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In: *Variations on community: the Canadian space*. Otrúsarová, Lucia (editor); Martonyi, Éva (editor). 1st edition Brno: Masaryk University, 2013, pp. 275-280

ISBN 978-80-210-6404-1

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.81420>

Access Date: 03. 03. 2025

Version: 20250212

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True Confessions: Canadian Literature for Young Readers after 2001

Abstract

The article focuses on the winners of Governor General's Literary Awards for English language in the category of children's literature in the years 2001–2011; in search of the Canadian space, real or imaginary. The examples show the children's need of belonging, which is found in the bond with the land and sky.

Résumé

L'auteure se concentre sur l'espace canadien, réel ou imaginaire, de l'ensemble de livres appréciés dans les années 2001–2011 par les Prix littéraires du Gouverneur général décernés dans la catégorie des livres de jeunesse par le Conseil des Arts du Canada. Les exemples choisis montrent le désir des enfants d'appartenir quelque part ce qui est présenté par l'intermédiaire de leur harmonie avec la terre et le ciel.

It is no secret that literature reflects both real and imaginary dimensions. Literature spans across time and space and at the same time provides readers with an intimate picture of that environment. The rise of national literatures is evident in the increase of texts which deal with specific places and concerns, and make even outsiders familiar with domestic matters. Once national literature is established, its position can be subverted by a change in the canon (as is well known from the post-modern period). It can also be the emergence of new literary fields and genres which challenge the national writing. This paper focuses on contemporary Anglo-Canadian literature for young readers in search of the Canadian space, real or imaginary.

Taken from a central European point of view, there were two novels for young readers which used to represent the Canadian space: *Two Little Savages* (1906) by E. T. Seton and *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) by L. M. Montgomery. Experiencing innocent adventures in the eastern parts of Canada, their protagonists were of the tender age of ten or twelve, in a period when childhood fluently transformed into adulthood, with almost no adolescence in between.

The book market has changed over the past one hundred years. The growth and importance of literature for young readers is reflected in the number of volumes printed, the various and specialized publishing houses, the extension of topics, age categories, as well as in the growing number of literary prizes and book festivals. To explore and analyze a representative sample from the position of an outsider, I have decided to start with “the tip of the iceberg” – the win-

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ners of the last ten years of Governor Generals' Literary Awards [for English language] in the category of children's literature (2001–2011).

Historically, Canadian children's literature had to face similar problems as Canadian culture and literature in general, that is, the strong position of British and American markets. In spite of the emergence of books by Seton, Montgomery and others a century ago, "it has only shown significant growth in the last twenty-five to thirty years," says Judith Saltman in an overview (Saltman 23); "at the end of the 1990s [it] has emerged as a force" (Saltman 24). It seems that the best treatment of all aspects of Canadian space is provided by "first-class picture books for children" (Saltman 24), a special category in the Governor Generals' Literary Awards (GGLA).

Surprisingly, stories of young characters in the background of historical periods and events are the most frequent within the ten selected GGLA books for children. What Saltman says about contemporary Canadian historical fiction for young readers is true in that it "often incorporates the theme of coming-of-age" (Saltman 30); these characters "exhibit, for the most part, dignity and moral sensibility in their decision-making" (Saltman 30). The scope of historical periods in these GGLA books is not that wide; however, the link to Canadian space, real or imaginary, is quite impressive. The Ireland of 1847, the famine and immigration to Canada are captured in Caroline Pignat's *Greener Grass*. While the novel focuses on the reasons for migration and on the Irish roots of the immigrants, Canada is depicted in the final chapter of the novel as "nearly fifty Irelands side by side" (Pignat 261). Even in this brief comment, the Canadian space represents promise. The last thing we learn about Kathleen, a teenage girl on the ship, is that she is "Alive. Free. And full of hope." (Pignat 267).

Briefly, the other settings in the selection include the late Victorian era as the background of the fantasy adventure fiction novel *Airborn* by Kenneth Oppel. A 1934 disaster on Lake Muskoka forms the climax of John Ibbitson's novel *The Landing*. The Depression era in a prairie community is introduced with a touch of magic realism in *Dust* by Arthur Slade. The coast of Nova Scotia in 1952 is the starting point for an exploration of the history of piracy in William Gilkerson's *Pirate's Passage*. Iain Lawrence's *Gemini Summer* captures the atmosphere of the early space flights in the mid-1960s. Many details of the year 1965 are provided in *The Crazy Man* by Pamela Porter, a novel written in free verse. The present day in a small prairie town is used as the setting of *True Confessions of a Heartless Girl* by Martha Brooks, as well as that of *Stitches* by Glen Huser. *Fishtailing* by Wendy Phillips (another novel in free verse) takes us among contemporary teenagers in Vancouver.

