

# A Postmodern Argument Against Censorship: Negotiating Gender and Sexual Identity through Canadian Young Adult Novels

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**Résumé:** D'après les théories postmodernes, les gens créent leur propre identité en réagissant aux discours culturels qu'ils doivent subir. Les adolescents canadiens étant ainsi soumis à des discours contradictoires sur la sexualité, il devient donc impérieux d'étudier en classe des oeuvres qui contrebalancent ces influences parfois discutables. La lecture de romans de bon aloi, sous la gouverne de professeurs attentifs, permettra donc aux jeunes de définir et d'assumer leur identité sexuelle de façon sereine.

**Summary:** Postmodern theories suggest that meaning is never fixed and constant, and that people are continually creating their own "identities" (their beliefs about themselves, their values, their ways of relating to the world) in interaction with the public and private forms of language which surround them. Canadian teenagers are bombarded by cultural discourses concerning gender, sexuality and violence which may be contradictory, confusing and destructive. Canadian young adult novels studied in school offer alternative discourses which enrich and balance ideas and messages received outside of school. Young people need the freedom to read and study Canadian novels in school in the company of a caring teacher, and in ways which allow them considerable latitude in negotiating and constructing meanings for gender and sexual identity.

## **An Introduction**

The day before I began writing this article, a local murder case became the talk of our town. Two teenage boys (recent graduates of high schools near my university) had been arrested and charged with beating to death a 28-year-old Indian woman. One of the boys was a student in our Faculty of Education, the other the son of a university professor. Needing to think aloud about my emotional response to this event, I spoke at length with a colleague who also works in English Education. We both felt sick and horrified, anxious to sort out and explain to ourselves the complexities of gender, race, class, violence and sexuality that were woven through this case. Because we had both worked with teenagers in English classes, we also spoke about teaching literature. Murder, the heartbreak of death and ruined lives, framed and permeated our discussion of sexuality and censorship in Canadian young adult literature and in Canadian high school classrooms.<sup>1</sup>

Although I have taught high school English, I now work in teacher education. In recent years I have become accustomed to using post-structuralist theories to try to understand the world I live in. I work with notions of the constructed self, trying to understand the multiple cultural discourses that influence and inform my work in preparing teachers of literature and literacy. My argument in this article is framed by certain postmodern assumptions. I will assume a crisis of confidence in western civilization's historical faith in traditional reason and

rationality. I will assume that most teachers no longer feel comfortable telling their students what is “true” and “right.” I will assume that language does not reflect pre-existing meanings, but rather that language is the site where meanings are created. I will assume that meanings, even those embodied in literature, are constantly in flux (Eagleton; Cherland, 1994a).<sup>2</sup>

I will also assume that Canadian teens, like all people, create their identities in interaction with the cultural discourses around them; that these discourses (collections of public and private language, both spoken and written) *create* certain meanings, and embody certain political views (Weedon); I will assume that each person is continually constructing a set of conscious and unconscious thoughts and beliefs, a sense of herself, a way of relating to the world. Finally, I will assume that high-school English classrooms are important sites for these constructions of self, places where teenagers ought to have opportunities to engage with the cultural discourses they encounter in literature; where they can have serious discussions about their lives; where they can work through pain and contradiction, constructing multiple perspectives and understandings of events like the murder I’ve mentioned above. Classrooms should be places where young people feel the horror and anguish of violence, and the joys and complexities of sexuality, and talk about them. They do not need to be protected from exposure to these discourses (indeed, they *cannot* be protected from exposure to them). Instead, they need adult company in engaging them, in considering alternatives, and in battling confusion and despair.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, I want to argue, in postmodern terms, against the censorship of novels in high school English classrooms. This kind of censorship cannot be tolerated, because young people need to encounter in the literature they read at school a wide variety of discourses concerning gender and sexuality and violence. They need to be able to engage with these discourses openly and rigorously, through talk and through reading and writing, in cooperation and in dialogue with an experienced adult reader and cultural critic (their teacher). I fear the consequences if they do not.

