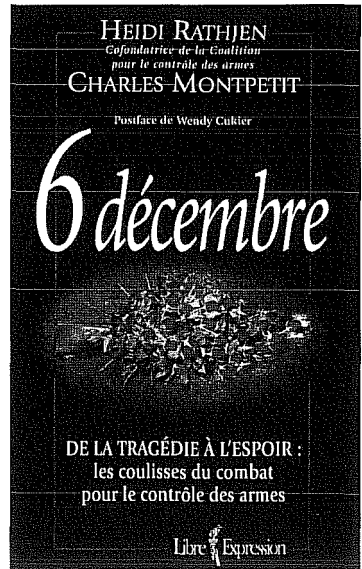
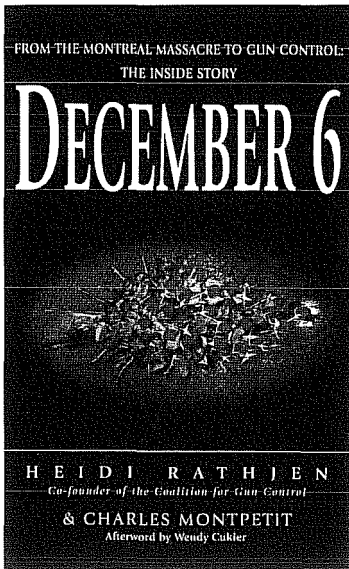


# The Publishing of Politics: The Making of December 6

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• Charles Montpetit •



*Summary:* The fear of reprisals will often keep authors from speaking out about the difficulties they encountered during the publication process. Hoping to get a much-needed exchange of information started in the literary community, Governor General Award-winner Charles Montpetit breaks the silence with a case in point.

Here we go again

This is the second “Making of” that I’ve written for CCL — the other being about the sex education anthology *The First Time*, back in 1995. It’s not

that I'm particularly fond of offstage stories — I might not have written this one if CCL's call for papers on "The Politics of Publishing" hadn't landed on my desk as I wrapped up the *December 6* project. But since the journal expressed specific interest in comparing French- and English-Canadian practices, I couldn't help pondering that a manuscript which had been simultaneously retained, edited and released by Toronto and Montreal publishers would make for an ideal case study.

However, let's keep this in perspective. While I'm not here to talk about the book's contents (the brutal killing of fourteen Montreal women and its aftermath), I do realize that people may feel uneasy about it, especially in the context of children's literature.

I can understand this position, as I myself used to think that way. When the shooting occurred in my hometown, I was so shocked by the ensuing media frenzy that I refused to read or watch any news report — I couldn't stand the way journalists displayed the witnesses' tears for all to see. Weren't these people's lives difficult enough as they were?

I only snapped out of it a year later, when the survivors' record-breaking petition failed to prod the government into taking steps to prevent similar tragedies. Before I knew it, I was on the phone with the Polytechnique students' spokesperson, Heidi Rathjen, and I was offering any help I could provide to shore up their campaign.

You'll have to take this on faith: the idea of a book had not entered my mind at that point. For the next five years, I became the movement's writer-in-residence, editing news releases, scripting out press conferences and translating bulletins to the hordes of supporters. As any "objective" journalist will tell you, you can't take part in a parade and cover it, so I was perfectly content to assist the organizers, no strings attached.

Still, as I spent my time with them on the front lines, I constantly marveled at the efficient way they overcame each and every obstacle. Without any experience in politics, these youths dealt with their trauma head on, no matter what their peers, their teachers, their MPs and every pundit in sight were telling them about the futility of their efforts. Even more impressive, they were standing up to a well-organized, powerful gun lobby, and they were scoring major points against it!

It suddenly dawned on me that I was witnessing history in the making. Right before my eyes, a bunch of kids were taking the worst nightmare we had experienced in decades and they were turning it into a victory that would save a lot more lives than their aggressor had taken. There was heartbreak, there was resolve, there were electrifying cliffhangers: every teenager, every student who felt powerless in the face of tragedy needed to know about this.

## The proposal

It took a lot of persuasion, but I managed to talk Heidi into it. As long as the project did not keep her from attending to her duties, she conceded that it might be inspiring to budding activists.

