

# Am I a Canadian Writer?

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**W**hat is Canadian literature? What is a Canadian novel?

I am not going to be so foolhardy as to attempt to define these terms; many have wandered into this wilderness—and returned, what else but bewildered if they were honest, or with simplistic or outdated notions if they were naive; this is hardly surprising—the country is changing around us even as we speak, stirring up a host of conflicting ideas and interests, and to look for an essence, a core, a central notion within that whirlwind is surely an illusion. To define this country or its literature seems like putting a finger on Zeno's arrow: no sooner do you think you have done it than it has moved on.

But I think I can still ask, Am I a Canadian writer? Why, you may ask. Whence this perversity? (Has anyone been calling you names, at least recently? Has anyone said you are not a Canadian writer? Well, the issue did arise several years ago, I believe, but this time the question is my own. Why, you ask?) Because an author often asks, or is asked: Whom do you write for? Who is your audience? And an author often, egotistically, vainly, as it has been observed, wonders in those dark moments that are supposed to be all creative but aren't always so—surrounded perhaps by a pool of bad reviews; the publisher perhaps seen to want a compromise, a betrayal; garbage seems to be published and yet is hailed as great world literature—dejected, he wonders: Who will remember him? Who will read him, after he's sailed off into the sunset? And if he's read at all, then, as what? Where? In a Canada, where he still has to spell out his first name? Where he finds himself sputtering out in frustration, I am no more ethnic than you are; I am not a

professional multiculturalist, a specimen demonstrating this country's political or social reality, justifying its place on some UN list of wonderful places just behind Switzerland and ahead of Belgium? and where he has to assert, I am not an immigrant writer, my writing is not immigrant. Or will there be a place for him in the land where he was born, that has a special place in his heart, which he thinks has been relegated to the margins of this world, but where he is seen as only historically relevant? And what about overseas, when he has to take pains to make his hosts realize that no, he is not a brown Eskimo; his land is not quite that of the red-coated Mounties, and the whales, and the north, but something different and complex—a city where it snows, but where there are also a lot of people who look and speak like him?

These are the frustrations of looking for a place to belong.

In many countries, these frustrations do not even arise. If you have come from outside, you don't belong. Period. I can think of France or Germany, or the Middle East, or Japan. How dare you think of yourself as a French writer? You have to prove yourself. (Get rid of the headscarf first.) But in Canada and the United States, which are relatively new countries and constituted of constantly arriving immigrants, the situation is different and dynamic and, happily, we may say, full of contradictions.

Traditionally, a new Canadian or American was someone who left the shores of Europe, and later China and Japan, set foot on the new soil, kissed the earth, and adopted the new land; forgot the old. At least, let's assume this for the time being (forgetting the special privilege of coming from Western Europe and Britain, with which there was a cultural continuity and constant contact). The succeeding generations were adapted, spoke the language and idiom, played baseball or hockey or football, had integrated. That is the traditional model of immigration; it still makes a lot of people very comfortable. It makes the sociologists of immigration feel like mathematicians. (There is a QED-ness to this picture of immigration.)

Canadian literature, correspondingly, would be characterized in this traditional picture by something essentially Canadian; it would explore, address the core of what Canada is and means; you might think of the theme of survival; you might think of nature—the cold, the wilderness, the prairie, the mountains, the Atlantic; of a certain, privileged kind of colonial experience. We all know the Prairie-grandmother novel; the growing-up-in-Newfoundland-or-Nova Scotia, walking-along-the-beach-with-an-ancestor novel; the World War I novel; the cool-thirtysomething or -fortysomething Vancouverite novel.

These are all venerable Canadian themes.

You might say I have forgotten the multicultural nature of this country.

But I ask myself, what is multiculturalism? Isn't it simply a waiting post, a holding area for immigrants, a quarantine to hold the virus and keep the peace while succeeding generations have time to emerge, fully integrated, assimilated? What a joy to behold a young Canadian of Asian or African background, speaking an accepted Canadian dialect; and what a pain in the backside, the contentious parents who claim their version of English is as good, if not better, and curry is simply great? Who is multicultural except the immigrants from Asia, Africa, the Middle East; those whose language is not English, whose culture is not western and Christian?

