Calling for Braver Conclusions

—Margaret Steffler

Aikins, Anne Marie. *Racism: Deal with It Before It Gets Under Your Skin*. Illus. Steven Murray. Toronto: James Lorimer, 2004. 32 pp. $12.95 pb. ISBN 1-55028-844-X.

Aksomitis, Linda. *Adeline's Dream*. From Many Peoples. Regina: Coteau, 2005. 209 pp. $8.95 pb. ISBN 1-55050-323-5.

Banerjee, Anjali. *Maya Running*. New York: Wendy Lamb, Random House, 2005. 209 pp. $22.95 hc. ISBN 0-385-74656-3.

Dueck, Adele. *Nettie's Journey*. From Many Peoples. Regina: Coteau, 2005. 209 pp. $8.95 pb. ISBN 1-55050-322-7.

Fitch, Sheree. *Peek-a-Little Boo*. Illus. Laura Watson. Victoria, BC: Orca, 2005. 32 pp. $19.95 hc. ISBN 1-55143-342-7.

Freedman, Zelda. *Rosie's Dream Cape*. Illus. Silvana Bevilacqua. Vancouver: Ronsdale, 2005. 113 pp. $8.95 pb. ISBN 1-55380-025-7.

Gilmore, Rachna. *A Group of One*. 2001. Markham, ON: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 2005. 184 pp. $12.95 pb. ISBN 1-55041-925-0.

Guest, Jacqueline. *Wild Ride*. Toronto: James Lorimer, 2005. 165 pp. $6.95 pb. ISBN 1-55028-880-6.

Olsen, Sylvia. *White Girl*. Winlaw, BC: Sono Nis, 2004. 235 pp. $9.95 pb. ISBN 1-55039-147-X.

Silverthorne, Judith. *The Secret of the Stone House*. From Many Peoples Ser. Regina: Coteau, 2005. 217 pp. $8.95 pb. ISBN 1-55050-325-1.

Silvey, Diane. *The Kids Book of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada*. Illus. John Mantha. Toronto: Kids Can, 2005. 63 pp. $19.95 hc. ISBN 1-55074-998-6.

Wheeler, Jordan, and Dennis Jackson. *Christmas at Wapos Bay*. From Many Peoples. Regina: Coteau, 2006. 134 pp. $8.95 pb. ISBN 1-55050-324-3.

Deborah Ellis's 2002 novel, *Parvana's Journey*, was the final text in this year's children's literature course at Trent University. We studied the novel at the end of March, in the midst of the outcry against requests to ban or censor Ellis's more recent book of non-fiction, *Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak* (2004). The objection to *Three Wishes* came from the Canadian Jewish Congress in response to the inclusion of the book on the Ontario Library Association's Silver Birch reading list. Several school boards, including the York, Toronto, Niagara, Ottawa-Carleton, and Essex School Boards, took action against material deemed to be inappropriate or biased (Eaton). *Three Wishes* attempts to present, in a neutral manner, the actual voices of the children of conflict and war, without the intervention, interpretation, or fictionalization of the authorial presence. Ellis's decision to allow Palestinian and Israeli children to speak for themselves seems to me to be a wise one. The initial naming of the 429 children who died between September 29, 2000 and March 7, 2003 (12–17) distances the author and invests the book with the powerful presence of the children, even before their voices are heard. Ellis is obviously aware of the risk of telling someone else's story, as is apparent in her decision to allow the children to tell their own stories. She seems to be heeding the advice of writers such as Chinua Achebe, who maintains that "the story we [Igbo people] had to tell could not be told for us by anyone else no matter how gifted or well intentioned" (38).

