

# Canadian Science Fiction: A Survey

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Although science fiction generally encourages a cosmic and cosmopolitan outlook, it is neither surprising nor undesirable that there are observable differences between the productions of different countries. Anthologies of Russian, French, Japanese and Australian science fiction, for example, have given some sense of these differences. Since the bulk of science fiction is written in America and its nature is well known there has never existed nor is there likely to be an anthology labelled "American Science Fiction". At the same time there does not exist an anthology of Canadian science fiction in spite of the fact that the home situation is almost exactly opposite that in America. Indeed, one might ask, what Canadian science fiction? Any argument for the specifically American nature of the genre gains considerable support from the evidence that the output of science fiction appears to stop abruptly north of the 49th parallel. Canadian science fiction *is* a rare phenomenon but it does exist. Much of what little there is appeared and continues to appear in American publications where it becomes essentially indistinguishable from the mass of American science fiction. It is the intent of this survey of predominantly English-Canadian science fiction to render visible and distinctive an aspect of Canadian writing hitherto largely invisible.

In a superficial "mythic" fashion, it is not difficult to account for the dearth of Canadian science fiction, in spite of the fact that Canadian literature generally and science fiction do share one salient characteristic: a respect for the pressure of an environment which is often foregrounded. But the basic shape and nature of the genre is, in many ways, an expression of a particularly aggressive American attitude towards nature. No doubt many of the attitudes and actions taken in the course of extending the western frontier and subjugating the landscapes were undesirable, but the guiding ideal of "conquering" the unknown is at the heart of science fiction. In Canada a rather different mythology appears to operate. It finds expression in the somewhat clichéd notion that climatically and geographically the landscape is too much for man to handle. This reverent or submissive attitude towards nature translates into a fiction which tends toward mythic fantasy and stories about animals often told from the animal's point of view.

Furthermore, the conservative history of Canada, as opposed to the revolutionary history of America, clearly entails a regard for the status quo and a suspicious or cautious attitude towards change. Science fiction and change, of course, go hand in glove.

However, it should be recognized that the aggressive, revolutionary characteristic of science fiction can account for many of its worst qualities. Norman Spinrad's *The Iron Dream* presents the not altogether frivolous hypothesis that in a parallel world where Hitler does not become a German leader, he expresses his vision as a science-fiction writer. The frenzied apocalyptic sensibility which accompanied the rise of the Third Reich is one that can and frequently does find an outlet in science fiction. There is, of course, a positive side to the coin and there is room for the gentler, more caring and human-centred kind of science fiction perhaps more consistent with a Canadian value system.

In fact Canada *has* contributed significantly to the overall history of science fiction. I have primarily in mind two books: James De Mille's *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* and Frederick Philip Grove's *Consider Her Ways*. The first of these has found its way into one of the histories of science fiction—J. O. Bailey's *Pilgrims Through Space and Time*. The second by incredible oversight does not figure in any. *A Strange Manuscript*, published posthumously in 1888 but written eight or more years earlier, is one of the best science-fiction novels of the nineteenth century.

In an opening "frame" chapter, four Englishmen on a yachting holiday pull aboard a floating cylinder which on examination is discovered to contain the "strange manuscript". The manuscript, which is read in turn by each of the group, tells the story of Adam More, the sole survivor of a shipwreck, who drifts through an opening in the great Antarctic ice barrier to find a lush, almost tropical world. This world is inhabited by a Semitic people called the Kosekin whose "utopian" society derives from the inversion or distortion of Western and Christian values. The Kosekin have carried altruism to a logical extreme where well-being and life itself are regarded as evils, and poverty and death as the supreme virtues. The frame situation is periodically reverted to in four chapters where the Englishmen discuss the nature and validity of the account. While very derivative of such works as Thomas More's *Utopia* (hence the protagonist's name), Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* and especially Poe's *Narrative of A. Gordon Pym*, De Mille's satiric romance is replete with fresh and marvellous incident and achieves a uniquely interesting synthesis.

