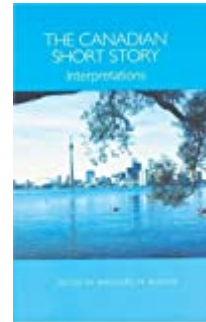




**Reingard M. Nischik, ed.** *The Canadian Short Story: Interpretations*. Rochester: Camden House, 2007. x + 426 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57113-127-0.



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### **Beyond Atwood: The Canadian Short Story**

Reingard M. Nischik has compiled a collection of essays on the Canadian short story ranging from its beginning through the end of the twentieth century.[1] The text offers a wide range of essays and perspectives, all by European academics who “are or have been affiliated with German, Austrian, and Swiss universities” (p. ix).[2] The text is as much a project of literary interpretations as an attempt at a literary history of the Canadian short story. Because of its historical component, this collection presents a selection of stories chronologically instead of thematically or regionally. A chronological organization permits readers the opportunity to consider the discussions occurring at a similar moment in time among stories, authors, and critics alike. Due to this chronological ordering of the text there is an impetus to consider the nature of the Canadian short story in relation to the time in which it was written rather than or in addition to, for instance, thematic or regional consideration. Likewise, the book provides a “map” of the Canadian short story in a “Time Chart” that positions Canadian literature alongside American and British literatures (pp. 389-397). This project is both a “national” and a transnational project insofar as there is a persistent recognition of other liter-

ary traditions, even though the volume does not provide a truly “comparative” analysis between these literatures and Canadian literature.

Perhaps of interest to many scholars of literary studies, this collection is admittedly “conservative” because it is based primarily on a statistical review of anthologies of Canadian short stories, and the most popular authors and stories were selected for inclusion (p. 2). Subsequently, this volume establishes, though it may not intend to, a canon of the Canadian short story. Unfortunately, a younger and lesser-known generation of writers is left untouched and unstudied. While this method may appear irresponsible to some critics, it should not be held against the value of this volume. The collection works to evaluate and interpret these selected stories from a variety of literary perspectives, each chapter includes a complete bibliography, and, in many cases, a substantial number of footnotes provide further sources that may be of interest. Likewise, Nischik’s introductory chapter clearly explains what the book does and does not consider; for example, French-Canadian stories are only mentioned within the introduction and a few footnotes.

The majority of essays provide close readings, rather than theoretical readings, of short stories; that is, there is a general favoring of traditional interpretation that can be found in “national” literature departments instead of more theoretically driven approaches that are commonly found in comparative literature and/or cultural studies. Although, in most cases, this approach does not distract the reader, a volume such as this may benefit from further emphasis on cultural studies and comparative research. A few articles, such as Dieter Meindl’s chapter on Sinclair Ross, clearly draw on, and perhaps favor, theoretical research. In Meindl’s essay, such theorists as Martin Heidegger, Luce Irigaray, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Helene Cixous appear in the development of the argument. In contrast, other essays make use of a short bibliography and little theory, and favor close readings, such as Stefan Ferguson’s chapter that draws on only one piece of criticism and a biography. This is as much a commentary on the study of literature as it is an interesting mode of interpretation.

In many instances throughout the collection, chapters are in dialogue with one another and interpretations begin to repeat and overlap. For instance, contributors persistently question masculinity in the early Canadian short story. This question appears in the chapters by Konrad Gross, Julia Breitbach, Martina Seifert, Paul Goetsch, and Meindl. Gender, more generally, likewise emerges repeatedly. In her introduction, Nischik remarks that “not only do the three leading writers of the Canadian short story happen to be female, but such a large number of female authors have written in the genre that this even gender distribution seems self-evident today. It is noteworthy, however, that this state of affairs has partly resulted in gender-sensitive and gender oriented writing style not only in Canadian literature in general, but also in Canadian short fiction” (p. 31). Many chapters make allusions and references to the question of gender, even though gender is not the named subject of these chapters.

As can be expected, this volume concerns itself with prominent themes in Canadian literature, including “Canadianness” (from Silvia Mergenthal’s essay [p. 192]), the indigenous/native voice, immigration, urban versus rural, the question of the United States, the matter of “Two Solitudes,” and issues popular to contemporary cultural/literary theory (postcolonialism, imperialism, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, autobiography, etc.). The issue of identity, particularly the question of gender as mentioned above, emerges as the persistent theme. Wolfgang Klooss, for instance, refers to the

“space between fiction and autobiography and the role of the border in the definition of identity” in his chapter on Clark Blaise (p. 236). As such, the Canadian short story addresses more than one topic, such as gender, and instead focuses on a series of questions dealing with a the search for identity found in Canada’s literary culture. For example, Christina Strobel writes that “June Rule calls herself both a lesbian and a feminist, thereby taking a double stand” (p. 301). Many chapters begin to provide a variety of tautological configurations to describe an author. According to Fabienne C. Quennet, Mordecai Richler, for instance, is a “third-generation Canadian Jew,” or Eva Gruber celebrates Thomas King as “Canada’s foremost Native writer” (pp. 149, 353). Thus, even when not explicitly about identity, the contributors often inform the reader of the author’s identity.

