

# The Writing of British Columbia Writing

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British Columbia is the opposite of an advanced country & for it I am profoundly qualified.

Malcolm Lowry, Notebook for "A Forest Path to the Spring"

I'm trying to get them [colleagues at Simon Fraser University] interested in having a department of B.C. studies. They think I'm joking. (Laughter) I think I got something going this year. I think there are going to be a couple of courses on B.C. studies; but I want a whole department of B.C. studies.

George Bowering, Interview with Barry McKinnon, 19

Blood/bone/sea/rock are our words. Death is our event. We take the first steps out of our own nothing. The worker logging poems are the beginnings of stories to share. The landscape/magic/Indian poems are the beginnings of religion to share. We are, as poets, all animists. Our first poetic acts give voice to objects.

Marilyn Bowering, 26

Academics at the University of British Columbia have continued to study Lowry *ad nauseam* because the British-born drunken genius already had an international reputation. One cannot further one's own academic career by doing some legitimate research into a legitimately British Columbian writer such as A. M. Stephen, about whom a biography is long overdue.

Alan Twigg, 1986, ii

British Columbia, having always thought itself different from the rest of Canada, reverses the central position [of received theses of national identity] . . . revealing their bias towards an eastern sensibility. The image of nature in British Columbian literature, for example, is nurturing rather than alienating, portraying a promised land where spring not winter, is central to the imagination.

Russell McDougall, 152

Throughout the sixties and early seventies Vancouver has been the home of a large number of radically experimental writers — Daphne Marlatt, Judy Copithorne, Maxine Gadd, Gerry Gilbert, David W. Harris and Bill Bissett; all except Bissett have found little Canadian readership east of the Rockies.

Frank Davey, 93

There's a lot of west in my poems. A lot. The rain forest, the sound of the people's heads, and the kind of interior music there is here on the coast. And the space, the trees. And there's a lot of green in my poems, from the ferns and the pines.

bill bissett, 134-5

B.C. is on the Yahoo fringe of the Canadian tradition. The bureaucrats are holed up in Vancouver. The interior rules the province politically and in literature.

John Harris, 3

British Columbia is heaven . . . Only the hills are bigger, the torrents are bigger. The sea is here, and the sky is vast; and humans — little bits of mud — clamber up rocky slopes, creep in and out of mountain passes, curl up in sleeping bags and sleep under the stars. The Japanese fish, Chinese have vegetable gardens, Hindoos haul wood, and I often feel that only the Chinese of the 11th and 12th century ever interpreted the spirit of such a country.

Frederick H. Varley, [letter to a friend in Halifax],  
cited in Donald W. Buchanan, 3

We're not an empire here, but the edge of one (or several), so we're seldom under the compulsion to generalize and define in the way that, say, Ontario, might be . . .

Dale Zieroth, 5

A heterogeneous . . . society with neither an indigenous tradition nor a focused sense of identity, yet with an enveloping momentum that discourages perspective.

Cole Harris, 86

. . . the West Coast has put me in touch with a soft, allusive presence of Pacific rim influence . . . and a growing awareness of place within nature. But I periodically must go elsewhere so that other people and society, art and technology can have their turns pouring into me.

Jerry Pethick, 97

Days of our years . . . Corridors of our spirit.



When Reginald Eyre Watters and his large editorial advisory board organized the 576 pages of *British Columbia: A Centennial Anthology* (1958), they opened with a section titled "Days of Our Years," a montage, January to December, of "everyday" events and places in a province's history. Watters thus understood the province's writing to be grounded not in panegyrics or landscape descriptions, but in glimpses of human beings at work and at play. As Watters presents it, British Columbia's community diary follows the calendar but is not chronological:<sup>1</sup> an accounting of supplies stored at Port Simpson, dated 1835, is followed by the luncheon menu for gas pipeline workers at Charlie Lake (1957), and the wage rate (\$2.25 for 10 hours) for railroad builders at Kicking Horse River (1884).

