

unruly designs they refuse to acknowledge. Although we are given the sense of a society in transition, the major conflict in the story occurs within its protagonist. The daughter of Scots-Norman nobility, young Jenny is torn between two marriageable men. Intrigued by the wealth and status he can offer her and by the potential to improve her family's fortunes through marriage, Jenny is drawn to Earl William de Warrene, an arrogant young brawler who sees her only as a possession. On the other hand, she is befriended by the inscrutable Tam Lin, a landless Scottish knight who has been claimed by the fairies as one of their own. Jenny's task is first to know her own heart and then to liberate her suitor, at great personal risk, from the magical chains that bind him. A curious but successful blend of historical realism, psychology, and fantasy, *An Earthly Knight* is a well-structured and entertaining novel. Like the other works considered here, it insists upon the lived reality of a place and time remote from our own. This is the best reason to read about the past, of course, for by increasing our knowledge of how other people have lived, we are better able to judge our own performance on the vast public stage of history.

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### Going Beyond the Limits of YA Fiction / Laurence Steven

*The Black Sunshine of Goody Pryne*. Sarah Withrow. Groundwood, 2003. 177 pp. \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-577-6.

*The Canning Season*. Polly Horvath. Groundwood, 2003. 203 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-522-0.

*The First Stone*. Don Aker. HarperTrophy Canada, 2003. 229 pp. \$15.99 paper. ISBN 0-00-639285-7.

*Flux*. Beth Goobie. Orca, 2004. 258 pp. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55143-314-1.

*The Hippie House*. Katherine Holubitsky. Orca, 2004. 233 pp. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55143-316-8.

The limits of YA (young adult) teen fiction are found in its circumscribed purview. The work of Beth Goobie, whom Tim Wynne-Jones claims "just might be the best YA writer in the country" on the blurb for her earlier book, *Before Wings* — is an exemplary case. Her YA protagonists such as Sal Hanson in *The Lottery* are fully absorbed in their world, but to readers outside the YA audience and world or on its

fringes, the horizons seem narrow and the problems often appear to be triviality writ large. Being fully absorbed easily shades over into self-absorption. While school bullying, ostracism, sexual insecurity, fragile self-image, loneliness, and an uncaring or indifferent adult/institutional society, are no doubt real concerns for the inhabitants of YA novels (as well as many of their readers), those of us who are past those years or who are going through them relatively unscathed tend to look on them wryly, seeing much of the concern as a psychosocial phase or "rite of passage" or seeing the injustices that undoubtedly do occur in the teen years pragmatically, as something we all have to put up with at that time, however we wish they would go away. Such a reaction does not mean YA novels are inevitably superficial (although a lot of them are); it just means the generic niche is circumscribed, programmatic. Once through the teenage-angst developmental window, readers tend to move on to richer material with broader appeal and significance. If they do not, we can understand such readers to be indulging in a habit, hunkering down in their comfort zone, or even obsessively replaying familiar patterns, not unlike regular readers of romances or westerns or viewers of soap operas.

The five novels under review here each in its own way participates in YA concerns, but four of them, by embedding those concerns in a larger world of meaning, whether generic, historical, stylistic, or structural/thematic, show that Canadian fiction for teens has a vibrant range extending well beyond the formulaic. The fifth remains within the YA purview but exploits the claustrophobic atmosphere to good effect.

In *Flux*, Beth Goobie transcends the limits of YA fiction by finding a genre niche that fits her like a glove. What this gripping novel reveals is that Goobie has affinities with the sci-fi dystopian fiction tradition of Zamyatin's *We*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, and most recently Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*. Among literature for young people, *Flux* is thematically comparable to (and easily in the same league as) L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*, though *Flux*'s YA provenance gives it a grittier realism, closer in that sense, though on a smaller scale, to Lyra's multiple worlds in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy. In *Flux*, Goobie's protagonist, Nellie, experiences many of the trademark YA issues: alienation, loneliness, identity threats in the face of monolithic institutional bureaucracy, bullying, separation from parents both physically and emotionally, insecurity about self-image, concerns about incipient sexual maturity. Also like Goobie's other YA protagonists, Nellie is an individual: she is self-reliant, smart, brave, confident, suspicious of authority, and has an unwavering faith that the world does make sense, despite appearances. The difference in *Flux* is that Goobie counters the YA tendency to inward-looking absorption by participating in a socio-political critique that has readers reflect outward upon current developments in our own society as well as inward upon our role as individuals in that society. She breaches the parochial limits of the YA genre by creating an entire sci-fi world embodying the dynamics of insider/outsider, rigid order/creative freedom, victimizing adults/victimized kids, etc. Nellie has escaped from the Interior (the rich, technologically-controlled, gated centre of the city/civilization) to the Outbacks (the working class, poorer, less-controlled urban fringes that surround the Interior). Having lost her mom, Nellie is now homeless and on her own, trying to elude the spies of the Interior while avoiding the inhabitants of the Outback. She also discovers that she has the ability to "travel the levels," to ride the flux between the different realities that vibrate at different molecular speeds. As the story progresses she joins forces with Deller, a fourteen-year-old gang leader

and her former tormentor. She is searching for the key to the nightmares of medical experiments that haunt her from her past, while he is searching for his brother who, like many Outback children, has disappeared. Although the plot is intricately developed, *Flux* doesn't contain the whole story. A forthcoming sequel, *Fixed*, promises to take Nellie's search for her past and Deller's for his brother into the Interior. I'll be watching for it.