Whenever we had the chance, we'd sit in a fast-food joint, plop a recorder on the table and take down her impressions while they were fresh. A first-person primer, the story would be intercut with various testimonies, interviews and documents — and since our focus was on process rather than who did what, we would avoid identifying anyone by name (we'd stick to people's titles, such as "my MP" or "the Prime Minister"). This way, we reasoned, the story would always feel current to the readers, rather than get dated with every change in the political landscape.

I sent outlines and sample chapters to all the English-Canadian publishers for young adults. Since the whole country wanted to keep such a nightmare from happening again, I must say I expected a tremendous response.

I was wrong. Not one company showed an interest in the project. Our recap of the tragedy caught the eye of a few editors, but their attention plummeted the moment the characters got into constructive action. As one of them put it, "Your cover letter intrigued me, as did the first few pages. [But] you pretty much lost me by Chapter 5."

The only encouragement we got came from the children's imprint of McClelland & Stewart, Tundra Books — to whom an M&S staffer had referred our proposal. "Your idea of aiming this book at teenagers is accurate," said the editorial assistant, "yet I believe that the teenagers that you refer to are in their late teens and, therefore, considered part of the adult market."

Fine, then. Having run out of other options, we modified our proposal so that it spoke of teen and adult readers, and we sent it on a second round of the country's slush piles.

On August 17, 1998, the same people we had originally contacted at M&S asked to see the manuscript. We obliged, but since we had already done our own translation, we retained the right to pitch it ourselves in Quebec. It took a while to have our way (nonstandard clauses are always harder to negotiate) but we did get signed by mid-December. We then turned to one of Quebec's top publishers, Libre Expression, and they came onside within ten days.

Whew, we thought. Guess we can finally relax now, right?

Shows how naive we were — the troubles hadn't even started.

## The tunnel at the end of the light ...

M&S's contract called for a final version by February 15. If they suggested any corrections, we figured we'd work on it for the first six weeks of the year, then handle LibEx's comments by their deadline of March 22. It was a tight schedule, but we thought we could pull it off.

Alas, both companies had a much looser conception of their obligations.

For starters, February 15 came and went without our receiving any mail from M&S. We expressed concern to publisher Doug Gibson, but he didn't see this as much of a problem. He was quite willing to wait until we were finished with LibEx and, should any conflict arise in the correction process, he assured us we'd have the last word with his editor, Dinah Forbes.

Good thing too, because we could hardly believe our eyes when we got the text back a month later: our whole premise had been gutted, and entire pages were now cut or rewritten. "The first change arises from the issue of who is going to read the book," Forbes explained. "Very few are going to be young people who might lap up the lessons of your story, for the simple reason that very few young people are book buyers.... You'll also find that where the manuscript changed to an interview format, I've reworked the interview as a straight narrative. [Finally,] give us the full names of people and organizations.... Not naming names would have the unfortunate effect of bewildering your readers."

We were still reeling from the impact when LibEx editor Brigitte Bouchard called us in to deliver her own assessment. To our despair, it matched Forbes's on the matters of age, style and names — but while Bouchard hadn't done much rewriting, her verdict was even harsher. According to her, the manuscript would be "unpublishable" unless it was cut by 25% whenever it got too technical. Those scenes, she said, should be replaced with more emotional material.

Now, I don't object to a healthy dose of criticism: I've dispensed more than my share, and I know I'm licked when different sources come up with similar arguments. But that's not the issue here. Why did anyone publish anything for kids if their low purchasing power was a dealbreaker? Why did both publishers sign us if the manuscripts we had sent them were so inadequate? And what was the point of a contract if it could be rescinded so easily?

## Let the rush begin

M&S and LibEx may have been of one mind, but LibEx definitely called for more work ... and seemed to be intransigent about it.

Such hard-line posturing, I'm sorry to say, does not sit well with people who've fought gun lobbyists for several years. In fact, we came this close to dumping them and letting M&S publish the book in both languages, like they had done a year earlier with *The Ice Storm*. Handling just one set of corrections would have simplified everything, but while Gibson left us several messages encouraging us to jump ship, he never sent us the paperwork to that effect.

Since we were now on LibEx's time, I grudgingly offered to split the difference and change half of the passages they found objectionable.

