Boys on the Defensive: Scott Young and the Myth of Hockey

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This is the case of a high-school land, dead-set in adolescence; loud treble laughs and sudden fists, bright cheeks, the gangling presence. This boy is wonderful at sports and physically quite healthy . . . . will he learn to grow up before it's too late?

Early Birney, "Canada: Case Study: 1945"

One of the fascinating aspects of the recent boom in hockey literature has been the way writers have grappled with what might be called "the myth of hockey"—that is, as Michael Buma puts it, the "accumulated pool of cultural meanings and significations" that have become attached to the game (Buma 5). Novels like King Leary, The Good Body, Twenty Miles, and others, take popular assumptions rooted in the myth of hockey and subject them to the kind of imaginative rethinking that the best of literature does. To develop a fuller appreciation for what is at stake in this rethinking, however, it is useful to go back and explore some texts that helped to establish or reinforce these assumptions.

In this article, I would like to offer Scott Young's trilogy of juvenile hockey novels, Scrubs on Skates, Boy on Defense, and A Boy at the Leaf's Camp, as particularly useful in this regard. Published in 1952, 1953 and 1963, Young's novels span—and are steeped in the sensibility of—the years of the so-called original six era of the N.H.L., which began with the contraction of the league to six teams in 1942 and ended with the expansion of the league in 1967. This era was a period of intense consolidation of the
hockey myth in Canada, aided, in no small part, by the beginning of television broadcasts of Hockey Night in Canada in 1952. That Young's novels effectively captured the core elements of the myth is reflected in their popularity then and now. In his 1994 autobiography, *A Writer's Life*, Young says that the idea for the trilogy came from Farley Mowat, who had told him one day that if a writer wanted a pension, the best way was to write a "good juvenile"—and that Mowat had proved prescient, since the trilogy was still selling a steady 5,000 copies a year well into the 1990s (151). The enduring popularity of the trilogy has led critics like Jason Blake to claim, as recently as 2010, that the Young books remain "the best-known hockey novels" in Canada (24).

An additional virtue of the novels, from the point of view of illustrating the myth of hockey, is the fact that they are juvenile fiction. James Smith, in his *A Critical Approach to Children's Literature*, suggests that children's literature is defined by a group of interrelated elements: its use of less complex language; its treatment of characters of interest to young people; its emphasis on plot and, ultimately, plot closure (generally of the happy kind); and—most importantly for my purposes here—its tendency to have a didactic purpose (Smith 6). Children's literature often contains explicit statements and / or dramatic illustrations about what a given culture believes are its most important values. This is very much the case with Young.

Young himself was well-positioned to tap into popular assumptions about hockey. From the end of the Second World War until the 1980s, he was a member of sports journalism royalty, as his reception of the Elmer Ferguson Award in 1988 suggests. In his work he occupied the classically ambiguous position of so many sports journalists, trying to maintain a critical freedom in his reports while yet maintaining the connections
necessary for access to "insider" information. His position as "insider / outsider" brought him close to a number of key hockey figures of the original six era and led to books like *The Leafs I Knew* (insider tales of the Leafs in the 1950s and 60s) and three sets of as-told-to memoirs, two for Punch Imlach and one for Conn Smyth. In 1980, Young quit his position as sports columnist for the *Globe and Mail* over articles published by the paper critical of Imlach. In an interview with Peter Gzowski, Young claimed that the falling out was a matter of principle over the fact that the author of articles, Donald Ramsay, had used "unnamed sources" to support his claims, but the fact that the articles themselves were highly critical of Imlach was likely a contributing factor.

The Young trilogy fleshes out a number of aspects of the myth of hockey. In what follows, I will focus my analysis on four main aspects, each with an enduring significance for later cultural representations of the game.

**Hockey and Canadian Identity**

As Whitson and Gruneau have suggested, the core element in the hockey myth is its assertion that hockey is Canada's game, and that, as a consequence, hockey offers a "graphic expression of 'who we are'" (*Artificial 4*). Because of the roots of hockey in Canada, and the continuing passion of Canadians for the game, hockey is said to be a privileged expression of Canadian identity—an embodiment of what it means to be truly Canadian. But what defines the truly Canadian?

Young's trilogy offers two quite different—though importantly interdependent—answers in the stories of Pete Gordon and Bill Spunska.
Scrubs on Skates, the first novel of the trilogy, introduces Pete Gordon, "the best schoolboy centre in Manitoba," who has ended up having to attend a new high school when it is built in his hometown of Winnipeg (11). The novel follows Pete's struggles to adjust to this new school—Northwest High—and to play on a team of novice hockey players ("scrubs") instead of the seasoned championship team he had been on at his old school, Daniel Mac. Counterpointed with Pete's story is the story of the most scrub-like player on the Northwest team, Bill Spunska. Bill is a recent immigrant from Poland by way of England who, although a natural athlete, has never skated or played hockey before. For all his deficiencies as a hockey player, Bill has natural athletic ability, a strong competitive drive, and, last but not least, a sterling personal character. After spending most of the season practicing hard, being a supportive team-mate, and waiting for his opportunity, Bill is rewarded by the chance to fill in for a suspended team-mate in the crucial last game of the season, and ends up assisting on the winning goal (by Pete).

The stories of Pete and Bill offer two takes on how a boy might succeed at hockey and life in Canada. Indeed, it could be said that the stories are themselves national allegories: two portraits of the Canadian nation as adolescent, but maturing, hockey players.

Pete begins with all the natural advantages of an established (or establishment) Canadian boy. His family is solidly middle-class, his father a lawyer, his mother a stay-at-home mom. With a name like "Gordon" the family is probably descended from the hardworking Scots-Presbyterians who played a key role in the European settlement of Canada and the establishment of what has popularly become known as Canadian identity. One of the reasons Pete is so upset about having to leave Daniel Mac is that his
father had been a star athlete there (38). His bedroom, decorated with pennants, crests and pictures of his father as well as himself, is a miniature of the halls at Daniel Mac, which are filled with the evidence of all the championship sports teams the school has had over the years (5). Daniel Mac itself works metaphorically to represent established Canadian identity, and, with its subtle hint of an English public school, it links that identity to an even more established (and establishment) British identity.