In this anniversary anthology, British Columbia writing (significantly the book honours not Confederation but the establishment in 1858 of the colony of British Columbia, coincidentally the year of the Fraser River gold rush) begins as a layering of fine differentiations in personal economics and small-town celebrations. Much of the writing in this opening section is anonymous, typically excerpts from small-town newspapers, more interested in the annual ball of the Barkerville Fire Brigade than in the niceties of legislative politics. Surprisingly, perhaps, B.C. is here found first not in sublime mountains and idyllic valleys, but in fragments of story about people earning a living. The emphasis prepares us to listen carefully to the language of Alan Morley's "Towboater's Stomp" (Watters 217-19), as it does to Peter Trower's description of a tradition of logging poetry (see Trower), Tom Wayman's many manifestos for the literature of work,<sup>2</sup> Gladys Hindmarch's stories of work at sea, *Watery Part of the World* (1988), and to Phil Thomas' crucially important configuring of B.C. writing as *Songs of the Pacific Northwest* (1979).

Watters' closing section, titled with Victorian ponderousness "The Corridors of our Spirit," risks something more transcendent in defining

<sup>1</sup> Watters does provide a one-page "Chronology" of political events up to Confederation (xvi), but the ensuing diary immediately shows its gaps and inadequacies. The chronology is more in the spirit of the archival map (1761) which Watters whimsically includes as frontispiece: there what we now think of as British Columbia is vaguely blank: "It is very uncertain," puzzles the map-maker, "whither this part is Sea or Land" (xv).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Tom Wayman, ed., *Paperwork: Contemporary Poems from the Job* (Madeira Park, B.C.: Harbour Publishing, 1991).

British Columbia, but often finds a pastiche of competing material allegiances:

A British Columbian . . . is a man who has a California-type house, a Montreal mortgage, an English car, and a Scottish dog. His wife, who comes from Regina or maybe it is Calgary, either has a cat whose forebears came from Persia, or she has a small bird from the tropics which she keeps in a cage allegedly imported from Eastern Canada, but more likely made in Japan.

(Watters, 481-82)



The days of Malcolm Lowry's years slide over and through, and suddenly slip under one another. Reading in the tens of thousands of leaves of his manuscripts at the University of British Columbia, surely one of the richest deposits of writing in British Columbia, I am repeatedly amazed by the restless accumulation which is his method of composition: a published work begins as a note, maybe a short paragraph, which is pried apart again, and again — two or three passages are wedged between the original beginning and end, and, then, a restart and an excerpt from an entirely different work will be inserted into the insert. Lowry's method, I muse, might stand for the processes of British Columbia's writing in general, its prying and filling rich with analogies to intertidal deposition, to exposed aeons of geological layering, to the multiplying growth upon growth of moss upon tree upon nurse log which makes rain forest. Its leafing is interleaving. Think, for example, of the parentheses, tucked into parentheses, as the governing syntax of the forming and unforming delta where Daphne Marlatt's *Steveston* (1974) grows.

But however unreliable these analogies, the process of layering has another important function in developing readers' awareness of writing in place. When North Vancouver writer Sharon Thesen rewrites North Vancouver writer Lowry in *Confabulations: Poems for Malcolm Lowry* (1984), the result, however catholic, marks a recognition of textual antecedents. The distance between the texts in Watters' anthology and Thesen's *Confabulations* marks the distance covered over the past generation in emerging awareness of a local tradition, albeit a tradition marked by anxious cosmopolitanism and unease about the very concept of *Tradition*. The same prying apart may be found in George Bowering's self-conscious rewriting of George Vancouver in *Burning Water* (1980), in Lionel Kearns' deconstructing John Jewitt in *Convergences* (1984), or in Daphne Marlatt interrogating Martin Allerdale Grainger's male narrative

of resource extraction in *Ana Historic* (1988). In British Columbian corridors, we often hear the blurred harmonies of the round, the writers now repeating earlier writers with differing intonations. As Lowry wrote to Robert Giroux about the form of *Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*, “it is a canon, or roundelay, with everyone taking up his part, dropping out, new voices joining in and dropping out, without beginning or ending” (Malcolm Lowry Collection 3:1).



