

# The Author in Canada

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**I**n fact, I might be addressing you today under false pretenses or through misrepresentation or through misunderstanding, for I must admit that I know very little about Canadian authors. Except for a few well-known ones, Canadian authors in general are rather in the shadow and we hear very little of them. Could it be that the Canadian author is too modest and shies from publicity? This could be partly true. However, I personally think that the real cause lies in the indifference to the Canadian author shown by the publishers, the public, and the governments, especially in the case of Canadian writers for children, even if some publishers do try hard to sell Canadian books. This indifference still can be extended to a number of librarians.

Even between the authors themselves there is very little contact. There is no real contact between the English and the French writers. In each case, perhaps there are a few exceptions. Authors' associations do not create a real "rapprochement" between authors. Perhaps I am speaking for myself when I say these things, for, as far as I am concerned, even if I belong to authors' associations, French and English, I have few contacts with authors, and those I have are artificial and social.

It could be because I am mostly involved in another profession, that of being a librarian and a library administrator. For in Canada, writing is a kind of luxury and, if the author is not financially independent, he or she has to earn bread and butter through other means and use free time, when available, for the art of writing. I shall come back to these points later in my talk. I do not mean that I despise other professions. On the contrary, I praise highly my library profession and, for some time now, I have devoted all my time to library activities, and this shall continue until I retire. If I still live then, I shall devote all my time to writing—and perhaps to a few other things.

So, it will be a rather very limited image you will have of the Canadian author, since it will be mostly mine.

Until now, I have been invited to speak to thousands of children, English and French, in various schools. One day I addressed 600 children, delivering six talks in the same day, sometimes in English, sometimes in French, to groups of a hundred at a time from various schools in Cornwall, and this from 9 a.m. to the end of the afternoon.

Generally, the children vary between grades one to five and are in six to eight groups. Most of them are seeing an author for the first time. After the talk, I provide a long period for questions. Often such a period is longer than the talk itself for two reasons: firstly, I am always afraid they could get tired hearing me talking, and secondly, I prefer to engage in dialogue with children.

You would be surprised at the questions they ask. Most of them are relevant, keen and intelligent, most of the time very practical, such as: "How much money have you made with your books?" This one usually embarrasses me, probably because of the bourgeois concept deep in us that the more a profession pays, the more it is important. Then I modestly have to say that, for most of us, writing does not pay very much. Then I feel even more embarrassed if some smart child asks: "Why then do you write?" I feel embarrassed here again because I still do not know why I write, and I tell them so.

Why do we write? Of course I would like to make money with my books, but I do not know how. There must have been some vanity in me at some time, but certainly this has been gone for a long time now. There was certainly the urge to express myself, mixed with another urge: that of fleeing this world and getting myself lost in a world created by my fantasy, with an effort to penetrate again into the kingdom of childhood.

What really attracted me and brought me to write for children is the poetical side of it. The world of childhood is full of poetry. One cannot really write for children if one does not shelter within himself or herself a poet. It is so false to think that it is easy to write for children, that any insignificant story written in an easy language will be appreciated by children. It is, as you all know here, extremely difficult to write for children, for they are severe judges and they see things through the poetical eyes of innocence. For example: they believe in truth, fairness, simplicity and justice. In our present confused and rotten world, these virtues are certainly sheer poetic idealism. I wanted the poet in me to express thoughts and create a world, however small it would be, through the freshness, imagination and fantasy of a child, yet with the lucidity and experience of life of an adult. The approach has to be genuine, for the child will sense the contrary very quickly. A child is usually very intelligent and too often this intelligence is underestimated.

One other question always asked by children is also a most difficult one to answer. Here it is: "How did you become a writer?" or "How does one become a writer?"

