

# Book Reviews

## Prom Night: Youth, Schools and Popular Culture

Amy Best. New York: Routledge Press, 2000.

BY CHERYL VAN DAALEN-SMITH

Best begins her compelling analysis of prom night by telling her reader that as she was researching this qualitative feminist study, a young woman gave birth in a bathroom stall at her high school prom. Compelling doesn't begin to capture how Best weaves authentic narratives from diverse youth across America telling their stories associated with their high school proms. It's a marvelous read with wonderful references: in fact it is almost like being there with a sociologist on one arm and a date on the other.

*Prom Night* is a socio-cultural analysis wherein Best ensures the voices of youth are central. Though once seen as trivial in a scholarly interest sense, Best convinces her readers that proms as a unit of sociological study demand our attention. As the reader we walk away from this engaging read with a true understanding of how the prom is one of the most influential rites of passage into heterosexual adulthood. Indeed, Best demonstrates that the prom is a dress rehearsal for adult life—which in the process privileges heterosexuality, whiteness and class.

Early in the text Best demonstrates how consumerism and hegemonic femininity frame and influence the phenomena of proms. Dresses are

mandatory as is jewelry, fancy hair and a date of the opposite sex. In the text, youth clearly articulate the struggle to decide on what to wear and who to bring and that the prom is a deeply conformist enterprise. In her fifth chapter, Best presents countless examples surrounding the rules associated with proms including dress, limousines, and sexual expectations in hotel rooms. In fact Best goes so far as to insist that proms are just another site of social control deeply rooted in patriarchy. Chapter Seven is interesting in that Best highlights how resistance to the rules or expectations plays out including the emergence of gay proms and all-black proms in America. The same resistance exists in many high schools in Canada as well.

Best's strengths include her attention to race, class, gender and sexual orientation. She devotes Chapter Six, entitled "The Divided Dance Floor: Race in School," to issues associated with race and white privilege. Best's most important attribute, not only in her text but also in her design of the study itself, is her clear commitment to ensuring the voices of youth are central. Countless photos and narratives paint each page and chapter with an invaluable realism that the reader will truly appreciate. Not only will readers be reminded of their own personal time, contemplating how prom night was or was not a fit for them, but they will come away with a deeper understanding of how popular culture prescribes behavior, enforces social rules and serves as a watershed for youth into patriarchal, racist, classist, and heterosexist adulthood. A must read for advocates of youth

## We Want Some Too: Underground Desire and the Reinvention of Mass Culture

Hal Niedzviecki. Toronto: Penguin Books, 2000.

BY LIISA KELLY

In struggling to analyze the ever-changing phenomenon that is entertainment culture, few writers manage to maintain a high standard of academic credibility while projecting the passion and energy that, can engage a wider non-academic audience. While pop journalists trip over themselves to remain at the edge of what is "hot," cultural theorists often miss the mark in reaching the audience to which their work is truly relevant. Hal Niedzviecki breaks the mold in his new book, posting a fresh alternative to either side of the fence with work that is both accessible and dynamically complex.

One need not know him as the editor of *Broken Pencil* to perceive that Niedzviecki approaches the current youth culture as an insider. Though he briefs the tired "evils of consumerism" speech, Niedzviecki's real focus is on the power of the underground to uplift the so-called "TV generation" from the restraints of imposed cultural ideals, allowing us all a place to create meaning for ourselves as artistic producers. He says that art and communication are all that is left to create meaning in our lives now that we have become apathetic to family, work and religion.

"Lifestyle culture," as he calls it, now takes precedence in defining the identities of teens and twenty-somethings, which, in the independent context, is not such a bad thing. The "do-it-yourself" creative philosophy proves more empowering than distracting for today's youth who are not brain-washed by the masses but produce entertainment on their own terms and for their own consumption through counter-cultural involvement. With this, Niedzviecki reminds us that the production of art is often more for the well-being of artists than their prospective audience, although by no means is youth culture closed off from the outside world. The works produced by young people in bands, zines and theatre groups express their perceptions of society in ways far more genuine and personally relevant than what is presented in the mainstream. To Niedzviecki, the obsessive creation and consumption of culture is a healthy form of validation for current youth, which is a point that is hard to argue.