And if the construction of identity and the negotiation of meaning are to occur, teachers need to use instructional methods that allow for them. Traditional methods of high school literature study may in fact discourage such work. Teacher lectures, for example, assume that meaning in literature is something fixed that is to be discerned and then transmitted, usually from an adult teacher to a teenage student. Strict teacher control of classroom “discussion” implies that the negotiation of alternative meanings is not welcome. I would suggest that where providing freedom for the negotiation of identity is the goal, processes of instruction which allow students and teachers to construct several possible meanings for gender and sexuality are essential to the success of the enterprise. Fortunately, there are several instructional methods which do.

In this article I will be looking at three Canadian young adult novels, each of which has been the target of censors, each of which presents some meanings for gender and for sexuality<sup>4</sup> that Canadian teens are encountering daily (through films, rock videos, popular magazines, song lyrics, television, and their local newspa-

pers), and other meanings that are for the most part missing from these discourses. I will analyze each novel briefly with regard to gender and sexuality, and then describe instructional approaches which allow students to think about those meanings, to work toward deeper understandings of them, and to construct hope.

## **Part II: Three Novels and Three Teaching Approaches**

### ***Snow Apples* by Mary Razzell (Vancouver: Groundwood Books, 1984)**

Set in 1945 on an island near Vancouver, *Snow Apples* is presented in the first person through the main character, Sheila Brary, age 16. This is the story of Sheila's last year of high school, of her relationship with her mother, of her friendship with a neighbour woman, and of the difficulties she encounters in her emotional and sexual relationship with her boyfriend Nels Bergstrom, the local carpenter's son. In the course of the novel, Sheila battles with her traditional Catholic mother for the opportunity to continue in high school, and decides that she will become a nurse. She also becomes pregnant and, with her father's help, secures an abortion. At the story's end, she leaves home for nursing school in Vancouver.

*Snow Apples* is, from one perspective, a moving, historically-situated portrait of sexism and gender oppression within the family. Both Sheila and her mother struggle with the social forces that limit their lives. Sheila's mother must feed her children and maintain a home for them, although she receives financial help from their father only when he feels like giving it. When she secretly saves enough money from his Air Force family allotment checks to begin to build a house, and registers the land and building in her own name, he becomes angry and abusive. Sheila's mother suffers at her husband's sexual infidelities, and she fears him physically, but knows that she is bound to him by the church and her community's expectations.

It is interesting that Sheila suffers from sexism primarily at the hands of her mother. Today's teens are likely to be familiar with the kind of sexism Sheila endures outside the family, the unwanted sexual attention she receives from employers on her part time jobs, the double standard for sexual behaviour for the girls and boys in her community. But it is her own mother who gives her less to eat than her brothers, who insists that only Sheila leave school in order to take a job that will add to the family's income, who discourages Sheila from spending her own money at the dentist. Mrs. Brary's anger at her own suffering is directed against her daughter Sheila, rather than against her sons. Sheila registers this: "But it was the rage my mother directed against me that was hardest to bear. It was as if I was being pounded by her words, and it got so bad that I couldn't think, couldn't do anything except wish desperately that she would stop" (113).

*Snow Apples* makes gender oppression concrete, and introduces an idea that may or may not be new to Canadian teens in the '90s: Sexism is enacted, not only by the society, but also within the home; and girls may suffer not only at the hands of men, but also at the hands of other women. In a similar way, *Snow Apples* offers concrete examples of the belief that female people are the *victims* of sexuality.

Sheila receives countless warnings from her mother about the dangers of acting on her sexual desires (pregnancy, disgrace, the loss of love). And when Sheila becomes pregnant, disaster does follow. Her boyfriend deserts her, and her fears that she will also lose her home and family and her future seem very real.

*Snow Apples* also offers, however, two discourses which are generally missing from public representations of female sexuality. One is the missing discourse of female desire (Fine). The other is a missing discourse of grief and loss in the aftermath of abortion.

