We all fall down: TEACHING GENDER AND DIVERSITY IN THE CLASSROOM

Introduction

Last fall, I asked my grade six English class to write a book report on their favourite Canadian novels. Several students groaned. This surprised me, since we had had many discussions about great Canadian novels, and I had conscientiously placed Canadian authors in our classroom library. Furthermore, the objective of the school library has always been to identify Canadian literature and to allocate funds to support our literary community. Still, the influence of imports such as *Harry Potter* and *A series of unfortunate events* had led my students to doubt that any Canadian author could ever be as good as these global classics. As Raymond Jones suggests in his article *A long-delayed answer: the case for Canadian children's books* (2001), Canadian schools have provided students "…with only imported books about people in foreign lands" for so long, that "we are telling [our students] that the best books and the important people, places, things, and ideas come from elsewhere." As a result, many students will believe that Canadian books are "…inconsequential or boring" (Jones, 2001, pg. 10).

Yet over the past eight years of teaching, I have noted that one author in particular always seems to grab the attention of students with varying levels of reading ability and different backgrounds. Eric Walters is an author that many parents have told me has been recommended to them by Chapters employees because he is well-known for his high interest, low readability novels. So when his new novel, *We all fall down* was published last year, I knew it was in my best interest to read this novel because I would be reading many book reports on it in the future.

And this is what prompted me to write this paper. *We all fall down* explores the traumatic event of 9/11 through the eyes of a male protagonist in search of a relationship with his workaholic father. The protagonist, Will, goes to his father's office in the Twin Towers for a school "go to work with a parent" day, and the two are forced to work together to escape after the terrorist attacks. Although the story explicitly focuses on Will's nascent masculinity, there are a number of female characters who play crucial but neglected roles in the novel, working as guides and interpreters to the world surrounding the boy. With its fast-paced action, it is not a surprise to me that this book is gaining more and more popularity with students in the Middle School years. Yet with this popularity comes the need to examine how an educator can utilize this novel in a classroom, and what benefits and problems might arise from engaging students with a text that touches on a number of sensitive and controversial issues, from the obvious global political issues raised by the terrorist attacks of 9/11 to the more understated ideological concerns with its representation of gender roles.

This paper will be divided into two sections. The first half deals with the implications of using *We all fall down* in the classroom, and is particularly concerned with the conceptions of gender implicitly developed by the novel. In the second half of this paper, I suggest that despite (or perhaps because of) the problematic nature of this novel, it is important to expose students to such a text and to teach perception as a skill and not to avoid literature which may be awkward or difficult to teach.

SECTION ONE: WHY TEACH A PROBLEMATIC TEXT?

Canadian writers have always been fearless when it comes to tackling difficult themes and topics. Many of them believe that "empowerment is the right of every child and that children need to discover in themselves both their strengths and weaknesses" (Canton, 2001, pg.13). At times, their choice of subject matter can "…make us adult readers terribly uncomfortable" (pg.13) which is why my initial reaction to *We all fall down* was to dismiss it because it dealt with a subject too controversial to discuss in the classroom. When *Quill and Quire* reviewed it last March, Robert J. Wiersema noted that the "…use of the 9/11 attacks is both the novel's biggest liability and its greatest strength" (Wiersema, 2006, par. 5). I now believe that this is what makes it such a valuable novel. While previous Canadian writers of realistic fiction have chosen to use Canadian settings which depict the hardships and tribulations of survival, Walters has taken his novel to another level by utilizing the current political climate of terrorism to demonstrate how one may triumph and succeed with faith and love in others. Thus, it is important that when this novel is introduced to a school setting, that educators not become side-tracked by the setting of this novel, but rather embrace it for

its potential to teach the things we want our students to learn: acceptance and respect for one another, faith and courage to persist in doing what intuitively feels right, and persistence in overcoming hardships and learning to make difficult decisions even when we don't want to or don't feel we are able to.

