

# Marian Engel's *Bear*

## Romance or Realism?

The historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its addressees.

—Hans Robert Jauss

**M**arian Engel's novel *Bear* is compelling both in its own right and for the reaction it has elicited from critics over time. Before and after this novel was published, Engel's work was generally regarded as disappointing—flashes of brilliance with fine writing, but disappointing as stories. *Bear* was different: "In fact, *Bear* is a delicious, readable triumph, certainly complex but far wiser and more mature than Engel's *No Clouds of Glory* or *The Honeyman Festival*; finally pulling together the angry, unanswered escapisms of *Monodromos*" (Montagnes 71). In 1987, Elizabeth Brady noted that "[of] the more than fifty reviews I have tracked down, those that overwhelmingly praise *Bear* outnumber its detractors on a three-to-one ratio. Generally speaking, two aspects of the novel were singled out for distinction: the masterful cross-genre blending of realism and myth, and its singularly appropriate, spartan prose style" (13). Doris Cowan put into perspective the high water mark that *Bear* reached by pointing to the signal change it made in Engel's career:

Since [*No Clouds of Glory*] her output has been steady, and consistently fine: five novels now, as well as a collection of short stories and some fiction for children. She has earned the respect of other writers, and the admiration of a large number of devoted readers, but she was not sensationally successful—that is, not until the publication of *Bear*. It is a brilliantly crafted, sad, odd story of a woman who is so lonely she falls in love—romantically, erotically in love—with a bear. Almost without exception, reviewers across the country were amazed and delighted. *Bear* won the Governor General's Award for Fiction in 1976, and Marian Engel became a literary star. (7)

What Hans Robert Jauss would call the first horizon of readers, or those who received a work at the time of its publication, most often understood *Bear* as a romance, with critical focus trained on the trajectory towards consolidation, self-understanding, salvation, and success. First, I will demonstrate how the romantic quest of the novel was understood primarily as a search for female or national identity, the holy grails of the dominant second-wave feminist and Canadian nationalist social movements of the era.

Then, taking this first horizon interpretation as a point of departure, I offer a second horizon of interpretation that began to develop with the waning of the aforementioned dominant identity movements. In these more contemporary times, the idea of identity no longer elicits optimism or expectation of successful achievement among critics and readers, but rather intense skepticism. When understood as romance, this novel seems to offer a triumphant self-discovery of the protagonist as a woman and a Canadian. By contrast, when understood according to conventions of realism, *Bear* becomes an engagement with the historical and gendered circumstances that make the story seem strategically non-triumphant. While the novel clearly supports different kinds of readings, the discovery of parallel female and national identities becomes subtler and more realistic if they are viewed as in conflict with each other.

### ***Bear* as romance**

In 1976, a critical consensus that identity was successfully achieved in *Bear* was clear: “[Lou] returns cleansed and renewed, and brings with her hope for the possibility of renewal and reconciliation to us all” (Wiseman 8). To such critics, *Bear* offered a transformation of reality: “The novel opens quietly and ends in the same way, Lou in the intervening pages having experienced a sort of redemption” (Baker 125). Sometimes the novel was seen as offering atonement and at other times a blessing, but either way, most critics in 1976 liked what they saw as a happy ending: “There is a kind of benediction, however, as Lou is able at the end of her stay on the island to re-establish a relationship which seems very like one of mutual respect and even tenderness with the bear” (Laurence 15). In keeping with this critical orientation, the quest motif was defined as ultimately successful and uplifting:

The journey that draws her forth from her burrow this particular spring is undertaken ostensibly on behalf of the Institute, which has inherited an estate in the lake and bush country of Northern Ontario. But we very quickly recognize in it the classical pattern of the journey in search of self, of roots, of meaning, of reconciliation within the immanent unknown. (Wiseman 6)

Most critics felt that “[b]y the end of the book she has undergone a complete rebirth” (Moss 31). The attraction of this redemption and reconciliation was that “[o]ne emerges from the experience [of reading *Bear*] with a chilly yet marvelous sense of well-being—a feeling that in some deep and indefinable way, things really *are* all right” (Mattison 36).

