

# Teaching Canadian Children's Literature: Learning to Know More

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• Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer •

*Résumé:* Dans cet article, les auteurs examinent les problèmes reliés à l'enseignement de la littérature canadienne pour la jeunesse au niveau universitaire. Or cette production littéraire est-elle avant tout de la littérature pour la jeunesse ou de la littérature canadienne? En se concentrant sur des questions de genre et de spécificité nationale, les auteurs et leurs étudiants ont développé une typologie des caractéristiques de la littérature pour la jeunesse au Canada anglais. P. Nodelman et M. Reimer analysent les activités scolaires proposées en termes de pédagogie et d'exploration de la canadienité.

*Summary:* This article explores the problems and the excitements of teaching Canadian children's literature in a university context. Is this literature most significantly children's literature or Canadian literature? By focusing simultaneously on both generic and national paradigms, the authors and their classes developed a provisional list of the characteristics of mainstream Canadian children's literature. The article explores the implication of these classroom activities in terms of both pedagogy and the exploration of the Canadian features of Canadian literature.

A course in Canadian children's literature sounds like a good idea — just as does having a journal like this one devoted to it. Adults interested in children's literature ought, surely, to have a special interest in the texts written by Canadians and published in Canada primarily for Canadian children. As a matter of common sense, texts written by Canadians for Canadians are most likely to be the ones that represent the world in ways a Canadian audience will recognize. Furthermore, it seems patriotic and important to encourage children to read books produced in their own country and, therefore, to offer a course designed to give adults interested in children's reading and studying children's literature at a university in Canada specific knowledge of those books.

It was thinking of this sort that led us to include a course focusing on Canadian texts among the children's literature offerings of the University of Winnipeg English department. We've taught the course many times in the past decade or so, and always retained the conviction that a course of this sort ought to exist. Nevertheless, we've been dissatisfied with our efforts. The course never quite worked — not, that is, until recently, when we did some careful thinking about the problems and then completely redesigned the course. In the process of doing so, we've learned a great deal both about pedagogy and about the subject of children's literature produced in Canada. In the pages that follow, we describe how we came to understand the problems we'd been having, outline our attempts to solve those problems, and describe some of the implications of what happened in our classrooms.

As we explored why earlier versions of the course weren't working, our first thoughts centred on how this course differed from the other children's literature courses we offered. Those courses are organized by genre — fiction, picture books, poetry, and fairy tales. The Canadian children's literature course involved students in reading in all these genres at once. Was it possible that children's texts were more tellingly organized by generic differences than by the national location of writers or publishers?

That would seem to be one of the conclusions to be drawn from an assignment we often set at the beginning of the course, in which we asked students to go to a bookstore or library and identify as many Canadian children's books as they could find there. They discovered very quickly that this is not an easy thing to do. Some stores do put Canadian books in special sections, and some libraries put maple-leaf stickers on book spines. But in the many that don't, the students are unable to pick out the Canadian books. In appearance, the Canadian books are indistinguishable from the books surrounding them that were produced in the USA or in Britain. Unless you already know the names of Canadian authors or Canadian publishers, you can't separate them from all the rest.

The problem of lack of distinctiveness apparently extends beyond external appearance to the content of the books. Students in all of our versions of the course have rarely known which of the books they have read, either as children or adults, are the Canadian ones. They are surprised to hear, for example, that Robert Munsch or Gordon Korman are Canadian writers while Mercer Mayer and Gary Paulsen are Americans. Unless a text signals its Canadian origin by referring to such landmarks as the CN Tower or the corner of Portage and Main, students rarely have a sense of anything recognizably distinctive that would tell them a book was Canadian.

So the problem was this. On the one hand, we, and our students, were convinced of the importance of focusing especially on Canadian texts.

On the other hand, we were not sure which texts were the Canadian ones, and not easily able to distinguish them from texts written elsewhere. If the texts were so difficult to distinguish, why the feeling that they ought to be singled out for special attention? In struggling with this pedagogical problem over the years, we tried several versions of the course.

In one version, we solved the problem by ignoring it. We simply offered an introduction to children's literature in general, using Canadian texts as examples of general trends, issues, and characteristics. This version of the course worked remarkably well. The fact that the texts were Canadian didn't prevent them from representing some common characteristics of children's literature or helping students to explore the attitudes that define their choices of books for children. Canadian writers for children, like those for adults, write within traditions and genres established elsewhere and with a knowledge of texts produced elsewhere. For most readers, Canadian texts for children are far more obviously children's literature than they are Canadian literature. But, exactly because the course worked well without notice being taken of the national origin of the writing, we had to ask ourselves why we would teach such a course at all. Why not just offer a course in the books Canadian children read — i.e., the indiscriminately Canadian, American, and British books available in Canadian libraries and bookstores?

In other versions of the course, we invited students to explore such questions themselves. Is there anything distinctively Canadian about these texts? Should we encourage children to read them simply because they are Canadian?

