

“The Ice Is Its Own Argument”: A Canadian Critic Takes a Second Look at *Bad Boy* and Her Own Modest Ambitions

• Sue Easun •

Résumé: L'auteur recourt à la théorie de Margaret Atwood développée dans *Survival* afin de renouveler la lecture du roman de Diana Wieler, *Bad Boy*. Elle compare les résultats de son analyse aux interprétations de ses collègues universitaires Mary J. Harker et Perry Nodelman et conclut que "lorsqu'on examine ce qui constitue une littérature, l'on doit étudier concurremment les auteurs et leurs exégètes".

Summary: The author uses Margaret Atwood's theories to see whether she can discover something new in Diana Wieler's *Bad Boy*, and does. She compares her findings with fellow academics Mary J. Harker and Perry Nodelman, and concludes that "when one considers what constitutes a literature, one must study the critics along with the authors."

... criticism of performances in research, as in art, requires the application of standards or criteria of good performance, and insiders' standards and criteria are not the only ones available. More carefully, criticism is an exercise of taste: intellectual taste in the case of research, artistic taste in the case of works of art. Poets and composers no doubt feel that only they are qualified to judge their own works and those of their fellow artists; they believe the taste of professional critics is flawed and distrust it. [But] we reject their claims ... We do not admit that only a poet can judge poetry. (Wilson 110)

Four years ago, I wrote a short piece called "The 'dark background': a note on violence in Canadian children's literature," which looked at a single novel, Diana Wieler's *Bad Boy*, in the light of *Survival*, Margaret Atwood's commentary on the Canadian penchant for victimization. Since that time, two more articles on *Bad Boy* have appeared, by Mary Harker and Perry Nodelman; and *Survival* has been joined by Atwood's latest take on our literary sensibilities, *Strange Things*. I found myself beginning to wonder what we five — Atwood, Harker, Nodelman, Wieler and myself — might have to say to one another and, more to the point, whether my own critical sensibilities had changed in any significant way. This article is the story of my musings; its purpose is to reconsider the arguments set forth by Harker, Nodelman and myself in light of Atwood's latest critical foray, to extend the analysis to include observations on my own

development as a critic, and to offer my opinion on what characterizes us as Canadian.

Let us begin with Atwood's excursion into what she subtitled the "malevolent North." *Strange Things* consists of four invitational lectures, delivered by Atwood at Oxford University. These lectures in turn form part of a series, which she likens to a "half-way house between the non-specialist public and the ivory tower" (1). Her choice of topic, appropriately enough, is Canadian literature, an area "almost completely *terra incognita*" to a "certain kind of literary Englishperson," (which, she carefully points out, does not include "the Scots, Welsh, or Irish, nor ... the ordinary reader" (2).

Atwood's desire to establish her credentials, both early and emphatically, is completely understandable, and strongly resembles her preface to *Survival*, in which she describes herself as a "writer rather than an academic or an expert" (11). What intrigues me, however, is the manner in which she establishes those credentials. There is no question she knows how to please her audience's palate, and dishes out deference, wit, and acumen with culinary flair. But Atwood's deference is as deceptive as her "amateur enthusiasms" are engaging. Her command of Canadian literature in general and Canadian poetry in particular is extensive, her opinions well-considered. While she may have chosen not to spend her days assisting others in the quest for cultural literacy, it is clear her choice was not made at personal expense.

In *Strange Things*, Atwood explores a number of image-clusters connected with the Canadian North, patterns of belief and imagery and identity which, she claims, have inspired generations of writers: "... popular lore, and popular literature, established early that the North was uncanny, awe-inspiring in an almost religious way, hostile to white men, but alluring; that it would lead you on and do you in; that it would drive you crazy, and, finally, would claim you for its own" (19). The examples she uses to explain these motifs — Gwendolyn MacEwan's *Terror and Erebus*, John Richardson's *Wacousta*, and Marian Engel's *Bear*, to name a few — are brilliantly selected, not only for their aptness in illustrating particular points but as literary leitmotifs across the lectures themselves. None is what I would call "popular literature," however; and certainly none is children's literature. But ... what if one were? What would it seem like from Atwood's perspective?

