

## Taking Stock, Reprise

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### Article abstract

This essay examines the 1978 Calgary Conference on the Canadian Novel, and the publication that emerged from it entitled *Taking Stock*, as a moment that distills the ongoing tabulation of Canadian literature in various lists and inventories that seek to identify and anoint significant works. It focuses on two speakers at that conference, Robert Kroetsch and Marian Engel, as examples of major writers who are still read but who are gradually disappearing from contemporary cultural awareness, despite their important contributions to the development of the Canadian canon. Engel and Kroetsch participated in an important moment in Canadian literary history; Engel's *Bear* and Kroetsch's *The Studhorse Man* embody a sense of what Canadian literature aspired to, but those works also foreshadow the evolution of Canadian fiction. Their authors straddle the penumbra of the last forty years, and how Canadian literature bloomed, matured, and now seems to withdraw not from its continuing bravura performance in the global literary world, but from its own memory and recognition of those early pathfinders. Their works speak to the paradox of Canadian writing as ironically unaware of its own invention.

# *Taking Stock, Reprise*

ARITHA VAN HERK

CANADIAN LITERATURE IS A CHANGING FIELD, absorbing and reflecting the multiple narratives of our mosaic culture. Resilient in its constant reinvention, our literature's nationally complex articulation has enabled a combination of subversive and celebrated literary achievement. The origins and development of this small and surreptitious — if not occasionally devious — culture follow myriad paths. That our fiction now flourishes, and that our novels and short stories are repeatedly acknowledged in international English literature, has been a matter of pride mingled with insouciance; contemporary Canadian fiction is strong, recognized worldwide. We almost take its success for granted, and certainly filch credit for its triumphs.

One aspect of our sturdy plurality might be found in the extent to which we enjoy the art of forgetting. Our attention span in terms of a defined “canon” is as fickle as our weather. The push to “know” the latest literary blockbuster often appears to be at the expense of those novels that over the last fifty years built a foundation of experiment and necessary narrative, chronicling Canada in all its diversity and aggravation. How then can we measure the distance we have come? Has our fiction developed its own superstitions, tropes that go past the heavy significance of our “natural” world and the extent to which nature replays itself in our literature? Why do so many Canadian novels continue to feature animals as protagonists, quests for “identity” among eccentric outsider characters, and uneasy portrayals of our cities, cities whose depiction is never quite as urbane or beautiful as those cities that have inspired novelists for centuries? But these are rhetorical questions, with answers insufficient to encompass the proliferating voices of Indigenous, multicultural, and multi-regional writing.

The more elusive if exigent question might be why we keep searching for an authority that will adjudicate the stutter and stature, achievements and casualties, of the Canadian novel. Reviewing now, dwindling to a blogospheric toxin of taste, in the information age, appears to focus most on the deficits of the fiction we are offered. Success is measured by

sales, which are tied to prize winning and prizewinners, as if anointment provides a turbo-driven shortcut to a definitive literature. Our literature is wide-ranging and variable, yet much of it is obscure, published by small presses and in literary magazines, destined never to reach an audience of any size, satisfying to a writer and her followers and friends, but to dominant cultural indentations and influences invisible. One of the delicious aspects of Canadian literature is vested in that cryptic quality, a shyness that persists despite the quality of what is created.

How then to assert importance for particular works? Lists that catalogue Canadian literary works “essential” or important appear frequently, from the perennial CBC compilations to the *Globe and Mail*’s “Globe 100” at year’s end. For example, in 2013, David Berry, in the *National Post*, provided a distillation of those books most commonly found in university English course curricula, “Ten authors you have to read (if you’re a Canadian student).” He asked English chairs, professors, and adjuncts to send him their “curricula, syllabi, entrance exams, recommended readings and personal preferences” and reported that “they cited more than 170 writers, and books ranging from anthologies of pre-1800s poetry to last year’s Giller nominees. I compiled them, counted them and came up with the list below.” His inventory, as might be expected, includes the usual suspects: Atwood and Ondaatje, Leacock and Laurence, Ross and Moodie and Kogawa and King. His justification for the exercise was not only to arrive at an “imperative list of books,” but to argue for common knowledge: “it’s still helpful to know what makes up primordial alphabet soup: Whether you want to admit it or not, there is going to be a collection of books that form a kind of literary vernacular, a shared experience that we all draw on that in some sense sets our parameters for discussion and understanding and reflection.” His point is persuasive, and the academic responders to the poll doubtless inflected its orientation and results.