Canadian teens will rarely encounter portraits of female desire as convincing as those offered in this novel. Sheila's passion for Nels is sharp and physical, at times overwhelming, both painful and ecstatic. Razzell presents it as a collage of physical sensation and sensual imagery:

I cried out with pain. But he didn't stop, and then when the pain lessened, I seemed to loosen, become drowsy. Melted with pleasure, mounted up with pleasure. Stayed there, held there. A sense of danger — or excitement — held while I teetered ... and fell. Such a long way down — my head would crack when I hit. Instead I came down into deep soft water that folded over me, rocked me.

I opened my eyes. The trees were black lace against the sky. A full moon lighted up the woods, Nels' face. His eyes were closed, his face peaceful.

After that we forgot about time. I felt the springiness of moss under me and the pressure of twigs digging into my back. Once I noticed the shape of alder leaves, black against the moon. But always there was Nels. The smell of his hair was grass drying in the summer sun ... (104)

In this passage, and in the pages that precede it, Sheila is not a victim of male desire. She is a sexual agent in her own right, and as such her story offers an alternative discourse of female sexuality, one often suppressed by more dominant discourses which deny the existence of female sexual desire, and in doing so serve the society's need to invest female people with responsibility for the *control* of sexual behaviour.

The other missing or alternative discourse offered in *Snow Apples* has to do with the emotional aftermath of abortion. Where else might Canadian teens experience an account of the pain many women feel after making such a "choice," and of the support women can offer each other in these situations?

I wasn't hungry, I wasn't anything. I wanted not to bother, or be bothered, or made to care.

Helga sat beside me at the table and buttered my toast. 'Eat,' she said. It was only the sight of her hard brown hand lying at rest on the spotless cross-stitch tablecloth and that look of hers that was like — love, but simple, without hurt — that made me pick up my knife and fork.

It was grief that was overwhelming me. I hadn't expected it. I thought I would only feel relief. A boy ... somehow I thought it would be a girl. All along it seemed — because it was a problem and not wanted — that it had to be a girl (151).

Canadian teens have available to them a number of conflicting and emotionally charged discourses related to abortion. But it is only in literature, I believe, that they will find abortion portrayed as personal experience. Razzell's inclusion of abortion is, of course, one of the features of *Snow Apples* that has attracted censors. Her character uses abortion in desperation, to save herself and preserve her future, and although she suffers physical and mental anguish through abortion, she

succeeds. This is, of course, an idea anti-abortionist censors wish to suppress.

Here I would like to suggest a two-part instructional approach which supports students in articulating their responses to novels like *Snow Apples*, and which allows them to hear and consider the responses of others: the use of response logs and response circles (Foster). *Response logs* are individual notebooks that students keep while reading in class or at home. Each notebook contains a series of dated entries, made at regular intervals, in which each student jots down "responses" (thoughts, feelings, notes on related ideas, comparisons or connections with other works of literature or with films or videos). The response log, a requirement of the class for which credit is given, then becomes a resource for the student to use in small and large discussion groups with other students. The log can also be a source of ideas for essay topics which are worked out in consultation with the teacher.

Entries in a student's response log for *Snow Apples* might look something like this:

<b>Nov 1:</b>	<i>I wonder why this title? I like the picture of apple blossoms on the cover. The flowers are white, delicate, very pretty. Is that like Sheila, the girl in the story?</i>
<b>Nov. 3:</b>	<i>I hate Mrs. Brary! So mean. But I feel sorry for her too. It must be hard for her to have so many kids to look after and not much money.</i>
<b>Nov. 5:</b>	<i>I like the way Sheila spends her pay check for clothes and some things she wants. It makes her feel good. I feel that way too when I get paid and can go shopping. It's good to make your own choices. I like earning money. But it's more than that. It's good when you get what you need. Sort of like I used to feel when the "Little Princess" comes back to her cold room to find a fire in the grate and supper waiting. Very satisfied, and maybe relieved?</i>