The reconciliation of identity often reached mythic proportions, as is evident in the contention that Lou had “perhaps achieved that great romantic ideal, to be in harmony with nature. . . . *Bear*, then, is a book about Canadian history and mythology and its form is representational rather than psychologically realistic” (Thompson 32). In 1976, Michael Taylor argued that this novel “is so powerful both as story and myth, simply because it renders with a very fine economy and concentration particular people in a uniquely strange and interesting situation” (Taylor 127). Margaret Laurence further pointed out that *Bear* conveyed

a sense of connectedness with all of life, and it has a strongly mythic quality, a quality which is reinforced by the bear lore and legend, from the ancient European world and from the North American Indian life-view, things which Lou learns both from the Pennarth library . . . and from Lucy, an old Indian woman who sometimes visits the island and who is herself a mythic earth-mother figure. (15)

Critical assessments of *Bear* often themselves employed the inflated rhetoric of romance. In 1976 Lou was called a “synthesis of British and Canadian culture, and the bear is a synthesis of North American culture: The point seems to be that just as European culture flowered after a primitive era, so there is hope for ours” (French 38).

The fully developed treatment of both female and national identity issues was a focus of admiration. This novel was often compared to Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*, since both sent female protagonists into the Canadian wilderness and brought them back to the city, and both were interpreted according to the romance structure that so many critics felt they had found in the novel: “The wilderness is *within* Atwood’s narrator; it is a matter of coming to terms with oneself and hence with the natural world. In *Bear* it is different—a matter of coming to terms with the natural world and hence with oneself” (Appenzell 107). In both cases, the expectation is that something important about identity is being resolved, and that such resolution marries self-understanding to, at the very least, harmony with the protagonists’ environments. Even the relatively few critics who did not like the novel acknowledged the existence of what were often perceived as parallel female and national identities: “The novel is a multi-layered exploration into Lou’s personal, Canada’s historical,

and man's generic pasts, and the bear is intended to be the symbolic manifestation of aspects of all three" (Solecki 345). Coral Ann Howells observed in 1986 that "*Bear* emerges as a feminized version of the Canadian wilderness myth, a quest for unity of being through loving connection between the human and the natural worlds" ("*Marian Engel's Bear*" 113).

The persistence of this view of parallel interests supports the claim that critics were invested in particular understandings of the novel. In 1976, French saw Engel as having written *Bear* as a novel about "women's fear of being dominated" and the vulnerability communities feel when they are marginalized on the basis of either national or gendered identity because "[a]t its most elemental level . . . the bear represents the primitive society of Canada" (38). The suggestion that Lou's fear of the bear could emanate from either her female or national position in the web of human relations makes those identities seem almost interchangeable. Such reasoning suggests that, whether the protagonist's search is for female or for national identity, one assumes that a quest can result in discoveries of both and, additionally, that their coexistence would not likely pose problems. Critical response to Engel's work was so marked in its search for female and national identity quests—and the implied harmony between the two—that critics have pointed to their own responses as a source of interest:

[t]oo often, appraisals of her novels are contingent upon the reviewer's or critic's sense of accord with their ideas and implied values. Increasingly these ideas and values have been squeezed to fit into two narrow criteria: the degree to which a book is idiosyncratically "Canadian" (the Survival Theme); and the degree of its adherence to, or deflection from, feminist ideological "correctness" (the Liberated Heroine Theme). (Brady 10-11)

In addition to finding evidence of identity in Engel's work, critics of the day tended to downplay tensions that might emerge if female and national identities were pursued at the same time. Woodcock broached a potential conflict between the two quests when he argued that

at no point does Engel suggest that any human being is exempt from that search [for authentic identity] or from the self-examination it necessitates; at the same time she is honest enough to recognize she must embark on the quest admitting the particular limitations of viewpoint that being a woman imposes on her. (18)

His acknowledgement that a consideration of gender might have limiting effects on identity quests does not go so far as to admit that gendered and national paths toward self-discovery might actually pose problems for each other. Nor does the conviction that an individual psyche can incorporate characteristics arising simultaneously from both a natural Canadian

wilderness and a natural female anatomy anticipate trouble between the two. Instead, this idea of naturalness was seen as harmonious because such a wilderness can bring “into relief what it means, in turn, to be human and what, particularly, it means to be female. Canadian literature is well stocked with wilderness women” (Baker 127).

