

# Letter to the Editors

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Dear CCL:

Enclosed is a cheque for \$29 to renew my subscription to *Canadian Children's Literature* (sorry about the delay).

While I'm at it, I have a few questions and comments. Since last I wrote (on February 25, 2001) about the issues of the de-Canadianization of our children's literature and historical novelists' evasion of "the common realities of the societies they write about" (as Anne Scott MacLeod argues in "Writing Backward: Modern Models in Historical Fiction" in *Horn Book* 74.1, 26-33), the former trend appears to have continued unabated. According to an article headlined "U.S. demands trample Canadian kids' lit" in the June 1, 2001 *Globe and Mail*, "So worrisome is the trend in English Canada that the Association of Canadian Publishers recently hired a consultant to study the matter and report by the end of summer or early fall." I haven't heard anything about what the conclusions of the study were, and so I am very anxious for an update as to whether this distressing trend (as the journalist, Marina Strauss, put it, "It could be a national tragedy") will be addressed in a future issue of *CCL*.

I'm also wondering if another issue of *CCL* devoted to history is in the works (I greatly enjoyed the issues "History I" and "History II" that came out back in 1996). The time seems ripe, given the apparent "burgeoning interest in Canada's past," as evidenced in the field of Canadian children's literature by, most notably, Penguin and Scholastic's *Our Canadian Girl* and *Dear Canada* series. I'd love to read experts' analyses of this trend, which would seem to belie the pessimism of many Canadian children's book publishers. This may, however, just be a passing fad: according to at least one media commentator, the Canadian history craze may have peaked — ratings for the second season of CBC's *Canada: A People's History* plummeted — so it'll be interesting to see just how committed these publishers really are to "bringing Canada's past alive." After all, Scholastic only came out with a Canuck version of their *Dear America* series (which they marketed, and continue to market, in Canada. I bet it won't work the other way around) after Canadian history became a hot commodity (and, according to an article in a recent *Quill & Quire* ["Fortress Scholastic," Feb. 2002], Scholastic has a dismal record when it comes to Canadian content in their monthly catalogues). And even Groundwood Books, whose publisher, Patsy Aldana, has protested against how Canadian publishers "have begun to shape their lists to the needs of the U.S. market," pitched a book "about a pioneer doctor in Peterborough, Ont. . . . with a North American slant, without mentioning Peterborough, to entice the U.S. reader" (Marina Strauss, "U.S. demands trample

Canadian kids' lit," *Globe and Mail*, June 1, 2001).

While there are many excellent books by Canadian authors who have chosen non-Canadian settings (Deborah Ellis's *Parvana* and Priscilla Galloway's *The Courtesan's Daughter* spring to mind), there are an increasing number of others in which the authors' decision to set their books outside Canada and/or dilute the Canadian flavour seem to have been motivated mainly by the demands of the marketplace. (I was once accused of parochialism for complaining about Canadian writers who set their books outside Canada. However, isn't it just as, if not more, parochial to eschew underutilized Canadian settings for tried-and-true foreign locales in order to break into the international market — something we see all too frequently with Canadian writers of popular fiction?) *CCL* contributor Perry Nodelman touched briefly on this issue in his review of *Bud Not Buddy* ("Published by Delacorte Press in New York . . . [and] set in the American state of Michigan") in the Summer 2000 issue of *CCL* (98: 73-74): "the claiming of *Bud Not Buddy* as Canadian challenges the possibility that there might be such a thing as a distinct group of texts definable as Canadian and understandable as such. . . . It'd be nice to be able to claim a novel as good as *Bud Not Buddy* as a text of Canadian children's literature. In fact, I happily do so. But even in doing so I sense significant differences between this novel and the children's literature produced specifically in and for the community of Canadian children's publishers, editors, librarians and teachers. A lot of that literature is just as satisfying — but, I sense, in different ways. The challenge this Newbery Award-winning Canadian novel by an American citizen [Christopher Paul Curtis] creates, for myself and others, is to find ways of enunciating the difference." (This is not to disparage Curtis, a novelist born and raised in the United States who came to Canada as an adult, as opposed to writers whose experience has been primarily or entirely Canadian.) Perhaps Nodelman could devote an entire paper to this topic in a future issue of *CCL*.

I'd also like to see him tackle the other trend, that of historical novelists' evasion of the common realities of the societies they write about. In the August 1998 *Quill & Quire* (the same issue in which Barbara Greenwood's article "Liberated ladies or fettered females? Are authors of historical fiction giving their female protagonists too much freedom?" appeared) he wrote an incisive review of *Prairie Fire!* by Bill Freeman, giving short shrift to the "anachronistic tolerance" of the central characters, a family of 1870s prairie settlers whose eldest daughter falls in love with and marries a Métis. Unfortunately, such inauthentic historical novels continue to be published, and not all reviewers are as critical as Nodelman. Maxine Trottier's *By the Standing Stone*, a prime example of this trend — and also of the trend towards the Americanization of our children's literature — made it into the 2000-2001 "Our Choice," was nominated for the Red Maple award, and received wholly favourable reviews. The reviewers saw nothing suspect about the aristocratic British heroine's eventual marriage to an illiterate, unassimilated Oneida warrior; her reckless and irresponsible (for the times) behaviour (she habitually flouted her guardian's wishes by borrowing his shirts and breeches without asking and going out alone in a small sailboat, and endangered herself and her 13-year-old cousin by insisting that they wander off all by themselves even though the latter warned her it was unsafe to do so); her adoption of an implausibly well-mannered, well-spoken street urchin after being inspired by the Random Acts of Kindness-type philosophy of a camp follower with a heart of gold; or Trottier's portrayal of Enlightenment Britain as a stifling, conformist environment and her

