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In: *Canada consumed : the impact of Canadian writing in Central Europe (1990-2017)*. Sparling, Don (editor); Kürtösi, Katalin (editor). 1st edition
Brno: Masaryk University, 2019, pp. 115-129

ISBN 978-80-210-9368-3 (paperback); ISBN 978-80-210-9369-0 (online : pdf)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.81857>

Access Date: 02. 04. 2025

Version: 20250401

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Present and Absent Canada: The Reception of Canadian Literature after 1990 in Slovakia

Lucia Grauzl'ová

Abstract

This article focuses on the reception of Canadian literature in Slovakia from 1990 to 2017. Although the overall number of Canadian works translated into Slovak has risen compared to the pre-Velvet Revolution period, their selection is even less representative because the list of writers published is largely dominated by commercially successful authors of popular fiction that is not in any obvious way associated with Canada. Lucy Maud Montgomery, the mother of the immortal *Anne of Green Gables*, tops the post-1989 list of the most-translated Canadian writers – not surprisingly, as her works have been continuously available to Slovak readers since the late 1950s. The presence of Margaret Atwood, the contemporary Canadian literary icon, was also predictable, but although four of her books have been translated she is far from being a household name with the general Slovak readership. The popularity of the film version of *The English Patient* might explain the translations of three of Michael Ondaatje's novels.

Résumé

Le présent article porte sur la réception de la littérature canadienne en Slovaquie entre 1990 et 2017. Bien que le nombre total d'ouvrages canadiens traduits ait augmenté en comparaison avec la période précédant la Révolution de Velours, leur sélection semble encore moins représentative que dans le passé puisque la liste des écrivains publiés est largement dominée par les auteurs de fiction populaire dont les livres ne sont liés au Canada d'aucune manière évidente. Lucy Maud Montgomery, auteure de l'immortel *Anne ...la maison aux pignons verts*, apparaisse en tête de la liste des écrivains canadiens les plus traduits en Slovaquie après 1989 – les ouvrages de Montgomery sont continuellement disponibles aux lecteurs slovaques depuis la fin des années 1950. La présence de Margaret Atwood, icône de la littérature canadienne contemporaine, sur cette liste a également été attendue bien que son nom ne soit pas très connu du lectorat général en Slovaquie – et ce malgré la disponibilité de quatre de ses livres en traduction slovaque. Le succès du film *Le Patient anglais* aurait, de son côté, motivé la traduction de trois romans de Michael Ondaatje.



Canadian literature in Slovakia has never achieved the popularity of its American counterpart. Before 1990 it was underrepresented in Slovak book culture mainly for ideological reasons. Canada was seen as a part of the “corrupt capitalist West,” which meant that publishing houses approached its literature with caution. Only very few Canadian authors were made available in Slovak at that time. Out of the little over thirty Canadian titles that were translated during the forty years of Communist Party rule, the majority were set either in Canada’s pristine forests or in its idyllic rural gardens. The only Canadian writers who achieved a sizeable popularity in Slovakia were Lucy Maud Montgomery and Ernest Thompson Seton. Their books accounted for about sixty per cent of the Canadian titles translated and published in this period. Although, considering their print runs, they must have won the hearts of Slovak readers, their reception in print periodicals was almost non-existent. The reason was that Montgomery and Seton were regarded as authors of children’s and young adult literature, which was not – and still is not – subject to serious critical scrutiny in Slovakia.

Purely quantitatively, it may seem that the situation has changed considerably since the end of Communist Party rule in 1989. The number of Canadian titles that have been made available in Slovak since the Velvet Revolution is now a three-digit figure (about 300 works). However, a close survey of the book list will reveal that most of the titles were written by popular fiction authors who sell well globally, yet are not connected to Canadian culture in an obvious way. The list is dominated by names such as Joy Fielding, Arthur Hailey, Mary Balogh, and Judy Gill, whereas the names of CanLit greats are largely missing.

This is not surprising. Although the ideological barriers to publication were removed after 1989, new limitations emerged. The dictate of ideology was replaced with the dictate of the market. In a market economy, the potential to generate sales is one of the key factors in deciding which book titles are going to be translated and made available to readers. As a result, quality Canadian literature is losing compared to its popular counterpart. While Fielding, Balogh, and Hailey saw the translation and publication of dozens of their books, canonical Canadian authors, except for Lucy Maud Montgomery, are made available mostly randomly and in small print runs. The consequence is that although there has been a steep rise in the number of Canadian titles brought out by Slovak publishers since 1989, Canadian literature and culture remain largely unknown to Slovak readers.

