

## The Outline of Contemporary Canadian Literature

Yu. Chernova

Petro Mohyla Black Sea National University, Mykolaiv, Ukraine  
Corresponding author. E-mail: chernovadolceyliia@gmail.com

Paper received 23.01.18; Revised 27.01.18; Accepted for publication 29.01.18.

<https://doi.org/10.31174/SEND-Ph2018-151VI44-03>

**Abstract.** The article gives the historic background of the development of post-colonial literature in Canada and enumerates contemporary Canadian writers giving the most interesting facts from their biography and the list of most powerful works. The research compiles the material for better viewing of the modern tendencies of the Canadian literature development as a tradition in the independent country.

**Keywords:** *Canada, Canadian literature, contemporary writers, historic background.*

Literature as written and spoken material is most often a reflection of the country's history. Frequently students do not know the significant historic events from Canadian history so it is worth of giving them an introduction in order to create later a full picture of the literature as a separate cultural tradition.

The first Europeans to reach Canada were the Vikings. They did establish a colony in North America but they abandoned it because of conflict with the natives. After that Canada was forgotten until the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. In 1497 the English king Henry VII sent a Venetian navigator and explorer named John Cabot on an expedition across the Atlantic to Newfoundland. Then in 1534 and in 1535-36 a Frenchman named Jacques Cartier sailed on two expeditions to Canada. However no permanent settlements were made in Canada until the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. In 1604 a Frenchman named Samuel de Champlain founded Port Royal in Acadia (Nova Scotia) and in 1608 he founded Quebec (this name is believed to be an Algonquin word meaning a narrow part of a river). In 1642 the French founded Montreal and the new colony in Canada was called New France. But after the war of the Spanish Succession (1701-1713) France was forced to recognize British control of Hudson Bay and Newfoundland. The French were also forced to cede Nova Scotia to Britain. More conflict between Britain and France was inevitable. During the Seven Years War (1756-1763) the two nations fought for control of Canada. In 1763 the French were forced to surrender all their territories in Canada to Britain by the Treaty of Paris. After the American Revolutionary War about 40 000 Americans who remained loyal to Britain migrated from the newly independent country to Canada which finally gained democratic government on July 1, 1867 when Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick were federated as the Dominion of Canada. Having passed the British North American Act Britain marked the official birth of Canada. Many Britons migrated to Canada and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century many Eastern Europeans also migrated there. In 1896 gold was found in the Klondike district of the Yukon and a gold rush ensued. More definitive independence came in 1931 with the Statute of Westminster, and in 1982 with the Canada Act and the repatriation of Canada's Constitution. But Canada is still a constitutional monarchy, the head of state being the monarch, currently Queen Elizabeth II. Today Canada is divided into 10 provinces and 3 territories.

Canadian culture is heavily influenced by British and American influences. The province of Quebec historically has maintained a distinct French culture. Thus fears of a cultural take-over initiated the establishment of many laws and institutions to protect Canadian culture. It all concerns literature as well which in its turn can be divided in two grand blocks: French-Canadian and English-Canadian.

Starting with the latter one it is necessary to mention that a group of Canadian writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was resolute enough to write with Canada being their setting in order to

place their own country's literature as a unique tradition in the complicated historical and cultural context. The most significant Canadian novelists who have much impact on public are Margaret Atwood, Robertson Davies, Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro, Mordecai Richler and Rudy Wiebe. They are united by their love for Canada but acutely differ in the writing style. Each of them worships the Motherland with its harsh climate and thinly scattered population.

Margaret Laurence (1926-1987) is widely read and respected. Writing from childhood she makes plot and personality inseparable showing the audience something they have experienced themselves. Laurence's style is full of symbolism that is easily perceived by an ordinary reader. In one of her short stories entitled "The Loons" the authoress makes these birds and Native Canadians interwoven because the disappearance of the former reflects the exile of the latter. Living with her husband in Africa Laurence wrote and published in 1954 "A Tree of Poverty", her own translation of Somali folktales and poetry, the first such collection ever published in English. Her novels are "This Side Jordan" (1960), "The Stone Angel" (1964), "A Jest of God" (1966), "The Fire-Dwellers" (1969) and "The Diviners" (1974). "The Stone Angel" is the book for which Margaret Laurence is best known and is consistently listed as one of the greatest Canadian novels ever written. In "The Stone Angel" the writer gives a birth to a fictional Manitoba town called Manawaka which occupies a notable place in the Canadian imagination. The novel is narrated retrospectively by a ninety-year-old woman Hagar Shipley in her eldest son's home in Vancouver. Laurence presents female perspective on modern life showing us choices women must make and their consequences. Moreover Laurence wrote several books for children and published three short story collections. Also Margaret Laurence was a founder of the Writers' Trust of Canada, a non-profit organization that tries to encourage Canadian writing community. In 1986 Laurence was diagnosed with lung cancer when the stage was already the last one. The authoress committed suicide at her home on January 5, 1987.