While response logs provide students with a rather private means for working through their reactions to novels like *Snow Apples* (the teacher is the only audience), response circles provide a more public forum for negotiating meaning in the company of others. Students need opportunities to talk with each other about what they read, and what they think and feel as they read. *Response circles* are small groups of students, all of whom have read the same work, all of whom

are willing to share some of their thoughts and responses to it. Response circles are *not* teacher directed, and the teacher need not always be present. They do not require that students write, but the talk that goes on in response circles often supports essay writing because it tends to generate and refine ideas. Students bring their response logs with them to the response circles.

Teachers can keep response logs too, as preparation for class, and participate in response circles with their students. In this way they can serve as models, demonstrating for students ways of thinking about literature, of managing and working through its contradictions. Teachers working beside students in negotiating meaning provide some hope that it can be done, and some evidence that we need not be overwhelmed by life's complexities. Probst believes that in response logs and in response circles students will uncover many more possible meanings for a novel like *Snow Apples* than any one teacher could provide.

***Bad Boy* by Diana Wiener (Toronto, Groundwood Books, 1989)**

*Bad Boy* is set in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, a town that values amateur hockey, the backdrop for this story of teenage friendship, sexuality and violence. The main character, A.J. Brandiosa, is 16. The loneliness of his life as the only child of a divorced father is eased when he makes the local Triple A hockey team. But when he discovers that his best friend and hockey buddy, Tulsa Brown, is gay, A.J. allows his anger and fear to lead to violence on the ice. A.J.'s struggle to identify and define his own sexuality, and to enact his gender in culturally-appropriate ways, is at the heart of this novel.

Mary Harker's analysis of *Bad Boy* provides a thorough discussion of the ways in which Wiener subverts traditional gender assumptions and canonical forms. Here I will simply point out that *Bad Boy* does provide Canadian teens with some views of gender that they will encounter elsewhere in the culture, and some they may not, and it presents them in fresh and vivid ways. *Bad Boy* makes clear the ways in which masculinity is constructed in mainstream culture, the fact that masculinity is enhanced and characterized by violence, and the loneliness of the individuality it requires.

The idea that heterosexuality is *compulsory* in nearly every culture is not a new one (Cucchiari). It has been argued that, for both genders around the world, heterosexuality is rewarded because it is the basis for social organizations built upon kinship systems (Ortner and Whitehead). Failure to comply, failure to be heterosexual, is severely punished because it threatens the social order. Wiener's A.J., whose heterosexual longings are so central in his relationship with Tully's sister, Summer Brown, seems to suffocate with fear that he will be contaminated when his friend's homosexuality is discovered. He fears the consequences of being labeled "gay." This fear, and the revulsion for homosexuality that he has been taught to feel, push A.J. to sever his relationship with his gay friend, a relationship which has been central to his emotional health. A.J. fills the lonely void created by the loss of Tully with the applause and adulation of Treejack and

other boys at school. His violent behaviour in hockey games is something they understand as admirable, and essentially male. This same group of male "friends" does everything possible to encourage A.J. to use and victimize his female friend, Summer Brown. They present a view of masculinity and relationships that Canadian teens will no doubt have encountered elsewhere, because this is one dominant cultural discourse of the 1990s.

A.J.'s belief that homosexuality is an illness is fairly representative of another cultural discourse many teens will have encountered outside of school. Wieler presents this view in sharp contrast with an alternative view of homosexuality, as A.J. and Tully discuss the matter on the phone.

'You can get counseling, Tul. You're seventeen. They wouldn't tell your parents or anything. Just cut him loose and you can get better. I know you can.'

'Look, I know what you're getting at,' Tully said shortly. 'But don't sweat it, okay? You don't know what you're talking about ...'

'Lavalle is bad news!' A.J. insisted.

'He isn't my first lover.'