Despite this unfavourable situation, some quality Canadian authors have been made available to the Slovak readership since 1989. This paper focuses on three writers who have had at least three books translated into Slovak: Lucy Maud Montgomery, Margaret Atwood, and Michael Ondaatje. It deliberately omits Alice Munro, whose three short story collections have been translated into Slovak recently, because the reception of this author in Slovakia is being dealt with by Jana Javorčiková in a separate



article in this volume (“Between Sound and Silence: Alice Munro’s Critical Acclaim in Slovakia”, pp. 215–222). It is assumed that these authors have left at least a certain trace on Slovakia’s book culture and inscribed themselves in the hearts of Slovak readers. Besides exploring the circumstances of the publication of the translations of their books, this article seeks to map their reception in newspapers and periodicals intended for the general readership as well as online (especially at databazeknih.cz and on the website of Martinus, a major Slovak bookseller, which allows customers to post reviews). It is expected that reviews in newspapers and mass circulation periodicals and online reviews have a greater impact on how general readers consume books than reviews in academic journals, which are meant for specialized readership and are thus largely inaccessible to or beyond the scope of the interest of readers outside this group. Although online reviews are not always written by professional readers who have a literary education and are well informed, and are often what Ann Steiner refers to as “private criticism in the public space,” marked by “heightened emotion,” “self-expressiveness, intimate language, and self-exposing details,” and expressing “view[s] based on experience rather than on the text,” they are just as likely to influence book lovers’ purchase decisions as reviews written by experienced professional reviewers. According to a *Forbes* article, consumers increasingly trust online reviews; 88 per cent of them attribute them the same weight as a personal recommendation (DeMers). In addition, despite being of dubious literary quality, online reviews are still interesting as evidence of a book’s reception.

Lucy Maud Montgomery

There are very few literary characters who have become the best friends of so many girls and young women worldwide as the outspoken and dreamy red-headed Anne Shirley, better known as Anne of Green Gables. As attested to by the numerous excited, if not ecstatic, online responses on Slovak bookselling websites, Anne has been popular with several generations of Slovak women too. The Anne books seem to be synonymous with childhood memories, daydreaming and an elixir of happiness and joy for moments of loneliness and sadness, and they have been read not only by today’s teenage girls but also by the generation of their mothers and grandmothers (see customer reviews at martinus.sk).

After all, the first of the books, *Anne of Green Gables*, was translated into Slovak sixty years ago, in 1959. Two more of the Anne books, *Anne of Avonlea* and *Anne of the Island*, were brought out by the same publisher, Mladé letá, ten years later, and helped Anne Shirley establish a firm foothold in Slovak book culture. As I write elsewhere, the Anne books achieved print runs comparable to those of Hemingway in the



communist years, which gave their author, Lucy Maud Montgomery, pride of place as the most popular Canadian author in Slovakia (Otrisalová 2012, 169–170).

Montgomery has not been taken off the pedestal since then. In the nineties *Mladé letá* brought out translations of the remaining titles in the Anne series – *Anne of Windy Poplars*, *Anne's House of Dreams* and *Anne of Ingleside* in 1993 and *Rainbow Valley* and *Rilla of Ingleside* in 1994 – as well as novels which feature Anne only in the role of an episodic character (*Chronicles of Avonlea* and *Further Chronicles of Avonlea*, both in 1995). In addition it published other books from the pen of “Anne’s mother.” It can be assumed that the reputation that Montgomery had grown and the impressive sales of the Anne books in the previous years encouraged the publisher to have other books by the author translated. The positive sales expectations might also have been contributed to by the popularity of Kevin Sullivan’s TV adaptation of *Anne of Green Gables*, which Slovak Television started broadcasting in 1993 and which probably surpassed even the original book version in popularity.

