

Reading Mainstream Possibilities: Canadian Young Adult Fiction with Lesbian and Gay Characters

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Résumé : Le présent essai bibliographique recense quinze romans pour adolescents qui présentent des personnages homosexuels ou lesbiens. Ces représentations sont examinées à la lumière des possibilités qu'elles créent pour les jeunes lecteurs. Cependant, ces possibilités restent limitées et se cantonnent dans un registre traditionnel : les lesbiennes et l'expérience lesbienne n'apparaissent presque pas; quant aux personnages homosexuels, ils servent de faire-valoir aux héros, forcément hétérosexuels, ou ne jouent qu'un rôle mineur. Cependant, les représentations les plus positives de modes de vie homosexuels se retrouvent chez les personnages adultes, qu'ils soient parents ou non.

Summary: This bibliographical essay gathers together fifteen Canadian young adult works of fiction with lesbian or gay characters. The representations of lesbians and gays in this sample are examined in light of the possibilities created for young adult readers. Such possibilities for being in the world are limited and are relentlessly mainstream: lesbians and lesbian experience are barely represented, and gay male adolescent characters generally function to support the characterization of their heterosexual friends, as do other minor gay male characters. The most promising and positive representations of homosexual lives are found in the characterization of adult gays and lesbians, including that of gay parents.

Introduction

It has been argued that we require a rich narrative context in order to live meaningful lives (O'Connell). This rich context, composed of various and competing narratives, allows us to realize an identity which encompasses our understanding of who we are and how we stand in relation

to others. I began this project with the assumption that the stories of homosexual lives and experiences found in Canadian young adult fiction have something to offer those who read them.¹ The narrative accounts of gay and lesbian experience in fiction may represent possibilities for being in the world, whether read by queer or straight young people. As Sean P. O'Connell writes

Stories have at once referential and performative power. They set up possible ways of being in the world, invite one to the realization of those possibilities, but they do so by drawing together what has already been, is now, and can be. (100)

Librarians were early advocates for the provision of stories with lesbian and gay themes for young people. Teachers, writers, publishers, social workers, and others added their voices to this cause, as seen by the variety of bibliographic materials created by these groups.² We assign value to these stories for the extent to which they provide possibilities for those young people not represented by mainstream notions of youth sexual orientation and sexual identity. Published testimonials bear witness to the power of stories to ease the loneliness, despair, confusion, isolation, and curiosity that comes from realizing one's sexual identity is other than heterosexual. This is illustrated in the following excerpt, written by a young man about his coming out experience; it is taken from a collection of essays and photographs that celebrate the lives of gay, lesbian, and bisexual young people:

I read Edmund White, Bret Easton Ellis, George Whitmore, James Baldwin. I read them all for the sex. . . . But while I was looking for one thing, I found another: a series of experiences, a set of emotions that echoed my own, beyond sexual desire. I found characters who were lonely like I was, sad like I was, and some characters who were happy living lives I was not even sure were possible. (Mastoon 68)

The desire for and discovery of an alternative way of being in the world are clearly articulated by this young man, and he found some satisfying stories to answer his needs. What kinds of possibilities for being lesbian or gay are represented in Canadian young adult fiction? It is to this question that I address the remainder of this paper.

Canadian YA Fiction with Lesbian and Gay Characters

Lesbian and gay characters are barely present in Canadian fiction for young adults. Published bibliographies of young adult literature with gay and lesbian themes or characters typically include the novels *Bad Boy* by Diana Wieler (1989) and *S.P. likes A.D.* by Catherine Brett (1989). Other Canadian

books with gay and lesbian characters rarely make it into these listings.³ I have identified fifteen works of Canadian young adult fiction with lesbian and gay characters⁴ — a difficult task due to problems of access to novels about homosexuality (see Rothbauer and McKechnie, “Gay and Lesbian Fiction”; Spence), combined with the failure of many reviewers to indicate the presence of lesbian and gay characters or their tendency to downplay it in the titles under study (Fuoss; Rothbauer and McKechnie, “The Treatment”).

