“A superb novel by a rising Canadian literary star…”
— Kirkus Reviews

“With all their flaws, the three narrators jump off the page with terrifying realism. Bev, Mannie and Faye are hard to forget.”
— CM Magazine

“(The) three dysfunctional teenage characters are fascinating in their complexity. This powerful narrative will definitely resonate with teenage readers.”
— Resource Links

“If a great book is defined as one that you enjoy reading, and whose characters stick in your consciousness, then this is a great book.”
— Voice of Youth Advocates (VOYA) Magazine

A story about parents (loving and not-so-loving), babies (abandoned and desired), countries (functional and not-so-functional) — but mostly, about those caught in-between...

TEACHER’S GUIDE
**PLOT SUMMARY**

LIKE MOST BABY GIRLS BORN IN CHINA, then abandoned at markets and police stations over the last couple of decades, Faye is the adopted golden child of adoring Western parents. At seventeen, though, she’s starting to spend way too much time alone in her room, pining over a chain-smoking Belorussian exchange student and adding to her list of reasons that China sucks.

Enter Faye’s long-lost childhood neighbour – self-absorbed, unpredictable, lusciously pregnant Bev – who wants something from her old friend and won’t stop until she gets it.

This, however, may prove to be the least of Faye’s worries; Mannie, Bev’s joyriding puppy of a baby daddy, has a half-crazed romantic agenda of his own.

As one cold, miserable prairie spring inches toward summer, the unexpected and sometimes explosive decisions each make steer them straight toward disaster.

This is the story of three unforgettable teenagers feeling their way into the burdens of adulthood in an imperfect world.

**SETTING**

I CALL MY BLOG “Writer in the Middle,” which includes the tag line: *I've lived in Winnipeg my whole life. It’s an unassuming, middle-of-the-continent kind of place that sometimes yearns for greatness — which is why it suits me, I guess.*

My three books are all set in Manitoba — Flin Flon, Winnipeg, Churchill — because as a writer, what I have to say is distinctly Manitoban. My characters, and my imagination, it seems, inhabit the centre of what has become one of the safest and richest places on earth, whose only real extremes are its weather, but whose skeletons in the closet cannot be denied.

*Your Constant Star* is set in Winnipeg, a place where pretty much everybody falls into one of three categories: those whose ancestors emigrated from Europe nearly a century or more ago to settle the land and industrialize the city; those who’ve emigrated more recently, mostly from Asia and Africa, to escape political strife and terror; and those
whose Aboriginal and Metis ancestors’ original way of life and all that sustained it was gradually, but doggedly, ripped out from under them.

Still, as far as many are concerned, Winnipeg is really neither here nor there. Other than the odd headline about its freezing temperatures, its glacially slow-rising river waters and its high poverty rates, the city may be in the middle but rarely takes centre stage.

Will 21st century initiatives like the national Museum for Human Rights bring the city a renewed glow of prestige? This brings us to perhaps the key word in that tag line: yearning.

Pretty much all my stories involve a pervasive, sometimes senseless yearning.

In Your Constant Star, the three young protagonists collide like electrons, attracting and repelling each other as each seeks something they can’t really name.

China-born Faye wants to understand what may never be understood — why is she so pissed at her doting parents? What makes her long-lost friend, Bev, tick? How can her birth country be so brutal and so beautiful at the same time? Bev, determined to give her offspring what she doesn’t have, just wants to feel something — to give a shit for once in her life. As for Mannie, a hero is in own mind, he just wants to come to the rescue for once in his life.

No matter who we are, to feel alive, is to yearn. So I write about yearning, in all its forms.

And hopefully, my stories are also about mercy. For yearning means we all walk around with a nagging sense of the unattainable and unrealized, of who we want to be and who we really are.

For most us, if we’re lucky, we come to understand that being neither here nor there is a pretty good place to be.
POINT OF VIEW

THREE FIRST-PERSON NARRATORS drive the plot of Your Constant Star. In other words, Faye tells the beginning, Bev the middle, and Mannie the end. Faye then revisits the reader through an epilogue.