Telling someone else's story is always risky, as became clear in our tutorial discussions of *Parvana's Journey*. When I explained that Deborah Ellis is currently researching and writing a book about a child caught up in the drug trade in Bolivia, several students objected to what they saw as a disturbing exploitation of the predicaments of children in a globalized world, and thus an appropriation of the voice of the child. Aware of Ellis's careful research, cultural sensitivity, and humanitarian donation of royalties, the students were uneasy in their criticism, particularly when they considered that the real children fictionalized by Ellis do not have a forum for their own voices or the ability to communicate with the members of the reading public whom Deborah Ellis is so successfully engaging and in whom she is instilling such strong awareness. Keeping silent can be dangerous as well. Despite the reservations raised by some of my students, or perhaps *because* of the reservations, *Parvana's Journey* inspired one of the most worthwhile and controversial discussions of the course. Like the non-fictional *Three Wishes*, *Parvana's Journey* "challenges [readers] to put themselves in another's shoes" (Coyle B3) through the type of identification with the "other" that inspires empathy and compassion—so that you "climb into his skin and walk around in it" (Lee 30), as recommended

by Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a book that makes an appearance in Ellis's novel and is also on the list of books that have been banned in Canada (Hill 5). But my students were uneasy about their right to empathize. The single focalization of Ellis's novel, centred on Parvana, deliberately provides for readers "the opportunity to identify with that character, to see themselves in terms of that character's thoughts and experiences" (Nodelman, "Of Solitudes" 66). But the actual distance between Parvana and the Canadian reader is more appropriately and honestly conveyed, in the opinion of some of my students, by acknowledging and maintaining the difference between fictional character and reader rather than attempting to bridge it.

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At the end of the term I was beginning to write this review essay, so the tutorial discussion alerted me to consider the relationship between the author and the characters in the nine "multicultural" novels under review here. Not one of these books attempts to do anything close to what Ellis tries to do in *Parvana's Journey*; the authors of these nine novels are all insiders deliberately writing out of their own family's history and culture and are exempt from accusations of exploitation or appropriation. But this careful fiction does not convey voices as powerful or as memorable as the voices in *Parvana's Journey* and *Three Wishes*. *Parvana's Journey*, not constrained or contained by the multicultural Canadian setting or audience, assumes a shrinking, globalized world and readership, and is deliberately less conscious of the politically "proper" place to situate the voice of the Afghani child. Jane M. Gangi applauds the efforts of Groundwood Press as one of the "few presses" that "undertake telling" the stories of the world's "estimated six million refugee children" and praises Ellis's contribution to "honouring this vulnerable group while expanding the perspectives of those more fortunate" (253). The jarring wailing in *Parvana's Journey* breaks through any remnants of polite, political concern, expressing impatience with postcolonial issues of ownership and appropriation, while conveying the urgency of

this particular voice which emanates through an unlikely source and spokesperson in order to be heard. The emotionally intense voice of the refugee child, who misses receiving her daily portion of bread because she lines up all day in the hope of being chosen by the "Canada people" (177), contrasts with the understated and overly controlled voice of the child safely ensconced within multicultural Canada, even if that position involves victimization and oppression. My sense is that there is a politically correct carefulness and preoccupation with "translating" and teaching culture within the Canadian context of children's literature that results in a stilted style and quality, thereby hindering the creation of voices that can actually be heard and responded to.

That having been said, there is a range of success in the creation of genuine voices among the nine novels covered in this essay. Four of the novels are concerned with European countries of origin. Three of these books, looking back at the Ukraine, Germany, and Scotland, are part of the From Many Peoples series, Coteau Books' celebration of Saskatchewan's centennial. The fourth book, published by Ronsdale Press, depicts a protagonist who has immigrated to Toronto from Russia. Aboriginal characters and communities in British Columbia, Alberta, and Saskatchewan are the focus of the next three novels, the Saskatchewan-based novel being the fourth in the Coteau series. The final two novels depict Canadians in Manitoba and Ottawa who are visited by relatives from India. The package also includes three non-fiction titles: an "ethnic" alphabet book, a book about racism from Lorimer's Deal With It series and *The Kids Book of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada* from the Kids Can Press series.

The inclusion of books dealing with Aboriginal characters and communities within an essay covering "multicultural" children's books requires comment. Aboriginal communities are obviously the only non-immigrant Canadian communities and thus stand apart from the multicultural mosaic of those who have emigrated from elsewhere. Despite the historically distinct status of First Nations as the original Canadian culture, the Aboriginal community is often erroneously depicted in children's literature as simply one part of the multicultural mosaic. Such an attitude is, to some extent, apparent in the choice made by Coteau Books to include the Aboriginal but not the English immigrant in the From Many Peoples series. The Eurocentric view tends to separate the dominant, white Anglo culture from the multicultural mosaic, setting itself apart as the "norm" and placing itself in the centre. The term and concept of "multicultural" can become confused with "marginal" and with "difference" from the dominant centre. The ease with which the Aboriginal community is considered to be simply one part of the mosaic is troubling, but is also probed and questioned in a couple of these texts.