Although literary tastes and trends change, Anne’s popularity with Slovak girls and women seems to be undying. This is confirmed by Marta Jankajová, the long-standing managing editor of *Mladé letá*, who says that the Anne books still achieve good sales (Kopcsayová); Ester Krahulcová, a librarian at the Karol Kmeťka Regional Library in Nitra, according to whom the Anne Shirley trilogy still resonates with young adult readers in Slovakia (“Deti čítajú”); and a number of blog posts about Anne Shirley on the Slovak web. In addition, *Anne of Green Gables* places high in popularity surveys in Slovakia. The readers of the *smeženy* magazine, a weekly supplement to a major Slovak daily, voted it the book of their youth in an online survey in April 2010 (Gašparcová). The book also achieved success in the Slovak version of the BBC Big Read, a national book survey whose aim was to find the nation’s Best-Loved Book and popularize reading, which was aired by Slovak Television in the same year. Slovaks voted *Anne of Green Gables* the fourth-most popular book and the second best-loved book by a foreign author (“Zoznam”).¹

As popular as *Anne of Green Gables* is with Slovak readers, it seems to have been largely overlooked by professional critics and reviewers since its first publication in the late 1950s. This lack of interest on the part of reviewers may be accounted for by the fact that the book is viewed as part of the category of children’s and young adult literature, which is generally underappreciated in Slovakia – and not only there. As Charles Sarland writes, “The criticism of children’s fiction has been something of a poor relation in critical studies,” the reason being “the tendency . . . to view writing for children as a ‘mere’ craft, not worthy of critical attention” (42). Although the situation is slowly improving and increasingly more literary scholars are working “to claim a space in the literary canon for texts written for an audience of young readers”

1) Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince* was the most popular book.



(Wannamaker 22), most existing projects in Slovakia which review and evaluate texts aimed at children and young adults (for example, *Úlet s knihou*) do so primarily to give advice to parents on which books to buy for children or give guidance to educators on how to use particular books to develop their pupils' reading skills. They therefore inevitably focus on evaluating the axiological aspects of the texts rather than their literary quality.

The few reviews of Montgomery's books that are available also deal with their educational potential. While most of the reviewers before 1990 emphasized the conformity of Anne Shirley with the socialist ideal of womanhood, praising "the sense of responsibility with which Anne fulfils her school and home duties and the unrelenting enthusiasm and dedication she shows in training for a teaching career" (Otrisalová 2012, 171), after 1990 the reviewers turn to extolling the unconventionality and independence of Anne's spirit, character traits thanks to which she is perceived as "ill-mannered" and "quick-tempered" by the people around her (Pánisová). Anne's ability to "assert her emotions, opinions, attitudes and ideas of love in an extremely conventional environment" is also pointed out by Jana Juráňová, a Slovak gender studies expert, writer, and translator, according to whom Anne has the potential to serve as a positive role model for teenage girls ("Anna zo Zeleného domu"). Barbora Gričová from *Lenivý rodič* ([Lazy parent], an online site offering information and advice related to children's upbringing), is convinced that *Anne of Green Gables* should be "a guidebook for any coming-of-age girl," because by presenting moral values in a natural manner it has the potential to push the development of the girl's character in a positive direction. Gričová is not the only reviewer who points to the morally instructive dimension of Montgomery's writing. Contemporary reviewers in general speak of the author's tendency to season her stories with moral lessons (see Pánisová, Grbjar); however, they never accuse her of moralizing and sentimentalism, which were typical features of young adult literature and women's literature at the beginning of the twentieth century. Instead, they praise the timelessness and transferability of Montgomery's attitudes and ideas.

A few reviewers also note the literary quality of Montgomery's writing. It is appreciated for the passages in which she, as one of the first authors in world literature, lets children speak and think for themselves. The reviewer – mf – even goes as far as recognizing Montgomery's influence on other modern children's writers, Slovak authors such as Klára Jarunková not excluded. By drawing a link between Montgomery and Jarunková, one of Slovakia's most successful and most translated children's book writers, the reviewer makes it clear that Montgomery is a major Canadian author of international stature. Another reviewer, Martin Grbjar, sets her as an example for contemporary Slovak women authors who, in his opinion, can learn from her how to write a good, captivating story for girls and young women. In his 2009 review of



Anjel medzi tieňmi (*Among the Shadows*, a short story collection) he uses attributes like “brilliant,” “rich,” and “faithful” in reference to Montgomery’s narrative style, language, rendition of dialogue, and descriptions of situations, emphasizing her qualities as a writer although she writes “only” for girl audiences (Grbjar).