This, too, turned out to be interesting but unsatisfying. Asked to think about what makes the texts they were reading Canadian encouraged students to consider distinctively Canadian aspects of their own experience. As happens in most discussions of Canadian identity, their ideas tended to focus around key features of Canadian history and geography. Our immense mountains and prairies — and also, the spiritual values of our aboriginal peoples as currently understood — made us especially reverent of nature. Our British colonial roots made us more reticent and polite than Americans. Our two founding European nations and multicultural history of immigration made us more tolerant of ethnic difference. And our geographical position — sharing the North American continent with the more powerful USA — made us less pushy and arrogant and more humble. Almost always, our students defined themselves as Canadians in terms of how they were not like Americans. And, in all the ways they mentioned, they usually viewed themselves as being superior to Americans.

But that's about all. Invited to consider how these characteristics might resonate in the texts they were reading, the students could do little more than point out that some of the settings weren't urban and that some of

the characters had Chinese or Ukrainian names and liked going to the cottage in the summer. For the most part, in fact, students didn't accept the invitation. Given any choice at all, our students would much rather discuss the pleasures a text offers or how they felt about its being censored or shared with children than consider the ways in which it might be Canadian.

This suggested an intriguing contradiction in our students' views on this subject. On the one hand, they applauded the idea of Canadian children reading books about Canadian children. On the other hand, they lacked an interest in — and even, sometimes, actively resisted — any consideration of what might make the books distinct enough to be especially suitable for Canadian children. They preferred to take the Canadian qualities of Canadian texts for granted, and leave them unexplored.

Our students' lack of interest in these questions made us uneasy. Theorists of ideology maintain that a primary effect of the operation of ideology is to allow subjects to maintain two contradictory beliefs at once (Jameson 79) and to insist on the obviousness of their beliefs (Althusser 245). As educators, we have a vested interest in not leaving the supposedly obvious untested. It seemed important to us, then, to attempt to make students aware of how contradictory they were being, and to help them either to move past the contradictions or to explore the contradictions in explicit and appropriately complex ways. It was just this that we never managed to do very successfully.

All of these matters were in the back of our minds as we considered books we might include as texts for the sections of the course we planned for 1997. A lot of the books we were thinking about — especially the newer novels that had appeared since the last time we'd taught the course and, among those, especially the winners of prestigious prizes for Canadian children's books — seemed to have a lot in common with each other. They had similar situations, similar characters, similar dominating themes and images. They even had similar titles, often including words like "black" or "dark" or "shadow." Our first instinct was to reject many of these books on the basis that we had already chosen similar ones and ought to work for more variety. But then we began to wonder if it was possible that the similarities we were noticing might have something to do with the fact that the books were all Canadian. We felt that it did — a gut response, admittedly, but a strong one. And, we realized as we tossed out titles to each other, we couldn't think of many American or British children's books that shared the characteristics we'd been noticing, at least not with the same intensity or in quite the same way. While we couldn't define it or even find words to name it, we intuited a clear difference.

It was at this point that we began to consider yet another version of our course. Instead of ignoring the Canadian issue or raising it merely as one

of many questions for students to explore, we would make it the central focus of the course. We would choose all our texts from the group of novels that seemed to have so much in common and thus allow the similarity to become blatant, rather than choose texts that allowed it to be ignored. We would be honest with our students, and tell them that we had chosen the texts because their apparent similarities intrigued us and we would like to understand them better. We would also tell students of our conjecture that the similarities in the books had something to do with their being Canadian and that a closer look at the similarities would allow us to test the conjecture. Through doing so, we hoped to learn something more specific about Canadian identity as expressed in books for children and, perhaps, about the part those books played in making child readers conscious of themselves as Canadians.

In other words: we decided to confront our own uneasiness about the course, and our own and our students' uncertainty about what makes books Canadian, head on.

As our planning developed, the fact that two of us were teaching sections of the course in the same term became significant. It offered us a number of opportunities to extend our initial booklist and to complicate the test of our hypothesis. Both of us agreed to select texts from a group we came to call "the mainstream tradition." Each of us, however, made choices from this group and organized schedules according to our particular predilections as teachers. We agreed that, while each of our classes might explore a variety of the reading strategies we believe are important to the study of children's literature in any course, each of us also would spend a significant amount of class time on the specific discussion of the commonalities among these "mainstream" texts. Because we expected that our lists of commonalities would be somewhat different and because we knew that our interests as teachers and scholars are somewhat different, we decided to visit one another's classes midway through the term, to bring the contexts, conclusions, and perplexities of our class discussions to the notice of each other's class. This, we hoped, would alert each of the groups to areas of particularly interesting commonalities and would check the tendency of either group to make overreaching conclusions.

There were many aspects of this plan that excited us as teachers and that we expected would challenge our students. We liked the idea of foregrounding the methods by which we, as literary scholars, developed and judged evidence in literary arguments. We liked the opportunity our visits to one another's classes would give us to demonstrate some variation among the styles and methods of literary scholars. We recognized that our frank admission of the conjectural nature of the course would make us vulnerable as instructors — how dare we teach what we did not in fact know? But we also hoped that the experimental direction of the course would stimu-

late enthusiastic discussion and active learning for students.

