

# Guy-Guys, CWILA, and Going Down the Hall to the Archives

Laura Moss

On September 25, 2013 a short interview published in *Hazlitt*, Random House Canada's online magazine, sparked a giant controversy. In the interview for a recurring feature entitled "Shelf Esteem," "a weekly measure of the books on the shelves of writers, editors and other word lovers," Governor General's Award-winning author David Gilmour was asked by Emily M. Keeler to discuss the contents of the bookshelves in his office at Victoria College, in the University of Toronto, where he teaches. His comments about literature and the classroom ignited a media firestorm. People took particular exception to his point that "I'm not interested in teaching books by women," clarifying that "when I was given this job I said I would only teach the people that I truly, truly love. Unfortunately, none of those happen to be Chinese, or women. Except for Virginia Woolf. . . . I say I don't love women writers enough to teach them, if you want women writers go down the hall. What I teach is guys. Serious heterosexual guys. F. Scott Fitzgerald, Chekhov, Tolstoy. Real guy-guys. Henry Miller. Philip Roth" (qtd. in Keeler n. pag.). He also explained that "I haven't encountered any Canadian writers yet that I love enough to teach" (qtd. in Keeler n. pag.). Gilmour's comments immediately raised the ire of people across the country. While a few supporters defended his academic freedom and a few more raged against the politically correct mafia and the "feministas" who criticized his points about women writers, the majority of responses took the form of commentary on the sexism and racism evident in Gilmour's interview, many of them coming from right down the hall.

The simple question I want to address here is the one a dentist friend of mine asked me the other day while we were watching our sons play soccer. Why does anyone care what David Gilmour thinks? It is a good question. A minor writer gave an off-the-cuff interview for a trade publication where he said some outrageous things about “great” literature and generally made himself look pompous. Why then, have there been dozens of follow-up articles and interviews nationally and internationally, as well as hundreds of blog posts, Twitter punchlines, and Facebook rants responding to his comments? Why have people rallied in the streets? Why have men and women across Canada used their voices in whatever avenues they could access to show their dismay or support?

I can think of six reasons why Gilmour’s comments immediately gained traction and why so many people seem to care so deeply. These group around 1) the state of the profession, 2) responsibility to students, 3) power in the institution, 4) public accountability, 5) other recent examples of sexism in Canadian academic settings, and 6) an increase in awareness about issues of equity in Canadian literary culture. University of Toronto graduate students Andrea Day and Miriam Novik convincingly argue that Gilmour’s “comments have made explicit what is so often implicit. He has gracelessly articulated the biases that too often dictate what sort of literature is considered ‘serious’ and ‘useful,’ opinions which too often shape teaching and reading at all levels of education and private life” (n. pag.). In sum, Gilmour’s statements tap into (fears of) what lies beneath the surface of contemporary Canadian culture.

First, by exclusively placing work by “serious heterosexual guys” at the centre of his teaching, the message is that, for Gilmour, the major qualification for literary greatness is to be male, white, and straight. The work of women writers, Chinese writers, Canadian writers, and non-heterosexual writers is not serious enough to merit his time or his students’ attention. He disdainfully leaves the study of those “other” writers to instructors that he implies are less discriminating than he. It is the generalized nature of Gilmour’s claims about what he wouldn’t teach (work by those whose gender, sexuality, or racialization marks them as other—as if such singular categories exist), juxtaposed with the specificity of what he would teach (work by a handful of “guy-guys”), that makes this particular case raise hackles. Gilmour’s remarks about the books he chooses to teach are like a kick in the gut to those critics, theorists, and teachers who have worked hard at leveling the literary playing field for the past four decades. The English academy, whether studying Canadian or

medieval literature, or really anything in between, has expanded the canon to include work of excellence by writers from a diversity of backgrounds and has extended the classroom to engage a multiplicity of voices and approaches. I am of course referring to the impact of postcolonialism, feminism, queer studies, and critical race studies, but I am also referring to the work of those interested in print culture, ecocriticism, new historicism, cultural materialism, poststructuralism, and experimental writing, among many other approaches that have had an impact on what and how books are taught in higher education. Gilmour's teach-books-closest-to-your-heart version of authorial veneration is completely out of step with literary studies in the twenty-first century. Indeed, following the interview, the University of Toronto English Department quickly distanced itself from Gilmour's classes at Victoria College when Paul Stevens, the acting chair, stated that Gilmour's comments "constitute a travesty of all we stand for" (qtd. in Bradshaw n. pag.). Teachers and students jumped in to point out that English classes are interested in books by many more writers than white heterosexual men. However, if Gilmour limits the writers he teaches this way, we might wonder how many other instructors are flying along with him under the radar?

