



## **Reaching across Borders: Canadian Girls Reading African Girls' Stories**

—Julie Cairnie

Badoe, Adwoa. *Between Sisters*. Toronto: Greenwood, 2010. 208 pp. \$18.95 hc, \$12.95 pb. ISBN 978-0888999962, 978-0888999979. Print.

Combres, Élisabeth. *Broken Memory: A Novel of Rwanda*. Trans. Shelley Tanaka. Toronto: Greenwood, 2009. 120 pp. \$12.95 pb. ISBN 978-0888998934. Print.

Joyal, Lisa. *Swahili for Beginners: A Young Adult Novel*. Toronto: Sumach, 2007. 200 pp. \$10.95 pb. ISBN 978-1894549691. Print.

Kent, Trilby. *Stones for My Father*. Toronto: Tundra,

2011. 176 pp. \$21.99 hc. ISBN 978-1770492523. Print.

Mankell, Henning. *Shadow of the Leopard*. Trans. Anna Paterson. Toronto: Annick, 2009. 240 pp. \$19.95 hc, \$10.95 pb. ISBN 978-1554512003, 978-1554511990. Print.

Oron, Judie. *Cry of the Giraffe: Based on a True Story*. Richmond Hill: Annick, 2010. 208 pp. \$21.95 hc, \$12.95 pb. ISBN 978-1554512720, 978-1554512713. Print.

For this review, I was asked to read and to consider ten recent titles in children's literature, all of them about Africa and all of them published in Canada. What relevance does Africa have to young Canadian readers? It can have a lot of relevance if they see themselves reflected in African stories, as Nelson Mandela

points out in *Long Walk to Freedom*, when he recalls bonding with a group of Inuit teenagers while his plane refuelled in Labrador. Sometimes the relevance is not quite so obvious, however. For me, this is a particularly personal question, as I am often pushed to think about the relationship between what I study (Southern African

literature) and who I am (a white Canadian woman). In recent years I find myself increasingly engaged with this question as I try to work out the relationships between Canada and South Africa, and between Canada and Zimbabwe. Moreover, I increasingly find myself going back to my own childhood experience of Africa on the southern shores of Lake Ontario, in a small city close to the United States border. For me, Africa was experienced through family stories and photographs (many members of my father's extended family moved across the continent in search of status and security), through books (a child's reference book, David Mountfield's *A History of African Exploration*, still occupies a space on my bookshelf at home), and through friends (as a child, I was thrilled to have friends from Kenya and Uganda). Africa seemed exotic, different, and far removed from my experience growing up in a quiet suburban neighbourhood in Canada. I had a kind of long-distance adolescent relationship with the continent, and so, when I read Lisa Joyal's novel *Swahili for Beginners* (one of those recent ten titles) and encountered Georgie, an equally zealous white Canadian adolescent girl with a fixation on Africa, I knew how I could manage these widely divergent texts: I decided to focus only on the six novels for and about adolescent girls and to foreground Georgie from Joyal's novel, one of the many and diverse Canadian girls reading African girls' stories.

The title of my review essay contains two present

participles: reaching and reading. The action is in the present, is ongoing, uninterrupted, never finished. Engagement, interpretation, and comprehension are always in process. It is this sense of process and possibility—evident in all of these books for and about adolescent girls—that engenders hope. These six novels that tell stories of African girls are set in a wide range of countries: Mozambique, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Ghana, South Africa, and Tanzania. What is the effect of reaching and reading across the borders that separate Canadian girls' experiences and stories from African girls' experiences and stories? What is gained? Does a girl like Georgie read in order to learn about another culture, to understand her place in the world? Are readers like Georgie able to "identify" with the characters in these stories? It is both impossible and problematical to assume a homogenous readership, so here I am interested in exploring the complications of reading African girls' stories for a girl such as Georgie, whose life experience is radically different from the girls whose life stories she encounters. Borrowing from Margaret Daymond's introduction to *South African Feminisms*, I argue that these texts may facilitate a "community of purpose" (xx), rather than an earlier generation's unsustainable model of "sisterhood," which implies sameness (xix). My hope is that these new titles will help young Canadian readers to understand the complexities of Africa and African girls, and to understand a little bit about the possibilities of



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ethical engagement with African problems and ethical exchange with African girls. Moreover, they may help to destabilize a number of prevalent national myths: namely, that Canadians are saviours and peacemakers, and that Canada is a place without a violent colonial history and present. My hope for these texts is that they foster critical thinking in adolescent girls (and perhaps offer a brief sabbatical from “vampire fiction”!). Georgie is an example of the kind of ethical engagement that is possible for white and privileged Canadian girls.

