

On using Canadian Material in Classrooms by Lori Weber

Why should Canadian teens read realistic fiction by Canadian authors? *Klepto* author Lori Weber explains how and why her SideStreets novels are used in Quebec classrooms.

[Do you think you could write me up a couple of paragraphs for the blog about how they use your books in the classrooms?](#)

In the past eight years, since the publication of my first SideStreets novel, *Klepto*, I have visited dozens of classrooms to talk about my books and do writing workshops with students. Most of these have been in Quebec, but I have also visited Newfoundland, Ontario and Manitoba. In each place, one thing has remained the same: kids love to meet authors. They especially love to meet authors from their own country. This is why it is so important that kids be exposed to Canadian material. I myself remember the thrill of reading books set in Canada when I was in high school, back when CanLit was in its infancy. An even greater thrill was reading a book set in Montreal, where characters walked on streets I had grown up exploring. Perhaps that is why I try, whenever I can, to make connections through setting.

For *Klepto*, I focus on the bird sanctuary (*Maison Alouette*), which is based on one that really exists in Hudson, and on the cages that are lovingly set up to help the birds recover. The students see that the injured birds are a symbol of both Kat and her sister, so the sanctuary is a great place for Kat to face herself. Students are then asked to create a portrait of their perfect space. What would it include, if it could include anything? In a workshop on *Split*, I focus on a scene where the main character, Sandra, climbs Mount Royal at night with her boyfriend, Danny. She leads him to the cross that serves as a beacon for Montreal and is its most famous landmark. We talk about the symbolism of the cross and of the fact that Sandra wants light: she wants to be seen, unlike Danny, who is always pulling her into the dark. The students then write a short scene where their character goes to a location that has meaning and that reflects their emotional state. When I work on *Tattoo Heaven*, which is a popular choice in the French schools, we also work on setting by looking at Theresa's bedroom and how everything in it is white. The kids pick up right away on how that is important because Theresa has leukemia and her mom keeps her environment super sterile and lifeless. They then write a description of someone's room, focusing on its colour and on all the objects in the room that build a profile of the character. In *Strange Beauty*, I used a lot of history about the building of the Jacques Cartier Bridge in Montreal, because it led to the eviction of the main character's grandmother when she was a kid. Penny and her grandmother go back to the demolished street in the east end and she pictures the ghost-houses stretching down toward the river. Students write about a day they spent with a grandparent or older relative where they learned something about their family history. They try to work a landmark or piece of setting into their memoir.

I say this as an author and as an English teacher: we want kids to love books. We want them to think of books the same way they think about video games and movies. And that means we have to be very thoughtful about the books we encourage them to read. Steering them toward books by Canadian authors is one way of getting them into reading because it brings the act of reading closer to home. It is saying that a book isn't something abstract and disconnected to their lives, but it is something that can reflect their lives and the potential struggles they are having. It isn't about out there, but about in here, close to home, close to where they live. I have seen students' eyes light up as they call out, *Hey, I know that place.*

I've been there. And a book doesn't have to have an overt local setting to accomplish this. I talk to students about Canadian books that are set in other parts of the country, or that have no concrete setting. But the fact that the author is Canadian is often enough. I say, *Hey, this guy is from British Columbia.* *Have any of you been there?* Six eager hands shoot up in the air. Bingo! Connection made.

Good books for young people are more important than ever, given the force of mass media and the lure of technology. I would go so far as to say they can be an antidote to the more crass commercial values marketed to kids. Why not give the metaphorical medicine a Canadian flavour at the same time?