The prevailing physical spaces explored in the selected novels are country side – small isolated communities surrounded by prairies or lakes, or suburban areas on the edge of a city wasteland. This is surprising because towards the end of the 20th century "at least 75.5% of Canadians live in an urban environment" (Egoff 122), and one would assume a relevant reflection of urban settings in contemporary writing. Since the authors choose mostly historical periods, a return to a rural setting seems logical. Rural, regional and environmental writing has been present in Canadian literature since its beginnings and it seems to be on the rise now. With respect to the extensive body of regional scholarship, Kateřina Prajznerová stresses the important role of regions in the culture of Anglophone Canada; for her "the region offers a meeting ground for a multitude of distinct ways of being Canadian" (Prajznerová 177). In the



presented examples, I will show how in the majority of the awarded novels the authors captured the resonance between their characters and their space; their “way of being Canadian” is surprisingly similar.

The opening lines in *Dust* stress the sense of belonging: “The prairie had marked Matthew as one of its own. He understood the connection between himself and the land, understood that he belonged there; when the wind blew, when the rain dotted his face, when the snow fell, he belonged” (Slade 1). A natural bond between the boy and the prairie is expressed in the next sentence: “When the sun darkened his skin, he knew the invisible rays were also working on the field of wheat beside him” (Slade 2). After Mathew disappears, it is his brother Robert who gets the chance to comment on “mutual resonance” (Prajznerová 177) between the land and the men. Robert sees a typical plant of the prairies, tumbleweed. Its local name is Russian thistle and Robert develops an association: “Had they actually blown in all the way from Russia?” (Slade 37). Within several sentences, the writer creates quite a complex notion: “He pictured the thistles tumbling over the North Pole, the Yukon, and landing here in Saskatchewan. The thistles struggled against the barrier like soldiers trying to scramble over barbed wire. It reminded Robert how his Uncle Edmund had gone over the trenches into No Man’s Land” (Slade 37–38). In the image of tumbleweed, the author managed to combine regional geography and the nation’s history as a natural part of the boy’s personal understanding of the place. So even if tumbleweeds are known for their uprootedness, for the boy they represent his roots.

The sense of belonging is important for little Emaline in *The Crazy Man*. After her father left their prairie town fed up with climatic challenges, she says, “How/ in the world could someone just disappear?/ Like snow on a windy day” (Porter 57). The author uses a familiar environment not only as resonance of the sad moments in Emaline’s life, but also to show its healing power. Angus the crazy man takes the girl to the fields where they “felt the flowers, smelled them. Rolled dirt/ between our fingers./ I asked him what these fields/ smelled like to him./ ‘Angus smells happiness,’ he said” (Porter 87). When the author focuses on happy moments in the girl’s life, she allows her to perceive the environment through several senses: “The prairie wind blowing my hair./ I lay on my back on the cool ground/ ... Prince [the dog]/ warming my side/ as I watched the sky” (Porter 16). The sensual and physical belonging to the land are one. Nothing is threatening even at night when the girl is alone: “Heard coyotes in the night/ from my open window. / ... / Smell of wood smoke/ on the night air./ A full moon” (Porter 137). Feeling, seeing, hearing, speaking, smelling and touching – the girl is sensitive to her environment. This all helps her find her place in life when her injury makes her immobile and her father leaves the family.

The Crazy Man is filled with many historical details. The reader learns about “Tommy Douglas/ the preacher who got elected Premier of Saskatchewan/ and got a law passed/ so we don’t have to pay to go to hospital” (Porter 21). There is also a reference made in connection with the Vietnam War: “our Prime Minister [Mr. Pearson] making a speech down in Philadelphia” (Porter 109). While these and many other facts may inspire the reader (the young one, or the outsider) to find more information on the topic, the sensual hints about belonging to a specific place are perhaps what provide a more vital understanding about being Canadian.



One recurring image concerns the vastness of space in the prairie provinces: “When you lie on your back in a bare field/ and look straight up, all/ you see is sky” (Porter 16).

Seeing the sky, its colour and character, guessing its meaning, being in harmony with it, or using it as a point of physical departure, or the beginning of the narration seem to be a typical feature of most of the children’s books in question. This also suggests that the stories for young readers have left the “two little savages” and the “red-haired girl” safely at rest in the woodlands of Ontario and Prince Edward Island, and have moved further west, to the open plains. The sky of Manitoba in *True Confessions of a Heartless Girl* is introduced in the second sentence of the novel: “It was ten o’clock in the evening, and veins of light flashed across the sky, an immense and rounded womb” (Brooks 12). The metaphor of the sky as a “womb” can be seen as a prelude to this story about the pregnant teenager Noreen, the divorced young mother Lynda and the wise old spinster Dolores. The motif of the sky is repeated many times in the novel. For Dolores, a clear sky, long vistas of a “big stretch of the valley” together with “the hot sage-smelling wind blowing off the land” (Brooks 72) are signs of understanding, spirituality and forgiveness. For Wesley, the young Cree father of Noreen’s child, the sky is part of natural wisdom inherited from his ancestors. “Out on the prairies on a clear night,” he explains to Noreen, “as long as you can find stars, or even imagine them, you can convince yourself that you don’t feel lonely” (Brooks 48). The sky and stars follow Noreen, who is unsure about herself, lost and puzzled (or heartless, as she sees herself), on her way to self-appreciation and coming to terms with the people around her. Canadian space has a healing effect in this novel.