A.J. stood, his pulse striking his temples like a drum, a bass drum, big and loud and empty.

'What?' he whispered. This was Chicco's all over again, only worse. This time there was no protective layer of doubt.

'You're sick,' A.J. said.

Tully ignited. 'What the hell century do you live in? We're talking about a lifestyle, not a disease.'  
(123)

If these are perspectives that Canadian teens are likely to have encountered elsewhere, what's new in *Bad Boy*? I see in this novel a presentation of casual gay male sexual encounters, and an understanding of how they can occur, that (I believe) Canadian teens are *not* likely to have encountered elsewhere. I also see incidents of male violence from the inside, and, although I cannot condone such violence, I come to understand it better.

Most Canadian teens are aware that casual male homosexual encounters, like heterosexual encounters, can happen entirely apart from love and connection and relationship. Wieler's novel invites understanding of *how* this can happen. Her descriptions of these encounters, like the one that follows, are not voyeuristic, not entirely positive, but they may foster humane insight.

A.J. was wrong. Sex was never a problem for Tully. Sex was a song that started in his head; he could hear it a long time before he was touched. It had rhythm and tone and heat. It started in his head but it sang in his body, and like all good songs, he could lose himself in it. Sometimes it was loud and fast, hard rock driven by raw guitar. Sometimes it was soft and slow, the very last number they played at the prom. Sometimes it was even air-guitar, a dance you danced alone, just for joy.

The problem was when the music stopped. Tully knew that moment. At a school dance or a wedding, there was sometimes a gap between the ending of one song and the beginning of another. You looked around, feeling stupid and shy, painfully aware you were standing with a stranger. (142)

Wieler doesn't condemn, and she doesn't romanticize. Rather, she contributes to a discourse rarely heard, a perspective rarely portrayed. She does this again in her presentations of A.J.'s violent behaviour in hockey games:

He'd only meant to grab him, shake a little sense into him. But when A.J. took hold of the Viking

jersey, the Winger threw his arms around him, a bear hug to stall A.J.'s swing. Panic drove through the boy like a white-hot spear.

Don't touch me! his mind shrieked. His arms shot up, breaking the hold, slamming the winger hard into the boards ...

The winger was struggling, trying to protect his face. But A.J. was strong. His heart was thumping and the adrenaline was singing and he knew he could have lifted the winger off the ice. Easy. As easy as curling five pounds, again and again and again. He couldn't stop. Even when his hand came back wet he couldn't stop. He felt the linesmen pulling at him, no more important than leaves falling off his back. The whole world was the rhythm of his arm and the love song descending from the stands. (115)

A.J.'s violence is not a conscious choice. It fills a need and gives a form of pleasure with a life of its own. As readers experience A.J.'s violence from the inside, they can begin to know its source. In a similar way, it is greatly to Weiler's credit that readers (male and female) can empathize with both A.J. and Summer in their violent sexual encounter at Treejack's party. Again, we view the experience from the inside, through literature, in ways not provided for elsewhere in the culture.

Although response logs and response circles, the methods discussed in connection with *Snow Apples*, would also be useful and helpful with *Bad Boy*, I would like to suggest something different here: *literature study groups*. If response circles emphasize talk about what goes on in a reader's mind, literature study groups emphasize talk about what goes on in an author's text. Students work in mixed, usually teacher-assigned groups, to analyze a specific work of literature. They are asked to work together to examine the ways in which the author has constructed the text, and comment upon the meanings they find there. Students are responsible for identifying specific uses of literary elements in a given work. Often the teacher listens and take notes while a group works, and coaches students as they learn to do literary analysis. The emphasis in a literature study group is on understanding the author's art and craft, and on constructing rich interpretations that are rooted in the text.