The three Coteau books that examine European roots fall under the genre of the "immigrant" novel, as the protagonists and their families construct settler communities on the Saskatchewan prairie. The perceived connection between the child or young adult and the immigrant is noted by Perry Nodelman, who suggests that perhaps "adults who write for children conceive of childhood and adolescence as something like being an immigrant—a stranger in an unsettling strange land" ("Of Solitudes" 71). Elizabeth Waterston more generally refers to the use of the immigrant story as "a symbol for the trauma of all uprooting, loneliness, and rejection" (87). *Nettie's Journey* by Adele Dueck takes place in the Ukraine, anticipating the farms of the Canadian prairie only at the very end of the narrative. Judith Silverthorne's *The Secret of the Stone House* is a time-slip novel, in which Emily witnesses and communicates with her Scottish ancestors, who are building their stone farmhouse in Southern Saskatchewan. *Adeline's Dream*, by Linda Aksomitis, is the only one of these three books that is structured in order to allow the exploration of the European culture within the Saskatchewan setting. Linna makes the physical transition from Germany to the sod houses of Qu'Appelle in the first few pages of the novel and struggles with the challenges of such a displacement throughout the rest of the narrative. The characters in these three novels live, look back at, or anticipate the conventional adaptation of the immigrant to the land, the weather, and the already existing communities.

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In his 1999 paper, "A Parliament of Stories: Multiculturalism and the Contemporary Children's Literature of Saskatchewan," Gregory Maillet outlines the multicultural context—two hundred cultures and eighty languages—of the "ethnically diverse" province that produced these Coteau books in 2005 (49, 57). The rather conventional and idealistic view of the adaptation of the immigrant perhaps speaks to what Maillet identifies as a "province that is ethnically diverse, economically co-operative, and politically supportive of the arts," in other words a region that does not demonstrate the "minority culturalism" that depends on "skin colour and economic class as the primary variants of culture" (57, 50). To some extent, it seems to be the urban setting that establishes race and class as the basis of culture; the rural region is invested, from the outside at least, with some of the idealism and

unity of the pastoral idyll, where cultural differences are not as visible and thus supposedly matter less. Coteau Books, along with Maillet, rightly objects to such a simplification of "multiculturalism" and responds by drawing attention to three of the cultures that "settled" the prairie, demonstrating, in the case of the Ukrainian Mennonite community, the horrors of those conditions that instigated leaving the "old" world and, in the case of the German community, the hardships and prejudice that greeted the arrival in the "new" world. Obviously, progress has been made since 1976, when Kuz Lubow reported the difficulty of finding books set in Canada, "with characters who were not of English background, or where at least one character would be of an ethno-cultural background" (227). Less progress has perhaps been made since 1984, when Adrienne Kertzer lamented that so many children's immigrant stories employ two strategies: "the happy ending and simplification," both of which "imply a condescending view of childhood" (17). Kertzer suggests that "perhaps the fault lies with our view of the child, both as character and as reader. Judging by our children's immigrant stories, we see the child reader as timid, in constant need of reassurance—the future will be better; yes, he too will succeed" (17). Such happy endings are still the norm in these current books and continue to mitigate the hardships in the idealized manner that disturbed Kertzer twenty years ago.

These three novels from Coteau, dedicated to the memory of LaVonne Black of the Saskatchewan School Boards Association, tend to be didactic in their attempts to recover historical details for the reader. Aksomitis's explanation of the sod houses or "soddies," for example, steps off the fictional page in order to become a history lesson, while the prairie fires in Silverthorne's novel seem to be there simply to demonstrate the historical existence of such disasters. Similarly, the explanation of Mennonite diasporas provided for Nettie is too obviously there for Dueck's reader rather than her character. In these novels of immigration, the purpose is didactic in the retrospective attempt to recover and retain the cultures of those who settled Saskatchewan one hundred years ago. Too often, there is a sense that the novel is a history textbook in disguise—albeit a very captivating one.

