

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

by Pam North

There I am, at the front of the room, defending myself. From this distance, I'm just a little form, a pencil behind the table-top podium, head down. My glasses obscure my face, but from here I'm featureless anyways - an outline, a white shirt, a sweater, a skirt - in the mind's eye.

The room is grand and lofty. The weighty limestone construction, long rectangular windows and steel trusses have been reimagined to create a stately banquet hall. Once a railway station, the architecture and detailing of the building bridges classical stoicism and Art Deco with the industrial age in Hamilton, Ontario. Today, round, white table-cloth-covered tables that can seat twelve crowd the floor space. I've been here before: union meetings, the annual Hamilton "Prayer Breakfast," at least one wedding. But this is my day, to defend myself.

This space is never particularly quiet. Usually food servers are moving between tables, and people are generally not here to listen. But in my mind's eye, people put down their forks for a minute and look up. They want to see this woman, this English teacher who's way off. English teachers don't usually get the floor, but this time she represents something bigger. She deserves at least a look, even though the looker is pretty sure about what they will see, and they're right: she's quiet, nervous but trying to maintain composure, has greying hair, glasses, head down into a book.

I am that English teacher, the one accused of exposing students to words that have been deemed unacceptable on four pages of a novel. 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 don't need to read the other words on these pages, the ones 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, presumably to have me reprimanded and the book taken off the curriculum. The audience has read about or heard these other words that were spread amongst parents with tight lips and jagged eyes. These other words, on the same four pages, are hard and challenging and uncomfortable to read. They are supposed to be. I am more concerned when such words elicit snickers and repetition in the school cafeteria, but I know they will as well - that's all part of highschool life.

The other words that I don't need to read on the same four pages, are the words of a vile verbal assault on an innocent. They are the words used by people who are worse than bullies. When spoken individually, they lose their full charge and are heard everyday throughout the halls of a highschool and certainly on many popular Netflix shows.

In fact, the words on pages 377-381 that are allegedly the source of the uproar appear in most of the novels we teach and offer to our grade twelve students on our independent study lists. Contemporary fiction, like contemporary movies, streamed series, podcasts, youtube videos, music lyrics, also make use of these offensive words. As well, extra-marital affairs, sexual assaults, murder, torture and all kinds of treachery 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 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.

The scene above in the banquet hall did not actually occur; that is, my vindication, my opportunity to clear my name and defend the merits of the novel I chose to teach, never came to pass. The scene is a fiction I've created. In my imagination I am able to dispel society's fear that teachers like me are trying to indoctrinate kids with horrid ideas, or plant the seeds that make young people confused about their own gender or sexuality. In my imagination, I am able to show parents and others the craft and the humanity of the book: the juxtaposition of language, use of symbolism and image patterns. Ideas like the importance of accepting one's self and of accepting differences in others are fundamental to the novel

The novel is Canadian, a finalist for the Giller Award, Governor General's Award, Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize, Orange Prize and Amazon.Ca First Novel Awards, among others. I chose the novel because it follows a young person's life and shows how family life can be difficult but full of forgiveness and love. I chose the novel because it prompts readers to see themselves in the context of the voices presented in the novel

and determine a pathway to empathy for the main character. I chose the novel because it moves the reader to believe that differences amongst people must be met with dignity, and it does so with sensitivity and grace.

So what exactly did happen in my highschool in 2017, when I chose to teach the novel *Annabel* to my two classes of grade twelve students?

First, I'd like to provide a little more background. In 2017, I was just three years away from retirement. Admittedly an "English Lit geek" to my students, I have a Masters Degree in literature and taught nothing but 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 Dickens, Austen, Orwell - the classics, and I loved them all. Teaching Shakespeare was my favourite and I would plan and save it for just the right time in the semester.

Over the years, let's face it, students grew tired of long sentences and were unimpressed by iambic pentameter or nineteenth-century vocabulary. My teaching career spanned the introduction of the internet, which posed new challenges for English programs: synopses of books were easy to find and plagiarism became rampant; digital language and communication trained students to process shorter sentences, shorter forms and fewer words.

We started to look for literature that would appeal to 21st-century kids, and continue to challenge them to read for multiple meanings in words and for layers of meaning

below the literal level in texts. The English curriculum set by the Ministry of Education requires students to read from a variety of genres with a variety of perspectives; teachers are not required to choose books from a specific list. Each English department finds its own material, although we teachers often collaborate with our colleagues at other schools and keep abreast of what's new and award-winning. After years of Laurence, Atwood, Davies and Ondaatje, we moved to Thomas King, Andre Alexis, Kim Elchin, Esi Edugyan among others.

During the summer of 2017, I read *Annabel*, and thought that it ticked all the boxes for program suitability and would be a compelling read for students. I often attend the Eden Mills Writers' Festival in September, and made a particular point of going to see Kathleen Winter who was on the ticket. We spoke after she read from her new book at the time and I told her that I was planning to teach *Annabel* to my grade twelves. She graciously offered to respond to my students' questions via email later in the semester when we finished studying the novel. "Perfect!" I thought.

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"Ms North, can I talk to you?"