“The LRC 100,” published over two issues, January/February and March 2006, in the *Literary Review of Canada*, aimed to provide a register of “Canada’s Most Important Books,” and ponderously included reports and journals, economic histories, and biographies of politicians. It did not raise the hackles that Margaret Atwood’s introduction hopefully promised that it would. She writes, with characteristic wryness, “All comparisons are odious and lists are by nature comparisons. Therefore all lists are odious, and I for one have a lot of trouble making

them up. A list called *The LRC 100: Canada's Most Important Books* is a recipe for a brawl, as there will be many disagreements about what should or should not have been included." What she goes on to observe is of greater value than the list itself:

It may soothe some offended souls to note that this modest offering does not claim to list the hundred best Canadian books. That a work can be "important" without possessing much literary merit as such has long been a truism. (Take, for instance, the Geological Survey of Canada, 1863 — number 6 on this list.)

Quite right. "The LRC 100" is distinctive for including analyses and interrogations, Pierre Trudeau's *Federalism and the French Canadians* alongside Howie Meeker's *Hockey Basics*, Stephen Vizinczey's *In Praise of Older Women*, and Dennis Lee's *Alligator Pie*. In truth — and this is an investigation worthy of development elsewhere — Canadian writing actually shines when it comes to Geological Survey reports and political polemics, studies and commissions, diplomats' memoirs, and essays on art. Perhaps all our calibrations of fiction and poetry are wild attempts to establish an intimate liaison with Canadian *belles lettres* that are too aloof for our mad desire. Atwood goes on to muse, "But what is meant by 'important'? Many of these books were highly influential in their day but are now largely forgotten; others have become classics. . . . Perhaps these books may be viewed as having made us what we are today." The assiduity of "making," then, the assembly of those myriad pieces that construct a heritage or define that old chestnut of "identity," is still a preoccupation.

And list making, with its incumbent disagreements, suggests an engagement with Canadian fiction as a matter of persistent discussion. Our national broadcaster appears to believe that one of its mandates is to produce lists and sub-categories. The website for *CBC Books* includes Summer and Fall Reading Lists, but also "10 controversial Canadian books you need to read," "20 novels to read if you want to be a writer," "12 Canadian novels that should be movies," "12 Canadian books that should be taught in high school," "12 books by Indigenous women you should read," "12 underrated Canadian novels," and "12 Canadian novels guaranteed to make you cry." The heavy reliance on "should" makes these checklists sound nutritionally necessary, recipes for cultural health. And they signal that list making is no longer a controversial

process, but an accepted and embraced means of aggregation that offers a version of order and compression.

In a positive light, the targeted recipients of these lists might also imply increasingly variable readers. This methodology volunteers to do the work for a reader trying to determine what to read, the implied valuation a shortcut and a timesaver for those overwhelmed by the infinite number of books out there. Interestingly, in tabulations such as “100 Novels that Make You Proud to be Canadian” ([www.cbc.ca/books/cbcbooks100.pdf](http://www.cbc.ca/books/cbcbooks100.pdf)), the focus is primarily contemporary. It seems the sweep of Canadian literature, although impressively chronicled, is only too quickly relegated to its function as a historical artifact, and to the “boring” survey courses that slog their way through writing from Confederation to 1950.

