



**Looking for Canada:
Places and Cultural Spaces in Recent Fiction for Adolescents**

—Theresa Rogers

with Laura Dunford, Mollie Freilich, Megan Lankford, Marilyn Rivers-Bowerman, Vasiliki Tassiopoulos, Karen Taylor, Kay Weisman, and Beth Wilcox

Brooks, Martha. *Mistik Lake*. Toronto: Greenwood, 2007. 208 pp. \$14.95 pb. ISBN 978-0-88899-752-4. Print.

Choyce, Lesley. *Book of Michael*. Markham, ON: Red Deer, 2008. 224 pp. \$12.95 pb. ISBN 978-0-88995-417-5. Print.

Gringas, Charlotte. *Pieces of Me*. Trans. Susan Ouriou. Toronto: Kids Can, 2009. 144 pp. \$17.95 hc. ISBN 978-1-55453-242-1. Print.

Holubitsky, Katherine. *Tweaked*. Victoria: Orca, 2008. 180 pp. \$9.95 pb. ISBN 978-1-55143-851-1. Print.

Ibbitson, John. *The Landing*. Toronto: Kids Can, 2008. 160 pp. \$17.95 hc. ISBN 978-1-55453-234-6. Print.

Jocelyn, Marthe. *Would You*. Toronto: Tundra, 2008. 166 pp. \$19.99 hc. ISBN 978-0-88776-816-3. Print.

Nanji, Shenaaz. *Child of Dandelions*. Honesdale, PA: Front Street, 2008. 216 pp. \$17.95 hc. ISBN 978-1-932425-93-2. Print.

Stevenson, Robin. *Out of Order*. Victoria: Orca, 2007. 176 pp. \$9.95 pb. ISBN 978-55143-693-7. Print.

Tamaki, Mariko. *Skim*. Illus. Jillian Tamaki. Toronto: Greenwood, 2008. 144 pp. \$18.95 hc. ISBN 978-0-88899-753-1. Print.

Taylor, Drew Hayden. *The Night Wanderer*. Toronto: Annick, 2007. 218 pp. \$10.95 pb. ISBN 978-1-55451-099-3. Print.

Introduction

In writing this review, a group of graduate students and I set out to map the terrain of the most interesting recent Canadian adolescent literature written in or translated into English. We were interested in how a sense of place intersects with the cultural landscapes of contemporary Canada as produced or represented spaces in Canadian literature for young people.

I work in a master's program with an interdisciplinary focus on children's and young adult literature at the University of British Columbia. Students take courses in English, Creative Writing, Library, and Education departments. When I was asked to review recent Canadian young adult fiction, I invited students from the program who were also taking my courses (Teaching Adolescent Literature and/or Introduction to Research in the Teaching of Literature) to collaborate with me. Both courses introduce a variety of theoretical perspectives on young adult literature. Some of the students have previous experience writing reviews for journals and magazines, and others don't, but all are sophisticated and avid readers of young adult literature. The process of writing collaboratively, however, is often a challenge, and this project was not without its trials. My sense is that some of the co-authors were simply happy to complete the "assignment" and move on to other projects, while others continued to work on several drafts and contribute to conversations about the works and the perspectives taken. My position of

power as professor allowed me a certain freedom to shape and reshape the reviews as my own interest in the topic developed.

We began our exploration with a box of books sent for us to review by the editors of *Jeunesse*, formerly *CCL/LCJ*. From that box, we began by choosing those works that were published most recently (between 2007 and 2009) and were addressed to older adolescent readers, but might also appeal to a broader audience. Members of the group also suggested other novels that might qualify, several of which are included.

While many of us had the opportunity to read several books, I asked the group to review books that might be considered "edgy." By "edgy," I meant works that resist discourses of adolescence as a "stage" or notions, such as those critiqued in the work of educational theorist Nancy Lesko, of adolescents themselves as dangerous and endangered beings. I asked the group to consider books that disrupt boundaries between adolescence and adulthood, use alternative narratives or formats, or challenge notions of appropriate content; in other words, literary works that assume their audience to be sophisticated readers and open to new literary forms. In one of several group conversations, this notion of "edginess" became more fine-tuned.