On second thought, however, the plan also struck us as overbalancing the representation of one segment of the writing community. The “mainstream” texts were novels written in English and published since 1980. Many of them were award-winners. Most were published by a handful of central Canadian publishing houses. All of them were written by white Canadians.

The texts most likely to disturb any complacency about this particular “mainstream” representing the whole field of Canadian children’s literature would, obviously, be those published in Quebec or elsewhere in French. But since our course is located in a department of English — and also, sadly, because we can’t expect the students of our western Canadian university to possess a reading knowledge of our other official language — we had to ignore the issue of a second Canadian “mainstream” altogether. (In later versions of this course, we’ve included French language children’s books from Quebec in English translation — a not very satisfactory solution to the problem, since the mere fact of these books being translated and published by English Canadian publishers makes them part of English Canadian children’s literature.)

We could, however, select texts from less central kinds of English Canadian children’s literature. We could include representatives from other genres of children’s literature, from earlier Canadian children’s literature, from censored or contested literature, from literature written by regional writers or published by regional presses, from Native Canadian writers, and from writers from communities of recent immigrants or racial minorities.

Following the principle we had already established of making the questions we had about the course central to the course, we developed another plan. Half of the course would be taken up with the study of the “mainstream” and the other half would focus on texts that might reveal the limitations of that mainstream as representative of Canadian children’s literature as a whole. Moreover, since the first half of the course was likely to involve many large-group discussions guided by the instructors, the second half of the course would involve small-group work on specific non-mainstream topics guided by students.

The course outlines we developed according to these principles were neither wholly the same nor wholly different. As representation of the mainstream, Mavis Reimer’s students read, in order, Monica Hughes’s *Hunter in the Dark* (1982), Welwyn Wilton Katz’s *False Face* (1987), Janet Lunn’s *Shadow in Hawthorn Bay* (1986), Brian Doyle’s *Angel Square* (1984), and Michael Bedard’s *Redwork* (1990). Perry Nodelman’s students also read *Hunter in the Dark* and *Shadow in Hawthorn Bay*, along with Katz’s *Out of the Dark* (1995), Doyle’s *Spud in Winter* (1995), and Tim Wynne-Jones’s *The Maestro* (1995).

The non-mainstream topics and texts we asked students to research

similarly had some overlaps and some divergences. Reimer's students could choose to investigate one of the following:

- Canadian children's literature written before 1980, with L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) as the text the class would read in preparation for the group's presentation.
- Native Canadian children's literature, with Beatrice Culleton's *April Raintree* (1984) as shared text.
- children's literature by Winnipeg writers, with Perry Nodelman's *The Same Place But Different* (1993) as shared text.
- plays for young people, with both a performance at the Manitoba Theatre for Young People and the published script of Drew Hayden Taylor's *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock* as shared texts.
- contested material for young people, with Cherylyn Stacey's *How Do You Spell Abducted?* (1996) as shared text.

The choices of non-mainstream topics for Nodelman's students also included plays for young people, centering on a performance of *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock*; earlier Canadian texts, but with a focus on Catharine Parr Trail's *Canadian Crusoes* (1850); and children's literature by Winnipeg writers, but with a focus on Carol Matas's *The Primrose Path* (1995) rather than on their instructor's own novel. Rather than censored material, their final choice was a consideration of Canadian picture books. Both classes were assigned Margaret Buffie's *The Dark Garden* (1995) to read for the final examination, for which students were asked to respond to, analyze, and evaluate Buffie's novel in light of what they had learned about Canadian children's literature during the course.

We began the course by highlighting the ways it was organized to raise questions about shared qualities. As the classes progressed, we encouraged students to be aware of those qualities and to be thinking about their possible significance. Thus, as soon as we had experienced class discussions of more than one of the "mainstream" novels, we left class time open for considerations of how the second novel might be like the first, then how the third might be like the other two, and so on.

Meanwhile, we encouraged students to try to make sense of the similarities they were or were not discovering by introducing them to contextual information that might be relevant. Using basic assumptions from reader-response theory, we asked students to characterize themselves as readers and to describe their responses generally. We also had class discussions focused more narrowly on the question of what they felt it meant for them to be Canadian, and discussions about whether or not they felt any particular

sympathy with the novels we had asked them to read. We encouraged them to think about whether or not peculiarities of Canadian geography and history might lead our children's writers to a tendency to certain qualities or stances or tones. We introduced them to the possibility of globalized theories of Canadian identity like those of Frye and Atwood, and encouraged them to consider the novels in terms of the presence or absence in them of a garrison mentality or an obsession with victimhood and survival. (We also pointed out the possibility that, rather than being evidence of a shared Canadian mentality, the presence of these features in novels might merely mean that these writers knew these theories and intended to express them.) Finally, we discussed the peculiar history of children's literature in this country — the surprisingly recent development of a viable publishing industry, the network of professional interrelationships among the various authors we were studying, the relationships between children's publishing in Canada and in the USA, and so on. All of this, we hoped, would allow students to consider whether the similarities we were discovering could be accounted for in terms of an understanding of a peculiarly Canadian identity or in terms of the shared values and preconceptions of a smaller children's literature community — or whether they were significant enough to need to be accounted for at all.

