

# Review Articles & Reviews / Critiques et comptes rendus

## IT'S THE FIRST TIME: FOUR POINTS OF VIEW



**The First Time: True Stories.** Vol. 1. Ed. Charles Montpetit. Orca Book Publishers, 1995. 150 pp., \$7.95 paper. ISBN 1-55143-037-1.

**The First Time: True Stories.** Vol. 2. Ed. Charles Montpetit. Orca Book Publishers, 1995. 135 pp., \$7.95 paper. ISBN 1-55143-039-8.

Charles Montpetit's two-volume collection of "true" first time sexual experiences combines the talents of some of Canada's best young adult writers — writers as diverse as Budge Wilson, Brian Doyle, Mary Blakesee, Deirdre Kessler, Martyn Godfrey and Julie Lawson — with the delightful audacity of a straight-talking no-holds-barred approach to sexuality and sexual experience. The high quality of the writing alone makes *The First Time* particularly satisfying reading. There are also some wonderful surprises — W.P. Kinsella wouldn't have been an obvious choice for me, but he has created a piece that works well in this collection. The

cartooning talents of Leanne Franson are equally refreshing and will delight readers of all ages.

Montpetit is to be especially commended for the originality of his concept and for "translating" his original French-language idea into an English-language version. Indeed, it is the strength of Montpetit's individual presence that makes *The First Time* so inviting. He has created an authorial voice which is carried throughout the two volumes from his thoughtful opening introductions to *The First Time* to the individual introductions to each story and he radiates an easy approachability. Montpetit definitely wants to talk to — not down to — teens about first time sexual experiences. It's Charles Montpetit's premise that it's not as easy to talk about sex as it should be, nor to find the right atmosphere to comfortably share sexual experiences without being merely titillating.

These "true" stories are, however, sometimes presented as autobiography

while at other times the truth has been encased in a fictional format. It's not always easy to tell which is which and — in this instance alone — Montpetit doesn't guide the reader. I found the constant reminders that these stories are "true" — implying that they are not fictional, but sometimes told as fictions — a little disconcerting. I'm willing as an adult reader, familiar with the majority of these authors, to believe Montpetit. But even I approached the "true" definition with a grain of salt.

And that for me is the problem with *The First Time*. We have a wonderful diversity of approaches to talking about and understanding sexual experiences, written by creative writers who have been able to fully convey the emotional depths of first time sexual experiences, BUT despite my own enjoyment as an adult in reading *The First Time*, I'm not sure that teens will really pick up these books on their own. Nor am I convinced that teen readers will really care to hear about the first time sexual experiences of our best young adult writers. Television and movie stars, athletes and rock musicians maybe — but young adult writers? Inviting book covers aside, will these two volumes of *The First Time* not have to be pushed into the hands of teens? Teachers, librarians, parents and anyone concerned about teenage sexuality will find lots of jumping-off points for discussion in *The First Time*, but will the audience to whom Montpetit has really directed his attention find them?

**Jeffrey Canton** is Program Coordinator at The Canadian Children's Book Centre. As a reviewer he is best known as a member of CBC radio's Fresh Air Book Club. His work has also been published in Xtra! Quill and Quire and Paragraph.

Judy Blume's 1975 *Forever*, the "explicit" story of a high school girl's first sexual experience, likely holds the record for being the most censored book in English-Canadian schools. However, *Forever's* notoriety will undoubtedly soon be challenged by the two volumes of *The First Time*. The books' editor, Governor General's Award-winning YA author Charles Montpetit, will certainly not be surprised by any censorship because his initial treatment of the subject, *La Première Fois* (1991), met adult resistance, an experience Montpetit described for CCL in "Book banning: A how-to guide for beginners" (issue 68).

Montpetit speaks to his intended audience in the same fashion as the "Degrassi Talks" titles *Sex* and *Sexuality* addressed adolescents — directly and in their own terms. Eschewing nonfiction's traditional "Introduction," Montpetit instead utilizes a "Precautions" section in which he explains why he has produced these two sets of books about real-life, first-time sexual experiences. Montpetit argues that school sex-ed programs may deal with the mechanics of sex, but the cautious, desexualized approach adopted by, or forced upon, teachers does not respond to the real questions students have: how does one get there in the first place; what does the experience feel like; and what kind of impression will be left behind?