Much as he promotes the underground, Niedzviecki can never truly condemn the joys of pop culture to which he refers with a kind of post-teenage suburban nostalgia that I found easy to relate to. After all, what could be more interesting to the culturally obsessed than 327 pages of probing into the likes of "eighties cartoons," Beck and the Museum of Bad Art? To some this may seem like the blind and trendy validation of everything "low culture" in the name of art. Yet, Niedzviecki adds credibility to his topics by drawing on classic streams of cultural analysis (for example linguistics, semiotics and "the spectacle"). When quoting McLuhan and Sartre, the casual tone he adopts makes them more palatable to the general public. In other words, the writer's style is equally appealing to the seasoned academic and the young cultural consumer. Of further relevance to the discipline of Cultural Studies are Niedzviecki's deeper questions, such as "What does it mean to create art in the twenty-

first century?" "What is creativity and how does it help to get us through the day?" "What is culture," and, most pressingly, "what is reality for the current youth," a "new breed" raised with media overload and mass-cultural influences woven right into their psyches? Niedzviecki's writing entertains but is deceptively multifaceted, valuable on many levels and for a varied audience.

The author's only flaw in the tone of this book is a tendency to lapse into the cynical. Although his views are well-defined, Niedzviecki fluctuates between affection and bitterness for his chosen subjects. One might say that his contrasting treatment of mass and underground culture serves to fulfill a certain "journalistic obligation," although the strength of Niedzviecki's opinions make them come across as a bit discordant. Nonetheless, his pure joy in the study of culture overshadows this minor flaw. Every word he writes is a celebration of art by and for the consumption of everyone, projecting his enthusiasm for freedom of expression and mass involvement in the creation of culture. Niedzviecki's book, in a word, is *relevant* to its audience of twenty-first century Canadian youth. After all, it is they who "want some too," and, like Niedzviecki, can have it with some spunk and attitude.

### **Entre Femmes et Jeunes Filles: Le Roman Pour Adolescentes en France et au Québec**

Daniela Di Cecco. Montréal: Remue-ménage, 2000.

**PAR CAROLINE CARON**

Un ouvrage fort intéressant que celui de cette professeure de français de l'Université de Caroline du Sud.

Également très pertinent puisqu'à la croisée de deux littératures négligées par la recherche et par le fait même dévalorisées: la littérature jeunesse et la littérature féminine. Quelles sont les représentations de la féminité que les auteurs proposent à leurs lectrices qui sont des femmes en devenir?

Cette question sera posée dans une double perspective. Celle de l'aspect commercial du livre, qui fait intervenir la soumission des représentations sociales aux règles de la commercialisation, puis le contenu, qui véhicule des valeurs ainsi qu'une idéologie de la féminité. Il est par ailleurs intéressant que l'auteure compare ces deux dimensions entre le Québec et la France.

La conclusion frappante de ce travail, c'est que la littérature pour adolescentes constitue à elle seule un champ d'investigation. Conclusion qui est basée sur une étude approfondie d'un corpus de travaux de recherche en littérature ont reposé jusqu'ici sur un modèle d'analyse masculin, donc non universel. En conséquence, les théories doivent être questionnées et révisées. De plus, l'ouvrage révèle que par l'écriture de romans destinés aux adolescentes, les auteures tentent une communication entre elles et la génération qui leur succède. Cependant, ce sont les impératifs du marché qui orientent les choix des éditeurs qui publient pour le public cible que constitue le lectorat féminin. Un ouvrage de référence en littérature jeunesse et féminine, inspiré et documenté par d'autres auteurs, travaux et théories, particulièrement les théories littéraires et féministes.

### **Girl Talk: Adolescent Magazines and Their Readers**

Dawn H. Currie. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999.

**BY KELLI DILWORTH**

When I was growing up, my friends