There was a clear consensus in the group that "overwhelming didacticism" disqualified books



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that may have had “edgy” content but were compromised by tidy endings. As Megan pointed out, “It didn’t matter how edgy they were—in terms of technology, drugs, sex, etc.—it mattered about how it was treated at the end, whether space was given to adolescents to experience things and respect given in terms of resolving those issues themselves.” Kay felt that a book could have an upbeat ending but still deal respectfully with interesting issues, as in the book she reviewed, *The Landing*. Laura suggested that in a truly “edgy” work an author is willing to permanently damage his or her protagonist: “I know this sounds a little weird, but if the events of the novel are not significant enough to mark the character/s experiencing them, how can the novel provide its readers with a resounding conclusion? This does not mean the narrative must have a tragic ending, it simply means there must be a mark left behind that prevents the narrative world from fully recovering.”

Whether any or all of the titles finally selected can be considered “edgy” remains unresolved. The two key aspects I asked the group to consider in writing their reviews were the literary quality and the “Canadianism” of the works. With a mix of Canadians from various ethnic groups, expats, and Americans among the reviewers, the perennial question of “What is Canadian?” arose, as well as who can judge this. This is not surprising given the “uncertain cultural identity” “Canadianism” denotes (Saltman 116). Many of the reviewers commented on their annoyance at what they took to be the erasure of specific cultural markers in Canadian books to make them more “palatable” for the US market, a phenomenon identified by Patsy Aldana in “Crossing the Money Boundary.” I asked that students consider the cultural

representations in these works, as well as the authors' cultural backgrounds, many of which are as complex and shifting as the Canadian cultural landscape. In our approach, we assumed that the writers draw on their overlapping heritages, as First Nations People, as Canadians whose families have lived in Canada for generations, as Québécois, and as more recent immigrants, while holding a diverse group of young readers in mind.

We asked how a sense of place is inscribed in these works. What spaces are writers imagining or reflecting? How do they represent these places and spaces in their narratives? This includes geographical spaces such as Eastern or Western Canada, Québec, cities, towns, rural settings, or private schools; social spaces such as families, homes, or friendships; and cultural spaces such as Indigenous, Japanese-Canadian, or recent-immigrant communities.

As I was revising the reviews for this essay, I began to explore further this notion of space in terms of the Canadian "national imaginary" in children's and young adult literature posited in the recent collection *Home Words*, edited by Mavis Reimer. The collection reinforces the idea that the spaces of adolescence are themselves liminal—situated between childhood and adulthood—so that many protagonists are coping with geographical, social, and cultural displacements as they make the journey to adulthood. *Home Words* deepened my interest in examining, across the

reviews, where the protagonists are physically located, their movements, and the ways that their "mobile subjectivities" (Reimer, "Homing" 2) or elusive cultural identities are represented. How do these identities play out in relation to societal norms and conventions throughout the narratives of recent Canadian fiction?

When I shared these new perspectives with the group after writing the first draft, Kay mentioned that the question "What is Canadian?" is similar to questions of home/away, of filiation/affiliation, of inclusion/exclusion, and of what constitutes a national imaginary in a multicultural country. Vasso thought we might have focused less on notions of the "other" and more on increasingly integrated and hybrid identities across generations. While reviewing within the initial framework, Mollie noticed that places stood in for larger themes, such as wilderness for reconciliation, and that these novels offered generous spaces for adolescences to deal with "issues" rather than relying on cultural discourses, such as those she often found in American young adult novels, that denote a desire to "fix" our youth. Karen agreed, and added that southern Canada—the cities, the urban centres—becomes the place where the final vestiges of adolescence are shed in the journey toward adulthood.

This review essay is the outcome of a collaborative process of finding how these ten works fit into the larger cultural landscape of Canada. In general, our reviews note how young protagonists in these works

deal with difficult and sometimes tragic experiences that move them through cultural landscapes and through adolescence toward more adult sensibilities.

Recent Novels for Young Adults Written by Canadian Authors

The first two works we review, *Mistik Lake* and *The Landing*, journey into pastoral terrain and generational history. In both of these works, the settings are infused with a sense of family and belonging, which influences the choices of the protagonists to stay or move on.