Diana Wieler's *Bad Boy* is set in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, a place where "winters [were] so long and bleak they bordered on madness [and] hockey was something to devour in the hungriest, emptiest months of the year" (47). Winters in Moose Jaw, then, are as malevolent as any to be found in the Yukon, the North-West Passage, or at Wino Day Lake, except that Moose Jaw sports the thin veneer of civilization: weddings, exams, cruising, parties ... and sportsmanship.

On the surface, *Bad Boy* is a tale of hockey and sexual identity. Given the ages of the two protagonists — sixteen-year-old A.J. and seventeen-year-old Tulsa — either theme has a recognizable readership, and each coats the storyline with a civilized veneer of its own. I first read *Bad Boy* with a view to its treatment of homosexuality. When I reread it several years later in haste, having a mere 48

hours to produce what became "The 'dark background,'" it was because I recalled A.J.'s brawls and turned hopefully to *Survival* for theoretical backing; what emerged was a brief excursion into *Bad Boy's* world of necessary roughness, an exception to Atwood's thesis that "[Canadian] literary characters live their lives as victims rather than heroes" (32). Both times, like Tully, I skated across the surface, content with the pleasure of "an incredible rush" (21). In contrast, my third reading has been purposive and sceptical, with the result that this article is not only more self-conscious, but decidedly less tongue-in-cheek, than its predecessor.

When I first came across "Tweaking the canon," I was convinced Mary J. Harker had written the article that "The dark background" should have been. While Harker touches upon *Bad Boy's* violent overtones (as I did in "The dark background") and homoerotic subtext, her argument is centred on Wieler's subversion of a literary subgenre known as the "Bad Boy Book"; and indeed, much of her article is devoted to marking parallels between A.J. and Tully and two of the genre's most famous icons: "Young readers today — and possibly the writers of modern Bad Boy stories — have probably never heard of these early Bad Boys, let alone read any of their books — except two, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*" (23).

Nevertheless, Harker's interpretation of *Bad Boy* and mine part ways in at least one important respect. She claims that A.J.'s "naughtiness never seriously threatens society" (24), because his values are fundamentally the same as those of his community. Since she is focussing on textual matters — specifically, Wieler's use of discrepant texts — it is not surprising that she is more interested in how A.J. and Tully express themselves than in what motivates their respective behaviours. As she sees in Wieler an ability to "[temper] the values of her realistic textworld ... like self-evident common sense" (24), so do I see in her a determination to do likewise.

Admittedly, I had been wondering about the validity of my own focus on violence. Since Atwood never actually mentions the word "violence" in *Survival*, I have been fighting the nagging doubt that I had ascribed thoughts and motives both to her and to Wieler that had more to do with my need to make a critical connection than with any conscious design on their part. The timely publication of *Strange Things* assured me that even if Atwood hadn't been thinking about violence then, it was certainly on her mind now.

Harker praises Wieler for her willingness to "subvert male-dominated literary forms" and her skill at appropriating "[the] excluded male voice that lies buried within the [Bad Boys' genre]" (79). Atwood expresses similar sentiments in *Strange Things*. The Canadian North, she notes, is often depicted as active, female, and (sometimes sexually) sinister, regardless of the author's gender, so long as the protagonist is male; as quoted above, she, the North, is "uncanny," "awe-inspiring," "alluring," and, at times, fatal. In short, she is not to be trifled with, for she sets rather than plays by the rules.

At the very least, Wieler's world of Triple A hockey is alluring. It is rife with ritual and laden with libido, though the latter tends toward androgyny.

The discipline is fierce, the expectations high, the risk of failure great. One can die on the ice, in reputation if not in fact. (Though I am reminded of a line in *Strange Things* — “I made it through without the loss of any appendages; which is what people often say when they come back from the Canadian North” [v] — when I think about A.J.’s dream [124].) Nor does it require much imagination to envision a hockey rink as the Great White North contained.

