

The law as protector: A conversation with Linda Phillips and Peter Ringrose

Ronald Rompkey

Résumé: *Dans une entrevue accordée à Ronald Rompkey, Linda Phillips et Peter Ringrose expliquent comment ils ont concilié leur régionalisme et l'examen d'un problème social universel, l'abus sexuel, en composant Ask me no questions, un roman "thérapeutique" à la fois ancré dans la réalité terre-neuvienne et ouvert aux préoccupations des jeunes d'ailleurs.*

Ronald Rompkey talks to two of the authors of *Ask me no questions*, by Linda Phillips, Peter Ringrose, and Michael Winter, a novel that explores the problems of sexual abuse. Published by Prentice-Hall of Canada in 1990, the novel is copyrighted by the Public Legal Information Association of Newfoundland.

Rompkey: What is the Public Legal Information Association of Newfoundland, or PLIAN as you call it, and how does it see its mandate?

Ringrose: PLIAN works to provide the public with information about the law, particularly to teachers, students, and "helping professionals" such as nurses, clergy, and social workers who work in rural communities. Information is provided through a variety of ways: a telephone enquiry service, oral presentations to public interest groups, professional development seminars for teachers, lectures to students, and publications which are important complements to all of our information services. Like similar associations in all other provinces and in the territories, PLIAN is funded in part by the Department of Justice, Canada.

Rompkey: I know that you and Linda have written several other books, but this is the first novel you have collaborated on?

Ringrose: Yes, usually we write expository materials to assist teachers and students in the law and democracy curriculum taught in Grades 11 and 12. In fact, you could say that one of our objectives is to assist teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador to attain a high standard of knowledge about law and how to teach it. In 1986, when we started planning to write something on sexual abuse, we identified a gap in the available materials.

Rompkey: What gap?

Phillips: A review of available materials on the topic of sexual assault turned up a variety of guides and information brochures. These materials typically defined sexual assault and provided information about what individuals could

do if they either suspected someone of sexual assault or were victims themselves. The emotional nature of sexual assault was emphasized in the research literature. At that point we realized that writing on sexual abuse, a particular instance of sexual assault, for young people must be done with sensitivity and understanding, and in our judgement that could not be done with expository materials. Further investigation did not turn up any narratives for young people on the topic.

Rompkey: There must be other examples where sensitive topics such as sexual assault have been done through fiction.

Phillips: Yes, there are many examples of literature dealing with life experiences such as handicaps, failures, death, drugs, and family break-ups. All kinds of sensitive issues are dealt with through literature. However, *Ask me no questions* is probably the first blending of literature and law.

Rompkey: I notice that there are three authors for this novel. How did that work?

Ringrose: As Linda has already mentioned, she and I laid the groundwork for the novel in 1986. In the fall of 1987 we wrote an extensive proposal outlining the project, and we finished the novel in the winter of 1990. For about a year over 1989 to 1990 we hired a research assistant, Michael Winter, to assist us with some of the particulars of the work. He assisted us in many ways such as confirming medical evidence, double-checking details, meeting with high school students, attending counselling meetings, and drafting sections dealing with particular issues in the novel based on what he had learned.

Rompkey: It seems that writing a novel to inform young people about sexual assault is very demanding.

Phillips: Yes, the writing was a painstaking process. Not only did we carry the burden of having to ensure that the novel would hang together, but also that it portrayed accurately the sexual assault situations. In addition, we had to introduce the appropriate legal issues, represent accurately the rights of individuals, present the alternatives available to sexual assault victims, and illustrate the ways in which potential assaults may be prevented. There was much give-and-take about ideas for Peter, Michael, and me. However, in the end the final decisions rested with Peter and me.

Rompkey: The parallel that comes to my mind is something like a group of studio writers for, let us say, a screen-writing project or a television series, where you have a group of people constantly moving with a developing plot, and that works since they're all moving towards the same goal. But I'm not sure that would work the same way for a novel.

Ringrose: You're right. I don't think the parallel works because somebody has to set the goal. That was the responsibility Linda and I had, so we were constantly establishing goals and integrating the plot, mood, and characterization into the storyline. It was a demanding and slow process.