*The Hippie House* by Katherine Holubitsky, is an end-of-innocence novel. It combines a period portrait of the small Southern Ontario town of Pike Creek from roughly December 1970 to December 1971, with a coming-of-age year in the life of thirteen-year-old Emma Jenkins. The catalyst for the changes is the serial murder of two teenage girls and the emotional stress the unsolved crimes foment in the town. The challenge for any novel that combines genres in this way is to keep them balanced in presentation, not letting one overwhelm the others. For the most part, Holubitsky succeeds in this, but if you don't stick with her through the slow opening you won't recognize the success, since at the outset the author seems more interested in historical nostalgia than plot. I sense that Holubitsky is indulging in her memories of being a young teen as the counterculture hit town. Although the development of the historical context is thoroughly researched, I'm forced to wonder for whom Holubitsky is writing when Emma responds to her brother's band as follows:

We had ironed our hair, frosted our lips and dabbed lemon-scented perfume behind our ears. There was a revolution going on and until then we had been too busy growing up to enlist. But now high school waited at the end of the summer, and with The Rectifiers and their screaming guitars among us, we were involved. (5)

But *The Hippie House* does get going after the murder: as the author carefully lays out the town and its folk and lets the suspects multiply, the tradition of small town neighbourly trust gradually cracks and fractures. The structure creaks a bit as she tries to have the first-person protagonist get all the plot details; Emma overhears a lot and detectives tell things in front of her that they probably shouldn't and tell others private stuff as if unaware that the small-town gossip network will spread such stories around fast. These few improbabilities in the murder mystery dimension are compensated for by the good pop-culture period details and the gradual infiltration of the counterculture into small-town southern Ontario, from the token draft dodger who opens the token head shop down the street from the token Dairy Bar, to the riot-wracked rock concert on the edge of town. Takes me back, frankly. The town's loss of innocence is mirrored by Emma's as she moves into the 1970s world of experience that YA fiction would claim as its own. As her brother leaves for university, he asks Emma to look after his guitar:

I accepted it in my arms like I would a baby. I carried it to my room, placed it carefully in the corner next to my sewing machine, flopped on my bed and cried as though it were the end of the world.

It was true that with [the murderer's] conviction the immediate threat to our lives had been removed. But the experience had cut deep and the inherent trust in the world we had known as children was gone. (233)

Polly Horvath's *The Canning Season*, the deserving winner of the 2004 Young Adult Canadian Book of the Year award, is a delightfully quirky combination of Roald Dahl grotesquerie and John Irving ethical particularity. Horvath extends her protagonist Ratchet Clark's circumscribed YA world with an uncaring single parent (Henriette) and a physical deformity she must keep hidden ("That Thing!") outward into the weird and wonderful world of her great-second cousins Tilly and Penpen Menuto. Both in their nineties, they share an enormous old seacoast house in the bear-infested Maine forest, Glen Rosa, "made from old brick and spouting a profusion of towers and turrets that reached up in line with the tops of the pines that encircled it to prick the vast starry sky" (19). As we enter Ratchet's life with her "Aunts," the values of her former life shrink into humorous inconsequence by comparison. Horvath succinctly captures the superficiality of Henriette's world in the prayer that sums up her life: "Thank God for the Hunt Club!"

Horvath's genius is in the fullness yet economy of her presentation of a life of value, despite its outward strangeness and isolation. The metaphor of the canning season, for example, wherein the goodness of the blueberries is captured and preserved for future savouring, carries over into the moral world of Glen Rosa, where in their relative isolation behind the bear barrier the old sisters have preserved a care for each other and the world around them that offers a wide vista to Ratchet and also to Harper, another waif they take in. Horvath uses a juxtaposition of a range of stylistic and tonal registers to embody the variety of human particularity that goes into genuine relationship. At one point, as an example, Tilly is telling Ratchet of Penpen's decision to become a Zen Buddhist who "must take in whatever shows up. You cannot turn anyone away." Penpen demurs about "becoming" Buddhist, but says it's a "lovely philosophy" and wonders whether we mustn't "trust in some kind of design to it all" (24). And then, just as other writers would be tempted into heavy weather about belief and ultimate meaning, Horvath has Tilly respond: "'Good thing we don't live closer to town. . . . We'd be eaten out of house and home. Vacuum cleaner salesmen would be moving in with us'" (24-25). Similarly, Horvath never lets us forget that the mundane aspects of life are interwoven with its beauty: "They settled back in their chairs. Night had come thickly, darkly, like felt over the dining room windows through which pinpricks of starlight shone. Tilly burped" (75). *The Canning Season* is a richly human and joyful book and I recommend it highly.

