

Perceptions of Contemporary Canadian Fiction

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Many stories can be told about how Canadian fiction has been received; a single essay can only tell one of them. On the publication of new works, critics offer their critiques. Later, these immediate evaluations become affirmed or challenged in critical works, which offer theories that can be used to see works in broader perspectives. One way to think about how the works discussed in this volume have been received, then, is to look at some of these broader perspectives and at some of the ways these changed during the 1970–2013 time period that this volume addresses. The story that this essay will tell surveys several models that tie many works together: these models focus on nationalism, multiculturalism, postmodernism, and globalization as important ways to understand contemporary Canadian literature.

Nationalism: Creating Canons

Margaret Atwood's book *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, published in 1972, is a prominent example of both thematic and nationalistic criticism. Atwood posits that nations have distinct literatures that reflect key ideals in their national myths, and that "every country or culture has a single unifying and informing symbol at its core" (*Survival* 31). For England, she says, the Island is the central motif (Atwood, *Survival* 32). Following Frederick Jackson Turner, she identifies the Frontier as the dominating myth for the United States (Atwood, *Survival* 31). For Canada she names Survival (Atwood, *Survival* 32). In Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, for example, the motif plays out in the survival of the central figure, Morag, but works out tragically in the lives of her Métis lover and several of his relatives. On the other hand, should Audrey Thomas' *Intertidal Life* or Alistair MacLeod's *Island* be seen as British, given their island settings? Atwood avers these symbols should not be seen

as “articles of dogma which allow no exceptions,” but as “vantage points from which the literature may be viewed” (Atwood, *Survival* 31).

In a sly reference to a book by her teacher, Northrop Frye, entitled *Anatomy of Criticism*, Atwood writes, “This method will, I hope, articulate the skeleton of Canadian literature. It will let you see how the bones fit together, but it won’t put flesh on them” (Atwood, *Survival* 40). Atwood identifies a series of motifs that reflect the *Survival* idea. Some of these Frye would call archetypes. One example would be what she calls the “Great Canadian Baby” (Atwood, *Survival* 207). The notion that a book ending with the birth of a baby might suggest the birth of a new society makes this a particularly apt motif for relatively new nation—a former colony—trying to assert its individual identity in the shadows of the mother country and the country to the south. However, Atwood describes the child as “the Baby Ex Machina, since it is lowered at the end of the book to solve problems for the characters which they obviously can’t solve for themselves” (Atwood, *Survival* 207). Atwood uses a probable pregnancy towards the end of her novel *Life Before Man* as a symbol of a new community coming into being, yet troubles any sense that this baby will provide a happily-ever-after ending for the characters by having the pregnant woman worry about whether she will lose her job because of becoming an unwed mother, and how her partner will react to the news (284).

Victimization becomes a key motif for expressing the concept of *Survival*. Borrowing from popular self-help books, Atwood identifies four basic Victim Positions. In Position One, the victim denies that he or she is a victim (Atwood, *Survival* 36). Those in Victim Position Two acknowledge victimhood, but feel that whatever victimizes them is too powerful to fight. Victims in Position Three “refuse the assumption that the role is inevitable” (Atwood, *Survival* 37). Victim Position Four encompasses “creative non-victims,” those who transcend victimization and are able to tell their own story in original and imaginative ways: “you are able to accept your own experience for what it is, rather than having to distort it to make it correspond with others’ versions of it” (Atwood, *Survival* 39).

The Victim Positions, with their natural progression from one to four, work exceptionally well for analyzing characters in Atwood's own fiction. In literature in general, they are most useful as a tool of analysis in stories that show a protagonist progressing to an epiphany. Atwood uses Del Jordan, the protagonist of Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* as an example of a woman who attains Position Four:

[Del] has secret ambitions as a writer, again the culture is bent on stunting or destroying them, and the situation is compounded by the fact that the potential artist is a woman. She defies the culture, leaves it, and survives to become an artist; but she transfers her imaginative allegiance from the stylized world of Gothic grotesques she has dreamed up as an adolescent to the small-town "here" she despised when she was actually living in it. She chooses to write from the centre of her own experience, not from the periphery of someone else's, and she sees her act of creation as an act of redemption also. (*Survival* 193)

The heroine of Aritha van Herk's *Restlessness* might be seen as transcending victimization, even victimization by death, since Dorcas chooses her killer and the day of her death, thereby taking control of the uncontrollable. That would place her in the Fourth Victim Position, a creative non-victim, no longer victimized, able to create her own life—and death—story.