Phillips: We were also challenged to unite a number of considerations. First,

we had to ensure that we had the elements of what one would call "good literature". Thus, we had to be ever cognizant of the criteria for writing a novel even though our goal was to educate young people on the nature of sexual abuse and on the role of the law as protector. Second, we accepted our responsibility to fulfil that goal by developing legal content through literature. It is our view that the union of law and literature provides a new and better way to present information for teaching and learning about law than has been traditionally the case.

Rompkey: I guess all of us who are interested in literature dream of writing a novel, especially one that does well. I know that neither one of you is a novelist primarily: one of you is a lawyer, the other an academic. Had you ever thought that you would be a novelist and that you would have all kinds of creative questions to answer?

Ringrose: Yes, I did. Since very early childhood I have wanted to write a novel and have played with ideas for a novel. Since Linda and I have been successful with our expository materials and now with the novel, the future opens up a variety of options and we have chatted about the nature of our next projects.

Phillips: While I would not be able to say that I have always had a desire to write a novel to the extent that Peter has suggested, I was an English literature major. Over the years, I have published poetry and short stories, written about the treatment of particular topics in literature, and have argued for the use of literature as a means to foster reading and writing ability. Bearing these and other writing experiences in mind then, I guess I would not see the actual writing of a novel as so unusual.

Rompkey: When you first decided to start this project, what sort of readership did you have in mind?

Ringrose: Teenagers around the ages of 14 to 16 years. However, while it seems to have found its niche in the 14-17 age range in the school system, adolescents and adults are also reading it and reporting it to be a "good read for anyone concerned about the topic of sexual abuse".

Rompkey: Why did you focus on young adults?

Phillips: From a theoretical perspective, some of the basic tenets of reading development guided the identification of young adults as our readership. While it is generally agreed that reading development is continuous, it is also agreed that there are stages.

Rompkey: What does stages of reading development have to do with writing a novel for young adults?

Phillips: Well, for instance, there is the stage of beginning reading where individuals begin to associate sounds with letters and a more accomplished stage where individuals use their facility with word recognition and read to learn. By the time most students are teenagers they have achieved some degree of independence in reading and can thus focus their attention on the topic they are reading rather than on trying to cope with reading it.

Rompkey: It seems to me that being able to deal with the language in the novel was as important to you as the treatment of the topic of sexual abuse.

Phillips: Yes, in writing about a topic like sexual abuse, readers must have a reasonable degree of sophistication in language development. This was an important consideration because we wanted to be reasonably sure that the concepts and language used in the novel would not be hampered by a reader's lack of reading competence. As Peter says, we aimed the novel at young people for whom sexual abuse is a particularly sensitive topic. In other words if they disliked the novel, we wanted them to dislike it as a novel and not because they couldn't deal with the language and the ideas.

Ringrose: There's another consideration, too. The novel is not written only for victims. It is written for young people generally, to strengthen their thoughts about the meaning and evils of sexual abuse and the need to be empathetic and caring for the victims of sexual abuse. The book was read and discussed by sexually abused young people in a self-help group. You'll notice that those young people are acknowledged at the front of the novel as the G.R.O.W. group. They were consultants to us on early drafts and advised us where changes needed to be made in order to represent well their interests, concerns, and emotions based on many of their experiences.

Rompkey: There's another side to the novel that has to do with the law as an abstraction and with the role of the law in people's lives.

Ringrose: We wanted to illustrate and confirm in many young people's minds that the law is part of their daily lives, that they have a right to the law, and that the law belongs to them. We wanted to give them a sense of ownership of the law: a sense that the law is a protector, that it provides fundamental protection for all of us. I don't think that young people always appreciate that, perhaps because of the way law is frequently taught in high schools. Law is perceived frequently as an admonitory, punishing social instrument largely because most textbooks and teachers focus on criminal law, yet criminal law probably represents no more than five percent of the law's activity on a daily basis.

Rompkey: I suspect the way the law is portrayed by the media, especially by television, contributes to the perception that it is punitive for the most part.

