

# Playing the Monster Blind?

## The Practical Limitations of Updating the Canadian Canon<sup>1</sup>

*Laura Moss*

Lynn Coady's story "Play the Monster Blind" has roughly 11,200 words. To my mind, it is one of the best short stories recently published. However, in the anthology of Canadian literature I am currently co-editing with Cynthia Sugars, we seriously have to ask if we have 28 printed pages for this short story. Is it worth 2.3 % of our total allotted pages? Does the story compose 1/43rd of the Canadian canon we want to represent? Coady's "Big Dog Rage" is only 12 pages. Does that make it a better story for the anthology? If Coady is in, who is out? Bliss Carman or SKY Lee? Or both? Or neither? What is the provenance of the most highly canonized works? How organic is Canadian literature, really? Looking at the pragmatics of creating a Canadian literature anthology leads me to consider the practical limitations of canon formation.

Further, what kind of narrative about Canadian literature do I want to teach in a 13-week course? Do I want to provide a historical overview (from the explorers to now), or focus in depth on an important issue (from globalization to food), or theoretical approach (from feminism to postcolonialism)? Why are some books taught more than others and should I teach them too? What changes have taken place in pedagogical approaches to Canadian literature and how might they help my teaching? Do they affect the books I choose to teach? What should be on graduate student comprehensive exam lists? Is there a canon I think the students should know? Am I being responsible to the rich history of Canadian literature if a student I work with hasn't read Susanna Moodie, A.J.M Smith, Don McKay, or Joy Kogawa when he

graduates? How much does literary history play a part in the literary future? These are the questions I ask myself all the time. In thinking about the institutions of Canadian literature, I think it vital that we pause to reflect on some of the realities of everyday canon formation.

I am aware that I am a bit late to the game and that the canon debates (involving Robert Lecker, Tracy Ware, Frank Davey, Carole Gerson, Barbara Godard, Imre Szeman) are fashionably “over.” However, since I subscribe to the truism that canons are always in process, I don’t think the discussion can or should ever be complete. Ideally, a canon should reflect the current literary, social, and theoretical climates of the field. I agree with Lecker’s position when he says “canons serve to facilitate debate, encourage change, and force those addressing literary and social issues to take responsibility for their positions, no matter how subversive or self-serving.” I also agree with Lynn Bloom who argues that “a canon may be seen as a map of the territory it encompasses” rather than with the notion that canons are the “best” of what has been thought and said in the world. So, if a canon is a map of territory, where are we trying to get? How do we get there?

In the preface to his 2004 edition of *A History of Canadian Literature*, W.H. New remarks on how much has changed in Canadian literature since the first edition of his *History* was published in 1987: “new literary voices are also being heard; the sheer number of publications has increased manifold; technological changes have altered both the manner of literary production and the patterns and methods of dissemination; and such issues as ethnicity, ecology, economics, social status, gender, copyright, and sexuality all vie for further attention.” How do we map the new literary voices New is speaking of? How do we wade through the number of publications, the changing forms of production, and the increasing emphasis on prizes and expanded global markets? How do we balance the varieties of issues that vie for attention?

How do we reconcile books as commodities/products with our literary specialists’ mission to take them seriously as art and as indicators of culture and community? My questions here arise out of some observations I’ve made over the past few years as a literary consumer, a Canadianist, and a postcolonialist, an anthologist creating a product, a teacher teaching in a public institution, an editor of a journal that needs to keep subscription rates up, and a researcher at a research focused institution. I have shifted from concentrating on the more ideologically driven concerns about inclusion and exclusion to considering the more mundane, yet powerful, practicalities of marketing, reviewing, anthologizing, and teaching of recent Canadian

literature. The possibilities of canonical expansion are at least in part governed by the sheer volume of work published, publishers' restrictions on page lengths, permissions drawbacks, and a lack of time for any one critic. So, the limitations arise in temporal and economic factors. It is not, as I once thought, all political. Or, time and money are political, just differently political than I had realized before being faced with hundreds of books for review or courses to be taught within existing frameworks.

The single most revealing contributor to my own shifting consideration of canons in Canada has been becoming a reviews editor at *Canadian Literature*. I now see how much work is being published in Canada today and how hard it is to stay on top of it all. I hear colleagues remembering the old days when one could realistically expect to read everything published about Canadian literature. Those days are gone. Over the last few years, *Canadian Literature* has gone from publishing reviews of approximately 200 books a year to 2004's total of reviews on over 500 books of fiction, poetry, drama, theory, and criticism. Part of the increase has come from an editorial decision to expand the types of books *Canadian Literature* is interested in (for instance, we now seek reviews on works of literary theory even if they are not specifically about Canadian subjects). However, the lion's share of the increase comes from our attempt at keeping up on reviewing at least a reasonable cross section of books produced/ordered/received. Yet, we are still not reviewing many works that come out. With a limited number of qualified reviewers, space limitations in the journal itself, and a lack of time for the editors (we don't get a stipend or a course release for working on the journal), it is difficult to do just that.