The set of activities that became the most productive for both sections, however, began as an introduction to the consideration of children's literature as a genre. Nodelman has argued, in *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*, that children's literature can be distinguished as a genre from other types of writing. Reimer had assigned as required reading the chapter of *Pleasures* in which Nodelman describes his theory of the genre and outlines a specific set of characteristics that define it, organized under the conventional literary categories of characters, plots, themes, style and structure, and focalization. At this point in the course, Reimer's students had read a number of the "mainstream" novels. It occurred to her that the list of characteristics Nodelman describes might act as a sort of cognitive schema to help the students determine ways in which the novels they were reading represented or diverged from a generalized type. So she asked them to consider, in small groups, the ways in which these novels matched and did not match the ideas presented in *Pleasures*. The responses from the small groups were combined into a comprehensive list of similarities and differences.

The class was invited at this point to speculate in a large-group discussion on the significance of their findings in terms of the Canadian provenance of the texts. They found very little to say. Many, in fact, expressed considerable doubt that their findings were significant in any way.

But the general climate of class discussion changed after the list of similarities and differences developed by Reimer's class was shared with the students in Nodelman's class, as the basis for further small group work.

Here, the task was to consider whether or not the conclusions reached by Reimer's students could be seen to apply also to the slightly different group of "mainstream" novels these students had read. The result was a more detailed list. Nodelman's students insisted that many of the statements they had been given had to be complicated before they could be said to apply to all of the novels they had read. But it also became clear that, to an astonishing degree, these novels did, in fact, share characteristics with each other. This expanded list was sent back to Reimer's class. Students in both sections continued to develop this document as the course progressed — and, eventually, to use it as a cognitive schema through which they could evaluate the degree to which the texts studied later in small groups did or did not diverge from the mainstream.

The list of shared qualities of the "mainstream" novels, which appears as an appendix to this article, was the most interesting and thought-provoking result of our work in the course. We are still in the process of digesting the significance of what we and our students discovered and created. It seems obvious to us that the books produced recently by the major Canadian publishers of children's and young adult fiction tend to address their audiences in terms of surprisingly similar themes expressed in surprisingly similar ways. Some of these similarities are ones these books share with texts of literature for children and young adults produced elsewhere — they are characteristics of children's literature as it exists around the world in our time. But others qualities are uncommon in the children's literature of other countries — and seem, therefore, to represent something distinctive about children's literature in our own country.

One key result of our activities in this course was our realization of our need to keep on thinking about these particular themes and modes of expression. We wanted to explore the emotional, intellectual, and cultural atmosphere and the material practices that might account for them, and to investigate how this core of shared qualities might operate to construct a shared subjectivity in the Canadian children who have access to these books. While the results of the small-group presentations on non-mainstream topics were too varied to report in summary here, it was evident that the ways in which cultural climates and material practices exclude some voices must be taken into account in these further considerations. We clearly had much work to do in order to develop the ideas we had engendered. In the time since the experience we describe here, we've begun to do some of this work, with interesting and provocative results. We'll say more about that later.

Meanwhile, however, we want to focus on what we learned from the process of the course itself, and from our students' response to it. We'll start by outlining some of our disappointments, and the ways in which they might suggest ways of understanding both some central problems in current university pedagogy and some central problems in coming to terms with Cana-

dian children's literature.

One disappointment was the readiness of some students to attribute authority to the list of characteristics they had generated. Even though they had participated in discussions about the adequacy of particular articulations of items on the list, and had seen the list revised and recirculated, a contingent of students in each section ignored the provisionality of the class's findings. In their final examinations, they assumed that their task was merely to corroborate the existence of the various commonalities in Buffie's novel. A related attitude was adopted by a few of the small groups in presenting their research on texts that might challenge the mainstream. Having developed the list, they were unwilling, apparently, to admit that it did not account for all Canadian texts for children. There was, in these instances, much stretching of ideas and wildly imaginative interpreting of texts to make the new material fit the old categories — and some annoyance when we pointed out the lack of persuasiveness of the interpretations and suggested that perhaps our categories might not actually account for everything. If they weren't absolutely true or a universally acceptable approach to all Canadian children's texts, then why were we wasting our time on them at all?

To some extent, these were problems we had anticipated, since we regularly encounter students anxious about having the "right" answers. The biggest surprise came for us from another direction, in the adamant resistance of a few students to any attempt to create such a list of commonalities. To the end of the course, they vehemently rejected this as a mistaken exercise.

What was most interesting about this rejection is that it grew more vehement as the similarities we were finding in the novels became more obvious. As the evidence mounted, so did the resistance to the conclusions it seemed to be implying. One energetic discussion took place after a student announced that it was all well and good, but after all, you could find anything you wanted to find in a book if you set out to look for it, so weren't we just making this all up? A surprising number of other students not only agreed with this statement, but agreed with a degree of passion that suggested some serious investment in not wanting to accept the presence of all these commonalities in the texts as anything other than a delusional fantasy we had all somehow succumbed to. The resistance continued into the second half of the course, when many of the small groups not only neglected to mention the ways in which the material they were discussing did or did not relate to the lists engendered earlier, but generally neglected to discuss the Canadian provenance of the texts in any way at all. The group doing picture books seemed genuinely surprised when told that their choice of materials should be restricted to Canadian books.