Teaching contemporary realistic fiction provides readers with "…a way of knowing about the world beyond their own experiences and allows for further exploration of issues with which readers may have had some personal contact" (Bainbridge & Pantaleo, 1999, pg. 81). Realistic fiction can explore a variety of topics, including: family, friends, adolescence, survival, and cultural diversity. Yet, like most survival stories, there are always varying levels of give and take which may impact the degree to which survival is accomplished. In my opinion, the loss in *We all fall down* is the lack of recognition that Will has for understanding the female characters in the novel. As Will attempts to survive the hardships of his relationship with his father and the tragedy of 9/11, he loses a key understanding of how male and female relationships interplay with one another—an important lesson which is integral to understanding compassion and understanding for otherness. Thus, this novel is more about Will as a victim of his own lack of understanding about gender than anything else and this is something which is neither fully explored in the novel, but is important to explore in the classroom. The novel raises a number of problematic questions about the representation of gender roles and social norms even as it relegates these issues to the background of a narrative that focuses on a conventionally masculine coming of age story. Walters' protagonist is a young male who largely emulates the stereotypes and expectations of conventional codes of masculinity, and the women in the novel seem secondary to the narrative of his development. Thus, the novel offers representations of how social norms work to marginalize and stereotype others, but largely allows its readers to ignore these issues in order to sensationalize the growth of the central heroic male figure.

Teaching a problematic text has the advantage of forcing students to make their own decisions about what is right and wrong about the biases within the novel. As teachers, we are often afraid to do this, and yet this is probably one of the most important aspects of teaching. Decisions in contemporary schools are often dictated by increasing levels of accountability, and therefore the "messy" complications of the classroom and the spontaneous classroom chatter are becoming dismissed as behavioural concerns rather than teachable moments of discovery. The "audit movement," which was developed under the Thatcher government in Great Britain in the early 80's and spread in subsequent years to North America, for example, (Shore & Wright, 1999, pg. 558) has introduced "…mechanisms for measuring 'teaching performance', judging 'research quality' and assessing 'institutional effectiveness'" (pg. 557) while at the same time encouraging themes of empowerment and self-actualization that suggest that "…audit is an open, participatory and enabling process; so uncontentious and self-evidently positive that there is no logical reason for objection" (pg. 599). Although the audit movement's stated goal is to promote openness, it has created a language of standardization to explain away the spontaneity of the classroom. The goal of the audit movement is to improve the quality and efficiency of teaching and researching. The rationale for this logic is that educators will be empowered by knowing and understanding specific expectations of their duties, mission statements, strategic plans, and performances (pg. 560).

But this spontaneity within the classroom is where gender issues are often most prominent. It is usually the initial uninhibited reaction to the literature being studied that prompts discussion and debate about how gender is depicted in a novel. Thus, in teaching a problematic novel such as *We all fall down*, educators provoke spontaneous student response, and acknowledge that there are grey areas when it comes to talking about gender. By encouraging this kind of spontaneous response, teachers invite students to notice the blind spots of the novel, the contentious issues that are never fully acknowledged or addressed in the novel. As Lissa Paul points out in *Reading Other-ways*, while novels may be structured in ways that lead readers into believing that the characters that speak are the dominant forces within the novel, sometimes, it is more interesting and important to analyze who does not speak and why this is the case (Paul, 1998, pg. 16). Likewise, it is important to ask why Canadian authors are ready to speak about messy and challenging topics, but teachers are not ready to teach them and students are not sure how to handle them within the framework of the classroom.

Binary oppositions within the novel

The novel sets up several binary oppositions in its theme, setting, characterization, and conflict. For the sake of brevity, this paper is focusing on how gender is structured within the novel in connection to the theme of relationships in the novel. The novel's development of human relationships is set against the

