

Finger on the Line: One English Teacher's Brush with Controversy

Personal Essay (3324 words)

By Pam North

“What we really need are aliens, extraterrestrials,” she says from the front of the room. This is the opening line of her defence, her attempt to provide hope and quell fears. She’s small, pencil straight behind the table-top podium, head down.

The room is grand and lofty. Once a railway station, the architecture and detailing of the building bridges classical stoicism and Art Deco with the industrial age in Hamilton, Ontario. Weighty limestone facades, long rectangular windows and steel trusses have been reimagined for a stately banquet hall. Today, cloth-covered tables crowd the floor space. The building now hosts a variety of events: union meetings, weddings, the annual Hamilton Prayer Breakfast. But today this room functions as a type of court, and the English teacher on stage is given the opportunity to defend herself. The allegation: she is pushing an agenda which is confusing and corrupting youth.

This space is never particularly quiet. Usually food servers move between tables, and people are generally here to chat rather than to listen. Today, however, audience members put down their forks and look to the podium. They want to see this woman, this English teacher who’s way off. Teachers don’t usually get the floor outside the classroom, but this time she represents something bigger. She deserves at least a look, even though each looker is pretty sure about what they will see, and they’re right: she’s quiet, nervous but trying to maintain composure, with her head down into a book.

I am that English teacher, the accused. The arraignment of sorts is based on four pages of a novel. Continuing my line of defence, I begin to read passages from the pages in question:

“Wayne thought about beauty...Just once to look in the mirror and see a beautiful face...Wayne

didn't need that much beauty...The broken beer bottle had beauty. It had a stag on it, with antlers...Beauty is gone, Wayne thought. Beauty is gone and beauty is never coming back and it has not even been here yet" (Winter 377-381).

I choose to read the words on these pages, the ones that my accusers have ignored. Words like "beauty" and "broken" are as purposeful as the words for which I have been called immoral, a bad influence, the words for which the school council has gone to the principal and the superintendent, hoping to have me reprimanded and the book taken off the curriculum. The audience has read or heard about the "disgusting" language and "inappropriate" words of an abuser, and then these words have been hissed amongst parents, faces alight with tight lips and jagged eyes.

Admittedly, the dialogue of this one character on the four pages is hard and challenging to read. His cruelty strikes to the heart, and ought to. I am more concerned when such language elicits snickers or casual disdain and is repeated in the school hallways and cafeteria. But I know it has been as well—that's all part of high-school life.

This dialogue on pages 377-381 portrays a vile verbal assault on an innocent, and the words used, the supposed source of the uproar, appear in most contemporary fiction, contemporary movies, streamed series, podcasts, youtube videos, music lyrics, and yes, in the novels we teach and offer to our grade twelve students on our independent study lists. But while extra-marital affairs, sexual assaults, murder, torture and all kinds of treachery often exist in most of the

literature that we have been teaching for years, strangely, *Annabel*, by Kathleen Winter, the novel in question,

contains none of this R-rated content. I would imagine that this novel in film form would be rated PG. The actual physical assault of Wayne, takes place “off stage” and is not described in the novel.

So why is this particular book and my teaching of it supposedly so egregious, and worthy of censure?

The novel *Annabel*, is set in Labrador, in the 1960s-80’s and is a coming of age story of a child who is born inter-sex.

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In 2017 when I chose to teach the novel *Annabel* to my two classes of grade twelve students, I was close to retirement. I have a Master’s Degree in literature and taught English to students of all levels and grades, nine through twelve, for over thirty years. Teaching was a passion for me. In the early years, we studied Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, the works of Shakespeare, Austen, Dickens, Orwell—the classics, and I loved them all.

Times change, our society grows, and evolves, as does language. After years of Laurence, Atwood, Davies and Ondaatje, we moved to Thomas King, Andre Alexis, Esi Edugyan, Richard Wagamese and others.