Robertson Davies (1913-1995) is well-known internationally. He analyzes his own characters dramatically by exploiting all concepts – "the duality of experience, the beneficence of wonder, the sanctity of the psyche, processes of individualization" [1]. Davies's psychological patterns of this analysis are much more notable than his protagonists. The first significant novel written by Robertson Davies is entitled "Tempest-Tost" (1951). This work opens his first trilogy The Salterton Trilogy set in an imaginary town and depicting cultural Canadian life. The second and third parts of the cycle are "Leaven of Malice" (1954, won special award for humor) and "A Mixture of Frailties" (1958) respectively. This trilogy contrary to the following complicated ones is read like a love story in the best traditions of romantic fairytales. But the real world fame was obtained by the novelist

after he had finished his philosophical and magic The Deptford Trilogy where Davies demonstrates his avid interest in Jungian psychology. "Fifth Business" (1970), "The Manticore" (1972, won the Governor-General's Literary Award in the English language fiction category) and "World of Wonders" (1975) came to be known as it. The Cornish Trilogy contains even more striking fantastic elements comprising "The Rebel Angels" (1981), "What's Bred in the Bone" (1985) and "The Lyre of Orpheus" (1988). The last cycle The Toronto Trilogy wasn't finished by the writer and remains incomplete including "Murder and Walking Spirits" (1991) and "The Cunning Man" (1994). Davies was the first Canadian to become an Honorary Member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. Also wrote plays, essays and critical pieces. Robertson Davies is survived by three daughters. A park in Toronto was named after him in 2007.

Mordecai Richler (1931-2001) is one of the most eminent Canadian writers. A singular figure in Canadian literary and cultural history, Richler remained, in the words of critic Robert Fulford, "the loyal opposition to the governing principles of Canadian culture"[2] throughout his long and productive career. His instincts were to ask uncomfortable questions and to take often unpopular moral positions. Born into an Orthodox family in Montréal's old Jewish neighborhood, a community he immortalized in his work, he was from the start a complex and uncompromising figure, at once rejecting many of the formal tenets of his faith. That tension, comedic sensibility and fearlessness about speaking his mind ensured that nearly every word he published displayed a distinctive emotionalism. No one else sounded like Mordecai Richler, and few other writers in Canada have ever demanded, and maintained, such a high profile as both an admired literary novelist and a frequently controversial critic. Richler is considered to have achieved a professional writing style only with his fourth novel, "The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz", published in 1959. The novel gave Canadian literary world one of its most challenging protagonists but the work had little impact in Canada which was still apathetic in terms of art and literature, so the novelist continued living in London where he had settled by 1954. He and his wife did not repatriate permanently with their five children until 1972, and did so then in the thrall of a determined cultural awakening, a period now known as the era of cultural nationalism. Richler both helped define the new literary Canada, and benefited from its unfolding. Other novels of his "The Incomparable Atuk" (1963) and "Cocksure" (1968) are satires of insight and ferocity, as well as caustic, at times surreal wit. "St. Urbain's Horseman" (1971), the seventh novel of Richler, was published simultaneously in England, the USA and Canada, and won Richler his second Governor General's Award (the first was for "Cocksure" and "Hunting Tigers Under Glass"). In 1974, "The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz", by now a well-taught text in Canadian high schools, was also turned into a successful film. The library which Richler portrayed in this novel was given his name in 2015. On its appearance in 1997, "Barney's Version" became an instant bestseller and, shortly, winner of the Giller Prize. By many it is considered to be autobiographical because it is a story of unapologetic Jew Barney Panofsky. The death of Mordecai Richler was mourned throughout all Canada.

Carol Shields (1935-2003) is the author of "The Stone Diaries" (1993, winner of the Governor General's Award, National Book Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize), "Larry's Party" (1997, winner of the Orange Prize) and "Unless" (2002, winner of the Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize). Shields was an American-born novelist but having got mar-

ried to a Canadian student got Canadian citizenship. The couple had a son and four daughters. Carol Shields was also intensely interested in Jane Austen and wrote her biography entitled "Jane Austen" which won the 25 000\$ Charles Taylor Prize for literary non-fiction in April 2002. Carol Shields died of breast cancer. "The Stone Diaries" is a story of a woman who tries not to be tied to the domestic household, the topic Shields highlights bravely. To the authoress's mind women shouldn't be dedicated housewives only, thus she gives a kitchen a symbolic meaning – in the novel it is a scene of birth and death simultaneously.