There are now well over one hundred English-language titles published specifically for a young adult audience that portray gay or lesbian characters (Jenkins 298). *I'll Get There, It Better be Worth the Trip* by John Donovan, published in the United States in 1969, is generally considered to be the first novel for young adults to include a homosexual encounter between two boys (Cart 63; Jenkins 299). Twenty years later, Greenwood published the first Canadian young adult novel to feature a young gay man (Wieler's *Bad Boy*), and Women's Press of Toronto gave us a story about a young woman coming to terms with her attraction to another girl (Brett's *S.P. Likes A.D.*). William Bell's 1992 novel *No Signature* includes a portrait of the main character's gay best friend. Two years later, a gay father and his partner appear in the title story of the collection *Traveling on Into the Light* by Martha Brooks (1994). Bernice Friesen and Linda Holeman both include homosexual characters in short stories in their respective 1995 collections, *The Seasons are Horses* and *Saying Goodbye*. In 1996, *Bottom Drawer* by David Boyd offered an account of homophobic violence. Diana Wieler depicts another relationship between gay men, one of whom is HIV positive, in the third book of her *RanVan* trilogy, published in 1997. Another short story with a gay male character is found in Mary-Kate McDonald's 1998 collection *Carving My Name*; in the same year, a young gay man comes out in *Telling* by Carol Matas. Glen Huser's 1999 novel *Touch of the Clown* portrays a gay man who has AIDS-related illnesses. The collection of stories *Graveyard Girl* by Wendy Lewis (2000), describes the unrequited love of one girl for her best female friend. And 2001 saw the publication of three novels for young adults with gay male characters: *The Game* by Teresa Toten, *Dancing Naked* by Shelley Hrdlitschka, and *Box Girl* by Sarah Withrow.⁵

Are gay and lesbian characters at all present in Canadian literature for young people? The brief list given above provides a clear affirmative answer. The search for lesbian and gay characters prompted my investigation, but as Kirk Fuoss reminds us in his 1994 study of male homosexuality in young adult fiction, we must ask questions of the various representations of these characters (162-68). Do they tell their own stories or are they secondary figures in someone else's narrative? Who are the gay and lesbian characters? What happens to them? What is missing from the accounts of homosexual experience?

Presence and Absence

Both the presence and the absence of homosexuality in fiction for young people have political implications. The absence of lesbian and gay characters (and of other sexual minorities) in young adult fiction supports the dominant ideology that posits heterosexuality as natural and normal and alternative sexualities as unnatural and abnormal (Fuoss 163). However, the mere presence of gay and lesbian characters does not necessarily signal a shift in ideological constructions of sexual orientation and sexual identity. Fuoss found in his sample of problem-realism young adult fiction that the actions of gay characters were marginalized, occurring "off-stage and out of sight" (170). He also writes:

Although homosexuality may not be silenced in or absented from YA texts to the extent that it was prior to 1969, the texts published since then nevertheless exhibit a sustained resistance to the articulation, by a gay narrator, of his own story. The implication seems to be that while it's one thing to permit talk about homosexuality, it is quite another matter to permit a homosexual to talk. (165)

The various representations of lesbian and gay characters found in this sample of Canadian young adult fiction are categorized into four groups: lesbians, gay male friends of main characters, adult gay men or gay fathers, and minor gay male characters.

Lesbians

There are 26 homosexual characters in this sample of Canadian fiction. Among these, there are six lesbians or potential lesbians, two of whom are central protagonists of their own stories — Stephanie in *S.P. Likes A.D.* and Tish in the short story "You Never Know" by Wendy Lewis.⁶ Tish's sexual identity or orientation is never unequivocally declared, and her growing attraction to Alex could be written off as an adolescent crush. In a later story in the collection, narrated many years later, another character makes a reference to Tish's ambiguous sexual identity: "Tish wasn't a giggler, like most of the other girls. She was quiet, big boned with short brown hair and brown eyes. People said she was a dyke" (186). However, while Tish's identity may be ambiguous, her one kiss with Alex is definitely not. It is a unique description in this genre of young adult fiction for two reasons: it depicts the same-sex desire of a young woman and it describes the magic of a passionate kiss. In other words, the action does not occur "off-stage and out of sight":

They were little kisses, tilted to the right at first, then straight on, then to the left. Her lips were as soft as feathers. Our noses rubbed. I felt like a

blind person discovering for the first time what my best friend looked like. We kissed some more. In her mind, Alex was probably seeing a Grade Thirteen football stud or maybe a square-jawed movie star. But I was thinking, *Wow! This is Alex! Beautiful, special, amazing Alex!* (58)

A flushed Alex soon pulls away in disgust, wiping her mouth as she does so, but Tish immediately understands that she is in love with Alex.