Rosie's Dream Cape by Zelda Freedman is more successful as a story in that historical conditions are secondary, conveyed through a personal narrative that does not necessarily speak for an ethnic group. Sweatshops in Toronto, the violence of the Cossacks, and urban poverty are interwoven with Rosie's dream of creating and wearing a red cape to the Ballet at the Royal Alexandra Theatre. The symbolism of the careful and painful construction of the beautiful cape from fragments pieced together from the old and new world successfully supplants the archetype of

the Cinderella gown bestowed by a fairy godmother and magic. For a Russian immigrant in 1921, Toronto offers magic only in conjunction with, and as a result of, hard work and suffering. Lisa Makman points out that "work in multicultural children's literature is not a dangerous domain for children," but actually "generates a positive identity for the child, a sense of belonging to a community" (292). It is true that Rosie achieves that sense of belonging after considerable difficulty rather than danger. After reading *Rosie's Dream Cape*, I am uplifted by the beauty and aptness of the cape as a literary and cultural symbol. Historical details about the formation of labour unions, relegated to a non-fictional appendix entitled "Wonder What Happened to Rosie," do not replace or overpower the story. Similarly, the connections between Yitzy's 1921 sweatshop factory and current conditions of child labour are pointed out in the prefatory note, "My Promise"—perhaps unnecessarily, as the discerning reader could draw the connection without direction. The literature does not exist for the purpose of containing the cultural history and message, or as a "vehicle" to tell the story that should not be lost. The cultural history, message, and story are the literature.

Freedman's impulse to write is similar to Dueck's, as both make clear in authorial notes to the reader. They are inspired by women of the previous generation, Dueck by her mother-in-law and Freedman by her mother, which brings me to a connection among these novels that was immediately apparent. Eight of these nine novels are written by women and have a female protagonist. This could simply be coincidental, but even so, the relationship between gender and multicultural Canadian children's literature seems to be worth mentioning. On the simplest level, the marginalization of the protagonist is increased if the age is that of a child, the ethnic association is that of a "minority," and the gender is female. So the female, visibly ethnic, child protagonist pushes the marginalization to the extreme. Gender and ethnicity are recognized as markers of the margin, but the young age of the character is in many ways the least acknowledged of the "ghettoized" regions. In combination with ethnicity and gender, the marginalization of the child as child is hopefully accentuated and noted. The female author speaks authoritatively and from experience of marginalization, while the female character challenges her ethnicity and her gender as a pair, doubling the oppression and the resistance. Moreover, many of the protagonists in these novels have a male partner who, based partly on gender, provides a second implied point of view to accompany that of the female protagonist. These are not true "alternating focalizations of two characters" identified by Nodelman as a prevalent narrative technique in Canadian children's literature ("Of Solitudes" 59),

but the implied point of view does draw the reader away from the centralized focalization. For example, Linna has the unlikely Henry, who is comfortable in the society of Qu'Appelle, while Emily has Geordie, not only of the other gender, but from another time period. Connections between these partners definitely develop to a stage in which "they come to share the same story in the same space—as do Canadians in the public mythology of multiculturalism" (Nodelman, "Of Solitudes" 72), with the result that "one dominant narratorial position is privileged and dialogue is thus subsumed by monologue" (McCallum 56).[1] So the partnership and dialogue are there not to probe difference, but simply to acknowledge it in order to defeat and erase it as the immigrant adapts to Canada. What is particularly troubling in these examples is the subsuming of the female gender by the male "guide," who holds the solutions and answers.

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The fourth Coteau book, *Christmas at Wapos Bay*, is the only novel in the group with male authors and central characters. The narrative focuses on three children: a brother and sister and their male cousin. The novel establishes the figure of Mushom, the grandfather who lives on the land in Northern Saskatchewan, as the guide. Environmental degradation caused by fire has made it difficult for the Cree family and community to live off the northern land. Mushom's grandchildren, Talon, Raven and T-Bear, visiting from the south, learn how to survive. Although there is some tension between the lifestyle of the urban south, familiar to the younger generations, and the "bush" life led by the older members of the family in the isolated north, the conflict in the novel is between the winter wilderness and the people who inhabit it. The fire that has altered the environment, the cold of the winter storm, and the extreme landscape provide the forces that challenge the young characters. The non-Native community does not have a presence in the book. The lack of conflict between Native and non-Native communities results in a novel that does not seem to be "multicultural" in the expected sense of different cultures interacting with one another. Jordan Wheeler and Dennis Jackson examine the relationship between the youngest and oldest generation within an Aboriginal family experiencing some tension between northern and southern lifestyles. The conflict is based on regions and generations rather than on a dominant and

marginalized culture, which often and predictably manifests itself in white-Native partnerships.