"How one becomes a writer?" I do not know. Who knows? For there is no given recipe. Who would have believed, in my case for example, that I would become an author one day, with six books published in French and four in English in Canada, two of these published also in United States by a well-known New York publisher, and one book re-edited in a pocket book edition? All the odds were against my becoming a writer. I was born in a small village lost in the

woods of the Laurentian Mountains; my parents were wonderful people, but too poor to be able to provide me with education beyond grade 8. We had to walk two miles in the morning and two miles in the afternoon to attend the only rural French school in the area. Along the way to school, we had to cross fields, woods, a small river. How many May, June and September days have I lost from school? (Perhaps they were not lost for it might be during that time that I got the bug for writing). Anyway, I missed school often, losing myself in the fields, lying under a tree or along a little creek, staring for hours at the water running swiftly away forever or at a big tree far away or at a big sombre boulder, thinking with a great deal of fright that certainly a ferocious Indian would spring out suddenly from behind one of them and make me prisoner or kill me with an arrow. Or I might be amused by the rays of the sun finding their way through the leaves of a tree I was lying under or by the ever-changing monsters created by the clouds.

In winter, when there were endless days of snow storms, we were taught by the railway station-master in the station, between two train tracks. When trains came, making the little station tremble under a hell of smoke and noises, we left our slates and chalks and ran out to the platform to help the station master with the big mail wagon.

It was certainly by a miracle or through a fairy's wand that one day I was able to continue my studies in Montreal. By that time, I was 11 years old and in grade 3. Up to age 11, I had read one book, which was the only book known to be in the village, passing from hand to hand. One day, it came to our house.

And yet, at age 13, I was already writing poems on an old barrel in the back porch of our home in the country during my summer holidays and proudly showing them to my mother, a former teacher, who encouraged me with all her heart.

How can this be explained?

That is why I feel helpless when it comes to explain to the children how one becomes a writer. All that I tell them is this: To become a writer, you have to place yourself in front of a white page and scribble on it. Scribble and throw away in the basket. And one day, you might like what you have rewritten so many times and it might be good and you might find a publisher who might find it good also and might publish it.

At other times, I tell them: You will become a really good writer if you keep your children's eyes and ears, in other words if you see things and hear things that other people do not see or hear anymore.

Anyway, an author for children in Canada has to be patient, tenacious, persistent and somewhat naive. For, when an author has written a book for children, first he or she has to find a publisher who will publish the book. And this is not easy, even if the book is good and promising. Then, supposing that finally the work is published, in most cases it will gather dust in the publisher's warehouse, or the publisher will bring out a few thousand copies and, after this laudable effort, the book is out-of-print and forgotten.

The whole process is still a mystery to me. A few exceptions taken into account, most of the time the publishers do not seem to be proud of what they bring out for children. The Canadian book stores for the great part seem to be indifferent to Canadian book production for children. Libraries, school and public, do buy some Canadian books for children, and of course they can not and should not spend all their budget on Canadian books. However, they could buy many more Canadian titles than they do, although some of them are beyond reproach on this matter.

How often, when I have spoken to classes of children, the school librarians have asked me how they could get my books, for, after many tries, they could not find my books at local book stores. Some book stores will tell you that they did not know these books existed, and so on. And this in the city where I have lived and worked for so many years. Imagine then: What book stores in other parts of the country will be able to sell my works?

Except for a few devoted children's book reviewers such as Irma McDonough and Janet Lunn in Toronto, Sheila Egoff in Vancouver, Alvine Belisle in the Province of Quebec, and the group who produce the new *Canadian Children's Literature* review periodical, book critics in general ignore book production for children, thinking probably that they would lower themselves by reviewing a child's book. And yet, what names have crossed the centuries? La Fontaine, Perrault, the Grimm Brothers, Hans Christian Anderson, Lewis Carroll: all writers for children. Of the same period, how many authors for adults have survived?

Here, I would like to quote Ruth Nichols, a well-known Canadian author for children, when she said: "Children's literature is still the orphan of the publishing industry (in Canada)" and Irma McDonough, editor of *In Review* and the *Ontario Library Review*, when she says: "It is clear that the publication of the Canadian juvenile scarcely had priority on any publisher's lists at any time in our country".

So, at times, we feel like we are hermits in a desert, curious specimens in our own country. Not to say that very few of us are known outside of Canada. France ignores the French Canadian author for children, and Britain and the United States ignore the English Canadian author for children. We are the poor relatives, the ex-colonialized. They see us with contempt, if they ever notice us.