Within the first four pages of *S.P. Likes A.D.*, the reader learns that Stephanie does not like Eric Sullivan in “that way” but that she does like Anne Delaney (7-8). The author goes on to depict Stephanie’s confusion, annoyance, and acceptance of her amorous feelings for another young woman. Anne does not reciprocate Stephanie’s feelings, and this is shown through Anne’s actions (or perhaps lack of them) rather than through a description of Anne’s own feelings. The character of Anne remains shallow and one-dimensional throughout the novel, simply providing a context for Stephanie’s feelings. This book is admirable in its early attempt to normalize the feelings of a young woman who suspects she may be a lesbian, but its cautious earnestness can easily be read as didacticism. Stephanie’s contemplation of the presence of a single bedroom in the home of an adult lesbian couple is notable for what it does not say:

If there was only one bedroom and only one bed then it must mean that Kate Burton and Mary whatever-her-last-name-was must sleep in it — *together*. She found that she wasn’t that surprised, as if she’d known this from Kate Burton’s first mention of “we.” She found it a little exciting, and for one brief, splendid moment she had a vision of herself and Anne Delaney living in one room and sleeping in one bed. (51)

It is clear that Stephanie is unable to visualize herself with the girl of her dreams — she simply lacks the pictures of how this might look. So while there is little direct expression of lesbian sexuality in this novel, it remains the singular account of the internal life of a young woman coming to terms with her own recognition of an alternative sexual identity.

S.P. likes A.D. also remains the only Canadian young adult title that I know of that has an unequivocal depiction of adult lesbians. In this novel, Kate Burton is a paleontologist and her partner Mary is an artist. They are characterized as positive role models, providing a picture for Stephanie (and for readers) of what it could look like for two women to live together in a long-term loving relationship. On the other hand, in her short story “Toxic Love,” Linda Holeman suggests the heartache and uncertainty of a failed love affair between two adult women. Carla imagines a triangle relationship in which the English teacher Madeleine Kleinfeld is in love with Marcel Gauthier, the history teacher who is, in turn, in love with the secretary, Lola Pickell. Because she cannot bear to watch Miss Kleinfeld suffer (she has observed her growing distraction, her haunted looks), she con-

spires to throw Miss Kleinfeld and Mr. Gauthier together and she rejoices when Lola Pickell suddenly leaves town. Soon, however, Carla comes to the realization that the love notes she found in the secretary's desk are actually from Miss Kleinfeld to Lola Pickell and that a happy ending for these two lovers does not seem likely. It is difficult to claim lesbian identities for these two female characters as the story is narrated somewhat unreliably by a teenage girl whose imagination is fired by tempestuous stories about "the pain of human relationships" (5). However, this story does present the possibility of adult lesbian experience.

Young Gay Men; or, "My Good Friend is Gay"

Twenty of the 26 homosexual characters in the sample are gay males. In many of the stories, these gay male characters represent the best friends or good friends of the central young adult protagonist. Diana Wieler is the only author to create a complex characterization of a young gay man — Tulsa Brown in *Bad Boy*. Tully is depicted as reasonably comfortable with his sexual identity, although he does have a recent history of drug abuse that may or may not be related. The novel is mostly about his best friend, A.J., who must cope with his homophobic feelings when he learns that Tully is gay.⁷ Tully's gay identity is stable throughout the novel. He dates girls in an effort to protect his identity, but he knows that he is gay and accepts that. A.J. appears immature, confused, and unstable by comparison: he rejects his best friend; he alienates his family; he sexually attacks Summer, Tully's sister; and he loses himself in his acts of violent aggression both on and off the ice. In this way, the characterization of the gay friend functions in a supporting role: Tully's experiences act as a catalyst by providing a context for the development of the main character.

William Bell deploys a similar formula of friendship, sports, and homophobia in his novel *No Signature*. When Wick learns that Hawk, his best friend and the school's star athlete, is gay, he abandons him. Eventually Wick realizes that "loneliness . . . is the worst feeling in the world, worse than pain, worse than anything" (126). He understands for the first time the isolation and loneliness that Hawk must feel. He tries to contact Hawk but fails when his calls are misinterpreted as prank calls. After Wick's successful win on the first day of the wrestling tournament he learns that Hawk drank too much and that he then tried to kill himself by driving into a concrete wall (143-44). The two boys reconcile by the end of the novel, but Wick remains uneasy:

And yet his body, the body that wanted to do things with other men, repelled me. I couldn't get my mind around that cold hard fact, and I knew I probably never would. There was no use trying to run away from that. But he was still my friend and I knew that the agony he felt inside was worse than the pain of his wounds.

