

Lisa Moore. *Flannery*. Toronto: Groundwood Books, 2016.  
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Lisa Moore's young adult novel, *Flannery*, takes me back to one of those childhood events shared by many who came of age in eastern Canada during the 1980s: a bus trip to Quebec City during which my friends and I passed around a dog-eared copy of Judy Blume's *Forever*. Ensnared inside the dust jacket of a safer, more sanctioned book, the novel became our rite of passage as we read it in the liminal space of the moving bus. *Forever* told us everything we were hungry to know about the adult world we were about to enter; truths about love and sex and female desire we knew we needed, but that grown-ups were keeping from us. *Flannery* is that kind of novel. It tells the kinds of truths that make me want to plant the book where the things that really matter reside in the teenage world: under my daughters' beds.

*Flannery* is a coming-of-age novel that artfully employs the conventions of the young adult "problem novel" to beautifully and empathetically render the culture of youth in contemporary St. John's, Newfoundland. Like most protagonists of young adult fiction, 16-year-old Flannery has her share of challenges. The daughter of a single mother whose passion for creating art and writing her parenting blog doesn't pay the electricity bill, Flannery knows too well the shame that comes from trying to cash a welfare cheque at the supermarket. She's the kid who didn't get to go on the Quebec trip because her family couldn't afford it. She is also the kind of kid you might say has had to grow up "too fast," often forced to take on the role of the responsible parent.

As well, Flannery is authentically capable and she is aware of the inequities that structure the adult world: "We used to be what's called the working poor, but now we're just plain old poor," she observes. Flannery is a good student, but she can't afford to buy her biology textbook, and it doesn't help that her mother Miranda blows the rent money on a toy helicopter drone for her 10-year old brother, Felix. Miranda seems impulsive and flighty at times — she wears a tiara as

part of an ongoing feminist art project and her art is ephemeral and unsellable — but in Moore’s hands the single mother is a complex character readers come to love and Flannery grows to understand. Being poor is not the sum of this quirky family of three, and Moore departs from the hazards of the cliché “problem novel” with her fulsome characterization and depiction of the protagonists’ deeply complex emotional lives.

For instance, Flannery is in unrequited love with her childhood friend, Tyrone O’Rourke, aka “Spray Pig,” a troubled graffiti artist who is too wrapped up in his own unique challenges to see Flannery’s feelings for him have developed. Flannery recognizes that Tyrone’s interactions with her are problematic, and at times downright disrespectful, but she also understands that she is “a person who likes to feel awe,” and unrequited love is nothing if not awe-inspiring. When Flannery and Tyrone are assigned to work together on a project for their entrepreneurial class, the novel introduces the “problem” around which the plot is structured. The two decide on a novelty product, a series of love potions that become a surprising success among their peers. More importantly, Flannery must somehow find a way to be true to herself while struggling with her feelings for the unreliable Tyrone and her own breaking heart.

Unrequited love is a standard convention of the young adult problem novel, but one of the many admirable qualities of *Flannery* is its treatment of love — and love’s loss — in its many forms. Tyrone’s indifference may be partially responsible for Flannery’s breaking heart, but the deeper hurts are her unrequited love for the absent father who doesn’t know she exists, symbolized by the chocolate heart he gave her mother and which she keeps in a jewellery box under her bed.

Most poignant, perhaps, is Flannery’s sadness as she loses her best friend, Amber, who begins dating the charismatic and controlling Gary Bowen — a multi-faceted representation of toxic masculinity I wished I’d had the benefit of seeing in the young adult novels of my own youth. One of the most heart-rending and beautiful scenes in the novel occurs when Flannery desperately attempts to re-establish the

connection she and Amber once shared by engaging her in a language game of similes and metaphors, one of those hallmark pleasures and unique intimacies of childhood friendship the novel is so delightfully adept at evoking. “My feet are a tub of ice cream so frozen it bends the spoon” Amber quips after her sneakers are soaked by a passing truck, and for a tender moment the two recall the pleasures they once experienced in their faltering friendship.

Moore has a talent for cadence and for figurative language that she masterfully lends to Flannery’s first-person narration. Its authenticity lies in its recreation of a youth culture that is universally recognizable, while still being true to the local context of St. John’s. Flannery uses metaphors that beautifully evoke childhood to describe her handwriting in a first-grade notebook: “My printing went outside the lines and bunched up and slanted like the losing team in a tug of war.” Moore’s teenaged characters live their lives on Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, but her digital natives’ use of language incorporates this brave new world in a startlingly beautiful manner, undermining adult panic about teenage social media use by depicting an openness to linguistic play unique to this generation. When Flannery encounters Tyrone at the mall, for example, her “heart does a leap like the gazelles flying through the plains of Mongolia that I watched on YouTube last night when I was supposed to be doing Math.” I have never been to St. John’s, but when Flannery describes the time she and Tyrone rode down Long’s Hill in a supermarket shopping cart when they were eight, I feel like I’ve been given a snapshot of what childhood must be like there. Of course, it isn’t all pretty nostalgia. As the novel progresses, Flannery struggles in silence when she is bullied and harassed by her peers, and Amber suffers an experience of traumatic harassment that echoes the tragic story of Nova Scotia teen Rehtaeh Parsons.

What thrills me most about *Flannery* is this: its respect for the culture and experiences of its teenaged characters and readers. If Flannery struggles with the absence of a father, she has also benefited in surprising ways from the loving attention of Miranda’s past boyfriends, with whom she read many of her favourite classics of children’s

literature, and whom she describes as having been “in cahoots” with her younger self. Moore remains “in cahoots” with her child and youth characters throughout the novel, never resorting to heavy-handed didacticism or downplaying the validity of their responses to troubling experiences. While it might be tempting as adults to see Tyrone’s graffiti merely as an act of vandalism and rebellion, for example, Moore also appreciates the beauty of ephemeral art and the emotional depth and complexity of teenage forms of creative expression. In his depiction of his mother as the Snow Queen, Tyrone expresses the pain he feels when his mother chooses to overlook the abuse her son suffers at the hands of his stepfather. Moore allows Flannery to express the truths she comes to understand in her own experiences of trauma and disappointment, one of which is the realization that “adults could be evil.” At times, the adult world can also be woefully blind to the capabilities and rights of young people. Some of Flannery’s most significant moments of self-assertion and maturity occur when she understands her experiences in the context of social justice and adult culture’s tendency to overlook young people’s rights as human beings. If there is a message, it is perhaps directed at adults, showing us that to be effective and authentic allies to young people, we might best adopt the style of Miranda’s boyfriends.

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George Murray. *Wow Wow and Haw Haw*. Illus. Michael Pittman. St. John’s: Breakwater Books, 2014. ISBN 978-1-55081-462-0

*Wow Wow and Haw Haw* is acclaimed poet George Murray’s first children’s book, and it is an enchanting first. His eloquent, evocative