So why, then, were these students, theoretically willing to believe in

the importance of Canadian books for Canadian children, so opposed to thinking about a group of texts in terms of the implications of their shared qualities—implications that might have helped them to understand more about what makes texts Canadian and why that might be important for children to have access to? There seem to be several possible — and related — explanations.

First, the student's comment that we would find anything we decided to look for in a text appears to stem from some basic assumptions about literature and literary study that, in our experience, many university students share, assumptions that seem to have developed in response to pedagogical practices common in many high school and university English classrooms. One assumption is that literary texts are open to an infinite range of meaning — that they can and do in fact mean whatever any reader chooses to see them as meaning. While this seems to allow for a range of possibilities, many students use it as a justification for dismissing the significance of any particular act of interpretation. If a text can mean whatever anyone wants it to mean, then it actually doesn't mean anything in particular at all — certainly not anything worth discussing with others.

This then relates to a second assumption, that the meanings English teachers find in texts are "hidden." That is, these meanings are not available to other, more normal readers, but are made up by the teachers themselves as a sort of secret code available only to those with power and used to impose their power over less powerful people from whom the meanings are hidden. Our lists were a form of "hidden meaning" — ways in which Professors Nodelman and Reimer could impose their own arcane vision of things on the class as a whole and thus devalue the authentic responses of the students themselves and cause them to have lower grades than they deserved. *Interestingly forgotten in all this* was the fact that the lists had been developed by all of us working as a group, albeit by people some of whom now wanted to declare the inauthenticity of their own involvement in the exercise.

At any rate, all of this amounts to a distrust of the ability of any literary text to actually communicate anything in itself. It defines literature as something that allows you to engender meanings within yourself as an act of self-discovery, not as something that conveys somebody else's vision or ideas to you. Indeed, one student identified the "many chances for self-discovery" as an important strength of the course on the evaluation form. While we believe in the importance of self-discovery, a major part of our effort as teachers of literature always is to move students beyond a solipsistic vision of reading. We try to persuade students that texts do work to convey specific meanings and do, in fact, often convey them to attentive readers with a repertoire of communally shared reading strategies, and we encourage students to enter into dialogue with these meanings.

Meanwhile, many of our students have an equal but contradictory faith that literary texts are acts of self-expression on the part of their authors. Consequently, another facet of their resistance to a study of shared qualities of texts seems to be an investment in the idea that texts emerge from the unique imaginations of individuals and are therefore individual and unique. The idea that a group of texts might share any quality at all with other texts is, therefore, deeply distressing. That might explain why the resistance grew as the commonalities became more obvious. Some students revealed a similar distress during discussions of how authors work with editors and how publishers' methods of choosing books on the basis of marketability might influence what writers choose to write. Any sense that the act of composing literature is not a spontaneous production and representation of an unique individual imagination contradicts a view of writing, indeed of themselves and the world they live in, that appears to be deeply meaningful and important to many of our students, too important to sacrifice for the sake of a list of shared qualities in Canadian children's novels. Stated baldly: the idea that Canadian texts, or Canadians themselves, might share qualities by virtue of their nationality seemed to many of our students to fly in the face of their increasingly urgent need to protect a strong and very important belief in the unique individuality of each and every individual human being.

This highlights for us a key pedagogical problem our course revealed to us. As educators, we develop classes, courses, and curricula on the basis of an understanding of a core principle of cognitive psychology, one we have mentioned already: that human beings respond to new information in terms of models or schema built from past experience. As Ulric Neisser says, "Not only reading, but also listening, feeling, and looking are skillful activities that occur over time. All of them depend upon pre-existing structures ... called *schemata*, which direct perceptual activity and are modified as it occurs" (14). As scholars, we accept the basic assumption of our discipline that literary texts emerge from a context of previous texts known to writers, and that our own understanding as readers and thinkers develops as we consider texts in a range of other contexts or schema: literary forms and genres, societal assumptions, cultural environments, historical events, current attitudes and assumptions about race or class or gender. All of these activities insist on placing texts in relation to each other in order to read their commonalities and define their differences. Our students' resistance to the exploration of commonalities suggests a wider resistance to a number of activities requisite to a thoughtful response to literature — perhaps a resistance to thoughtfulness itself. We began to wonder if this resistance signalled an attempt to preserve some mainstream ideological values of our culture from critical analysis, critical analysis that might dislodge the power of those values over our students.

It struck us as especially significant that the resistance came so ur-

gently and so strongly specifically to a question of shared national values and, in particular, shared Canadian national values. Our students are much less resistant to questions of what texts might share by virtue of the shared sex or race of their authors. For instance, the groups of students in both sections who undertook research into texts written by aboriginal Canadians raised no objections to discussing these texts as sharing a context.