The vast and endless sky, presented to the young readers as a familiar or helpful Canadian space, can be traced in other novels of the selection. In *Stitches*, of all possible introductions, the narrator pictures himself in the background of a vast horizon of a prairie town: “Mavis Buttley Junior High wasn’t something you’d pick out along the skyline, but it was what was on my mind between grades six and seven” (Huser 7).

In *Airborn*, the sky is a prevalent setting of the novel, home to the young airship cabin boy Matt: “Some people say it makes them lonesome when they stare up at the night sky. I can’t imagine why. There’s no shortage of company” (Oppel 1). He names familiar star constellations, but then he meets a stranger and so his adventures start. The anonymous air space loses its spiritual meaning and becomes understood more in technical terms.

Gemini Summer refers to the real Gemini space flights from Cape Canaveral in the mid-1960s. We watch them on TV with the Rivers family in the outskirts of Toronto. The imagination of the author makes a meeting happen between his character Danny Rivers and a real astronaut, Gus Grissom. Flying together high above the Earth, the astronaut says to Danny: “You wouldn’t believe the sort of ideas I’ve had up in space ... You see the whole world as a miracle ... You see there’s more to it all than any one person can ever understand” (Lawrence 246). Here the vast space means wisdom, which this time is not linked to spirituality, but to environmental concerns.

In *Fishtailing*, the present-day Vancouver is represented by a group of high-school students: Miguel, a Latin-American immigrant; Tricia, of Japanese-Canadian origin; and two ‘non-ethnic’ white students, Kyle and Natalie. The story revolves around violence, manipulation, poetry, bullying and non-functioning families. The sense of place is broken, as is the identity



of each of the four. The big city is depicted indirectly. It is only through the behaviour, emotions and feelings of the protagonists that we gain a sense of the region. This is how Tricia remembers her bike ride with Kyle: “With every breath/the leather of his jacket/air thick with rain and cedar” (Phillips 77). Even in this dark novel, the local flavour represents a moment of happiness.

Since the turn of the millennium, there has been an increase in the number of Canadian book awards for young readers: The Canadian Children’s Book Centre lists close to seventy different entries on their web pages.¹ Of these, the General Governor’s Literary Awards have become Canada’s premier book awards. Launched in 1937 for the fiction and non-fiction of 1936, the event did not include the juvenile literature category until 1948.² The selection of winners presented in this paper reflects many contemporary trends in writings for the young. The latest one, the distinction between literature for children versus that of young adults, has not yet been recognized by the organizers. Thus, novels for readers from 7 to 18 + are all considered within one category.

Canadian space as pictured in the selected novels is mostly located in the prairie provinces and in the west. The fact that these regions are reflected in nationally awarded stories for young readers is very important: it is evidence of the healthy development of Canadian literature for young readers. As each place comes to life in its story, the literary map of Canada for the young has extended far beyond the east coast and the Old World.

Animating the recent past is another distinct feature of the present selection. Stories set in various Canadian regions are linked with 20th century historical milestones. From ecological disasters to the space race and the civil rights movement, Canada is placed within the context of the modern and post-modern world.

Since its beginnings in the mid-19th century, modern children’s literature has been appreciated for providing space for the imagination of the young reader. In the present selection, especially in the books for and about younger children there is more play with fantasy and imagination; pirates, astronauts, flying objects and magic provide a link between the real world and fantastic adventures. In the selected books for and about teenage characters, the imaginary dimension connects with spirituality and, not surprisingly, with visions of maturity.

What is very important, but beyond the scope of this paper, is that two prize-winning novels were written in free verse. They reflect the changing nature of the reading habits of contemporary youth (who focus on short fragmented texts) while at the same time providing full reading pleasure.

Back in the 1980s, Sheila Egoff was surprised that “the few novels with city backgrounds have virtually no Canadian flavour” (Egoff 122). Since that time, Canadian cities have increased in the number of inhabitants, quite often in the proportion of “visible minorities” – as immigrants from non-European countries are called. Their stories are different. In the presented selection, traditional (white) characters prevail and they know or learn where they belong. They find solace in the open spaces, in their bond with the land and the sky. Children and teenagers of visible minorities who live in Canadian cities need the sense of belonging very much for

1) see www.bookcentre.ca/awards/canadian_awards_index

2) see “Governor General’s Literary Awards” at <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/>



their well-being. Their search for identity within Canadian space is the subject of numerous contemporary novels; nevertheless, these works (with the exception of *Fishtailing*), have not managed to place in the present GGLA selection. It will be interesting to observe what the GGLA [for English language] in children's literature will bring in terms of space, identity and belonging over the next ten years.

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