Martha Brooks rarely disappoints; she delivers beautifully written stories about young, spirited women who overcome tragedies large and small. In *Mistik Lake*, as in earlier works such as *Confessions of a Heartless Girl* and *Bone Dance*, Brooks depicts young romance, and adolescence more generally, with an authentic generosity.

Although the story is told from three perspectives—that of seventeen-year-old Odella, her great-aunt Gloria, and her boyfriend Jimmy—Odella's absent mother Sally is another central figure in the narrative. In the prologue, we learn that Sally was the sole survivor of an accident in which a car crashed through a frozen lake: "Mom was sixteen at the time, living on a farm near the lakeside town of Mistik Lake—697 souls of mostly Scottish, French, Icelandic and Ojibwe descent, and every one of them affected by the tragedy" (13–14). Shortly after the accident, Sally and

her family relocate to the city of Winnipeg, but she never fully recovers. She turns to drink and eventually leaves her husband and three daughters.

As the oldest daughter, Odella tries to cope with the loss of her mother and her feeling of responsibility toward two younger sisters, and seeks a respite in Gloria's old cottage in Mistik Lake. The movement between the rural setting and the city is also the route to Odella's ability to journey through adolescence. Rediscovering the town and the affection held there for her mother helps Odella to embrace her family history. She also finds love with a gentle young man with ties to her family. Gloria is a magnificent character with her own narrative arc of self-exploration that is moving but never self-indulgent, and its intersection with Odella's self-realization normalizes much adolescent confusion and angst, as well as non-heterosexual identities as portrayed through an acknowledgment and acceptance of Gloria's long-term relationship with a woman.

The exquisite sense of place, the traversing of time-periods (from the 1940s to the present), the representations of adolescence, and the intergenerational relationships of Icelandic immigrants in this novel fit within the traditional Canadian literary landscape, yet the novel also feels contemporary in its portraiture of young women coming of age in the past and present.

The Landing, John Ibbitson's Governor General's Award-winning depression-era story about a teenage

boy who feels stuck on his family's farm in the Muskoka Lakes, Ontario, stands out for its lyrical and polished writing. The setting at Cook's Landing is viscerally evoked and is contrasted with more glamorous places, such as New York City, the home of fifteen-year-old Ben's new rich and well-connected neighbour Ruth Chapman, who comes for the summer to grieve for her husband. Up to that point, Ben leads a dead-end existence with his widowed mother and cantankerous uncle. His days are filled with endless chores (mostly odd jobs for wealthy cottagers in the area); his only real pleasure comes from playing his violin. When Ruth hires Ben to fix up her cottage on nearby Pine Island, she discovers his passion for music, tempts him with visions of the larger world, and encourages his dream of escaping the narrow confines of Muskoka.

Ben's descriptions of the landscape are vivid: "Sometimes in January, when there's a white sun . . . you can't hear a single sound except your feet crunching in the snow—it's so silent and frozen" (98–99). Elsewhere, Ben's passion for music is compared to the sensation of drowning. Much of the action is cerebral and highlights the local realities Ben observes: the pristine wilderness versus foreclosed village businesses; wealthy cottage owners versus the poor, unsophisticated locals who cater to their every whim; and the spiritual needs of artists versus the practical expectations of ordinary folk.

Ruth, after introducing Ben to the world of finer things, inadvertently abandons him, but she also helps him to imagine another place for himself in the world. Ultimately, the volatility of nature—a major, destructive storm—provides Ben and his mother with the conditions to leave "the Landing" and the reader is invited to envision a different and perhaps more "cultured" life for Ben in Toronto. This welcome displacement contrasts with literary works in which the Canadian rural landscape is valorized.

The next four books, *Out of Order*, *Would You*, *Tweaked*, and *The Life of Michael*, deal with the contemporary suburban or urban lifestyles of teenagers who are faced with difficult or even tragic circumstances. These works traverse the home and school lives of often unspecified but presumably white, Anglophone, middle-class protagonists.