While “serious” attention persists in scholarly circles, the continued health and survival of “Can Lit” may be more contingent than we want to believe. In augmenting the Governor General’s Awards, the Giller and the Griffin prizes provide instantaneous prominence. Still, the question persists: is the shelf life of literature much shorter than it once was? Are we living with a transitory literature and has the recent past merely proven that we read with a temporary attention? Do the enumerations and roll calls demonstrate most a Canadian unease with “canonicity” or with writing that declares itself serious, embedded in the cultural memory of the nation? Lists are always under erasure, have a way of destroying their own order rather quickly. Who, now, has read *Tay John* or *Wacousta* or *The Mountain and the Valley*, let alone that brilliant and difficult tour de force, *The Double Hook? Roughing It in the Bush* gets covered over and over, while *As For Me and My House* has slipped the canonical traces a bit. *The Imperialist* is resisted if not resented. Everything by Alice Munro is, since her Nobel Prize, religiously pored over, but Martha Ostenso’s *Wild Geese* and Thomas Raddall’s *The Nymph and the Lamp* are virtually forgotten. So what transpired in the last fifty years of Canadian writing to move reading from the attentiveness that garnished the twentieth century to our current insatiable gulping down of the new, heedlessly ignoring those predecessors and progenitors? Certainly, their colonial mannerisms are passé; and perhaps they simply no longer hold our attention. Time modifies significance.

My own introduction to literary measurement and computation occurred at the now-storied “Calgary Conference on the Canadian

Novel,” which took place 15 to 18 February 1978. I was a student at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, and for some reason, in the mad generosity that sometimes overtook our professors in the late 1970s, it was proposed that we should mount a field trip to attend that conference. It promised to be a spectacle of name-dropping and name-calling, and Calgary was a mere 300 kilometers down the road from Edmonton. The conference organizers were amenable to the presence of students, presumably to leaven what was bound to be some bombastic academic posturing, and if I recall correctly, our registration and accommodation were covered, so we happily piled into a van and undertook a pilgrimage to the conference, already promising to be controversial because one of its aims was “to propose a list of significant Canadian novels that can serve as a guide to those interested in the masterworks of our literary tradition” (Steele 158). Our pilgrimage was innocent; it was not yet May and Calgary was not Canterbury, but perhaps we were seeking a version of blissful martyr, and what we lacked in devout courage, we had more than enough and to spare of fun and storytelling out of the experience.

The conference brought “together major Canadian novelists and critics in order to focus attention on our literary heritage” (Steele 156), but it was the list of the 100 best Canadian novels that released a “Pandora’s box of anger, gossip, and controversy,” to the surprise of the ballot administrator, Malcolm Ross, then editor of the New Canadian Library imprint, who claimed that he was merely trying to enable “a basis for discussion” (Ross 136, 138) about what was being taught and what materials needed to be accessible for the ongoing study of Canadian fiction. When the lists were distributed and Margaret Laurence’s *The Stone Angel* was declared the most important novel in the 100 Great Canadian Novels, the sparks flew. As Boh Kinczyk said in his review of the publication, “The Calgary Conference (to misquote one of the speakers) was full of blood, loud noises, and pissing in each others boots. Wish I had been there” (Kinczyk, web). Well, I was, and it was indeed full of loud noises and other interesting behaviours.

It was my first encounter with the volatile and fascinating combination of bile and swagger that can accompany a literary grudge-match of critics and writers, both gangs equally attracted to and repelled by the other. The energy of the gathering was indisputable, and the prominent writers present, from Gabrielle Roy to Laurence to Henry Kreisel, were a revelation to a neophyte writer and reader. I was alternately aston-

ished and skeptical, impressed and indifferent as only those who do not yet know the occasion of their own inexperience can be. As a young female student, I was alternatively ignored, assessed, and hit upon with bewildering speed, and for me the meat of the conference was certainly coloured by this concomitant experience.