Ringrose: There again, the law is portrayed as a punitive or admonitory social instrument concerned with cops and robbers. The novel allows us to break away from that view of the law and shows it in its true light, as a positive social force and as a protector.

Rompkey: Does the Public Legal Information Association have a philosophy about the law and the role of law as such?

Ringrose: Yes, I think you might sum it up with the cliché that the law doesn't belong to judges or to lawyers or to the police but to people. It belongs to all of us as part of our social fabric. Everyone has the right, indeed perhaps the obligation, to be aware of the law and the role of law in our daily lives.

Phillips: In our day-to-day lives we typically hear of the legal system in a puni-

tive manner without taking stock, for instance, of how it provides order in our daily lives. For the purposes of our discussion the most relevant feature perhaps is recognition of the fact that the law is based upon searching for truth. One of the things that we try to get across in this novel is that the law does seek for truth and that just as Leslie, in the novel, will get to tell her story about how she was abused, so too will Leslie's dad get to tell his story. And so the law will seek to look at the consequences, the circumstances surrounding the incidents, and to arrive at a judgment on the basis of the evidence available.

Rompkey: We've mostly been talking around the novel and really haven't said anything about the book itself. Readers of *Canadian Children's Literature* may not have read it or may not even be aware of it. Briefly, what is the fictional context for which these events occur?

Ringrose: The plot is typical of sexual abuse cases that we found in the research literature.

Rompkey: Presumably, then, the fictionalizing arose out of the research that you did.

Ringrose: Clearly, yes.

Rompkey: So this is not just something you imagined. It holds pretty much true to...

Ringrose: It's very true to what is known about sexual abuse cases.

Rompkey: What is so typical about it?

Ringrose: The typical parts of the novel include the family structure and the sequence of events. There is an average family where both parents work, and there are children, one boy and two girls. Both girls have been or are being sexually abused by a parent, and neither girl is aware of the abuse of the other. These abusive situations are concurrent until something precipitates knowledge on the part of both. At some point the two girls learn of the abuse that they have both suffered; that knowledge often leads to some resolution. This plot structure allowed us to introduce social workers, the police, the court structure and crown prosecutors, and the trial process. Generally speaking the plot structure as outlined duplicates many sexual abuse cases.

Rompkey: What happens?

Phillips: *Ask me no questions* is the story of two innocent girls being sexually abused at different times by their father. The older girl, Leslie, indulges in occasional flights of fantasy to escape from her guilt-ridden and confused life. Susan, the younger girl, is not so fortunate. Through disclosure and with time, Leslie and Susan learn to replace guilt and confusion with liberty and justice.

Rompkey: Where do the law and the public agencies come in?

Phillips: In the novel we walk the reader through the role played by the police, social workers, and legal professionals. These people were an integral part of getting across the point that there are alternatives for victims of sexual

abuse. Even that point had to be handled delicately because disclosure is a very difficult process, and we tried to bring that out in the novel. We also tried to demonstrate that there are people who can care and can help. There are things the victim can do. We are saying, "Here are some of the things that you can do, and here is what you can expect if you disclose."

Rompkey: What sort of effect would this kind of fiction have, then, on an adolescent reader? What kind of thinking would you hope to encourage?

Phillips: It expects a lot from its readers. They must consider, as Leslie must, what to do in a complex situation and judge their ability to face the consequences. Young people face complex situations every day. What we hoped to do was to build on their understanding, to heighten their awareness, and to enliven their discussions on the issue of sexual abuse. The issue of sexual abuse is an extremely legalistic concept, and through our portrayal of sexual abuse in the novel we tried to keep it at a personal level.

Rompkey: The young characters of this novel are only part of the whole dramatic situation. The other part of it has to do with people whom we might call support people, such as teachers, social workers, and legal people. What is their role?