A literature study group working with *Bad Boy* might notice, for example, that Weiler makes use of extended metaphor in the passage cited above which describes sex for Tully. Sex was a song. A literature study group could work together to explicate and tease out the possible meanings inherent in this image. How does Weiler bring to a reader's mind the different physical states that music (or sex) can induce? How is it possible to lose oneself in music? What different moods are evoked through this metaphor, and how does Weiler use imagery and the structure of the passage to evoke them? With practice, students working in literature study groups can not only find answers. They will also learn to ask their own literary questions.

Peterson and Eeds provide full and careful explanations of procedures and record-keeping devices for use with literature study groups. I think that these groups are especially valuable in working with a novel like *Bad Boy* because they can lead students to realize that the meanings in a novel are constructed meanings, not transparent truths, and that all media messages, because they are constructed, can also be contested and resisted.



**Two Moons in August** by *Martha Brooks* (Toronto, Groundwood Books, 1991).

Set in 1959 in a small prairie town near a tuberculosis sanitarium, the story of *Two Moons in August* is told in the first person by sixteen-year-old Sidonie Fallows, who is grieving deeply and struggling with loneliness one year after the death of her mother. Her doctor father is lost in his work. Her older sister is absorbed in her relationship with a handsome medical student. Kieran, son of the new doctor in town, is caught up in his own anxieties over his father's violence and his parents' separation. Sidonie, speaking in the present tense, provides the reader with an immediate experience of her emotions as she reaches out to others and works toward healing.

The plot of *Two Moons in August* is structured around the relationships of several different couples. These relationships provide fertile ground for exploring gender roles, constructions of masculinity and femininity, and the role of sexuality in relationships. Sidonie and Kieran must work at establishing a relationship that incorporates and goes beyond mutual sexual attraction. Sidonie's sister Bobbi and her boyfriend Phil, because they are older, in university rather than in high school, and so at a different stage of their lives, must think in terms of lasting commitment, of vulnerability and high stakes risk, and of their place in society as an inter-racial couple. Sidonie, the child of a loving relationship, fears the pain of loss that her father has experienced. Kieran, the child of a violent relationship, fears his own violent impulses. And although the reader sees the violent relationship of Kieran's parents only from a distance and through his eyes, the horror of male violence is conveyed with psychological depth.

Kieran says, 'Sidonie, you're not listening to me. She's going to be in Toronto by herself — with him.'

... 'The last time my mother and father were together he punched her through our glass shower door,' he says in a soft sickened voice, the side of his face, his lips, brushing the screen. 'And there's blood all over the place and he's dragging her out of the bathtub, out through all that glass and she's screaming. She's crying for him to please stop.' He turns completely around to face me. 'He's real big. I've never dared hit him before, but I did hit him, and when he didn't try to stop me I just kept hitting him and hitting him and hitting and hitting until he held me. Oh, God, what's he going to do this time?' (137, 138)

With a few words (glass, blood, punch) Brooks conveys the extent of the danger and the possibility of death. Kieran's mother's helplessness at this moment (signified by her nudity in the bathtub), his father's physical size, his own impulse to respond with violence, his terrible fear, are all here to be experienced.

*Two Moons in August* also presents ideas and themes related to sexuality, some familiar to Canadian teens and some, I suspect, not. One familiar discourse is embodied in Sidonie's repeated worrying about Bobbi and Phil "using each other" to fulfil their sexual desires. Sidonie knows that it is possible they may help themselves to each other's bodies without taking care to be respectful of each other's minds and hearts. Another familiar cultural discourse is presented through the repeated references to love and loss woven through *Two Moons in*

*August*. Sidonie has lost her mother. She's also lost Peter Stafford, a boy killed in a car accident and her first friend at a new school. Phil has lost both his parents. Sidonie fears Bobbi and Phil will lose each other. She worries that Kieran will have to move away. This novel provides teens with ample opportunity to discuss the feelings of vulnerability and risk that accompany caring and commitment in sexual relationships, and to consider them in safe and contextualized ways.

