

First-person Hypertext

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Grade five we all knew what a slut was: Tammy Stevens. Tammy was in grade six. She'd sit all angelic-like in assembly, cross-legged on the gym floor. She was sitting on Ricky Sutherland's hand. I'm serious. We were grossed out and fascinated. I went home and practiced sitting on my hand. It didn't seem worth it, somehow. Ricky Sutherland went around talking like having a girl sit on his hand meant he wasn't a virgin anymore.

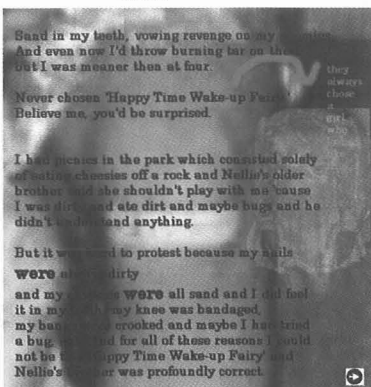


For half the day I joined Mrs. Mackenzie's grade six class. Sometimes I was in love with Mrs. Mackenzie and sometimes I thought Mrs. Mackenzie was disgusting. On the plus side, she arranged special Lord of the Flies brunches for the grade six class—and me. I got to make a papier-maché pig head and stick it to a ruler. Mrs. Mackenzie said “be-al-ze-bub” and her mouth looked like she was kissing. When the grade six class went to Toronto on a field trip I had to sleep with Mrs. Mackenzie in the Holiday Inn bed, because I was younger, and from the French class and was good at math. Mrs. Mackenzie would sometimes put her hands on my shoulders in the hallway outside the grade six classroom and say things

like “it's ok to be smart and be a girl.” Well, duh! I always looked at my shoes, embarrassed for both of us, and Mrs. Mackenzie would give my shoulders a hard squeeze.

The grade sixes were so different from the kids I knew. I hardly said anything when I was around them. Mostly they talked about making out on the senior playground equipment—dedicated to the memory of two classmates run over by a chicken-licken delivery truck. It was so sad. I remember the day they dedicated the playground equipment: “Now children, this equipment should remind us all of Ben and Thérèse who are now angels.” Our principal wondered why no one wanted to play there much.

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Vanessa. Here she is at 3, up ahead in the laneway, thin hair shining down that back and I'm chasing her, in a line of children all trailing toys. The Fisher Price phone slows me down. But I was always faster than Vanessa and I could always catch her.

At six she had an attractive, wandering hazel eye. I would brush the hair off her face, her earnest hands trying to stop me.



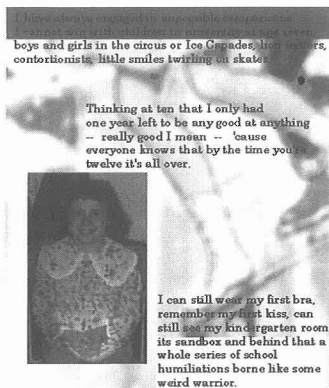
Five years ago I wrote a hypertext novella called *These Waves of Girls*. Part fiction, part digital memoir, this web-based piece represents a particular moment in hypertext time, as a text-based work in the classic hypertext vein and as first-person confessional. I understand young girls as having this wonderful combination of often being unsafe in the world, but being hugely resourceful, too, powerful and wanting. Thematically, then, I began with a fascination with girl culture and my place within it and outside of it.

At a theoretical level, the text considered questions around how narratives of girlhood are discursively produced and how hypermedia might enable a writer to craft a complex and new kind of text while resisting the impulse to produce a standard univocal account of the subject matter—a linear developmental tale. When we say ‘Girl,’ what do we see? What’s she supposed to be like? I wanted to play against what happens in developmental novels, and hypertext—the actual mechanics of the code—allowed me to challenge simplistic causality. Although it’s a fairly narrative text, the small stories are to be encountered in no particular order. I wanted to write *These Waves of Girls* as a hypertextual fiction and not as a book because hypermedia enabled me to perform some of the key points I wanted to make; it gave me a new way as a writer and an artist to show instead of tell. I wanted the small stories and memories to crash like waves because I wanted possibly contradictory tales to emerge, for readers to encounter the complex nature of diverse girlhoods themselves—girls at once strong, as victims, as scheming, as vain, as kind, as wanting ... all of this within one girl. Or are there many girls here? The waves can be read as generational, as one girl growing up, or many, it can signal one point in time with all these crashing narratives, remembered in one instant, like a thick palimpsest. Because it’s a hypertext, I think it can be all these things. Waves carry you out. You drown. You ride. You remember to hold your breath and wait for the wave to pass. Waves are relentless. I wanted the girls’ laughter to crash and echo in the piece, too, signalling the complicated pleasures and sensuousness of being together.