During the summer of 2017, I read *Annabel*, and thought that it ticked all the boxes for program suitability—Canadian, nominated for several awards, and compelling for students: it follows a young person whose personal identity is challenged by family and society; it moves the reader to believe that differences amongst people must be met with dignity, and it does so with sensitivity and grace.

In terms of the bigger, social and political context, the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements were insisting that society examine itself. We'd begun to acknowledge the history of our Indigenous people, and attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community had begun to shift. But when I started to teach *Annabel* in 2017, I became increasingly aware that we were on the cusp of another struggle. Some groups were advocating for greater social inclusion and others felt the natural fabric of our society was under threat, yet again. This time, the focus was transgender people.

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“Ms. North, can I talk to you?”

“Of course, what’s up?” I’m sitting at my desk, laptop open.

Maryann clutches her binder like a hug and pivots on her heel to make sure the classroom has emptied of bodies. Long hair shading her face, she stands in front of me, almost leaning on the

desk. Maryann sits at the front of the room and isn't part of the two or three groups of kids around her. I'm aware that she is uncomfortable generally, as she is now.

"Like, you know how I'm reading that other book ... the girls with the mom who wants them to marry or something ..."

"Yes, ... how's it going?"

"Well ... " she looks up at me now with a careful smile, "so ... I don't really want to read it ... I'd rather go back to the first one, I was further into it." Now she's swaying from one foot to the other, eyes gliding to me and then over my desk, a nervous smile flashing on and off across her red cheeks.

"Oh, o.k ... but, I thought *Annabel* wasn't working for you ... What about your mom?"

"I know, I know. So, I told her, after she sent that email ... like, I just told her the book made me uncomfortable because I wasn't reading; I bombed those quizzes ... " She hugs her books more tightly and bounces on tiptoes, legs straight. "I'm really sorry ... "

The week prior, I'd received an email from Maryann's mom—her daughter was not to read *Annabel*. Their family believes in two genders only, the book is inappropriate and confusing and is making her daughter uncomfortable.

As per our department protocol, I had Maryann choose another book from our list.

“Oh ... o.k ... and so your mom knows about the quizzes too?”

Maryann puts her head down, clutching her binder more closely, nods her head.

“O.K ... is it o.k. with your mom if you go back to reading *Annabel*?”

She looks up at me now, teary-eyed, and nods again. I get it.

Tears are rolling, burden is released, truth is shared. We're good, I hope.

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Maryann's mom and the parents of another student in my class were on the school's parent council. The week after my discussion with Maryann, I received an email from the other student's parents, asking to see me. I hoped they wanted to discuss their son's poor grades and attendance, but I suspected what was coming. Their son was the first of the two students who told me he didn't want to read the book at the outset, saying it was too weird, but quickly changed his mind when he realised I would be offering him another novel in its place.

In retrospect, I wonder how things would have unfolded had I skipped the talk about sensitive material and the need for an open attitude when approaching the novel. I was trying to stave off

any giggles or worse when the students learned that the character, Wayne, had been born with both male and female genitalia and hormones. Almost all of the students were mature and accepting, as I have usually found seventeen and eighteen-year-olds to be, but a couple were looking for an out, and I had suggested one would be provided if anyone felt uncomfortable reading the book.

Also, when we were further into the book, I alerted the students to the sensitive material on pages, 377-381—a trigger warning, but in retrospect, ammunition for parents?

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“We’re not here because of the hermaphrodite ... It’s the language—that section the kids had to read.” The father is sturdy and calm to start.

I can feel my eyebrows raise. *Keep your face neutral*, I coach myself. I look at him squarely.

“How can you bring in a book like that, and give it to the kids?” Mom is skittish, her voice shaky.

The room is hot and messy as it usually is when thirty teenage bodies leave at the end of class. I have a pile of essays in front of me, desks askew and papers on the floor. A couple of students show up at my door to hand me their essays and return books. I motion for them to leave their



work on the front counter, and then I get up to open the windows, hoping the air will cool things off.

