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# PATTERNS AND TRENDS IN CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN LITERATURE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE: SPOTLIGHT ON MENTAL HEALTH

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**Patterns and Trends in Contemporary Canadian Literature for Young People:  
Spotlight on Mental Health**

**Synopsis:**

This presentation presents data from three original studies relating to patterns and trends in contemporary Canadian fiction for young people. A key part of the discussion spotlights picture books as well as junior and middle grade novels and young adult fiction that present mental health issues.

## **Patterns and Trends in Contemporary Canadian Literature for Children: A Spotlight on Mental Health Themes**

### **ABSTRACT**

Children's literature is considered an important resource supporting child development. We occasionally hear about patterns and trends in terms of changing content in children's materials, but how do we really know what changes are occurring unless we set out to investigate comprehensive samples? This was the thinking behind the current project: drawing together the findings from three recent comprehensive studies on particular literary forms in Canada and then offering initial conclusions regarding targeted content of contemporary Canadian children's books. In particular, themes related to mental health challenges are discussed in light of the importance of facilitating mental health in our schools and communities.

Qualitative content analysis from three separate studies identified patterns in the following samples of Canadian books for young people: 22 verse-novels; 57 picture books published in 2005 and 120 picture books published in 2015; and 50 fiction novels for various age groups published between 1995 and 2010 that present characters with disabilities. Dresang's notion of Radical Change illuminated particular elements of these resources in terms of changing forms and formats, changing perspectives, and changing boundaries. General findings will be discussed as well as particular treatments of mental health in these books for children and young adults.

Study results connect to critical literacy and reader response as well as reader engagement. Implications for schools and public libraries are also discussed in terms of connections to students' funds of knowledge, reading comprehension, and the continued role of reading and books in the digital age.

## **Patterns and Trends in Contemporary Canadian Literature for Children: A Spotlight on Mental Health Themes**

Children's literature has long been considered a key learning resource for children, facilitating cognitive development, language development and personality development, as well as encouraging reading skills, strategies and interests (Huck, 1979). More recently, educators and researchers have considered children's literature, including picture books, as a source of support for diversity and equality in Canada and globally (Arizpe & Styles, 2016; Bainbridge & Johnston, 2013; Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Edwards & Saltman, 2010; Heffernan, 2004; Pantaleo, 2008; Sumara, 2002). Despite their importance in schools and communities, a comprehensive analysis of contemporary titles is missing from research and practice, underpinning a concern about what children's literature audiences are actually experiencing when they explore these books. Three studies are summarized in this paper, utilizing comprehensive sets of Canadian verse novels and picture books as well as contemporary Canadian fiction portraying characters with disabilities. Titles particularly adept at presenting mental health issues are discussed in detail.

### **Literature Review**

#### **The Changing Face of Children's Literature**

Debates related to social justice issues have occurred in Education regarding the integration of diversity themes in curricula, with a focus on children's literature. Discussions have embraced a variety of topics, including gender and multiculturalism (Bainbridge, 2010; Johnson, 2010) and topics of sexual orientation and disability as contemporary books demonstrate more inclusive understandings of diversity (Courtland & González, 2010; McNeil, 2010). Radical Change (Dresang, 1999), applied as a literary theory, has conceptualized the changes in children's literature in response to our digital world. These changes appear, according to Dresang's notion of Radical, in three categories: *textual forms and formats*, *perspectives*, and *boundaries*, and it is hoped that the content of contemporary books connects well to social justice ideals in educational practice. Original definitions of *Radical*, however, have limited application in a field ever changing. Examinations of children's literature from contemporary perspectives is important in order to identify and critique current developments.

Recent explorations of Canadian verse novels (Brenna, Liu & Sun, 2017), picture books (Brenna, Sun & Liu, 2017) and fiction novels (Brenna, 2010, 2015) attempt to identify Radical Change in action. While all three of Dresang's original categories of *Radical* appear in contemporary Canadian work, particular aspects of the evolving content of children's literature emerge as especially worthy of attention. One such aspect relates to mental health, a topic Dresang (1999) discusses in relation to the late 1990s in North American work for young people. Exclusively positive portraits of characters with exceptionalities, including mental health challenges, seemed to dominate the field in the 70s and 80s, possibly attempting to overturn the negative images often present in the past. In the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, more

authentic characterizations have appeared, and this trend continues to evolve in higher numbers of dynamic characters where exceptionality is drawn alongside other character traits.