"Of course, what's up?" I'm sitting at my desk, laptop open, finishing attendance.

She clutches her binder like a hug and pivots on her heel to make sure the classroom has emptied of bodies. Long hair in front of her face, little voice, she stands in front of me, almost leaning on the desk. Maryann is very quiet in class. She 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, not just in the moment.

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

"Yup, 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 other 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, nervous smile flashing on and off across her red cheeks.

"Oh, o.k....but, I thought the class novel 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 clutches the books tighter and bounces on tiptoes, legs straight. "I'm really sorry..."

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

As per our usual 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, closer hug, kissing her binder now, nods her head.

"O.K...is it o.k. with your mom if you go back to reading the other book?"

She looks up at me now, teary eyed. I get it.

"She said I could decide...I didn't like that one you gave me. I like the first one...I'm just really behind now."

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. A few days later, I received an email from the other student's parents, asking to come in to see me. My hope was that they wanted to discuss their son's poor grades and attendance, but I knew 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.

To be fair, in retrospect, I wish I had 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 some female genitalia and hormones. Almost all of the students were mature and accepting, as I have 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.

My other mistake occurred when we were further into the book: I alerted the students to the sensitive material on pages, 377-381. I warned them that the scene contained some offensive language and would be difficult to read.

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"We're not here because of the hermaphrodite - that stuff is real...It's the language, that section the kids had to read." The father is sturdy and calm, to start.



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

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 help me to cool down, if not the parents.

I sit down again and try to relate to their concerns, hoping that their accusations are based on misunderstanding. “I raised two teenagers as well. I remember outlawing the playing of music in our house that contained certain lyrics - the ones that glorify abusive relationships or denigrate people. I can assure you that this novel does nothing of the sort.”

My attempts to defend the novel are not to be had. 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. 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. Ya, I think to myself, *keep your head, Pam!*

Across the front of the classroom, I have a display of twelve to fifteen other contemporary novels from which each student is choosing another book for the independent study unit.

"Stewart chose 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 parents shrug. "We know," they mutter. I'm not sure what to say now. Earlier I had asked them if they had read *Annabel*, and they both said that they had not.

Our discussion does not end satisfactorily from the parents' point of view.

"I knew it was pointless to come in here!" Mom says, flushed and frustrated and they leave the room sharply, chair legs scraping, jackets grabbed and desks bumped moving to the door.

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I knew that I would be “on the carpet” soon enough. I hadn’t even thought about asking the administration to be present for this meeting. Being the department head, I was responsible for the book choice, and my name would be the one to incur the scorn. Soon after the lunch meeting with the parents, I was called to the office. The principal at the time, a lovely retiree, was 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 last week 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, many of whom are on the council. The principal and I had a lengthy discussion about the themes in the book and the purpose of the four pages that had now become the focus for the case against the novel, and me. 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 gone to the superintendent. The principal 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 while we were studying the novel.

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,” says Carter, a quick student, always ready to ask questions and 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, my powerlifter, cap over shorn red hair, stretches out his huge 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. I spend my lunch hour listening to lectures from the infamous professor. *This guy is my age! Into Nietzsche, Jung, Orwell - this is my stuff, the canon. Why do my seventeen-year old boys even know about him?* I wonder. Then I come across the media reports: refusal to use non-gendered pronouns, Bill C-16, controversy on campuses. The bell rings. “Oh boy...” I log off and rush out the door to class.

A girl calls to me in the crowded hallway. “Hey Miss...Ms. North....”

My mind is still chewing away at what I've just learned, and hearing my name, “Ms,” voices from my past resurface as well: “*Why?*” “*Divorcee?*” and my favourite from my grandmother, “*Well, she must not think much of her husband.*” I was twenty-four.

The student catches up with me in the hall. “I forgot my book at home,” she says.

I tune back in, smile at the student and shrug. “Come on, I’ve got an extra in class.”

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I had not heard of the term “woke” when I chose to teach *Annabel*. In 2017 we were in the midst of #MeToo and Black Lives Matter was a well-established movement. But 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 almost seven years ago. Given what I hear from teachers today, I doubt *Annabel* would survive the onslaught of parental vitriol in 2023. Administrators and teachers are unable, it seems to me, to stand face to face with those who level such spurious complaints against them. Increasingly in the past few years, the scalding heat of book fires that threaten our educators and our students' learning, have surfaced around all topics related to the LGBTQ+ community. I would be supportive of parental concerns directed at the teaching of books that perpetuate, validate or glorify hate or violence towards any group. But *Annabel*, like most literature, invites readers to become more understanding and empathetic.

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, as I did then, about the students in my classes who were reading *Annabel*, and who could see themselves in the character of Wayne. The students might not necessarily struggle with their sexuality, or gender dysphoria, but they might have felt misunderstood, felt like disappointments to, or even worse, unworthy of love from, their parents. They sit quietly in our classrooms, and I want them to know they are not alone. Also, maybe students 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 all 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, there are at least 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 suffer terribly.

When I think back to my own highschool 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, books, 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 great; 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 finally 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.



## Works Cited

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