During the era of first horizon critical responses, and of those critics in the minority who did not like the novel, Val Clery, in 1978, was bothered by what he saw as Engel’s betrayal of her own realist ethic; to him, *Bear* was “informed by sentiment only and not by astringent objectivity” (14). Clery was disappointed that Engel would betray her hard-nosed objectivity, thus suggesting that romance was not what this critic would expect from Engel: “If it had not been consumed, my heart would be broken by having to criticize so rudely a Canadian writer whom I consider the imaginative superior of Laurence and Atwood” (14). Other critics in 1976 were decidedly disappointed because, significantly, they felt that the novel did not live up to romance: “[t]here is nothing in the bear that transcends the reality created in the book. The bear is not a symbol of the wild, fierce and untameable. He is just a tired, old bear, fallen into the clutches of a crazy, lustful woman. The drawing of Lou’s character is shallow, unconvincing” (Fish 42). In this vein, the “trouble” with the novel was seen by Margaret Osachoff in 1979-80 as stemming from Engel’s commitment to realism: “the trouble seems to be that Lou’s relationship with the bear is not presented in symbolic terms but realistically, and Lou is not mad like the narrator in *Surfacing*; so we are more likely to accept her ideas at face value” (18). Thus, among the critical readers who saw the book as romance, some were disappointed because it was too much a romance, and others were disappointed it wasn’t romance enough.

This disappointment that springs from a reading of the novel as realism opens the door to a second horizon of interpretation that challenges romantic readerly wishes for Lou to be symbolically integrated by the end of the novel, as both a woman and a Canadian. The question of how to read this novel, in other words, depends on where along the scale between romance and realism one derives one’s reading strategy. Does a mythic pattern of renewed identity dominate, or does the novel modulate more closely to a realist examination of the historical forces that have placed this individual protagonist in an ultimately untenable position? Reading *Bear* as a romance containing a successful search for parallel female and national identities was clearly tempting for many critics, but aspects of the novel have always challenged such an interpretation.

**Bear as realism**

One compelling argument against reading the novel as romance is the tension evident in issues that pit female and national identities against each other. As in Engel's other novels, national identity issues present problems for women. The image of a sleeping giant animal raises historical correspondences between Lou's love story and the political world. The story of an unwittingly dangerous beast trades on a famous 1969 speech to the National Press Club in Washington, DC, by Pierre Trudeau, then Prime Minister of Canada, in which he explained Canadian identity, using the metaphor of sleeping with a large animal capable of destruction:

Living next to [America] is in some ways like sleeping with an elephant: No matter how friendly and even-tempered is the beast, one is affected by every twitch and grunt. . . . Americans should never underestimate the constant pressure on Canada which the mere presence of the United States has produced. We are a different people from you. We are a different people partly because of you. (174-75)

While Engel's friendly beast is a bear instead of an elephant, he is similarly even-tempered, even generously accommodating, and unwittingly dangerous. This idea of living in a space threatened by external national cultural forces is developed through Lou's summer place, an American structure designed by Fowler, the "sort of American we are all warned about" (37). This American structure further contains British Victorian culture in the form of the library, which, in turn, contains Lou in her capacity as a historian assigned the task of documenting Canadian uniqueness, past and present. The bear occupies this complex space with Lou, but his meaning vacillates between American-sharing-the-continent-but-posing-a-threat and Canadian primitivism.

While the reader is tempted to understand the bear as Lou's personal integration of Canadian nature and history, the histories do not integrate because of the tensions suggested when they operate together in the same imaginary world. Whether the bear represents Canadian nature, an intrusion of British Victorian views of the world, or an American beast likely to inadvertently crush his Canadian playmate while swimming or sleeping, these histories cannot be braided together in a way that avoids tangible danger to Lou. In fact, exactly such a confrontation constitutes the climax of the novel. When the bear finally becomes aggressive, Lou fights back with a swift self-protective reaction, despite the danger: "'Get out.' She drew a stick out of the fire and waved it at him. . . . 'Go,' she screamed. He went out through the back door, scuttling. She walked as erectly as possible to the door, bolted it,

and fell shaking into bed” (132). Lou’s combat produces two different histories, since at one and the same time she can be seen as a Canadian fighting (American) imperial influences and a woman fighting a libidinally aggressive male. Trudeau’s sleeping-with-an-elephant metaphor points to the political, economic, and cultural vulnerabilities of a nation, while Engel’s treatment invests Lou with the sexual vulnerabilities of a woman. Parallels break down because, no matter how well she defends herself from threats of colonialism, imperialism, and patriarchy, the threat itself is contradictory. Canadian men might be made vulnerable by American influence, but Canadian women can be made vulnerable by men of any nationality, including Canadian men. Female and national identities are both implicated in the dangers experienced by women (and Canadians) in bed with big dangerous beasts.