But where Harker the scholar maintains an air of detachment, preferring to centre her comments on Wieler’s “feminist expression within a male canonical hegemony” (29), Atwood the writer would have us speculate on what happens to “outrage, treachery, salvation, refuge, or merely harmless play, when women get their paws on [them]” (88). Text, to Harker, demonstrates the author’s success at “[going] beyond mere endorsement of the status quo” (24). To Atwood, it is a living breathing “bundle of images and association” (89). And herein lies the major difference between Harker and myself: I have eschewed detachment for the chance, like Atwood, to peek inside the bundle and explore its contents.

Let us then revisit the notion of the Great White North as hockey rink. According to sports gurus Kidd & Macfarlane,

Hockey is the Canadian metaphor, the rink a symbol of this country’s vast stretches of water and wilderness, its extremes of climate, the player a symbol of our struggle to civilize such a land ... Hockey captures the essence of the Canadian experience in the New World. In a land so inescapably and inhospitably cold, hockey is the dance of life, an affirmation that despite the deathly chill of winter, we are alive. (4)

They go on to bewail *The Death of Hockey*, the title of their book, at the hands of the dreaded NHL, which they claim has turned our national dance of life into a conga line of greenbacks due south. In their eyes, the NHL is ruled only by money, and violence has proven to be a particularly lucrative cash cow. As a result, what once symbolized a noble struggle comes across as little more than a bar room brawl.

Is it coincidence, I wonder, that Tully is named after an American city (and conceived in a classic American car)? Or that he is the most joyous of dancers whether at a wedding or in a locker room, on skates or during sex? Does he perhaps serve to remind us of what hockey should be — the exhilaration, the grace, the horseplay—and to reassure us that, despite a stateside coupling or two, the old values have not been completely lost and might be ours again? If so, *Bad Boy* becomes a morality play on several levels, and is certain to have at least one malevolent character.

A.J. seems the obvious choice for the part: where Tully dances, he fights like a man possessed. On ice, he slams the Worm, takes out Fleury, and pummels Terry Frances. Off ice, he punches his Uncle Mike, roughs up Treejack and Lavalle, and comes dangerously close to assaulting his would-be girlfriend Summer. But malevolent? No, if anything A.J. is a victim of malevolence; and so, to a less extent, is Tully, despite his resilience and charm.

Atwood speaks of a creature called the Wendigo, “a giant cannibalistic ice-hearted Algonquin Indian monster” (87). While by no means a staple of Canadian literature, it has made its presence known in countless poems and stories of wilderness denizens gone mad:

Fear of the Wendigo is two-fold: fear of being eaten by one, and fear of becoming one.... The Wendigo has been seen as the personification of winter, or hunger, or spiritual selfishness, and indeed the three are connected: winter is a time of scarcity, which gives rise to hunger, which gives rise to selfishness The Wendigo is what you might turn into if you don't watch out. (67,69)

Now we have it on Wieler's authority that coach Landau is a ballbreaker (95); and indeed, the expressions he uses are definitely designed to emasculate:

'All right, gentlemen, you get to play with your pucks today'. (24)

'Get it up, Brandiosa'. (26)

'Watch me, Millyard — not your pecker'. (27)

'He wants to play footsie? Give him the message'. (49)

'I think it's time you asked Mr Fleury for a date'. (96)

These expressions not only strengthen the previously noted association between hockey and sexual identity but, when viewed as a continuum, suggest a natural progression from playing with, shall we say, one's own equipment to contemplating liberties with that of one's opponent. It is also noteworthy that these expressions are used to kindle increasingly overt demonstrations of aggression. That their suggestiveness would be lost on Tully and Lavalle, who have already played with each other's pucks, is as expected as their overwhelming influence on the sexually impressionable A.J. is inevitable.

Is the above enough to make Landau a Wendigo? No, although his alleged year in the NHL might mark him so in Kidd & Macfarlane's eyes. But there is a Wendigo in the city of Moose Jaw, and his name too begins with L.

Atwood notes that Wendigos lend themselves best to two kinds of stories: those in which “Wendigoization” is a manifestation of a particular environment (like a ghost in a haunted house); and those in which it becomes “a sliver of [the protagonist's] repressed inner life made visible” (74). While it is possible to read *Bad Boy* as a story of the first kind — a tale of two boys living in an urban fishbowl, who must battle spectres of vengeance and public opinion — such an interpretation inspires neither fear nor repentance. When viewed as a story of the second kind, however, it can almost run a chill up your spine.