With Vanessa things happened. All sorts of lessons that left metal tastes in my mouth. In our mouths as we kissed. She was born in Canada, England on her lips, her accent strong against my tongue. We went to different schools. Her friends were not my friends. And there was need, in her hunting pack, to keep pace.

Vanessa had always roamed shopping malls alone; quarries. Secretly I harboured large fears in her adultless world, though not in my own sweet terrain where I could run faster, confidently, could wrestle and hold and there was no child who could beat me, not older, not younger, not even my uncle's friends, boys in their teens who I would set upon like a feral child and they would hold back because I was a child and because they were weak.

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At recess we have a game with no rules in the junior playground.

Someone in the group yells something like "get Tommy Mathews! He eats egg sandwiches!"

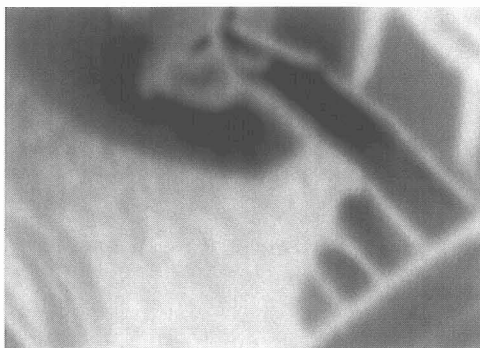
Tommy retreats, walking backward, pivots, runs full out, screaming. Reasoning pointless. And all of us run after him circles and circles clutching and screaming set upon Tommy like a rugby team always a little afraid Tommy will be dead by the time we're tired.

But no, Tommy yells from underneath the kicking "get John! He's a baby" and John twists from the pile, already in flight; already choosing a victim.

Somedays it's different. I catch Neil Williams, who does not love me, in a headlock and I don't let go. I'm sorry, but I can't help myself.

"It's very unladylike. You will never be married" my teacher says, pausing after each word. I tell her "I can be anything I want to be. You'll never be anything more than you are now. I don't know who could ever really love you." Why not? At 11 I'm very melodramatic. I can say anything. Besides, isn't that what she said to me?

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Fay Devlin and I are playing spin the bottle, just the two of us. She spins but she trembles. I put my tongue in her mouth. By the time we get to Truth or Dare, I have my lips on her nipple and I've made her do the asking.

I'm told I'm a bad cat. Unladylike. I've learned what happens to weak children who eat egg sandwiches or worse.

She says: "Don't tell, don't ever tell."

I say: "shhh ... can't promise."

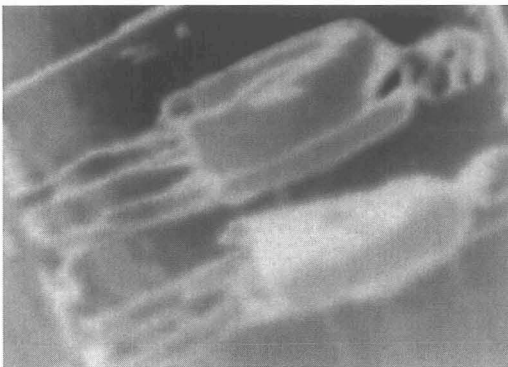
Aesthetically, I wanted to recreate the feel of a girl's diary in the 1970s, not necessarily my own, but the one I wish I had persisted in writing: pre-pubescent Rococo, ornate, busy, packed with trivia. In keeping with the collaborative spirit and collective memory-making enterprise of many feminist hypertexts of the period, the project was also a mnemonic system, filled with small gifts from people who encountered the text along the way to its completion: laughing into my microphone so I could make .wav files, baby pictures, pockets turned inside out to reveal mysterious things to put under my digital microscope. Waves came to life first as a series of old photographs of myself and scanned images from some children's books—then came the first stories and then a rapid weaving of images and stories and links.