This novel also modulates away from romance through the strong anti-fairytale trajectory of the novel. In 1991 Howells suggested that Engel’s method in *Bear* is a disruption of expected narratives, specifically “its breaking down of genre boundaries between pastoral, pornography and myth” (“On Gender” 72). I suggest that Engel disrupts narrative expectation not only by playing with these genres, but also by deploying the fairy tale form ironically, first to support and then to undermine Lou’s romantic view of the bear. Indeed, Christl Verduyn supports the relevance of fairy tales to Engel’s writing at this time by reporting that “the discussions about writing that Engel had with therapist John Rich had strong literary overtones and numerous references to fairy tales” (121). In the novel, Lou’s initial and potentially repulsive sexual interaction with the bear is related in terms of true and unstoppable love:

She knew now that she loved [bear], loved him with a clean passion she had never felt before. . . . There was a depth in him she could not reach, could not probe and with her intellectual fingers destroy. She lay on his belly, he batted her gently with his claws; she touched his tongue with hers and felt its fatness. She explored his gums, his teeth that were almost fangs. She turned back his black lips with her fingers and ran her tongue along the ridge of his gums. (118-19)

The ruse of true love is developed when Lou happily engages in conventional women’s work because, based on her enjoyment of her sexual difference as a woman, she feels free. Further, humour arises from the suggestion that a bear can understand more about women than can men:

[W]hat she disliked in men was not their eroticism, but their assumption that women had none. Which left women with nothing to be but housemaids. . . . She cleaned the house and made it shine. Not for the Director, but because she and

her lover [bear] needed peace and decency. Bear, take me to the bottom of the ocean with you, bear, swim with me, bear, put your arms around me, enclose me, swim, down, down, down with me. (112)

Lou's rapturous hope that love will win out parodies sentimental representations that lead to either a happy or tragic ending. Fairy tale expectations that lovers are irresistibly drawn to each other despite social disapproval are undermined by Lou's unsuccessful efforts throughout most of the text to entice the bear sexually. Then, when she achieves success, such as it is, it is a dangerous rather than triumphant moment. All tenets of romance are rendered ironic when hero and heroine do not end up together at the end, whether in death or marriage; here, their break-up is precipitated by a violent act associated with sexuality that bear could not "help" because of his masculine/animal nature; and the expectation overturned is her successful domestication of him through love. Romance has not provided the mechanism necessary to transcend dangerous biological differences. Although the bear demonstrates a certain amount of co-operation with Lou's libidinal will, his own sexuality erupts, eludes her grasp, and becomes dangerous. The effect is an eruption of reality that accentuates the dangers posed to this female by whatever the bear represents (imperialism or maleness).

The absence of an idealized female portrait also undermines the structure of romance. Colonel Cary, for example, does not function as a solution in the text. The Cary will stipulates the estate must be passed on to another Colonel Cary: her parents subvert the sexist intention of the will by giving her the Christian name "Colonel," thereby passing her off as a man. Unfortunately, the legal trick has not fundamentally challenged patriarchal social structures that are inevitably based on inequalities. Thus Colonel Cary's story is problematic as one of self-actualization of a woman in a Canadian setting. In this national setting, according to Margery Fee, "the only social models [Lou] can discover or imagine for identity are male. Although she aspires to the condition of the dominant male subject, she cannot finally adopt it, because it requires that she become dominant, a repudiation, for her, of her female experience" (22). The implicit tensions between Cary's gender and nationality render her female identity contradictory. The moral strain of subservience when one has rebelled against it invites an understanding of identity as contradictory to the point that the power to change becomes indistinguishable from the power to oppress.

As with the endings in Engel's other novels, *Bear* can be seen as presenting a woman who is alone and incapable of resolving the conflicts that interfere



with an integrated sense of herself. As an individual, Lou is unable to attain an integrated or renewed sense of identity because of the contradictory tensions that interfere with her understanding of herself as a Canadian or a woman. While Lou's individual consciousness is portrayed as subject to historical causation, critic Fee made the argument in 1988 that there is tension additionally apparent in Engel's representation of collective identity in this novel. The protagonist's individual tensions are portrayed as resonating on the level of larger social and historical possibilities because, according to Fee, Engel is able to deal more successfully with national than female identity problems: "[Engel] manages to debunk the colonial mentality, the male, literary tradition and even that representative of the wilderness, Noble Savage, Demon Lover and fairy tale Prince, the bear, but she cannot finally debunk the patriarchy" (20). Engel's definition of female subjectivity (how one fits into a place in society) fails, according to Fee, because "subjectivity is constituted collectively, and from a position of power" (20). As part of a collective, Lou cannot know herself as a woman because the requisite power for self-definition is institutionalized in society as male. If that society is also institutionalized on the basis of a patriarchal nationality, then women risk becoming puppets who speak to each other only through patriarchy when they articulate national values. Ironically, women who cannot think of themselves apart from their national identities disrupt attempts to create a communal sense of self-defined female identity. In *Bear*, female autonomy would require constitution outside institutional constructs (like nation) that are always already implicitly male:

