

Canadian Authors

I have lived in Canada for over three years now, but I'm ashamed to say I still haven't read that much Canadian literature. I haven't, for example, read Carol Shields despite her recent fame (though I have a copy *The Stone Diaries* sitting on my shelf, waiting to be picked up). However, I have read some Canadian writing, and my rather limited exposure to it forms the basis for the book reviews and the thoughts I am going to set down here. There is no particular order or league of merit to the books and authors I am going to talk about, but that is how I choose what to read, without any particular system. Maybe these names will give you some new ideas when you next visit a bookstore. If not, they will at least tell you something about my prejudices (I could say "my opinions" but that would imply rationality, which seems rather inappropriate when I'm talking about what I like rather than what I think).

One of the better-known Canadian writers is W. O. Mitchell, author of the classic Canadian novel *Who Has Seen the Wind*. The story is set in a small town out on the prairies. I read it a couple of years ago and some impressions still remain with me. I don't pretend to remember the details of the plot, or perhaps even all of the substance. I thought the writing was wonderful and the characters deeply and sensitively drawn. I could see and sense the affection the author conveyed for the prairie landscape of her childhood. Yet—strangely—the feeling I still carry with me is an inability to "connect," a lack of empathy for the place and its characters. I couldn't relate to the book, couldn't submerge myself in it, and even while I admired it I felt no nerve touched by the words. I can only attribute my sentiments to the distance it lies from own background. I never felt comfortable on the prairies. I grew up amongst hills, took holidays in the mountains, went to university in two very lively and exciting cities, and in my own internal world the prairies suck. I can't possibly divorce my prejudices about this part of the country from my reactions to a book set amidst it. But reading this novel made me accept something I think is quite fundamental: the greatest writing needs to find a resonant chord in the reader. It needs common ground with the audience. People I can usually relate to, politics I can usually relate to, but the prairies...well, apparently not. I'd love to hear the impressions of some other non-prairie natives to this book. Is it just my own clouded vision or can only those who have grown up on endless flat ground under the vast and ever-changing subtleties of the open sky really feel this story?

My second writer is Ruby Slipperjack, and having found her work both intriguing and compelling I want to tell you a little about it. She has been described as "one of the strongest Native voices in Canadian literature." There is a large body of heavy and dry academic writing about the psychology and lives of Native Canadians as opposed to us relative newcomers to North America. A great deal has been written about how their attitudes and society may differ from what many of us assume about human society and human nature. I have read a fair bit of that sort of stuff without really understanding what it means. Real appreciation of a thing frequently depends more on feelings than on facts. *Silent Words* is a touching vision of what it could be like to be a growing aboriginal

child within the last thirty years. The book relates the story of a growing native boy who runs away from his problematic home and finds his own way through a variety of communities and experiences. As I followed Danny through his journey of discovery, I found myself much more deeply appreciative of what it can mean, in psychological terms, to be a Native American. I'm not saying there are any profound statements or explanations of the meaning of life—there are no sermons. I also haven't joined the Wannabe tribe. I just felt a sensitivity and an absence of judgment which allows the reader to simply be with the boy as he finds his way in the world, a world where the expected and the valued take form in ways different from my own experience or the experience of anyone I know. It is much more personal, more informative, and leaves a far deeper impression than several thousand pages of research and analysis.

Another modern writer is Armand Wiebe. I bought his book *Murder in Gutenthal* after I heard him do a reading in Winnipeg. He comes from a Mennonite community, and the book (one of quite a few he has written) is an intriguing mystery set in a Mennonite village. Although I got used to the tongue-contorting names after a while, I doubt I appreciated all of the humour because I just don't have much common ground with the place and its people. Yet I found myself interested, and soon addicted, wondering what was going on, laughing at ordinary human failings and eccentricities. Even though it takes place in a totally alien setting, the story is "lightweight" and amusing--but still absorbing. Maybe I even learned something about the Mennonites (I knew virtually nothing about them before).

Finally, I want to talk about a much older volume whose title, *The History of the Northern Interior of British Columbia*, is a little uninspiring, but that is deceptive. It was written by the Rev. A. G. Morice who spent time travelling and exploring in the west of this country around the turn of the century, and who took it upon himself to write a comprehensive history of the area spanning the period from 1660 to the late 1800's. It describes the adventures of the explorer, the intertribal politics of the Indian nations, the conflicts and the relationship between the Hudson Bay Company and the Indians, and much more. It is pervaded by a strong sense of justice, and there are occasional digs at earlier, inaccurate travelogues and histories. Especially considering when it was written, it provides a quite remarkably unprejudiced account of some of the problems faced by the Indians as they adjusted to the new force in their lives. It is both a fascinating and (to me at least) very readable account of real life during a complex and traumatic period (for the locals), and an entertaining travelogue as well. His account of the deliberate and malicious introduction of liquor to Indian communities is an interesting reminder of the roots of many social problems with which the First Nations are still struggling today.

It seems to me that I have learned as much about Canada from fictional and non-academic sources as I have from the statistics and facts I have read. I hope you will take a look at some of the authors I have discussed, and form your own opinions and impressions. I had heard next to nothing about Canadian writers before I came here, but there are some real talents to discover (and I have only mentioned a few of them). So, the next time you go to a bookstore perhaps you'll consider picking up a Canadian novel.

- Dr. Euan Taylor, Vancouver, Canada
[c/o editor@teletimes.com](mailto:c/o_editor@teletimes.com)