By bracketing its organization of British Columbia writing with section titles suggesting tautological conceptions of time, and passageways more abstract than architectural, Reginald Watters' team opted for an a-topographical approach to regional definition. This generalization holds although the titles of the second and third sections — “The Sea Our Doorway” and “Mountains Enfold Us” — evoke landscape features. Even these sections do not concentrate very often, or for very long, on scenery: they emphasize, rather, what passes on or under the sea, and what goes through the mountains (trails, rivers, highways), or is found within mountains (coal, copper, gold and potential hydropower). A central story is the impatient narrative of boom psychology and exploiting of natural resources. But I think another explanation of the titles is possible.

No voices have been more obviously and inevitably joining in and dropping out of the British Columbia roundelay than those of native peoples. No one would claim this prominence in 1994 without recognizing the injustice and ignorance which are crucial themes in this story. Yet, this is not the place to enter in detail into the debate about appropriation. Let me simply state that it is difficult to think of a single British Columbia writer or artist who has not searched for some understanding of very visible and immediately relevant First Nations cultures. Emily Carr — in paint and in words — is the key exemplar. But few have not sought, from Floris McLaren to Hubert Evans to Phyllis Webb, to translate or trans-create (as Fred Wah adapts Coleridge's term) across this cultural gap.

Franz Boas, for all the limitations now evident in his work, may in his seeking for the equality of peoples, and in his commitment to understanding *in the field*, be the ultimate B.C. writer. The B.C. meta-narrative incorporates Boas' numerous field trips (and those of his numerous protégés) between 1886 and 1930: to go to live among the peoples of the First

Nations to find out, rather than to change something or somebody — not *to learn*, but, to approach the magic, to walk the corridors of the spirit.<sup>3</sup>

In a measure, to be sure, First Nations writers themselves are now re-visiting this narrative. But the narrative of the field trip hardly holds for long, as readers of the poetry of Greg Young-Ing, or of the oral forms in Jeanette Armstrong's *Slash* (1985), or of Harry Robinson's marvellous accounts of the days of his people's years, *Write It On Your Heart* (1989), will realize. This journal itself provided an excellent example in the several forms of the writing of Ron Hamilton (Nuu-chah-nulth) which it presented in 1991; an album of poems, a story, a literary analysis of his own writing, and the transformations implicit in the several names (the partial list cites thirteen) given him in the Potlatch. (See Hamilton)



Reginald Watters imagined writing in British Columbia to have 365 days and many more than one hundred years. Despite the faintly Biblical section titles, with their presumptuous repetitions of “our” and “we,” the collection seeks heterogeneity, and its editor bypasses the opportunity to write a synthesizing and summarizing introduction. In this tendency he lines up with critics earlier in the century, who, beneath such titles as “Literature in British Columbia” and “Present Literary Activity in British Columbia,” opt for lists of names and titles rather than arguments, although A. M. Pound does remark on the “wealth of outlandish and picturesque material . . . [in] the past of British Columbia.” (Pound 7, Douglas) Criticism of writing *in* British Columbia has usually declined to describe a *British Columbia* writing. Allan Pritchard's two-part article in *Canadian Literature* is the most obvious exception to this proposition. Pritchard responds to Atwood's “survival” thesis about Canadian literature with counter-themes he finds in British Columbia: exploration of a paradisaical land of enchantment, creating connections with the land through native culture, or environmental preservation. (Pritchard 1982, 1984).