Grove's *Consider Her Ways* — not to be confused with John Wyndham's novella of the same title — is also comparable with

*Gulliver's Travels* and not altogether unfavorably. This book was published in 1947 but written twenty years earlier. It concerns a society of ants from Venezuela who explore North America. The leader of the ants communicates his account telepathically to a human recorder. A satiric intention is present, but what makes the novel especially science-fictional is the emphasis placed on the compelling realization of the ant society and its peculiar perspective. This is an accomplishment which must have involved Grove in considerable background research. It is remarkable that a book which Desmond Pacey calls Grove's best has been completely overlooked by the historians of science fiction. And it is equally remarkable, given that one of the best books of one of Canada's best writers is straight science fiction, and given the existence of *A Strange Manuscript*, that demographers and historians of the Canadian imagination have not identified a science-fictional tradition.

These two books mark the high point of what might be called a mainstream or "classic" line in Canadian science fiction. This category includes stories by a number of major Canadian writers who have occasionally turned their hands to science fiction: for example, *The British Barbarians* (1895) and "*The Child of Phalandstery*" (1889 — a free-love society story) by Grant Allen (1848-1899) who spent most of his life in England but was born in Kingston, Ontario, and is included in bibliographies of Canadian literature; "The Man in Asbestos: An Allegory of the Future" (a satirical utopia) by Stephen Leacock; "A Queen in Thebes" (a post-catastrophe story involving incest) by Margaret Laurence; "After the Sirens" (a story about events in Montreal after an atomic bomb is dropped) by Hugh Hood; and "Lust in Action" (a lesbian dystopia story) by John Glassco. It appears that Brian Moore is fast being lost to Canadian literature, but he is a Canadian citizen and his novella *Catholics* is one of the finest works of science fiction ever written. It describes a modish Catholic church of the future and the action it takes against a group of pious but wayward monks who persist in offering the mass in Latin thereby attracting huge congregations. This treatment of man's need for faith and mystery (even if based on a lie) has been insufficiently appreciated by a science-fiction readership largely obsessed with rockets and ray guns.

Five other categories of Canadian science fiction might be distinguished. A second category comprises a number of less established contemporary writers (born in Canada, living in Canada, or New Canadians) who work exclusively or occasionally in science fiction. A typically ambiguous case is Judith Merrill who has recently become a Canadian citizen. Michael Coney, an Englishman living in Vancouver for a number of years, now is establishing his reputation in the world of science fiction on the basis of his prolific output of novels, such as

*Friends Come in Boxes*, and short stories. Mary Soderstrom, an American living in Montreal, has published a number of fine short stories in the American science-fiction magazines. Alan Hargreaves, an American English professor at the University of Alberta, has published a number of his short stories in a book entitled *North by 2000, A Collection of Canadian Science Fiction*. Unfortunately, Hargreaves's work is not very inspiring. Somewhat more successful is Stephen Franklin's *Knowledge Park* which takes its title from the name of the world's greatest library, which has been erected in an area straddling the Quebec / Ontario border. Actually Franklin's book is more an illustrated proposal for such a project rather than a genuine work of fiction, but the concept is an appealing one. A list of Canadian residents or nationals who have published at least one science-fiction novel or short story would include Neil Crichton (*Rerun*), Jeni Couzyn (the mid-section of *Christmas in Africa*), Christie Harris (*Sky Man on the Totem Pole*), Blanche Howard (*The Immortal Soul of Edwin Carlyle*), Basil Jackson (*Epicentre*), Marie Jakober (*The Mind Gods*), Erich Koch (*The Leisure Riots*), Ruth Nichols (*A Walk Out of the World*), Spider Robinson (*Callaghan's Bar, Telempath*), David Walker (*The Lord's Pink Ocean*), Jim Willer (*Paramind*), Michael Yates (*Fazes in Elsewhen*), John Keith ("A Planet Called Cervantes"), Stephen Scobie ("The Philosopher's Stone"), Eileen Kernaghan, Michael Libling, Peter Lord, and Suzanne Martel.