The books' contents are, therefore, intended to respond to these questions. *The First Time* largely repeats the format of *La Première Fois*: each volume has

eight stories, four by males and four by females, and one of the sixteen pieces is presented in cartoon format. With the exception of Montpetit's "White on white," a translation of his "Blanc sur blanc" from volume II of *La Première Fois*, the remaining entries are original. Volume II concludes with "A Special Invitation," a call for readers to consider becoming contributors for a projected third tome.

Montpetit, while leaving the definition of a "first time" to the individual, requires that "it must be a significant step in one's sexual awakening." Though most of the writers have interpreted "first time" to mean "losing one's virginity," other understandings are proffered. For example, Franson's "Impeccable taste" and Paw's "The gunshot" both deal with discovering one's gender preference in sex partners whereas Golick's "The only first time Rachel counts" sees sexually-experienced Rachel equating her first time with her eventual first orgasm. In Stephens' "Borders," being repeatedly raped as a child was the narrator's initial sexual experience. Given that the collection is a compilation, it is likely only happenstance that the conclusions of the first encounters are split almost equally between being positive and negative. As the stories' events occurred at various times over the last five decades, today's teens may recognize some seemingly ongoing adolescent "concerns," such as finding a safe place to do "it" away from unexpectedly appearing parents.

If *The First Time* has a weakness, it is that Montpetit ignores other significant questions related to teens and sex. In closing his "Precautions," Montpetit states, "No matter how preoccupied we may be with our society's problems, love should never be too sensitive a subject for discussion." "Love" and "sex," however, are not synonymous terms, and discovering the differences between the two is another important adolescent developmental task, especially when variations of that old line, "If you loved me, you would ..." are still successfully trotted out in the '90s.

While teens may initially gallop through *The First Time* looking for the largely absent "naughty bits," a slower, more thoughtful reading will fill in for them some of the gaps that their parents and/or the school system are unwilling to address. Undoubtedly, the biggest challenge facing *The First Time*'s two volumes will be their reaching the hands of the intended adolescent readers because many adult book selectors in schools, upon hearing about the works' contents, will simply avoid "problems" by practising that most silent of censorship's many forms and deliberately not purchase them. Hopefully, book stores, both independent and chain, will fill the gap.

**Dave Jenkinson** teaches courses in children's and adolescent literature in the Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba. For the last decade, Dave has authored the "Portraits" section of *Emergency Librarian*.

*The First Time* is a collection of short stories that examine, with varying degrees of success, first sexual experiences. Reading these stories for my own personal interest, I found them fresh and highly readable. As a teacher, however, I approached them more cautiously and critically.

Adolescents and teenagers are clearly included as part of the intended audience of this anthology. In his introduction, Montpetit states that 26% of Grade Nine students have already had a first sexual experience. In an age of sexually charged media, highly publicized cases of abuse, and the ominous shadow of AIDS, there is a need to explore the natural, emotional side of sex.

This need is partly filled as the authors examine a number of different situations. Older and younger narrators describe, from the perspectives of both sexes, heterosexual and homosexual relationships. How do teenage readers respond to the successes and problems encountered in these stories? All teenagers are interested in sex. They are also highly critical of adults or authority figures who try to appropriate the teenage voice. Some authors failed to present believable teenage characters in their stories. Mary Blakeslee, the author of "Bump and Grind," is too earnest in her attempt to portray a young girl's longing for a sexual liaison at a Rehab centre. The narration appears stiff and dated. Other stories are in danger of becoming confessionals. Brian Doyle's "Recorder Lesson" verges on this trap. However, the author manages to avoid it through his use of humour. Indeed, the most convincing writings in the collection are those that incorporate humour into their storylines. Martyn Godfrey, in "You owe me a Big Mac," couples humour with touching honesty to describe his character's eagerness and ineptitude. Other stories of interest are those that examine how close relationships are indirectly affected by sexual experience. Budge Wilson's story, "Questions and answers" traces the development of a mother/daughter relationship as the mother remembers her own "first time." Wilson encourages teenagers to look beyond the immediate physical gratification to the emotional long-term effects of a first sexual encounter.