Two writers who spoke at the Calgary Conference on the Canadian Novel, and whose novels appeared somewhere in the middle of the contentious list, exemplify that moment if not the last forty years of fiction in Canada. I had encountered them both before, as students will: Robert Kroetsch, when he gave a reading in Edmonton from his novel *What the Crow Said*, and Marian Engel, when she came to the University of Alberta as writer-in-residence in 1977-78. I first encountered her on the way to a class: into the elevator stepped a short, even shambling woman, dressed in a green duffle coat that made her resemble nothing so much as a bear. She was shy and self-effacing, although I later discovered that she could be fierce when crossed. A bear. Kroetsch, by contrast, was avuncular and outgoing, or at least he seemed so.

At the Calgary Conference, Kroetsch gave the opening address, entitled "Contemporary Standards in the Canadian Novel," and in his distillation raised the issue of how both canonicity and "what a novel is" (Kroetsch 9) have come into question. Kroetsch carefully records his reluctance to "locate/discriminate the canon of Canadian fiction" (9) and his own "fumbling" efforts to identify books that should be included in such a canon and why. His is a comic discussion of art and life, a stern dissection of "moral intensity" (10) as a criterion by which to test fiction. He argues for a radical usurpation of moralism and sounds a warning about fiction that insists on sincerity: "Instead of conscious art we have conscience art" (11). That brilliant line skulks at the end of a paragraph so quietly that it almost gets away with its own witty shape-shifting, which the rest of Kroetsch's piece performs as certainly as "coyote" lurks behind the best of all our metamorphosis stories. He goes on to unpack how the novel is always in conversation with its own history and, at the end of his piece, identifies those works unavoidable by virtue not of what they are "about," but by what they do, from the failure of language to articulate this Canadian literature and its placement, to "the Canadian writer as explorer or traveller . . . seeing a new world with old eyes" (16), to the region as novelist, "written by place, by weather" (17). He analyzes the fierceness of naming as a strategy for

domestication, and arraigns the necessary condition of fear, “the courage to be afraid” (17), next to “writing as the *subject* of writing” (17), most importantly, writing that is aware of and takes risks with the tool that is necessarily inescapable, writing itself (18). Fearlessly, Kroetsch declares, “There are writers for whom it would be an embarrassment, even a disgrace, to write an interesting sentence” (18). Almost forty years later, I want to stand up and applaud, and I wonder if any critic or writer would dare to be so bold now.

Marian Engel’s contribution to the Calgary Conference came later in the program, but was no less impassioned or compelling. Her words resonate, and I can still hear her voice as she took up the decidedly marginal position of being one of the few women asked to respond to the critics who declaimed so sonorously their male perspectives (this despite the many women writers present at the conference and the fact that Laurence’s *The Stone Angel* was accorded top place in the list of “the ten most important novels in Canada”). Asked to challenge the question of regionalism in response to Eli Mandel’s position paper exploring that slippery category, Engel saluted the extent to which Canadian literature is wildly and wonderfully regional, and how, for a writer, regionalism is a question of finding “that supernatural and almost surreal place where we feel we belong” (Engel, Panel 121). But she pushes beyond place to argue for gender as its own region, as key to fiction’s desire to replicate and explore its experience. It was a transfiguring moment for me as a nascent writer, when she declared, with absolute straightforwardness, “I’m a female, I’m a Canadian, I’m a WASP, and I’m an Ontarian, and these categories get into my work and I neglect them at my peril” (123).

Who, now, would declare herself such an uncompromising species? In all the subterfuge of who and where we are in the fiction of the twenty-first century, that straightforward assertion continues to hearten me, Engel factually asserting her pigeonhole. No adopting a pseudo-identity, no abjection, no travelling to another part of the globe to appropriate experience and find possible subject matter that will transcend this large/small country, no pretense. She concluded with, “It seems to me that the real dilemma is the point where fiction begins and reality leaves off, and the synthesizing of these two” (123). Her distillation summarizes not a simple constituent, but the complex inscrutability of Canadian experience and how its translation to any essential attribute is not possible, especially in a nation that is itself an act of imagination.