Nothing about the cover and description of *Out of Order* by Robin Stevenson hints at anything other than a run-of-the-mill rendering of the adolescent problem novel. In fact, the novel takes an honest, gentle, non-judgmental look at the making of "mean girls" and the devastating impact their bullying has on Sophie, an insecure girl who is prone to believe the taunts about her weight. The now-slim Sophie has recently moved with her mother from the East Coast to Vancouver Island, a new setting where she hopes to shed her vulnerability, but where she initially remains as skittish as the horse she often rides.



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As in many adolescent novels, the school is a place that stages the making and breaking of social networks. Sophie floats through her days in silence, secrecy, and pretence, engaging in lying, smoking, drinking, and disordered eating, influenced by a manipulative new friend. It is a wiser peer who later reveals the ironic self-destructiveness of Sophie's so-called "survival plans."

The adults in the novel mostly remain in the background, but their supportive presence is felt: "Mom drops us at the stables and blows me a kiss before she drives off. Sometimes I think she sees a lot more than I want her to" (131). And Sophie's grandmother wisely points out that growing up is anything but linear: "It's a funny thing. . . . You start thinking your life is complete, polished, everything just the way you want it. And then it all goes and changes on you" (215).

While the portrayal of adolescent concerns in *Out of Order* may resonate with readers outside Canada, the sense of place is uniquely Canadian in its particular representation of the dichotomy of the East and West coasts. The more pastoral Vancouver Island is juxtaposed against a harsher social scene in the East, invoking and reifying, while at times challenging, the trope of the rural as a space for transformation during the passage through adolescence.

Would You, Marthe Jocelyn's latest work for young adult readers, asks teens to journey through the unthinkable: a car strikes the much-admired eighteen-year-old Claire, causing irreversible brain damage and death. This tragedy is rendered through the diary jottings of her younger sister Natalie, a sixteen-year-old who spends her days in a small town lifeguarding at the YMCA and her evenings hanging out with friends who like to debate unanswerable questions: "Would you rather die or have everyone

else die?" (5).

Natalie and her friends are portrayed as Canadian middle-class teens who occasionally experiment with sex, underage drinking, and trespassing. They like their French fries with gravy, use their bicycles to get around town, and know a good thrift-store bargain when they see one.

The traumatic disconnect between Natalie's former distractions and her new reality is reflected in Jocelyn's writing style as it shifts to accommodate the range of Natalie's emotions. Readers hear the blunt assessment of the hospital trauma team, Natalie's poignant soliloquies addressed directly to her sister, and the droll commentary on her friend Leila's funeral attire: it "features a cleavage you wouldn't expect at a moment of bereavement" (158). Allusions to water and its calming properties abound as Natalie turns to her job at a pool to find a few hours of normalcy during Claire's final days.

Jocelyn avoids turning the novel into a message about guilt or remorse. No one is to blame: Claire's death is simply a horrible accident. Instead, Jocelyn offers readers an engaging, if sober, look at how one random incident can dislodge us, how a sense of home and family is disrupted, and how a young woman might move forward in the face of a fractured trajectory toward adulthood.

Katherine Holubitsky pulls few punches in her novel *Tweaked*; it illustrates the devastating effects

of having a drug addict in the family. Speaking with frank self-awareness, sixteen-year-old Gordie tells of his older brother Chase's rapid slide into addiction and its destructive effect on his family. All Gordie wants is to have a normal life, which means going to school, working part-time to save for his Fender Precision bass guitar, playing in his garage band, and developing his friendship with Jade. Now that Chase has been arrested for aggravated assault, his parents have gone further into debt to cover his bail and, once again, his addiction has taken over their lives. When Chase jumps bail, the family hits rock bottom: the parents' fighting escalates, the mother loses her job, and Chase vandalizes the house and steals Gordie's guitar. Things worsen when Chase disappears just before his assault victim dies and his case moves to adult court on his eighteenth birthday.

Tweaked portrays the overwhelming combination of anger, sadness, and bewilderment that families experience in the face of the wily yet irrational behaviour of a crystal methamphetamine addict looking for his next hit. We get a finely crafted, up-close portrayal of how the addict takes others down with him, not only emotionally, but also morally and financially. In telling this story, Holubitsky doesn't pander to or protect younger readers; she portrays Chase's oozing sores, lice-riddled head, and skeletal body both honestly and humanely. The tension between Gordie's parents is palpable. His mother

makes questionable choices in her refusal to give up on the hope of saving her older son that would surprise only the most unsympathetic audience.