I called *These Waves of Girls* a hypermedia novella because I saw it as a work that can only exist in new media, but at the same time I saw it as connected in important ways with more familiar literary form—and I didn't want to evacuate that influence. I deliberately used a number of very traditional storytelling techniques and worked with characters, was concerned with pace, with the feel and choice and weight of words. I took it as a challenge to produce a new media work that was still mindful of the way we hunger for stories, too. This isn't always the challenge, of course, but that was on my mind when I created the piece. And so I tried to write with the pleasure of storytelling at the surface. The tension in my own work is often a push/pull of pleasure and *jouissance* but here in this piece I give in unabashedly to narrative pleasures and *Waves* departs, then, from a vanguardist notion that the form must always be pushed to its limit.

Here I wanted to connect with readers who weren't necessarily expert readers of electronic texts, to move them, to carry them with me, and, of course, to keep them reading. I wanted, then, to create in readers an investment in pressing on through the texts. I wanted the reader to identify with these small stories, to like the girls, or girl, to be frightened for her, to cheer for her and laugh with her, to feel her through language. I started there and used the technology to help me build that kind of text. I think telling it with this technology worked, that the

fragmented form worked and that the hypertext linking structure made things possible that I wouldn't have thought to do in print, even if I could have found a way to write it. I'm glad to think that there is an audience online for this kind of work and that works like *Waves* may help to build readership, to capture people who love books as well as people who love flash.

A big part of the girlhood I describe in *These Waves of Girls*





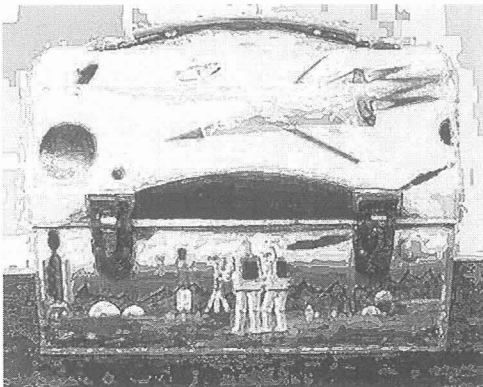
When the new year comes, I don't mention it—it might not be from him, after all, but I up the ante, though, and change seats so I sit right in the front row, in front of his desk. The card doesn't change anything. Just ups my fantasy level. I surprise myself and am in awe at how weird I've turned out to be, liking only grade 12 girls who look like boys and middle-aged mean men with lisps.

Vivian doesn't have to think very hard about her easy desire for Jason Simms, blond, all that innocent groping: "It's so neat you're going out with him. Let's all head over to his huge house for cocktails."

*That. That makes *so* much sense. This—me here in the back seat of Jennie's Caprice Classic, her strong hands on my back, under my shirt in the Embassy Hotel parking lot, my imagining just every once in a while that Mr. Anderson's hands are resting clammy and tentative on my thighs as I spread them apart for Jennie. This—this stuff makes no sense at all and gives you no high school cheering section. I try to image it: It's so neat you're going out with her." No, can't imagine anyone saying that. "Wow, I can see how you'd be into Mr. Anderson. Can we hang out with you guys and have cocktails in his probably cramped one bedroom apartment?" Uh-huh.*

It's not true to say nothing changed after the card. I would sit in my first row seat and spread my legs, just a little, just to see if he'd look at my white cotton underwear. I was never sure. I thought hard about whether he had really ever noticed me and whether that mattered. And why him and not one other boy in the whole school? For the rest of high school I behaved as if Mr. Anderson and I had had a very discreet affair—and I wondered what on earth he would make of the world if he knew that I, teen lesbian gymnast and tough girl, hiding her As in chemistry and smoking in soccer halftime did, in fact, fantasize about him—just a little—my eyes closed and his hands in my hair. Fucking him hard because what, after all, did the other grade nine girls know about desire? About how the strangest things can make you scream when you come and they never ever tell you that in Seventeen magazine, urging girls to find only the predictable beautiful.

