

## BOOK EXPO CANADA, TORONTO: 2004

As some of you may know, I've spent the bulk of my career in theatre, writing plays such as *Nurse Jane Goes To Hawaii*, *Rexy!* and *Papers*. But perhaps a clue to why I've started writing fiction about young adults can be found in my comedy, *Bag Babies*. In that play, one of the character's says of the world, "There's an In Crowd and an Out Crowd: civilization's one big high school".

Indeed, there's nothing we can learn about office politics that we didn't learn as teenagers dealing with class cliques, and there's no greater fear of being confronted by forces beyond one's control than facing an irate teacher, a final exam, or one's first date.

More seriously, teens are just as engaged as adults in the full range of human social concerns, from family collapse, to drugs and alcohol, to poverty and discrimination, to isolation, alienation, identity crisis, suicide, prostitution, gangs, and physical and sexual abuse. In fact, the only difference between adults and teens is that when crisis strikes, adults have years of accumulated coping skills to fall back on. Lacking these defences, teenagers are vulnerable, with only their wits to carry them through life's dilemmas and horrors.

The best YA novels use this vulnerability to examine the same universal truths found in books about adults; and they explore these truths with the same degree of depth, perception and literary art. I'm thinking here of novels like *Huckleberry Finn*, *Lord of the Flies*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Catcher in the Rye*, and *The Outsiders*.

If there *is* a difference between books about adults and books about teens, it lies in the voice of the protagonist. Personally, I'm particularly interested in first-person teen narration. The assumption of moral clarity, so charming in the young and so appalling in the old, has unique literary possibilities in the voice of an adolescent. The adolescent can imagine, and demand, a just world in stark contrast to reality: the disjunction between illusion and experience, hope and truth, creating tension and irony, comedy and tragedy -- all the more complex as the moral absolutes of our inexperienced, vulnerable, unreliable narrator are set on a shifting foundation of struggle and

uncertainty, fuelled by dizzying surges of hormones and passion.

Still, this difference between adult and Y.A. fiction is one of narrative perspective, not of content nor art.

As an aside, this equality of content and art is why I have a somewhat conflicted response to the term "YA". All of us in this room have enormous respect for young adult fiction, but the descriptor "YA" carries negative baggage in some adult literary circles. Reflecting on this prejudice, my mind drifted back to the 1960s, when, as a young man, I'd go to the public library looking for novels set in Canada. Books about Canadians, I discovered, weren't placed alongside the other books in the stacks. Instead, they were set apart on a shelf marked "Canadiana".

On the one hand, the term "Canadiana" was a helpful descriptor, meant to lead me and others like me to novels of special interest. But on the other hand, it had the effect of placing them, literally, in a literary ghetto: By inference, it led many of my generation to believe that real books, i.e. literature, were the international books on the stacks -- and that books by or about Canadians -- "Canadiana" -- were a less worthy, less valuable, sub-genre -- a point-of-view reinforced in the schools, universities and book pages of the time.

Descriptors, in short, have complex functions and effects. On the positive side, they can highlight works about marginalized communities, such as youth, creating a marketing niche that gives these communities an identified space and voice. But by hiving this literature from literature as a whole, by fencing it off, descriptors can also erect psychological barriers that limit its reach and readership in the wider community; that make it seem 'Other'; or, as in the case of "Canadiana", 'Lesser'.

There is an additional conundrum with the descriptor Y.A.. We all enjoy seeing our own communities reflected in fiction. Adolescents are no different. For teens who find the world of adults alienating, a Y.A. section in a store or library can be a welcome, accessible port in a sea of forbidding tomes. This is especially true for younger, non-readers. On the other hand, there are other adolescents, already reading adult

literature, who fiercely resent being considered anything but fully grownup. For them, as for adults generally, the term "Y.A. fiction" may carry a whiff of condescension; however unfairly, or inadvertently, they may see it as a kind of junk food for juveniles. In consequence, a large potential readership of both young adults and adults may be pushed away from literary experiences they might otherwise enjoy.