Since most of the reviews reference Montgomery as a Canadian author or Canada as the setting of her novels, and since there is no other Canadian writer who has achieved a comparable success with Slovak audiences, she is the best-known and best-loved ambassador for Canada in Slovakia. In addition, Montgomery has earned quite a solid reputation for her great writing skills in Slovakia despite being pinned down and confined to the box of an “author of books for girls.”

Margaret Atwood

Margaret Atwood is undoubtedly Canada’s most prominent literary figure and one of Canada’s best-known export articles. It is therefore hardly surprising that the first Canadian book to appear in Slovak after the revolutionary year of 1989 was from her pen.

Her novel *Vynáranie* (*Surfacing*) was published in a Smena edition in 1990, but its translation must have been initiated before November 1989. First, publishing houses at that time did not expect translators to complete their work within a couple of months’ time as is a common practice nowadays. This means that the novel’s translator, Katarína Karovičová, probably had a reasonable period of time to do her work. Also, the book was first published in Canada in 1972, so there was no apparent reason to rush the translation, since a few extra months or years would not further date the novel. Second, the novel was published in a print run of 15,000 copies. Print runs of such a size were typical of the period of socialism when “foreign literature in translation,” particularly if it was from Western Europe, the USA, or Canada, “enjoyed the status of rare cultural capital that was hard to get” (Korte 28). Later on, as a capitalist free market economy developed in Slovakia, print runs dropped to a level of 2,000 to 3,000 copies per title.

Although the translation of *Surfacing* was initiated in a period that was still characterized by censorship, it can be assumed that it was slowly waning in the late 1980s. And even if it had not, it would probably have been easy for the novel to pass the scrutiny of communist censors due to “its anti-American tendencies and its critical dialogue with the norms and conventions of Western civilization in general” as was the case in East Germany (Ferguson 100).

The publication of *Surfacing*, however, was not the beginning of Atwood’s story in Slovakia. As Marián Gazdík writes in his article on the author’s reception in Slovakia, Slovak readers had a chance to get the feel of both her poetry and prose in 1982 when



a selection of her works appeared in Slovak translation in the journal *Revue svetovej literatúry (RSL)* [World literature review] (Gazdík, 156). Unsurprisingly, Karovičová, the translator of *Surfacing*, also stood behind this endeavour. Among other things, she wrote an article introducing Atwood as “the pioneer of Canadian literature” and translated excerpts from *Life before Man* for the issue. Karovičová told Gazdík in a personal interview that she had later approached the Slovenský spisovateľ publishing house with a proposal to publish the whole novel, but it was rejected because according to the publisher Atwood was “an average female writer” who did not meet their high standards (Gazdík 156).

As is evident, Karovičová played a key role in enabling Atwood’s reception in Slovakia. In addition to her essay on Atwood and translations published in *RSL*, she produced an afterword entitled “Z hĺbín ľudského vnútra” [From the depths of the human soul] to accompany her translation of *Surfacing*, introducing the author, who had been a stranger to Slovak readers until that time, and outlining her central thematic concerns (e.g. the Canadian identity and environment, the position of women in today’s world, and US cultural imperialism). As Marián Gazdík and I point out in our article on English Canadian literature in Slovak translation, Karovičová’s paratext plays down the novel’s “feminist alignment” and brings to the fore its universal appeal (Otřísalová and Gazdík 122). The reason is that, as Nadežda Lindovská notes, “the word ‘feminism’ [is] an insult in Slovakia” (381). Women fear to be associated with feminism because being a feminist is automatically interpreted as being violently hateful of men (Lindovská 381). Therefore, rather than focusing on the feminist themes that the novel addresses, Karovičová deals with its environmental concerns, critique of Americans and their behaviour towards the environment, and the empowering transformation of *Surfacing*’s female protagonist, which is a result of her return to nature.