Elaborating on one of Pritchard's themes — establishing a home in harmony with nature — George Bowering argued with the general refusal to name *any* feature of B.C. writing by writing a muted parody of thematic criticism. As if recognizing that the earliest critical formulations of a subject are necessarily thematic, one of the province's most innovatively prolific poet-novelists writes his most sober, apparently least ambiguous pieces of

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to my colleague Kieran Kealy for discussions about the prominence of this narrative, particularly in B.C. children's writing.

literary criticism. Contrasting the stone mansion of Mazo de la Roche's Jalna to B.C.'s temporary "tents, brush shelters, shacks and boats," and citing the central activity of "harvesting and processing of house-building materials," Bowering argues that a high rate of immigration makes the search for home the central theme of British Columbia fiction. (Bowering 1984, 9-10) The doubled ironies are fascinating. Thus as he had sent up George Vancouver and bourgeois autochthony in *Burning Water*, so in this article he earnestly argues for a thematic generalization which is at once preposterously untenable, and counter-faddish. Deftly he subverts his own careful argument by honouring Malcolm Lowry's unfinished *October Ferry to Gabriola* (1970) as the apotheosis of B.C. fiction, and by selecting the restlessly peripatetic *Hetty Dorval* (1948) over the more overtly regional *Swamp Angel* (1954) to represent the work of Ethel Wilson. When most Canadian academic critics were falling over themselves to survive the paraphrase, Bowering was puckishly questioning academic modishness, and hinting that the inclination of post-New Criticism, feminism and post-colonialism, was precisely and necessarily to define and reconfigure themes.

My own first speculations about B.C. writing were presented at the same conference as George Bowering's home thoughts (B.C. Studies Conference, February 1987), and appeared in this journal three issues later. There I tried, through a slight torturing of the metaphor of "dumb talk," to emphasize the prominence of First Nations cultures in B.C. writing, and to highlight its primary concern to discover means of translating oral forms into printed text. Emily Carr, writer and painter, making "forms to fit the thoughts that the birds and animals and fish suggested" (Carr 51) seemed to me then and now (along with salmon and raven) the essential figure. It's an element that George Woodcock also found crucial when, a few years later, in this same journal he argued for D'Sonoqua's story as the presiding myth of British Columbia writing. (Woodcock)

As I tried some propositions on the poetics of orality in British Columbia, and George Woodcock sensed that D'Sonoqua was always hiding in the corridors of our spirit, Allan Pritchard added to *BC Studies'* growing portfolio of articles on the province's writing by considering how it had dealt with more recent history. Although he had no singular thesis to promote, he did frame his comments by noting "the significance of the invisible boundary (B.C.'s British law-abiding West) and the absence of the Western." (Pritchard 1992 67). And by centring his essay on *Tay John* (1938), a "mythic vision of the essence of western history," Ethel Wilson's *The Innocent Traveller* (1949), "a [comic and antiheroic] historical novel conceived as the antithesis of a historical epic," and Jack Hodgins' *Inven-*

*tion of the World* (1977), less history than amusing perception of a historical perception, he does promote the view that B.C. writers have paid less attention to history (especially political history) than other Canadian writers.

As is the way with such survey articles, already they will seem dated. Significantly, this journal's most recent article on B.C. writing is by a British visitor developing a post-structural approach to the semiotics of Bertrand Sinclair as discovered in his unpublished papers. Richard Lane marks both a turn to detailed examination of particular authors, and the long-standing extranational inclination of writing in British Columbia.



The days of my own years in British Columbia began in 1978, twenty years after the centennial which Watters' anthology celebrates. Although I had been studying and teaching Canadian literature for a dozen years, when I moved to Vancouver I would have recognized the names of perhaps only fifteen (among the 100 plus) contributors to the anthology, and of these I would have associated only three or four primarily with British Columbia. Having been long interested in landscape and region, I set out to find how writers had articulated the lushly unfamiliar place where I had arrived. I was surprised that the canon of Canadian literature, as I had come to know it, included so few B.C. writers. I taught Earle Birney, of course, and I had tried to discuss George Bowering's poetry once or twice, with scant success; Jack Hodgins' *The Invention of the World* had lately become a staple of my Canadian novel course. But even Ethel Wilson was largely a mystery, and Daphne Marlatt was only a name.