I sit down again and try to relate to their concerns. *Maybe a misunderstanding.* “I raised two teenagers as well. I outlawed songs with certain lyrics in our house—the ones that glorify abusive relationships or denigrate people. I can assure you that this novel does neither.”

My attempts to defend the novel go nowhere. Not only do these parents consider the novel highly inappropriate, but they question my integrity and motivations.

“I have to wonder what kind of immoral person would want students to read this stuff!” Dad is becoming more heated.

“Have you read the novel?” I ask.

“She,” he motions to his wife, “showed me the pages ... that’s enough!” Thick hands now curled on the sticky melamine, he pushes back from the table.

I can feel my own indignation rising to meet his insults. “I have to disagree. I believe the book to be highly moral. In any case, Stewart was given another choice to read from the outset and he chose to continue with the class novel,” I respond.

Across the front of the classroom, I have a display of the independent study novel options for the next reading unit; the students choose from among the twelve to fifteen other novels reflecting a variety of styles and subject matter.

“Stewart has chosen to read *Motherless Brooklyn* from the independent study list.” I point to the book on the ledge. “I have to warn you that the dialogue is full of swear words and other offensive language, and most of the characters are criminals. There are sexual indiscretions, murders, lots of thuggery in the novel. The book is wonderful, but the actions of many of the characters would be considered immoral.”

The dad rolls his eyes with a dismissive hand gesture. “That’s different.”

I’m not sure what to say now.

Mom stands and grabs her jacket from the chair. “I knew it was pointless to come in here!” She’s flushed and frustrated and they leave the room sharply, bumping desks as they storm to the door.

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I knew that I would be “on the carpet” soon enough. The next day, I was called to the office. The principal at the time was a retiree filling in; poor woman, she was caught in an ugly position. She sat me down and told me the parents had been fired up in the parking lot after the school council meeting and were taking the matter up the ladder.

“They reminded me that they’re Christians, and this book goes against their beliefs,” she said. The high school is in the public school board, but the community has a significant population from the Christian Reformed Church, some of whom are on the council. Funny, I thought, I would consider myself a Christian too, believing whole-heartedly in the teachings of Jesus about inclusion and love.

A few days later, the principal came to my room with news that the chairs of the parent council had, indeed, gone to the superintendent, but she was happy to report that the superintendent, herself an avid reader, had read the book when it first came out a few years earlier. She told the parents the book was absolutely appropriate for senior students to read.

The students in my two grade-twelve classes were well aware of the indignation swirling in some quarters of the parent community. Almost all of the students were silent about it, at least in class. I could tell that most of them were reading carefully. No internet summaries and essays were available and yet they were producing good work. In any case, teaching *Annabel* provided a rich education for me too.

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A group of boys who sit by the windows in my third period class, come in from Physics, dump their backpacks and pull out their novels.

“J.P. would love this book.” Carter, a quick student, is always ready to debate ideas. The other boys scoff and roll their eyes.

“Who’s J.P.?” I can’t resist the banter before class. The boys look sideways at each other.

Another student, resting his head on his crossed forearms, looks up. Bjorn, the powerlifter, cap over shorn red hair, stretches out his torso and sits up straight. “Professor ... youtube ... Jordan Peterson.”

I am intrigued. Bjorn is painfully polite, punctual and had asked me if he could read Dostoevsky for his independent study. If he and the other boys are into Professor J.P., I want to know about him.

Right after class I head down to the workroom.

“Have you heard of Jordan Peterson?” I ask a colleague who’s eating lunch.

“Ya, talk to Colin Davies. He’s all about him.”