I forced myself to touch him. I knew I had to, or I would never touch him again. (152)

While Hawk pretends to be asleep Wick does touch him with an awkward, slow caress as one of Wick's fingers finds Hawk's pulse beneath the warm flesh of his neck.

Bell provides a rich and realistic depiction of the main character of Wick, but as is the norm in this sub-genre of young adult fiction, the gay character is constituted out of stereotypical understandings of what it is to be homosexual. Hawk's sexual identity is revealed to the school wrestling team after they find his photos of male nudes; he then gets drunk and tries to kill himself. Hawk's only comments on his actions and feelings are spoken from his hospital bed: "I should change my name from Hawk to Half-man. . . . No, I'm serious. I'm so short I'm half a man. I'm gay, so I'm half woman" (156). The gay subplot provides a parallel context for the larger themes of the novel: responsibility to others, the dangers of trusting appearances, and the consequences of abandonment and running away. The disclosure of Hawk's sexual identity functions only as a test of maturity for the main character and offers little insight into the experiences of a young gay man.

A similar test of courage and maturity is constructed around the gay male character Damian Fletcher in David Boyd's *Bottom Drawer*. The main character, Mac Kuper, already has problems before he meets Damian on the Internet: his dad committed suicide when he was a young boy, his stepfather wants more from him than he is willing to give, and his mother just wants to keep her husband happy. Mac and Damian engage in a rewarding online friendship and Damian eventually discloses his gay identity. Mac has difficulty with this at first, but his fear of being like his bigoted stepdad compels him to overcome his initial responses. Damian and Mac meet in the real world to attend a concert together. They enjoy their outing and on the way home Damian gives Mac a hug, described as "a guys kind of hug" [sic] (112). Immediately afterwards, they are jumped and beaten by four guys who think both boys are gay. Damian dies of his injuries and Mac attempts to kill himself and ends up in a psychiatric institution. An additional plot twist implicates Mac in the beating incident, but he is quickly cleared of any criminal involvement. The gay character and any insights into his life are relegated to a secondary status in a manner that allows the main character to mature and realize that he "can make it after all" (122). This 1996 novel deploys a common early convention in this sub-genre of young adult literature — the unrepentant gay character will suffer terribly and/or die (Cart 198; Fuoss 167).

Wieler also uses this convention in her depiction of another challenging relationship between three male characters in *RanVan: Magic Nation*. Rhan encounters a friend from the past, Lee Dahl, during an ill-guided but

innocent visit to the offices of a racist organization. A complicated plot of intrigue develops when Lee Dahl asks Rhan to help unravel a murderous conspiracy within the ranks of the racist cell. Rhan soon learns that Lee is protecting his lover Jim Rusk, a much older man and the leader of the organization. When Rhan and Lee nearly come to blows, Lee discloses that he is HIV-positive. He says, "Who's going to look after me? Who could stand to watch this, live through this? Who's going to give to me when I can't give anything back?" (188). And while Lee does not die of AIDS-related illnesses in this novel, he does die violently from a gunshot wound meant for his older lover. Jim Rusk subsequently reveals to the media the names of the individuals and companies who have funded his racist organization — an act of redemption in honour of his murdered lover. Rhan learns that even his special power and vision cannot change the fact that some events in the Universe are random and meaningless. Once more, the experiences of the gay male character, as strange and tragic as they are in this story, provide a context for the chief protagonist's growth and self-understanding.

Dancing Naked by Shelley Hrdlitschka is about the consequences of a sixteen-year-old narrator's decision to bring her unplanned pregnancy to term. As she weighs her choices — abortion, keeping the baby, adoption — she relies on the support and advice of her good friend, the 23-year-old Justin, who is the church's youth group leader, a volunteer coordinator at the local senior's residence, and Kia's prenatal class partner. He is also gay. Kia learns about his sexual identity when she suggests to him that he raise the baby with her. He gently refuses this offer and later discusses his sexuality with her. This conversation becomes didactic as Justin explains the spectrum of sexualities: "Don't you remember that from your sexuality classes? People's preferences can range from completely straight or gay to somewhere in between" (176). It is refreshing that Justin's sexual orientation does not become his tragic undoing, but in some ways his character is simply too good to be true. This sentiment is taken to the extreme when he is explicitly compared to Jesus Christ in a conversation between Kia and her best female friend (121).