Second, *Globe and Mail* Books Editor Jared Bland voiced a leading theme in the commentary in his "Memo to David Gilmour," when he wrote that "teaching only books by 'heterosexual guys' does a huge disservice to your students" (n. pag.). Further, Stevens is quoted as saying that "teaching literature should not be self-indulgent, a matter of opining about one's likes and dislikes. It is a serious discipline in which students should be enabled to come to a better understanding of the world in which they live in all its complexity and diversity" (qtd. in Bradshaw). By focusing on Gilmour's students, Bland, Stevens, and many others, focused on pedagogical responsibility and the ethics of teaching.

When given the chance (and national public forum) to defend himself in both the *National Post* and the *Globe and Mail* a few hours after the release of the original interview, Gilmour said "I haven't got a racist or sexist bone in my body" (qtd. in Medley n. pag.). Instead, he argued that he just feels most comfortable teaching what he knows best: "I'm a middle-aged writer and I am interested in middle-aged writers. I'm very keen on people's lives who resemble mine because I understand those lives and I can feel passionately about them" (qtd. in Barton n. pag.). The fact that Gilmour teaches a class filled mainly by students he calls "girls" about the joys and perils of middle-aged male life does not seem to have dampened his passion for the subject. It

also doesn't seem to have occurred to him that the male and female, straight and gay, ethnically diverse undergraduate students in his class might not share his passion for middle-aged male sexuality. Indeed, he boasts that he saves Philip Roth's *The Dying Animal* "til the very end of the year because by that point they've got fairly strong stomachs, and they're far more sophisticated than they are in the beginning. So they can understand the differences between pornography and great literature. There are men eating menstrual pads, and by the time my students get to that they're ready" (qtd. in Keeler n. pag.). As a young student at Victoria College, I can't imagine that I would have ever had a strong enough stomach for such an approach to that novel. I agree with Bland that Gilmour's choices do first-year students a disservice.

The problem, as I see it, is that teaching a reflection in the mirror leaves little room for acknowledging the experiences of the other people in the classroom or being open to the many artistic engagements that go miles and centuries beyond the teacher's scope of experience. And, as Holger Syme so eloquently put it, "Rather notably absent from the interview: literature. Rather notably over-present: authors. Profession of the interviewee: author" (n. pag.) Focusing on the author instead of the literature makes the classroom a space for the expression of personal taste more than critical engagement with texts. One of the most memorable of the myriad anonymous comments posted on social media in response to Gilmour's interview succinctly stated: "teaching is not about self-replication." As my sister, Julia Zarb, who did her doctoral dissertation on issues of authorial intention in the 1990s, responded, perhaps Roland Barthes should have written about "Death of the Teacher" instead of "Death of the Author." Gilmour would have missed both death notices.

Literature is not sociology. It is not ethnology. It is not psychology. But it is not free of social significance either. The choices a teacher makes about which books to teach and what authors to foreground as meritorious, signifies something to the class. The teach-what-you-know approach Gilmour is advocating signifies male privilege, even an authoritarian privilege that is centred in the white male heterosexual image he seems to be so consciously fighting to uphold. It also means that he isn't likely to learn anything new himself from literature or from his students.

In his book *In Bed with the Word*, Daniel Coleman explores the pendulum swing that has occurred in the last century of literary studies. Drawing on the language of Paul Ricoeur, Coleman writes about the shift from a "hermeneutics of affirmation," which venerates literature, to a "hermeneutics

of suspicion,” which approaches literature with incredulity. He argues for the need to achieve a midpoint between affirmation and suspicion, a point of critical and respectful engagement with texts and their contexts. Gilmour’s interview shows a firm commitment to a hermeneutics of affirmation that reveres writers who fit into his small definition of literature. I concur with Coleman’s notion that a midpoint is more productive. The midpoint of respectful engagement is what I personally strive to cultivate in my classroom. I try to teach students to engage generously with what people have thought and imagined in the past and to think critically about literature in its contextual framework. My goal is to expose students to a multiplicity of well-written stories, plays, and poems. Sometimes these are from marginalized writers and sometimes from canonical ones. Sometimes they are the voices of literary theorists; sometimes they are the sounds of the poets themselves. I want us to read critically, creatively, and analytically because I believe that it is intellectually lazy to send students “down the hall” to get other perspectives than mine. Like a lot of my peers, who come in different genders, ages, shapes, and ethnicities, I’m less concerned with bringing my own experience to light and more concerned with my students’ ability as they synthesize the elements at hand. It may not be transcendent at every turn but there is always the potential to spark greater knowledge through debate.

