# The Rest of "American" Literature: Teaching Canlit

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I started teaching Canlit because of Gabriel Garcia-Marquez. In the 1980's, I became aware, as did everyone else, of the outpouring of innovated South American literature. Whether it had always been there or had only become suddenly available is questionable; nonetheless, I wanted to use some of Marquez, Cortazar, Neruda, Allende, Fuentes, and others in classes, and wondered where to put them.

It was obvious, of course: they were American writers, and I taught American literature. Even some of the anthologies started to include Latin writers. It only meant expanding the canon of what had been incorrectly called American literature, when it was really United States literature.

But that solution fathered forth another problem: if it were really to be American literature, what about the Canadians? Certainly there were writers "up there" as well, but one seldom heard of them.

I realized the only Canadian writer I knew well was Margaret Atwood and the only critic Northrop Frye. If there was more literature up there, it was sealed up behind the border; the border supposedly much more open than our southern border. So out of a sense of duty and equity I determined to learn something about Canlit, as I found it was called, even though I didn't expect to learn anything terribly interesting. After all, as even Canadians say, "Canada is a bore." (Brian Moore, *The Luck of Ginger and Coffee*, 214).

As I began to explore what was available, I quickly found that Canadian lit, at least, is not at all a bore; but finding out what it was, and how to access it, was difficult. There are some practical reasons for that, which are unfortunate for the student and/or teacher.

At the beginning, however, it seemed as if everything conspired to encourage this study. I quickly discovered that there was something called the ACSUS (Association for Canadian Studies in the US), and that several people in Minnesota were members—including some faculty at the state universities. I received invaluable help from Mark Vinz of Moorhead State University, who not only gave me some approaches to Canlit but also introduced me to people from the "other side." I also learned that Canada, through it's embassy, offered grants to US citizens wanting to study almost any aspect of Canadian culture, with the only requirement being use of those materials in course offerings to US students.[1] The embassy in Minnesota also made available their resources, including Canadian books readily available in the US.

My first task was to discover what Canlit was, exactly, and how it differed from US and other literatures. That, in turn, led me to look at Canadian history and culture, and I was surprised at how little I actually knew of the sprawling country that actually borders Minnesota, and which I've visited quite a few times.

To many Americans, if they think of Canada at all it's as a place to hunt and fish, with great areas of wilderness and a few cities clustered along the US border. I did know a bit more than that: a trip to Alaska some years back took me through major cities far to the north of the border, and four trips to Stratford, Ontario over the years for the Shakespeare Festival had given me a glimpse of the rich cultural milieu that supported wonderful theater. I began to dig deeper, getting at least a rudimentary idea of the rather brief but complex history of Canada, and then, through several trips into the country, exploring it's present-day cultural and literature.

Canada's major critic Northrup Frye once said the central philosophical question for Canadians was not so much, "Who am I?" as it is "Where is Here?" (Literary History of Canada, 826). Canadian nationality is quite new, and still supports a divided loyalty: the one dollar coin, as an example, displays the British queen on one side, and the native loon on the other (hence the coin's "loonie" designation—though it's a typically Canadian joke about which side the name's describing).

There has never been the revolutionary tearing-away from the old country that the US went through; hence never the sense of complete independence and unity that defines the States' experience; and even the duration of Canada as a unified country is newer than that



of the US: Newfoundland did not join the federation until 1949!

Defining Canlit is difficult, then, because of its diversity. Canadians tend to have greater loyalty to their province or even city than to federal government, and the literature often reflects that literal "provinciality." Further, strong ties to "the old country" add more complexity to the mix: a writer may be as deeply affected by the English, Scottish, French, or Ceylonese or Japanese or United States traditions and culture as by Canadian. For this reason and others, Canlit anthologies tend to be quite comprehensive, including great numbers of writers without much attempt to organize them into "schools," or patterns. Even an historical approach is rather pointless: Canadian literature , with the exception of "aboriginal" work is all new, within the last 150 years, with few major differences separating "older" from "newer" writers.

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There are some broad classifications. A number of recent writers have eschewed what they call the Canadian tradition, and having begun experiments with writing that "demythologizes" older writing; and one can make generalizations about Western Canadian writers (Prairie group) and Eastern (urban writers); but even these groupings tend to fall apart when trying to include Vancouver writers in the prairie group, or Newfoundlanders in the Eastern (or any) classification; and of course right in the middle is the anomaly of completely francophile literature, the Quebecois writers.

The best starting point for examining Canadian literature as a whole is probably still Margaret Atwood's early work, *Survival*, which attempts to clarify what is uniquely Canadian in terms of a national "victim" attitude or mind-set. Her more recent series of lectures, *Strange Things*, approaches Canlit thematically, and while not attempting to be all-inclusive, it does identify several of the major threads underlying much Canadian writing. Frye's *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* is also a useful overview of Canlit; and the current

situation of Canlit is discussed clearly in *Beyond the Provinces: Literary Canada at Century's End* by David Staines of the University of Toronto.

Beyond these basic guides, however, the best approach to Canlit is that offered to me by Staines himself, when I spoke with him on one of several literary journeys in Canada: visit cities, museums, exhibitions, libraries, and especially book stores, and learn everything possible about Canada, accepting it is diverse and often contradictory in its cultural attitudes.

There is, for example, some anti-American feeling, a fear of Big Brother taking over or, more subtly, infiltrating Canadian culture until it loses any unique qualities—quite justified, in many cases. At the same time, we found little individual resentment, and have always found Canadians not only courteous and more civil than many US citizens, but have been welcomed warmly into almost every area of Canadian life. Even in Quebec, which has a reputation for coolness toward "outsiders," the resentment was more evident toward other Canadians than toward US citizens.