Similarly, Marta Komžíková-Součková in her review of the novel, which was published under the title “Sugestívny svet Margaret Atwoodovej” [The suggestive world of Margaret Atwood] in *Dotyky*, a journal for young readers and aspiring writers, skillfully suppresses Atwood’s association with feminism by saying that although Atwood deals with women’s issues, sometimes she does so in line and sometimes in conflict with “the requirements of the feminist movement” (41). She writes that Atwood “goes against her own femininity,” mocking both women’s foolishness and men’s cockiness (Komžíková-Součková 41). Komžíková-Součková belittles the role of “the opposition of female and male principles” in *Surfacing* and ascribes importance to another aspect of the novel: “the choice between a superficial and meaningful way of life” (41). She does her best to convince the reader that Atwood is more than a women’s literature writer.

However, when Atwood’s novel *The Robber Bride* was published eight years later in Slovak translation (as *Nevesta zbojníčka*; translator Jana Juráňová) there was no way



for Atwood to escape being labelled a feminist, because her book was brought out by *Aspekt*, the publishing house of an eponymous feminist organization, which was established in 1993 as the first of its kind in Slovakia. *Aspekt* had shown an interest in the Canadian writer since its foundation. It had published a couple of Atwood's stories, a poem, a short essay, and excerpts from *The Robber Bride* in its eponymous journal by the time it published the translation of the book. Although the publisher promoted it as "one of the best novels by the famous Canadian writer" and "a masterpiece of twentieth-century literature" ("Nevesta zbojníčka"), the novel did not draw as much attention as one would have expected.

Despite being popular with female academics (see studies by Katarína Labudová, Jana Javorčíková, and Libora Oates-Indruchová), *The Robber Bride* received very few reviews in newspapers and magazines. Stanislava Chrobáková promoted it in the *SME* daily as "a novel about dangerous women, women-bees, women-typhoons, and women with a suspicious intuition, in short, a novel about various women and their similar destinies," which in a way confined the book within the boundaries of women's literature. Etela Farkašová, a Slovak writer and philosopher, wrote a detailed review of the novel for the *Aspekt* journal, praising this "exciting women's quadruple-story . . . situated in contemporary Canadian reality" as Atwood's "most sophisticated work so far" and its author as "a storyteller par excellence" (200). However, the review is unlikely to have been influential given the limited readership of the journal.

One can only speculate about the reasons for the novel's weak reception and lack of success in Slovakia. One of them could be the low profile of the publisher. *Aspekt* is a minor publishing house which is mistakenly, and unjustly, lumped together with such women's literature publishers as *Motýľ* or *Evitapress*, which have a reputation for publishing undemanding books of dubious literary quality for women. Another reason could be the publisher's association with feminism, which, as I have mentioned earlier, is quite unpopular in Slovakia, but it is difficult to assess whether and to what extent Atwood's association with the feminist publisher might have done a disservice to her reception in Slovakia.

Although Marián Gazdík suggests that Atwood's third novel in Slovak translation, *Príbeh služobníčky* (*The Handmaid's Tale*, 2001), "stoked quite a lively discussion in Slovakia" (159), I would say that its initial reception was also relatively lukewarm. Again, it reinforced Atwood's image as a feminist because some feminist groups had appropriated the book for their manifestos. And again, it was brought out by *Epos*, a non-mainstream publishing house which specializes in publishing professional literature and legal statutes and only marginally in fiction. As Gazdík, the translator of *The Handmaid's Tale* and popularizer of Canadian literature in Slovakia, writes, he was approached by the publisher in 1999 with a request to translate "an obscure fantasy novel," but being aware of the publisher's liking for sci-fi, he offered to translate At-



wood's dystopian novel instead (159). The book in English had already been reviewed in *RSL* in 1989. The reviewer, Alexandra Ruppeldtová, connected it with the tradition of “English ‘futuristic’ fiction” of Aldous Huxley and George Orwell (183), the authors whom Atwood is most often compared to. Gazdík, however, finds her reading of the novel as “an ironic, even satirical response to various feminist movements” (Ruppeldtová 184) to be “weird,” explaining that the reviewer did not understand that these movements had only reacted to the “tendencies which appeared in the USA and Canada at that time” (159).

