Canadian books in the context of a wider experience of reading literature, viewing movies and TV, playing games, using furniture, and toys and wearing underwear (and prom dresses) produced beyond Canadian borders. If we wish to develop useful understandings of the texts Canadians write for children and the ways in which children read and respond to them—and helping *CCL/LCJ* readers to do that, is, surely, the central goal of the journal—then we can’t consider these texts in isolation from all the forces that affect them. We need to be aware of and attempt to understand the wide range of Canadian and non-Canadian contexts

that affect Canadian writing and publishing, and the reading of Canadian children.

For that reason, the Editors of *CCL/LCJ* find ourselves deeply, and, we believe, productively uncertain about what exactly the name of the journal means—even about what each of the words in it means. “Canadian” and “*canadienne*.” “Children’s” and “*pour la jeunesse*.” “Literature” and “*Littérature*.” Each of these, we believe, can be most usefully understood as something we have and will continue to have questions about.

“Canadian/*canadienne*,” for instance: what makes a text Canadian enough for it to be a subject of discussion in this journal? Being published in Canada or, if a film or TV show, produced in Canada? But then, what do we make of the vast number of books now published in Canada being marketed also in the U.S., and therefore, presumably, not so specifically Canadian as to seem foreign to a potential American audience? How about the films shot in Canada by American producers? And how about books by Canadian citizens published by American or British publishers? Not Canadian, or are any and all books by Canadians Canadian? Does it matter if the writers have become Canadian citizens recently, or emigrated elsewhere prior to a book’s publication? There’s been an ongoing discussion throughout the history of *CCL/LCJ* about how Canadian texts for children are or aren’t different from the children’s literature

published elsewhere—and the conversation is not over yet. There’s more to be said about what makes a Canadian book Canadian, or for that matter, makes Canadians Canadians. And there’s much more to be said about what makes Canadian children Canadian. How do we understand childhood specifically in Canada and what part do texts for children play in developing that understanding?

Which bring me to “children’s/*pour la jeunesse*”: how do we define or understand what a child is, or what “*jeunesse*” is? Can we know? How do the constructs of developmental psychologists about what children can understand or of teachers and librarians about what children enjoy function in the reading lives of Canadian children? What if anything do children share in terms of patterns of thinking or ways of experiencing the world? Are Canadian children childlike in a generically North American way, or even a globally universal way, or do they more significantly experience specifically Canadian childhoods? Are Canadian childhoods more similarly Canadian or more importantly inflected by language or region or class or ethnicity? Are ideas about national or universal childhoods dangerously generalizing, or is the notion of a universal childhood, as enshrined, for example, in the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, a worthwhile goal to try to achieve? Also, when does childhood stop? Is a teenage phenomenon like the

prom beyond childhood, or merely representative of another stage of it? Is what we call Young Adult literature a separate kind of text altogether, or a variation on the conventions of children's literature? What are the implications of our uncertainties about these matters?

And finally, "Literature/Littérature": should the term refer exclusively to traditional texts in books, and what are the stakes if we say it does or doesn't? What might it mean for scholars and/or parents, teachers, and children? Does and should literature include nonfiction as well as fiction? Are the pictures in picture books literature also? Or the oral stories people tell? And what about the range of texts outside of books? What about movies and TV shows produced for children, or the stories implied by video games? And also: clothes and toys and all sorts of the paraphernalia of childhood can be read as texts, interpreted for their semiotics and ideological assumptions. Might they, too, be part of the literature we discuss in this journal? Why should they or shouldn't they be?

We hope to keep on being uncertain about these matters, and, therefore, to consider publishing articles that keep the questions open—that explore matters like the possible ongoing significance of new theory for understanding texts for Canadian children, or the relevance of a primarily American

mythology of prom in the lives of Canadian girls. And as the general paper call that appears elsewhere in this issue reveals, we hope that scholars in a range of disciplines relating to childhood and literature will view *CCL/LCJ* as an appropriate venue for their work. We will happily consider articles that explore the range of contexts in which Canadian writers write and Canadian children read. We are unlikely to accept for publication an article exclusively about, say, texts of children's literature produced in Spain in the eighteenth century or in Ghana now. But an article that made a case for those texts being a context for texts published more recently in Canada might well appear in *CCL/LCJ*. And while we are unlikely to publish sociological work focused exclusively on, say, Canadian teenager's smoking habits, we would certainly consider work on how attitudes towards smoking circulate inside and outside of the texts Canadian children experience—as, say in the Stupid.ca website, supported by the government of Ontario and designed "to show youth how the industry manipulates us and the effects that smoking can have." As this issue reveals, we hope to be as eclectic as we possibly can and in that way, be true to our mission of exploring what we understand (or are uncertain) about what it means to be Canadian/*Canadienne* and/or children's/*pour la jeunesse* and/or literature/*Littérature*.

Works Cited

Gov. of Ontario. *Stupid. ca*. 20 Mar. 2006. <<http://stupid.ca/main.html>>.