Timothy Findley (1930-2002) began his artistic career studying dance and then later theater. His first success as a novelist didn't come in Canada. His first two novels were rejected by Canadian publishers and were in the end published in Britain. The situation changed with "The Wars" (1977) which won a prestigious award and was adapted for film. Findley continued to write establishing his reputation as one of the most beloved Canadian writers. The novel by him "Not Wanted on the Voyage" (1986) remains one of his most popular and is a retelling of the biblical story of Noah and his journey on the ark. "The Telling of Lies" (1989) won an award for mystery writing. The success was followed by "Headhunter" (1993), a dark and futuristic novel. In 1999 Findley published one of the most ambitious novels of his, "Pilgrim", the story of a seemingly immortal man. Also wrote scripts for film and television. As a teenager admitted being homosexual. Timothy Findley was briefly married to the actress, but their marriage lasted only three months. Then he got together with his lifetime friend, the screenwriter Bill Whitehead, and they spent the rest of their lives together. Margaret Atwood was Findley's friend. The writer admired the work of Russian writer Anton Chekhov.

Mavis Gallant (1922-2014) by virtue of her early contacts with the French-speaking people of Quebec was bilingual from childhood. Best known as a short-story writer but also wrote some novels and essays. After her husband's death Gallant's mother remarried and left her daughter behind with a guardian. Later the writer would say that she had a mother who shouldn't have had children. Gallant changed 17 educational establishments. In her 20s started working as a reporter thus many critics didn't take her seriously as a writer. Gallant left journalism in 1950 to pursue fiction writing fulltime. She moved to Europe with the hope of being able to work exclusively as a writer rather than supporting herself with other work, and settled in Paris, where she resided for the remainder of her life. Her first internationally published short story, "Madeline's Birthday", appeared in *The New Yorker* and the magazine soon published other stories of hers. But the authoress didn't initially know these later stories had been accepted by the magazine, as her literary agent pocketed \$1,535 in royalties and told her the magazine had declined her stories. She discovered that she had been published only upon seeing her name in the magazine while reading it in a library. Fascism was one of the most painful topics for the authoress. Mavis Gallant wrote two novels "Green Water, Green Sky" (1959) and "A Fairly Good Time" (1970), and numerous celebrated collections of short stories: "The Other Paris" (1953), "My Heart Is Broken" (1964), "The End of the World and Other Stories" (1974), "Across the Bridge" (1993). Mavis Gallant valued personal independence and appreciated works by Boris Pasternak who also emphasized that only personal freedom matters.

Margaret Atwood (born in 1939) was born in Ottawa, the daughter of an entomologist therefore ecological catastrophes are acutely highlighted in many of her novels while the

writer herself has been an environmental activist for a long time. A long ago Atwood alongside Alice Munro became a symbol of Canadian literature, her works are published and translated into other languages straightaway after being written. The authoress is extremely prolific, writes fiction and poetry. Atwood's principal work of literary criticism "Survival: a Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature" (1972) is still considered to be an introduction to contemporary literature of her country internationally. In this piece of work Atwood states that Canadian literature should and can find its own way not to be a colonial addition to America or Britain. Atwood won more than 55 awards. Her novels include "The Edible Woman" (1970), "Lady Oracle" (1976), "Life Before Man" (1980), "The Handmaid's Tale" (1985), "The Robber Bride" (1993), "Alias Grace" (1996), "The Blind Assassin" (2000), "Oryx and Crake" (2003), "The Year of the Flood" (2009), "MaddAddam" (2013), "Hag-Seed" (2016). Fans of Atwood's oeuvre can visit her official site [margaretatwood.ca](http://margaretatwood.ca). Atwood often portrays female characters dominated by patriarchy and social oppression. There are numerous critical pieces on her novels and it can take much time to discuss her style but one should just once read Atwood and feel those mysteries, puzzles and riddles where nothing is accidental both in her plot and language. Complex intellectual metaphors nothing but imply opposite meaning.

Austin Chesterfield Clarke (1934-2016) was born in Barbados and moved to Canada in 1955. He is best known for the depiction of moving of his fellow Barbadians and their struggle for integration, especially in the trilogy "The Meeting Point" (1967), "Storm of Fortune" (1973) and "The Bigger Light" (1975). Clarke also wrote poems and short stories. In 1973 Clarke was designated cultural attaché at the Barbadian Embassy in Washington, DC. He became a Canadian citizen in 1981. From 1988 to 1993 he served on the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada.