This is an important and difficult story of contemporary Canadian life that leaves an indelible mark. The setting is the environs of Vancouver; the “Downtown East Side” is referred to as a site of drugs and destitution, but the ease with which drugs are obtained in the suburbs is also evident. The reader is shown the reach of the problem and how readily one can slip from one kind of life into another as Gordie puzzles over his brother’s trajectory: “It struck me how disconnected we’d become, how we lived in the same house but two different worlds” (96). Yet, while portraying the frightening passage into the destructive vortex of the addict, Holubitsky also offers alternative subjective possibilities for Gordie so that he does not become a victim of his brother’s choices. As his school counsellor points out, ultimately, “we are navigators of our own lives” (177).

Lesley Choyce, author of *The Book of Michael*, is a New Jersey native turned Canadian citizen who has written over forty books, for both adults and young adults. His work life has included farming, television hosting, and serving as a counsellor at a rehabilitation center. In terms of his writing, he claims to have “always been interested in things that go wrong in life” (“Philosopher”). In this novel, Choyce introduces the readers to a character who, in fact, couldn’t have more

go wrong in his life.

Five years after the event, Michael Grove recounts the story of being falsely accused, at the age of sixteen, of murdering his girlfriend Lisa. After being cleared and released from prison, Michael traverses a gamut of emotions: anger, fear, anxiety, guilt, overwhelming sadness, and confusion; occasionally, he breaks through the “fourth wall” to address the reader directly. Along the way, we learn of Michael’s emotionally charged sexual encounters, his acts of vandalism, his contemplation of suicide, and the use of drugs and alcohol among his friends. Culturally controversial issues, such as youth crime and capital punishment, are addressed as open questions.

Several well-developed secondary characters support the narrative, particularly Michael’s grandmother—his philosophical guru whose words resonate through his mind as he makes his most complicated decisions—and his jilted ex-girlfriend, Miranda, who we later learn was the actual murderer of Lisa. Miranda is convincingly drawn as a young woman “not of her time and place” (28), whose wildness drew Michael in at a time when he was imagining himself “turning bad” (29). Eventually, Michael experiences the oppressiveness of place as he attempts to move past the events and redraw his future. In a provocative resolution, he makes the unexpected and astounding decision to begin again with Miranda. For Michael, the fractures in his life are, in many ways,

of his own making, and they result in him inhabiting a place he calls “the black hole inside” (17), from which, at twenty-one, he is able to get “a life” (261), if not his life back.

The last four novels, *Skim*, *Pieces of Me*, *Child of Dandelions*, and *The Night Wanderer*, cover cultural terrain that up to now has been infrequently travelled in Canadian adolescent novels, including the experiences of young women from Japanese-Canadian, French-Canadian, First Nations, and Indian backgrounds.


In the highly original and inventive graphic novel *Skim*, by Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki, an urban, private secondary school for girls is a central staging ground for the journey of an increasingly depressed young Japanese-Canadian girl who identifies as “goth” (it’s the nineties) and is uncertain of her sexuality and her place in the social world of her peers. Sixteen-year-old Kimberly Keiko Cameron, nicknamed Skim (“because I’m not” [27]) lives with her hard-edged mother who, as Skim sees it, is cold and cynical and uninterested in sustaining a relationship with Skim’s father, who doesn’t live with them any more. Her mother does not spare Skim’s feelings in commenting on her appearance. Skim’s equilibrium is further upset by a sexual encounter with a female drama teacher who then disappears, and the gradual slipping away of her best friend.

Katie is one of the popular girls at school. When

her boyfriend, who is rumoured to be gay, kills himself, the response of some of the students is to start a club called “Girls Celebrate Life.” Through diary entries, Skim’s sardonic take on homophobia and other aspects of her peer culture, such as racism, are often reflected in a series of black-framed, grey-toned panels. The overall feel of the work is one of loneliness, near despair, and confusion, though it ends on a light note when Skim discovers a warm, new, if previously unlikely, friendship with Katie.