Despite some problems, *The First Time* succeeds in filling a need for exploring the emotional side of sexual experience. The mainstream classroom would likely not be an appropriate setting in which to introduce this work. A majority of Grade Nines still are not sexually active, and counsellors I spoke to fear "normalizing" sexual experience before teenagers are ready. However, in settings such as Guidance offices, school awareness groups, or even Sex Ed. classes, *The First Time* would serve to humanize sex for teenagers.

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**Summary:** Though *The First Time* shares many striking similarities with *La Première Fois*, one cannot but notice a fundamental difference between the English and the French stories: the young heroes from *La Première Fois*, no matter their age or their milieu, remain autonomous figures, self-defined, and freed from parental and social values — in short, self-assuming adults — whereas the heroes from *The First Time*, even when they challenge moral standards, tend to remain respectful of parents or other forms of authority — in other words, the subtext suggests that adolescents absorb dominant social values.

Fort du succès et de la controverse qui ont marqué l'édition originale de son recueil *la Première Fois*, Charles Montpetit tente de reproduire son coup d'éclat au Canada (anglais), c'est-à-dire de présenter un ensemble de récits traitant de la première expérience sexuelle "complète", celle qu'a vécue chaque écrivain

“*canadian*” qui a bien voulu collaborer à cette entreprise. Cependant, comme pour l’édition québécoise, les participants pouvaient conter l’expérience intime d’un être proche à condition que ce fût une “histoire vécue”. D’où la prétention à l’authenticité absolue de la part de l’éditeur.

Deux questions surgiront immédiatement à l’esprit du lecteur francophone: 1) dans quelle mesure le second recueil peut-il reproduire le premier? 2) et, dans ces difficiles lendemains référendaires, peut-on percevoir une différence essentielle, indice d’une identité culturelle spécifique? Deux questions précises, donc, avec, en toile de fond, l’adage d’Horace pour qui la répétition est une des composantes essentielles de l’oeuvre littéraire: qu’on se souvienne du *bis repetita placent* des pages roses du Larousse!

Tout d’abord, les ressemblances semblent l’emporter: d’une part, la présentation reproduit de manière rigoureuse le protocole de l’édition québécoise puisque la préface, les notices biographiques, la note liminaire du second volume et l’appel de la postface aux lecteurs-écrivains sont ou traduits de l’original ou fidèles au style familier et à l’attitude décontractée du présentateur; d’autre part, la multiplicité des expériences, la variété des formes narratives et la sensibilité à l’égard de l’orientation sexuelle participent du même esprit. Il serait facile de souligner les nombreux rapports de similarité: chaque édition contient un récit en bandes dessinées, une histoire se passant à l’étranger (au texte très chaste du Camerounais Polycarpe Ambé-Niba répond le récit très explicite, voire médical, de la Jamaïcaine Linda M. Brisset), un témoignage traitant d’un cas-limite (à l’amour violent et autodestructeur de Lérie Labrosse correspond le cri de l’enfant violé de Martin Stephens), sans compter les similitudes au second degré: par exemple, l’éloignement spatial et le dépaysement culturel qu’offrent les récits “franco-français” d’Élisabeth Vonarburg et de Jacques Pasquet rejoignent en quelque sorte l’éloignement dans le temps des histoires des années 40 et 50 que nous livrent Budge Wilson, Brian Doyle et W.P. Kinsella. Par ailleurs, il serait fascinant d’établir, pour chaque édition, un tableau comparatif des expériences, des formes narratives et du registre stylistique de la sincérité en fonction du “sexe” de l’écrivain. Ni le Québec, ni le Canada n’ignorent l’homosexualité, l’éventail des pratiques sexuelles, les embûches des précautions prophylactiques; en outre, les auteurs canadiens et québécois, couvrent la gamme des niveaux de langue, du familier au littéraire, et, en ce qui concerne l’acte sexuel, savent recourir à tous les degrés stylistiques, de la pudeur à la précision médicale, de l’euphémisme à la franchise la plus explicite. Pourtant, ces parallélismes, qui feraient plaisir aux ténors du fédéralisme pour lesquels n’existent au Canada qu’une seule nation et qu’une seule culture, ne tiennent pas devant un examen plus poussé du texte.

