

# Canadian literature today

Claire Joysmith \*

● *Claire Joysmith*: Could you give us a brief survey of Canadian literature?

■ *Elsbeth Cameron*: I'll start with a brief historical perspective. I think one of the most important things in the beginning was the fact that Canada, unlike the U.S., was not based on a revolution that brought with it a desire to have a new literature for a new country. In Canada it was quite different because we remained within the British Empire as a colony, and were very loyal to Britain. Our literature began by being very, very imitative of British literature. British literature was literature as far as the early writers were concerned, and the poets imitated the British Romantics like Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, and so on. They're derivative, but competent; they're not an embarrassment, but they're not exceptional either. The early novelists, on the whole, also imitated Victorian fiction. Indeed, there's still a strain today of very British literature and very British writers, the most famous of whom is Robertson Davies, who is now in his 80's or something, and he writes these long novels like Dickens, Thackeray, or George Elliot.

That's the first stage, a sort of British imitation stage in English literature. In French literature, we have very little until a bit later. There's more on the English side because the written tradition is stronger in English Canada than in French Canada, which, in the beginning, had much more of an oral tradition—there are songs and so on, and that, too, has continued because we have a lot of French singers and French dramatists. They are much more productive of drama, which I think

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comes from Roman Catholicism and the rituals of the Church—singing, the mass and all the rest of it. So, you have a difference, not only of heritage and tendency, one written and one oral, but also between two religions and a quite different sensibility.

The next major stage is the building of nationalism in Canada after World War I, when Canadian soldiers had excelled in Europe in the war. Then that nationalism developed in waves, sometimes stronger and sometimes not so strong, leading to a real culmination in 1967 with the centennial, the hundred years' celebration of Canada's confederation.

During that period, especially around World War II, a lot of mainstream novels were very nationalistic and they started to differentiate Canada from Britain; there's still a British aura but it's much more, "Who are we? What kind

of people are we?" And there's an attempt for novels to be very Canadian, almost in a forced way. One of the major writers then is someone whose biography I've written, Hugh MacLennan. He wrote six novels that were about Canada in different ways, and in a sense they're very theoretical: the social theories and the themes are more important than characterization, style, and so forth. He's fairly typical.

At the same time, there had begun to develop by then, in French Canada, different kinds of novels, different kinds of poetry and so on, but expressing what it was like in French Canada. And there's not so much a tendency for grand pan-Canadian themes. Much more than Canadian nationalism, it was of the province of Quebec, of course; it was in the French language, it wasn't concerned with all the rest of Canada, it was concerned with Quebec. And the

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It does seem with hindsight that the nationalistic novels were overly ambitious, and in a country so diverse as Canada it isn't possible to speak of Canada as one thing without getting so abstract that it doesn't mean very much.

● **CJ:** And how is the multicultural trend reflected in literature in Canada?

■ **EC:** Well, it's now a question of anybody writing about anything, and we have lots of writers of different backgrounds. For example, Neil Bissoondath from Trinidad has become fairly well known, and Janette Turner Hospital, who's Australian. She has one novel about an immigrant who comes from Latin America through the U.S. in a refrigerated meat truck and is taken illegally across the border into Canada. We claim Hospital as a Canadian writer, and we claim this as a Canadian novel, although it's not about Canada.

And the fellow who's just shared the Booker Prize (1992), Michael Ondaatje: he's from Sri Lanka and of Dutch ancestry, and his novel, that won the award—*The English patient*—doesn't have any Canadian characters; it has a Bulgarian, a Sikh, and it isn't set in Canada. But that's typical now, that anyone from anywhere and writing about anything is in no way un-Canadian.

There's much more recognition of just the excellence of whatever the work is. At least we hope that's the ideal. I think there are still a number of people who feel that there's systemic discrimination against certain groups. The aboriginal peoples have not been in the mainstream of our literature, although recently there are a number of voices that are coming forward. A funny dramatist called Thompson Highway, for example, is very good, and we also have David Daniel Moses, a wonderful aboriginal poet and playwright.

● **CJ:** Are these aboriginal voices similar to the Native American voices that can be heard now in the U.S.?

■ **EC:** Yes. They are emerging now; a lot of women, too.

● **CJ:** And do these voices try to salvage their traditions?

■ **EC:** They try to, yes. They're attempting to draw on their own traditions, but these have been so modified. First of all by not being continuously expressed and, secondly, because they're living in a context which is North American and English.

● **CJ:** And does this aboriginal literature depend on oral tradition, such as oral story-telling forms, for instance?

■ **EC:** Oh, yes, some of it's oral: different ways of telling stories, different narrative structures, devices, and so on.

● **CJ:** So this is a phenomenon in Canada, parallel in a sense to what's going on in the U.S.

■ **EC:** Yes, it's very interesting.

● **CJ:** And what can you tell us about gender role issues in Canadian literature?

■ **EC:** We have at least two first-class writers who put forward alternative sexuality. One is Timothy Findley, who lives in Ontario and writes frequently about homosexuality. And then, on the West Coast, we have a woman named Jane Rule, who writes about lesbian sexuality, going as far back as the sixties, and this writing is highly thought of. It really is open, it's very, very free in terms of who can write about what, and there's very little pressure to conform to some kind of literature.

● **CJ:** You mean there's no mainstream now?

■ **EC:** Yes. Even the old mainstream is coming under a sort of reassessment in the light of all this political movement of multiculturalism and so on. People are now looking back at writers like Hugh MacLennan, and wondering how come he was in the mainstream, but this woman who wrote about Jewish life in Montreal, Gwethalyn Graham, wasn't in the mainstream, though her book sold as much, and this kind of

thing. So, a reexamination of the canon is going on.

● **CJ:** This is happening in the U.S. as well; it's a big thing right now and is only quite recent. What is the cause?

■ **EC:** I think it's a result of post-modernism, because it tells us to look at how things are put together, that everything is a constructed and self-conscious object and this leads us, in turn, to ask, "How was the mainstream constructed?" Not just how was this book constructed and what is the interaction between the reader and the text but, in a larger framework, how was the canon constructed and the interaction between society and the canon? That's where I think it's come from.

● **CJ:** Why is Canadian literature so popular?

■ **EC:** I think Canadian literature appeals to many non-Canadian readers today because many people the world over have begun to feel what Canadians have always felt. That is, powerless. We were first a colony of Britain, then an economic satellite of the United States. This tends to make us feel that, as Northrop Frye has said, "head office is somewhere else." So the Canadian literary sensibility has always reflected this powerlessness. It has been from the beginning a literature from the periphery even when it has been about something central. It has favored a view from the margin that is suspicious of power.

Today almost everyone everywhere feels like this, to a greater or lesser degree. Problems of the environment, of nuclear disarmament, of feeding the world's population, the proliferation of human rights issues, feminism—all the ways in which human beings have become more vocal about abuses of power—these issues on which we now focus internationally have contributed to the development of a universal sensibility that Canadians have always experienced ❧