What does it mean then when a book set in India or Africa—for example—is hailed as a Canadian novel, receives a prize? What is it seen as? Is it seen as saying anything of significance about Canada? Anything about its history, its politics, its national concerns, its character; its landscape; its psychology? What will future generations think about it, as Canadian?

Perhaps it is considerations like these that went into the making of the Authors Section of the Canadian Literature Archive, with a special section, an appendix, allocated to Canadian Tamil writers; and perhaps considerations like these also go into the making of literature syllabuses for high schools and courses at universities. They don't know what to make of us.

It is tempting to say that a novel by a Canadian citizen is a Canadian novel, no argument. A book by a Kenyan writer who has never set foot in Canada is not a Canadian novel. This is a safe statement, it gives us an outer bound, tells us at least what cannot be called Canadian. But that is not enough. One may well ask: Are three or five years, after which one stands before a judge, swears loyalty, and obtains a piece of paper, enough to produce a Canadian sensibility, a Canadian work of literature?

We might say that any book written in Canada is different from the same story written elsewhere; this is contentious, for there is a question of degree; but there is some truth in it. But is that enough? When students of the future examine Canadian literature of the past, will they see Rohinton Mistry, or Harold Sonny Ladoo, to put it explicitly, as Canadian writers? Is anyone going to trawl through their works to bring out nuggets or essences of Canadianness? Will they (do they) think of Anne Marie Macdonald or Margaret Atwood in the same way as they think of MG? Don't we think of Marquez as Colombian, Joyce and Beckett as Irish? Is Nabokov really an American writer? And do we really think of Conrad as English? And so,

whom are we fooling here with our generous, inclusive definitions of Canadian literature?

Recently I met a young writer of Chinese descent, who told me how fed up he was of the stories of ghosts and bound feet and Chinatown that characterized so much Chinese Canadian and Chinese American fiction; he was impatient to tell the world, to tell Canada what being Chinese Canadian was all about. It was about dominating mothers, he said. About the war between the sexes. It is such young people that make the older writers nervous, threaten to make them irrelevant in a new Canada.

Whenever I pass through Toronto's Don Mills area, throbbing with new Canadian life, I know for a fact, I am envious about the stories that will come out from there. They will be defining stories; defining what?—again, a new Canada. But what will my stories define?

It is in those moments that I wonder if I have a home, as I thought I had, as I think I have every morning that I wake up (except for some of the more bitter winter days). All is not lost, however. There is a way out for writers of my ilk, of course, it is the only way out, and it is honesty itself. As simple as saying the emperor has no clothes on at all. That way out lies in the admission that it does not matter, it should not matter to me as a writer what the world takes me as, will take me as. I cannot write, honestly call myself a writer of fiction, a truthful fiction if I decided to write in such a way that I would be seen as more of a Canadian; as more or less of anything. A novelist is, and that is it. Others can put labels on you for their purposes—theses, papers, editorials have to be written after all—but you cannot work under the shadow of a label. The temptation is there, of course, to write a big “Canadian” novel and the pressure is there, which you see evident sometimes in what I call the “multicultural” novel, in which the author and the character strive hard, do their level best to be Canadians. But a character with depth, who is rooted deep in something, in a history, a culture, a psychological makeup, I believe eludes them, because all or much of their imagination is taken up with waving the flag as vigorously as possible. See what a cute Canadian I am. Or else we are presented with the Komagata Maru story for the nth time. If that is all we can come up with, as Canadian and South Asian with substance, then that proves a point. Striving too hard goes against honesty, against the creative impulse, and shows pitilessly that there really is nothing beneath the surface.

And so for the rest of us who do not want to demonstrate the workings of multiculturalism, we say, What does it matter what you call me; what

posterity takes me for? This is what I am: I live on such and such a street, in Toronto or Winnipeg or wherever; I have lived before in other places that I could name for you; I have brought up two or three children, I pay my taxes, contribute to a few charities, try to mow my lawn regularly. I clear the snow, though I tend to wait a little in the hope that the sun will come out and do the job for me. This is what I can write about, this is what the inspiration was, where it took me: a street in Dar es Salaam, a village in Ghana, a tenement in Calcutta.