And, like *Snow Apples*, *Two Moons in August* supplies sensitive and vivid contributions to the missing cultural discourse of female desire. Canadian teens are more likely, I think, to encounter cultural discourses which suggest that females are not supposed to feel sexual desire, and that they are wicked and irresponsible when they do. (Many churches, most sex education curricular materials, the remarks of older relatives, are all examples of such discourses.) Brooks, in contrast, provides teens with beautiful and concrete descriptions of female sexual response as it arises in connection with affection and companionship.

He stops on the little overgrown path. Through the leafy trees the sun dances in little spots on his back. I'm close enough to feel the heat rising from his skin through his T-shirt. 'Just keep going,' I tell him.

'Cripes, this is a jungle,' he says, winding along in front of me on the foot-wide trail.

I put my hand on his back to give him a playful push, but it sticks there like a magnet. I can feel his shoulder blades, the muscles tightening across them. 'Just a leaf,' I say, awkwardly brushing off his shirt.

He startles me by turning around, catching my hand between his. I'm laughing, and he spins around again. 'Get up on my shoulders,' he says, looking back.

'What?'

'Yeah, do it.' He crouches down, pats his shoulders.

I climb on, feeling giddy and a little scared. He's so tall, and in addition to being terrified of deep water I am also somewhat nervous of heights.

He lifts me up. 'How's this? Nice view?'

The tree-tops seem to spin all around us.

Looking over the top of his head, I can see this big terrific grin spread all over his face. 'God, you're small,' he says.

'Just follow the path,' I say, laughing. I lock my arms around his face, his chin. I want to bury my face in his warm sweet hair. As we slip down the path he hugs my legs closer down around his body and I feel weak. (83, 84)

How could these perspectives be responded to in individually meaningful ways? In working with a novel like *Two Moons in August*, teachers and students could make excellent use of *dialogue journals*: These are notebooks in which students engage in written literary conversations with the teacher. Students make dated entries in which they respond to what they are reading, but they direct each entry to the teacher (or in some cases to another student in the class), who then writes back in the same notebook. Nancie Atwell's descriptions of dialogue journals, and the support materials she offers, are very helpful to teachers who wish to try them.

Here are examples of student entries in a dialogue journal kept while reading *Two Moons in August*, and of a teacher's responses:

Feb. 10

Dear Ms. C:

*I finished reading Two Moons in August today. I loved it so much I didn't want to be finished with it. Martha Brooks is my favorite author now, and I am going to read her short stories in that Paradise Cafe book you have.*

*I have been thinking a lot about Kieran's mother. I think it was really good she left her husband and got a job in another province like she did. My mother told me that at least three out of ten Canadian women are beaten by the men they live with! My aunt left her first husband for that reason (because he hit her). I would never stay with a man who hit me. But you know what bothers me? Why did Kieran's mother wait so long, until he was a teenager, before she escaped? What do you think?*

*Your friend,  
Andrea*

Feb. 11

Dear Andrea,

*Thanks for your letter about Two Moons in August. Why do I think Kieran's mother waited so long to leave her violent husband? Well, we readers can only guess. But Brooks does give us a few clues. Remember when Kieran says that things were all right when he was little? Maybe the violence didn't start till he was older. And remember how lonely Kieran is when he first arrives in Sidonie's town? All his friends and relatives are back in Ontario. Think how hard it must have been for Kieran and his mother to leave the place that had always been their home. Maybe there are other clues too about why she stayed so long. Let's (both of us) keep thinking about it.*

*Your friend,  
Ms. C.*

Feb. 15

Dear Ms. C:

*Now I am starting to read Snow Apples. It's OK, but I don't like Sheila as much as I liked Sidonie. I'm not sure why.*

*Your friend,  
Andrea*

Feb. 16

Dear Andrea:

*I think the reasons you like Sidonie more than you like Sheila may be rooted in style. Think about point of view. How is each of the girls presented to the reader?*

*Your friend,  
Ms. C.*

Feb. 16

Dear Ms. C:

*Do you mean that Sidonie speaks right to me, and so I feel like I know her better and I like her more? And that I am reading about Sheila sort of from a distance? So I feel like I maybe don't know her as well?*

*Your friend,  
Andrea*

I would suggest that dialogue journals work like response logs to allow students to express the feelings and ideas that arise in connection with a literary work. But they also allow students to do some individual analysis of a text, and to ask questions and express concerns. Dialogue journals provide the teacher with a means for engaging in thoughtful and private conversation with the student, for addressing matters that are meaningful to that individual, and for establishing a supportive relationship in which meanings can be negotiated in trust.