Such white-Native partnerships are found in *Wild Ride* by Jacqueline Guest and *White Girl* by Sylvia Olsen. According to Norma Rowen, literature depicting the Aboriginal child usually manages cultural binaries through the "child pair . . . often, though not always, of different race . . . through which themes of racial and cultural confrontation are developed" (8). In *White Girl* and *Wild Ride,* the female protagonists depend on male counterparts in order to negotiate the unfamiliar territory of the British Columbia reserve and Banff Community High. *White Girl*'s Josie depends on a divided masculine guide in the Aboriginal males, Luke and Zeb, from within and outside the family. January in *Wild Ride* is led by the non-Aboriginal computer geek, Liam. Both form polarized partnerships of gender and culture. But both girls find themselves being guided in deeper ways by a female Aboriginal presence who provides much more than practical advice on how to cope. This complication of the third figure, Willow Whitecloud in *Wild Ride* and Ermaline in *White Girl*, works against the pattern of double focalizations, which, according to Nodelman, can lead to a "solution" in the form of the containment of one perspective and world by the other. This attempted complication of double focalizations is perhaps the result of the middle space occupied by these novels and novelists. Norma Rowen's statement in 1991 that "most children's books about Native people are not merely written by white authors but for white children" (7) could certainly not be made today with respect to the ethnicity of authorship. As a Métis writer, Jacqueline Guest belongs to both dominant and marginalized groups, settler and Aboriginal cultures. Sylvia Olsen is white, but married to a member of the Tsartlip First Nation, where she has lived and raised a family for most of her life. So, like Guest, Olsen negotiates two worlds. This is the liminal space from which polarities and dualities can be more accurately and fairly viewed, taking into account the complexities of cultural binaries that refuse to be dismissed or glossed over. Chinua Achebe refers to such liminality as the "crossroad"—"where the spirits meet the humans, the water meets the land, the child meets the adult," maintaining that "these are the zones of power . . . where stories are created" (Cott 80). The power of the child meeting the adult is the liminal zone that has received the least attention in postcolonial studies.

Most importantly and perhaps unexpectedly, this liminal space grants permission for cultures to remain distinct rather than one being absorbed by the other. Because there has been a blurring of difference within this negotiated region and space, a relationship of union and interaction does not need to be imposed or forced, and one world does not have to win out over the other. Rather than moving between two exclusive

worlds, or viewing one world from the vantage point of the other, these two novels blur distinctions in their confrontation with a confusing mixture. From this mixture it is not easy for the blatant or the insidious and subversive subjection of one half of the binary by the other to occur. In other words, the chaotic mixture means that there is no space automatically set aside for classifications of dominant and marginalized.

Despite the promise of the complexity of the liminal space developed in the course of these two novels, the conclusions disappoint in their attempts to provide narrative and thematic closure. The power and mystery of the spirituality associated with the death of Ermaline and the faith of Willow hint at the existence of worlds that cannot be explained away or used as elements in multicultural and gendered equations of power. The conclusion of *Wild Ride*, however, resorts to the essentialisms of spirituality according to the two cultures: "Jan's mind flashed over Willow's shaman rites and spirit helper, then her mom's faith in her rosary and prayer. She couldn't bring herself to call on either to help her win this race" (164). The binary is firmly entrenched, simplifying and undoing the suggestion that there is a less polarized and less competitive relationship possible between Aboriginal and white. In an attempt to move beyond the duality of the cultures, the novel simplistically and suddenly separates what has been impossible to disentangle and define up to this point. The conclusion of *White Girl*—"When I closed my eyes I heard stories I had never heard before and I knew this was only a beginning" (234)—is a variation on Nodelman's observation of "an urge to repress and forget past horrors" ("A Monochromatic" 49). Transforming the past into story can be a way to repress and forget through idealizing and romanticizing the "authentic." Josie's references in the Epilogue to the different "perspectives" of her white and Aboriginal friends seem designed to maintain difference, but the casual ease with which the perspectives are isolated contradicts the complications and pain of the cultural interaction depicted in the narrative. Beverley Haun sees two choices embedded in the postcolonial discourse of the dominant and the marginalized Aboriginal: "a return to aboriginal 'authenticity' or the creation of a form of 'hybridization'" (41). Olsen seems to be advocating "authenticity," but her position is not entirely clear. Although the liminal space creates possibilities within the text, the issue of narrative conclusions where there are no cultural