The account of gay experience in *Dancing Naked* remains somewhat banal: Justin has a "special friend" named Blair, he finds it difficult to talk about being gay, and he decides to come out publicly. The treatment of homosexuality is superficial and is greatly overshadowed by the main concerns of the novel, which revolve around Kia's decision to give her baby to adoptive parents. Homosexuality simply becomes one of many "issues" in this book. Kia's relationships with her church, her parents, her insensitive ex-boyfriend, her new elderly friend Grace, her girlfriends, and Justin each have a defining feature: her church is the gateway to the adoptive parents; her father wants her to get an abortion; her mother relives the anguish of her own decision to have an abortion before she left the Philippines for

Canada; her ex-boyfriend demands that she get an abortion and reacts abusively when she decides not to; her new friend Grace is dying of cancer; her old friends grow distant as her pregnancy progresses; and Justin is, of course, gay. So although Hrdlitschka does not rely much on stereotypes or clichés in her depiction of homosexuality in *Dancing Naked*, her characterization of Justin remains limited.

A suicidal gay teenager appears in "Four Mile Road," a short story in *Carving My Name* by Mary-Kate McDonald. Janine and Andrew dated for a few years but never "went all the way," even though Janine wanted to. Janine agrees to meet Andrew in the middle of the night because he tells her that he is thinking about killing himself. In a tearful exchange Andrew discloses that he is gay. Janine laughs in relief because it helps explain why he never wanted to have sex with her. Andrew explains that for the first time in his life he was "truly happy" (59), but that the next day he just could not cope with his situation. Janine reassures him and comes to the realization that she can continue to love Andrew, but with a new understanding of their relationship:

I've got my arms wrapped tight around this boy who is my soul mate, who is my partner in a world that we have both found such a hard place to be. And it feels right, because I've found something more important than a boyfriend or a lover. And so has he. (59-60)

Janine must redefine what it means to her to love Andrew in light of the disclosure of his sexual orientation — again the gay character provides a context for the growth and development of the heterosexual character.

The gay character in *The Telling* by Carol Matas receives a similar treatment. Alex is the fourteen-year-old middle sister, a basketball star, a feminist who rejects the label, the daughter of an outspoken, feminist midwife, and an aspiring writer whose summer job is as an entertainer at the local Renaissance Fair. The novel chronicles dramatic events in the lives of the three sisters as they move through various rites of passage: the eldest sister falls in love and experiences sex for the first time; the youngest sister drinks and parties with her wild clique of friends; and Alex negotiates the responsibilities that come with telling stories. Alex belongs to the small group of teenagers hired to stage brief and entertaining productions with a medieval theme. They decide to portray a witch-burning, but when Alex discovers that witches were usually women healers and midwives, she wants to change the script to reflect this. Her desire to make the play more political meets with much resistance from all the other players, except for Paul. We learn that Paul is gay when he appears at Alex's home in the middle of the night, bursts into tears and announces that he is "coming out" (76). Alex accepts him immediately and advises him to think twice about coming out at school. Soon after, Alex's younger sister drunkenly discloses Paul's sexual orientation publicly. This creates a parallel between the injustice per-

petrated on midwives and homosexuals during the era of witch-burnings and the ostracism and suffering that Paul faces now: he is harassed by his peers and is at risk of being thrown out of his home by his Christian fundamentalist parents. The experiences of this gay character are sketched quickly and with a reliance on cliché. His situation functions to illustrate the risks and responsibilities of truth-telling, but like other gay characters in these novels, Paul has little voice in his own story.

Teresa Toten portrays a third suicidal gay teenager in *The Game*. Thirteen-year old Dani Webster wakes up in a psychiatric treatment centre after consuming a life-threatening quantity of alcohol and pills. The author weaves together traumatic and tragic threads of physical abuse, neglect, love, and redemption. At the clinic Dani meets two other youth patients — Scratch, an incest survivor, and Kevin, a gay teen who has tried to hang himself. Dani writes to her sister that Kevin has been diagnosed with “gender identity disorder” (95), and we learn that he remains at the clinic at the will of his Christian fundamentalist parents. Throughout the novel there are many casual references to Kevin’s identity, usually when Scratch teases him about such things as his lack of style and his preference for old movies. Nevertheless, his sexual identity puts him at risk: he attempts suicide because of it (or, rather, because of the homophobic reaction of his parents); he is subject to harassment and attacks by the clinic bully; and he decides to run away with Scratch, seeing this as his only available option. The two female characters undergo transformations: Dani must forgive herself and her mother while coming to terms with the loss of her beloved younger sister, and Scratch must learn to trust others and find healthy ways to cope with her pain. Kevin, on the other hand, does not need to change. His identity is stable. While the reader receives only a simple account of Kevin’s experience, his story is *his* story. His homosexuality may be presented as pathological (he attempts suicide and is a patient at a psychiatric treatment centre), but he is not inserted into the narrative merely to allow the chief protagonist to come to some kind of understanding about herself.