My first novel, Where the Rocks Say Your Name…, similarly follows three young characters, but the story is told through an omniscient, or “all-knowing” third person narrator. This allowed me to play with perspective, and there were times I pulled right out of the human experience and briefly followed the wild animals in their midst.

I briefly contemplated writing Your Constant Star strictly in Faye’s voice, but changed my mind. Both Bev and Mannie kept coming to me, not just as characters, but as voices, and I knew each would demand their own telling.

Each narrative device – first person or omniscient – has its own challenges. For instance, in Your Constant Star, I had to decide which character should tell which part of the story in a way that didn’t confuse the reader, or leave them feeling dissatisfied when one voice “ended” and an entirely different one took its place.

It’s probably no accident that Faye, the most self-aware and articulate narrator, acts as a kind of bracket that begins and ends the overall story.
NOTES & RESEARCH

Faye’s Story

I spent months reading the growing body of literature (both personal accounts and academic analysis) about Chinese adoption.

Three of my favourites were:

• *The Lost Daughters of China.* Karin Evans (Penguin Putnam Inc., 2001)
• *Things That Must Not Be Forgotten — A Childhood in Wartime China.* Michael David Kwan (MacFarlane Walter and Ross, 2000)

To have some small clue about Faye’s cello studies, I also found

• *Classical Music for Dummies* (with CD included!) very helpful.
  (David Pogue, Scott Speck, Wiley Publishing Inc., 1997).

You can listen to the song Faye dreams of playing for Sasha on p73 (Dakota Forrester’s ‘Sonatina for Cello and Piano’) on my blog site (www.brendhasiuk.com).

Today, tens of thousands of adopted Chinese girls are coming of age throughout western Europe and North America as a direct result of China’s one-child policy and a culture that requires male heirs. This diaspora of young women who were abandoned at police stations, post offices, and markets can never trace their birth parents, while their adoptive parents have promised the Chinese government to do what they can to recognize and celebrate the girls’ Chinese heritage.

What will it be like for them as they mature into young women, these girls who are a product of a grand social experiment that seemed to meet everybody’s needs?

Adoption, and especially international adoption, speaks to everything that I’m most interested in as a writer: the intricacies of identity and culture, and how the internal voice and external forces collide to create the tension of all good novels.

This tension is perhaps never more pronounced than when we’re growing into adulthood.
Bev’s Story

A few years ago, the local media covered a months-long spate of car thefts and joyriding in Winnipeg. The stories were especially sensational because a supposedly well-brought up suburban high school girl (the child of social workers, no less) was not just involved, but seemed to be relentlessly remorseless in court about the risk that she and the young men who were racing these cars posed to public safety. At one point, she muttered: “Everyone has to die sometime.”

I have always been fascinated by sociopaths — those who live and work amongst us but cannot truly feel for anyone but themselves. Are these people the ones who are truly lost to the rest of us?

For more about female sociopaths in particular, I read *When She Was Bad*, by Patricia Pearson (Viking, 1997)

I also spent time making sure I knew the ins and outs of private adoption these days. For instance, I learned that in many cases, if a birth mother wants to give up her baby for adoption, she does not require the consent of the birth father.

Mannie’s Story

I have a long history up in Clear Lake, where the Keeseekoowenin, an Anishinaabe band, were “removed” from their land in the mid-1930s to clear the way to create Riding Mountain National Park. It’s an injustice that the Park is still trying to rectify to this day and Mannie’s beloved Betty gave me a way to explore this painful history.

You can learn more about Keeseekoowenin today at www.keeseekoowenin.com. They have also produced an excellent DVD that may be available through their website.

As a life-long Manitoba writer, my work pretty much always explores some aspect of this defining relationship between the province’s European settlers and its Aboriginal people, who are still paying the steep price of progress.

In Manitoba, for instance, the Métis (descendants of the European/Aboriginal unions responsible for establishing the nineteenth-century fur trade throughout Western Canada) have been re-establishing their identity as a people over the last couple of decades and Celeste’s story is inspired by their achievements.
Sasha’s Story

I traveled to Ukraine as a teenager in 1990, the year the Berlin Wall fell and four years after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

Over the years, I’ve read a lot (it was a bit of an obsession for a while!) about life both before and after the Soviet Union and have followed the aftermath of Chernobyl closely. On the day of the disaster, the wind was blowing north and the country of Belarus ended up with the highest levels of radiation.