From the point of view of his hockey career, Pete, born and raised in Canada, has the natural advantage described by Coach Turner: "Every boy in this country can play hockey if he wants to, start young and play all winter on corner rinks and vacant lots and on the streets" (13). He has already proven himself able to handle the more competitive hockey of the high school league, having scored the winning goal in the city championship game the year before. He is a skilled player, as evidenced by his introduction as "the best schoolboy centre in Manitoba" (11). He was even in line to become captain of the Daniel Mac team in the coming year (89). Pete's challenge, with all these advantages, is to learn how to become a good team-mate on a seemingly lesser team.

Two lessons for Pete stand out in particular.

The first has to do with how important it is for him to try his hardest, even in practice, and even if he could be the best player on the ice without his best effort. Without the necessary commitment, Pete is unable to summon the mental focus to take advantage of his talents in his first game; in fact, the player he is supposed to be guarding scores two goals. Thinks Pete: "His legs seemed made of lead, but it wasn't his legs that
were at fault" (55). Coach Turner recognizes that a star player not trying has a
demoralizing effect on other players: "It was sort of belittling the efforts of others when
someone with all the talent in the world, talent the others would trade anything for,
treated his talent as if it were nothing to get unduly excited about" (30). Pete realizes that
there is no use just going through the motions; if he is going to play, he needs to do his
best regardless of the situation (69). He also realizes that he is extremely lucky—
especially compared to Bill—and that this good fortune imposes certain obligations (80).

The second lesson has to do with sacrifice. A key moment in making Pete a real
member of the Northwest team occurs in the second game when he skates back to save a
goal even though his leg has been badly injured (111). His self-sacrifice impresses his
team-mates—especially the hardnosed captain, Vic DeGruchy—and his rehab of the
injury gives him the added opportunity of mentoring Bill during early morning work outs
(123).

In combination, these lessons add up to a kind of "noblesse oblige": Pete learns
that the advantages he has come with an equally high level of responsibility.

Bill's situation is different. His family has been in the country only fifteen months
(77). His father was in the Polish underground during the war (or a supporter of Lech
Walesa in the 1985 revised version) while he and his mother lived as refugees in
England. Bill has an English accent that marks him as a foreigner (12). Once the family
had emigrated to Canada, Mr. Spunska, though a professor in Poland, "worked cutting
pulpwood in the North," while Mrs. Spunska worked as a maid (77). Now Mr. Spunska
is an instructor of German at the university in Winnipeg and Mrs. Spunska is ill from exhaustion or depression (77).

Bill and his family, then, are new Canadians, and Bill's story works metaphorically as a portrait of Canada as a nation of immigrants. Interestingly, Northwest High itself metaphorically stands in for Canada as a new nation just as Daniel Mac embodied a more established Canada. Northwest lacks the tradition of Daniel Mac but it has greater resources, better sports equipment, and lots of human energy (36). Because the school is so new, the feeling about the hockey team turns out to be "even greater than it had been at Daniel Mac" because all of the students had felt the place "was empty, too new" and now "they had something to hold on to" (164). This view of hockey at Northwest mirrors the hypothesis Whitson and Gruneau advance, in their ground breaking sociological study *Hockey Night in Canada*, for the importance of hockey in Canada more generally. Given the famously unsettled nature of Canadian identity, they argue, hockey has taken on "even great symbolic currency" as one of those institutions, along with "our system of national government, our public health-care system, and the CBC," that Canadians cling to as "truly Canadian" (*Hockey Night* 277).

The Northwest hockey team is multicultural. The names of the players are a mix of traditional Scots-Irish-English (Paterson, Lawrence, Jamieson, Gordon), French (Duplessis), First Nations (Big Canoe), Asian (Wong) and European (DeGruchy, Kryschuk, Spunska). Scott idealistically portrays the hockey team as a model for how "people of all races could get along when they had something in common" (23). In this he echoes the post-Second World War shift in Canada away from national definitions stressing "Britishness" to those stressing multicultural pluralism.
Though Bill, like Pete, has two main challenges to becoming a successful member of the Northwest team, his challenges are very different. The first thing he must do, of course, is learn to play the game. In some ways, this is the easier of his tasks: from early on *Scrubs on Skates* emphasizes his natural athletic ability and competitive drive. He is first described as "a big dark boy . . . wide in the shoulders and thick through the rest of his body" (12) and Lee Vincent, the Scott Young-like reporter, says that the main thing he knows about "that kid" is that "he tries hard" (16). Coach Turner in *Boy on Defense* notes that Bill was good at "cricket, soccer, [and] tennis" from his years of growing up and that he had a "terrific competitive spirit" (10, 42). The second, perhaps more difficult task, is for Bill to remain patient and positive as he waits for his chance. How he waits depends on his character, and the novel stresses that character, as much as hard work and competitiveness, is required for Bill to succeed. As it turns out, Bill's positive personal qualities are emphasized throughout. He is shown to have "politeness" and a surprising old world dignity (*Boy* 16, 80), as well as a strong sense of responsibility to his family (this becomes a major focus of *Boy on Defense*). Because of his character, Bill doesn't become discouraged by his inability to make the team his first try; rather, he is the model of a good teammate, working hard on his own, attending all the games and cheering the other players on.

Ultimately Bill's success conveys the message that learning hockey can be a shortcut to social acceptance for an immigrant boy in Canada. Mrs. Spunska makes the lesson explicit near the end of *Scrubs on Skates*:

I know that usually a family must live in a country one generation, or sometimes two or three, before the children are accepted for everything. But
it seems to me that sport is different. It is what you are, not what you have been or what our parents have been . . . . (179).