Third, Gilmour’s use of the classroom as a bully pulpit raises questions about power in an institutional setting. What kind of power does an instructor have? How much autonomy should s/he have? How far does academic freedom extend? Such difficult questions arise out of this controversy and have been productively discussed in the wake of Gilmour’s remarks. Perhaps this is the best legacy of the controversy. In his original interview, Gilmour notes that he had received complaints in the past from parents of his students about the inappropriate nature of the books in his course. He also explains how he put those concerned parents in their place by telling them that a book that had been around for sixty years must have merit. I do not want to say that parents should dictate what is taught in a university classroom, but I do think that their concerns should be respectfully acknowledged. Gilmour’s repeated assertion of shock that anyone could be upset at his statements suggests that he thought that his status provided a solid footing for any opinion he might wish to voice. And he is partly right. Indeed, he was immediately given the chance to explain himself in national newspapers and on television. The media were scrupulously fair in giving him space to refute the claims made against him.

I somehow doubt that everyone who makes incendiary comments would be given such a quick chance at redemption.

Fourth, in this age of government cuts to education and the slashing of Arts faculty budgets in particular, Gilmour's elitist comments were a gift to anti-intellectuals across Canada. They read like a (damaging) parody of (what non-academics suspect happens in) an English class. See how useless English is? Should tax dollars be spent on teaching novels about men eating menstrual pads? It is all very well for people to love literature but why spend money studying it? What marketable skills could possibly be gained by reading Chekov? Articles like the ones that appeared in Vancouver's *Province* ("Female authors flap aside, university courses like English literature, art history don't deserve tax dollars") and the *Globe and Mail* ("David Gilmour an agent of the patriarchy? Oh please") used the outcry at the Gilmour interview to argue the damaging infiltration of political correctness into university education and/or the resultant irrelevance of such an education. Both the original comments and the vitriolic responses they elicited have been held up as evidence that a Humanities education is superficial and petty. However, significantly, one thing that literature courses do teach students is the difference between opinions and a well-articulated argument. Questions of accountability and public responsibility loom large in this framework and no one on either side of the debate can possibly win. But we can try to improve the standards of evidence and argument brought into the conversation.

Fifth, Gilmour is not alone in articulating a toxic strain of sexism in contemporary culture. His comments came a few weeks after the controversy over "rape chants" sung at first-year orientation (frosh) week festivities at Saint Mary's University (SMU) and at the UBC Sauder School of Business. The chant that came under fire from administrators and citizens is based on the word YOUNG that includes the words: "Y is for Your sister, O is for Oh so tight, U is for Underage, N is for No consent, G is for Go to jail." UBC Commerce Undergraduate Society (CUS) student leaders told frosh groups that if they were to sing the song, it had to be kept within the group, only sung in private gatherings, and kept as a secret. Both SMU and UBC have stepped in with official responses highly critical of the chants and the organizers of the frosh events. Stephen Toope, the President of UBC, acknowledged "the more pernicious, systemic aspects of the casual acceptance of violence and sexualization that we believe manifests itself in incidents such as the C.U.S. FROSH rape chant" and announced a task force to consider optimal means to confront this acceptance on campus (n. pag.). As Toope said, "we are

seizing this opportunity to strike at the sexual violence and intolerance that we know still lurks beneath the surface in pockets of our society” (n. pag.). The UBC Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Social Justice followed up with a statement demanding concrete action in the university community because “in Canada, as elsewhere, gender based violence is both commonplace and exists in multiple intersectional guises, many of which go unchallenged, and are simply assimilated and normalized in the name of the banal, the familiar, the known” (n. pag.).