Her identification of the place from which the writer speaks reverberates as prophecy more than synopsis.

If the Calgary Conference was a moment when Engel and Kroetsch were highlighted, asked to speak their minds, forty years onwards, these two writers can also be considered as epitomizing the span and evolution of Canadian literature since then. They were at that time recognized and respected, still writing and producing work, at the height of their creative powers. Now they are dead. Engel died in 1985, of cancer, at the age of 51. Kroetsch died in 2011, in a car accident, at the age of 83. *Requiescant in pace.*

Both Engel and Kroetsch are accorded canonical status. Both won the Governor General's Award for fiction, and both wrote iconoclastic books that do not fit into any conventional marker of Canadian fiction. Engel was a product of urban Protestant Ontario, a writer for whom expectation was always a challenge. Kroetsch came out of rural Alberta, a writer for whom the tall tale was never tall enough. They occupied opposite ends of the spectrum of male/female, west/east, realist/post-modern, and yet they model the inscrutability of what typifies Canadian fiction. For all the reputation they held in the twentieth century, both now are virtually "forgotten," or perhaps not so much "forgotten" as marginalized, relegated to an era that Canadian fiction has moved past. It is not entirely accurate to say that Kroetsch and Engel are not read. Their work is read — and taught — but read itinerantly, as representative of a curious past, peripheral, obsolescent, and no longer pertinent except in the hothouse of a classroom. This sidelining of two major writers is difficult to decipher, for both are recognizably part of what we would claim as influential. Because they are dead, their oeuvre is complete, which should make critical assessment relatively straightforward. Their names are familiar, and evoke a nod of admission, but a poll of students or teachers or Canadians in general evokes a chagrined shrug in response to a question about their presence in our cultural consciousness.

In their time, they infused new energy into Canadian writing, seasoned by the dynamism of the 1960s and 1970s, although their work is more muscular and adventurous than the more earnest of the books hiding out in the canon. They were both eccentric artists, extraneous to the mainstream of Canadian literature — if there is such a river. And they corroborate one of the seismic shifts that is changing our engage-

ment with the fiction that presumably “makes us real,” a reflection of Kroetsch’s over-quoted remark, “In a sense, we haven’t got an identity until somebody tells our story. The fiction makes us real” (Kroetsch, *Creation* 63). Or the real that chews through our fiction and then leaves it in a repository of the past. Their gradual erasure is disturbing, less because it marks the passage of time than because it appears to prove a laziness of attention that does not argue for an enduring canon but a slippery distillation that prefigures its own vanishing.

This conundrum was brought to light in the summer of 2014, when an American reader found the rather lurid mass-market paperback of *Bear* in a stack of Harlequins and tried to figure out why it had serious endorsements on the cover, and why it had won Canada’s most significant literary honour, the Governor General’s Award, in 1976. Suddenly *Bear* went viral, the Internet sparking with ill-informed speculation about this novel and its place in Canadian literature, readers and non-readers alike joining the clamour. Canadians, too, re-visited the novel, and offered opinions. “*Bear* is a book that confronts us with all the theme-iest themes, and then leavens all that literary weightiness with sopping erotic silliness. It’s so on-the-nose that it seems to be sneering at its archness. This undercurrent of irony and sly humour is, I think, what accounts for the new, half-smirking interest in *Bear*. Well, that and all the bear sex” (Semley, web). The spike of interest in *Bear* appeared to be precipitated by prurient shock rather than the revelation of good writing, when imgur, an image-sharing site that purports to “showcase . . . the freshest, most interesting and popular images on the web” (<http://imgur.com/about>), posted “What the actual #&\*# Canada?” (<http://imgur.com/gallery/uf3YE>) with the comment, “you have some explaining to do, Canada.” That response, and such derisive comments as “I feel like it’s part of my Canadian duty to read this and then possibly partake in some self-flagellation,” led to almost a million hits. Most responses were crude and entirely unliterary, but the “find” evoked a surprising amount of noise about how a Canadian novel could not possibly be so “racy,” could not possibly depict eroticism, let alone bestial sexuality and satisfaction. *Bear* does dare to push the envelope of realism and to explore the tenderness between a woman and a bear, both iconoclastically Canadian in their reference and resistance. Needless to say, many contemporary readers missed the subtle irony informing the novel, its exquisite analysis of the relationship between Canadians and