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conclusions remains an awkward problem and challenge. The endings, with their insistence on resolution and closure, return these narratives to the predictable pattern expected in a multicultural children's novel. The promise of complexity is withdrawn by conclusions that attempt to solve and simplify, treating the Aboriginal no differently than any multicultural group is depicted and treated in the literary text for children.

I turn here to non-fiction, *The Kids Book of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada*, as a break from the fiction that by its very nature is obligated, or perceives itself as being obligated, to provide an ending to a story that is ongoing. Silvey and Mantha's book is attractive, informative, and clear. The author and illustrator form one of the cultured and gendered "pairs" so prevalent in the fiction under review: Silvey is a female member of the Sechelt Band and Mantha is a white male. Only one of eight chapters is devoted to "Aboriginal Peoples after Contact," so the textual space squeezes contact to its compressed spot at the end, demonstrating the recent and short interaction of the two cultures. The book emphasizes the longstanding relationship between people and the land, reflecting in its large format the "vastness" of that relationship. One of the most effective illustrations is a black-and-white depiction of a classroom in a residential school, which contrasts with the colour and action of the other illustrations (57). This illustration will, I think, attract the attention of the reader in its "difference" from the others and in its effective representation of the process and results of European contact.

The existence of the spiritual realm, prominent in both Aboriginal novels under review, is taken to a ludicrous extreme in Anjali Banerjee's *Maya Running*, and what is immediately apparent upon coming to this book is the humour and sense of fun that have been missing from the works discussed so far. I concur wholeheartedly with Judith Saltman's comment that "lightness of spirit is . . . rare in young adult and culturally diverse fiction" (29). *Maya Running* is entertaining, and race is not exempt from humourous and outrageous treatment—it is in fact at the heart of it. It is through humour that Banerjee succeeds in evoking and conveying the voice and mannerisms of Maya and her family. Maya reacts to the maternal Indian voice with irritation and humour: Mrs Ghose says to her, "'Maya, have more rice and dahl? So thin you are. You are not eating. Kamala, has she become thin?'" Maya's response— "This is what Indians say even if you weigh a thousand pounds. I am Skinny Future-Girl with buckteeth and braces" (6)—positions her as a hyphenated Canadian, leaning towards the Canadian end of the hyphen. Maya's mother defends her daughter's body by scapegoating "ballet, skating, cross-country skiing" (6). While Guest and Olsen include spiritual worlds in their novels in an attempt

to complicate and blur the binaries of the cross-cultural experience, Banerjee goes further in her use of magic realism within a genre that tends to limit itself to realism with the conventional time-slip as the only expected variation. Working with the familiar "be careful what you wish for" narrative, as anticipated in the James Baldwin epigraph, "Be careful what you set your heart upon—for it will surely be yours," *Maya Running* incorporates the Hindu god, Ganesh, as the granter of wishes thoughtlessly and selfishly uttered. Ganesh is the remover of obstacles, which is basically what Maya asks for, and as the familiar story goes, she is shocked and appalled when her wish is granted but is not accompanied by the expected happiness. Ganesh performs in an unexpected way by literally intruding into the real world and displaying behaviour consistent with the childish behaviour of the adolescent characters, thus subverting in the process the exoticism associated by Maya with Indian culture and religion. Ganesh is similar in many ways to the Aboriginal figure of Coyote, the trickster who crosses all sorts of boundaries. The exaggerated humour and questionable nature of the worlds made available by Ganesh reflect the complexity of the cross-cultural space inhabited by Maya. It is not simple, straightforward, or identifiable. The novel concludes, however, with a definite statement, asserting Maya as an individual, a hyphenated Canadian who publishes in *The Maple Leaf Chronicle* and "gets letters from Indian relatives connected to her by threads that can never be broken" (209). Maya claims that she is "changeable, as transient as the seasons" and that with respect to "the dust and heat of India, the northern lights and the snow melting on the prairies" she is "all of this and none of this" (209). Conforming to the comfort and resolution of the "happy" ending, based on the flexibility of the hyphen, the conclusion leaves the reader longing for more of the hilarity and absurdity of Ganesh let loose in the world to stir up what will not settle easily or simply. The conclusion conforms to what Nodelman identifies as the tendency to "obliterate the possibility that such differences [gender, race, and class] matter, to see all differences as manifestations of individual personalities rather than culturally powerful categories" ("Of Solitudes" 82).