En effet, une différence fondamentale se perçoit bientôt et une certaine malaise s’installe chez le lecteur, même bienveillant, lorsqu’il s’arrête au seul texte commun aux deux éditions: *Blanc sur Blanc/White on White* de Charles Montpetit. A l’urbanité de ce récit, à ce qu’on doit appeler, faute de mieux, sa “montréalité”, s’oppose la ruralité profonde des textes canadiens; face à son amoralité ou, ce qui est plus juste, à sa maturité, se dressent, même dans les textes “*canadian*” les plus francs, une espèce de rectitude morale et un sentiment de

dépendance ou de soumission à l'égard des générations précédentes et du milieu social. Ce qui frappe, à cet égard, dans les récits québécois, c'est bien l'autonomie des jeunes par rapport aux adultes: peu importe qu'ils vivent chez leurs parents ou non, peu importe même que ces derniers s'opposent ou non à leur désir d'affranchissement, l'adolescent(e) québécois(e) est déjà un être pleinement autonome qui se montre capable d'assumer son choix et de vivre sa différence. Se sentant moins tourmenté et moins coupable malgré les états de crise qu'il peut traverser, il vit déjà comme un adulte. Quant aux malheureux parents qui osent tenir tête à cette poussée d'indépendance, comme la mère inquisitrice de Louise Lévesque, la fausse "maman Plouffe" de Reynald Cantin et le père, professeur de catéchèse et dernier des Mohicans à la Mauriac, de Lucie Papineau, ils ne peuvent que se voir discrédités et se rendre à l'évidence: leur enfant est un être plein et entier, bref, leur égal. La jeune fille handicapée de Michèle Marcoux, qui obtient sans résistance la permission de faire l'amour dans sa chambre même lorsque la famille est présente, serait impensable dans les textes canadiens. Ainsi, malgré les couvertures plus commerciales, plus invitantes et plus franches de l'édition canadienne (la main de la jeune fille qui sonde le pantalon ouvert du petit ami; la main de l'adolescent qui dégage le soutien-gorge de la petite amie), qui nous feront regretter la richesse symbolique et la tendresse un peu mélancolique de l'édition québécoise, malgré la redoutable efficacité de la bande dessinée de Leanne Franson, dont le graphisme approximatif et l'humour doux-amerrappellent, en plus feutré, la *Dirty Plotte* de Julie Doucet, (est-ce un hasard que cette histoire d'initiation à l'identité lesbienne, pleine de drôlerie et se jouant admirablement de la rectitude politique, se passe à Montréal?) et malgré la très haute tenue littéraire de la majorité des récits, on ne saurait oublier l'édition originale.

Car la nouvelle entreprise de Charles Montpetit mérite d'être connue (et reconnue) au Québec: la valeur exceptionnelle de certains textes, l'ampleur et la variété des contributions font de ce recueil, *The First Time*, une excellente introduction à la connaissance d'une littérature étrangère, la littérature canadienne.

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#### COMING OF AGE IN CANADA AND THE U.S.

**Changes in You and Me: A Book about Puberty Mostly for Girls.** ISBN 0-921051-95-6. **Changes in You and Me: A Book about Puberty Mostly for Boys.** ISBN 0-021051-03-X. Paulette Bourgeois and Martin Wolfish, M.D. Illus. Louise Phillips and Kam Yu. Public Health consultant Kim Martyn. Somerville House Books, 1994. 64 pp., \$14.95 paper. **It's Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex, and Sexual Health.** Robie H. Harris. Illus. Michael Emberley. Candlewick Press, 1994. 89 pp., \$24.95 cloth. ISBN 1-56402-199-8.

Most of us will recall sneaking books out of the library about sex and human anatomy that were so carefully oblique or scientific that they only served to confuse us further. Talking with peers, and little or no sex education didn't help.