

# One Proud Summer: Reading Politics to Marie-Nicole

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• Ruth Bradley-St-Cyr •

*Résumé:* C'est la famille et non l'école qui initie les enfants aux rudiments de la politique. Et l'apprentissage sera plus difficile si les valeurs politiques que les parents cherchent à inculquer ne sont pas celles de la majorité. Des oeuvres comme **One Proud Summer** peuvent cependant apporter une aide précieuse à ces parents désireux de sensibiliser les enfants aux problèmes politiques. En effet, les enfants ont une prédisposition à la politique puisqu'ils doivent, dans la vie quotidienne, établir une distinction fondamentale entre ce qui est juste et ce qui ne l'est pas.

*Summary:* Children do not get taught any real politics in school so any politics they are transmitted must come from parents. Parents have an uphill battle to fight if the politics they want their children to inherit differ in any significant way from the mainstream. Books like **One Proud Summer** are an important contribution to this struggle for a political education. Children do, in fact, have an aptitude for learning politics since the basic concept of what is fair and what is unfair is one that they grapple with themselves every day.

It wasn't that long ago that I decided it was finally time to start teaching my kids about politics — not national politics, although I did drag my eldest daughter on a tour of the Parliament buildings when we were in Ottawa last December. She found it boring, of course. She was really only interested in the "royal" furniture of the House of Commons and the Senate. I found it boring too, because I knew more about politics than our tour guide and so kept jumping in to help answer questions (**Question:** How often does the Senate overturn a bill? **Guide's Answer:** Gee, I dunno. That's a good question. **Ruth's Answer:** Not very often — about once every ten years. The most notable occurrence was in January 1991 when the senate overturned the new abortion law; we haven't had an abortion law since).

But politics is not about laws so much as it is about who lives, who

dies, who feeds at the trough, and who gets shafted. So it was while we were in the supermarket choosing ice cream that I decided it was time to teach them about politics. For quite a while I had put off telling them about the Nestlé boycott, child labour, starvation . . . in fact any issue of social justice, because I did not want to burst their magical childhood bubbles wherein they believe everything is possible (Santa, the tooth fairy, the Easter bunny, justice, etc.) and that the world is meant to be an essentially fair place, unfairness being the aberration. I didn't really want them to know that all those Barbies they keep getting for birthday presents are made in sweatshops in China, or that Smarties might have anything to do with babies dying from formula use in the developing world. But the moment of truth had come in the supermarket that day, as they were about to choose a Nestlé brand of ice cream.

It was with some hesitation, then, that I started to try to explain it to my children: "See the red oval with the word Nestlé in it?" I said. "We don't buy from that company because they sell baby formula in poor countries and lots of babies die because of it." They did not appear overtly horrified by this, but they were interested and asked more questions. Because fairness is one of the main issues that children grapple with on a daily basis, they immediately understood the issue in those terms — no, we don't want to send money to a company that has harmful business practices because it's not fair. They also understood that by recognizing the Nestlé logo they could do something to help those babies. It's a pretty powerful lesson when you think about it — our choice of ice cream has a life-and-death impact on the other side of the globe.

It is a parent's instinct to want to protect our children, but how best to protect them? We don't want to scare the pants off them when we "street proof" them. The aim is just to give them the information and the tools they need to protect themselves. It is the same with politics. They need to know where the major injustices of the world lie and how to deal with them. If we don't teach them how to deal with these, then they will likely grow up thinking that there is nothing they can change. It is in the best interests of the powerful to have most people think of politics as a big, scary, complicated machine that we can't touch because we'll break something. Current discourse about the "absolute necessity" of cutbacks, challenged by Linda McQuaig in *Shooting the Hippo*, is a clear example of this. Just as clear — in opposition to recent WTO and NAFTA trade meetings, for example — is that there are still people who do not buy into the "helpless" discourse we are spoon-fed.

Having succeeded with my first lesson, I decided that it was indeed time to take the political education of my children in hand. They will not get any formal political education until high school, and by the time they get there all politics courses may well have been transformed into "life skills"

courses so that they will be taught to fill out their income taxes properly to keep the wheels of government oiled. When I went to high school we learned about Watergate in our politics class, but truth and ethics have become so relative since then.

School history lessons are also unlikely to include any politics. This year in Grade four our now ten-year-old daughter Marie-Nicole is studying the Middle Ages, not by looking at the feudal system, of course, but at what people ate at banquets. The recently revised Ontario history curriculum does not seem to include any labour history or class-consciousness. I wonder why?

I was also concerned about Marie-Nicole because most of her school marks are average but she does have one outstanding quality — she gets her highest marks for following school rules. Where is our next generation of activists going to come from? She's not a likely candidate at this point to spearhead a sit-down strike for more school resources.

The next lesson was decided by my husband the night he brought home a movie called *The Replacements* to watch with Marie-Nicole and me. "You'll like it," he said jokingly. "It's about a union." Not. *The Replacements* is about a scab football team, assembled by management to cross the regular players' picket line during a strike. All audience emotion is directed for the scabs and against the union. This wasn't the lesson I wanted my daughter to have about collective workplace action.

Fortunately Marie-Nicole, who doesn't like reading, still loves to be read to. I brought home a young-adult novel from work (Women's Press) called *One Proud Summer* by Marsha Hewitt and Claire Mackay. The book is about the 1946 strike in Valleyfield, Quebec, against Montreal Cottons. The protagonist is thirteen-year-old Lucie Laplante who has to quit school to work in the mill after her father is killed in an industrial accident there. This is an historic Canadian strike and is the event that first brought attention to Quebec feminist and union activist Madeleine Parent.