As all of here know, young adult fiction is vitally important, on so many levels, for so many people. It has literary and emotional rewards for all ages. How to build the respect we feel for this field within the larger society, how to expand our readership among those who have yet to experience its treasures and possibilities -- or, more likely to the point, who have forgotten those treasures and possibilities -- this is a challenge as fascinating and complex as the young adults the field describes.

But where was I? Ah yes. The vulnerability of youth. And the way in which this vulnerability increases the literary and emotional stakes of both young adult characters and narratives: The opportunity to reconnect to that vulnerability, and those stakes, is why I was so excited when Rick Wilks of Annick Press approached me to write my first novel about young people, *Leslie's Journal*.

Working on *Leslie's Journal* took me back to my teens, and to my adolescent discovery that by the age of thirteen I had already formulated an all-encompassing vision of life. A world-view summed up by three words: "It's not fair!" This vision has stayed with me throughout my life. It's also a vision, it seems to me, that most of us share -- and that is at the core of most literature, whether tragic or comic. Another reminder, perhaps, that at heart, adults are simply teenagers with a past.

*Leslie's Journal* was a terrific experience, and I eagerly accepted Annick's offer to work on a second novel about young adults -- a novel set against the AIDS pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa -- a novel that would become *Chanda's Secrets*.

Researching *Chanda's Secrets* in the cattle posts, villages, cities and morgues of Botswana was a wrenching experience. I mentioned earlier that teens are engaged in the full range of human emotional and social life, including its various horrors. Nowhere is this truth

more vivid and self-evident than in sub-Saharan Africa. I'll share three stories with you:

The first is about a young man I met who was raising his two brothers. He'd been raising them since he was 14, and they were 8 and 10. He told me about how their papa had died when they were very young -- he said of tuberculosis, but we both knew he meant AIDS -- and about the time their mama was in the hospital dying. Relatives were dropping by. He heard them whisper plans to sell his family's cement-block home and divide up the proceeds along with his brothers. The night before his mama died, he got her to write a will that gave the house to him and his siblings. He kept them together with a roof over their head, but his relatives disappeared back to the country, and with them their support.

Or there was the young woman of 18, HIV+ with a two-year-old son, also infected. She was living alone with her boy, silenced by shame and stigma, unable to find the words to tell her parents that their only child and grandchild would soon be dead of AIDS.

And finally, there was the morgue for the poor that I visited in Francistown, the one described in the first chapter of *Chanda's Secrets*. It used to be a building supply centre, but the owner discovered there was more money in death than construction. So... people collected the bodies of their loved ones between a yard renting bulldozers and a yard selling paving stones and cement mixers. The owner, an old man, hale and hearty, with cigarette burns on his lapel, had emigrated from Britain seventeen years ago. I'll never forget the sight of him pushing aside a curtain at the back of the morgue. Under the light of a bare bulb I saw tiny infant coffins stacked floor to ceiling. They were made of pressboards, stuck together with finishing nails, spray-painted pink and blue, with a plastic lining stapled in place. Tiny tin handles were glued to the side; they'd fall off if you tried to use them. The owner said he sometimes stitched a ribbon to the baby's pillow for free, and fluffed a cotton shroud over the plastic lining, so that only the little face ever showed; I was assured it all looked "lovely".

These stories, and so many more like them, underlined for me a truth about the virus, a truth that has reinforced my world view -- Life isn't fair. It's not. And from that truth, the realization that large themes flow in consequence, and response.

*Chanda's Secrets* may be set against the AIDS pandemic, but it's not about a virus. It's about our needs and dreams, our love of family, the loyalty of friends, the fear of stigma, the pain of bereavement, the courage to live with truth, and the hope we discover in that courage.

I'd like to read you a short scene from *Chanda's Secrets*, and then in my remaining time, to field any questions you may have...