backdrop of the tendency in North American culture to simplify the horrific and complex problem of 9/11 into a distinction between "us" versus "them." Perhaps the ambivalence about the choice of subject matter expressed by Wiersema in his review of the novel was entangled in its vexed engagement with these binary oppositions, as Walters seems to both reinforce and unsettle this polarization of positions. In order to emphasize the disintegration of the relationship between Will and his father, Walters needed a climax that embodied this disintegration: the burning Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre. Will asks "...why would anybody want to do this to us? What did we do that could cause somebody to hate our country that much?" (Walters, 2006, pp. 158-9). The novel seems to endorse this polarization of the world into an opposition between "us" and "them." Will's father, John, responds by blaming extremists for the behaviour, asking Will, "Can you imagine any person, any normal, any religious person, saying they want to kill innocent people?" (pg. 160). In this way, Walters unsettles the potentially inflammatory rhetoric of George Bush's famous declaration, "either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" but does so by reinscribing a binary opposition that offers an illusory sense of stability to the world. The novel thus voices the appropriate, conventional morality about 9/11: that it was the product of a conflict between a rational "inside" and an irrational "outside," but in doing so, it promotes an overly simplistic reading of the event by polarizing views of the event into a simple tension and denying that what happened could be made comprehensible in any way.

This complexity and ambivalence extends to the representations of gender in this novel. Will's relationship to his father shows the position of a feminized "us" (Will and his mother as a domestic unit) and a masculine "them" (Will's father and the world of his workplace). When Will's mother tells him that his father, John, is looking forward to spending time with him, Will responds "I haven't seen him enough this week to know what he's been talking about'" and his mother replies "'This has been a busy week for him'" (pg. 17). Will then goes on to rationalize "I knew he had an important job, and that meant a lot of responsibility…as well as a big paycheck. But money wasn't a big problem for us" (pg. 17). Thus, the mother is used as a mediator between the son and father, but her intervention is neither credited nor heeded. This allows Walters the opportunity to develop Will's character as both an extension of, and an oppositional force to, his father. The mother's voice is never given acknowledgment, and her opinion on John's long hours at work, staying at home to take care of Will, and attempting to bond father and son into a meaningful relationship is not treated as important. This lack of voice from the "other," which is similar to the lack of voice from the Muslim point of view in this novel, is what fragments each character into interpreting and analyzing one another in a way that is neither fair nor accurate. Each character is in search of a version of normality which no longer exists in the heterogeneity of modern-day families due to longer hours at work and higher expectations to perform and be productive citizens of a global community. The novel thus suggests a strong sense of anxiety about "proper" gender roles without explicitly formulating the sources of this anxiety, and generally falling back on antiquated stereotypes. The novel thus raises gender as a question, but it is up to us, the teachers, to turn this question into a complex conversation within the classroom.

Sorting out gender

To begin this discussion within the classroom, it is often helpful to begin by getting students to see how these binary oppositions of gender come to exist. In *Sorties: out and out: attacks/ways out/* forays (1975), Helene Cixous suggests that the desire for hierarchical oppositions is what perpetuates the simplified reduction of experience to fixed categories of language. She maintains that the perpetual use of opposites within language creates a couple. The two words become intertwined so that one cannot be thought of without the other. Through this use of "coupled" language, hierarchical thinking develops. Pairs of words become categorized in such a way that they develop relationships with other pairs of words. Cixous uses the common pairing of the words male/female and activity/passivity to explain this point (Cixous, 1975, pg. 559-578).

Certainly, this connection between the female and passivity is not something new in relation to children's literature. Many studies have concluded that the longer "children are exposed to sex-bias and stereotypes, the more sex-stereotyped their attitudes become" (Campbell & Wirtenberg, 1980 in Pinsonneault & Malhi, 2004, par. 2). Early research in gender and children's literature concluded that "boys were less likely to read stories about female main characters" whereas "girls didn't mind reading about male main characters" (Sadker, Sadker & Klein, 1991 in Klein, Ortman et al, 1994, pg. 15), however, more recent research concludes that regardless of the gender of the main character, boys and girls will enjoy a

story if the character is interesting and active (Sadker, Sadker & Klein, 1991 in Klein, Ortman et al, 1994, pg. 15). Yet, many publishers still favour the old research and continue to perpetuate male and female stereotypes. Moreover, adventure stories rarely have a male and a female protagonist as a team because publishers believe that young readers will not accept that such a relationship can exist. Thus, the demands of the publishing industry perpetuate gender stereotypes in order to enable children to easily identify with characters, and thus tend to avoid raising the kind of issue that might teach children to think about these stereotypes. Why challenge children to think about gender if it is more economical and popular to provide stories which produce quick and easy stereotypes of gender? This is one reason why such novels as *Harry Potter* and *A Series of Unfortunate Events* are so popular; they are the idealized products of this gender debate which portray dominant male characters and largely secondary female helpers. More than ever, teachers need to think about how we can provide opportunities for both boys and girls to challenge them to read from different perspectives rather than to simply accept the ones with which they are conventionally provided.