I first consider three texts with African settings that engage with significant historical moments, but without obvious points of entry for many adolescent Canadian girls. These three texts raise questions about the possibility of ethical engagement, however, whereby girls may care about a situation that does not seem to concern them directly. The fourth text in this section, set in Ghana, is the story of a girl struggling with poverty, puberty, and the lure of consumerism; it is the most “literary” of the four and might be expected to draw Canadian girls with its apparently “universal” appeal. Next, I consider two texts that are directly engaged with the problem of white Canadian girls reading Africa. The first text reproduces colonial nostalgia and national mythology about Canada as peaceful and gently imperialist. The second, set in present-day Toronto and Tanzania, chronicles a letter exchange between Georgie and a Tanzanian girl named Ellie. At the end, the two pen pals are about to meet in person and there is a mixture of uncertainty and hopefulness about how that meeting will unfold. The text highlights the very palpable possibility of ethical exchange between a white Canadian girl and a black African girl.

### Reading for Points of Entry

The range of books available to young Canadian readers about the lives of African children is astounding. Of the four books with which I begin, two are translations and from writers who have no apparent connections to Canada: *Shadow of the Leopard*, by Henning Mankell (the only male writer in my selection of texts), is translated from Swedish, and *Broken Memory*, by Élisabeth Combres, is translated from French. The third, while written by Canadian Judie Orton, is similar to these two in that it is rooted in fact and, according to its subtitle, is “based on a true story.” These three books set entirely in Africa document significant historical moments: the land mine crisis in Mozambique, the Rwandan genocide, and the repatriation of Ethiopian Jews to Israel. All three novels draw heavily from the testimonial form and rely on fact to carry their fictions. *Shadow of the Leopard* is about a Mozambican girl who loses both legs when she steps on a land mine; *Broken Memory* tells the story of a girl with post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of the Rwandan genocide; and the third, *Cry of the Giraffe*, is the “true story” of the author’s rescue of her Ethiopian Jewish adopted daughter from slavery. The fourth, Adwoa Badoe’s *Between Sisters*, is presented as fiction and written by a Ghanaian immigrant, a doctor-turned-storyteller who lives in Guelph. In all four stories the reaching across borders takes place between people who share a culture, a race, or a religion—which any

particular reader will not necessarily do—so finding entry points is complex and fraught with difficulties.

*Shadow of the Leopard* is a disturbing novel drawn from the life story of a young Mozambican woman, nineteen-year-old Sofia Alface, who as a child lost both legs in a land mine explosion, a story documented in two earlier novels, *Playing with Fire* and *Secrets in the Fire*. Now we meet Sofia as a young married woman, with two children and another on the way, although she is not yet twenty. After I read a few pages of it, I looked for some indication on the cover that it is a book for girls. The publisher, Annick Press, tells us on their website that this novel “will draw many of Mankell’s high-school and adult fans,” and a reviewer promises that it will “open teens’ minds” (“Shadow”). My thirteen-year-old daughter’s mind certainly was opened by this text, which deals frankly with very mature subject matter, including domestic violence and infidelity. Its treatment of these subjects is grim and explicit, but there is also a strong measure of hope. Sofia forms strong bonds with other women, but the failure of her marriage is given tragic proportions.

Seemingly, the only man who manages to sustain an ethical relationship with Sofia is Mankell himself. In his introduction, Mankell explains that he interviewed Sofia, recorded her story, and then read aloud the whole book to her; this claim grants the text authenticity and truth, and it also underlines the white male author’s ethical representation of a poor young

black woman. At the same time, her inability to record her own story seems to primitivize Sofia; moreover, as if to underscore this, she is consistently associated with fire and engages in impulsive behaviour. My daughter was riveted by the book's documentation of domestic violence and infidelity; but hers—and this might be typical—was a horrified fascination. I worry that Sofia's *exotic* story may be consumed by Canadian girl readers and encourage a benevolent engagement at best. Mankell mediates Sofia's story for readers, not just in Canada but also across the world, and the text raises a number of ethical issues about the recording and thus the reading of African girls' stories.