*Ah, the physics teacher*, I note and then spend my lunch hour listening to lectures from the infamous Professor Peterson. *This guy is my age! Into Nietzsche, Jung, Orwell—this is my stuff, the old canon. Why do seventeen-year old boys even know about him?* Then I come across the media reports: refusal to use non-gendered pronouns, Bill C-16, controversy on campuses. The bell rings. “Oh yikes ... Here we go ... ” I log off and rush out the door to class.

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I had not heard the term “woke” when I chose to teach *Annabel*. I was just starting to understand that powerful influences were filtering out of podcasts, alternative news sources, and other platforms. These voices and viewpoints were filling in the spaces that I had always hoped were developed through reading literature and practising independent critical thinking.

My brush with controversy all happened over seven years ago. Given what I hear from teachers today, I doubt *Annabel* would survive the onslaught of parental vitriol in 2025. The flames of book fires that threaten our educators and our students' learning, are consuming any understanding related to the LGBTQ+ community.

I would be supportive of parental concerns directed at the teaching of books that validate or glorify hate or violence towards any group; but I’d like to think we would all support those concerns, just as I’d like to think that no such books would be taught in the first place. But of course, simplistic, even denigrating depictions of women, people of colour, and marginalised groups were all once the norm, not from malice but from ignorance. The consequence—perpetuating the myth of a natural entitlement of one gender, race, or group over another—is unconscionable. Clearly humans throughout time have demonstrated that our understanding is often self-centred and always incomplete.

“What we really need are aliens, extraterrestrials.” I look up at the audience and continue. “I like to think that a broader perspective from outside this narrow time and space, would force us to embrace our collective humanity.” The scene in the banquet hall, where I am able to defend

myself, is a fiction, of course. It didn't happen; my vindication is just pure fantasy. Sure, I would have liked my chance at the podium, my day in court to clear my name, maybe to stand up and actually be the "social justice warrior" that I was called by parents (a term which was new to me at the time and which I thought was kind of humorous); but my actual concern here is not about me, a comfortably retired English teacher, wife and mother.

I think now about students, like the ones in my classes who were reading *Annabel* and who could see themselves in the character of Wayne. Students might not necessarily struggle with their sexuality, or with gender dysphoria, but they might feel misunderstood. Some feel like disappointments to, or even worse, unworthy of love from their parents, while others may fear causing their parents' pain. Students sit quietly in our classrooms, and I want them to know they are not alone. Also, literature helps bridge divides. I like to think that my students who read *Annabel* could see, through the character of Wayne's father, Treadway, that parents often live in fear for their child and act in ways that seem uncaring, but that such parents can learn to accept their child for who they are. There's hope.

I think of the students I was privileged to know on a personal level through their journals and creative writing, the ones who broke my heart when they disclosed the difficulties of living in situations that further isolated them and even promoted self-loathing and depression. In every classroom across the country there are likely two or three who struggle with their sexuality or gender identification. The lucky ones are able to come out to their teachers and their peers, and best of all, have the support of their parents; the others must suffer terribly.

When I think back to my own high school experience in the early 1980s, I remember those kids who were ostracised and bullied. They cowered in classrooms, skirted the hallways by themselves, and they disappeared after graduation. Others were abusing alcohol or drugs or silently committing self-harm: later, some were known to have had tragic adult lives.

Schools today are reimagining themselves - what they stand for, and what they teach youth in the 21st century. Buildings are repurposed, books are up-dated, and even ideas change. Will society be able to evolve, or will we continue to put our finger on the timeline of human history and say, "stop right there; this was ideal; this was the way things should be!"? As the novel *Annabel* illustrates, Nature is full of multiplicity, not mistakes. It's up to us to see differently.

At the fundamental level, kids today are not more confused than they ever were, and they are not being confused by books that ask them to read for themselves and recognise the complexities of sexuality and gender; kids today have a chance to be authentic, and some have the courage to speak out. They need adults to set aside their fears and incomplete understanding, the causes that have had tragic consequences for many, for far too long

#### Work Cited

Winter, Kathleen. *Annabel*. House of Anansi Press, 2011.