

# Orca Soundings: A Critical Feminist Investigation

By Leah Boulos

In this feature, we offer a feminist critique of Orca Book Publishers' Orca Soundings series, a Canadian collection of short novels aimed at reluctant teen readers.

## Orca Soundings: An Overview

Orca Soundings is a Canadian book series released by Orca Book Publishers. They are known as Hi/Lo books: high interest, low reading-level novels for reluctant teen readers. Generally, Orca Soundings authors have achieved success outside of the reluctant reader market and apply specifically to write these titles. Usually between 100 and 150 pages, the books use their short length to pack a narrative punch at a breakneck pace. In order to capture the attention of teens who normally avoid reading, Orca Soundings books tackle controversial topics that reflect current teen issues. These topics include drug use, teen pregnancy, bullying (both on- and offline), sexual assault, and many more. Multiple issues are often covered in one volume.

There is certainly a great need to reach out to reluctant readers, and it is encouraging that Orca Soundings offers over 100 titles specifically for this market. Furthermore, it is important that quality Canadian literature is available to teens of all reading levels. Orca Book Publishers also provides valuable resources for both students and educators, including librarians. Overall, Orca Publishers is an important organisation that Canadians should continue to support and utilise.

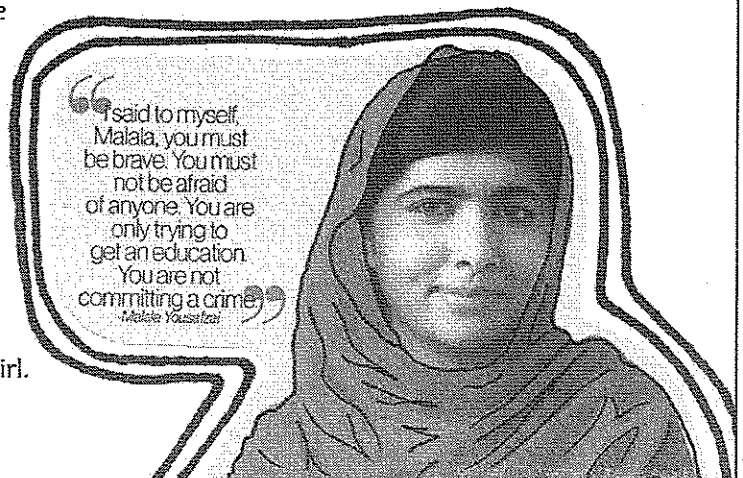
Unfortunately, from a feminist standpoint, Orca Soundings books can sometimes leave much to be desired. Their short length and simple language mean that characters must be developed and described quickly and simply. This can lead to negative character stereotyping, often on the basis of gender. Additionally, fast pacing can result in questionable narrative choices which then affect the overall morals or lessons promoted by the book.

In our feminist assessment of Orca Soundings books, we chose a sample of six titles, all of which were available through our local public library system. On the basis of their brief plot summaries, we selected volumes that appeared, at first glance, to feature female characters in stereotypical gender-focused plotlines. The selected titles were then evaluated for their treatment of female characters.

## The Trouble with *The Trouble with Liberty*

Of the novels evaluated for this article, we found *The Trouble with Liberty* by Kristin Butcher to be the most problematic. Protagonist Val tells the story of Liberty, the new girl in town. Liberty's attractiveness and carefree attitude make her the desire of everyone—girls want to befriend her and guys want to date her. Things go awry when Liberty accuses a teacher of sexually assaulting her. In the end, however, the teacher is proven innocent and it is revealed that Liberty has been lying to get attention.

Our feminist critique of this novel begins with its very title. *The Trouble with Liberty*, a double entendre that could refer to either the character or the concept of liberty, implies that it is dangerous for girls to act as freely as Liberty does. Even the choice of Liberty's name places a negative connotation on freedom. The reader, having read the blurb on the back of the book, already knows that Liberty is going to somehow be involved in a sexual assault. This means that the story can go one of two ways: either Liberty will be raped—and then perhaps blamed for her bad behaviour—or she will be lying about it, which proves that she is a liar on top of being a bad girl.



What was Butcher's intention when writing this story? What lesson was she attempting to convey? To readers, the book could be interpreted as a warning that girls who report being sexually assaulted might be lying<sup>1</sup>. To us, it is a parable of today's rape culture environment, in which sexual assault victims are faced with an inordinate level of skepticism and blame. The actual prevalence of false rape accusations is between 2% and 10%. A better book might have told the story of an actual rape victim struggling to find her voice; this would be far more reflective of what actually happens in sexual assault situations.

We do not argue that all books need 'good' morals. Literature, if it is to reflect actual society, cannot merely paint over life's ugly truths. The trouble with *The Trouble with Liberty* is that by presenting Liberty's story in black and white, using fairly one-dimensional characters, it does not convey the grey areas that are usually present in real situations like these. This lack of ambiguity is a detriment to many Orca Soundings titles, and will be further discussed later in this article.

### Girls and Boys: *Exposure* versus *Rat*

*Exposure*, by Patricia Murdoch, centers on Julie, who is relentlessly bullied by mean girl Dana. One night at a party, Dana becomes intoxicated and is coerced into posing for sexually explicit photographs by an older male teen, who intends to sell them. The camera with the photos somehow ends up in Julie's brother's backpack, and Julie takes this opportunity to finally get her revenge on Dana, who insists she was attacked at the party. Julie shares one of the photos, hoping to ruin Dana's reputation. In the end, when Dana threatens suicide, the two girls make peace with one another and the photo incident is forgotten.