In setting out to correct my own ignorance, and to find a way, through literature, to be at home in this different Canada, I soon noticed that my students were as ignorant as I. Stories hid themselves in salal and salmon: I wanted them to know those stories, or to tell them *to me*. I proposed a special studies course, "Literature in British Columbia," which I have in various guises now taught five times, and which anchors my claim to say anything at all on the subject. I write, then, as a recent arrival (itself virtually paradigmatic), and an academic, and one whose on-the-ground experience of the rest of the province outside the Lower Mainland is limited to occasional visits and tourist brochures. These characteristics may make me in some sense typical, but also evidently closed to several of the perspectives which my numerous epigraphs bravely hint at.



I begin with a clutter of epigraphs because my favourite regional essay of the last few years, William Least Heat Moon's *PrairyErth* (1991), gives me permission to do something I have long wanted to do. So many epigraphs suggest different ways of beginning; they speak in multiple voices, speak ideas I cannot take up in these few pages. In a way, perhaps, they contribute to the West Coast leisureland myth — they are a formal way of avoiding or deferring or diffusing responsibility. But collected epigraphs may also serve as a persistent model, both of the celebrated “openness” of B.C. writing, and of the forms within which critics, scholars and editors have assembled it.

The approach here announced is almost tediously *de rigueur* for anyone living in the post-structuralist university, where language is difference and cultural relativism, accordingly, shapes the syntax. But more than current academic enthusiasm seems responsible. Certainly when I went back to *British Columbia: A Centennial Anthology*, I was surprised at its eclectic diversity. If it is not as pluralistic as we might wish, it includes a range of writers, cultures, forms, and disciplines which perhaps only generous government subsidy could enable.



I have not summarized anthologies of B.C. writing — despite my references to Watters, the organization of anthologies would make a different if obviously related subject. But I am proposing that most attempts to construct something called “B.C. writing” characteristically opt for the anthology approach. One of the most post-modern discussions of the subject comes not from George Bowering, whose mistrust of realism might have suggested it, but from W. H. New, whose scholarly approach begins in the chronology of literary history. New mounts a fireworks display of insights, and sets them alight with a series of rhetorical questions. He discovers more than a little alienation in the writing of B.C., yet knows that it is profoundly Canadian. He honours Emily Carr, both as person and icon. He finds, uneasily, a Canadian writing that is as close to American literature as any in Canada. He detects a culture that profits from a league of prophets. As he ponders these ideas, they open up the plurality and process of more ethnic, geographic, and regional variation. It is next to impossible to discover in New's essay-as-anthology a definitive text. It might be John Donne's sermon that provides his title “A Piece of the Continent, A Part of the Main.” But he also recognizes a good representative novel in Jack Hodgins' *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne* (1979), a trickster's regional

fable, where the local is recognized less in setting than in people telling their own lives.

B.C. writers are nervous of being confined to one genre; indeed, remembering the native forms which provide a frequent dissonance, they would like a literature that did not recognize genre. Watters' anthology extends its sense of text to include painting, sculpture, photography, old café menus, bits of folk wisdom and cartoons — and, typically, Bill Reid's Haida designs for the dust jacket wrapping around the rest. When Robin Skelton and Charles Lillard assembled their two-part survey of "The West Coast Renaissance" in *The Malahat Review* (1978), they sustained Watters' organization by including sculpture, painting, and Susan Musgrave's work sheets. As Skelton says, "The picture I am presenting is not a tidy one" (Skelton 7). Surely it is also significant that so much of what has been written about B.C. writing has appeared in *BC Studies*, rather than in a more strictly literary forum. It seems that critics and writers want B.C. writing to be discussed in the context of ghost towns, archaeological digs, the organization of the Fraser Valley Milk Producers' Association, and the clan origins of overseas Chinese communities. It seems historians have been more interested in what could be British Columbia literature than the teachers of literature.