Rachna Gilmore's *A Group of One*, originally published in cloth in 2001 but appearing in paperback in 2005, is a much more realistic novel than Banerjee's. Like Banerjee, Gilmore successfully conveys the voice of the characters, particularly the fluid voice of Tara's mother as Tara receives and assesses it:

> "Of course she must come, Raj. She is Your Mother." There's a trace of her real British accent, not the exaggerated put-on one—she lived in England for a few years. And it slips out when

she's being gracious or controlled. (16)

The historical story within the contemporary story, predictably told by the grandmother, Dadiji, captures the attention not only of Tara, but of the rest of the family and the reader to the point that there is no awkward awareness of who is telling the story to whom. This is the type of historical exposition that can be relayed in an artificial manner, but the Quit India message of the Independence Movement has no overtones of dry didacticism as told by Gilmore through Dadiji. The blatant message of tolerance and, more specifically, anti-classifying and identifying, is expressed by Tara in the setting of the Canadian classroom: "'It's like everyone's always drawing circles and lines, but no one has the right. I'm me. And everyone's an individual. A group of one'" (115). Tara voices a solution which, in a subversive way, falls into an approach identified as troubling by Nodelman and Reimer—the approach that insists "in the name of tolerance" that "all people are basically the same despite their apparent differences" (172).The extreme "classifiers" in the novel, crossing cultures and generations, do need to hear and heed this message. In particular, it must be received by Dadiji, and must be delivered to her by her granddaughter, Tara. But it only works to balance an extreme; to live by the message of individual identity is to erase difference. The concern of *A Group of One* to work against the compulsion to classify and separate cultures, genders, and ages, and particularly to privilege any of the polarities involved in the binaries, results in a simplification of such differences. In the novel's conclusion, Tara rushes upstairs to answer Jeff's phone call, having heard, digested, and apparently recovered from the temporary interruption of the "Quit India" story and history. Supposedly, "home is once more the safe comfortable place" (Nodelman, "A Monochomatic" 45) once Dadiji's unwarranted concern with difference has been "cured" by the tolerance of Canada.

Canada's concern with its identity as a tolerant nation is reflected in the other pieces of non-fiction under review. *Racism: Deal With It Before It Gets Under Your Skin* is a straightforward and effective approach to an impressive number of racist attitudes. Without being condescending, glib, or preachy, Aikins and Murray provide more than the basic information and strategies. With very few changes, this book could effectively be adapted for adult readers.

The alphabet *Peek-a-Little Boo* is more troubling in its "use" of multicultural material. Sheree Fitch and Laura Watson's attractive and appealing book certainly fits into the historical trajectory outlined by Waterston, who demonstrates how the Canadian alphabet for anglophones has evolved from British origins to bilingual forms, including French and Chipewyan (15–17). A multicultural alphabet seems

like the next stage in its reflection or insistence upon the inclusion and tolerance of Canada in 2005. Each page introduces a baby, providing the baby's name and something belonging to him or her, an illustration, and a four-line rhyme ending in "Peek-a-little boo." On the "N" page, for example, there is an illustration of Nadir, the rhyme, "Noisy baby, / Boo-hoo-hoo! / Dry your tears and / Peek-a-little boo!" and the words "Nadir's nose." On the final page of the book the babies' ethnicities are identified and their names are explained. "Nadir" means "dear" or "rare" and is from Afghanistan. The use of alliteration and playful language is well matched by the exaggeratedly energetic and colourful illustrations. Despite the energy of the text and illustration, I am not completely at ease with this book. Canada, represented by the letter "R" for the name Rusty, is the only privileged entry to spread across the book's gutter to take up two pages. The easy and idealistic containment of twenty-six cultures inside the covers of the book is a metaphor for nation and world that will not trouble young listeners, but may be a cause of concern for some adult readers.