Alice Munro (born in 1931) was the first Canadian ever to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2013. She is called Canadian Chekhov and was immortalized on Canadian currency. The acclaimed short-story writer appeared on a silver collector's coin, joining Jane Austen and Astrid Lindgren, who appeared on UK and Swedish banknotes respectively. J. Moss stated: "Her prose is clear and uncluttered. She exhibits meticulous control over narrative voice and situation. She effortlessly evokes mood and manipulates response" [1]. But Munro is not a simple writer. Time and place in her stories are real and therefore readers are bewildered because they have already fallen out of the habit to read something non-complicated. Munro portrays the worlds of women and girls, and every time it is an absolutely new world and by being shared in recollection it causes an effect of *déjà vu*.

Rudy Wiebe (born in 1934) is a Canadian author and professor emeritus in the department of English at the University of Alberta. In his childhood for thirteen years he lived in an isolated community of about 250 people, as a part of the

last generation of homesteaders to settle the Canadian west. He did not speak English until six since Mennonites at the time spoke Low German at home. He is called a prose stylist, the way he shapes each phrase is unique and inimitable. Wiebe's novels include "The Blue Mountains of China" (1970), "The Temptations of Big Bear" (1973), "My Lovely Enemy" (1983), "A Discovery of Strangers" (1994), "Sweeter Than All the World" (2001). Also he published a volume of memoirs about his childhood. Wiebe writes of Mennonites, Indians and Metis. In "The Temptations of Big Bear" his vision of the Plains Cree in the last century is transported into our immediate presence.

Michael Ondaatje (born in 1943) is a Sri Lankan-born Canadian poet, novelist, editor and film maker. He is an Officer of the Order of Canada that proves his being one of the most renowned living writers. Ondaatje's parents got separated when he was a child, then he lived with his relatives until 1954, then moved to England to join his mother. Then he immigrated to Quebec in 1962. In 1992 he became the first Canadian to win the Booker Prize for "The English Patient". Other works written by Ondaatje include "In the Skin of a Lion" (1987), "Anil's Ghost" (2000), "The Cat's Table" (2011).

Rohinton Mistry is an Indian-born Canadian writer. He was born in 1952 in Mumbai, India to a Parsi family. He immigrated to Canada with his wife-to-be in 1975. He has written novels "Such a Long Journey" (1991), "A Fine Balance" (1995) and "Family Matters" (2002). All novels are about Indians and set in India. "Family Matters" is a touching story of a man who faces difficult home problems while ageing.

Yann Martel (born in 1963) is a Spanish-born Canadian writer best known for his novel "Life of Pi" (2001), international bestseller that has been dramatized. He is also an author of "Self" (1996), "Beatrice and Virgil" (2010) and "The High Mountains of Portugal" (2016).

Lawrence Hill (born in 1957) was born in Ontario to American immigrants – a black father and a white mother. His parents' work in human rights movement and Black history greatly influenced Hill's belonging as a writer. His first passion was running but his dreams of winning an Olympic gold medal were not realized. Lawrence is deeply passionate about the advancement of women in Africa and visited several African countries as a volunteer. His novels are "Some Great Thing" (1992), "Any Known Blood" (1997), "The Book of Negroes" (2007), "The Illegal" (2015). He also writes non-fiction.

Canadian literature charms a reader the moment he starts reading it. It is a mixed and multinational phenomenon but this feeling of devotion to Canada as Motherland makes us never forget what we once read by Canadian authors. It is like a black and white photo looking at which one can feel what a writer describes as if it has been already personally experienced.

#### REFERENCES

1. Moss J.(1981) A reader's guide to the Canadian novel. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.
2. New W.H. (2003) A History of Canadian Literature. McGill-Queen's University Press.
3. The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction/R.V. Cassill. – 5<sup>th</sup> edition
4. [www.localhistories.org/canada](http://www.localhistories.org/canada)
5. [www.encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com](http://www.encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com)
6. [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com)

#### Очерк по современной канадской литературе

Ю. Чернова

**Аннотация.** Статья предоставляет исторические предпосылки развития пост-колониальной литературы в Канаде и перечисляет современных канадских писателей, при этом делая акцент на самых интересных фактах их биографии и приводя список самых значимых их работ. Исследование компилирует материал для лучшего видения и понимания последних тенденций развития канадской литературы как традиции независимого государства.

**Ключевые слова:** Канада, канадская литература, современные писатели, историческая предпосылка.