While it is true that there are many examples of strong female protagonists in modern day literature, I would argue that many of them correspond to Lissa Paul's description of female heroes of the early 1970's who "…tended to be more like men tricked out in drag" (Paul, 1999, pg.118). They might have had great adventures and been the rescuer instead of being rescued, but they did not necessarily contribute specifically female traits to the story and instead mimicked the role that any male hero could have easily been written into (pg. 118). Contemporary children's literature has not greatly addressed this concern despite the multiple articles, essays and novels written on the feminist movement and acknowledgment of barriers between the genders. The majority of female characters in novels continue to suffer in silence within our children's novels. This suffering is "…interpreted as virtu[ous] (Paul, 1998, pg. 9), although I think in the case of *We all fall down*, it is not considered at all. There needs to be a recognition that the father/son relationship in *We all fall down* is one which revolves around the silencing of women. Certainly, each female Will talks to provides sensible and articulate knowledge about the world to which he belongs. Yet, he chooses to dismiss these conversations and instead retreats back into his own mind as a means of regaining control over the situation.

Recognizing women falling down

Although Will is the narrator and central focus of the novel, his experience of the world is mediated by six female characters. Each of these six characters is used in the novel to help establish Will's position in relation to the world outside him, but each is ultimately subordinated to the novel's central concern, the relationship between Will and his father. By marginalizing the role of women in shaping Will's life, the novel upholds a masculine ideal of a father-son relationship that develops through conflict rather than acknowledging alternative paradigms for character development.

The book opens with Will's teacher, Mrs. Phelps yelling to her history class to settle down and get to work. She is shown to be a significant authority figure in Will's life, and he describes her in this way:

> I didn't know Mrs. Phelps very well yet, but I liked her. She was interested in her students, but not too interested. And she seemed to take her job seriously, but not too seriously. She wore a wedding ring, and there were pictures of a couple of kids on her desk. That meant she had a life beyond history. Teachers who lived for their subject could really make their students' lives miserable. (Walters, 2006, pg. 2).

Will instinctively likes her because she is a mothering figure. While she is able to maintain discipline within the classroom, the wedding ring denotes that she has balance in her life. Will's comment about teachers who live for their subject and make their students' lives miserable is written in non-gendered language to suggest that both male and female teachers may be guilty of such behaviour, but the fact that her children and her wedding ring are mentioned in the previous sentence suggest that Will truly means that *female* teachers who are not married may make their students' lives miserable. Instantly, Walters creates a binary opposition between male and female teachers. It is this opening approach to male and female characters which dominates the rest of the novel. Mrs. Phelps becomes the first female interpreter of Will's view of the world. She is the first character to explain how history evolves and how relationships between sons and fathers are an important aspect of the Co-op program. She also foreshadows the disaster which is about to take place in chapter two, when she declares to the class "who knows, it might be an experience that changes your entire life!" (pg.14). She is thus presented as an important figure who initiates the novel's

action, although her theoretical knowledge is quickly relegated to the background in favour of the "real world" experience of Will's father.

This representation of Mrs. Phelps in the first chapter contrasts heavily with the portrayal of a girl in the classroom who remains nameless. For Will, the girl's identity is defined exclusively by her attractive physical appearance. Will describes her as a girl who had "…lots of cleavage, wore little tiny tops and had a tendency to bend over a lot to get things out of the pack underneath her desk" (pg. 2). Later on, Will emphasizes the need to "own" the girl as a piece of property when he declares "I didn't want to her to meet anybody. I already knew I was going to be competing with guys in grade ten and up so I definitely didn't need a rock star in the mix" (pg. 13). In short, Mrs. Phelps and the girl in the classroom play out the dual roles traditionally ascribed to women in patriarchal culture: the mother and the whore. The maternal image of Mrs. Phelps contrasts with the sexualized description of the nameless girl, and this contrast is intensified by the fact that the only other character in the novel who is never named is Will's mother.