Bad Boy is about nothing if not repression. Poor A.J.'s is obvious; he longs for the hugs his mother never gave him, is dismayed to find himself aroused at the sight of his father's girlfriend in a bathrobe, and can't make up his mind whether it's Tully or Summer he really wants. But while Tulsa is far from sexually repressed, he is decidedly less in touch with his inner psyche than his friend: “Sex was never a problem for Tully The problem was when the

music stopped You looked around, feeling stupid and shy, painfully aware you were standing with a stranger" (142). Then, too, there are his feelings for A.J., which he eludes with a grace reminiscent of a puck control drill (27), at least until the denouement in Treejack's basement. Though he knows himself well enough to recognize his propensity for recklessness, he assiduously avoids looking too closely at the consequences of his actions.

Enter the Wendigo. Atwood reminds us that Wendigos can only affect those who believe in them; and so Lavalley, in true Wendigo fashion, is simply a touchstone (albeit a monstrous one) for thoughts and feelings that already exist. When he makes his first appearance, a sexually suggestive foam fight between A.J. and Tully is already underway. It is Tully who makes the first move, by inviting him into the red Mustang, not the other way around; and while he encourages Tully's self-destructive recklessness, we have already been told that Tully has always been both. Even when he goads A.J. in the end, it is not until the latter has already admitted (if only to himself) some less-than-platonic feelings of his own.

What Lavalley does, then, is force the subliminal to the surface — note the association with water during the initial locker room scene, where he is described as "brushing past Tully so slowly he could have been underwater" (31) — infect each of his victims with words "as soft and insidious as a hypodermic needle" (31), and fade from view as winter takes over, leaving them exposed to the elements. Not surprising that for Tully, he represents the ultimate "high dive": "Another wild leap with his eyes closed and the pool bottom covering up too fast. And he knew without thinking that he picked teams the way he chose lovers, the way he found a party, or lost a friend" (147). For what is a pool, if not a melted ice rink? exhilarating, yes, but without even the scant protection that "skating on thin ice" might offer. And remember too Lavalley's eyes, the colour of cement, the deadliest of pool bottoms.

For A.J., Lavalley's effect is largely second-hand; when he asks Tully whether Lavalley is a friend of his — and one must wonder why he tried to stop himself from asking — he stares "as if he'd been hit" (32). Certainly A.J. has hit before (Uncle Mike, for one), but it isn't until after this incident that he begins to do so with increasing regularity and intensity, and with a decided predilection for wingers (which Tully and Lavalley both are). In fact, it is only when A.J. physically attacks both Lavalley (in the same locker room where the foam fight took place) and Tully (in Treejack's basement) that his recovery can begin. And since being a Wendigo requires first, belief and second, a taste of the forbidden fruit, he is ultimately saved by Tully's refusal to test the limits of their friendship. A period of self-imposed isolation follows, ended by the figurative advent of Summer into his life, for it is not by chance that A.J.'s most intimate moments are consistently associated with feelings of warmth:

The exhilaration surged through him like liquid heat. (26)

The heat grew inside him so gently, so cautiously ... (51)

Her laughter lit him up. (58)

The words settled inside him, as warm as hot chocolate. (105)

Panic drove through [him] like a white-hot spear. (115)

The feeling ... crept up and overwhelmed him with its heavy, hypnotic heat. (135)

... a chant to kindle the tiny fire that had finally leapt into being. (170)

The heat took A.J. by surprise. (186)

Of Tully's recuperation, we are told precious little, not surprising given that he himself prefers to go through life "without thinking." But it is a most unsettling silence, to this reader anyway. Tully has tasted Lavalley, and has made it clear he will taste others. Is he Wendigo? It is doubtful he will be manipulative, as Lavalley was, but is he truly as resilient as A.J. claims he is? I am reminded of Atwood's warning, that "the Wendigo is what you might turn into if you don't watch out" (69). And when has Tully ever learned to "watch out" ...?