### **Reading Instruction as a Social Practice Involving Critical Literacy**

Reading instruction can be delineated as a social practice that includes applications of decoding, text-meaning, pragmatic understandings, and critical practices (Luke & Freebody, 1997). Notions about critical literacy have been emerging since Freire's (1983, 1991, 1998) theoretical groundwork regarding the need for a thoughtful stance with respect to literacy, a heightening of interest in the topic developing in the late 1980s (Green, 2001).

The inclusion of children's literature in classroom reading frameworks has a substantial history of research supporting positive effects (e.g., Dahl & Freppon, 1995; Eldredge & Butterfield, 1986; Heald-Taylor, 1996; Huck, 1977; Morrow, O'Connor & Smith, 1990; Reutzler, Oda & Moore, 1989). More recently, classroom studies have examined the relationship between children's critical thinking and the texts to which they are exposed (Heffernan, 2004) and professional literature has attested to success with using titles involving diversity, such as gender nonconforming picture books in early education classrooms (Evans, Gilbert & Doyle, 2017).

Critical Literacy informs children's responses to texts in the manner in which texts may be interrogated on the basis of at least four dimensions: disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on socio-political issues, and taking action towards the promotion of social justice (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). In order to support the development of critical literacy, teachers require an understanding of related pedagogy in addition to sound knowledge of classroom resources that will support and engage their students in critical literacy practices.

### **Theoretical Approach**

#### **Theoretical Underpinnings**

All three studies summarized in this paper utilize critical theory (Freire, 1983; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002) as a lens for the interrogation of a particular study set of books. Radical Change (Dresang, 1999), used as a key theoretical framework, directly focused the research on *changing forms and formats*, *changing perspectives*, and *changing boundaries* within a contemporary study sample on a landscape where children's literature is continuously evolving. This research is underpinned by social constructionism in the manner that children's literature can be seen as a societal artifact, in a world that can be interrogated relative to the knower and where "meaning is not discovered but constructed" (Crotty, 1998, p. 42).

#### **Methodology and Method**

Through qualitative content analysis that highlighted the importance of rigorous and systematic attention to detail (Berg, 2009; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Mayring, 2000), books were evaluated on the basis of a series of Radical Change-related topics (Dresang, 1999) previously identified in an adapted topic list (Brenna, 2010) as well as emerging. The process of locating books utilized a variety of means, including communication to all Canadian publishers and use of the *Books in Print* database, reviews in *The Canadian Children's Book News*, the online CM

Magazine review of children's materials, and queries through word-of-mouth. Study results must be contextualized within the specific samples under investigation, noting publication year and the possibility that the groups of books are not necessarily all-inclusive of Canadian publications for that year although comprehensive samples were attempted. As such, study findings are not transferable outside the titles under investigation, however they are a useful snapshot of an ever changing landscape of children's titles. As well, these findings provide detailed discussions of particular books and groups of books.

## Findings

### Verse Novels

Twenty-two verse novels—book-length stories in poetry format— were located in a search for titles published between 1995 and 2016, and many of these emerged as award-winners in various contexts. The verse-novel form appears to be on the rise for young Canadian audiences, with predominantly female authors offering texts that ranged from realistic fiction (most common) to historical fiction and fantasy (least common), in first-person present-tense narratives that generally followed teen protagonists. Readability conventions noted include the following: various types of headings; strategic use of fonts and stanzas; and the inclusion of additional information that supports deep comprehension of the subject matter.

The increase of verse-novels can be contextualized within a discussion of *forms and formats*, acknowledging how various techniques such as word-pictures (Dresang, 2008) establish this form along with the inclusion of silence marked by blank spaces on the page. In addition, verse-novels also seem to lend themselves to *changing boundaries* and *changing perspectives*, as demonstrated by the integration of very serious subject matter predominating within the titles in this study set. What could be initially interpreted as a simplistic or easier version of a story may, in fact, be of equal or greater difficulty in terms of the demands on a reader's thinking—although verse novels may indeed carry fewer words than their prose narrative counterparts.