When she is introduced in Chapter Two, her role is to serve Will. Within the first page of the chapter, she announces "I like making things you enjoy" (pg. 15). It is clear that she is the one who makes the meals, organizes the family, and makes sure that Will does his homework. But her role is more than that; she is also the interpreter of Will's father's actions. She explains to Will that "Your father isn't happy with the situation either. He would like to be able to spend more time with us" (pg. 17) and one cannot help wondering if she is trying to convince Will or herself. While Will acknowledges that she chooses to stay at home and "put in time with her charities and volunteer work" (pg. 18), her marginalized role is exposed in her valiant efforts to convince Will that his father loves him more than his job. She declares "'It's not easy, and it's not what any of us would want. It's just the way it is sometimes. Your father would love nothing better than to play some basketball with you, or even go over to James's place and jam with you boys'" (pg.19).

This shift from the home to the workplace is evident in chapter three, when Will prepares to go to work with his father, John. While he is comfortable talking to his mother about his father, Will's reluctance to talk to his father is evident when he states "maybe he considered this 'quality' parenting time. For me, there'd have been a lot more quality to it if he'd just shut up and let me sleep" (pg. 24). When we are introduced to Vanessa, a fellow train commuter, she is serving coffee to the other men on the train. Yet, Walters has her state "'and we take turns bringing the coffee…it isn't always me. I wouldn't want these three males to get the idea that it's a woman's job to bring the coffee" (pg. 28). From one point of view, Vanessa's role teaches Will that women do not necessarily have to play the role of the caring nurturer, but, on the other hand, Will's assumptions about women are revealed when he observes, "She seemed pretty friendly. I wondered if Mom knew about Vanessa" (pg. 29). Will's concern that his mother should know about Vanessa might indicate that he can only conceive of her as a threat to his parents' relationship even though he emphasizes the solidity of this relationship by saying that they still held hands and kissed all the time (pg. 24). Again, the novel seems reluctant to ascribe a fully autonomous role to a female figure, and treats Vanessa as a superfluous and threatening figure in Will's family drama.

Yet another shift occurs when the reader is introduced to Suzie. While John insists on calling her his personal assistant, she quickly corrects him and calls herself a secretary. They discuss the issues of money and responsibility and John tells Suzie in front of Will that "'you do a whole lot of things that go well beyond the role of secretary'" (pg. 52) yet when it comes down to it, he asks her to "…take care of Will, show him around the place" (pg. 52). As with the girl in the classroom, Will's perception of Suzie is based on physical appearance; he notes that "she was younger than my dad, small and blond and…well, kind of cute" (pg. 51). After Suzie is asked to take care of Will, she begins to behave as Will's temporary mother, telling him "[John] does put in long hours…I even count the number of times he's tried to leave early to get home for a family meal or for something special—you certainly play a lot of school sports" (pg. 53) as if to denote to Will that his father does think of him, but that the office places certain expectations and restrictions on John's life. In other words, it is not John that has deserted his family for his career, but rather his career that has obligated him to work extensive hours. This is a direct reiteration of the previous statements that Will's mother makes in chapter two, as the novel again ascribes to a woman the role of acting as an apologist for patriarchy, and thus works towards naturalizing the gender hierarchy it describes.