With the exception of *Peek-a-Little Boo*, this group of recent "multicultural" texts does not hesitate to include extreme pain, suffering, and injustice in its examination of historical and current relationships between cultures. For example, Dueck's portrayal of the brutal stealing, violence, and killing inflicted by robbers and soldiers in the small Ukranian town of Gruenfeld; Gilmore's description of the violence of the movement for Indian independence; and Olsen's inclusion of racial hatred, credit their readers with the ability to receive and respond to harsh truths. The genre itself, however, is static and predictable. With the exception of the havoc resulting from the escapades of Ganesh in *Maya Running*, the "multicultural" children's novel in Canada has not yet expanded to reflect the more demanding and tougher subject matter that now informs Canadian children's literature. More playfulness of the type found in Thomas King's *A Coyote Columbus Story* would offset some of the earnestness and rigidity commonly found in works dealing with the dynamics of cultures within Canada. Nowhere is the inflexibility of structure and tone more apparent than in the conclusions of the novels, which insist on providing a closure that satisfies and solves. It is even more distressing to rectify and solve, with apparent ease, conflict and oppression that have been acknowledged than it is to simply deny or ignore their presence. Once introduced, there is a responsibility to deal in an honest manner with intolerance, racism, and prejudice: if the reader can handle their existence, it is not too great a leap to ask that reader to consider their *persistence* in a world that does not end happily ever after. Current readers live in a context where children such as Iqbal Masih

and Craig Kielburger (Makman 287–88) are activists fighting against the types of intolerance that these cross-cultural novels attempt to convey in order to promote awareness and compassion, which is, after all, the aim of much literature.

Chinua Achebe worries that we are losing "that ability to say 'Let us pretend' like grace before our act; and to say 'Our revels now are ended' like a benediction when we have finished—and *yet* to draw from this insubstantial pageant essential insights and wisdoms for making our way in the real world" (151). If the narrative itself does the job of activism by cleaning up everything in the end, then the genre is possibly promoting false complacency and dangerous satisfaction. The assumption that the young reader in Canada needs to feel safe and satisfied is perhaps doing a disservice to the children to whom Deborah Ellis dedicates *Parvana's Journey*—"children we force to be braver than they should have to be." In my interpretation, Ellis is including the reader as well as the characters, and "we" implies the global conditions that in an inclusive manner have an impact on all. The young Canadian reader is ready and prepared to be braver than we give her credit for. In her discussion of Beatrice Culleton's *In Search of April Raintree*, Rowen points out the irony of the marketing and distribution of the novel, which loudly proclaim that "the truth about the Native child at its bitterest is . . . a story not suitable for children" (17). The novels covered by this review essay challenge the child as reader within the narrative, but such challenges need to be stretched in order to cover and include the problematic ending. The postmodern lack of closure can and should have a place in the multicultural world of the child in order to reflect the real world lived in by that child and in order to offer the prospect and hope of many possibilities rather than a single idealized solution already arrived at. A conclusion chosen "in the name of tolerance" (Nodelman and Reimer 172), which deliberately places "greater emphasis on the commonalities and similarities among peoples rather than the differences" (Jobe 33),[2] separates Canadian children from their global counterparts, who certainly have to be much braver than the conclusions of these novels allow.

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Notes

[1] In his discussion of double focalizations, Nodelman acknowledges and quotes the work of Australian critic Robyn McCallum. Nodelman's article, "Of Solitudes," directed me to McCallum's study and to this particular quotation, which is quoted by Nodelman ("Of Solitudes" 79).

[2] Nodelman and Reimer, in their discussion, point out the difficulties involved in Jobe's approach (172). I am agreeing with their feelings of discomfort.

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