The story is unashamedly pro-union — refreshingly so, in fact. A good antidote to the politics of *The Replacements* certainly. I've read Marie-Nicole lots of stories over her ten years but I've never seen her so excited about a book. We'd read a chapter or two a day and she'd say "Again, again," begging for more. It was a good experience for both of us because I would stop and explain things to her, which she seemed to appreciate, saying, "I got to learn stuff like what's a union and lots of other words." When I asked her what her favourite part was she replied "it was all my favourite part."

I'm pretty sure a big part of the reason she loved the story is because it was told from the point of view of a protagonist she could clearly identify with. Marie-Nicole has never gone out by herself, not even to the corner store,

except to walk two blocks to visit her cousin. I keep telling her that she is old enough but she does not yet believe me. She says, "I liked the book because it was cool that a girl as old as thirteen would be allowed to go on strike." The self-determination of the main character was obviously more important to her than the fact that she "should not have been working at that age." The child-labour issue did not seem to bother Marie-Nicole at all, but since she is not particularly fond of school, I shouldn't find that surprising, I guess.

In fact, it reminds me of the Cuban *en campo* (in the country) school system where kids in the middle and upper grades do serious academics but also work part of the day on an on-site farm or factory. Is this child labour or is it akin to our co-op programs that "prepare kids for the workplace"? The labour of those students has a measurable impact on the Cuban GNP. I'm sure that gives them a sense of self-reliance and accomplishment that our school system is not particularly famous for. When reading, writing and arithmetic are stressed to the exclusion of all else, it is kids like Marie-Nicole, who has high marks in art and drama, or kids who have other talents that may not be reflected in their report cards at all, who find that school leaves them cold.

Marie-Nicole says she already knew something about strikes before we read the book: "that the people who are doing it don't work and they have posters and they try to get whatever they are trying to get to be fair." What she did not already know is "that it was dangerous." Police presence was extremely heavy in the Valleyfield strike and tear gas was used at least twice against the strikers. Marie-Nicole says that "was wrong because it could make someone blind and the police were being scabs."

Lucie, on the other hand, "was brave" in standing up for the union. In one scene, after hundreds of scabs are marched into the factory by police, the strikers "boil over" and start breaking factory windows. The police then throw out tear gas canisters. As this is the second time tear gas is used, the strikers have become savvy, and instead of dispersing, they pick up the canisters and hurl them through the broken windows. Pretty soon a white flag is seen waving from one of the factory windows. Yeah!

The fact that *One Proud Summer* is an intergenerational story also made it interesting for us to read together. Lucie's mother, Germaine, is another central character to the story. At first she did not welcome the strike and seemed to be against it. As Marie-Nicole says, Lucie's mother "was silent before and then she became loud to stand up for the union. Her husband died at the factory and now her daughter had to work and she's only thirteen. She was standing up for her family too."

My favourite character, however, is Lucie's grandmother, Monique Châtel, whom Marie-Nicole describes as "brave and old." It is through her mouth that much of the pro-union politics is delivered, combating the stere-

otype that old people are apolitical (as they are asexual). Monique, the veteran of previous strikes, is spunky and uncompromising, willing even to take on the priest, who, according to Marie-Nicole, "gets over-tempered about the strike because he thought that having a strike was wrong." The issue here is that the previous Catholic Workers Union (described as being completely gutless) has been replaced by the United Textile Workers of America.

Monique's politics are etched by hard experience: "... sometimes we lose. When a gang of thugs is sent to beat us up, yes, we lose. When a young man who marched with you on the picket line, who sat beside you at mass on Sundays, is shot down before your eyes and his blood gushes into the street, yes, we lose then, too. When the company shuts its doors because of the depression in the cotton industry, and the looms are silent week after week, and the sky is clean of smoke month after month, and there first is no meat, and then no milk, and then no bread, yes, then we lose.... But we win something, too, every time. Every time, when we forget our fear and fight back, when we turn off the switches and go on strike, we win something. Our self-respect, that's what we win. If we lose a hundred times, it's still worth fighting again, it's always worth fighting, for ourselves and for our children. And for our grandchildren" (34-35).

Marie-Nicole says, "I think that it was good that they [the strikers] did what they did because they were treated unfairly." The different types of unfairness she spotted were that women should be paid the same as the men, that the bosses should not play favourites or use "bad words" or yell at the workers. A bad boss is in itself unfair according to Marie-Nicole — "MacGregor was an unfairness" — because he was "scaring people and Emilie [another worker who was sexually harassed by MacGregor] was scared of losing her job."

Anti-union rhetoric, especially during an active strike, will continue in our society as sure as night follows day. People will still be encouraged to complain about their own personal inconvenience that a strike may cause rather than looking to the collective importance of fighting for the issues involved. Divide and conquer. But at least Marie-Nicole now has the information and some of the tools she needs to combat this. She has another opportunity to learn more now that her uncle, a school support worker, is on strike against the Toronto District School Board with CUPE local 4400 [spring 2001].

And another thing Marie-Nicole says she learned from *One Proud Summer* was "that in Quebec they speak English and French." She thought they only spoke French and "Quebecan" (Quebecois). "What's the difference between French and Quebecois?" I ask. "In Quebec they put in an accent," she says. I find this odd because she herself is French Canadian and goes to a French language school in Toronto.

I feel another lesson in politics coming on. I just wonder where I'm going to find a book that's accessible to her that would support that lesson.

### Notes

- 1 *One Proud Summer* by Marsha Hewitt and Claire Mackay was published by Women's Press in 1981. It is available through University of Toronto Press Distribution, ISBN 0-88961-048-7. *One Proud Summer* is in its 4th printing with over 10,000 copies sold. It is a Canadian Children's Book Centre Selection and winner of the Ruth Schwartz Award for Children's Literature.

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