Ruppeldtová's interpretation of *The Handmaid's Tale* as anti-feminist is not, however, unique. The moment when Offred is speaking to her dead mother, who was an ardent feminist activist, can quite easily be viewed as an ironic critique of feminism:

Mother, I think. Wherever you may be. Can you hear me? You wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists. (Atwood 127)

It is true that the novel is more often read as a critique of the New Right, religious fundamentalism, and the pro-life movement that appeared as tendencies in US society in the 1980s (see Huttová; Otrisalová, “Politický čin”), but one must realize that “[a]t the time, the Christian evangelical movement was finding common ground in the United States with anti-porn feminists” (Onstad). Thus, it is not wrong to see the theocratic patriarchal tyranny of Gilead as justified through feminist ideals and the novel as a warning “against the risks of taking feminist causes at face value” (Newman). Just as it is not wrong to read the novel as a backlash against the Christian conservative anti-feminists of the Phyllis Schlafly stamp who went against and repudiated the feminist legacy. As is evident, the ambivalence of its political message makes the novel vulnerable to multiple interpretations and misinterpretation.

While the first responses to the novel in the 2000s had a neutral tone and focused on its universal appeal (see Huttová; Otrisalová, “Politický čin”; Ferko), the novel's reception became more varied in 2017 when Hulu's TV series adaptation of Atwood's iconic speculative novel started to be aired. The TV series and the media hype that surrounded it – together with Trump's victory in the US presidential election, which allegedly increased demand for dystopian classics, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* included (Alter) – have led to a global rediscovery of the book, and Slovak readers have not been exempt from this global trend. Unlike the reviewers in the 2000s who saw the novel as a general warning against totalitarianism, readers in the late 2010s seem to be more sensitively aware of its relevance for our times. Lucia Čarná claims that Atwood predicted what we as society are very close to living:



a dictatorship of fanaticism, totalitarianism, the suppression of minority rights, and the violation of women's and children's rights. No, we are not a Gilead yet, but when you read some Internet discussions and see how some of our citizens are sending people to gas chambers . . . and consider only women who can have children respectable, you find out that this book is no longer sci-fi.

Jana Eldesová calls Atwood's novel an eye-opener for those who take their liberties for granted, because it "shows how easily we can lose them." In light of this, it is not surprising that *The Handmaid's Tale* was also noticed by the alt-right website Nadhľad, which regards it as "feminist and anti-white propaganda," accusing Atwood of "neo-Marxist paranoia and hatred towards conservative whites" (Againsttime).

That a TV series can do a better service for an author's reception than the noble intentions of academic reviewers is attested to by the fact that Slovart, a publishing house renowned for bringing out the best books by the best Slovak and foreign authors, republished Gazdík's translation of *The Handmaid's Tale* in 2018 and has commissioned him to translate another of Atwood's books, *Alias Grace*, into Slovak. Even though the novel was reviewed by Jaroslava Blažková and Danica Hollá-Terenová already in 1997 following its first publication in Canada in 1996, it can be assumed that the publisher chose this title for translation due to the success of the Netflix miniseries adaptation of the novel, believing that the TV series could stimulate the sales of the book.

These publishing initiatives may well mark a shift in Atwood's reputation in Slovakia. Rather surprisingly, the last Atwood translation to date, *Penelopiáda* (*The Penelopiad*, 2005), was published thirteen years ago. Since Slovart brought it out as part of an international project entitled Myths, initiated by the British publishing house Canongate, which invited selected contemporary writers to retell ancient myths, it is not clear to what extent the author's name might have been crucial to the publisher's decision to have *The Penelopiad* translated into Slovak. Although Atwood's book was indisputably one of the better retellings in the series, because it was not too philosophical or too experimental – it was "written in a really refined style" (Andričiková 198) and was made available in a "convincing and readily witty" translation by Jana Juráňová, who, according to Eva Batiková, did a good job at capturing the tongue-in-cheek irony of the original (7) – this rather inconspicuous book in Atwood's vast and diverse bibliography was unlikely to shoot the author to stardom in the Slovak context. According to one of the book's reviewers, Michaela Malíčková, a full appreciation of any retelling of an ancient story is possible only if the reader is familiar with the original version of the story. As a result, not everyone is able to enjoy and understand Atwood's playful and ironic retelling of Penelope and Odysseus' story, which blends traditional elements of Greek drama and modern narrative techniques.



Atwood still has to wait for a genuine breakthrough on the Slovak book market. Despite being one of the better-known Canadian authors, she is not a household name in Slovakia yet. Her books do not sell as well as Montgomery's, and until she achieves the status of a writer with good previous sales, publishers will be wary about publishing another book of hers irrespective of the international reputation she deservedly enjoys.