It's important at this point for us to acknowledge that we can claim little specialized knowledge of Canadian literature as an academic discipline. Both of us centre our research on children's literature, and have written occasionally on Canadian writers for children. But Nodelman works primarily with theoretical questions about picture books and the generic characteristics of children's fiction from a variety of countries, and Reimer specializes in Victorian children's literature and in Victorian fiction written by and about women. From our position as outsiders to the Canadian studies community, however, our students' attitude seems a reductive version of the attitude of at least one important group of scholars of Canadian literature. The very names of the associations and conferences that support these studies insist on the importance of studying and teaching Canadian literature. But a number of scholars question the value of focusing on this literature in terms of its expression of a distinct Canadian-ness, especially in terms of the way such an enterprise both works to exclude the connections of Canadian writing to international literature and devalues writing that speaks for marginalized groups within Canada. In a book called *What Is a Canadian Literature?* John Metcalf says, "Most of our theories about our literature are both comical and distasteful ... the only thing most of our critics have in common is the desire to exclude ... nearly all the visions of our literature are nationalistic, chauvinistic, smug, and amazingly white" (13). Similarly, Susan Rudy Dorscht argues that "'Canadian' is a problematic term that continues, despite the rhetoric of multiculturalism, to signify white and middle class when Canadians ... are already hyphenated" (138-39). If specialists are willing to generalize about shared characteristics, it is more often in terms of regional literatures — texts produced in Quebec or on the prairies, for example.

Postmodern deconstructions of explanatory paradigms have alerted scholars in all disciplines to the designs of master narratives like theories of what being Canadian means. Because the ideas of the nation and nationality are linked historically with the colonizing narratives of the nineteenth century, they appear to have been thoroughly contaminated as true accounts of the experiences of a group of people. But the idea of nation is an idea that had, and continues to have, intellectual and material effects in shaping the real lives of people. We share W. H. New's position: "I am concerned when I hear some local boundaries construed as irrelevant and national social agreements pronounced meaningless ... I am concerned because such faith in the

ostensible neutrality of postnational ideologies seems peculiarly narrowing — because it does not take into account the character of the culture of profit or the limits that master narratives of culture can impose on culture and learning” (30). In other words, to repudiate the category of nationality as a possible category for organizing study is, surely, to repudiate the investigation both of important historical ideas and of still currently relevant economic and cultural conditions. Conversely, to privilege gender, race, class, or geography (as in the focus on regionalism) as categories of investigation is not to relinquish dependence on explanatory paradigms, but merely to shift the narratives we agree to read as true or truly revelatory.

Rather than trying to find a different set of “right” answers, then, it seems important to us to ask what interests are being served by the discrediting of the historical narratives of nationality and the privileging of other narratives. Is such a repudiation a repudiation of the idea of history itself and a reification of what appear to be unchangeable and essential definitions of Self and Other? Victorian scholars have demonstrated that promulgation of the ideas of individuality and uniqueness, coupled with isolation from their peers, were critical controls exerted to keep Victorian girls in their place in the private, domestic sphere. Does the insistence of some of our students on their absolute individuality suggest that they have been similarly placed? If so, the existence of a course that insists that students consider the possibility that they share a collective identity as Canadians seems more important than ever.

That seems particularly true if we consider one other explanation for the resistance to speculations about national identity that we encountered — that our own students, and other Canadians, might be particularly prone to this kind of resistance. We began to wonder if students in similar courses in other countries — American students studying American children’s literature, for instance, or Swedish students studying Swedish children’s literature — would respond to this sort of discussion with the same reluctance. We suspected they wouldn’t — that the very fact of a resistance to this sort of thinking might itself be a clue to the peculiar nature of a specifically Canadian identity. We do tend as a people to pride ourselves on our inability to define who we are. And intriguingly, a number of Canadianists have developed theories that focus on forms of uncertainty. New says that “Canadian cultural practice ... has been repeatedly preoccupied with multiple possibilities,” and adds, “The principle of cultural flexibility has led some commentators to assume that Canada has no identity at all. They thus miss the point” (43). Similarly, E.D. Blodgett asserts that Canada “is a place of plurality that at once constrains and liberates.... Canada is to be defined as a crisis. Crisis, no matter how intense, is the intersection of competing arguments” (3).

One way or another, we learned a lot from this course — especially from the list of possible characteristics our students engendered and the students' own responses to the list. And despite the disappointments we've described, we believe many of the students learned a lot also. The quality of attention and discussion in the classroom improved as students became aware that their own observations were being used as the basis for a list that was so central to the work — a list, moreover, that would be shared with students from another section of the course. There were useful discussions in both sections about whether the description of particular characteristics was sufficiently nuanced. Few students complained that they didn't know what to write about in their individual writing pieces. Many students used the list as a resource for their own work, some confirming class findings, the best extending and querying class findings. A number of students emphasized this aspect of the course as the most valuable aspect of their learning experience in their class evaluations, suggesting that the exercise had helped them learn "how to explore the genre of children's literature" and "how to think and write critically." In this sense, at least, we have solved our problem with this course — we had made our own uncertainty about it a key feature of what we managed to teach in it.