As the trilogy continues, Young emphasizes how Bill becomes Canadian through hockey. *Boy on Defense* and *A Boy at the Leafs' Camp* take up Bill's story and illustrate the stages of his development as a player and a Canadian. *Boy on Defense* tells how Bill becomes an Assistant Captain on the Northwest team and leads the team to the championship. He is then rewarded by a contract to play for the Toronto Maple Leafs (240). Along the way he loses his English accent and learns to speak Canadian slang like the rest of the teammates (*Boy* 18); he helps his family deal with the financial difficulties of being new Canadians (first with a part-time job, then with a signing bonus from the Leafs); and, with the tacit approval of Mr. and Mrs. Gordon, he begins to date Pete's sister Sarah. In *A Boy at the Leafs' Camp*, Bill learns about becoming a professional player. He impresses his coaches, who proclaim that he has a bright future. Then—in a bit of very heavy-handed symbolism, even for Young—he is sent off for further seasoning on the Canadian National Team program at U.B.C. (*A Boy* 241).[^6]

Interestingly, there is an adult sequel to the juvenile trilogy, *That Old Gang of Mine*, which came out in 1982. It's a pretty awful novel in a lot ways, but it is interesting for the glimpses it gives of how Young imagines his characters in later life. In the case of Bill and Pete, they both end up representing their nation. Not only do they play in the Olympics together (the main plot of the novel), but Bill joins the Canadian diplomatic corps afterwards and Pete gets elected to the House of Commons.
That Old Gang of Mine aside, the way Bill eclipses Pete in Boy on Defense and A Boy at the Leafs' Camp does raise some interesting questions. Bill, it turns out, is the only one of the two with real professional potential; Pete is hampered by his lack of size, his "slightly built five feet eight inches" (Scrubs 9). Does this mean that Bill is actually the better—more ideal—Canadian? From the point of view of national allegory, the overall message of the trilogy is not that Bill is better, I think. Rather it is that the future of the nation requires the combined efforts of characters like Pete and Bill both, just as a hockey team requires the co-operative play of different players in different roles. Still it is hard not to avoid the implication that Bill represents an especially important aspect of the future of the nation. Bill seems to be the "new blood" needed to revitalize the Canadian body politic, a body politic that, at this point in its history, is understood to possess a lot of skill as well as the remnants of a noble tradition, but that, like Pete Gordon, seems to lack the raw physical power to reach the highest level.

Hockey, The North, and The Small Town

Scrubs on Skates and A Boy on Defense take place in Winnipeg. Winnipeg, on the edge of the prairies, has the kind of cold winter that reinforces the mythic connection between hockey and Canada's "unique northern environment." It is no accident that the novels are not set in, say, Vancouver; in Vancouver, boys are not going to "play all winter on corner rinks."

The Winnipeg winter is an important backdrop in the novels. After his first, disastrous game for Northwest in Scrubs on Skates, Pete wakes up to "snow swirling fiercely around his dormer windows" and his room as cold as "the Arctic" (Scrubs 63).
This is the first mention of weather in the novel and it sets a pattern; after this, there are numerous references to snow, wind, and cold, but no mention of weather of any other kind. *A Boy on Defense* takes place against a backdrop of equally snowy conditions. The novel opens on the night before the first game of the hockey season, and when Bill heads out the door, "snow was falling, muffling the noises of the trains in the yards two blocks away" (*A Boy* 32). Clearly, at a basic level, the winter weather reinforces the association between hockey and the northern climate. It's as if, once the high school hockey season starts in mid-to-late November (by the timeline in the novels), the weather must, by definition, be snowy. There is also an implied comparison between the harshness of the external environment and the sheltered ice of the hockey rink. One of the longstanding mythic ideas about hockey is that in developing the game Canadians took a bit of winter, domesticated it, and turned it into a source of pleasure. This idea is captured nicely in the title of Michael McInley's popular history of the game: *Putting a Roof on Winter*. In *Scrubs on Skates*, the long description of the "city's biggest rink" on high school hockey nights evokes the enclosed, communal, celebratory space in the arena compared to the wildness of the wintery night outside.7

The wintery backdrop also reinforces the different versions of Canadian identity embodied in the stories of Pete and Bill. Pete is shown from the outset to be adept at dealing with the winter. When he wakes up to the snow after his disastrous first game, he decides to work off his frustration by going out to shovel the walk and driveway. After breakfast, he dresses appropriately for the job: "[Pete put] on a heavy woolen shirt that he sometimes used for skiing; over it went a thick sweater; his parka jacket and hood were downstairs" (68). Then he works in a thoughtful way, clearing snow first away from the
garage doors, getting those doors open, and helping his father back the car out the driveway (70). Pete's competence in dealing with the snow mark him as a native of Canada.  

Bill, by contrast, does not even have a proper winter coat. He has only a "cheap, stiff raincoat, the only coat he owned" (53). Bill's lack of proper winter wear is in part a sign of his family's poverty, of course, but it also signals that he comes from a foreign land. In *Boy on Defense*, Bill's coat is described explicitly as an *English* trench coat (124, italics added). One of the indicators of the increasing Canadianness of Bill and his family is the fact that his parents buy him a proper Canadian winter coat for Christmas. The coat is "three-quarter-length dark blue wool with a thick quilted wool lining and a big fur collar" and Bill knows "a half dozen boys in school who had coats exactly like this" (124).  

Although the larger mythic dimensions of the connection between hockey and the "unique northern environment" are left only implied in the Young novels, the Winnipeg setting does suggest, in the deeper background, the myth of the North that has had such a powerful role in the self-definition of Canada. Carl Berger, in his aptly titled article "The Truth North Strong and Free," has done a fine job of explaining the provenance and main features of this myth. According to Berger, assertions linking the northern climate of Canada to the characteristics of the nation date back to the time of the French explorers; however, these claims were particularly influential as part of an attempt to distinguish the identity of the new nation in the half-century after Confederation. Robert Grant Haliburton of the Canada First Movement made one of the key early claims about Canada as a northern nation. Here is Haliburton speaking to the Montreal Literary Club in 1869:
Our corn fields, rich though they are, cannot compare with the fertile prairies of the [American] West, and our long winters are a drain on the profits of business, but may not out snow and frost give us what is of more value than gold and silver, a healthy, hardy, virtuous, dominant race? (Haliburton in Berger 86)

From the time of Haliburton on, numerous Canadian writers, artists, and politicians have articulated variations on similar themes. Basically, the argument has been that Canada's northern climate is responsible for a national character that includes physical hardiness, self-reliance, and personal virtue. The cold climate has also been said to have a kind of Darwinian cleansing effect. Daniel Coleman summarizes this effect as follows:

[The] rigours of life in a stern, unaccommodating climate [was said to demand] strength of body, character, and mind while it winnowed away laziness, overindulgence, and false social niceties. Canada's placement in the North meant that . . . over time its population would shed all over-bred aristocratic European delicacy as well as repel 'southern' lassitude and hedonism. (24)

Ultimately, according to Berger, the northern climate was said to produce that most Canadian of characteristics: "the inclination to be moderate" (98).