Sporadically throughout the story, Skim passes time by walking on dark streets or riding aimlessly in buses, so that the city becomes a presence where “you are never really alone . . . it just feels lonely” (107). In this way, the city of Toronto is evoked, though not named, and it provides a fitting urban backdrop for the rapidly shifting affiliations among the characters. While Skim’s lack of affiliations is reflected in her night wanderings, the creators of this graphic novel offer temporary re-affiliation and lightness at the end through the use of lighter tones and more white space.

When Charlotte Gringás’s novel *La Liberté? connais pas* was first published in French in 1998, it won the Governor General’s Award for Children’s Literature (text). It has been translated by Susan Ouriou and republished by Kids Can Press as *Pieces of Me*. The protagonist, Mira, is a lonely fourteen-year-old living in a half-basement apartment in Montreal with her eccentric, psychologically disordered mother who



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wildly sews and knits colourful garments that she stores in boxes. Mira, who prefers wearing black and mostly shuns her mother's gifts, is depressed.

The confining sense of place is effectively conveyed from the first page when Mira, sitting alone in the school cafeteria, ruminates on a young maple tree outside the window: "I love how it's spindly and struggling to survive on its tiny patch of land, sandwiched in between the asphalt, the cars, the bicycles and the pedestrians. Living in what you'd call an environment hostile to the development of life" (7). Through a series of spare first-person vignettes, we learn how Mira feels about her developing body, her sadness, and her hesitation to follow her passion and talent for drawing. Offsetting the more cloistered spaces, such as her home, are many poetic, if overworked, allusions to birds in flight that intensify as Mira finds and, for a time, loses a friendship and then permanently loses her father to a tragic plane accident. Mira inappropriately displaces her affections onto her art teacher, but finds true support and solace with the school counselor; both of these sensitively drawn characters are gentle guides for Mira. In the end, Mira takes responsibility for her own sense of freedom and begins to view her filiations and affiliations in new ways.

The text reads as seamlessly lyrical, so that we suspect it is a good translation, retaining a particular sense of place—the sights and seasons of Montreal. There is also a distinct cultural sensibility not often found in young adult novels first published in English, particularly in its portrayal of budding sexuality and acceptance of and compassion for others. In reviewing this novel, we became curious as to why more French Canadian young adult novels are not translated to English, so we contacted the publisher. Editor Karen Li

responded, noting costs involved in translation and the slim profit margin for YA novels. She added, however:

The editor-in-chief and I had been discussing why we in English Canada aren't prouder or more in touch with the history of French-Canadian literature. Working in children's publishing, we believe that reading habits start young—maybe the habit of reading books in translation starts young, too! In any case, I think that young readers certainly have less prejudice than adults when it comes to an author's cultural background.

She also noted the work had been nominated for the Governor General's translation award, which it has since won.

Shenaaz Nanji based her novel *Child of Dandelions* on her experiences as a young Indian girl living in Mombasa during the reign of Idi Amin. Issues of citizenship and racial and ethnic categories in a postcolonial setting are the backdrop to the story of feisty fifteen-year-old Sabine, a "Uganda Indian" girl who is put in the terrifying position of helping her family to escape before the final days of the "countdown" from August to November, 1972. The chapters are effectively structured around the increasing pressures Sabine feels as the ninety-day limit approaches, from the first hints of a cooling friendship with her friend Zena to the disappearance of her

beloved uncle, and then to the threatening visits by soldiers to their formerly safe and idyllic home.

The most affecting scenes are those in which the schism grows between Sabine and her beloved Zena as they suddenly move from more playful concerns of dressing up and dancing into chaotic political events. On Sabine's last visit to Zena's house, Zena says to her, "we cannot associate with Indians . . . You are brown and I am black." In this one scene, Sabine's naïveté in believing that friendships can overcome larger societal fractures is palpably shattered. Zena has always known that the relationship is unequal, and her close relationship to the new government has already lessened her naïveté.