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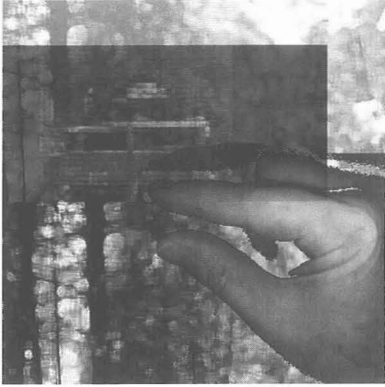
involves boys and men but, curiously, very few people even mention the men in the piece, although they're everywhere. I think they're diverse, but the men are seen entirely through the eyes of girls. They're at the mercy of girls' memories and interpretations at the scene. I wanted the men in the piece to be vulnerable in the face of that, too—to signal that somewhere inside the girls know that they're making 'him' up just the way he's making her up. We feel big when we do this; we feel small. The girls in this piece are aware of being seen, but they look back. The boys, right from the early images of them in the schoolyard, are hunted by the girls, chased, set upon by girls and other boys. The adult men are variously slightly predatory (and rightly or wrongly vaguely pitied by the girl), unpopular, instrumentalized in the service of the girls' lives and wishes (they need them as boyfriends, as fantasy objects, they need them to fit in, they use them in ways the culture generally says only boys/men can use, sometimes, yes, they are overcome with desire for them), they are good in an emergency (anonymously running away from the glass door with the small boy who cuts himself, for example). And things aren't so simple: girls 'making' men buy them drink is not a straightforward story of girls 'using' men, is it? I like that the hypertext makes it possible for this to be read alongside the constraints imposed on girls. I want the reader to feel heart-broken for them even when they're being manipulative. You need your reader to ache when bad things happen even to (momentarily?) 'unlikeable' characters. The hypertext also makes clear the collusion of the girls themselves in the narrative that says they must be in love with 'him'—perhaps any him.

Waves is an erotic piece. Many of the stories are about girls' sexual relationship with one another, and I don't frame this in terms of being off limits at a particular age. I tried to write stories that took the desire of the girl as the point of departure and while I see her desires as very much constructed by the culture, she's not without choices. But the piece wouldn't work if the male characters were flat, if



they were all villains, if her desire could be explained away in terms of things men do. In the end, I tried very hard to write a piece that didn't make fun of anyone, a piece that really performed the idea that just when you're feeling powerful, perspective can shift, with one click. I don't think it would work as writing if the stories judged people, or asserted the richness of girls at the expense

of boys. That said, in lots of places I do try to capture what I see as a real magic in all-girl spaces, to talk about kid culture and to value women's friendships with



He's turned his head and pressed his face right into the dirt. Lets out a scream. Muffled. Crazy.

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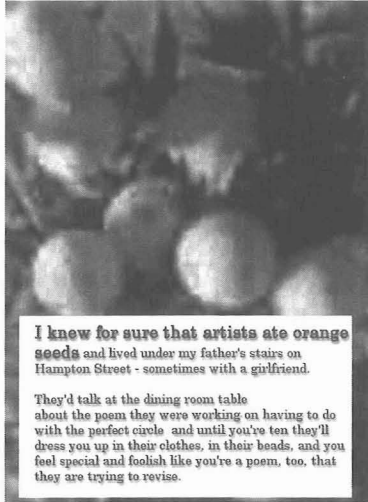
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five. Then we're running scattered—scared, too, and I taste blood in my mouth as I get back on my bike, like one of the other girls has bitten her cheek. We're off like bees but not before our hands dip and clutch knowingly, return to our bodies holding his clothes. I'm sorry, we say, silent, it's only to slow you down.