nature, and its perspicacious examination of the extent to which our nineteenth-century sensibility persists into the present. But that blip of attention to *Bear* in the summer of 2014 presaged the extent to which Canadian fiction must contort itself to retain or re-gain attention. “It’s not every day that a Canadian novel published almost forty years ago is suddenly a hot topic online,” said Terry O’Reilly on CBC’s *q*. And that, sadly, summarizes the literary cachet of one of the finest and most unusual novels in our national treasure chest.

*Bear* appears to occupy that realm of books read and abandoned, re-found and re-discovered only when an entirely off-centre moment makes them momentarily appetizing, devoured, and then forgotten again. We find them when we search for the unusual, the racy, and our resurgent interest is as fickle as the attention that sudden eruptions always evoke. They crop up in odd websites, such as “Outmoded Authors,” a “reading challenge for all interested in exploring authors who were kicked out of the ‘in’ crowd.” The mousy brown covers of Canadian literature (*Bear* was originally published in a plain brown wrapper) hide a good many such revelations. Why have we put those novels into the undergrowth of “passé” literature, and with the retrospective revision of time, or sheer laziness of attention, forgotten the power and complexity of writing that established the foundation of our literary character by reconnoitering our doubts and disquisitions?

The same “shocking breakthrough” might be deemed possible with Kroetsch’s scatological odyssey *The Studhorse Man* (1969), which has not gone viral, although it, too, could, with a racy cover, become a “hot topic.” The novel predates *Bear* by almost ten years, but shares with *Bear* apposite characteristics, both of them unusual choices for the anointment of our highest honour. *The Studhorse Man*’s narrator, a lunatic sitting naked in a bathtub and trying to argue for his own relevance, tells the story of a man who, in a desperate attempt to stop time and the inevitable ascendancy of automobiles and gasoline, peddles a studhorse from farm to farm. He is jeered at, mocked, and scorned, not only because everyone is buying cars and horses are being put out to pasture, but because the notion of procreation — sex — for sale has become a zone of prudish hesitancy. The novel won the Governor General’s Award in 1969 and was read then with the same scandalized pleasure that readers brought to Engel’s *Bear*, although its sexual escapades are less transgressive, doubtless because they are the adventures of a man

looking for mares that his magnificent studhorse can service, and in the process finding himself in myriad situations where he must perform as “stud” to a series of insatiable women. His “unwilling” willingness propels the hero (Hazard Lepage) on a journey through the small towns and down the back roads of Alberta, just after World War II and just before Leduc would bring in the oil strike that spelled the end of horses and the future of the automobile. The futility (or success) of Hazard’s quest is documented by his biographer, who, “enthralled by [Hazard’s] very crudeness,” invents his biography of Hazard sitting naked in a bathtub in the Provincial Asylum in Ponoka. But that does not make the book less ribald or overtly sexual in its unfolding. As I point out in my introduction to the 2004 edition, “the peregrinations of the sexual rogue are as much a part of Hazard’s journey as his occupation. The many beds that Hazard performs in cover a panoply of myth and place, parody and hyperbole. Volatile and passionate, this is a man who sleeps in a different bed every night (including a bed of bones in a boxcar, the back seat of a car, and an icehouse), who must fashion his comfort to his circumstances, his needs to his desires” (van Herk viii). In short, the novel is a perfect candidate for a viral moment of discovery in the great stumbling beast of attention that stalks cyberspace.