### Verse Novels and Mental Health Themes

Most Canadian verse-novels are written for teens. Lesley Choyce's *Jeremy Stone* (2013) deals with bullying and suicidal thoughts, among other challenges faced by various characters. Jeremy, who discovers himself to be an Old Soul, must somehow help these characters to hold it together. Alma Fullerton's *Walking on Glass* (2007) explores the perspective of a young man whose mother's suicide attempt has left her in a coma from which she will never awaken, while his father has disappeared into depression. Written in the format of a free-verse journal, the trademark of many contemporary verse-novels, *Walking on Glass* offers an example of the kind of emotionally-rich subject matter common to this set of texts. Another title depicting a teen dealing with a parent's suicide is *Karma* by Cathy Ostlere (2011), a story set in India during the period of Gandhi's 1984 assassination. A second book by Fullerton, *Burn* (2010) deals, from a first-person teen perspective, on stress and emotional problems including pyromania. *Fishtailing* by Wendy Philips (2010) also follows emotional trauma through a close look at cruel games played in highschool and their resulting angst and despair. *Fishtailing* won the 2010 Governor

General's Award for Children's Literature (text). Gabrielle Prendergast's *Capricious* (2014) and *Audacious* (2015) follow Ella through various emotional issues and introduce her mother who is struggling with an eating disorder.

One verse-novel suitable for younger readers in the 8 – 12 age group is Pamela Porter's *The Crazy Man* (2005). This book deals directly with mental health themes from its setting in rural Saskatchewan in the 1960s. Winner of the 2005 Governor General's Award for Children's Literature (text), this novel will appeal to a wide variety of readers with diverse reading skills and interests.

### **Picture Books**

In a comparison of Canadian picture books published in 2005 and 2015 (Brenna, Sun & Liu), findings illuminate how contemporary titles feature children as protagonists (rather than animal characters) and have shifted from a focus on fantasy (34% of the books published in 2005 were in the fantasy genre) to non-fiction (34% of the books published in 2015 dealt with non-fiction). Very few of these titles represent characters with disabilities, and mental health concerns are non-existent in the set. Important to note is that the number of picture books published in Canada has quadrupled in this ten year period, yet the subject of mental health—increasingly seen in books for older readers—is not apparent.

Interesting results in the exploration of Canadian picture books relate to *forms and formats, perspectives, and boundaries* through the appearance of blended genres, the inclusion of readability cues involving font type, color and size, and an increasing trend where serious subject matter is translated for younger readers. These topics are worth watching in terms of Radical Change now and into the future.

Particularly noteworthy in the 2015 set are intriguing character choices. Carolyn Beck's *That Squeak* unfolds as the narrator, Joe, delivers a soliloquy about bereavement addressed to "you"—the missing character Jay of the partnership, who virtually becomes us, the reader. The protagonist in Nicola Winstanley's *The Pirate's Bed* is the pirate's bed personified—traumatized in a storm and then swept out to sea. In Jude Isabella's *The Red Bicycle: The Extraordinary Story of One Ordinary Bicycle*, readers are carried along as Big Red, a donated bike, is helpful to a sequence of new owners in Africa.

In terms of audience-age, the group of 2015 books seemed to consider older readers as a specific target for a considerable number of titles: 6.7 % of the books in that group were assessed to have content and vocabulary suitable only for readers ages eight and up. Melanie Florence's striking picture book, *Missing Nimâmâ*, emerges from two perspectives: a little girl who is missing her mother, and the mother who has disappeared as one of Canada's missing and murdered Indigenous women. From the spirit world, Kateri's mother watches as her child is looked after by her grandmother, a poignant story beautifully illustrated by François Thisdale who articulates Cree beliefs and traditions by using the kamâmakos (butterfly) as an iconic symbol of Aiyana (Kateri's mother).

Because picture books are increasing for an older readership, it is predicted that mental health, a topic clearly introduced in novels and verse-novels for older readers, will increasingly emerge in picture books in the near future. This is definitely a trend to watch.

### **Picture Books and Mental Health Themes**

While titles in the 2005 and 2015 sets did not figure highly in terms of inclusions regarding mental health, one Canadian picture book comes to mind that does represent this topic. Kyo Maclear's *Virginia Wolf*, illustrated by Isabelle Aresenault (2012), is intended for ages 4 – 8 and is based on the childhood relationship between writer Virginia Woolf and her sister, Vanessa Bell. While depression is not specifically mentioned, the topic is gently introduced through discussions of Virginia's wolfish temperament and the solace she finds through art. Another somewhat older book, Marie Day's (2002) *Edward the Crazy Man*, interprets homelessness and mental illness for younger readers—an early example of Radical Change on this topic in Canadian work.