In his *Postmodern and the Rule of Literature*, David Simpson notes that an increasing number of academics, literary critics in particular, "are busier writing about themselves than they ever have been before" (25), in an attempt to plant "living speech in the place of dead letters" (65). Which, I suppose, confirms both my academic status and my critical aspirations. Certainly, I was determined to write of my growth as a critic before I'd even heard of Simpson (though, I confess, I am now feeling decidedly more self-conscious about it!). But it seems to me that when one considers what constitutes a literature, one must study the critics along with the authors. Could it be that my interpretation of *Bad Boy* is more Canadian than the book itself, regardless of the fact that its characters reside in Saskatchewan and its author was born in Winnipeg?

I look at Harker, who views Tully and A.J. as "feminized" versions of those paragons of American boyhood, Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn respectively. The words "Canadian" and "post-colonial" never appear in her article, yet somehow I'm drawn to one of Atwood's observations in *Strange Things*: "... if you are looking at writing in Canada at all, you can't just footnote the women" (90). And I wonder, if *Bad Boy* had been written and published in the States, would there have been someone like Harker who saw its "indeterminate literary status ... [as] significant" (20)? Similarly, is the only difference between my portrayal of Lavalley as Wendigo and, for example, Christine Jenkins' acerbic commentary on the tendency for fictional gays to meet tragic ends, that my analysis needn't accommodate a corpse? Or is the threat posed by a Wendigo something only a Canadian can sense?

Too, Jenkins mentions at least two novels (Sandra Scoppetone's *Happy Endings Are All Alike* and Frank Mosca's *All American Boys*) with detailed descriptions of violent assaults; given that *Bad Boy* is listed in her bibliography, why wasn't it cited, or, for that matter discussed, anywhere in the article? In short, is the uniqueness that Harker and I have each assigned to Wieler's work a product of our cultural sensibilities, and an unfortunate/unintentional oversight on Jenkins' part? Or is it there, and Harker and I see it more easily because

we share a common heritage? Or (perish the thought) do we see it simply because it is a shared heritage?

As if in response, W.J.T. Mitchell of the University of Chicago notes: "The most important new literature is emerging from the colonies — regions and peoples that have been economically or militarily dominated in the past — while the most provocative new literary criticism is emanating from the imperial centres that once dominated them — the industrial nations of Europe and America." Assuming, at least for the moment, that Canadian literature fits Mitchell's definition of (post) colonial, we are immediately faced with a power discrepancy, not unlike that expressed in my opening quote by Wilson. In both cases, we are obliged to determine who is "inside" the specialty, who is "outside," and what constitutes the specialty itself. Where the specialty is "literature," authors are in and critics out; where the specialty is "literary," the critics are in and the authors out. In our particular case, not only can a Canadian author not be a critic (except in the sense that we are all critics), and vice versa, Canada itself is slated to be valued for its literature rather than its criticism.

Given such a world-view, Atwood's inclusion in this paper immediately becomes suspect, and Jenkins' under-utilized. Stated somewhat more baldly, Canadian children's literature may have acquired a distinctive voice, but we must wait a little longer for the Americans and the Europeans to tell us exactly what it is ... and, by extension, when its distinctiveness is worthy of note. For certain, we cannot trust a writer to tell us.

I for one find such a scenario troubling. How is it that, just when Canadian literature in general and children's literature in particular comes into its own, imperial bias shifts from creative to critical control? Even if, as Wilson claims, "critics of literature ... get whatever authority they can by their reputations and the persuasiveness of what they say, not by their standing in an authoritative critical institution" (109), why is the outside perspective of greater value than that from the inside?

In his "Bad boys and binaries," Perry Nodelman explains why he found "Tweaking the canon" not completely persuasive. While he agrees that it is rare to hear the marginalized voice alongside the mainstream, and that Wieler has "open[ed] the door to different forms of being male" (40), he declares that Tully and A.J. are far from treated equally. Both Wieler and Harker, he says, focus overmuch on A.J.'s rites of passage. Tully ends as he began: happy and incorrigible, albeit a tad less self-indulgent. A.J.'s sufferings affect his sexuality, his self-esteem, *and* his general outlook on life.

