

So Many Books

Susan Fisher

I often fear that books are taking over my life, as if reading were becoming the greater part of living. Here in the *CL* office, a similar impression prevails—books are winning out. Review copies crowd the shelves, pile up on the floor, annex desk tops, and fill our briefcases. We ship books out regularly, but the total quantity of books in our precincts never diminishes. We have brought this fate upon ourselves, for we order review copies of all titles that seem pertinent to the study of Canadian literature. The problem is the ever-increasing number of books that fall into this category.

As Laurie Ricou points out in “Last Pages” in this issue, it’s hard to say what might be useful to our readers. If you reflect for a moment on the interests of the English department in your neighbourhood, you will soon conclude (as we have done) that just about anything from oral history to natural history, medicine to folklore, geography to genetics could, in some way, bear on the study of Canadian literature.

Of course, our first interest remains Canadian literature and literary criticism, but for most Canadianists, affiliations based on gender or post-coloniality or period can be just as important as strictly national concerns. A book of interest to a scholar working on Rohinton Mistry is unlikely to attract the eye of the Agnes Maule Machar specialist (though he or she may also be interested in Machar’s near-contemporary, Sara Jeannette Duncan, and so the Indian material pertinent to Mistry may be useful after all). Nonetheless, our aim must be to serve all our colleagues.

We review literary criticism, novels, short stories, poetry, drama, travel writing, children's books, essays, autobiographies, reference works, art and film criticism, histories, diaries, local histories, cultural studies, and so forth. (We have even reviewed a few cookbooks.) Moreover, we try to do this in both official languages.

The relentless expansion of literary studies into neighbouring zones is not the only reason our reviews section keeps burgeoning. The number of books being published is steadily increasing. (One observer claims that somewhere in the world, a book is published every thirty seconds; in the face of this, even speed readers must admit defeat.) In Canada the pace is somewhat more leisurely—about one every forty minutes (based on the figures for 1999, the most recent year for which Statistics Canada supplies data). Many of these are not titles we would review; still, in our areas of interest as in other sectors of the market, a lot of books are being published. Between 1992 and 1999, the number of books published in English in Canada rose from 6,556 to 10,757. The growth in publishing in French was not so marked—from 3,155 to 3,682. (What is remarkable about French-language publishing is its size relative to the francophone population: about one-fifth of Canadians are francophone, but a quarter of all books published in this country are in French.)

If one judges only by the Statistics Canada picture of the 1990s, Canadian publishing is on a path of sustained growth. But the past three years have brought problems, most notably the bankruptcy of General Publishing and its allied distribution service in 2002. As Marc Côté pointed out in a recent issue of *Canadian Literature* (CL #177), the losses occasioned by the General Publishing debacle forced many small publishers to cut back their lists.

But a great many books are still being published in this country. In an article first posted in September of 2003 at www.dooneyscafe.com, Toronto writer Gordon Lockheed asserts that Canada simply “produces too many books.” Consequently, like any over-produced commodity, the book is losing its value, both in the marketplace and in the cultural life of the country. Lockheed goes on to decry the state of reviewing in this country, pointing out the steadily diminishing amount of space given to books in the nation's newspapers. He also takes a swipe at journals like *CL*: “Canada's university journals have completely descended into jargon-mustering or have become glossy display cases for artifactual materials.” We try not to muster jargon but rather to minimize it. (Lockheed, for his part, is mustering some pretty arcane words of his own: what, I wonder, are “artifactual materials”?) And if

newspapers and magazines are retreating from the domain of the serious review, then *Canadian Literature* has an even greater responsibility to provide the coverage not being provided elsewhere.

What is our duty to Canadian publishers, writers, readers, and scholars—and to the many Canadianists outside this country who read *CL*? What should our reviews accomplish? Laurie Ricou, writing in this space eighteen years ago (*CL* #109), described the reviewer's job as a "rear view" or a "turning around to look again"; he compared reviewing to walking through a Japanese garden, in which the "perspective going back the way you have just come is entirely different." Jan Zwicky, in the Fall 2003 issue of *Malahat Review* (a special issue on the topic of reviewing), asks that the reviewer become "a kind of literary naturalist, someone with sharp ears and a good memory." One of *CL*'s associate editors, Kevin McNeilly, also writing in the *Malahat Review* special issue, describes a review as "a speaking part that also attends to the voice or voices of another. It is a verbally proactive form of listening." In the October 2003 *Journal of Scholarly Publishing*, Ronald W. Tobin likens reviewers to "guests at a banquet prepared by an author." (Those among us with long experience of reviewing may instinctively feel that if food analogies are to be used, survival rations, fast food, and steam tray leftovers should find a place alongside the haute cuisine, but this is cavilling.) The reviewer, like the guest at a banquet, has certain responsibilities, chief among them "to be critical but civil." This is a fine injunction and one that we all should remember. But David Henige in the October 2001 issue of *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* worries that shrinking word limits are forcing even conscientious and civil reviewers to resort to formulaic reviews (as predictable, he claims, as the average *Love Boat* episode): "a few sentences set the stage, followed by a brief description, and perhaps an analysis of the book's contents. Then, for balance, a few nits are picked, to be succeeded by a 'despite these, this is a useful contribution to knowledge' conclusion." The result is that reviews become only "ritual objects" instead of the "contributions to colloquy" that they ought to be.

Henige's fears do not seem unfounded. In 500 words, it is hard to do justice to a book that represents many months or years of a writer's time. But I am constantly impressed by how much information and analysis our reviewers manage to fit into the small space they are allotted, without resorting to the formulaic approach condemned by Henige. I am afraid that we are about to test their skills even further. We have decided to initiate an experiment at *CL*: for some new works (certainly not all), we will ask for a notice of only

200 words, somewhat like the “In Brief” section of the *Times Literary Supplement* or “Briefly Noted” in the *New Yorker*. This will be hard on our reviewers, and it may shortchange some writers (and their publishers). But only by reducing some reviews can we hope to continue to accommodate the many new titles we receive. We hope that a short notice will give our readers enough information to decide whether the book in question is one they want to acquire.

We also hope that, despite the limitations of space and the inevitable delays, our reviews will continue to serve as “contributions to colloquy.” While editing the reviews section, I frequently stop to note the titles that I want to follow up on; I have also on occasion stopped to laugh out loud and even to wipe away tears. The scholarship, wit, breadth, care, and civility of our reviewers continue to impress me. I hope that other readers of *CL* also find the reviews pages a useful (and even entertaining and affecting) source of information about our field which, like the universe, seems destined to expand.



We are delighted to welcome two new associate editors to Canadian Literature.

Laura Moss, Assistant Professor of English at the University of British Columbia, joins us as Associate Editor (Book Reviews). Laura is the editor of a critical edition of Frances Brooke's The History of Emily Montague (2001) and of the recent collection Is Canada Postcolonial? Essays on Canadian Literature and Postcolonial Theory (2003).

Our new Associate Editor (Francophone) is Réjean Beaudoin, Professor of French at UBC. He is the author of Naissance d'une littérature. Essai sur le messianisme et les débuts de la littérature canadienne-française (1989), Le roman québécois (1991) et Une étude des Poésies d'Émile Nelligan (1997). Réjean will play a central role not only in the book review section but in all the francophone elements of Canadian Literature/Littérature canadienne.

We are very fortunate that Laura and Réjean have joined the CL team; we look forward to presenting their work in future issues.