Indeed, what our students most strongly responded to, sometimes negatively but often very positively, was the uncertainty the course imposed upon them — a lived (and distinctly Canadian?) experience of what Blodgett calls an "intersection of competing arguments" and an awareness that useful answers are rarely simple and rarely final. We had foregrounded exactly those questions that seemed the most perplexing, the most fundamental — and finally, the least answerable. Furthermore, the exercise that generated the most animated discussions was one that engaged two explanatory paradigms, that of a generic literature and that of a national literature, and refused ever to leave either out of consideration, so that multiplying rather than ignoring categories was a key to productive learning.

This is the sort of complexity and uncertainty that accompanies any careful consideration of a complex field that avoids easy answers. Indeed, what strikes us as the most noteworthy feature of our work in the course is the way in which it replicated for undergraduates the activities of professional scholars in the process of their research. Universities are sometimes said to be institutions that preserve, transmit, and create knowledge. These three functions are often separated in practice, with libraries and archives being assigned the function of preservation, teaching the function of transmission, and research the function of creation. As we have come to understand it, the most important aspect of our re-design of the Canadian Children's Literature course was the way in which it allowed us to move beyond transmitting knowledge in the classroom and to demonstrate to stu-

dents how knowledge is created through a re-consideration and re-contextualization of what is already known. Students in these classes participated in the building of new knowledge about the subject they were studying. Their uncertainties paid off in the form of exciting new possibilities, for them in terms of their ability to enter uncharted territory and begin to develop some mastery of it, for us in terms of our perceptions of how we might build on their findings. All of us were in the process of learning to know more.

In fact, the students' work has turned out to be much more than a limited classroom exercise. Since we first taught this course, we have regularly used the list these classes developed as information for other classes in Canadian children's literature, which these subsequent classes have modified and refined in their turn. The refinements, not surprisingly, have reflected the particular interests and pressures within specific classes. For example, a group of students in one 1999 version of the course brought their studies in gender from other classes to their consideration of the literature. Reading from this perspective, they added a number of qualifications about the different ways in which the common characteristics of the novels are inflected in books featuring male characters and books featuring female characters. They agreed that the novels are more interested in action than in description, but, in boys' books, the events lead to physical survival or to the accomplishment of specific tasks, while the events in girls' books more typically lead to psychological or spiritual self-realization. The shared subject of curiosity and learning, they concluded, also was gendered, with boys typically learning information and skills, while girls usually learned about themselves. In another 1999 version of the course, students combined their knowledge of the list of characteristics with materials from an earlier lecture on theories of Canadian identity to make connections between the expected themes of isolation and community and Frye's theories about the garrison mentality. They read the five "mainstream" novels they studied as stories of characters who leave various symbolic forms of garrisons in order to achieve community, and saw that as a utopian response to a distinctly if not uniquely Canadian view of isolated selfhood. Such revisions to the list open up the conversation within classes about the relation of the knower to the known.

As we suggested earlier, meanwhile, our own research has been informed by the work of these undergraduate students. As a number of the long explanations and qualifications in the appended list suggest, the nature of home in the Canadian texts proved to be difficult to define. As the lists were passed back and forth between classes, students often found that they wanted to add further variations to the descriptions of the characteristic plot patterns or the thematic valuations of home in the novels. The difficulty of reaching agreement on these items suggested to Mavis Reimer that a more

systematic consideration of home might point to something important and, possibly, distinctive about Canadian children's literature. With another colleague from the University of Winnipeg, Anne Rusnak of French Studies, she designed a comparative study of the representation of home in the award-winning novels in French and English. Their research has confirmed the observations of our students that the completed circular journey is rarely found in Canadian children's literature and has complicated these observations by finding that different variations of the pattern are popular in French and English texts. Reimer and Rusnak's paper on the representation of home in French and English Canadian children's literature will appear in a forthcoming issue of *CCL*. Reimer and Rusnak plan now to extend that work to interrogate the binary bilingual and bi-cultural picture they have developed of the patterns of these elite texts.

On another front, Perry Nodelman has developed an interest in the prevalence of narratives with two focalizations that our students helped make us aware of. He has been developing an increasingly lengthy list of Canadian children's novels that operate in this way, and begun to speculate about their significance. It seems to have less to do with the old theory about our national preoccupation with two solitudes than it does with the ways in which the presence of two focalized characters works to detach readers, prevent identification with any one character, and encourage critical objectivity.

Having seen it change as students worked on it, we know that the list we developed with our classes is not as complete or as nuanced as it might be. In appending the list to this article, we hope, not to claim authority for it, but instead, to pique the interest and the scepticism of other teachers and scholars. For the call for papers associated with this list, please see the outside back cover of this issue. What are the possibilities and the limitations of this list or such lists in general? Do any of the characteristics we've listed suggest values that distinguish Canadian children's literature as a particular collection of texts from other children's literature? Or are shared characteristics more simply explained in terms of the material facts of publication in Canada? Are the needs and responsibilities of a teacher of Canadian children's literature different from, or even antithetical to, the needs and responsibilities of a scholar of Canadian children's literature? How important is it to consider the full range of typical Canadian children's reading in developing a description of Canadian children's literature? As we continue to teach and to think about Canadian children's literature, we look forward to the responses and revisions of other students and scholars to our list in progress.