The last character in the novel that bears the most obvious connection to the relationship between Will and his father is the young woman named Ting whom they rescue from the burning building. She is given a name that bears a strong resemblance to the word "thing" and is, accordingly, a silent character who does not speak English very well, Ting, becomes the "commodity" which Will and John share. They both feel obligated for her safety and literally take turns carrying her on their backs. She becomes a dead-weight in

this novel. A person, and yet not a person in that it is her physical bearing which is important to Will and his father, not her personality or usefulness. John mentions that she hardly weighs anything and she gladly wraps her arms "…around his neck and her little head peeked out from beside his head, but the rest of her was completely blocked by my father's body" (pg. 127). Ting says very little during this part of the novel, although she does acknowledge that John and Will are father and son. She mentions she has two daughters and for the first time, Will comes to realize that although she "…felt like a burden or baggage, or at best, like an unspoken challenge, a competition between me and my father to see who could cart her the farthest" she was "a real person with at least two other real people…waiting for her at home" (pg. 143). This is a turning point in the novel as Will begins to realize how important relationships are, although the focus remains on the father-son relationship, and, on the final page, Ting remains an afterthought as neither male character consciously worries about her, but both "realized" that she too was safe (pg. 183).

Thus, it is easy to see that several key stereotypes of gender emerge prominently throughout the novel. Women are either portrayed sexually (the girl in the classroom, Vanessa, Suzie) maternally (Mrs. Phelps, Will's mother, Suzie), or as insignificant (Ting). Such stereotypes exemplify Will's overly simplistic perceptions of his world, but we also begin to see that life and relationships are not adequately explained by such simplifications. Thus, once again, as an educator, I see my task as being to help my students recognize this problem and to identify it in such as way as to produce another view and interpretation to the novel.

SECTION TWO: HOW DO WE *NOT* TACKLE THIS NOVEL IN THE CLASSROOM? FALLING DOWN IN THE CLASSROOM

Given the problems with representations of gender discussed in the first half of this paper, the second half asks, conversely, how can we *not* tackle this novel in classroom? Certainly, it would be wrong to ignore the common threads of binary opposition within this novel and a class on characterization and conflict would not be accurate if gender was not part of the discussion. How does one begin to utilize such a rich text and to help students discover what their opinions are, and furthermore, how do we "hide" our own biases so that students develop an authentic understanding of themselves and of the world? How does one promote higher critical thinking skills in such diverse texts?

Differing perspectives

One of the most problematic aspects of the novel that I have discussed is also one of its greatest strengths. Its use of gender stereotypes and simplistic binary oppositions can be used to challenge students to think critically about the problems of representation that the novel raises. As Bruce Appleby points out, "as long as we continue to burden ourselves with the metaphors of gender differences, with the myths and the baggage we carry from our childhoods, we give in to that way of thinking" (Appleby, 1992, pg. 21). This novel represents stereotypical views of society in a way that seems unavoidable to a mature and well-versed reader. Thus, it is important that children are provided with the proper tools to recognize these stereotypes in order to understand that they exist.

One way to discuss how binary oppositions work within a novel is to provide written and oral opportunities for reflecting upon different perspectives. As educators, many of us are guilty of asking students to ignore "…their gender roles as they read… [and to] immerse themselves in the literature" and follow and reflect on the central point of view (McCracken, 1992, pg. 60). Nancy Mellin McCracken (1992) suggests that educators should encourage students "to read with their full gender experience intact, to resist the central point of view when it contradicts that experience, and to seek artistry both in the particulars and the universals" (pg. 60). This technique of reading provides the class with the opportunity for self-reflection, and also elicits an interpretation of the text from each student which is not determined by the narrative limits of the male-centered plot. For example, how would *We all fall down* differ if it were written from the perspective of Mrs. Phelps or of Ting, or of Will's mother? Ting's interpretation of the story, for example, might be more critical of the fact that Will and his father work together in a competitive manner. Will's mother, on the other hand, might tell the story a neglected mother living on her own and raising a child who may or may not understand the sacrifices his father has made for him. Mrs. Phelps' story might suggest a frustrated teacher, anxious for her students to understand the complications of world politics and to learn to appreciate the lifestyle they already have. Furthermore, students might be asked to think about how the novel would differ if it were written from Will's perspective twenty years after the

incident? By providing the opportunity for students to rethink the structure and analysis of characters, they become better able to shift into differing roles and see the problematic issues and concerns from that character's perspective.