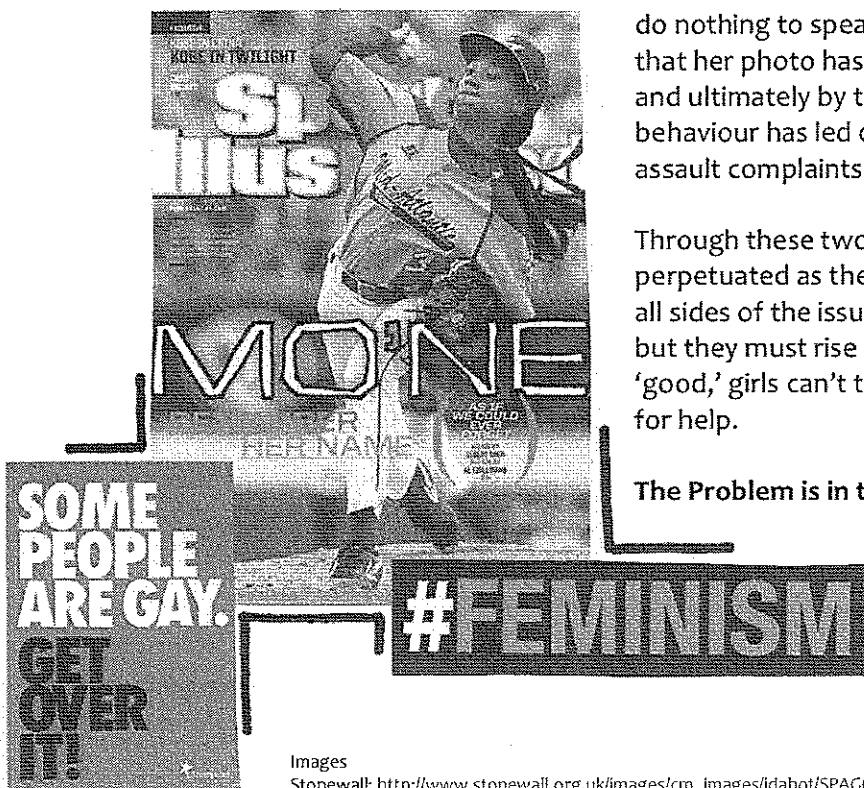
Lesley Choyce's *Rat* also involves the use of nude photos to ruin reputations, but the story is told from the perspective of a male victim. After Colin rats out two other boys for assaulting an elderly man, his head is photoshopped onto a nude photo and shared on the internet. Colin remains unbothered by it until he learns that two other girls have also been victimised in the same way. From that point onward, Colin becomes a champion for justice, determined to rat out the perpetrators in order to save the reputations of the victimised girls.

The two novels present a dichotomy between how girls and boys presumably handle adversity, specifically when faced with situations involving sexual assault. In *Rat*, while Colin remains stoically uninterested in retaliating on his own behalf, his motives change when he feels he has someone to protect. This plays into the stereotype of the heroic male character. Furthermore, the female victims in this story do nothing to speak out against assault. In *Exposure*, upon learning that her photo has spread, Dana reacts by lashing out at her peers, and ultimately by threatening suicide. Additionally, her previous 'bad' behaviour has led others to disbelieve her story, and her valid sexual assault complaints are never followed up on.

Through these two examples, we see gender stereotypes that, when perpetuated as they are in these novels, negatively affect people on all sides of the issue. Boys can't show when they are personally hurt, but they must rise up to protect the 'weaker sex'. Unless they are 'good,' girls can't turn to other girls—or even to authority figures—for help.

### The Problem is in the Pacing: *In the Woods* and *Comeback*

Although not as egregious as the examples outlined above, we examined two other Orca Soundings titles that present additional problems. The biggest issue with these two novels is the impossibly rapid pacing of their plotlines. The plot of *In the Woods*, by Robin



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Stevenson, includes an abandoned baby in the woods, a secret pregnancy, memories of sexual molestation, a medical emergency, and a negative mother-daughter relationship. In Vicki Grant's *Comeback*, protagonist Ria is dealing with her parents' divorce, a negative mother-daughter relationship, her father's death, rumours that he's committed financial fraud, running away from home, a medical emergency, learning that her father did not actually die, and watching her father get arrested – all within 132 pages.

By attempting to fit in as many crises as possible, the authors lose their chance to flesh out each story's characters. This results in one-dimensional characters who, regardless of gender, prove very difficult to relate to as a reader. The books' dedication to fast pacing also robs each story of its chance to convey a meaningful moral or message. Much like the novels outlined in earlier sections, these two approach difficult issues without nuance, denying readers the opportunity to experience issues' depth and ambiguity. This leaves little room for reflection or genuine engagement with content, activities which are just as important for reluctant readers as for avid readers. As a result, these books seem to encourage readers to accept whatever the author has explicitly conveyed, rather than analyzing and reflecting upon what they have read. This dedication to breakneck pacing, when combined with the series' tendency to cover controversial teen topics, facilitates an environment in which titles like *The Trouble with Liberty* are allowed – and encouraged – to exist.

### Doing It Right: Orca Soundings' Feminist Potential

Despite our concern with certain volumes in the Orca Soundings series, we feel it would be remiss to paint every title with the same brush. Meg Tilly's *First Time* tells a powerful story of a girl overcoming her sexual abuser and connecting with her mother. *Kicked Out*, by Beth Goobie, is a tale of female liberation, as the protagonist strikes out on her own without the validation of her parents or her abusive boyfriend. These two titles demonstrate Orca Soundings' potential to tell good stories, build strong characters, and maintain the interest of reluctant teen readers. They also show that feminist themes are appropriate for everyone, regardless of reading level or perceived intellectual ability. By publishing more novels like these, Orca Soundings has the rare opportunity to reach out to a demographic that might not encounter other forms of feminist literature. This is an important task that we hope Orca Soundings will take seriously in the future. ☐

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