Similar to Mankell's text, Combres's *Broken Memory* also relies on the testimonial format. As part of her work as a journalist in Rwanda, Combres collected accounts of survivors of the genocide and then transformed them into this novel about a young survivor who struggles with PTSD after witnessing her mother's murder. The epilogue offers an account of Emma's successful life as a twenty-four-year-old teacher. Centred on the problem of memory, voice, and relationship in the aftermath of trauma, the story evolves from a little girl with no sense of a future to an adolescent girl who is able to imagine a future for herself. What is interesting here, though, is that there is no white presence (except for Combres) in the novel. Combres does not claim authenticity of voice, with the implication that there is only so far one can go to

reproduce an African girl's story of loss and trauma. Significantly, the narrative is told in third person, which seems to suggest that a white woman writer cannot reproduce Emma's voice; instead, it is the Rwandan community itself—men and women, adults and children—that facilitates Emma's voice and recovery. There are no aid workers or instances of white rescue, but instead fellow community members, both Hutu and Tutsi, help Emma overcome her PTSD. The black Rwandan community, often through the community tribunals, *gacaca*, rescues Emma and other children in the novel, but it is not a seamless rescue and takes a long time to unfold.

The absence of outside intervention is notable from a Canadian perspective because of the role of a Canadian general in leading the UN mission to Rwanda. Because it was Roméo Dallaire who brought to light the shameful apathy of Canada and the world about Rwanda, it is hard for me to read Emma's trauma without recalling Dallaire's: after his posting in Rwanda, he was found in an Ottawa park curled up in a foetal position.<sup>1</sup> It is likely that many children in Canada are familiar with the broad contours of Rwanda and with Dallaire's example of ethical engagement, given that there are several schools in Canada that bear his name. *Broken Dreams* challenges its young readers' preconceptions about African girls and exposes them to a traumatic experience, encouraging them to feel deeply another girl's pain without making it their own.

Unlike *Broken Memory*, there is a dramatic rescue by an insider-outsider in Oron's account of the trauma experienced by her Ethiopian Jewish adopted daughter, Widutu, in *Cry of the Giraffe*. Like Combres, Oron trained as a journalist and then turned to fiction writing. Consistent with the testimonial format, Oron drew the story from her daughter and chose to present her story in first person to lend greater authenticity to the account. In interviews, Oron explains that she changed names and altered some details in order to protect her daughter's privacy. Similar to the other African girls' stories, this one follows Widutu from ages nine to sixteen and is a grim, detailed, and honest account of her adolescence, documenting rape, abortion, poverty, and slavery. Like *Broken Dreams*, the text ends in the present (the future of the text itself) when the girl is twenty-one years old and thriving.

Ultimately, Widutu thrives, not as a result of the intervention of the local community (as is the case of Combres) or a benevolent writer (such as Mankell) but through her rescue by a white Canadian woman, Oron herself. Oron could be read as a trope or stereotype of benevolence and care, but she is motivated by identification with the poor young black girl: they are both diasporic Jews. *Cry of the Giraffe* complicates questions of race, home, identity, and identification. This all seems very sophisticated, but Annick Press advertises the intended audience of the book as "14+." Indeed, one *Amazon.com* reviewer suggests that the

book is for readers "from 14 to 100!" and another proposes that it is accessible "whether you are 15 or 75!" ("*Amazon.com*"). On *Goodreads*, a popular book review site for teens and adults, one commentator suggests that there is significant tension between the age of the character and the "adult" themes: "Although this is the story of a young girl, Widutu's experiences make for a very adult story" ("*Cry*"). Oron's book challenges those neat distinctions between the "young girl" and the "adult story," expecting that young girl readers will fully engage with Widutu's complex story.