The volume is remarkably accessible as it generally shies away from unnecessary verbosity or jargon. Each chapter opens and closes in the same fashion. They begin with an introduction to the author of the short story that generally includes biographical details. This introduction is followed by a brief literary history of the author. Finally, the chapter ends with the interpretation of the work at hand. This volume is ideal for scholars interested in introductory overviews of the Canadian short story and for undergraduate courses addressing the Canadian short story. Given the methodology used in selecting the stories, it could also accompany a popular anthology of Canadian short stories.

Overall, this is a useful introductory text to the Canadian short story, though it also extends beyond introductions and simple readings with essays on the story of the Canadian Renaissance often adopting theoretical readings, such as Nischik’s “(Un-)Doing Gender: Alice Munro, ‘Boys and Girls,’” which, as the title would suggest, draws heavily on the writings of Judith Butler, particularly *Undoing Gender* (2004). It is hopeful that a paperback edition will be released, making the volume even more accessible. This collection moves beyond Margaret Atwood, who Nischik refers to as “the acknowledged figurehead of Canadian literature” and “Canada’s most important writer,” and works to show Canada’s literary diversity by means of commonly anthologized authors (pp. 26, 331). Indeed, this is a text that shows the breadth and depth of the Canadian short story from a wide range of perspectives, theories, and approaches. *The Canadian Short Story* is, as its editor would hope, a celebration of Canada’s literary culture.

Notes

[1]. The edited collection includes interpretations of the following short stories (in order of presentation): Charles G. D. Roberts, "Do Seek Their Meat from God" (1892); Stephen Leacock, "The Marine Excursion of the Knights of Pythias" (1912); Raymond Knister, "The First Day of Spring" (c. 1924-25); Frederick Philip Grove, "Snow" (1926/1932); Morley Callaghan, "Last Spring They Came Over" (1927); Sinclair Ross, "The Lamp at Noon" (1938); Ethel Wilson, "We Have to Sit Opposite" (1945); Hugh Garner, "One-Two-Three Little Indians" (1950); Joyce Marshall, "The Old Woman" (1952); Mordecai Richler, "Benny, the War in Europe, and Myerson's Daughter Bella" (1956); Sheila Watson, "Antigone" (1959); Hugh Hood, "Flying a Red Kite" (1962); Mavis Gallant, "The Ice Wagon Going Down the Street" (1963); Alice Munro, "Boys and Girls" (1964); Margaret Laurence, "The Loons" (1966); Clark Blaise, "A Class of New Canadians" (1970); Audrey Thomas, "Aquarius" (1971); Rudy Wiebe, "Where is the Voice Coming from?" (1971); Norman Levine, "We All Begin in a Little Magazine" (1972); John Metcalf, "The

Strange Aberration of Mr. Ken Smythe" (1973); Jane Rule, "Lilian" (1977); Jack Hodgins, "The Concert Stages of Europe" (1978); William Dempsey Valgardson, "A Matter of Balance" (1982); Margaret Atwood, "Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother" (1983); Leon Rooke, "The Woman Who Talked to Horses" (1984); Thomas King, "Borders" (1991); Carol Shields, "Our Men and Women" (1999); and Janice Kulyk Keefer, "Dreams:Storms:Dogs" (1999).

[2]. Nischik includes chapters by Heinz Antor, Rudolf Bader, Georgiana Banita, Gordon Bä¶lling, Julia Breitbach, Stefan Ferguson, Nadja Gernalzick, Brigitte Glaser, Paul Goestch, Konrad Gro?, Eva Gruber, Lothar HÄ¶nnighausen, Heinz Ickstadt, Wolfgang Kloo?, Nina KÄ¼ck, Martin Kuester, Maria and Martin LÄ¶schnigg, Dieter Meindl, Silvia Mergenthal, Nischik, Fabienne C. Quennet, Caroline Rosenthal, Martina Seifert, Christina Strobel, Waldemar Zacharasiewicz, and Jutta Zimmerman.

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