Survival as a concept for categorizing large numbers of works has been criticized because looking for a particular subject matter in literary works will automatically select against those works that don't display the given theme, potentially ruling out whole groups of texts, while giving special emphasis to those that reflect the theme. Aritha van Herk's *Restlessness*, for example, might be read not as suggested above, but rather as having an anti-survival theme, challenging survival as a major Canadian paradigm.

Frank Davey has made serious attacks on Atwood's theory and other Canadian thematic criticism. Focus on theme reduces both culture and texts to "catch words such as Atwood's 'victimization' and 'survival'" (Davey 3). He deplors the way Canadian criticism

is “reluctant to focus on the literary work—to deal with matters of form, language, style, structure, and consciousness as these arise from the work as a unique construct” (Davey 1); thematic criticism “attends to the explicit meaning of the work and neglects whatever content is implicit in its structure, language, or imagery” (Davey 3). However, it is important to note that readers can do with thematic criticism what Davey says they should do with other kinds: not just show that stories demonstrate the theme, but that they vary, in literary ways, as they do so. The language and other “clothing” an author puts on the theme alters it, too, enlarging any given theme beyond what might seem its limiting boundaries. Or, in the metaphor Frye and Atwood use, readers can put flesh on the bones, and in doing so, reveal both commonalities and differences of literary technique as well as subtle variations on the theme.

Many stories from many nations use *Survival* as a premise, for example, British writer Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* or American author Jack London’s “To Build a Fire.” Perhaps Davey’s strongest criticism of *Survival* is that “Atwood develops her thesis that victimization is a characteristic theme of Canadian literature by ignoring its ubiquity in contemporary world literature” (4–5). Yet Atwood often describes how the Canadian character struggling for survival differs from an American or British character in similar circumstances (see, for example, Atwood 73–75 or 209–10). Davey calls for criticism that studies “that ground from which all writing communicates and all themes spring: the form—style, structure, vocabulary, literary form, syntax—of the writing” (7), rather than simply focusing on meaning.

Canadian nationalism was fostered not only by *Survival* and other works of thematic criticism, but also by literary scholars who met in Calgary and listed one hundred significant Canadian novels, works that express the nation’s mythos; the list was published in 1982. “It was composed, virtually in its entirety, of realistic, linear, conventional novels that were the central, defining texts of the new Canadian tradition—one that valued works that affirmed the country and its people,” writes Robert Lecker (668). One of the novels discussed in detail in this book, Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners*,

made the top ten in that list (see Matthews 151). *The Diviners* offers a particularly interesting example of the Davey/Atwood controversy, as discussed in the chapter on Laurence. On the one hand, I suggest a reading that makes it a highly nationalistic text. On the other, I offer—and prefer—a reading that asks about the literary effects Laurence creates surrounding her characters.

Multiculturalism: Expanding Canons

If one way to define Canada has to do with a unifying symbol—Survival in a harsh world that constantly victimizes its inhabitants—an alternative way has been to think of the nation as a mosaic, a term that *The Canadian Encyclopedia* traces back to John Murray Gibbon's 1938 book, *Canadian Mosaic: The Making of a Northern Nation*, which contrasted Canada's encouragement of immigrant groups to remain distinct with the American melting pot image of assimilation. John Porter used the term "Vertical Mosaic" in his 1965 book, *Vertical Mosaic: An Analysis of Social Class and Power in Canada*, "to convey the concept that Canada is a mosaic of different ethnic, language, regional and religious groupings unequal in status and power" (Vallee).

The mosaic metaphor suggests that Canada is made up of distinct pieces: people of many different ethnic backgrounds, both native and immigrant. Some critics looking at the literary canon believed that it should reflect that diversity by including works by formerly marginalized groups. Other critics, such as Davey, believed that concerns about writing itself and literary genre should be preeminent in selecting Canadian texts. By the 1980s and '90s, exploding canons became an important task that literary critics set for themselves.