I read Nodelman as being more critical of Harker than of Wieler, whom he praises for writing a novel that is "subtle, complex, interesting, and brave enough to tackle hard topics" (40); if she has erred in equating "irresponsible" and "immature" with "gay" — not so surprising, to my mind, since the OED reveals that gay has been synonymous with "lively," "showy," and "licentious" at various points in time — it is error born of a sincere attempt to differentiate between her main characters, confounded by a publishing industry not quite ready for "happily ever after" same-sex relationships. Harker, on the other

hand, is offered no excuse; as the interpreter, it is her responsibility not only to assess Wieler's creative process, but to maintain firm control over any creative urges of her own. In other words, by assuming that "Wieler's purpose [in contesting monologic male discourse] is in itself monological" (34), Harker sets herself up for the same charge: underestimating Tully's potential to be more than A.J.'s foil, and fashioning an argument that has more to do with what Wieler might have done than what she actually did.

Where "Tweaking the canon" once seemed the article I should have written, "Bad boys and binaries" has become the one I wish I had. Not that my encounter with Nodelman has changed my impressions of Tully (possibly because I know someone very much like him), nor moved me, either here or in "The dark background," to change a word of my analysis. Yet its effect is undeniable: broadening my knowledge of cultural discourse, heightening my awareness of (mono)logical fallacy, and challenging me to reconsider my choice of Atwood on the basis of both.

Nodelman conceptualizes *Bad Boy's* violence in sado-masochistic terms, patiently explaining how behaviours which are encouraged, tolerated or overcome in one (e.g. sexual) arena are often diametrically opposed in another. No Wendigo haunts his imagination save, perhaps, when he refers to A.J. as a "victim of his own pent-up rage" (38). Then again, he spends very little time discussing Lavalley (whom he nonetheless recognizes as vile, nasty, and despicable). And I think to myself, A.J. and Tully may appear in binary opposition, but something, or someone, must set off the chain of events which brings that opposition to the fore; Nodelman has missed something crucial by overlooking Lavalley's pivotal role. Perhaps if he had turned to Atwood, and I to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (his critical touchstone), my paper might have been more sociological and his more metaphorical. But would he have seen Lavalley more clearly? Would I have missed him completely?

Of course, I have no answers to such questions. Nor, to be honest, do answers seem particularly necessary. As I said earlier in this paper, I was drawn to peek inside "the living breathing bundle of images and association" that authors see in one another's works. With Atwood as my guide, I saw a Wendigo in *Bad Boy*, which I did not see in either *Trying Hard to Hear You* or *All-American Boys*. (But then, why would one expect to see a Wendigo anywhere other than a northern clime?! Or, for that matter, in every northern clime?) I fail to see how such an encounter makes either of us less a critic, or we three less Canadian; or, for that matter, why it might even be under suspicion.

By now, I might assume that you have accepted, if not deciphered, the relevance of the quote with which I open the title of this article, but such an assumption would run counter to much of what I have said above. It is drawn from Gwendolyn MacEwan's verse-drama *Terror and Erebus*. It is spoken by a character called Rasmussen, and I cannot refrain from pointing out that *Bad Boy* too has a character of the same name (though there the similarity ends). And it is cited in passing by Atwood as illustrating "the collapse of science under circumstances in which rationality and objectivity cease to have meaning

because they have become useless" (26). You cannot argue with ice. You cannot understand it, defeat it, or bargain with it. You can only take it or leave it, for it will always outsurvive you.

That *Bad Boy* has little of either rationality or objectivity, except in its crafting, we have already seen. The only cause-and-effect in evidence is that when one is hit (physically or emotionally), one bleeds. There is no knowing why Tully is gay and A.J. straight. We never find out why Alina Brandiosa left (it is not clear which parent had the affair), nor why she has no contact with her son. And we'll never know what Lavalley would have said about his fight with A.J., had Landau not cut him off. The result, to resurrect a previous metaphor, is a morality play, set against a "dark background" and etched in ice. In the end, I contend, it is our ability to live with such ambiguity, and in rare moments transcend it, that makes us and our literature truly Canadian.

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