Burke Cullen would agree. In an unpublished paper delivered to the B.C. Studies Conference in November 1992, he speculated that the essential B.C. novel is inherently post-modern. Formed in mimicry of a "topographical labyrinth" and questioning centrist authority, British Columbia's narrative is confused by the times where white and native world views collide. (Cullen 3) As in W. H. New's essay, or, for example, in Roy Kiyooka's poetry/paintings, the corridors of B.C. writing are always crossing one another at odd and perplexing angles.



Had Reginald Watters opened his centennial anthology with a section titled "The Days of the Year," he would have signalled the first organizational principle of the nature essay: the annual cycle of seasons. But his pluralizing of "years" thickens the concept into an inexact overlay of cycles. And using the possessive individualizes the cycles: each inhabitant's sense of time defines a personal configuration of characters and actions.

Jacket and dust jacket feature Bill Reid's twinned Haida beaver figures. In their ways of comprehending their writing, British Columbians have mistrusted the Canadian reliance on wilderness or landscapes as origin and

starting point. Presumably, unlike prairie writers, students of British Columbia have had a hard time detecting a homogeneous landscape; they cannot find a separate language, as in Québec, more or less co-extensive with the province's legal boundaries. In 1968 Henry Kreisel published his essay "The Prairie A State of Mind," still an essential starting point for anyone writing on the culture of the Canadian Prairie<sup>4</sup>; none of the various studies discussed in this essay has, or is likely ever to have, such status in B.C. studies. In 1979, Patrick O'Flaherty published his *The Rock Observed: Studies in the Literature of Newfoundland*, a satisfyingly comprehensive historical definition of the unique culture of Newfoundland. I hope to be proven wrong, but I suspect no such book will ever be published about British Columbia. Ontario, incidentally, has not bothered about describing its own regional literatures, since all the attempts to define Canadian culture are assumed to be also definitions of Ontario.<sup>5</sup>

Whenever critics, scholars, writers take up the subject of B.C. writing, they immediately and continually sound a note of reluctance. The title of the Simon Fraser University conference (1981) hinted at the elusiveness of the subject: "the coast is only a line." A special number of *Essays on Canadian Writing* tested this elusiveness by supplying the title "West Coast Issue" to a collection of essays edited by John Harris, from "Prince George, the geographical centre of B.C.," which argues, more implicitly than overtly, that "the north gives birth to the south (an historical fact in B.C.)" (Harris, 41). As in the special issue of *Open Letter* devoted to B.C. poets, the impulse here is slightly anarchic. Only Dale Zieroth, as discussed by Peter Buitenhuis, is likely to sound British Columbian, in the sense of being identifiably attached to place. Norbert Ruebsaat's cordillera, as discussed in an interview with Kathy Mezei, is found only in "notes, snippets, lyrical images" (Ruebsaat, 151), rather than in a coherent perception of a landscape. Fred Wah talks about "place" and "locus" in Sharon Thesen (Wah 115), but these terms prove to refer more to strategies of perception than to passages jolting the reader with shocks of recognition.

That Barry McKinnon's interview with Brian Fawcett appears both in *Essays on Canadian Writing* and *Open Letter* emphasizes the same vague misgiving. The "local," a persistent principle throughout these ten interviews, is less conspicuous than is the "open." The local here does not consist

<sup>4</sup> The way for Kreisel's distillation of the central prairie trope was prepared, of course, by Edward McCourt's *The Canadian West in Fiction*, first published in 1949, which frequently relied on the same figure.

<sup>5</sup> The international "un-bundling" of the nation state in the 1990s has destabilized concepts of the centre. A recent exception to my observation about Ontario is W. J. Keith's *Literary Images of Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

of salmon streams, salmon, or the salmonberry, but rather in clues and codes detected in the nostalgia for such home-made journals as *Tish* or *Imago* and in the impressive independence of such B.C.-grown presses as Sono Nis, Oolichan, and Talonbooks.