What ultimately prohibits [*Bear's*] attempts at resolution is not just male power, but the equation of sexuality, voice, and power, and the rejection of them all as male. This reluctance to take power is perhaps sensible; power seems to corrupt women by first turning them into men. To reject power is to be forced into Lou's untenable position, cut off from both sexuality and a voice. (Fee 26)

According to this view, Lou's very isolation makes her identity resistant to integration, since a collective female identity results from banding together. A collective sense of identity might have constituted political strategy for the Women's Liberation Movement of the social world, but Engel's privileging of isolation keeps conflict and contradiction in focus, as though to insist on positioning patriarchy as an ongoing threat that is best seen in confrontational terms.

Emphasis on the realist elements of the novel highlights tensions within and between female and national identities, suggesting such tension is

the point of the text. While Sarah of *No Clouds of Glory* retreats alone to Montreal, and Audrey of *Monodromos* retreats alone to England, Lou in *Bear* stays in English Canada to retreat alone to the city. Lou has coped with the same issues that occupied her fellow protagonists, and has been equally unsuccessful, but she appears happier about her experience, thereby making her story more amenable to those who wished to interpret it as romance. Nevertheless, attention to the moments when female and national aspects of character actually work against each other makes sense of this novel as extending one of Engel's ongoing themes: Lou is yet another female protagonist who is understandable according to social and historical forces that render her incapable of integrating her understanding of herself and that leave her alone at the end. Atwood's unnamed protagonist in *Surfacing*, at novel's end, was reaching toward a life with her boyfriend, no matter how doomed their relationship might be. Engel's Lou returns to no one. The Director is no longer possible as a diversion, and the bear, despite the promise he offered as a tool for self-examination, does not provide any sense of community.

So how are we to read this novel in the end? Engel herself noted its Rorschach flavour: "I'm interested in your reaction to *Bear* because it's almost an empty book, in some ways. People bring their own content to it. And they make it what they want it to be" (qtd. in Klein 27). Verduyn offers one way to read the novel from a contemporary vantage point with her contention that Engel explores dualisms in women's experience: "Marian Engel's protagonists endeavour to fuse oppositional forces in their lives, in an effort to avoid a dichotomized, alienated existence" (9). Engel's vision is thus a world in which dualism is not so much resolved as transformed through strategic deployment of contradictory narrative strategies. In this vein, romance extravagantly shot through with realism can be seen as romance hung out to dry, undercutting any sense of stable identity, whether female or national. Engel's attempt to fuse rather than choose opposite worlds leaves room for a certain amount of anti-patriarchal chaos.

For example, the ending of the novel has been interpreted as similar to that of Atwood's *Surfacing*, although the occasional critic in 1976 disagreed: "[t]o read *Bear* as yet another story of the need for us (Canadians) to get into touch with the wilderness is quickly to place it as nothing more than a neat (and sexier) version of, or footnote to *Surfacing*" (Kennedy 390). The suggestion that *Bear* meant something different from *Surfacing* was explained in terms of the writing itself: "Despite the potentially trivializing qualities of

*Bear*, one is struck with the quality of the writing. . . . Throughout the book, one feels the quiet authenticity of Engel's writing, as if that is what she were writing the book about" (Kennedy 390-91). Or as was suggested in 1977, "*Bear*, to a certain extent, proffers that we should be more concerned with making history than with uncovering it" (Labonte 188). Verduyn extends this line of reasoning by suggesting that, for Engel, writing is the "means of living and working on one's own terms and as a woman" (10). Instead of making claims of resolution, one can ask how the writing itself makes a portrait of identity possible without integration or resolution.

Perhaps the interpenetration of realism and romance underscores the conviction that contradictions at work in female experience are more important in and of themselves than the possibility of their integration. Realism as a reading strategy for this story can be seen as providing an ironic wink at misguided efforts to invest in the possibility of integrated identity. The reading of this "empty book" continues to fascinate, not only because of the nature of the novel itself, but also for what critics are willing to read into it.

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