Aspects of the storytelling verge on the didactic, particularly dialogue that pointedly describes the conflicting viewpoints; other aspects feel contrived, such as Zena becoming one of Idi Amin's wives. But the gripping series of events and the wider implications of such a conflict hold interest until the end. Nanji claims to have written *Child of Dandelions* to "better understand the historical event of expelling an entire community that had lived in Uganda for three generations" (Excerpts). Readers are not only invited to experience the vivid sights of Kampala in the early 1970s, and to experience it as home for Sabine, but also to follow her through the ordeal of sudden displacement based on ethnic and class conflicts. The result is a story that delves into the consequences of

sudden cultural displacement that many Canadians experience prior to their arrival in this country.

The Night Wanderer marks the debut of Anishinabe (Ojibwa) author and humorist Drew Hayden Taylor as a writer for young adults. This “native gothic” novel is rich in both a sense of place and the cultural spaces of a group of First Canadians. A mysterious visitor from Europe, Pierre L’Errant, requests a place to stay at the home of sixteen-year-old Tiffany, her father Keith, and granny Ruth, on Otter Lake in an Anishinabe community. Tiffany is distracted by immediate concerns, particularly the unravelling of her relationship with a white boy from a neighbouring town, which makes plain the cultural “baggage” of two groups that, over the decades, have shared geography but little else. As Tiffany discovers, Pierre is an ancestor who has a longer view, disclosed through his musings and stories. He says to Tiffany, “For hundreds or thousands of years, Anishinabe people lived here. They hunted, laughed, played, made love, and died in the village that once stood here. And in that same village over those same centuries were hundreds and possibly thousands of young girls just like you, asking the same questions” (200).

The novel is less successful as a vampire tale (Pierre engages in nocturnal wanderings) than as a compelling exploration of the particular struggles of a contemporary Anishinabe teenager dealing with the absence of her mother, bullying and prejudiced teens,

and failed romance. Tiffany’s fights with her father are robust and true, as is her grudging admiration for her granny Ruth, a wise seer. The unfolding of events related to Pierre’s visit and a gripping few pages at the end when Pierre nearly fails in his effort to resist treating Tiffany as prey offer some wonderfully chilling imagery, but never create a sustained atmosphere of fear and suspense typical of gothic horror. Readers are left, however, with a tactile sense of Otter Lake and its people and a surprisingly tender tale of healing.

In *The Night Wanderer*, Tiffany’s dissatisfactions are skillfully set against centuries and generations of cultural displacement of the Anishinabe people. As the narrator says of the neighbouring non-Native community, “People of Granny Ruth’s generation had cleaned their houses. People of Keith’s age had guided them to all the best fishing locations on the lake. And Tiffany’s generation had to deal with this baggage” (112). Through Pierre’s story, Tiffany comes to appreciate her affiliations, and readers are offered a unique experience of a sense of place across time.

Closing Thoughts

In reviewing these works, we were struck by how Canadian fiction for young adults is itself coming of age. These works represent the rich talent and diverse physical and cultural geographies of this country. While some of the works may have flaws, the range of places represented and the particular physical

settings—urban, suburban, and rural—shape the lives and subjectivities of the protagonists in ways that are new for Canadian young adult fiction.

Mistik Lake and *The Landing*, written by the most skilled of the writers, reinscribe a traditional Canadian sense of place with fresh perspectives on mobility as the protagonists navigate adolescence. *Out of Order* and *Would You* both reify and challenge East/West and city/town dichotomies that posit the west or the small town as more pastoral or healthy. *Tweaked* and *The Book of Michael* take us to the intersection of the urban and the suburban, an important transitional space for many young people.

Finally, *Skim*, *Pieces of Me*, *The Night Wanderer*, and *Child of Dandelions*, the most complicated

narratives, begin to fulfill a promise of portraying the mosaic of diversity in Canada's national imaginary. In different ways, these novels tell stories of affiliation and displacement at the centre of Canada's paradoxical identity as a place of inclusion and exclusion. In these novels, the authors often show respect for the resilience, subjective mobility, and complexity of their protagonists, and therefore of their readers.

So we close this review with renewed respect for ways the authors of these works have grappled with both historical and contemporary issues that affect young people living in a country with a diverse and changing physical, social, and cultural geography, and an unfixed and sometimes deliberately obscured, yet somehow recognizable, national imaginary.

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