The fourth and final book I wish to discuss in this section is Badoe's *Between Sisters*, a novel set in Ghana and written in Guelph by a doctor-turned-storyteller who also teaches African dance and drumming. In many respects, her position resembles that of Yvonne Vera, the Zimbabwean writer who wrote her first two books, *Nehanda* and *Under the Tongue*, in a high-density and seemingly uninspiring suburb of Toronto. *Nehanda* is set entirely in Zimbabwe and makes no reference to Canada. Vera, at least, was in the midst of a highly diverse community;<sup>2</sup> Guelph, on the other hand, while liberal and "organic," is also very "white." There are no obvious Canadian connections in *Between Sisters*, and the novel is set entirely in Ghana. How, then, do young Canadian girls, particularly white and privileged Canadian girls, reach across borders and read an African girl's story, particularly the story of a girl with a "hope-starved future" (17)?



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This text has generated a lot of online discussion—by girls in Canada and the United States—and most of the discussion centres on the ways in which readers might “relate” or “identify” with sixteen-year-old Gloria Bampo, a girl who not only is poor but struggles in school, experiences the complications of her own and others’ sexuality (most notably a salacious doctor who rapes her), and also wants to fit in and have nice clothes and accessories. I think *Between Sisters* challenges girls in Canada to rethink Africa (Gloria’s life and interests may not be so starkly different from their own), but also points out significant differences (the prevalence of AIDS, different cultural practices regarding gender and sexuality, and widespread poverty). The inclusion of a glossary at the end of the book signals that *Between Sisters* may require assisted reading.

The title itself is significant, and as one young reviewer points out, “I didn’t like that this novel didn’t explore the relationship between Gloria and her sister, Effie. It’s called *Between Sisters* but it rarely addressed the blood sister relationship. Instead it focuses on the relationship between Gloria and her so-close-they-could-be-sisters employer, Christine” (“Between”). At the heart of the novel is Gloria’s various relationships with women and girls: with her mother and sister at home in Accra, with Christine, a doctor and her employer, and with Bea, another young employee in the doctor’s compound. Gloria’s relationship with Bea (who is also a thief) is complicated by jealousy and competition, and Bea’s disturbing death from a botched abortion at the end led one online commentator to refer to this ending as “an old-fashioned morality play” (legxleg). Christine and Gloria are both black and their families have close ties; not surprisingly, Gloria has high

expectations that they will share an uncomplicated intimacy when she begins work as her housekeeper and nanny. There is, however, a huge (although not insurmountable) gulf between Gloria and Christine: as the doctor's astute husband points out, she is "like a sister" to Gloria but not a real sister (174). In turn, readers are urged to confront their own relationship of sisterhood with Gloria. In Badoe's novel the "sisters" belong to different social classes, but they find an ethical way to connect: the doctor (Christine) helps the servant (Gloria) survive and thrive, with hope as a result. The problem of ethical border crossing and ethical exchange is intensified in the two recent books that focus on white girls' relationships to Africa: *Stones for My Father* and *Swahili for Beginners*.

### Reaching for Ethical Exchange

Two recent Canadian texts for young people explore the possibility of "community of purpose," to return to Daymond's term, and expose the relationship between whiteness and femininity. On the one hand, *Stones for My Father* is set in the past (South Africa in 1901), chronicles the experience of a young Boer girl (Corlie) of Lord Kitchener's concentration camps, and is more concerned with identifications with men (black and then white) than with "sisterhood" as such. On the other hand, *Swahili for Beginners* takes place in the present and chronicles a developing relationship between adolescent girl pen pals, Georgie from urban

Toronto and Ellie from Mbosha, in rural Tanzania. These texts need to be considered in their stories' chronological order to trace a changing Canadian relationship to Africa and to African people: Corlie's first identification is with a black boy, Sipho, but ultimately she shifts her allegiance to a white Canadian soldier, Colonel Bryce; Georgie's closest relationships are with girls, not only Ellie but her best friend in Toronto, the white and privileged but also ethical and sensitive Jodi. Both books challenge girls' sense of their place in the world, but *Swahili for Beginners* is a more sustained study of a relationship between two girls with very different life experiences.