concomitant romanticization of life in the North American wilderness. Barbara Demers took an approach similar to this last in her acclaimed, award-winning novel *Willa's New World*: she crudely exaggerated the shortcomings of eighteenth-century British society while going to the exact opposite extreme in her depiction of First Nations life in Rupert's Land (contrasting the two cultures with "simplistic sharpness," as a reviewer from *Booklist* put it). According to Demers, eighteenth-century British females were all downtrodden chattel so ill-equipped to form opinions or draw conclusions that their male relatives had to do all their thinking for them (which would surely have come as a surprise to the many strong-minded women of the time, such as the renowned bluestocking Elizabeth Montagu) and her young British heroine could never have grown or developed as a person if she hadn't wound up living in Rupert's Land.)

With all due respect to R.G. Moyles (*CCL*, no. 100-101: 180-181), I couldn't disagree more with his statement that the availability of such novels as *By the Standing Stone* will surely cause our culture's lamentable lack of historical awareness to have abated "a few decades from now." I think they'll only contribute to the abysmal state of historical awareness. They strike me as the kind of ahistorical historical fiction that tells us more about the author and his or her own times than the period purportedly chronicled. Beneath their mincing formal speech and funny old-fashioned clothes, Trottier's sympathetic main characters are "completely Canadian" in a very twenty-first-century way, at a time when our country and national identity were still only in an embryonic phase. With this revisionist approach, important historical events that helped to shape Canada and the Canadian character can be misrepresented with impunity. A reader reviewing *By the Standing Stone* at <http://chapters.indigo.ca> wrote that she especially enjoyed the part where "the Canadians" (British visitors who had only been in the colony three years) took part in the Boston Tea Party. Well, of course, since the inhabitants of Canada were pretty much the same sort of people then as they are today, why wouldn't they have helped their American friends stand up to a (as Trottier would have it) tyrannical foreign power? So much for how the subsequent influx of thousands of Loyal American refugees, and many of the *Canadiens'* resistance to the Rebels, would help to determine Canada's survival as a separate entity.

I was pleased that Heather Kirk expressed concern over Trottier's "suspiciously whitewashed and paternalistic" history in the historical note of her picture book *Storm! At Batoche*, which Kirk reviewed in the same issue of *CCL* (100-101: 155-157). I myself find Trottier to be alarmingly selective in her reporting of historical events. Kirk concluded "that Trottier romanticizes Riel and the Métis dangerously" in her "revisionist historical note" by glossing over the fact that they "resorted to violence." Trottier romanticizes the American revolutionaries even more dangerously in both the main text and the historical note of *By the Standing Stone*. In one crudely manipulative sequence, her travel-stained main characters approach a stuck-up Bostonian lady and her blustering, sycophantic coachman — the story's sole Loyalist characters (or perhaps I should say *caricatures*) — to ask for directions, whereupon the lady insults them and refuses to be of assistance ("Drive on. I cannot bear the sight of these beggars, much less the dreadful smell!" she whined in a bored tone. 'It is a disgrace how many ruffians wander the streets of Boston these days shouting one slogan or another') while her coachman fawns on her and threatens them ("Liberty, indeed," the coachman rumbled, clenching the reins. Then his voice rose. 'If liberty means that such trash as you might feel free to approach and speak