There is a general reluctance to locate British Columbia in B.C. writing.<sup>6</sup> As in W. H. New's essay, the best way to write about B.C. writing is to assemble an anthology, the more eclectic the better.<sup>7</sup> The commentators have wanted to leave lots of spaces where they, or their readers, can jam in something else. In our corridors we keep sensing Malcolm Lowry's spirit.



A special issue of *Maclean's* (24 August 1992) may not be an exact parallel to a hard-cover state-subsidized centennial anthology, yet it is notable how much the contemporary popular press sounds the same notes as Watters. Scenery is duly revered, but is consistently set aside to define a sliding "state of mind." Peter C. Newman, a relatively recent immigrant, emphasizes, as does Watters, a region of time: "Most folks consider themselves citizens as much of their time as of their place." (13) The essence of the province is some kind of mellow craziness. According to Newman, "British Columbians boast of only one identity: that they are different" (Newman 13).

*Maclean's* feature on British Columbia is an anthology of print-bites (from 100 to 1,000 words) updating many of the motifs — "Window on the Pacific," "Green Cathedrals," "The West Coast Dream Machine" — prominent in Watters' collection. Subjects of considerably less presence in 1958 range from the fashions of marketing (identifying a west-coast cuisine) to the central political and cultural issue of contemporary British Columbia — the urgency of unsettled native land claims. Where writing is concerned, the market also makes the definition: Linda Svendsen, author of the short-story collection *Marine Life* (1992) so enthusiastically reviewed in the United States, gets seven lines to explain her return to British Columbia from New York. The other two writers fleetingly profiled are Carsten Stroud, author of *Close Pursuit* (1988), a non-fiction account

<sup>6</sup> Compare with Robin Skelton's claims for the surrealism, abstract expressionism, and committed internationalism in B.C.'s art and fiction.

<sup>7</sup> The "varied abundance" which sets the theme for Watters' "Foreword" (viii) anticipates the principle of inclusiveness (extending from mystery thrillers through self-published local histories to academic works) which governs the content of the tabloid *B.C. Bookworld*, the best continuing source of information on writing in British Columbia.

of New York City's police, and a crime novel *Lizardskin* (1992) set in Montana, and Doug Coupland, the best-selling definer of *Generation X* (1991), the children who can never expect to do as well as their parents have.

As a signal to the rest of Canada, this triangulation of recent writing from British Columbia misses Sharon Thesen, Barry McKinnon's *PulpLog* (1991), George Bowering's British Columbia trilogy, and the energy of the journal *West Coast Line*. But, in one sense, its disparate settings fit with the way one writer after another has refused to define British Columbia writing.

Carol Windley's first book of short stories *Visible Light* (1993), seems to me, therefore, with my regional antennae up, profoundly a British Columbia book. It is linked in spirit to the transactions of subdued feeling in Linda Svendsen's *Marine Life*, and, as the title itself indicates, to the paradoxes of repetition and sly syntax so fundamental to Ethel Wilson. Yet Windley devotes relatively little of her quiet prose to descriptions of place, or to specific place names. Windley writes about responses sensed rather than observed, of astonishment turned introspective, of women listening to what is said when "he" is not listening. Place is evoked in terms more general than specific: "Everything was grey, a different shade of the same cold grey: the sea, the sky, the gulls" (Windley 73). And this description, it turns out, might also apply to the coast of Greece. Still, perhaps, the notion of nuances of grey, of light seemingly made visible by fog and mist, gives regional inflection. And always and everywhere Windley injects a subtle bit of craziness, a sensitivity to the world of tsunamis and volcanos and out-of-body experiences. The corridors of the British Columbia spirit are "different." "No one has really discovered it yet. It is a sort of dreamland, waiting. You can make what you want out of it" (Windley 262).

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