*Stones for My Father* is set at the end of the South African War and chronicles the experience of Corlie Rioux, whose father has died and who is left in the care of an inattentive and resentful mother who clearly favours her two sons. Even though the mother, other women, and even Corlie herself are presented as particularly resourceful, without men or with a limited number of older men and young boys, Corlie's identifications are with men and boys: she adores her dead father and her young brothers and has an intimate (from her perspective) relationship with Sipho, a servant/playmate who is "gifted" to her at birth. It is her relationship and bond with a kindly Canadian soldier who works with the British that gets a lot of attention, however. It is he who ultimately rescues her from her cruel mother. Canada—and this filters down



to Canadian children, particularly white Canadian children—is portrayed as different from racist regimes, such as the American South (slavery) and Apartheid South Africa. The novel draws out these connections, but through the lens of nostalgia. The epigraph, for instance, remembers “those who came before me—the sons and daughters of the prairie and veld.” Even though the Canadian soldier participates in the British “scorched earth” policy and the imprisonment of Boer men, women, and children, Corlie perceives him as kind, and he embodies the favourable stereotype and mythology of Canadians, Canadian soldiers in particular, as neutral peacekeepers. This is the text’s Canadian connection, and the reader may see herself reflected in the soldier’s relationship with Corlie. Black South Africans form the backdrop to the story.

Corlie forms a strong bond with Siphon: she is benevolent toward him and he is an attentive servant. As they both mature, however, there are undercurrents of impropriety, and she is expected to forgo the intimacy because (it is only ever implied) the relationship could be perceived as sexual or could become sexual. Her mother explains, somewhat cryptically, “it wasn’t proper for [Corlie] to spend so much time with Siphon” (16). In the early twentieth century, this fear had a name: “black peril.” Their relationship requires careful examination. Siphon, who is introduced early in the novel, comes across Corlie who has fallen asleep on her father’s grave after an argument with her mother.

Siphon wakes her from her repose: this moment recalls *Sleeping Beauty*, but without the kiss—although his lips are described, which draws attention to his sensuality. He addresses her as “*kleinnooi*,” an honorific title for a girl “boss” (14). Corlie explains to the reader that he was “gifted” to her shortly after her birth. The two “played at being equals,” but it seems that he teaches her a great deal more and offers her significant guidance, care, and protection (15–16). Later, after the family leaves to find the *laager* (a defensive encampment), Corlie acknowledges that whites rely on Africans for survival (35). The relationship is complex and fraught, and while Corlie claims to know him and to share much in common with him (including absent fathers—and much more obtusely, the social ambiguity of being “mongrel[s]” [129]), there is much of Siphon that is unknown and indecipherable. One young reader on the *Goodreads* website expresses frustration with the text’s silences: “And *what* did it mean when Corlie tossed off an explanation of the custom of having an African playmate ‘gifted’ to ‘most Boer children’? That is a pretty huge concept to take in, actually! Hold on, give me more than two sentences! Why can’t I find more information about that anywhere? Particularly, in the book?” (“Stones”). This is a fascinating critical intervention because it suggests the limited and flawed exploration in the text of cross-racial relationship, of “a community of purpose” between a white girl and a black boy.

Corlie never perceives Siphio as a threat (he is a “loyal African, as his father before him” [16]), but the narrative makes clear that there is much beneath the surface. Siphio sings Boer songs with Corlie, and Corlie includes him and other loyal Africans in the collective “we,” but his gestures do not always indicate allegiance with the Boers and their battle with the British: he grins (17), grunts approval (19), and he orders her to “get down!” when there is a risk they will be discovered by “khaki [English] soldiers.” The liberal Corlie receives this as an “affront” (20), but she “follow[s] Siphio into the long grass” (22). Siphio is overly familiar with Corlie, and this was strictly forbidden when most whites feared that black men would form intimate relationships with white women. Eventually, Siphio helps the white family find the *laager* (49), but in the *laager* he is brutally beaten by a Boer man, Petrus, and the young boy retaliates by killing him. Siphio and his family are taken to an African camp after the *laager* is discovered. At the end of the novel, Corlie learns that Siphio has been executed for murder, but at this point she has changed her focus from Siphio to Colonel Byrne, the kindly Canadian soldier with whom she walks off at the end, toward the future: “Could Lindiwe and her daughters [Siphio’s mother and sisters]—if indeed they were still alive—ever forgive us? I knew that the answer to these questions depended on the future, not the past. We would create a new country while the old one would dissolve into myth” (165). This closing raises key questions about historical trauma

and the way forward. In post-apartheid South Africa this involved the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which challenged white South Africans to acknowledge their active participation in and complicity with the regime. Here, though, Corlie’s affiliation is with a white man, signalling a shift toward white English liberalism rather than a radical realignment of affiliation.