to a fine woman like my mistress, may our ties with England never be broken.' . . . 'Move away or have your toes ground to mush!' . . . 'And be well gone from here or I shall call the soldiers and have you taken away!'"'). But when the three filthy, disreputable-looking travellers (one an Indian warrior and another a young woman in men's clothes) walk off the darkening streets into Paul Revere's shop, Revere — who is all alone with his valuable wares — isn't at all unfriendly or suspicious: he greets them "warmly," then kindly and courteously inquires if he can be of assistance. As if this weren't enough to ensure that the reader will perceive the impending Revolution as a black-and-white struggle between British oppressors (and a few Loyalist lackeys) and noble, freedom-fighting Rebels, Trottier even uses her heroine's struggle to free herself from the brutish trader who tries to enslave her as a metaphor for the Revolution, which is pretty ironic, considering how (as Samuel Johnson observed) the "greatest yelps about Liberty" came from slave owners. In the brief outline of the Revolution in her Author's Note, she ignores the Rebel armies' attempts to capture the colonies of Canada and Nova Scotia. While she *does* acknowledge that depredations were committed against the Loyalists, she creates the impression that such activities were limited to central New York and her sympathy does not extend to non-Native Loyalists. Indeed, though she reveals that "[s]adly" the Revolution created a civil war amongst the Six Nations and resulted in the flight of thousands of Mohawk, Seneca, Cayuga, and Onondaga refugees to the British stronghold of Fort Niagara, she fails to mention that, equally sadly, the Revolution also created a civil war amongst the American colonists and that thousands of the ones who remained loyal to the Crown were also driven into exile. She writes that the fighting took place between "the British military and the Americans" and the Native allies of "[e]ach side," reinforcing her message in the main text that *Loyal* Americans were only a minuscule percentage of the population of the Thirteen Colonies. This one-sided approach does a disservice not only to Canadian readers, who receive such a distorted picture of their history, but also the American readers to whom Trottier is presumably attempting to pander. After all, not all of them are averse to hearing the other side of the story: in her positive review of Janet Lunn's infinitely more evenhanded novel *The Hollow Tree* at <http://barnesandnoble.com>, a 14-year-old from Michigan wrote, "most books that are about the Revolutionary War are from the rebels' point of view, and make it sound that the Loyalists were the only ones who did things wrong." (She's certainly right about the preponderance of pro-revolutionary historical fiction: the prolific and jingoistic American writer Ann Rinaldi's output alone nearly exceeds the *total number* of young adult novels written from a Loyalist perspective that have been published in Canada during the past 30 years. With such biased American historical fiction crowding our bookstore and library shelves, the last thing we need is for Canadian writers to get in on the act.)

Regrettably, *Under A Shooting Star*, the next book in Trottier's series, continues in this vein. The novel is a marked departure from earlier Canadian novels set during the War of 1812, such as Marianne Brandis's *Fireship* and Robert Sutherland's *A River Apart*, both of which were very evenhanded. In *A River Apart*, for instance, Sutherland's Canadian hero and his two close American friends were torn between their loyalty to each other and their loyalty to their respective countries; Sutherland also resisted the temptation to turn the Americans' father, a War Hawk, into a two-dimensional villain. *Under A Shooting Star* is ostensibly a tale of divided loyalties; however, in spite of a Canadian-born, half-Oneida, English-raised hero,

the story actually has a pronounced bias against the British, Indians, and even the Canadians. For about the first nine-tenths of the story, the war is characterized by British, Indian, and, to a lesser extent, Canadian aggression against the blameless Americans. Trottier fails to place the war in its larger international context, completely ignoring the massive struggle against Napoleon that was raging in Europe. The reader is repeatedly reminded of the perfidiousness of the British military; Trottier has even killed off her unlikely fictitious family of the British aristocrat, her Oneida husband, and their ex-beggar boy adopted son in such a way as to reflect badly on the British. While an early scene involves the destruction of an American homestead by Indians and references are subsequently made to the "horrifying news" of further Indian raids, the *Indians'* grievances are never clearly articulated. In fact, Tecumseh is all but vilified: Trottier places undue stress on his poor relationship with his son Paukeesaa, and has one of her sympathetic characters accuse him of being a warmonger who is leading his people to their doom. Actually, the Indians are the most racist and intolerant characters in the book. An anachronistically tolerant (to borrow Nodelman's phrase) American pioneer girl muses on how strange it feels to be hated "simply because of the color of [her] skin" after her sister's thoughtful offer to tend the wounds of their injured Shawnee enemy is ungratefully met with a burst of invective. Some of the Canadians come in a close second in the bigotry and brutality departments: a gang of Canadian punks stone an American girl and call her "American doxy"; a group of "coarse," "dirty," "unshaven," and "foul-mouthed" Canadian lowlifes are overheard boasting how they've butchered American men, women, and children in order to sell their scalps to a Canadian gentleman who collects the things for a hobby. On the other hand, Trottier avoids any mention of how the Americans invaded Canada at the outset of the war, occupied the village of Sandwich, and sent out raiding parties for miles into the surrounding countryside. In the final fraction of the story, in what can only be described as a last-minute sop to Canadian readers, the hero (who'd heretofore stayed out of the fighting because of his aversion to the British military and his determination to protect his saintly American love interest and her innocent little sister, trapped in Canada by the war) is forced by circumstances beyond his control to take part in a battle, after which he announces that the men fought bravely and that he is now willing to take up arms in the defence of his uncle's homestead (not that his newfound resolve is ever put to the test, as the fighting never resumes in that part of Upper Canada). Mention is made of Tecumseh's corpse having been mutilated by American soldiers after the Battle of the Thames; however, in contrast to the almost unrelenting demonization of the British and the Indians, the impression created is that *this* was the aberrant act of a few bad apples. Moreover, the incident lacks the emotional impact of the macabre boasting of the Canadian scalp hunters, for Tecumseh has been portrayed so unsympathetically and the matter occurs offstage and is reported secondhand.

According to one of Trottier's publishers, she is "quickly becoming one of Canada's most prolific and accomplished children's authors." (This appeared in her author profile on the web site for Stoddart Kids.) If *this* is the future of Canadian children's literature, then God help us.

Sincerely,  
Gretchen Runnalls  
Winchester, Ontario