

RED PAINT, PURPLE BALLOONS AND GREEN GRASS

by Sean O'Toole

This morning when I drove into the parking lot of the small-town-Ontario high school where I teach, I was greeted by new graffiti. Emblazoned on one portable in striking red paint was the word "Bitch." On another was a semi-literate statement urging people not to mess with the local Catholic school: "Dont fuck wit St Doms." The graffiti brought to mind the garbage strewn on the floor in the computer hall, the newly broken window by the greenhouse doors, and how the word "gay" was scribbled across a plaqued letter from John Irving that hangs on the wall in the English hallway. I thought of how the other day, a wayward backpack smashed into me as I chatted with a student in the hall. Backpack Boy ambled on, no apology, just a silent, over-the-shoulder scowl.

Kids today—no respect for property, teachers, each other, themselves. The place is going to hell. It's a whole new world and things have changed. Or have they?

Recently, while gathered around the breakfast table with a group of old high school friends, the talk shifted from our high school glory days in the early 80s to high school today. Things were better back then, they decried—black and white, simple, kids knew their place, knew right from wrong. But today? How can you teach those gun-toting thugs? they asked. Get rid of the hats, the baggy pants, iPods, cell phones. Bring on uniforms, metal detectors, video cameras, they implored, bring back the strap, the yardstick, the tough-as-nails vice-principal. What happened to kids shutting up, doing their homework, doing what they're damn well told? Gone to hell, all of it.

I didn't say much. But I'm on the front lines, so they put it to me.

I thought for a moment. I said I wasn't so sure things had changed much since we were in high school. Toss a thousand teenagers into one building for seven hours a day, 190 days a year, and things happen. Stuff gets wrecked, people fight. But wonderful things happen, too. People grow, bond, create, discover, understand, take chances. Maybe the nasty stuff—disrespect, vandalism, violence—is the cost of doing business. And while it's dispiriting and horrifying and tests your faith, it isn't new. Indeed, the same things happened when we were in high school. But we were in the middle of it, so we didn't really notice. Twenty-five years down the road, the details fade and, through rose-tinted glasses, we remember the big game, the good times,

the laughs. Somehow, we don't remember the bad stuff that was right under our noses. Until we take another step back. And remember things as they really were.

When I was in high school I stood in the foyer before the first-period bell and watched a guy named Scott kick a boy almost to death. Nobody jumped in to help—no teachers, no students. The fight ended when Scott stopped kicking the guy in the face and walked away. That summer, Scott picked up where he left off and stabbed a guy to death at a bush party.

And there was more. If you were a misfit in Grade 9 gym class, your clothes were tossed in the shower while your friends from Grade 8 pretended they didn't know you. If your parents were Pakistani, you were ostracized and abused, the odd one out when the science class partnered up for labs, the last pick in gym class. Bullies bullied, drug dealers plied their trade in the smoking area, and the back wall was a canvas for spray-paint graffiti artists.

So I'm not sure high school has changed as much as our perspective has changed. I see it the Friday of every Thanksgiving weekend when first-year college and university students visit and complain that since they left, the school's gone downhill. The kids are punks, the place is a mess, there's no respect. They claim the Grade 9 kids clogging up the halls are different, cocky, don't know their place. Things have changed, they moan. But they don't notice the boy who graciously held the door for them or the girl curled up with a book in a comfy chair in the library. They don't see the bright purple birthday balloons taped to a locker and they don't hear the sweet sounds of the group of kids gathered on the front lawn, lush and green, playing guitar, singing Ben Harper and Jack Johnson. Little moments of beauty and grace.

The high school experience consists of the good, the bad, and everything in between. From the outside looking in, it's all gone to hell. But with a little faith, you push away from the breakfast table, take one more step back, and see a bigger picture—a picture that's colourful, not black and white. A picture that contains striking red paint, bright purple balloons, and lush green grass.

Sean O'Toole is a high school teacher in Bracebridge, Ontario.



Orca *Currents* Middle-School Fiction for Reluctant Readers



Nine Doors Vicki Grant

978-1-55469-073-2 \$9.95 PB
978-1-55469-074-9 \$16.95 LIB RL 3.2

Special Edward Eric Walters

978-1-55469-092-3 \$9.95 PB
978-1-55469-096-1 \$16.95 LIB RL 3.2

Perfect Revenge K.L. Denman

978-1-55469-102-9 \$9.95 PB
978-1-55469-103-6 \$16.95 LIB RL 2.5

Explore Christy Goerzen

978-1-55469-119-7 \$9.95 PB
978-1-55469-120-3 \$16.95 LIB RL 3.5

Now available:

Teachers' Resource Guide

978-1-55143-956-3 \$45.00 SPIRAL BOUND
OR DOWNLOAD INDIVIDUAL TITLE TEACHERS' GUIDES
FREE OF CHARGE AT WWW.ORCABOOK.COM

Now 34 titles in the series
Reading level: Grades 2.0 to 4.5
Interest level: Ages 10+
Short, high-interest novels
Titles are available in paperback
and library-bound editions



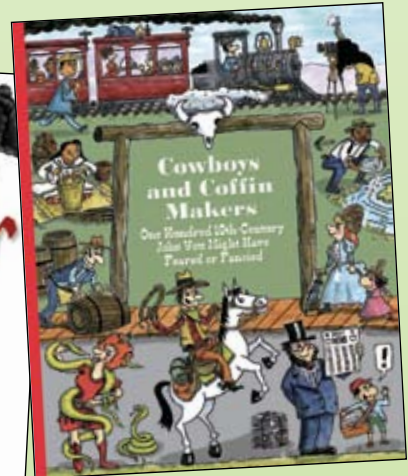
ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS
www.orcabook.com • 1-800-210-5277

annick

LIVEbrary on Demand

... Kids, Kings, and Cowboys ...

From ancient Egypt to 19th-century America, history comes alive with these highly acclaimed books from Annick Press.



RISE OF THE GOLDEN COBRA by Henry T. Aubin

★ *2008 Honor Book, Children's Africana Book Awards*

An epic adventure from the time of the Pharaohs.

"... a well-crafted and intriguing adventure that offers (students) the opportunity to ponder serious moral issues."

—School Library Journal

KIDS WHO RULE: The Remarkable Lives of Five Child Monarchs by Charis Cotter

★ *IRA Children's and Young Adult Notable Book*

They were queens. They were kings. They were kids.

"... well worth reading." —Booklist

THE APPRENTICE'S MASTERPIECE: A Story of Medieval Spain by Melanie Little

★ *White Raven Collection 2008, International Youth Library, Munich*

A brilliantly written story of friendship and hope set against the brutality of the Spanish Inquisition.

"The brief narrative poems are small gems of insight and emotion ... and resonate with contemporary connections." —VOYA

ROYAL MURDER: The Deadly Intrigue of Ten Sovereigns by Elizabeth MacLeod

Danger, drama, and death among royalty from Cleopatra to the Romanovs.

"... the sort of book that young boys and girls as well are going to find fascinating."

—Ken Settrington, Children & Youth Advocate for Library Services, Toronto Public Library

COWBOYS AND COFFIN MAKERS: One Hundred 19th-Century Jobs You Might Have Feared or Fancied

by Laurie Coulter

★ *Honor Award, National Parenting Publications*

Learn all about life on the American frontier through the jobs people did.

"... this book truly provides young readers with an understanding of these different careers." —Canadian Children's Book News

LIVEbrary on Demand at www.annickpress.com

Authors of these books are available for virtual visits to your classroom or library.
Includes Lesson Plans, Assignments, Quizzes, & Discussion Questions