I never see those girls again. Heading back to Vanessa's, I worry what her mother will say to us so flushed, so tingling, panting into the garage, clutching a small boy's shirt. But Evelyn is sleeping—again—and Vanessa and I go upstairs, take off our own shirts. It seems hours since I spoke. Vanessa pulls the bottom drawer right out of her dresser and in duet I place the shirt to the very back. She closes the door and I read her mind some more and put my fingers on her warm chest and slow her heart and she presses her lips against mine, sealing secrets.

Her body is warm, beauty-marked, her hair thin across that lazy olive eye. I swallow hard and I am sorry, I would say something spell-breaking but I can't feel what running boys feel, only this wave of girls.



women as they grow up. This often occurs in the absence of men and boys, and in *Waves* it means that men are in the text but do not have equal space. This resonates with the title, too: in one of the stories the young girl is kissing another young girl, but they've just chased and caught a boy on his bicycle, humiliated him. The scene is difficult, I think, and when they return home they can't find words, the kiss is haunted by the young boy's trauma and the character says: "I would say something spell-breaking, but I can't feel what running boys feel, only these waves of girls."

Since meaning is constituted in relation, I loved the way that the order in which these pieces is read can change the tone of the piece entirely. When I read aloud to an audience from *Waves* at a conference in Aarhus, for example, I kept looping back, at the audience's suggestion, to two incidents where a young girl encounters a man at a movie theatre and he puts his hand on her thigh.

The incident itself is seen through the young girl's eyes and she 'wills' the encounter—or does she? This small moment takes up very little narrative space in terms of the entire piece but because I looped back to revisit it, I felt it haunt the rest of the reading—even reading a scene of triumphant laughing girls seemed burdened, sad.

Of course this works in the other direction, too, and mostly I see *Waves* working as a piece that speaks to the strength and complexity of girls. I see it working to do that at the level of code as well as at the level of narrative. I see the form of *These Waves of Girls* as richly suggestive of the judgements we make, normative assumptions about girls, and playful around questions about the need to see everything as teleological (she does this because of this

incident here). As an artist and writer, I think, and hope, that hypertext has made my work less didactic. I also wanted to do *Waves* to be VISUAL. And I wanted the reader to hear that skipping rope hitting the sidewalk.



entirely and began to watch TV an average of seven hours a day (as is found in the US)—there were losses, one after the other.

But none of the forms went away entirely. Many cultures, particularly those who have only recently had a place at the banquet table of modern middle class lifestyle, never lost their sense of story, and the role of story in their culture. They have much to teach us in our re-storifying process. We still talk a great deal about our lives, and about the books, films and television we consume. People find ways to gather. Many families have reclaimed the dining hours as storied social ritual, and make camping trips communal story exchanges as often as they can. Some of us also write. We have composed letters to each other, penned poems to our sweethearts, and pounded out essays, pamphlets and books. Story has been part of all these exchanges, and we can build deeper senses of listening, understanding and composition, from this foundation.

[...]

At the Center for Digital Storytelling, we believe we can use media, ironically, to overcome the more troublesome residual effects of our consumer media culture. The digital storytelling community has described the Internet and new media explosion as a release to a century of pent-up frustration at being involved in a one-way discourse; electronic media speaks at us but we could not talk back. We want to talk back, not on the terms of the governors of media empires, but on our own terms. We want the full diversity of expressions to be available, even if we ignore most of them, most of the time. The fact that there is a webpage on the art of spaghetti sculpture, with flash narratives and a how-to video, somehow comforts us. That could be our obsession, our signifying experience, open for an exchange with a community of like-minded spaghetti sculptors around the world. Even if we never visit, we rejoice to know we could.

With video and audio production achieving a technical complexity and affordability that is only slightly more involved than learning the QWERTY typewriter, we will want to use those forms. We need not duplicate the use of media that services the entertainment industry, filling screens for hours to rationalize advertising time. We can decide to make short films that invite responses in spoken word, text, and other short films.

Those of us committed to story as a healing process can emphasize the listening, the exchange, and the solemnity of life passage that re-invest storytelling with the meaning it deserves. In that world, the green forest's tens of millions of stories, will find ways to enrich all our lives.

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