And yet, some of books for children can be favourably compared with the best in the world and of any time. But still too many people ignore their existence. Again, I would like to quote Irma McDonough: "The heartening thing is that we have the writers and the artists to fill the requirements, if we only give them the chance, for a writer does not grow unpublished!"

And to add to all this, the Canadian readers are constituted of two groups along with two official languages in Canada: French and English. Within each group, the Canadian author in general has then a very limited clientele. A few authors of one language are translated into the

other. But there should be much more of this, so that one group would come to know better the other.

Finally, the Canadian author for children has to compete on his own ground with mass productions saturating our market with books of a presentation quality that the Canadian publisher cannot achieve because of the cost. These books come from countries with much greater population than Canada such as France, Great Britain and United States. Others come from countries, like Belgium and Switzerland, with old and well-established publishing firms. These countries can produce a book by the hundreds of thousands. This is impossible in Canada. It is impossible for our publishers to compete with many productions coming from other countries because our publishers cannot produce and sell in quantity enough to meet the costs of such publications. This is where our governments should help. There is no alternative. Our governments try to help here and there, but sporadically, in a small way and without any coordination and efficient planning.

It is great that the Canadian people have developed through two of the most important cultures in the world. However, in a way, this works against the Canadian author. Take a small country like Finland. I am sure they must sell in general more copies of a book than we do here, because their books are published in Finnish and they do not have to compete in general with the production in the French or the English language (and I have in mind here more than France and England).

So please do not think that I am against the invasion of our country by a great number of publications from other countries. We, as authors, can benefit a great deal from this when it comes to acquiring a cultural background and the knowledge of the art of writing. However, as I said, this privileged situation also works against us, as you can imagine. It could be quite different, however, if our parental and at the same time competing countries would *frankly* (and I insist on that word), would *frankly* open their doors to and encourage our literary productions.

In addition to all this, the Canadian author for children has to compete with television and so many more distractions that take away many potential young readers. I agree that this situation exists in the rest of the world, but it is more serious here because of the accumulation of the factors I have mentioned.

Now I am at the end of my talk and I am sure you think of me as a sombre pessimist, a bitter frustrated author. I assure you that I am all the contrary. I have written practically all my life and I still have a small audience. When I meet parts of this young and small audience, it transports me and gives me the best joys any author could expect. I love writing and, once I retire (and this will be in four years, two months and eleven days)—of course if I live to that time and have a reasonable health—I shall write for the rest of my life, even if I am not published anymore for what I have said, and this for my own satisfaction and to quiet my old bug. And maybe one day, after many generations, some soul might be taken by what I had to say. I think this is the real urge in any writer: one day, the communication with a sister soul!

My pessimism lies elsewhere. My worries can be summed up in this way: What if the Canadian author for children is not better encouraged, if the publication of children's books in Canada is not better sustained? Here I blame partly our publishers, jobbers, book stores, libraries and our general public—and especially our governments for not having up to now *seriously* tried to size up the situation and helped to remedy it. I say *partly*, because the situation is very complicated and no one group should take the blame entirely. But here again, our governments should act, and quickly, and not sporadically nor in a timid way, but with millions of dollars spent through intelligent and efficient programs. For this will be the price for saving our literature. There is no other way. And our publishers will have to pull up their breeches, together with our jobbers, bookstores and librarians. Otherwise, I am afraid that the Canadian book market for children one day might disappear and then Canadian children will not read Canadian anymore. Of course, our children should read the best of the world's production. But when they will not read *also* of our history, of our geography, of our folklore, traditions and way of life, of our imaginative and literary works, when they will ignore what we are, what we think, what Canada is and what made it, then they will not *be* nor *feel* Canadian anymore. Canada would then have lost its soul, its identity. Mind you, I am not the one who holds in his hand Diogène's lantern. Others too are deeply concerned with this so worrying situation. Let us hope that one day the Sleeping Beauty will awake and fully realize the danger that threatens her.