As with the Gilmour interview, I approach the “rape chant” by thinking about the power of speech and the vulnerability of those hearing it, about audience, and about cultural positioning. In this case, the audience of the chant was a group of first-year students on a bus being asked to join in by their leaders. I wonder whether there were survivors of sexual assault on that bus? I wonder what will happen if one of the new students is assaulted over the next few years? Will he or she feel safe reporting it, remembering the chant the frosh leaders led? Will they feel supported by their institution now that it has come to light and been censured by the school? Lucia Lorenzi, a doctoral student in the English department at UBC, responded to the rape chants by saying “I am going to make it very clear why this is a problem: using secrecy to legitimize violence and sexism is precisely the tactic used by abusers and assailants themselves. Suggesting that things are ‘okay’ so long as they are not brought into the public eye is exactly how domestic abuse continues to be perpetrated and excused. Informing people to ‘keep a secret’ is one of the top tactics used by abusers to silence their victims” (n. pag.). I hold the frosh leaders responsible for their actions but I also believe them when they say that no harm was intended. That is why the rape chants are so terrifying. They reflect the pervasive acceptance of sexism and rape culture in Canada today. In her response to the chants published in the feminist blog *Hook&Eye*, Erin Wunker was exactly right when she said, “Here’s the thing: unlearning prejudice takes time. Unspooling the ways in which we all, each of us, are interpellated into pernicious systems of inequity that depend on divide and conquer strategies takes time. It is hard” (n.pag.). The rape chants show that within contemporary culture there is a toxic strain of acceptance of authoritarian abuse, the abuse tends to be sexist and perpetuated by silence. The rape chants and the Gilmour interview are two sides of the same coin. Both perpetuate the normalcy and the banality of power inequities. When brought to light, however, both have also been called to task and used to speak to the pervasiveness of the problems at hand. This in itself is heartening.

Finally, Gilmour's comments make concrete the inequities in Canadian literary culture that Canadian Women in the Literary Arts (CWILA)<sup>1</sup> have proven in the last two years. In response to the Gilmour interview, CWILA posted the following status update on its Facebook page:

Thank you #1 to David Gilmour for the spontaneous CWILA fundraiser he kick-started today by saying that he doesn't teach female writers or Chinese writers in his English class at the University of Toronto.

Thanks #2 to Emily M. Keeler for editing and publishing the interview with Gilmour who says offensive though not terribly shocking things that indicate how much work there is to do if we are going to have an equitable literary communities and cultures in Canada.

Thank you #3 goes back to David Gilmour for publishing a follow-up interview in which he makes a plea for women to not stop buying his books and in which he calls Keeler "a young woman who kind of wanted to make a little name for herself."

Every time Gilmour opens his mouth, you've got a reason to support CWILA's work for gender and racial equality in Canadian literature. (n. pag.)

Indeed, Gilmour's comments illustrate what CWILA has demonstrated numerically.<sup>2</sup> CWILA was created in the spring of 2012 when poet and UBC lecturer Gillian Jerome decided to go beyond anecdote about the lack of review space and attention given to women's books in Canada and to count the number of book reviews in the media dedicated to work by male and female authors. Jerome questioned the status quo and wanted to prove that women writers in Canada were at a significant disadvantage through the collection of hard data. Within a month, she and a small group of women and men had rallied over 50 volunteers to count almost 2500 reviews in 14 publications and to analyze the numbers. While many had long suspected that there was a gender bias in literary culture in Canada, the first CWILA count proved it. Over the course of its first year and a half in existence, CWILA has grown to 400 members (writers, critics, poets, reviewers, editors, publishers, scholars), become incorporated as a not-for-profit organization, and chosen its first Critic-in-Residence position (poet Sue Sinclair 2013). CWILA now compiles the largest data set in Canada that tracks gender in book reviewing culture. On the CWILA webpage, the organization also publishes interviews with/by Canadian women/genderqueer writers, reviewers, and editors, as well as essays that address issues of racial and gender equity. The core idea behind CWILA is that it is not enough to point to the problems of inequality but that those within the literary community must work together to change the culture itself.

For the 2012 Count, CWILA added a new set of metrics. Alongside gender, the organization also tracked the percentage of authors and publishers of the



books reviewed that were Canadian. As I said in my report on the findings of the 2012 Count, “we set out to extend the C in CWILA.” The decision to count the nationality of writers and publishers was not a kind of monitoring of Canadian content or policing of Canadian identity. Instead, it was a way of measuring the support of the Canadian book industry and writers within Canada by local and national newspapers, journals, and magazines. In total, of 3,092 reviews counted in the 25 publications monitored for the 2012 Count, two-thirds were about books by Canadian writers. Further, two-thirds of the publications reviewed books by Canadians at least three-quarters of the time, and the majority of reviews are of works by Canadians in 22 out of 25 publications. The overall 2012 CWILA Count numbers suggest that, as I noted, “Canadian publications are, by and large, committed to evaluating Canadian writers and invested in carrying on critical conversations about Canadian literature” (n. pag.). In this regard, Gilmour seems to be an outlier in his lack of engagement with Canadian writers.