My first real literary exploration began after reading as much Canlit as local libraries and the Canadian embassy could offer. I then was introduced to David Williamson of Winnipeg by a mutual friend, Mark Vinz of Moorhead, Minnesota. Vinz had worked with Willamson in an alliance of prairie writers that resulted in the anthology *Beyond Borders: New Writing from Manitoba, Minnesota, Saskatchewan and the Dakotas.* Williamson is the author of several novels, TV plays, and short stories, and was for a time chair of the Writer's Union of Canada. Like most Canadian writers, with a market of only twenty million potential readers, Williamson has a "day job" as a dean of business and applied arts at Red River Community College in Winnipeg.

A busy life, obviously; yet he was a gracious and valuable host, taking time from all his activities to actually escort me around Winnipeg and arrange introductions to many of the writers in that community. As my introduction to Canadian literature and hospitality, he was tremendous; I learned more in a short time with his help than would have been possible otherwise, and also thoroughly enjoyed my week stay. Among the writers I met were David Arnason and Dennis Cooley, the influential novelist and poet Robert Kroetsch, and Carol Shields, who had just been awarded the Pulitzer for her wonderful novel *The Stone Diaries.*



A second longer journey of exploration started in literary Ontario and carried me across Canada to New Brunswick, then back to the Stratford Shakespeare festival. This time, following Professor Staines advice, my wife and I did a wanderjahr, exploring the culture of the provinces from Ontario east. One piece of advice: there is far too much to see in the three weeks we allotted ourselves, and distances are vast. We planned to go all the way to Newfoundland, to experience the unique and eccentric world of *The Shipping News*, but realized in New Brunswick that we'd run out of time and would have to return to make our reservations for plays at Stratford.

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Nonetheless, we gathered considerable material and experience in exploring the Canadian cultural and literary world from Toronto east, and I was able to make some distinctions between the "two cultures" of Canadian literature: the "Prairie Writers" of the west, and the more urban and complex eastern Canadian milieu. The influence of the authors' native country is stronger here as well , in a place which does not resemble a melting pot so much as a rich menu of cultural identities. Thus we have Michael Odaatje, most famous for *The English Patient*, but also writing more frequently for his native Ceylon—and seldom of Canada. The fascinating actor, dramatist and novelist Robertson Davies is strongly influenced by his Oxford background; and Mavis Gallant, the ex-patriot, writes from a Gallic perspective. And of course there is a whole body of Quebecois literature, which must be approached as the work of a separate cultural entity.

There is also the distinctly provincial work of Lucy Maud Montgomery, whose *Anne of Green Gables* made her one of the few cross-cultural writers, and Prince Edward Island's unique culture familiar to readers world-wide. Besides E. Annie Proulx's marvelous *The Shipping News*, Howard Norman in *The Bird Artist* and *The Northern Lights* portray a Newfoundland culture unlike any other in the world.

Both Proulx and Carol Shield received consecutive Pulitzer prizes recently, which was only possible since both have retained dual citizenship; but the

effect was to call attention to the fact that there was , indeed, a body of Canadian literature, and a number of writers north of the US border who could attract readers anywhere. As I began to learn something about Canadian writing, I found there were great numbers of them.

Besides Atwood, Odaatje, Montgomery, Farley Mowat, Robert Service, Gallan and Alice Munro, there was Robert Kroetsch, whose prose and poetry are fascinating; Timothy Findley, an Ontario dramatist and novelist, whose *Elizabeth Rex* at Stratford was imaginative and challenging; Joy Kogawa of Vancouver, whose *Obasan* portrays the Japanese-Canadians' plight during WWII; the substantial body work by Margaret Laurence and a number of other older writers, almost entirely unknown to United States readers.

I mentioned the major difficulty involved in teaching Canlit earlier, and must clarify it now, because it also explains our ignorance in the US of this large body of fine literature. Canadians read US literature; in fact, are likely to be familiar with more of "our" writers than they are of there own. I discovered the problem when I first taught Canlit at Minnesota State University -Mankato after my reading and travel had prepared me to speak with enthusiasm, if not great authority, about what I'd learned.

When I attempted to order books through major Canadian publishers, I found it almost impossible: I could get copies of books by Shields and Proulx, who had broken through the border and been published in the US; but others like Robert Kroetsch and those published only in Canada, were "not available," nor were most of the major Canadian anthologies or reprints of many of the "classics" of Canadian literature. I still have no clear reason for this difficulty, although I've had several explanations. In the end, it became clear that the only way to get several of the texts I wanted was to order them from a Canadian bookstore; fortunately, I'd made several contacts, both in Winnipeg and Toronto, and the store owners had no such difficulty ordering books from the publishers, then shipping them to me. It is a real paradox, that the Canadian embassy is eager for US students to learn about Canlit, but Canadian publishers are reluctant to furnish the books necessary to the same students.

At any rate, after the first experience—and some stalling until the books, reordered, could arrive—I found students as interested as I was to learn about the whole new body of good writing



available to them. I hope this inconvenience won't keep others from the pleasure of exploring both the culture and literature of our best neighbor. My experience was both an education and an awakening to what should be considered when we teach our students "American" literature. In addition to incorporating some north-North American writers in American literature surveys, I taught courses in "straight" Canadian literature, which is more successful as a thematic or genre class than historically, since what one teaches is almost all contemporary, or at least modern, literature. Further, I taught a course simply The Rest of American Literature, where I returned to GG Marquex and company, and combined the best of South American with the best Canadian literature, compensating, I like to think, for our presumptuous definition of "American" literature.

Notes

[1]For information or applications for Canadian Studies grants, contact the nearest Canadian Consulate General, or the Academic Relations Office, Canadian Embassy, 501 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001 or call (202) 682-1740.

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