

No More Lord of the Flies

CANADIAN BOOKS FOR NOVEL STUDIES | BY GILLIAN O'REILLY

No more *Lord of the Flies*, please. Less of *Bridge to Terabithia*, *Of Mice and Men*, *Number the Stars*, *The Giver*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *Sarah Plain and Tall*. Many of these winners of the American Library Association's Newbery Award. Others have been notable books for teens, or even adults. None, however, are Canadian and they've been taught for years — and decades — in the Canadian schools. When looking for books for novel study, there are lots of good reasons to look beyond these "old staples" and to look at Canadian books that are being successfully used in the classroom.

This article draws from personal experience — mine and others. My own sons, in all their years of elementary and high school, encountered between them two Canadian books for young people (Jean Little's *Little by Little* and Janet McNaughton's *The Secret Under My Skin*) and one Canadian book for adults (*The Apprenticeship of Daddy Kravitz*). All too often they, like many Canadian children, read the same books that their parents took in school. Too often, they, like other students, encountered the same book in different grades because their teachers are drawing on the same small pool of titles. When I complained that one son had taken *Lord of the Flies* twice, a mother in British Columbia told me with exasperation, "My daughter studied *The Outsiders* three times!"

It is handy when the book not only is an effective piece of writing, but also illustrates a time or place or social situation or theme we want young readers to know about. That's sometimes the reason given for teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird*. However, the desire to illuminate a social period is all the more reason to consider books that give readers the perspective of a Canadian writer. If you want to illustrate a period of Black history, why not look to Christopher Paul Curtis's *Rud*, *Not Ruddy* or *Eljoh of Buxton*?

When an otherwise delightful Grade 7 teacher explained that John Steinbeck's unutterably dreary *The Pearl* was good for readers like my child because it was short and had a good moral, all I could think of was how much more young readers would enjoy Brian Doyle's *Up to Lew* — beautifully written, set in a unique Canadian time and place, exploring a range of human themes like community and forgiveness and tolerance, and extremely funny. That last feature

— humour — is important as we continually search for books that will excite boys to keep reading, many of the old reliables are notable for fine writing, few are notable for humour.

At the same time, the Canadian Children's Book Centre hours of or encounters excellent teachers who are seeking out new books for their curriculum (even under the pressures of budget) and find exciting, relevant, enjoyable reading for their students. Accordingly, CCBC has compiled a short list of books that are ideal substitutes for "the old standards" in novel studies for Grades 3 to 8. (The websites in parentheses indicate where teacher tips and guides are available.) A follow-up article will look at titles for high school readers.

There are many more Canadian books that can deserve a place on school shelves but space permits us only a few here. Check out the Canadian Children's Book Centre's annual guide, *Best Books for Kids & Teens*, for more suggestions.

WHY NOT SUBSTITUTE...? FOR GRADES 3 TO 6

Replace any of *Sarah Plain and Tall*, *Bridge to Terabithia*, *The Giver* or *Number the Stars* with one or more of the following.

Frieda Wishinsky's *Canadian Flyer* series offers engaging time travel books for younger readers and is now up to 14 books. For pioneer alternatives to *Sarah Plain and Tall*, Wishinsky has *Pioneer Kids* — which covers the lives of Saskatchewan settlers with lots of curriculum connections (www.pioneerpress.com). *The Olden Days Coat* also features a time travel story, by the acclaimed author Margaret Laurence, as 10-year-old Sol makes an unexpected connection to her heritage and her grandmother.

Little by Little by Jean Little or *As Long as the Rivers Flow* by Larry Loyie and Constance Brissenden offer thought-provoking memoirs. Little's amazing ability to recall childhood's thoughts and emotions with clarity and immediacy take us with her as she retraces her path from little girl to published writer. Loyie documents his childhood years in northern Alberta before he was sent to residential school in a way that conveys pride and respect for one's history in a moving and insightful way (www.firstnationswriter.com).

A classic like Parley Plosser's *Owls in the Family* appeals to many

grades, whether as a read-aloud or for novel study. The timeless story of a boy, his dog and two orphaned owls — with very distinct characters — is charming, funny, informative and totally engaging. As one elementary teacher who has read this book with four different grades told me, "They love it. It's a classic for a reason."