Adult Gay Men or Gay Fathers

I have been unable to identify any Canadian young adult fiction that contains a characterization of a lesbian mother, but *Box Girl* by Sarah Withrow and the short story “Traveling on Into the Light” by Martha Brooks both portray a gay father. In Brooks’s story, sixteen-year-old Sam nurses her anger towards her father, who left her and her mother when he fell in love with another man. It is not so much her father’s new sexual identity that hurts her but rather his failure to confide in her (72). Sam visits her father with her mother’s encouragement and takes an immediate dislike to the man who arrives with her father to meet her at the airport. However, it is soon apparent to Sam that she has made a mistake about the other man’s

identity, as her father's actual partner is a different, older man with whom she establishes a friendly relationship. Sam continues to punish her father with withdrawal and silence until she recognizes the strength of his bond with his partner. This is described in a moving, final paragraph:

It was about eight o'clock at night, and I just happened to walk in as Dad and Luis had their heads bent, in unison, examining something on a light table. It was dark in the studio, so that just their faces were lit up — lit by the soft, reflected light. They looked, somehow, so right together, the way good couples do. And I was struck, all of sudden, by my father's courage. There is no other word for it. (80)

This passage is the only one in my sample that offers a celebration, though muted, of a homosexual relationship. It is all the more unique, since the young adult protagonist voices it and since it is neither preachy nor didactic in its pro-gay sentiment.

In *Box Girl*, thirteen-year-old Gwen also resents her father for his new sexual identity as a gay man. Five years earlier he fell in love with another man, causing Gwen's mother to flee to France without her daughter. And while Gwen longs to be reunited with her mother, her life with her dad and his partner, Leon, seems happy and secure. This book is unique in the way that it deals with Gwen's coming-out process as the daughter of a gay man. When her best friend learns that Gwen's dad is gay she rejects Gwen. Gwen expects to feel relief and to receive understanding when she finally tells her friend about her dad, but she is soon disappointed when her friend responds with disbelief, disgust, and fear (138). Later, the new girl at school, Clara, is determined to be friends with Gwen, even though Gwen is rude to her and makes an effort to isolate herself from others. Clara does prove to be a reliable and supportive new best friend and when Gwen discloses that her dad is gay, Clara is unfazed. Later at the dinner table with Clara, Gwen's dad and his boyfriend, Gwen says, "God, what I wouldn't give to live in a normal house, with normal people who were normal." Clara's response encapsulates the underlying theme of the story when she replies, "Seems pretty normal to me" (175-76). While much of this novel is about Gwen's fear of others finding out about her gay dad, he does have a voice and he exists through more than his daughter's fears and resentment. He wants to stop acting embarrassed and ashamed about his relationship with Leon. The following exchange illustrates the sensitive expression of all three voices in this story:

"Kevin," Leon says softly. "We don't absolutely have to do this."

"Yes, we do," Dad says, running a hand over my head. "It's been long enough and Gwen has to understand. We can't keep catering to this ridiculous shame." He says it like he's been practicing. What comes next comes out so strong. "I want to be out. I want for Gwen to be out."

"But I don't want that," I cry, and it's like I've slapped him across the face.

"When do you think you'll be ready?" Dad hisses.

"NEVER! I want him to go. I hate him. He can't stay here."

Leon's crying. I run into him and push him toward the door. "I don't want you. Go away. NOW. Go." He moves backwards, but Dad catches both my wrists and holds them tight.

"It's not him you're mad at, Gwen."

"Yes, it is. I hate him. He's the one who made her leave and I'll hate him forever." (136-37)

The stories by Withrow and Brooks illustrate a shift in the characterization of homosexuality. The two gay fathers are unapologetically gay and although both want acceptance and forgiveness they are not going to change or hide or pretend to be any other way, not even to ease the hurt and discomfort of their daughters. Moreover, the readers of these books are not subjected to the kinds of didactic narratives that explain or rationalize issues associated with homosexuality that we see in some of the other texts.