But that moment has not arrived (yet), and Kroetsch’s astonishing work is read primarily by scholars and university students (it’s not high school material), and with selective attention. His poetry is studied most, and the novels are parceled out as curiosities, regional works about Alberta (that tainted province, butt of all our fears and antagonisms), and then puzzled over and put aside as belonging to the twentieth century, old fashioned for their reliance on innovative irony and Rabelaisian humour. When I taught a graduate course on the writings of Kroetsch in 2014, the students who registered had for the most part little familiarity with his oeuvre. Some had read *What the Crow Said* or *Seed Catalogue*, but they were only scantily familiar with the work of the man who had won the Governor General’s Award in 1969 for *The Studhorse Man*. Their delight at discovering his wit and style was in inverse proportion to his growing invisibility.

Why do I use Engel and Kroetsch as examples of the curious vicissitudes of Canadian attention? As figures, they are readily summarized. “Marian Engel (1933-85) belonged to the generation of Canadian women writers who came to prominence during the 1970s. While

contemporaries such as Margaret Laurence and Alice Munro are well known and widely read, Marian Engel has received less attention — despite an impressive literary output and significant contributions to the profession of writing in Canada” (Verduyn, *Lifelines* 3). Novelist, poet, and literary critic Robert Kroetsch can be encapsulated as being “drawn constantly to those Canadian experiences which offer metaphors of contingency, of conditional assent” (Thomas 15). They are both mid-list writers who had flares of notoriety, and then, after solid and important work, have now begun to fade from view, if not the long-range canon. I do not wish to argue for their significance, or criticize their neglect, or declare that we occupy a time incapable of appreciating their eccentricity or brilliance. That is a game the rich multiplicity of Canadian literature makes irrelevant, as the many lists of different categories of writing now argue. I have singled out Engel and Kroetsch because of their fascinating positions at the 1978 Calgary Conference on the Canadian Novel, and because they encompassed “an important era in Canadian literary history” (Verduyn, *Marian* 5). Their writing is unique, and in its time broke barriers, but our contemporary unfamiliarity with them is not surprising. These writers are exemplary for their interesting contributions (regional and otherwise) to the development of a national literature, and for their subsequent effacement. In that sense, they are quintessentially Canadian, and I argue for them not as exceptional, but as templates.

They embody the wry understatement and self-deprecating humour fostered by Canadian writers in the second half of the twentieth century. The paradox of Canadian writing is that it wants to be Canadian writing, and does not mind the limitations of that designation. *Bear* and *The Studhorse Man* embody a sense of what Canadian literature sought to become and what Canadian literature is capable of. By their very eccentricity, they foreshadow the evolution of Canadian fiction. They are remarkable works by two authors who were much praised and valued, but who are now both dead, and, having been relegated to the twentieth century, are no longer read as avidly as one would expect, given their stature, their completed oeuvre, and their quality. They encompass the recent past, the penumbra of the last forty years, and how in that space of time, Canadian literature bloomed, matured, and now seems to withdraw not from its continuing bravura performance in the global literary world, but from its own memory and recognition.

It is difficult to measure the formation of a canon, or the tides of fashion in study and cultural literacy. It is impossible to predict what will endure, or what will fade. It is impossible to remember the future. And yet, Liebhaber, one of Kroetsch's inimitable characters in *What the Crow Said*, does "remember the future" and then, terrified at what he has glimpsed, tries immediately to forget what he has remembered. As Christine Jackman so cogently argues, "Liebhaber fights against a master narrative written in the past, with the power to remember and structure both the present and the future. However, as long as he seeks to counter the absence of 'meaning anywhere in the world' with a pre-written and inflexible story, he is caught" (89). In fact, in a role suggestive of the passage of literature itself, Liebhaber addresses the tension and torment of all possible predictions:

Bent over his drawers of type in the long night, Liebhaber tried to remember the future. But he remembered nothing. He knew it was Gutenberg who'd made all memory of the past irrelevant. (Kroetsch, *What* 59)

And there, in a nutshell, rests the moment of reading that we seem to relive now, the ultimate terminus of Gutenberg and movable type, when it is no longer necessary to remember or to cling to a canon, no longer important to identify those texts that shaped the past because the only part of history that matters is the present.