Ringrose: The inclusion of these people illustrates some of the points we want to make about law and the legal process, so that a young person reading the novel would have a step-by-step understanding of what is likely to follow from disclosure. And at the same time, I would say it shows the law in a supportive role. The law occasionally insists on bravery and supports that bravery in a young person. One of the questions in the back of the accompanying teachers' guide is a very good example of this: "Has the law assisted Leslie in becoming the heroine of the novel?" I think the answer is *yes* because the law plays a supporting role, first in protecting Leslie after disclosure, and then in requiring her to do certain things such as testify and be cross-examined. But even her testimony is protected by the law because she gives it behind a screen, away from her father's gaze.

Nevertheless, to get back to the point, the supporting roles of the people in the story illustrate in a sequential way what is likely to happen following disclosure. Readers see the disclosure develop, first from a conversation with a family friend to a meeting with a social worker, then an interview with police, followed by interviews with the Crown attorney and then to the preliminary hearing or preliminary inquiry. Evidence is brought forward, and the dad is remanded to trial. And then we take the trial through the various stages to the trial outcome and the resolution of the story. A young person reading all of that would be well informed of the implications of disclosure and how the legal system is going to work through a disclosure of sexual abuse.

Rompkey: It sounds as if you're hoping to take some of the mystery out of the whole business of entering into the legal process. Would that be safe to say?

Ringrose: Yes, we wanted to take the fear of the unknown out of the minds

of our readers about what to expect, at least in an ideal situation what to expect upon disclosure.

Rompkey: Let's turn now to the technical background of the novel. How extensive was your research there?

Phillips: Research was done at every step of the way. In the last six months, for instance, we left no stone unturned in order to make sure that what was written was correct. The novel was reviewed by social workers, pharmacists, lawyers, and by one of the foremost writers in the field of sexual abuse. Revisions were made on the basis of their comments in order to improve the quality of our work.

Rompkey: And what about fictional realism?

Ringrose: The book is accurate to the last detail. The novel opens with Leslie flying a kite on Signal Hill. Almost to the last draft of the novel, the kite was called "Boötes," after the constellation. But, if you read through the novel you'll understand that the name of the kite was taken from a Christmastime evening with the mother and daughter, Leslie, on a bridge over the Humber River near Corner Brook. However, when we researched the constellations over Corner Brook we learned that you couldn't see the constellation "Boötes" in December over the skies of Corner Brook. This finding led us to change the name of the kite to "Ursa Minor". That kind of detail requires precise attention at all stages, even though it may seem unimportant.

Rompkey: Let's go back again to why you chose to write fiction.

Phillips: We chose to write fiction because research has shown that expository text is more difficult to understand than narrative text. It is known that the underlying structures of expository text are not recognizable immediately by readers, and this would have important consequences for what readers may get out of what is read. Given the intimate and sensitive nature of a topic like sexual abuse, fiction made the most sense and allowed us to portray life-like situations. Perhaps most importantly, a novel would allow individuals to read privately, on their own time, in their own space, and to go back and reread.

Rompkey: That brings us to the question of why a novel works.

Phillips: Sexual abuse cuts across all socio-economic levels, all religions, and all educational levels. The subject has universal appeal. More than anything, a novel gives a reader a way of dealing with the problem of sexual abuse. It informs the reader that sexual abuse is wrong, that there is something that can be done about it, and that each of us has a responsibility to assist anybody who has a problem with sexual abuse. From beginning to end, a novel can round out and offer a fairly comprehensive picture of the many faces of sexual abuse. I think an important element of a good book is that when you're finished with it, it leaves you lots to think about, and that's what we have tried to do in *Ask me no questions*.

Rompkey: I gather that the novel has been quite successful. What was the print run?

Ringrose: The initial print run was 10,000 copies.

Rompkey: That's quite extensive for a Canadian book.

Ringrose: Yes. Prentice-Hall Canada says that if an unknown author sells 800 to 1,000 copies of a book of this sort, the company considers it to be a success. They are very pleased with the success of *Ask me no questions*. The press run is sold out completely . . .

Rompkey: ...now in October 1991?

Ringrose: ...on October 30, 1991. The first run is completely sold out, and there are back-orders in one or two provinces. It seems that fairly soon Prentice-Hall is going to have to consider whether or not to reprint.

Rompkey: But that sale wasn't made from the first print run, was it?

Ringrose: Yes.