There is a third adult male character included in this category: Cosmo is a gay man who has AIDS in the novel *Touch of the Clown* by Glen Huser. He functions as a surrogate father in the story to Barbara and her younger sister Livvy. He is compassionate, sympathetic, and loving, in marked contrast to the self-indulgence and the physical and emotional abusiveness exhibited by the girls's real father. Cosmo rescues the girls from a life of neglect when he insists that Barbara call the police after her father has beaten her. Soon after, Cosmo dies. It is not until his funeral that we learn that Cosmo was gay. There are earlier references to photographs in his home that mostly feature him and one other man and to his style of decorating and manner of dress, but these are subtle indications of his identity that could easily be overlooked or misconstrued by readers. What is unique in this novel is the total acceptance of Cosmo by the young adults who attend his clown workshop, including Barbara. And like other gay characters in this sample of novels, Cosmo has a "gift," or in the words of one his friends, he has "an ability to change us in ways that we would never have thought possible" (213). Barbara affirms this when she imagines a spotlight on Cosmo as he "pluck[s] a rose out of nowhere and . . . hold[s] it out toward us. A gift" (213).

Minor Gay Male Characters

There are eight other gay male characters in this sample of Canadian young adult fiction. These characters play minor roles in some stories, while in others they are merely mentioned by other characters. For example, in Friesen's short story "Breaking Eggs," Lori refers to her gay Uncle Wallace when she explains why people whisper that she is gay (15).

In Wieler's *Bad Boy*, Derek Lavalle is Tully's mean and manipulative lover. Tully certainly does not seem to like him much, but he is intrigued by his "mean streak" (73). Derek makes up the third in an emerging triangular relationship between the three boys: he is Tully's lover; Tully betrays A.J. with his failure to disclose his true identity; A.J. rejects Tully only to admit in one of the final scenes that he is attracted to him; Tully rejects Derek and confesses that he has always "wanted" A.J.; and Tully ultimately rejects A.J. as a lover. Aspects of homosexual desire are represented in each of the three characters: A.J. has a crush on Tully, Tully is in love with A.J. but does not act on this in order to save their friendship, and while Derek and Tully do engage in a sexual relationship there is no love between them. Furthermore, we never learn why Derek acts in the ways that he does. He remains a shallow, one-dimensional character whose chief narrative function is to support the portrayal of Tully, the main gay character.

Blair, Justin's love interest, appears briefly in *Dancing Naked*. The disclosure of Justin's sexual identity is foreshadowed in a scene at the seniors's residence when Kia sees the two young men through a window and wonders aloud about Blair. Blair exists solely to support the characterization of Justin: this special friend suggests an active expression of his sexual orientation. Stephanie's best friend's brother is gay in *S.P. Likes A.D.* and as a minor character he normalizes the feelings that Stephanie has for Anne Delaney. When she tells her best friend Devi about her feelings, she is immediately accepted because homosexuality is not new to her friend. Mr. Hassam is another minor character in *S.P. Likes A.D.* who is rumoured to be gay after Devi's brother sees him going into a gay bar. The rumour is shared among a group of young people, including Anne Delaney, who reacts by voicing homophobic comments about how homosexuality is "sick" and "unnatural" because "there have to be children" (91-92). The author uses the voice of one of the adult lesbians to explain that people should be accepted no matter who they are, even if they happen to be gay. Norman Johnson is a minor gay character in *The Telling*. His experience of harassment is narrated by the eldest sister to illustrate how difficult life can be for young men who come out as gay in high school. We learn about Norman after Alex advises Paul to consider remaining closeted for a few more years. Sam also has a gay male friend in "Traveling on Into the Light" with whom she discusses her feelings about her father's actions. He is not sympathetic when he says, "What'd you expect? A kiss-and-tell confession to his *daughter*? You couldn't have handled it" (72). Luis, the boyfriend of Sam's father, is another minor gay character.

These minor characters represent the possibility of other gay lives and other gay experiences. Their appearance in the texts allows that there is more than just one homosexual character in any story. However, there is an almost complete lack of evidence of communities of gays, lesbians, or queer people in this body of work. The only community that we do see is at

Cosmo's funeral in *Touch of the Clown*.⁸ Moreover, many of the main (straight) characters know or know of other gay men, but lesbians and lesbian experience are rarely presented.

Discussion and Conclusion

My purpose in this essay was to provide evidence that lesbian and gay characters do exist in Canadian young adult fiction. Sexual minority characters are few in number and their stories are usually limited to the difficulties of their lives. As in the larger sub-genre of literature with gay and lesbian themes to which these fifteen Canadian works belong, these fictional homosexual characters are present and are visible to the mainly heterosexual protagonists. However, as Jenkins notes, lesbians and gays have yet to be the focus of their own stories and continue to be "portrayed as outsiders who live (often somewhat precariously) within the heterosexual mainstream" (320).