There is a direct, three-way set of connections between historically dominant versions of Canadian identity, the myth of the North, and the myth of hockey. In the Young novels, this is evident in the way the "Arctic" climate of Winnipeg stands in metonymically for Canada, just as hockey stands in for Canada and at the same time is evoked as a product of the Arctic climate. The education of Bill and Pete as hockey players is an important part of their education as Canadians, and this includes the
strengths of body and character that are also said to be products of exposure to a northern climate.

One last point about the myth of the North. There was an explicit racism attached to early articulations of the myth of the North. Canada's climate, it was thought, made it unsuitable for immigration from the weaker "southern" races and prime for immigration from other "Aryan" or "northern" races. The "hardy, virtuous" race that was to evolve from these immigrants did not include First Nations people (the "white" in "Great White North" is painfully telling when viewed through the lens of Canada's settler-colonial history). By the time of the Young juvenile trilogy, this explicit racism had been exposed by history (among other reasons, it was hard to maintain a Canadian identification with the Aryan races after two wars against Germany), but strong residual elements were still around. Young's novels are explicitly anti-racist. The Northwest team, as I mentioned above, is portrayed as multicultural, and, in fact, what leads to Jamieson's suspension at the end of Scrubs on Skates (thus giving Bill a chance to get in the lineup) is a fight he has in order to defend Benny Wong from being called "a yellow Chink" (185). The liberal idealism of the novels' anti-racism is, however, undermined by the stereotypical nature of the "ethnic" characters. Benny is a stereotypically feminized Asian man, "a quiet kid, who wouldn't say boo to a goose" (183); he addresses Lee Vincent obsequiously as "mister" (22). Rosario Duplessis talks in French dialect and has a stereotypical temper. And so on. Just as importantly, the identities of all the ethnic characters, including Bill, are defined against the "norm" of Pete's established (Scots-British) Canadian identity. And Bill himself conforms to the right type of immigrant as dictated by the myth of the North. Though he is described as having dark hair and dark
eyes, he also comes from Poland, decidedly in the northern part of Europe. He does not come from, say, Nigeria; in 1952, the myths of hockey and the north both would deem this impossible or undesirable or both.

The Winnipeg setting of Scrubs on Skates and Boy on Defense is also significant for another reason. Winnipeg has the virtue of being a smaller city—not a small town, exactly, but with many small town attributes. Young's evocation of corner rinks, train whistles, and an overall cozy sense of community are all small town-like, not to mention the fact that high school hockey is what is played at "the city's biggest rink" (44). The small town feel plays into another myth important to Canada's self-definition: the myth of the small town. Canadians, we are told (or have often told ourselves), are typically thrifty, morally conservative, humble, and nice—virtues characteristic of small town folk. The identification of Canadian values with the small town is so long-standing that it was already ripe for lampooning when, in 1912, Stephen Leacock published his famous Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town. For Leacock, the small town retains a powerful hold on the Canadian imagination precisely because it evokes a simpler, more innocent time, a time that involves a romanticized version of our own childhoods. The parallel to the hockey myth's evocation of "apple-cheeked boys on frozen ponds" is not an accident.

More serious literary interrogations of the small town since Leacock (Robertson Davies, Alice Munro, and Margaret Laurence come immediately to mind, as do more contemporary writers like Miriam Toews, David Adams Richards and Lynn Coady) work to ironize the romantic version of the small town, but the romantic version retains a powerful hold on popular representations of hockey.
The setting of the trilogy shifts in *A Boy at the Leafs' Camp*. To attend his first professional training camp, Bill must travel east and—more crucial from a symbolic point of view—south to Peterborough. Peterborough in the early 1960s was only about one-fifth the size of Winnipeg, but the description of what Bill encounters when he steps off the bus has a big city feel: "There was the smell of diesel fumes and a dusty hurried atmosphere, full of people—sitting, standing, walking, reading, talking" (7). When he walks into town to find the hotel he will be staying at he discovers that "[the] streets were crowded with full cars—weekenders coming here, or heading for Toronto or other cities" (8). It is September; the weather is sunny and clear, and remains that way throughout Bill's stay. Just before the inter-squad game that contains the climax of the novel, Bill reflects on the strangeness of playing hockey in such a place and in such weather: "Tuesday night, it seemed strange to be going to play hockey. The temperature had gone into the eighties during the day" (171).

Young's choice of location for his fictional training camp was dictated by the fact that the Toronto Maple Leafs' did hold their training camps in Peterborough in the early 1960s. The selection of details Young uses to create the Peterborough setting, however, are straight out of the myth of hockey. The setting works to reinforce the differences between this place and Winnipeg, just as the focus of the novel is about Bill learning the differences between the hockey here and at home. Literally and metaphorically, Peterborough is only one stop away from Toronto, and the hockey here is only one stop away from the big time, big city hockey played at Maple Leafs Gardens.

Myths are about origins and essences. They try to explain the origin of things (creation myths) or something about their eternal characteristics (as in the related myths
of Icarus, Prometheus, and the Garden of Eden, all of which portray the essence of being human in a craving for "godlike" knowledge and a related tendency to transgression). The myth of hockey is no different. As the general statements from Whitson and Gruneau above suggest, the myth of hockey portrays the origins and essence of the game in the "northern environment and landscape"—the domain of snow and rural or small town life. So in Home Game, when they wish to evoke the "things eternal" about hockey, Ken Dryden and Roy MacGregor offer a series of boys in rural settings playing hockey outdoors (except for the outdoor portrait of Dryden's own Pee Wee-aged team). The opening chapter of Home Game, "The Common Passion," gives privilege of place to small-town Saskatchewan in defining the nature of the common game—just west on the TransCanada Highway from Winnipeg.