Those looking for social studies links might examine British Columbia writer Ellen Schwartz's *Staling Home* — the story of a young mixed race New York orphan who suddenly finds himself living with his mother's Jewish family in Brooklyn, reluctantly becoming a fan of the hated Dodgers because they have just hired Jackie Robinson, the first Black player in major league baseball. Sports, racism and social change — and a child's simple desire for home — combine in an excellent book which appeals to both boys and girls (www.tandrbooks.com).

If you are looking for science fiction or futuristic novels, Monica Hodge's powerful classic *The Keeper of the Iris Light* presents lots of interesting and thought-provoking twists, not unlike *The Giver*, as well as an amazing relationship between the protagonist Olson and Guardian, who has raised her on a lonely planet far in the future. (Eager readers will be pleased that this is the first of a five trilogy.)

Why stop here? There's also Becky Citra's pioneer stories (www.orcabook.com), Alan Cumyn's *The Secret Life of Owen Sky* (especially good for boys), Richard Scrimgeour's *The New from Jupiter* (www.tandrbooks.com) and many more.

WHY NOT SUBSTITUTE...? FOR GRADES 7 AND 8

Middle school students are so often presented with *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Of Mice and Men*, *Hatchet* and *The Outsiders*. The following excellent books will give them fresh and interesting alternatives.

The Secret Under My Skin by Janet McNaughton is a complex and intriguing book used in a number of schools. In a twenty-fourth century world poisoned by a "technoscan" and dominated by ideology, May Raynes comes to learn more about her past, her talents and what she might contribute to a hopeful future. McNaughton draws on Newfoundland geography and natural history to provide a rich setting for this thought-provoking tale.

For an interesting pairing on a contemporary topic, offer Deborah Ellis's *The Breadwinner* and Rubiana Khan's *Wasting War*. Both books are set in Afghanistan — the former in the time of Taliban rule, the latter after that regime was toppled by Western forces. The young girls in each book struggle with events beyond their control and find their own strengths, but each book offers a unique perspective that will give students much to think about.

Rud, *Not Ruddy* by Windsor author Christopher Paul Curtis is the award-winning story of a Black boy in 1930s Michigan who sets out to find his long-absent father — a musician. Buddy's rules for life are both poignant and funny and his beautifully written story illuminates the history and culture of the time. As one reviewer wrote when the book first appeared, "Some books widen horizons; this one stretches them out to Prairie dimensions."

Winner of the 2006 TD Canadian Children's Literature Award and the Governor General's Literary Award, *The Crazy Area* explores attitudes to mental illness and the struggles that come when families break apart. Author Pamela Porter sets her deeply moving story in Saskatchewan and tells it in beautifully written poetry.

Mable Riley: A Reliable Record of Humdrum, Peril and Romance by Marthe Jocelyn was the winner of the first TD Canadian Children's Book Award (www.tandrbooks.com). Jocelyn has a remarkable ability to find a unique voice for her characters. Mable's journal entries document her life as she adjusts to her role as the younger sister of the teacher and discovers all sorts of new people and ideas in the community she and her sister now call home.

The Landing by John Ibbotson is another winner of the Governor General's Literary Award. Set in the Depression, this beautifully crafted work offers a moving story of a boy with dreams and talent that seem to be forever frustrated by the narrow, hard-scrabble world of Depression-era rural Ontario until two events change his life.

While Brian Doyle is the author of many exceptional books and different fans have different favorites, my personal choice is *Up to Lew*. Wonderful to read aloud, the book draws on Doyle's heritage of family storytellers to mix heartbreak and humour in just a few pages. This is a moving tale of loss and healing, tolerance and forgiveness, community and family.

And of course, if you are teaching any book about boys and dogs, offer as a supplementary read Gordie Korman's *No More Dead Dogs*, an irreverent take on some of the classics of the classroom.

There are just a few of the titles teachers might use to refresh, enrich their classroom literature studies and entice their students with new and relevant titles. Look for more books for the high school reader in our next issue and visit the CCBC website (www.bookcentre.ca) for more suggestions. &

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What Canadian books are you teaching or would you like to see taught in elementary or secondary schools? Send your suggestions to gillian@bookcentre.ca and we'll publish them in a future issue.

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