Robert Lecker's 1990 article in *Critical Inquiry* "The Canonization of Canadian Literature: An Inquiry into Value," takes the Canadian canon to task for not analyzing the values it perpetuates in its choices. He complains that the canonizers created "an image of themselves and their values" (Lecker 657); he terms this "cultural self-recognition," and goes on to state, "Literature becomes a means through which Canadians can know themselves and verify their

national consciousness” (Lecker 662). Values in works selected for the canon include “a preoccupation with history and historical placement; an interest in topicality, mimesis, verisimilitude, and documentary presentation; a bias in favor of the native over the cosmopolitan, a concern with traditional over innovative forms . . .” (Lecker 657). Works that are experimental or show international influence get excluded, Lecker avers, “because they are somehow treasonous in their alignment with things foreign” or “because in being ‘experimental’ they are antirealistic, anticonservative, anti-Canadian” (669). Thus, many works by women, native Canadians, and people of ethnicities other than the dominant British Isles group would automatically be rejected for canonization. Lecker calls for “the rehistoricization of Canadian literature—not in terms of the vague notion of value embedded in rhetoric and propaganda of our inherited school, but in terms of a new and rewritten conception of history as a narrative that is not received but created, not dictated but free, false, in flux” (671).

In 1982, Canada repatriated its Constitution; this document includes the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which acknowledges the equal rights of all Canadians. The definition of Canada as a multicultural society fosters embracing differences. Including in any Canadian canon works by members of diverse ethnic groups, religious persuasions, and sexualities becomes essential, if the canon is to give a glimpse of the nation.

In this volume, Holly L. Collins discusses two fictions written in French in Québec by Haitian immigrants, Marie-Célie Agnant’s *The Book of Emma* and Dany Laferrière’s *How to Make Love to a Negro without Getting Tired*. Similarly, Janice Fiamengo writes about Madeleine Thien’s *Simple Recipes*, a book of short stories by an Asian Canadian writer, which is part of the new canon. Because of the movement both in Canada and elsewhere to expand canons, these texts—and more like them, if there were more space—can be included in a volume on contemporary Canadian fiction.

Postmodernism: Exploring one Postmodern Genre

The postmodern period in literature began after World War II; postmodern writers attempted “to break away from the modernist forms, which had, inevitably, become in their turn conventional, as

well as to overthrow the elitism of modernist ‘high art’ by recourse for models to the ‘mass culture’ in film, television, newspaper cartoons, and popular music” (Abrams & Harpham 227). Robert Kroetsch, for example, as Aritha van Herk talks about in her essay in this volume, offers a revision of a doggerel ballad about the Yukon Gold Rush as a basis of his *A Man from the Creeks*. Similarly, van Herk’s novel *Restlessness* deconstructs popular genres: the thriller and the murder mystery.

In *Surviving the Paraphrase*, Davey supplements his critique of thematic criticism by proposing several analytical projects. One of these he terms “Discontinuous Structure in Post-Modern Canadian Writing”: it “could directly attempt, on the basis of Canadian literature, an elucidation of the problems and advantages of discontinuous literary structure. Such structure has been at the core of most significant new writing in Canada in the last decade,” he wrote in 1983 (Davey 9). He acknowledges that literatures of other countries use this literary technique, but “the opportunity nevertheless exists for a literary problem important to all literatures to be usefully discussed strictly in terms of Canadian writing” (Davey 9).

Linda Hutcheon picks up Davey’s challenge in *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*, but goes beyond his suggestion of discussing the use of discontinuous structures as she discusses many aspects of one genre of postmodern writing in Canada: fiction. According to Hutcheon, postmodern art “is openly aware of the fact that it is written and read as part of a particular culture” (1); it seeks “to trouble, to question, to make both problematic and provisional any . . . desire for order or truth through the powers of the human imagination” (2); and it “implicitly challenges any notions of centrality in (and centralization of) culture” (3). “It is . . . the place where the centre is paradoxically both acknowledged and challenged,” Hutcheon writes, and the border is its preferred space (4). Postmodern irony “refuses resolution of contraries—except in the most provisional of terms” (Hutcheon 5); verbal irony, along with word play “can subvert the authority of language, language seen as having a single and final meaning” (7). Parody,