In the case of the Young trilogy, there is a clear sense of progression from corner rink hockey to amateur high school hockey to professional hockey. Scrubs on Skates and Boy on Defense offer a comparison between hockey played on corner rinks and hockey played in the arena. As Coach Turner puts it early on, although Canadian boys have the advantage of playing all winter on corner rinks, playing hockey on a team in a league is a "different [thing]" (13). For Pete and the other Northwest boys, playing in the more competitive high school league is not only a pleasure but a rite of passage. As a boy grows into a man, the novel suggests, his competitive nature demands greater challenges. Still, when things go bad for Pete early on, he yearns for the old corner rink: "[he] wished that he were five years younger and could go out to the corner rink and work this off" (Scrubs 71). By the time of Boy on Defense, Bill has embraced the corner rink himself, and the novel offers a long romantic evocation of him skating there—an
indication of his increasing "Canadianness" (see Boy 157-58). The implication is that the corner rink remains, in a sense, the source; and it is essential for players moving into hockey further away from this source to go back now and then to be renewed.

**Hockey, Gender, and The Family**

As you might expect, Young's trilogy is rich with mid-century clichés about gender and family. Girls and women have no direct role in the hockey. When Red Turner ponders the mysteries of the competitive spirit, only boys and men are part of his pondering: "what is it that makes us, men and boys, want so much to win a game?" (Boy 42).

In the hockey world portrayed in the novels, females are restricted to traditional feminine roles. Sarah Gordon, for example, plays the roles of moral cheerleader and love interest. She attends all the hockey games and cheers passionately for the Northwest team. When things go badly for Pete, she calls him out for not trying but also insists, on his behalf, that he will not abandon the team. When Mr. Gordon asks Pete if he would like to "quit hockey, altogether," she jumps in: "That's our school now and Pete wants to play for it. And he'll get used to Buchannan and Bell pretty soon and try just as hard as . . . as . . . " (Scrubs 62). At this point Sarah is described as having a "brightness in her eyes that meant that with one more word, if she couldn't stop herself, she'd bounce out of the room crying" and Pete is surprised to learn how strongly she feels (62). Her defense of the Northwest team contributes to Pete's recognition of the advantages of attending a new school.
As a love interest, Sarah has conventional physical virtues: she is blond and attractive, with "her mother's lissome figure and father's fair hair and complexion" (4). She is the kind of teenaged girl teenaged boys develop crushes on. Pete's friend Ron Maclean comes around the Gordon house a lot, but "sometimes lately Pete hadn't been sure whether Ron would come quite so often if it wasn't for the coincidence that Sarah was usually around, too" (40). Sarah also has conventional feminine interests. One of her passions is acting and she plans to major in "home economics" at university. When Mr. Spunska jokes that majoring in psychology will help her "be a good wife," the larger context of her characterization suggests that this is not a joke at all (126). Sarah and Bill are attracted to one another. They sit together during games before Bill starts to play, and eventually, part way through Boy on Defense, go on a date. Before the date, Bill puts on his new (Canadian) coat and it fits "perfectly" and looks "terrific" (Boy 130). The date is a success; Sarah and Bill have "fun" and "talk . . . in a way that wouldn't have been possible only a few hours ago" (132). Sarah compliments Bill on what a gentleman he is: "You seem to know exactly what you're doing all the time. You don't get flustered. It must be that Continental poise . . ." (131). Thus the text advances Bill's old world politeness as a model for how a good Canadian girl should be treated, while at the same time presenting the role of love interest to an up and coming hockey player as a desirable occupation for a good Canadian girl.

The mothers in the trilogy, Mrs. Gordon and Mrs. Spunska, also have very limited roles. Mrs. Gordon is basically a Victorian domestic angel. Her role in Scrubs on Skates is to be quietly supportive of Pete and the rest of the family and to make sandwiches.
About the most significant words she speaks in the novel are: "Some parcels in the car, dear . . . . Would you mind getting them in?" (42).

Mrs. Spunska is more complicated—though not by much. The backstory of the Spunska family suggests that she had the strength and resourcefulness to care for herself and Bill, first for eight years in England when Mr. Spunska was in the Polish underground, then for another year in Canada when Mr. Spunska was assigned by the government to cut pulpwood in the North. During this latter period Mrs. Spunska worked as a maid (Scrubs 77). By the time of the novel, however, she has become a damsel-in-distress.

The first description of her suggests that she has suffered some form of nervous exhaustion or depression as a result of overexerting herself during the time her husband was away. Now that he has returned, she has taken to her bed, where she lies with "a thin face, huge dark eyes, black hair drawn back severely from her forehead" (124). Over the course of the novel, Sarah and Pete and other members of the Northwest hockey team all go to visit Mrs. Spunska. This cheers her because it suggests that Bill is making friends, and it leads her to make the statement, quoted above, about the way sport can be a fast track to belonging for immigrant boys. The biggest improvement in her health occurs when Bill actually gets into a hockey game. Afterwards, her doctor jokes that Bill playing "was better than his medicine!" (217).

The limited female characters occupy one side of the benevolent patriarchy that characterizes the mid-20th century nuclear family idealized by Young in the novels. The other side is, of course, occupied by male heads of household. True to type, both of the
Gordon and Spunska families are led by cigar/pipe-smoking, gently-authoritative patriarchs. Mr. Gordon, a former star athlete who went on to become a lawyer, husband, father, and pillar of the community, is studiously not overbearing with his son, in keeping with a man who is comfortable with his own authority and who is teaching his son to be his own man. At a couple of key moments in the text, however, he intervenes to give Pete sage advice. After Pete is hurt by the bad press he receives after his unsuccessful first game, Mr. Gordon explains "dryly" that an athlete is "really a sort of public servant" and "the public feels cheated" when he doesn't measure up, an observation that Pete finds has "a wisdom to it that was almost cynical, but . . . [also] sharp and clear" (Scrubs 68-9).