Standing at Victoria College beside a statue of Northrop Frye, adorned for the day with a pink boa and a tiara, Novik and Day opened the “Serious Heterosexual Guys for Serious Literary Scholarship” rally they organized in response to the Gilmour interview by quoting Frye from *The Educated Imagination*: “what is the use of studying a world of imagination where anything is possible and anything can be assumed, where there are no rights or wrongs and all arguments are equally good? One of the most obvious uses, I think, is its encouragement of tolerance.” As they said, Frye “encourages us to read widely, the better to build empathy and understand the imaginations of those around us, and he would no doubt encourage Gilmour’s students to take that trip down the hall” (n. pag.). This issue of *Canadian Literature* takes that trip as well. The issue did not set out to be a response to David Gilmour’s cavalier comments but it serves as a fitting one. Not only does this collection of critical essays show that the idea of “women’s writing” is facile and pointless but also that Canadian writing is similarly beyond simple categorization. Further, the acts of literary archaeology in this issue—with forays into the archives of Phyllis Webb, Richard Outram and Barbara Howard, Gauntlet Press, Carol Shields, Margaret Atwood, and Rosanna Mullins Leprohon—prove that writers within the canon and on its margins alike can be productively reconsidered with careful study and new approaches. Cumulatively the essays go well beyond tolerance. Indeed, with the Gilmour controversy, this issue proves the timeliness of returning to the archives.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## NOTES

- 1 Full disclosure: as book review editor at *Canadian Literature*, I volunteered to provide our numbers for the inaugural count. (I am glad to say that we were one of the only publications in the country that reviewed men's and women's books equally in our English book reviews in both the 2011 and 2012 counts.) I was so struck by the results of the national count that I decided to join CWILA and have been involved ever since, serving on the board of directors and, with other scholars at UBC, creating a social justice research network around scholarly issues raised by CWILA.
- 2 The initial CWILA count found that although women published half the books in the country, in 2011 they only received an average of 38% of the book review space (as low as 23% in some publications like the *Walrus*, 33% in the *National Post*, 40% in the *Globe and Mail*, and as high as 54% in *Quill and Quire*). The 2011 Count also found that men write more reviews than women, men tend to review books by men, and books by male writers receive more review space in top venues than books written by women authors. The 2012 Count, conducted in the spring of 2013, found a slight improvement in the data and a movement toward equity. Most significantly, in interviews with editors and reviewers (see [cwila.com](http://cwila.com)) several mentioned how they had worked to try to close the gender gap in their own writing and allocation of review space since the bias proven in the original count came to their attention. The point is that CWILA's research had raised an awareness of the issue and had an impact in changing it. As Jerome noted in her analysis of the gender numbers in the 2012 Count, "in one year we can see many publications with significant changes in the number of published reviews of books written by women, most notably the *Walrus* (23% to 56%), *Canadian Notes and Queries* (25% to 46%), *Fiddlehead* (29% to 56%), *Geist* (38% to 49%), and the *National Post* (33% to 42%)" (n. pag.). Further, as Jerome points out, the 2012 numbers show a 10% rise in the total number of book reviews written by women (from 38% to 48%). Still, a discrepancy remains in that men review books by male writers 70% of the time. See [cwila.com](http://cwila.com) for full analysis of the 2011 and 2012 Counts.

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### Judy Brown

It is with sadness that we announce the passing of our friend and colleague Judy Brown on September 1, 2013. Since 2005, Judy served as an associate editor at *Canadian Literature*. She was an award-winning teacher in the English Department at UBC and a dynamic editor at the journal. Her passionate commitment to the fields of Canadian Literature, Children's Literature, and Technical/Professional Writing was remarkable.

Judy will be remembered by us at the journal as an exceptionally kind and generous person who worked thoughtfully and compassionately. A few years ago, after she received the 3M Teaching Award in recognition of her outstanding work as a teacher, Judy said, "If you're looking for a life where you're always going to be stretched, challenged, surprised, and inspired by your students, or at least be open to being inspired by your students, then this is a really good life to choose." Judy passed away after a life of inspiring students, colleagues, readers, and friends. She will be missed.