Don Aker's *The First Stone* won the Nova Scotia Library Association's Ann Connor Brimer Book Award for 2004. Taking its title from the biblical adage that the one without sin should be the one to cast the first stone, Aker's novel moves a powerful and disturbing story of irresponsible teen violence causing physical and emotional devastation, into the realm of physical, emotional, and spiritual rehabilitation. Chad Kennedy — Reef to his friends — is a seventeen-year-old Halifax punk on the cusp of becoming a hardened adult criminal. Aker's depiction of Reef and his buddies drifting cynically through a meaningless life is raw, visceral, and tough to read. In fact, in his attempt to portray their bleak life accurately, Aker risks falling into the same unimaginative space they inhabit — full of foul language, empty bravado, and superficial wisecracks. What saves the novel from becoming the thing it intends to critique is the structural balance Aker maintains by switching chapter by chapter between Reef's story and that of Leeza Hemming, a girl from the right side of the tracks who is questioning her own life's purpose after

recently losing her older sister to a fast-acting cancer. In chapter three, the switching happens page by page and then paragraph by paragraph as Reef runs from an act of vandalism out onto a highway overpass, where he channels his anger at everything into a rock which he throws into the oncoming traffic, and through the windshield of Leeza's car as she drives home from her volunteer job in a seniors' care facility, where she works in order to feel that her "being there made a difference" (19).

The structural linking of these seemingly opposite lives allows Aker to draw out the very similar emotional need each of the protagonists has to have a purpose for living. As Leeza emerges from her coma into a world of pain and begins the infinitely slow process of rehabilitation, Reef is sentenced to a halfway house and then into volunteer work in a rehab center where he undergoes a similar process, learning, in the words of the sentencing judge, "what suffering is all about" (62). The balancing chapters come together as Reef — it seems inevitably, if improbably — is unwittingly assigned to Leeza's case. As they see each other and begin to emerge from their emotional isolation, we as readers are challenged to see Reef as Leeza does, in other words as more than a monster. The challenge of the title is brought home to us when Leeza's mother, who was at the trial, finds them together and explodes in vitriol and hate. Aker wisely leaves the novel unresolved, although with hints that the fragile tendrils of relationship that have sprouted between Leeza and Reef might grow. *The First Stone* is a YA novel, but one that thematically and structurally places YA angst in a context of a redemption that is timeless.

Sarah Withrow's *The Black Sunshine of Goody Pryne* has been nominated for the 2005 MYRCA (Manitoba Young Readers Choice Award). As a compact YA novel that develops a distinctive scenario with strong characterization, it warrants the nomination. The YA environment is immediately recognizable. Stevie Walters is a fourteen-year-old who looks eleven-and-a-half. His father died in a car accident two years earlier, and his mother now cuts up pictures of his dad in front of him every time she's upset with Stevie. He feels as though he has a black hole inside him most of the time. His only friend is Goody Pryne, who "looks like she swallowed a Volkswagen" (9), who gives off a vibe "like it's only a matter of time before she bursts wide open and does something like you read about in the papers" (10) and who loves astronomy and dreams of journeying to another galaxy. Goody's parents are separated; her father pays her off so he needn't be bothered with her on visitation days, and her mother reads in bed all the time in her immaculate house. Goody's previous best friend Josie is now making Goody's life hell for some reason she won't divulge to Stevie, but Stevie is conflicted because he is becoming attracted to Tsula, Josie's confidante.

Withrow builds the tension in this pressure-cooker by exploiting the potential of the YA genre within its limited purview. We get into this world through Stevie's first-person perspective, and he's so caught up with his own situation and his relationship with the unpredictable Goody that our attention is focused unrelentingly on this small field of activity. A genuinely claustrophobic atmosphere grows in the novel, with Goody and Josie in effect circling each other looking for an opening and Stevie and Tsula trying to fend off the inevitable. It comes, of course, about halfway through, resulting in Stevie ending his friendship with Goody. Ironically, the pressure comes off once he does so and he begins to develop new relationships. Feeling more confident in himself, he now undertakes to reconcile Goody and Josie, an action leading to the second climax of the book, in which Goody plans to em-

bark on her intergalactic voyage. My only demur with Withrow's novel is a lingering feeling that Stevie used Goody therapeutically and discarded her when he no longer needed her to lean on. Goody fades out of the book near the end, and Stevie wishes he had a picture of the two of them so he "can remember these past two years—when I was sad and Goody Pryne was my best friend" (177). Although Withrow ostensibly lets Stevie out of the circumscribed world by leaving him with Josie and Tsula and writing Goody out of the book, she unintentionally shows Stevie's world to be circumscribed still.

C.S. Lewis said the worst thing a writer for children could do was write down to them patronizingly. Authors of contemporary young adult fiction have taken Lewis's dictum to heart, attempting to give back to their audience its own world rather than one that adults would feel more comfortable with. The problem here, though, is that the circumscribed worlds thus created risk presuming that the lives of teens are narrow and thin. By wanting not to patronize, YA authors often do just that. I'm reassured, therefore, by novels such as those reviewed here; while clearly aware of the YA audience, they also know that audience lives with the rest of us in a vast and various world.

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