When Pete admits, after he achieves his first successes at Northwest, that he had wondered earlier if he would ever feel good about hockey again, Mr. Gordon responds "dryly" again: "Young people feel that way quite often before they get enough sense to know that every trouble passes eventually" (145). To round off the picture of the learned but not overly didactic elder, Mr. Gordon quotes Shakespeare: "'To thine own self be true'" (81). Mr. Gordon, the text makes clear, leads by word and example, but mostly by example, in keeping with the traditional model of masculinity he represents (a man of few, but well-chosen, words, who mainly lets his deeds do the talking for him). As Pete learns what it takes to be a leader on the Northwest hockey team, he is also acquiring the characteristics to be a man like his father—a leader at home and in the community.

Like Mr. Gordon, Mr. Spunska is a benevolent patriarch, whose "rule wasn't hard, but it was law" (Boy 9), and a role model for his son both on and off the ice. Bill's determination and ability to handle adversity are implicitly linked to the example set by his father. Mr. Spunska, unlike his wife, seems only to have gotten stronger because of
the challenges he had to face during the War and after. When Pete asks Bill if it was
tough for him to cut wood when he first came to Canada, after all his years of training to
be a language professor, Bill shrugs and replies: "[My father] has done harder things than
chopping down trees" (Scrubs 77). Mr. Spunska's sense of duty to his family is
reproduced in Bill's sense of duty to both team and family; and, indeed, much of the
drama of Boy on Defense is a result of Bill trying to deal properly with all his
responsibilities. And finally, Mr. Spunska sets an example to Bill of appropriate national
integration. Once he is settled into his new job at the university, the professor begins to
read up on Canadian history. He describes the Rebellion of 1837-38 at one point as "a
very small military action" (Boy 159) and on another occasion at work recalls a date from
Canadian history that the other—Canadian—professors couldn't, which occasions "great
laughter at a Pole's telling Canadians their history!" (Boy 165).

The maturation of Bill and Pete is described explicitly as them acquiring
characteristics from their role model fathers. On the ice, Pete, learns something like the
noblesse oblige of the privileged male leader. As a star player, he is the target of some
goonish attacks, but, for the sake of the team, he never retaliates. Bill, on the other hand,
learns to apply the same sense of duty, humility, and commitment to his own life as has
his father. Interestingly, Bill, like Pete, is shown to value academics as well as sports—a
direct product of the professional stature of their fathers. On this point the role model
fathers embody a message worthy of one of Don Cherry's more sensible refrains: play the
game you love kids, but also stay in school!

One last point about the importance of family in the trilogy. Clearly, the trilogy
idealizes the traditional nuclear family that is a stereotype of Fifties popular culture. At
the same time, it suggests that players with character issues are more likely to come from bad family situations. The villain / rival characters in the second and third novels, Cliff Armstrong and Benny Moore, both come from problematical family situations. Cliff's selfishness on the ice is attributed to his pushy family (*Boy* 21); Benny's goonish violence is linked to the fact that his father is a violent drunk, and that he was raised "partly by grandparents and partly in foster homes" (*A Boy* 21).

**Hockey and Violence**

The place of violence in hockey has been a subject of debate since the earliest days of the game. As Colin Howell explains, early newspaper accounts often reported on "the serious injuries and even deaths that occurred in hotly contested matches" (45). Stacey Lorenz and Geraint Osborne offer a case study in this early reporting in "'Talk About Strenuous Hockey': Violence, Manhood, and the 1907 Ottawa Silver Seven-Montreal Wanderer Rivalry," which gives ample evidence of the extremely violent nature of some early hockey games, as well as the public fascination with this violence. (See also the Lorenz and Osborne essay in this collection.) The violent quality of hockey has given rise to a series of perennial questions. What level of violence is appropriate to preserve the essential (i.e."manly") quality of the game? What level of violence is justifiable in the pursuit of hockey success? And perhaps most crucially, given the violence required of all players at a certain level for success: "how to distinguish the manly athlete from the violent brute?" (Howell 45).

Bill Spunska, in many ways, is the archetype of the aggressive masculinity celebrated in the myth of hockey. His game combines dynamic offensive rushes with
hard-hitting defense. Coach Turner in *Boy On Defense* says that Bill's game is similar to that of "Eddie Shore" (*Boy* 73). The first two novels each contain key scenes in which Bill lays some other player out with a violent body check. In *Scrubs on Skates*, Bill flattens Pete in practice even before he has learned to skate—a wake up call for Pete and a hint of Bill's potential (*Scrubs* 26). In *Boy on Defense*, Bill lays out Cliff Armstrong, the selfish prima dona forward, and immediately doubts his own motives: "he hadn't wanted to hit him so hard . . . or had he?" (*Boy* 97).

*A Boy at the Leafs' Camp* picks up the questions about violence raised in the first two novels and explores them in a sustained way. In this novel, as I suggested above, Bill is challenged to learn what it takes to be successful at the highest level of hockey. The biggest issue he faces is how to deal with the more intense quality of the competition, which includes a higher risk of violence and injury.