To my surprise, Bouchard readily agreed. To my greater surprise, the task was much more satisfying than I would have thought. Artistically speaking, it might seem repugnant to clip phrases for the sole purpose of tightening the word count, but all this chipping away did bring an unexpected lightness to the drearier parts of the story. On the advice of a half-dozen youths I recruited as test readers, I even managed to surpass my quota!

Necessity also worked wonders with Heidi, who had developed the habit of burying her feelings so that reporters would pay attention to her campaign rather than her emotions. Tight-lipped as she had become about the personal aspects of the fight, she finally opened up and provided some of the most compelling scenes of the book.

Better still, it turned out that LibEx's commitment had never really wavered. Their stance mellowed considerably as improvements rolled in, which in turn elicited more cooperation from us.

Back in Toronto, however, M&S had taken the opposite route. In spite of our agreement ("the Publisher shall not make any changes to the manuscript of the Work without the consent of the Authors"), Doug Gibson reneged about final say: "We see it as vital for the good of the book that at least 90% of Dinah's editorial changes be instituted," he wrote us, "and, most important, be instituted with enthusiasm and conviction." Since we were uncomfortable with her decision to rewrite the text herself, could we refuse or veto these changes? "We publish a hundred books a year and never hear those words from our authors. If we encounter them again, we will have no option but to cancel the contract."

I'll pass on the absurdity of ordering people to be enthusiastic — especially when you've violated your pledge to them. There were more pressing issues at hand.

"Although we have not spoken to the French publisher about their preferences," the ultimatum continued, "I would assume that their changes will dovetail nicely with the ones we require.... It is important to us that the books published in both languages be very similar." Translation: "We don't know what you did in the Quebec version but we want that too, even though

we didn't think of it ourselves."

Last but not least, there was the cover design. From day one, Heidi and I had insisted that we were equal partners. This was no ghostwritten memoir or as-told-to deal. We'd adopted Heidi's perspective to facilitate reader identification, but we had worked together in both real life and the shaping of every sentence. It went without saying that the by-line should reflect that arrangement.

Yet all of a sudden, Gibson and Forbes were telling us that "the marketplace would be baffled by our giving equal billing to two authors" and that "using the same sized type for [both names] would incorrectly suggest that the book is by and about both of you." It mattered little that plenty of other first-person narratives bore double, evenly-matched credits (including the translation which they were now trying to emulate). M&S would simply not budge.

That was the last straw. As a professional who'd spent eight years on this project, I was adamant about getting the recognition — or flak — that I deserved. But like Heidi, I also cared deeply about promoting her cause, and didn't want to cause a fuss that would delay or jeopardize the publication. If the book helped save a single life, who was I to place my pride above that?

With every fiber of my heart screaming to reject M&S's offer, I retreated to the French version and let Heidi take over the English book. In a last-ditch attempt to compromise, she offered to sanction the entire rewrite in exchange for equal credits. Gibson seemed to find this acceptable, agreeing that "the font size would be the same" for both by-lines.

If you looked at the cover which appears in these pages, you already know that he had his fingers crossed. While our names are indeed the same height, they differ in color, spacing and thickness. I don't know what the company hoped to gain with such childish trickery but I'm sure it did not boost sales. On the contrary, we cut our purchases down to 200 copies, as opposed to the 1000 books we bought from LibEx.

#### **A few final comparisons:**

- M&S felt it was too late to add a picture inset in June. LibEx did it in August without a hitch.
- M&S billed us \$1000 for Heidi's final corrections. LibEx never charged us for mine.
- M&S released the book a month late. LibEx met the same deadline bang on.
- M&S's hardcover costs \$29.99 (no paperback is planned). LibEx's softcover retails at \$19.95.
- M&S's promotion department sent us nine reviews and articles. LibEx's

publicist snagged 41.

So there you have it: a promising venture that decayed into outrage, and a near-disastrous translation of which I'm now terribly fond. Needless to say, you'll have to draw your own conclusions — I won't even imply that the comparison holds for other projects.

All I can say is, I hope this is the last such article I get to write.

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*Charles Montpetit won a Signet d'or, a White Raven and several other prizes. He hates talking about himself in the third person.*