Seven of the fifteen titles contain elements of a "coming-out" narrative where the sexual orientation of the homosexual character is disclosed with serious, risky, and often negative consequences. The elements of the coming-out story are predictable: fear, confusion, and self-loathing on the part of the lesbian or gay character; and disbelief, resistance, intolerance, harassment, and abuse on the part of family members, friends, and peers, with trajectories that lead to self-acceptance and acceptance by some or self-annihilation and utter rejection by others. There are suicidal gay characters in this body of work. Two gay characters die violently at the hands of others. One gay character dies of an AIDS-related illness. There are only two kisses: a passionate one between Alex and Tish that heralds the end of their close friendship, and a chaste one between Jim Rusk and Lee Dahl which signifies the nature of their relationship to Rhan Van. Diana Wiener remains the only author to attempt a depiction of actual sexual encounters between two characters of the same sex in her novel *Bad Boy*, although there is nothing in it that constitutes a love story. More to the point, there is very little that is uplifting or affirming in any of these novels or short stories that might speak to young lesbian and gay readers about the possibilities that exist after the initial coming-out process, after the declaration of one's sexual identity or orientation. One of the young lesbian participants in my doctoral research had this to say about the books she had read that contained lesbian or gay themes:

And a lot of them are like issue stories, like homophobia. And, well, I don't want to read about homophobia. I'd rather not because it's not the biggest issue in my life. . . . I understand that it's probably important for someone who is having a lot a trouble with coming out and doesn't have any sort of support and is looking for that. But for me, I was just like, this is the same

story. This is my story already. . . . Show me the possibilities! Show me that someone can be gay and lesbian and be in love and do the things other people do in books. Because I couldn't relate to straight characters in books. I wanted something that was me and showed me the possibilities that were available to me.⁹

Canadian young adult fiction offers little to this reader, not least because of the general failure to represent lesbian experience. Perhaps the most promising possibilities come from the representation of adult homosexual characters where we see evidence of survival and of real loving relationships. Small comfort, perhaps, for young adult readers who long to find themselves in a story that celebrates *their* lives.

Notes

- 1 Also, I am engaged in doctoral research in which I explore the role of voluntary reading practices in the identity negotiation of young women who self-identify as lesbian or queer. Influenced by my reading of Michel de Certeau, I wonder to what extent reading allows my participants to escape their lives or to create safe spaces in which to explore and claim their lesbian or queer identities. This ongoing work is expected to be completed by December 2003.
- 2 See, for example, Clyde and Lobban; Ford; Hawkins; Monroe; and Vare and Norton.
- 3 Two recent bibliographies include Day; Jenkins.
- 4 I make no claim that this list of fifteen titles is comprehensive. I found it very difficult to locate even these few books. My methods included (but were not limited to) serendipitous browsing of the shelves of new books at various public libraries and bookstores, along with recommendations from colleagues and research participants. I welcome additions and invite readers to contact me with titles that I have missed.
- 5 I acknowledge the helpful suggestions from Joanne Findon and an anonymous reviewer regarding additional titles for inclusion in my analysis.
- 6 Although the main character in Bernice Friesen's story *Breaking Eggs* is harassed by her peers who call her "queer" and "stupid dyke," she explicitly rejects a gay identity. While it may be possible to extrapolate from her comments to establish a closeted lesbian identity for this character, there is no real evidence in the story to support this.
- 7 For insightful commentary on the characterization of both A.J. and Tully, see articles in *CCL* by Cherland, Easun, Harker, Hoogland, and Nodelman.
- 8 See Jenkins for a discussion of this absence of community in young adult novels with gay, lesbian, and queer content that were published between 1969 and 1997.
- 9 Excerpt taken from my interview with Nicky (pseudonym), an eighteen-year-old self-identified lesbian.

Canadian Young Adult Titles with Lesbian or Gay Characters

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- Brett, Catherine. *S.P. Likes A.D.* Toronto: Women's, 1989.
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- Hrdlitschka, Shelley. *Dancing Naked*. Victoria, BC: Orca, 2001.
- Huser, Glen. *Touch of the Clown*. Toronto: Groundwood, 1999.
- Lewis, Wendy A. "You Never Know." *Graveyard Girl*. Red Deer, AB: Red Deer, 2000. 55-68.
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