### Conclusion

I have mentioned only three novels, but there are, of course, many other Canadian young adult novels which contribute to the cultural discourses surrounding gender and sexuality and violence. Kevin Major's *Far from Shore* suggests that alcohol interferes in heterosexual relations, and that male people face issues of self-confidence, anxiety and hesitancy in establishing sexual relationships. Bernice Culleton's *April Raintree* explores the intersection of race and gender oppression, and supplies a terrifying depiction of the experience of rape. I have argued against censorship and for the presence of these novels in high school English classrooms, suggesting that teenagers growing up in postmodern times have a right to encounter the widest possible array of conflicting cultural discourses, and to negotiate the construction of gender and their own sexuality there in the company of a caring adult.

I have tried to suggest that, like concerned parents, like committed librarians, many high school teachers are in the business of battling moral lethargy, confusion and despair. In English and Social Studies classrooms especially, and in the school library where there is a place for their literature, Canadian teenagers can accept an adult's invitation to work together to find meaning in life, and hope for the future.

I will conclude by returning to a point I made briefly at the beginning of this article: I fear the consequences of denying teenagers free access to the discourses of literature, and the opportunities to confront them in school. I worry that the subtleties of our cultural constructions of gender and sexuality, the positive and humane aspects of our cultural beliefs, and a rich variety of cultural perspectives will not be discernible in the flash and flow of media surrounding teenagers outside of school. Faced with the task of creating their own sexual identities, and denied a full range of possibilities, what might they become?

The stakes are high. I am thinking of the two local boys I mentioned in my opening paragraph, who (I believe) negotiated their sexual identities outside of school and in a world without literature. Children of my community, they have grown up to be capable of rape and murder, and I am sick and ashamed. I don't mean to imply that a lack of literature is the cause of all their problems. I do mean to say that they did not have its help. We (the adults of my community) must do better.

### NOTES

- 1 I thank my colleague Dr. Jim Greenlaw for this stimulating and inspiring conversation, and for the suggestion that I write this article.
- 2 While these views are certainly postmodern, what is not postmodern about my argument is an

emphasis on hope.

I think that other kinds of arguments against (and in favour of!) censorship make different assumptions. Many assume, for example, the existence of a unified, rational, and essential "self" which either can or cannot resist the evil (or the good) embodied in books.

- 3 I don't want to be naive about the role of the teacher here. The teacher's gender and sexual identity will certainly be a factor in classroom engagements with these discourses. It will make a difference if the teacher serving as the adult companion is a 27-year-old Caucasian male or a 45-year-old Chinese-Canadian female. The teacher's sexual identity and beliefs may well be problematic for some students, and for the teacher herself. At best, the kind of classroom interaction envisioned in this article provides chances for the teacher, too, to engage with cultural discourses and negotiate his or her sexual identity in the company of others.
- 4 I use both terms because I have different meanings for "gender" and for "sexuality". "Gender" is a compulsory social identity, a category to which a person is assigned at birth (like "race" or "class"). Gender is something people must learn to "do" in all the activities of their daily lives (West and Zimmerman, 1987). "Sexuality", on the other hand, has to do with the physical and emotional desires an individual develops and acquires and constructs, and with the ways in which he or she comes to act in order to satisfy those desires. I believe that the expression of sexuality is shaped and constrained by gender. (See Cherland, 1994b, for a more complete explanation of these ideas.)

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