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Canadian Voices: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry by Emerging Canadian Writers. Volume One.

Toronto: BookLand Press, 2009. 248 pages. ISBN 978-0-9784395-5-2.

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About half a year ago an anthology bringing together 58 “emerging Canadian writers” (in its first volume) drew my attention, since I am interested in the various expressions of New Canadians’ search for a new identity. The reasons why I have decided to present it to the members of the Central European Association for Canadian Studies are manifold. As a “powerful and moving collection, which stretches across the boundaries of age, skin colour, language, ethnicity and religion to give voice to the lives and experiences of ordinary Canadians,” it may equally interest the literary critic and the Canadian literature historian, the Canadianist of various academic orientations, and the teacher who can use this volume as a resource book for classes in Canadian studies.

The question I asked myself before reading the volume was whether “emerging” pointed to the recent Canadianness of the writers included in it or to their very recent attempts at trying their hand in writing. In most cases both interpretations are valid. Migrants from different parts of the world, such as India and Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Italy, England, Poland, China, Serbia, Croatia, Kenya, Albania or the Caribbean, side by side with a few Canadian-born, bring a vibrant multicultural perspective of life in and around Toronto, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and even California.

The prose section, which is more substantial than the one devoted to poetry, includes both non-fiction and fiction – short (and short

short) stories or excerpts from novels or longer texts of the memoir type – honest, ironical, questioning, confessional, often brilliant, and always challenging for the Canadianist, who can as well read and interpret a large part of the volume as a collection of documents of individual histories and acts of self-therapy to counterbalance the trauma of displacement or other traumas and to add a new dimension – a literary one – to each reconstructed identity. The short prose texts, three to five pages each, are illustrations of a wide range of aspects which have to do not only with personal individuation, but also with broader contemporary issues related to multiculturalism, globalization, demographic dynamics, and various other anthropological questions.

Many of these short prose texts include brief definitions or descriptions of identities. They may be drawn in a generational perspective, e.g., “I come from a long line of sales people and hypochondriacs” (Nancy Kay Clark, 44), or strictly personal, e.g., combining physiological and occupational details: “My sister is a peri-menopausal, lactose-intolerant, software sales rep with an irritable bowel” (Ibid.). Exposed to co-existence and, sometimes, confrontation between two cultures, one protagonist of the Punjab tradition realizes that this is the frame within which “I began to understand my own significance” (Manny Johal, 70).

A few texts clearly reflect inherited forms of spiritual identity – religious or some other

forms of beliefs. Individual, relational and communal identity patterns are pinned down in condensed forms. Occasional details reconstruct not only individuals' stories but also stories of colonisation, of civil wars, of natural hazards, of human hatred, and human solidarity. The settings themselves are varied, the reader being taken to different countries of origin or of transit, as well as to specific Canadian places. Sometimes a narrow space brings together characters that would normally be separated by natural, political, social and cultural frontiers: "We are worlds apart, but sometimes geography and physics have now become inches and centimetres" (Perparim Kapllani, 84). Many details are equally interesting for the general reader and for the anthropologist. A (non-fictional) story taking place in mid 20th-century Kenya takes the reader into a world "ruthlessly segregated by race, colour and ethnicity, and further defined by title and tribe, class, caste and creed..." (Braz Menezes, 104) A traditional Eastern girl from Pakistan, who has gone through an arranged marriage according to the tradition in her country, is now the teenage wife of a university professor hired by the largest Nigerian university. She finds herself in a multinational community and tries to impress her husband by quickly learning the first rules of snobbery and of an elevated lifestyle. (Zohra Zoberi, 199-201). It is only the beginning of life-long learning through trial and error... Another character's life adventure, meanwhile, starts in Thailand, goes through Laos, and continues in Scarborough, Ontario (Pratap Reddy, 138-143). For another character, going from Prescott, Ontario, to Toronto to study Film and Television Arts is a form of displacement that is seen as the necessary step on the way to Hollywood... (Steven Hilliard Stern, 168-172). These are only a randomly selected few of the stories encapsulated in the 44 prose pieces of the volume.

The second part of the anthology, much shorter, gathers a bunch of poems, 24 in all, illustrating different backgrounds, different styles, different levels of craftsmanship and even different fashions along the time span. Some rhymed, others half-rhymed, unrhymed or clumsily rhymed, these poems share the profound need for sincere expression of joys and sorrows and wonders otherwise hard to express.

Jatin Naik, a Canadian journalist also included in this anthology as a poet, looks upon *Canadian Voices* as "a testament to the lives and experiences of ordinary Canadians. Through a vibrant, varied sampler of the Canadian literary scene, the book captures timely personal and cultural challenges, ultimately sharing subtle insight and compassion."

The book project was promoted and edited by Jasmine D'Costa, a highly respected prose writer and cultural activist, included in this anthology as an "emerging poet". Born in India, after being an academic and international banker for 25 years, Dr. D'Costa moved to Canada in 2004 and pursued a career in writing. Her own life story is exemplary for what it is like to be an emerging Canadian writer. Author of the collection of short stories *Curry is Thicker than Water* (BookLand Press 2008) and former President of WEN (The Writers and Editors Network), she says the stories included in this volume are "just as diverse as the people involved" and presents the book in the following terms: "*Canadian Voices* thereby aims to show how diverse Canada is and to take pride in our diversity. It's about being able to appreciate how people can be different from each other yet share so many things in common. The book contains fiction, non-fiction, memoir, humour, excerpts from novels, poetry, and real-life stories." Moreover, it is announced as only the first in a promising series. We look forward to the unfolding of this ambitious and generous project.