So, what gets reviewed and why? In the past, before I started to work for *Canadian Literature*, I had thought that the choice of which books to review was an ideological decision delineating what is the best work, what is the most representative of contemporary climates, and what vision of Canadian literature the journal wanted to project. With experience, I realize that while some of these certainly hold, the truth of the matter more often lies in the practicalities. Some books go through requests for reviews from five separate people (and many months) before someone agrees to do a review. If no one is willing or able, sometimes a book that deserves to be reviewed gets shelved. First novels more rarely get reviewed because of the lack of recognition of the author by the review editors or by potential reviewers who do not want to spend their time on an unknown quantity. It is easier to find a reviewer for a prizewinner than not. It is infinitely easier to find a reviewer for a new

Margaret Atwood novel than a collection of short stories by a previously unpublished writer.

Then there is the question of who writes the reviews. The lack of prestige in writing reviews, where they count little for tenure, for instance, limits the number of younger faculty willing to do reviews and places a burden on them if they do. Those who agree to write reviews consistently tend to be the more senior academics or graduate students. As critics (and reviewers), we are in a position of immense responsibility to the field but we need to recognize that with such responsibility there is an arbitrariness that can not be avoided.

In a recent job search, I asked all the candidates the same question: what are five texts that you think that a graduate student specializing in Canadian literature should be aware of before graduating? Note that I wasn't asking anyone to name the top five Canadian novels, or to define a canon, but what is important to know. I didn't specify that the list had to be fiction, poetry, or theory. I left it open. The responses were fascinating: one woman angrily told me that she would not answer because she spent so much time deconstructing the canon that she wasn't going to build it back up for me. Most people named five works of fiction; most were post-1970s; some were chronologically distributed. Few responses were innovative or theory focused. What became evident was that most people thought this was a trick question: a construct-the-canon game. My question was actually a precursor to very practical questions about working in an institution: about comprehensive exam structures and lists, candidacy papers, undergraduate course offerings (should a student in a senior class in Canadian literature be assumed to have any specific knowledge from having taken "Introduction to Canadian Literature"), and future developments of current course offerings. While these considerations are on some level ideological, they also have to do with the practicalities of balancing a plethora of on-going and working canons. This anecdote reminds that you can't, and shouldn't, untangle the practical concerns from the ideological ones. They are both important in the day-to-day workings of a department and a culture.

Writers who live off of their art have long understood the interwoven nature of art and practical considerations. I close with the words of Sinclair Ross, written in a letter to my father in response to an invitation to attend a symposium in his honour at Sir George Williams/Concordia University. While I don't want to quantify success, relevance, or value, it is important to keep Ross' practical terms in mind while considering ever evolving canon-formation.

Apartado 258  
Malaga, Spain  
December 2, 1975

Dear John:

You no doubt think me ungrateful, but far from it. In fact, the generosity of what you suggest overwhelms me. But apart from being a colorless old man with a poor voice who would not help things along, I don't measure up. A two-day symposium in my honour, everybody saying what a fine writer I am, while all the time, in what we might say "practical terms," I am such a dud! Sawbones Memorial, despite a number of favorable reviews, has sold 2,600 copies: Whir of Gold, 1,100. I have never been translated; apart from 3 short stories on TV, I have never been filmed. I'm not complaining; I have my own reservations about Ross: but what I would hear in Montreal, with the "facts" of my literary career staring me in the face, would have a hollow ring.

. . . It's late; next month I'll be 68. At the moment I am at work on a sequel to Sawbones, but not, I'm afraid, with much enthusiasm. Even if it stands up as a novel—and at this stage, revising, I'm not at all sure—McClellands will no doubt think of those 2,600 copies and be wary. Revising, of course, is a depressing chore, and later I may feel the urge to scribble at something else; but right now I'm ready to call it a day and for the rest of time left me try to relax and enjoy myself. Some make it; some don't. There's no use pretending. At least I can give myself an A for effort.

My warmest thanks for your effort. And I'm sorry.

Sincerely,

Jim.

[Sinclair Ross]

NOTE

- 1 A version of this editorial was presented at the joint Simon Fraser University / University of Guelph "TransCanada: Literature. Institutions. Citizenship" Conference, held in Vancouver, June 2005.