*Swahili for Beginners* nudges at the historical and the true to imagine a Canadian girl reaching across borders and reading an African girl’s story—ethically and mindfully. How does the young narrator, Georgie, read Ellie’s story? Ultimately, Georgie (and Canadian readers) learns something about Tanzania, but also about Canada. In her acknowledgements, Joyal reveals the limits of her own imagination and skills: she admits to “not speaking the language” of the title and relying on dictionaries and a friend, implying as well that her manuscript required the critical reading skills of young girl readers named Leora, Lauren, and Emma. She does not know enough about Africa or about the readers of her book (and, by implication, the two girls at the centre of the story). The text nonetheless employs a first-person narrative (in different forms) for both Georgie and Ellie. Both girls are presented as hopeful and happy, and Ellie herself appears early in the story, just like the ill-fated Siphio in the more grim *Stones for My Father*. Unlike Siphio, however, Ellie is present, aspirational, and independent throughout; she is never servile in her relationship with Georgie. They never



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meet in person—that takes place after the text closes—and so there is a measure of uncertainty about how their relationship will unfold. While Georgie’s first-person narrative appears to frame and contain Ellie’s letters (which has been characteristic of white women’s and girls’ narratives about black girls), Ellie manages to break through the surface and facilitate a relationship of mutual exchange.

This book speaks to me mainly because of the main character: similar to my childhood self, Georgie is fascinated by Africa, ill informed, hopeful, and optimistic, and has a strong desire to make a difference in the world. Furthermore, she grows up in a similar socio-economic and geographic location to mine. I can certainly “identify” and “relate”—but will young readers? Does the text interpellate young and compassionate readers? For Georgie, especially at the beginning of the novel, Africa is exotic and mysterious, and she and Jodi have many misconceptions about it. Georgie also admits the limits of her imagination. When she receives a Christmas letter from Ellie, she is shocked to learn that people celebrate the holiday in Africa: “I hadn’t thought to wish Ellie a happy Christmas when I wrote my last letter to her because I didn’t think that she celebrated it. I didn’t know why I thought that” (123). Her interaction with Ellie and her engagement with development issues—particularly around education—form the core of the text. Jodi becomes engaged by issues of hunger and food security, telling Georgie about the latest Oprah show featuring Ryan Hreljac and Craig Kielburger, two Canadian boys who started foundations to support water access and to stop child labour in the developing world. Their stories, via Oprah, inspire the girls to make a difference, but Georgie still struggles to achieve an ethical relationship with Ellie; at one point, Georgie even sends her pictures of Tanzania, for which Ellie is grateful, but it is a gesture that points to the potential

problems of benevolence: self-interest, arrogance, and condescension.

*Swahili for Beginners* resembles a conventional and feminine epistolary novel, which takes the form of letter writing between friends (usually friends who are young women or adolescent girls). The epistolary form charts intimate relationships, but it also highlights social structures and problems: even though most young people in Canada communicate through social networking and mobile texting, Ellie does not have access to a computer, so their relationship is subject to the vicissitudes of “snail mail.” Ellie sends Georgie a total of ten letters, all of which are included in the text. Between July and the following May they arrive monthly, with the exception of February. Why? Georgie never speculates, but Ellie tells her in an earlier letter: “Between Jan and March of every year, there is not much time to do anything except help take care of the farm” (121). The novel “plays” with the conventions of the form: Georgie employs a digressive first-person narrative form, and she summarizes rather than includes her own letters. The text has a distinct narrative cycle: Georgie’s reflections on her life in Canada’s largest city, a letter from Ellie, Georgie’s reflections on the letter, and then the cycle begins again. Georgie’s voice and viewpoint begin and end the text. While it is tempting to read Georgie’s narrative as framing and containing Ellie’s, their exchange is far more complicated and complex. Ellie, for one, is not passive and obsequious:

for instance, she tells Georgie that she chose her from a range of pen pal options.