To learn more about the Chernobyl disaster, read Life Exposed: Biological Citizens of Chernobyl, by Adrian Petryna (Princeton University Press, 2013).

To learn more about Russia’s recent history and what it might be like to live there today, read Russians: The People Behind the Power by Gregory Feifer (Twelve, 2014).

Discussion Topics

• Faye is angry — at her friends, at her parents, at China. Does she have a right to be angry at any or all of them? Which ones?

• Faye seems to have decided that her parents are hypocrites. What is her evidence? How might this apply to how they viewed her childhood relationship with Bev Novak?

• In her teens, Faye is struggling with her adoption and history, but Emma, who shared a crib with her in the orphanage, seems unfazed. Why do you think that is? Does there have to be a reason?

• Why did Faye steal the moon gate photograph from the book at Emma’s parents? What do you think it represents for her?

• Why do you think Faye is so drawn to Sasha? Is it important that Celeste would not approve?

• Bev and Faye have a shared history together and yet it seems their memories of things are entirely different. Is that possible? What does how they remember say about each of them?
(Discussion topics, cont.)

- Bev seems to care for nobody, including her unborn baby. Do you think she’s a product of her upbringing or a born sociopath unable to feel for others? Is she both? Do you believe that Bev doesn’t care at all for her baby?

- Why do you think, after all those years, Bev remains so interested in Faye and her family? How do they influence her choice of Will and Helen?

- Bev tends to categorize people with dismissive titles: Fat Goth Chick; Dr. Calm and Confident; the Little Alien. Why do you think she does that?

- Why do you think Bev didn’t abort her and Mannie’s baby? Was it just to punish her own father, Ray, or did she have other reasons?

- After Bev delivers her baby, she feels light as air again, a helium balloon that some kid lost at a birthday party. What does she mean when she says: “I will let the Little Alien take off to its home planet, that gingerbread house in Wildwood…?”

- Nothing seems to connect Faye and Mannie except Bev. In what key ways are they different? Are there ways that they’re the same?

- Mannie was greatly influenced by both his madre and his foster mother, Betty. In what way are they both part of him?

- When Faye resists after Mannie asks her to lie about Bev’s role in the accident, he says, “Please. It’s all I got.” What does he mean by that?

- Faye develops a friendship with Mannie at the end of the book. Why is this relationship so important to her?

- Do the experiences of Faye’s birth family in China and Betty’s family in Manitoba have anything in common? Do all human rights abuses leave the same legacy?
RESEARCH AND WRITING THEMES

• One could argue that Sasha and Faye are united by the pain of political forces so much bigger than they are, whereas Bev and Mannie’s sufferings are more particularly their own. Do you agree? Explain why or why not.

• The title of the book comes from a Confucian poem Faye memorized as a child:

   Through the cloud and gloom I was
   Your constant star
   Now you have gone from sight
   And love’s white star
   Roams aimless through
   The night.

Pick a character and identify ways in which their story explores these themes of desertion and devotion.

• Dreams are a common literary device. Identify examples of how each character’s dream voice take us places where their conscious voice isn’t quite prepared to go.

• The original title of Your Constant Star was “The Moon Gate.” This photo of a Chinese ‘Moon Gate’ taken by Robert Moore (Beijing, 1932) immediately captured Faye’s imagination. Explain how each narrator struggles with two versions of themselves.
BIO

Brenda Hasiuk’s short stories have appeared in some of Canada’s top literary journals, and her two novels — Where the Rocks Say Your Name… and Your Constant Star — have received much critical acclaim.

She recently released Boy Lost in Wild, a collection of her short fiction set in Winnipeg (the coldest major city on earth!), where she lives with her husband and two children.

CLASSROOM ACCESSIBILITY

I am happy to visit your class in person (always possible within Manitoba, can often be arranged in other provinces) or via skype.

I will also answer any and all e-mail inquiries or comments from students.

CONTACT

bhasiuk@shaw.ca
www.brendahasiuk.com
204-895-4783