Much of what Bill has to learn in *A Boy at the Leafs' Camp* is embodied in his interactions with Benny Moore. Benny is, in many ways, a more intense version of Bill himself (if the novel didn't take place in 1962, you'd want to say that Benny was Bill on steroids). Both are big, dark-haired, square jawed boys, though Benny, tellingly, is said to be the bigger (*Scrubs* 12; *A Boy* 15). Like Bill, Benny is an up and coming defenseman. Unlike Bill, however, he is willing to go to virtually any length to succeed. This includes a willingness to push the limits of violence. Benny's reputation for goon-like behaviour is emphasized at the beginning of the novel; amongst other things, he is suspended from Junior hockey at the time training camp opens because of an assault on a referee (*A Boy* 20).
A significant part of *A Boy at the Leafs' Camp* is devoted to the rivalry that develops between Benny and Bill. Before they even get on the ice, they exchange words: "Keep your head up," says Benny, "I hit pretty hard." "I hit pretty hard myself," replies Bill (*A Boy* 19). Then, in practice, they battle. At one point Bill makes one of his typical headlong rushes and pinballs into Benny, flattening him (69). Benny retaliates by taking a run at Bill (74). The rivalry culminates in two violent incidents during a split-squad exhibition game. In the first incident, Benny charges at Bill but Bill stops hard to avoid him—and Benny crashes headlong into the boards (191). Then, as the last meaningless seconds of the game run down, Benny tries to run Bill again. This time Bill lowers his shoulder and Benny is caught by surprise; he is thrown back, hits his head on the ice, and collapses (192). In this second incident, Benny suffers a near-fatal brain injury. He ends up in the hospital, in a coma, for a number of days.

Benny's injury causes Bill to question his own motives as a player. Though people reassure him that his check was clean, he wonders if he had actually tried to hurt Benny (199). He had similar thoughts after his hit on Cliff Armstrong. This time, however, the thoughts go beyond the recognition that his competitive drive means he has a "lower boiling point" than other players (*Boy* 101) to the idea that, if he played as hard as he needed to succeed, even if he played a clean game, he could truly hurt someone. As a result, he becomes tentative on the ice and his play suffers (*A Boy* 242-3).

The self-doubt Bill suffers becomes, for Young, a teaching opportunity. In the pages that follow Benny's injury, Young uses the voices of the wise old defenseman Otta Tihane and the Punch Imlach-like coach Pokesy Ware to offer Bill (and his wider
juvenile audience) the classic defenses for hockey's violence. Ware takes Bill aside to give him this pep talk:

I'll tell you, kid. You can't afford to think about things like [the incident with Benny Moore] and play this game. A guys goes by you with his head down some night, carrying the puck, your job is to hit him as hard as you can. You want to do it cleanly, but checking is part of the game . . . . If you're going to be afraid every time you hit somebody you're going to hurt him, you're not going to be the kind of a hockey player . . . you might become. (A Boy 228-9)

Even more telling is Otta Tihane's story about a real life incident involving Gordie Howe and Ted Kennedy. As Tihane tells it, Kennedy checked Howe and Howe "wound up with a fractured skull," which led to outrage amongst the Detroit faithful (205). Howe himself, however, after he had recovered, was asked about "the rougher aspects of the game" and gave what Tihane considers to be the "definitive comment" about professional hockey. "I like [hockey] the way it is," said Howe (according to Tihane and the historical record). "Sure, it's sometimes tough, but why not? It's a man's game." (206).

The allusion to the Kennedy-Howe incident would have a particularly strong effect on Young's English readers in 1963. The historical incident, which happened during the first game of the playoffs in 1950, would be perhaps the most famous example of hockey violence for these readers (at least the adults among them), comparable to the events associated with the Rocket Richard riots for French speaking Canadians. So important was the incident in hockey history that seventeen years later Sports Illustrated devoted a long article by Stan Fischler to it. Fischler's article, called "The Greatly Exaggerated Death of Mr. Howe," describes the events of 1950 in great detail. Interestingly, the description suggests that Young in fact modeled the climactic
confrontation between Bill and Benny on what happened between Kennedy and Howe. As Fischler describes it, the historical incident occurred in the dying seconds of a 4-0 game, when it seemed that Toronto, in the lead, was just running out the clock. Kennedy came out across the Leaf blue line about six feet from the boards and Howe swept in from the right and "attempted to crash Kennedy amidships" (Fischler). From there, two conflicting accounts evolved that are much like the two incidents between Bill and Benny. One version, favoured by Toronto fans, had Kennedy stopping short as Howe tried to hit him and Howe flying past to crash into the boards; the other version, favoured by Detroit fans, had Kennedy somehow surprising Howe, either with his shoulder or stick, maybe with an outright spear, and sending him down (Fischler). Afterwards, Howe's injuries were so severe that he required brain surgery. So grave was his condition that a call was put through to Saskatchewan urging his mother to get to her son's beside (Fischler).

By invoking the real-life incident between Howe and Kennedy, followed by Howe's historical defense of "the rougher aspect" of the game, *A Boy at the Leafs' Camp* reinforces its justification of hockey violence by reference to real world authority. Who is going to gainsay Mr. Hockey himself about what hockey is? That a trilogy of novels about boys growing into manhood through hockey ends with the idea that the rougher aspects are what make hockey "a man's game" is particularly telling.

For the most part, then, *A Boy at the Leafs' Camp* portrays the violence of hockey to younger readers (and their parents) as a form of inoculation, in Roland Barthes's definition of the term, that is, as an admission of a smaller wrong in order to "inoculate" against consideration of the larger wrong. This is consistent with the didactic purpose
of Young's trilogy more generally of reinforcing the dominant myths of hockey. The lesson is accompanied by an explicit articulation, on the part of Bill, of the right balance to strike between the "rougher aspects" of the game and the possibility of injuring someone. Bill recognizes that part of what has troubled him about the Benny Moore hit is that he couldn't be absolutely sure of his own motives. Now, he vows that he will know himself and that "From now on . . . I not only won't hurt anybody on purpose in this game—but I'll try, on purpose, not to hurt them" (A Boy 246; italics original). He decides that he will model his game after Tim Merrill, who plays "hard, strong, forceful, but never dirty" and that, for as long as he plays, he wants people to think of him "as a clean player" (246).

At the same time, A Boy at the Leafs' Camp leaves certain issues not fully resolved. For example, although Benny's recovery defers the issue about hockey's violence potentially leading to a fatal accident, it does not resolve it—particularly in relation to the professional game, which, the novel makes clear, is defined by an intensification of violence even in "clean" play. Similarly, although Benny's admission that he had intended "to knock Bill right through the boards" absolves Bill of wrongdoing on the original hit, it doesn't resolve the issue raised by Bill's apparently short temper. Is a shorter temper than usual a necessary consequence of the strong competitive drive needed to succeed in hockey?