Binary Oppositions

It is important that students feel comfortable voicing their opinions and raising concerns from varying perspectives. By recognizing similarities and differences between characters within a novel, students are able to recognize similarities and differences with each other. Julia T. Wood's article entitled *Bringing different voices into the classroom* (1993) discusses the problem of inter-personal communication by exploring a common phrase: "I know you think you understand what I said, but what you thought you heard is not what I meant." Wood uses a technique in her classroom which forces students to think about gender in different perspectives. Each student is asked to think about the following questions:

1. What did you hear _________say?
2. What did you hear the other characters (or people in the room) say?
3. What do you think _______ wanted as a response to telling us about_______.
   (Wood, 1993, pg. 84).

These three simple questions force the reader to reflect upon what a writer intends the reader to read and what the reader interprets from the words in the novel. This leads me into my second suggestion for teaching *We all fall down*, or any other novel for that matter. It is crucial that students and teachers reflect on the written word and analyze it from many different perspectives. Wood explains that it is important that students are able to recognize what she calls "voice of caring" and "voice of fairness" (pg.85). The "voice of caring" emphasizes "…the responsibilities people have by virtue of their relationship with each other" (pg. 85). The "voice of fairness" assumes that "what we 'owe' to others and are entitled to expect from others depends on our rights and the highest moral goal is to be fair in how we treat others by honoring their rights while not violating our own" (pg.85). By recognizing that such voices may alter the perspective and intent of a conversation, students may begin to rethink how gender is portrayed within the texts that they read. Students of all ages should be encouraged to interpret each character's perspective and label key incidents within the novel as either a "voice of caring" or a "voice of fairness." Will's character, for example, exemplifies the "voice of fairness" throughout the novel. It would be interesting to have students assess his point of view in terms of the "voice of caring" to see if it altered their perception of Will and the way he treats others in the novel. Furthermore, how would this voice shift with age and maturity? How would it alter his long-term view of his relationship with his father? Would he respect his mother for keeping the family fully-functioning, or be disgusted with her for tolerating his father's lack of interest in his personal life?

Playing with words

In Lois Stover's *Must boys be boys and girls be girls? Exploring gender through reading young adult literature* (1992), she suggests that young readers should be provided with literature which "validate[s] their own experience as young men or women, but also challenge[s] that experience, perhaps showing them options of which they have been unaware" (Stover, 1992, pg. 94). Ideally, teachers should provide novels from varying points of views and genders on themes. One of the main themes of *We all fall down* is the relationship between fathers and sons and how it impacts their daily lives. Will's character is so busy feeling frustrated and bitter with his workaholic father that he barely notices others around him, other than to note that they have a relationship with his father that he does not have. Students should be aware that language expresses differences in voice within a novel. Gender plays a vital role in these differences. For example, "female discussion is often characterized by attention to minute detail, intimate feelings, and family and other significant relationships: male discussion and writing tends to be concerned with generalizations and evaluations" (Belenky in Stover, 1992, pg. 102). Students should ask themselves: is Will the type of character that I would want representing men to the adult world? Is Ting the type of

character that I would want representing women? By asking these questions, students will begin to adjust their thinking and critically analyze the types of novels they are reading. Rather than reading for content, students should be encouraged to read for description. The simple act of circling adverbs and adjectives to describe characters (or doing it for them in younger grades) will help to show the differences in these descriptions.

Conclusion

The objective of my paper has been two-fold: to recognize that novels such as *We all fall down* present messy and complicated representations of gender and for this reason alone, as educators we should challenge ourselves and our students to embrace these texts rather than cower away from them just as Canadian children's novelists seek to push the envelope on realistic fiction. This is not an easy task and certainly not one which is upheld in mainstream society. While many educators do fight to promote thinking about gender within their classrooms and push their students to consider the consequences of stereotypes, there is a momentum of standardization within our schools which is pushing to ignore the complexities of these issues and to minimize the value of the curiosity and the spontaneous reactions that characterize students' engagement with such difficult literature. Now, more than ever, we must find creative ways to educate ourselves and read the novels which our students are curious about to promote diversity and multiple perspectives of literature. The question of "how can we teach *We all fall down?*," should be changed to "how can we *not* teach *We all fall down?*" By altering our worries about risky texts, we can begin to alter our children's worries about embracing them.

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