The story should end here, and it does for me. But once in a while, one likes to play the polemical game, and go further, in a way that does not matter to one's creativity but helps to address questions outside of it.

And so, one asks: Isn't there any way, then, in which I can be truly Canadian?—not out of kindness and generosity of other Canadians—which let us admit proudly and gratefully have been there—but essentially Canadian, so that a person in Berlin or Tokyo, for example, or Nanaimo or Cornerbrook, two archetypically Canadian places in the minds of some, would look at one's work and say, Yes, of course it is Canadian? If so, then we have to define a new, adulterated, complex essence for Canada.

One might define and truly recognize a category and a phenomenon called Canadian Postcolonial; those of us who would be described by this term are essentially those who emerged from the colonies in the 1960s and 1970s; we tell the stories of those societies—stories which have not been told, or do not have a ready reception in the centres of the world; we are the historians and mythmakers; the witnesses. We are essentially exiles, yet our home is Canada, because home is the past and the present, as also the future. We belong to several worlds and Canada has given us a home, an audience, a hospitality, a warm embrace. We get a category all to ourselves because there are so many of us.

But we might go further and say that not only are there so many of us, we also have entire communities here, consisting of people who have shared our experiences; we are telling the stories not only of there, but also for people here. We are bringing the stories here to accompany those who have arrived here. They came with their clothes, and sometimes with their pots and pans, and left it on us to bring their stories here. These stories are not only for their consumption; they are not for nostalgia; they are their history, describe their being. And therefore they are for their future generations as well. And that puts a whole new dimension or shade to the question of who we really are.

If we are telling the stories of so many Canadians, aren't we then telling the stories of Canada as well? What kind of Canada? This is not a Canada only of the Mounties and hockey, the north and Newfoundland, the beer commercials, into which newcomers assimilate; it is a Canada which constantly adjusts and redefines itself, though in degrees. It is a Canada that is as much urban as it is the north. If ten percent of a nation resides in one city, then a cityscape deserves to be recognized as being essential, as essential as the Rockies, as the Prairies, the Atlantic. The Americans have done this; Canadians are embarrassed to do it.

This idea is, naturally, anathema to many people; for one, to those whose Canada of the mind and memory and history, of the images and essence imbibed in childhood, jars with the kaleidoscopic reality outside their windows. Neighbourhoods, cities, no longer look the same; is the sense of national self also going to change as drastically? Are we turning Oriental? We would like to be politically correct, we will admit that a Canadian after all is anyone who is a citizen. But there is a limit. There are strong emotions involved in the idea of a changing Canada. And there are also those who have lamented the fact that this country has not had a powerful mythology, a dominating sense of itself as an entity; has had no essence, so we have had to accept the wimpy notions of the underdog, the self-deprecating, or the numbskull but consistent and dogged Canadian, and a literature that goes with it. Just when the country had begun to have a sense of itself and its literature, here come these fellows and gals who write about the tropics. Give them the space, this is a tolerant country: but are they truly, completely Canadian?

The idea I am putting forward is that new Canadians bring their stories with them, and these stories then become Canadian stories. Canada's past lies not only in the native stories of the land itself, but also in Europe, and now in Africa and Asia; Canadians have fought not only in the World Wars, but also in the wars of liberation of Africa, Asia, and South America. We have veterans and heroes not only of those European wars, but also of wars elsewhere. Our children, however much they sometimes pretend that our past does not matter to them, also demand that. The stories of the Jewish Holocaust, the holocausts in Rwanda, the Partition of India, and the massacres of Cambodia are also Canadian stories.

Two to three hundred thousand new Canadians come to these shores every year; few people will say that this country has turned for the worse because of that; to remain viable as a country, we have no choice but to

allow our population to be augmented by 0.5 to 1 percent every year. And as much as many would like to hold up Cornerbrook or Nanaimo as emblematic of Canada, the reality is constantly shifting.

In this kind of convex reality, in which the world comes in, gets refracted and reimagined through Canadian writing, there is perhaps a place for writers such as I, who will always wash upon these shores.

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