Michael Ondaatje

Without the Academy Award-winning film adaptation of his novel *The English Patient*, Michael Ondaatje would probably have remained a stranger to Slovak readers. The likelihood that it was probably the global success of Anthony Minghella's film which made Slovart publish a Slovak translation of the book in 1997 is attested to by the blurb on the book cover, which promotes it as "an awarded book that inspired the film garlanded with 9 Oscars." To further strengthen the book's association with the film, the publisher decided to change the book cover when re-releasing the novel in paperback edition in 2000. The motif of sand dunes, which is so prominently present in the film, is probably supposed to help the readers connect the two.

However, as readers' responses on different websites suggest, not everybody who loved the film enjoyed the book as well. While the film tells the story of Count Almásy, which was extracted from the novel on which it is based, in a relatively straightforward manner with an emphasis on its mainstream intelligibility, the book is reminiscent of an impressionistic puzzle which few readers have the patience to solve. On online sites, most readers complain that the novel is "slow-paced," "difficult to read," and "confusing," and some of them admit that they have not finished it.

Despite that, *The English Patient* was probably quite successful with readers, because Slovart published two more editions of it (in 2003 and in 2016); the novel was also included in the SME World Library, which brought out fifty modern classics in 2005. Since the SME World Library books were sold in newspaper stands at reasonable prices, they sold quite well. According to the publisher, each title sold about 11,000 copies on average ("Svetová knižnica SME"), which is quite an achievement in Slovakia.

The relative success of Ondaatje's *The English Patient* probably stood behind the publication of his two other books in Slovak translation, *Anilin duch* (*Anil's Ghost*, Slovart, 2001) and *Divisadero* (IKAR, 2009). The book teasers that accompany them emphasize that they are from the pen of the author of the famous *The English Patient*, as if this fact alone should suffice to ensure some sales. However, the reception of these books by average readers is not dissimilar to that of *The English Patient*. They complain about "frequent plot digressions" and "lengthy, boring passages" and recommend others to arm themselves with patience.



As can be seen, Ondaatje is not very likely to top the list of best-selling authors in Slovakia. His fragmentary style is too complicated to satisfy average readers, who just want to read a good story. However, more discerning readers can appreciate the beauty and poetry of the language of “one of Canada’s best-known literary experimenters,” as Ondaatje is labelled by Slovarť (“Michael Ondaatje”).

Conclusion

Jana Javorčiková suggests that in terms of the number of translations, Canadian literature has been experiencing a period of renaissance in Slovakia since 1989 (“Kanadská literatúra” 57). And she is right – although only partially. Compared to the previous forty-year period when Slovak publishers put into print a little over thirty Canadian titles, there has really been a marked increase in the frequency of translations from Canadian literature in the past thirty years. However, most of the three hundred books that have been published since 1989 can be labelled popular or “low” literature, i.e., literature that does not have much literary merit. In addition, it is the type of literature that hardly ever explicitly addresses Canadian issues and thus fails to facilitate an intercultural dialogue between Canada and Slovakia.

Very few quality Canadian authors have captured the interest of Slovak readers to such an extent that their names are generally recognized in Slovakia. Of the three writers that this paper deals with, only Lucy Maud Montgomery has achieved mainstream popularity and the status of an author of timeless classics. Although largely overlooked by literary criticism, she is often commented on by general readers who find her Anne Shirley one of the most inspiring literary characters ever. Margaret Atwood and Michael Ondaatje, on the other hand, seem to be favoured by more discerning Slovak readers. Although some of their stories became popular with mass audiences thanks to the media of TV and film, their postmodern narrative strategies are appreciated only by some. As a result, they are unlikely to ever figure among the best-selling authors in Slovakia.

As is evident, Canadian literature is not fully established on the Slovak book scene. Current Slovak translations of quality Canadian authors are a result of individual endeavours by translators, the popularity of the screen adaptations of their books, or an author being awarded a prestigious literary prize rather than a result of the programmatic endeavour of Slovak publishers to introduce Canadian literature to the local readership. For this reason, Canada’s rich and varied literary scene remains largely undiscovered by Slovak readers.



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