Rompkey: They printed 10,000 to start with?

Ringrose: Yes.

Rompkey: If they thought that 1,000 would be doing well, they must have had very high expectations for this book.

Ringrose: I think they did. People at Prentice-Hall who read the book really liked it and supported it. In addition, the Public Legal Information Association of Newfoundland purchased a quantity of them for use in Newfoundland schools, as part of our focus on public education, as a very short-term, one-year education programme. We purchased a number for use in Newfoundland and distributed widely through the library system and the school system here. Of the 10,000, I think 5,000 to 6,000 have been distributed by Prentice-Hall Canada.

Rompkey: Still, that leaves 5,000 copies for the market, which is still pretty extensive.

Ringrose: A very nice success for them and for us.

Rompkey: I guess my original question was, though, why would they have expected to sell 5,000 copies from an unknown author or authors?

Phillips: There was much media coverage at the time on sexual abuse, so in many ways I think we wrote on a timely topic.

Rompkey: A *cause célèbre*. You've said that you printed 10,000 copies and that as of today it's sold out. They will be reprinting, I presume?

Ringrose: We're not sure of that yet. That was a discussion I had with them today, and we're waiting to see what other orders there have been. Prentice-Hall is looking at the school book market to see whether we can get some adoptions in a province or two. We know that it is widely distributed through all the school library systems in the Northwest Territories. I know that Prentice-Hall is attempting to get adoption in one or two provinces where they think there is an opportunity.

Rompkey: But where would the sales have taken place up to this point, if not in school systems? Just through the market?

Ringrose: Through the market place, generally, because the school book sales

have not been large. There have been a hundred copies here and there, with strong sales in Nova Scotia, for example.

Rompkey: So young people must be buying it and reading it on their own.

Ringrose: Apparently so. Yes.

Rompkey: Have you had any response from individual readers or from any part of the public sector at all, including social workers, teachers?

Phillips: We know that the novel is being used as one of the required readings in a number of adolescent literature courses at different universities. It's being used at Memorial University of Newfoundland, McGill, Arizona State, and George Washington University [Washington, D.C.].

Ringrose: I think also at the University of Alberta, because we've had requests from people in rural parts of Alberta for the *Teaching guide* to complete studies in a women's studies course. And it is apparently being used in some universities in Ontario.

Rompkey: What about the individual adolescents, though? Have you had any direct response from them?

Phillips: The novel was tried with several sets of classes, and we've had comments from some kids who've said that it was the first book they had ever read in their entire lives.

Rompkey: Completely? You mean from beginning to end?

Phillips: Yes. I think the topic is of interest to these young people because it is not written in a childish manner. It is written in a way that says, "Here is what we want to tell you." And it's told. Young people get a sense of self-respect from the novel, from the notion that somebody isn't talking down to them. The response has been very positive.

Ringrose: It's been very positive and we have a lot of correspondence from teachers, judges, lawyers, social workers, and some young people.

Rompkey: What kinds of things are *young* readers saying to you in the correspondence?

Ringrose: Linda gave you one reaction. Others have commented to us that the book was too short, and they wanted to know more about the story, and they wanted it to go on, even though it is a little on the long side for young adult fiction at 204 pages. Young adult fiction usually tops out at about 180 pages. So students feel that they need to know more, want to know more; and they are a little dissatisfied that this story ends so soon.

Rompkey: Has anybody written you and said that the book was in some way instrumental in his or her life?

Ringrose: I have heard indirectly that the book has led to several disclosures of abuse, but we have no direct evidence from a student.

Rompkey: I notice that the novel is a Canadian Children's Book Centre Choice. In what year did you receive this distinction?

Phillips: 1990.

Rompkey: The year of publication?

Phillips: Yes.

Rompkey: That's very encouraging. Where do you go from here?

Ringrose: We have played with a number of ideas. We know that Prentice-Hall is anxious to have us submit something else. Time is our biggest constraint.

Phillips: There is no constraint on our ideas, but as Peter says time is our biggest limitation.

Rompkey: I thank you both for this discussion, and I wish you well with your next venture.

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