Their complicated and complex exchange takes the form of mutual teaching and learning about three key issues in the two girls’ lives: anorexia and hunger, gender and sexuality, and economic imbalance. When Jodi’s sister Veronica develops anorexia, Georgie struggles to understand the social conditions that produce this illness. She shares her confusion in a letter, to which Ellie responds in letter six: “*I do not know of anyone who has this illness. . . . Many people in my country go hungry all the time, but that is because they are poor. . . . If they had money, they would eat.*” She claims that she doesn’t “understand” why a girl would choose starvation (108). In the next letter, she responds directly to Georgie’s questions about dieting: “*I don’t mean to cause you anger, but for me, these questions are strange*” (121). Ellie’s perspective is corroborated by the facts: the only studies of anorexia in black African populations focus on the urban middle class (see Dangarembga; Allwood and Szabo). It is Jodi who articulates the tension and even correlation between anorexia and hunger by volunteering at a food bank in Toronto: in the same city a well-off girl starves herself to achieve a prescribed standard of beauty and other people go hungry because of lack of resources. The confusion that Ellie expresses is also evident in Georgie’s Toronto.

In terms of gender and sexuality, the two girls have

a number of discussions about boys. Ellie explains that boys are privileged over girls when it comes to school attendance. This shocks Georgie, who has full access to education, plans to be either an astronaut or a pilot, and has an equitable relationship with Dylan, who is her boyfriend by the end of the novel. Still, Ellie is both ambitious and exceptional: she wants to be a doctor or a politician, purely for altruistic reasons, and stands out above the boys in her school, academically and athletically. Gender inequality is acknowledged but is not insurmountable. Ellie has no interest in boys (both girls are thirteen), but marriage is in her near future if she does not win a scholarship (her sixteen-year-old sister is due to marry the next year).

While the girls do discuss the issue of economic imbalance, it is a problem that is not fully explored. Both girls work, but Ellie does so to contribute to the family's sustenance, and Georgie does so to save money for an expensive flight. Georgie has a cellphone, a television, a computer, and free access to education; in contrast, Ellie has none of these things and tells Georgie that her mother sells bananas to buy her stationery and stamps. In fact, Ellie teaches Georgie a lot about poverty and even about the necessity of child labour. At the end of the novel, Georgie convinces her mother to travel to Tanzania to visit Ellie. Ellie declines an invitation to join them as they climb Kilimanjaro and go on safari, citing a lack of money and warm clothes, but Georgie and her mother plan to pay for Ellie's portion of the trip

and pack extra clothes. Georgie imagines ways in which she can help her friend, including paying her school fees, but wonders, "Will she be offended?" (199). She is beginning to learn that economic imbalance creates power imbalance too.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, these novels for and about adolescent girls raise questions about what Canadian girls like Georgie are capable of comprehending. All six novels expose such girls to the complexity of Africa and African girls—all of which may seem remote from their own lives. Canada is going through its own Truth and Reconciliation Commission, however, about the residential school system for First Nations people, and we Canadians, including children, have to reckon with our own recent violent past and its reverberations (like Rwanda and South Africa). There are many disturbing points of connection between Africa and Canada, but children also need to be inspired to establish more hopeful connections. The relationship between the two girls in *Swahili for Beginners*, one from Canada and one from Tanzania, is (I propose) a demonstration of Daymond's "community of purpose": in her last letter, Ellie concludes, "*I guess we have helped each other in different ways*" (181). It remains to be seen, though, what will happen when they meet face-to-face in Tanzania, and what will happen when and if Georgie pays Ellie's school fees. While Georgie observes that,

“although there was a lot that was different about Ellie and me because we lived in different countries, there were so many things about us that were the same, too” (123), Ellie is more inclined to point out the significant differences. Finally, I would like to suggest that a short consideration of these six recent titles about Africa

published in Canada raises questions about “the adolescent girl” and “adolescent girls’ literature”: the texts themselves offer ethical and even pleasurable alternatives to the selfish and precocious consumerist culture that pursues and captivates many adolescent girls in Canada.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> His memoir, *Shake Hands with the Devil* (2003), appeared in French the same year as *J’ai serré la main du diable*. Given that the book was available in France and that the United Nation’s role in Rwanda received wide international attention, it was likely known by Élisabeth Combres.

<sup>2</sup> Vera’s highly-acclaimed *Under the Tongue* closely resembles *Broken Dreams*: it documents a young girl’s inability to speak after a traumatic experience and an older woman’s (in this case, her grandmother’s) attempts to bring her to voice.

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