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## Appendix:

### Shared Characteristics of "Mainstream" Canadian Children's Novels

#### Characters

- The central young characters are in conflict with adults, usually with their parents. Typically there is a change in this relationship during the course of the novel. Even in novels in which both of these things are true, parents may be quite peripheral to the central events of the plot.
- Main characters have unsatisfactory home lives, communicate very lit-

tle with parents, and try to solve problems on their own. Usually, however, the solution comes when they turn to other people and stop trying to be independent.

- Despite problems, each protagonist is loved by his or her parents; sometimes that's the problem itself.
- In addition to turning to their peers for support, there usually seems to be another adult, not a parent, to whom the young protagonist turns for advice.
- Questions of dishonesty or secrecy are important in these books. Parents may be dishonest and secretive with their children or children may be dishonest or secretive with their parents. Resolutions typically occur when protagonists choose to tell secrets or be told them: communication creates a community, and that is seen as a positive development. And conversely, then, isolation, secrecy, not telling what you know, being independent and separate, are seen as dangerous.
- Main characters are "round" rather than flat. They change and develop during the novels. It also seems that there are key central moments at which they change—often almost at the end of the book. A choice is made which seems to bring together all the images, events, and conflicts that occurred throughout the book, in one intense moment of choice or perception. This also seems to be a point at which the characters are defined as being mature or becoming mature — they grow up, somehow — and that's the happy ending.
- The main characters are often "innocent" or ignorant — they don't know something, or pretend to themselves that they don't know it — so the key point is learning something or acknowledging it — facing a truth, moving past innocence or ignorance or lack of knowledge.
- The main characters are responsible but also dependent on others — or more accurately, there are always questions of dependence and independence, and of responsibility and irresponsibility.
- The main characters are outsiders, "unusual" young people; at least, there is a sense in which they have to see themselves as not "normal," and test themselves against the norm. It may be a specific instance of this characteristic that many of the main characters are from a lower middle-class stratum of society.
- The main characters tend to be adventurous people, willing to take chances and undergo danger.
- The main characters' actions are often more important than their thoughts.

## *Plot and Settings*

- The novels tend to be variations on the home/away/home pattern, rather than reiterations of it. In some cases, home is where the roots are, and going away represents self-discovery, maturation, loss of innocence, and the original home is not returned to. The initial or originary home often is only remembered or recollected in the text and not seen. In some cases, there is a move to, or an acceptance of a new home: away *becomes* home. In another variation, characters don't leave home despite problems in the home; rather, they stay and work to resolve their problems. Frequently there is a multiple pattern of movement between various homes and "aways."
- Questions about the safety and comfort of home are central to these novels. The books work to get their characters to confront the relative virtues of being safe or not, or the circumstances in which you might be willing to give up safety. Is there a paradoxical pattern here: trying to be safe is dangerous while learning to accept danger finally makes you safe?
- Home is not necessarily the building one lives in with their family; it may be a state of mind or feeling.
- The main character must conquer fear. This, indeed, may be the one generalization everyone seems willing to accept.
- The "fear" is often represented by "the dark": shadows, death, the wilderness, and bad weather (snow, fog), either alone or together.
- The stories move towards discovery, indeed, toward self-discovery. This is often related to the move past fearfulness.
- The novels are all driven by action, focusing on events rather than on descriptions of interior feelings or landscapes, for example.
- The climax tends to be very close to the end — a big central intense moment, and then it's suddenly all over.

## *Style and Thematic Structure*

- There is a repetition of central ideas in the novels — clearly unifying images that recur and give shape to the events.
- Most (but not all) of the novels switch repeatedly between two contexts, or have two stories going at the same time. For example, the novel might be structured around two different points in a series of events (flash-backs), two different focalizing characters, or two different historical settings. The two contexts come together dramatically at the central moment of the plot. Does this suggest separation and then convergence as a

structural principle as well as a thematic concern? The two contexts usually oppose the past and the present in some way, with resolutions often valuing letting the past go or moving beyond it.

- Some of the novels contrast (or at least reflect) urban and rural life (or perhaps, life in a civilized place and the wild).
- The language of the books is generally simple, but there are some complications, often in the introduction of words from other languages.
- Most of the novels are written in the third person.

### *Subjects and Images*

- Whether or not the books have the home/away/home plot pattern, they do tend to focus on questions of what home is, or where it is, or what it should be and how you should feel about it.
- There seems to be a prominent concern with health and sickness: the main characters either have illnesses or must deal with (and come to terms with) the illness or medical problems or deaths of others.
- Winter and/or the harshness of the climate or the landscape seem to be prominent themes. Being Canadian means being in touch with nature?
- There is *eventually* a love of nature evident in the novels. Characters often move from fear of nature to acceptance of it. Furthermore, descriptions of nature often become symbolic or meaningful in some way.
- Curiosity and the need or desire to learn are prominent in all of the novels.

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*Perry Nodelman is a professor of English at the University of Winnipeg. His current project is a book on the generic characteristics of children's literature.*

*Mavis Reimer is an associate professor of English at the University of Winnipeg, where she teaches and publishes in the areas of children's literature and Victorian studies.*