Amongst recent Canadian science fiction there are a significant number of books which might be classified as near-future political thrillers. Titles representative of this, my third category, are *Ultimatum*, *Exxoneration*, *Exodus: UK and Separation*, all by Richard Rohmer; *Killing Ground: The Canadian Civil War* and *The Last Days of The American Empire*, both by Bruce Powe; *The Trudeau Papers* by Ian Adams, and *The Men Who Wanted to Save Canada* by R. J. Chick Childerhose. By far the most popular basis for this kind of book is Canada's anxiety and paranoia about the elephant next door — fear of being taken over completely or fear that action taken against America by her enemies will spill over into Canada. William C. Heine has written an in some ways quite successful near-future story based on the latter fear entitled *The Last Canadian*.

The prospect of Quebec separation, it should be noted, was first treated in a book called *Pour La Patrie* by Jules Tardivel, published in 1895, which, for my purposes, counts as an example of a fourth category — visions, early and otherwise, of Canada's future. In Tardivel's vision, Quebec becomes independent at some point in the twentieth century. In a very recent book, *Canada Cancelled Because of Lack of Interest* by Eric Nicol and Peter Whalley, the country's balkanized future state is treated comically.

An extraordinary 30-page pamphlet published in Ontario in 1883 authored pseudonymously by one "Ralph Centennius" is entitled and describes "The Dominion in 1983" from the vantage point of that year. It appears that following an unsuccessful attempt by America to take over Canada, a utopia has been established and new cities with names like Electropolis (on Lake Athabaska) have been built. Taxes were abolished in 1945, no one has been murdered for more than 50 years, Parliament consists of a mere 15 members, and things are arranged so that rain only falls at night. An efficient transportation system involving "electric tricycles" and "beautiful rocket cars, which frequently dart through the air at the rate of sixty miles in one minute," is the source of a unified Canada. And telescopic observation of Venus and Jupiter has revealed living beings.

Among the plethora of books published in response to or influenced by Bellamy's *Looking Backward* was one by a Canadian Unitarian minister named Hugh Pedley. His *Looking Forward: The Strange Experience of The Reverend Fergus McCheyne* appeared in 1913. Fergus, experimenting with a new drug, falls asleep in 1902 and wakes up twenty-five years later, a relatively short slumber compared with the 113 years of suspended animation which befalls Bellamy's hero. Fergus learns that the utopian Canada of 1927 has come about as the result of the success of a movement for church unity.

In the far from utopian context of Canada in the 1970s it must be admitted that American domination of the science-fiction field is almost total, which brings me to a fifth category: ex-Canadians who have established their reputations in the context of American science fiction. A. E. van Vogt, born in Manitoba, and Gordon R. Dickson, born in Vancouver, might be regarded as Canada's gift to American science fiction. They have both played important roles in the development of the genre and have received considerable recognition.

There is no Canadian-born writer of comparative stature in the world of science fiction currently living in Canada. The closest approximation to such an ideal, however, is Phyllis Gotlieb. She is the author of a number of science-fiction novels, including *Sunburst* (1964), which is about a group of mutant "children" who develop psychic abilities following an atomic explosion, *O Master Caliban!* (1976), set on Dalgren's Planet where a ten-year-old telepath thwarts an alien threat, plus such fine science-fiction short stories as "Gingerbread Boy," "A Grain of Manhood," "Son of the Morning" and "Planetoid Idiot". Phyllis Gotlieb, on the basis of the quality and quantity of her output and as a native-born Canadian actually living in Canada, must be considered the central figure in Canadian science fiction. Indeed, it might be argued that Ms. Gotlieb *is* Canadian science fiction.

Consequently, in this six-category survey of Canadian science fiction, Phyllis Gotlieb has my final category all to herself.

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The following free booklists are available from Irene E. Aubrey, Children's Literature Librarian / Consultant, National Library of Canada, 395 Wellington Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0N4:

- \*NOTABLE CANADIAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS / UN CHOIX DE LIVRES CANADIENS POUR LE JEUNESSE
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