### **Canadian Fiction Novels Presenting Characters with Disabilities**

My doctoral study that interrogated Canadian fiction for young people (Brenna, 2010) located and analyzed 50 children's novels published between 1995 and 2010, by Canadian authors, that portrayed characters with disabilities. Specific to this exploration were *perspectives* and *boundaries*, as characters previously unheard and subjects previously forbidden were noted in book content. Foregrounded in this exploration was the increasing propensity for youth with exceptionalities to speak for themselves, and the absence of the “kill or cure” mentality apparent in classic literature where authors could not imagine a happy future for someone who was differently-abled (Keith, 2001). Influences of the digital world, including human interest stories on the Net, have translated into contemporary reading about self-actualized characters such as Rainey, a girl with a prosthetic leg, in Heather Waldorf's masterfully funny teen read: *Tripping*. One concerning finding of this study, however, is that characters with disabilities are not bestowed with other types of difference, such as minority sexual orientations or cultures. It appears that Canadian authors are not yet able to blend aspects of difference into a seamless whole.

### **Canadian Fiction Novels and Mental Health Themes**

William Bell's *The Blue Helmet* (2006) is a teen novel that includes mental illness as a trait of Lee's new friend, a mentor who changes his life forever. Lee is a high school drop-out living with his aunt in New Toronto; a part-time job as a courier introduces him to some interesting people, and one of these is Bruce Cutter. “Their unlikely friendship offers Lee a different perspective on violence, and Lee faces his own aggressive habits with transformative results. Cutter's characterization includes the richness of a man who exists in light and dark phases, whose uniqueness accompanies but doesn't overshadow his humanness, and whose backstory as a soldier evolves as a framework for the mental health issues that have developed. Cutter's eventual suicide leads Lee further into an attempt to understand the man who has



brought Lee peace and establishes that Cutter has at last been the peacekeeper he envisioned himself to be” (Brenna, 2010, p. 284).

Other young adult titles include Anita Horrocks’ *Almost Eden* (2006), Charlotte Gingras’ *Pieces of Me* (2009), and Martine Leavitt’s *Heck Superhero* (2004). All of these feature a protagonist dealing with a mother’s challenging mental health. The disparity of fathers vs mothers with mental illness is noted and cited here as a topic of concern.

K. L. Denman’s *Me, Myself and Ike* (2009) uses first-person narration to tell the story of a teen with schizophrenia. A second recently published Canadian title involving another teenager with schizophrenia is Martine Leavitt’s *Calvin* (2015), winner of a 2016 Governor General’s Award for children’s literature (text). One other noteworthy title is Wesley King’s book *OCD Daniel* (2016) a first-person read intended for middle-grades.

### **Significance and Implications**

Theoretical, methodological, and practical advances can be made through studies of children’s literature. Such studies promote social justice ideals and critical literacy across the globe. Childhood is a vital site of preparation for local, national, and global citizenship, and the resources shared with children demand the highest of scrutiny. The field of literature for children is a moving target, and a research design responsive to contemporary titles is necessary in order to capture and disseminate deeper understandings about books intended for our country’s children and beyond. Rather than envisioning children’s books as equally meritorious, it is crucial that these books be explored, evaluated and catalogued for educational purposes, shifting their legacy from a cool web (Graves, 1927) and into a radiant opportunity for deep, engaging learning with significant developments towards illuminative understandings of self and other.

While concerns with supporting mental health seem to be on the increase in our society, it is predicted that mental health topics will appear in greater numbers in Canadian titles for young people, with increasing authenticity as inspired by a vigilant readership. Although a number of very fine works for older children are available, we have yet to see mental health translated appropriately for younger children who experience negative effects of mental health themselves, through their families, and/or through their friendship groups.

As Stallworth states (2017, p. 33), “we can no longer afford to make those books that are considered classics, which are not inclusive of people...the staples in our classrooms.” Yet changing our practice in relation to children’s literature is difficult without keen knowledge about children’s texts and dissemination of that knowledge in ways appropriate to both educators and researchers. Further comparative studies across multiple countries is highly recommended as a direction to advance further the field of children’s literature, studies that introduce and target authentic characterizations as *windows and mirrors* for young readers (Botelho & Rudman, 2009).

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