The unresolved issues, I think, suggest a lingering anxiety on the part of Young about the nature of the professional game. A Boy at the Leafs' Camp, just as Scrubs on Skates and Boy on Defense, idealizes junior and high school amateur hockey as, in many ways, the best of the game—with just the right balance of competitiveness and lack of
corruption by the more violent and sordid aspects of the professional game. Lee Vincent, the sports writer stand-in for Young, makes this preference explicit in *Scrubs on Skates*:

[Lee Vincent] enjoyed a good professional game, or a good senior amateur game, but the feeling of these kids always got him hardest. A couple of times in his life, when he had been offered advancement on his own paper or more money from another paper, the thought of leaving junior and high school sports had been the one obstacle he couldn't overcome. (*Scrubs* 47)

Such a preference fits in well with the intended audience of a juvenile novel, of course, but it also hints at some of the underlying tensions in the myth of hockey that even Young, in his didactic treatment, cannot simply paper over. Exploring these tensions in a more explicit way is very much at the heart of the boom in hockey literature that has occurred in the last twenty-five years or so.\(^\text{13}\)

**ENDNOTES**

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1 The trilogy was reissued in 1986 in (rather regrettably) revised form. In what follows I cite from the original versions, which are the more historically significant.


3 The interview with Gzwoski can be found in the CBC digital archives at [http://www.cbc.ca/archives/categories/arts-entertainment/media/media-general/scott-young-the-dean-of-canadian-sports-writing-dies.html](http://www.cbc.ca/archives/categories/arts-entertainment/media/media-general/scott-young-the-dean-of-canadian-sports-writing-dies.html).

4 For an excellent analysis the role of the "enterprising Scot" in the construction of Canadian identity, see Daniel Coleman's *White Civility: The Literary Project of English Canada*. I also wonder if the name of Pete's family itself is not a subtle homage to the novelist Ralph Connor, whose real name was Charles Gordon; there are certainly elements in Young's trilogy that carry traces Connor's *Glengarry School Days*, with its famous early portrait of schoolboy hockey.

5 Official government policy reflected this shift. As Eva Mackey illustrates in *The House of Difference*, "cultural policies that centred on maintaining British cultural hegemony" (often to define the nation against the United States) were replaced by the ideas of the "pluralist 'cultural..."
mosaic" (50). Ultimately the Canadian government passed its official policy of "Multiculturalism within a Bilingual Framework" in 1971.

6 The entry on Father David Bauer in the Builders section of the Hockey Hall of Fame explains the origins of the program like this: "Following [his Memorial Cup win as coach of the St. Michael's School team in 1961] Bauer took a position at St. Mark's College at the University of British Columbia. It was during this time that he began to think seriously about putting together a national team of the top amateurs from across Canada. He presented his idea at the annual meeting of the Canadian Amateur Hockey Association in 1962 and it was accepted. He populated his roster with UBC students, some of whom had followed him from St. Mike's" (see http://www.hhof.com/html/legends.shtml).

7 This connects to a minor subplot in the novel. The penultimate game of Northwest's regular season is preceded by a "real prairie blizzard" with blinding snow and a driving wind "from the north" (166). Pincher Martin, the team's checking centre, is caught out in the remnants of this blizzard without proper boots (he left them at the Spunksas' after a visit to see Mrs. Spunkska and didn't want to disturb her by going back to get them). He ends up with a frostbitten foot. As a result, the team has to play extra hard to compensate for his limping movements on the ice (170). The way that the team pulls together to compensate for Pincher's handicap reinforces the theme in the novel about the importance of team play, and also anticipates Bill's stepping in for a teammate during the climactic last game.

8 It also, of course, marks him as a dutiful son. In a subtle way, Pete's shoveling of the snow reinforces the promise implicit in the juvenile fictional form (with its stress on happy endings) that he will be redeemed in the end, that, his attitude problem adjusting to his new team aside, he remains fundamentally a good Canadian kid.

9 The portrayal of Winnipeg is reminiscent of how Drinkwater describes Edmonton in Mark Anthony Jarman's Salvage King, Ya! Edmonton, he suggests, was "a fair-sized city but . . . more like a small town" (72).

10 According to the 1961 Canadian census, the population of Peterborough was 47,185 and the population of Winnipeg was 265,420. The population of Winnipeg in 1951, near the publishing date of Scrubs on Skates, was 235,710 (www12.statcan.gc.ca).

11 See the letter from Punch Imlach to Jim Pappin outlining the training camp requirements for the Toronto Maple Leafs in 1962 posted at http://thepuckdoctors.com/2010/01/leaf-training-camp-requirements-in-1962/

12 Barthes' definition is more explicitly framed in class terms: "The inoculation . . . consists in admitting the accidental evil of a class-bound institution the better to conceal its principal evil" (140).

13 Colin Howell's Blood, Sweat, and Cheers traces the tension between amateur and professional back to the turn of the 20th century with the advent of the first professional teams (7). This tension, of course, leads to questions about where the more authentic version of hockey is and what the costs of professionalization are to both individuals and the game—questions that inform a number of the literary novels in the last twenty years. Young stakes out the classical position on this in his trilogy: he holds up the amateur game as more "pure" and the professional game as alluring but fraught with personal and moral danger. Bill, at the end of A Boy at the Leafs Camp,
only validates his ambition to be a professional player by vowing to adhere to the code of
gentlemanliness associated with the amateur game. The trilogy ends with the triumph of this
position but there are clues within and without that Young isn't entirely convinced by his own
ending. Interestingly, Bill is said in *That Old Gang of Mine* to have forgone a professional career
while goonish Benny Moore has become a regular with the Leafs. This is partly no doubt just a
plot device to keep Bill eligible to play in the Olympics with but there is also maybe an
unconscious (or conscious?) acknowledgement in it of what the more likely path to success in the
pros is. Similarly, *Face-Off*, Young's 1971 adult novel about hockey (co-written with George
Robertson), offers a grim portrayal of the corrupting possibilities of the professional game.