Marguerite Heber, Marian Engel's character in *The Glassy Sea*, muses on her life at the end of that novel by considering it as a text. "Life . . . is a sentence between brackets: these brackets must be seen to contain what is, not what might have been. It is useless to ponder on what might have been, but entirely proper to map the future in terms of the real past" (146). The "real" past, that literary space so celebratory during the last decades of the twentieth century, has perhaps been relegated to obscurity, but it has not vanished, for its traces reside in the books that appear now, eager and new-minted, and if lacking in homage to or knowledge of their forebears, not lacking in their contemporary confidence. The present is written by the literature of the past, and if we look to texts that cannot be ignored, we also cannot ignore those peripheral texts that contributed to the growth of a sophisticated literature, one that needs to be aware of its inventions and errors, its laughter and forgetting.

In 1978, the Calgary Conference on the Canadian Novel made a bold gesture. It sought to perform historicity in the genealogy of conferences on Canadian literature, and signaled a long line of conferences to come. As Hallvard Dahlie recapitulates in his introduction to *Taking Stock*, Malcolm Ross circulated a request, along with the official ballot, to the participants (both writers and critics) to “first . . . help select a list of one hundred novels which ‘can be recommended as central to any study of Canadian literature’; second, that we list our own choices ‘for the *ten* best Canadian novels yet written’; and third, that we list ‘ten Canadian works of literature of *any genre* (including literary criticism) which [we] consider most indispensable to the study and appreciation of our national literary heritage’” (Dahlie 2). The goal was “to propose a list of significant Canadian novels that can serve as a guide to those interested in the masterworks of our literary tradition” (Steele 158). That language certainly delineates the era, relying as it does on the trope of the “master” narrative of greatness, significance, and importance. That the list led to passionate dissent, argument, and “flashy and ephemeral headlines” (Dahlie 2) might surprise us today, when lists are part of our consumption of literature, and the many lists available curtail the need to identify one as *the list*.

What the conference did articulate, for all that it was rather monolithically white, male, and academically correct, “was the maturity and richness of Canadian fiction, and even if it did not begin to achieve the ambitious fourfold objectives set out by its organizers, it did provide a national forum for the discussion of these objectives” (Dahlie 3). It is in that arena that I have chosen to commemorate Kroetsch and Engel as two prototypes of that moment, both of them ironic and humorous and germinal writers of their time, working toward a literature both practical and transcendent, and happily anticipating their own erasure by the multiplicity of Canada’s ever-evolving fiction. They were the ironic participants in that conference, wry and self-deprecating and although Kroetsch wielded the authority of a keynote and Engel contributed to a panel on regionalism, neither offered a conclusive demarcation. In fact, Kroetsch’s overtly stated reluctance “to locate/ discriminate the canon of Canadian fiction” (Kroetsch, “Contemporary” 9) is itself a prediction. He concludes that “we make books out of books. The paradox and the terror is always that: the need to invent out of the already invented” (16). His wise declaration anticipates the endless lists of Canadian novels that

continue to arrange and re-arrange themselves into sets and subsets, remembrance and forgetting. For it is through the legacy of writers such as Kroetsch and Engel that we make more books, writing back to their legacy and forward to a new one.

If I could revise history, I would bring Robert Kroetsch and Marian Engel together for a debriefing on the Canadian literature they envisioned at the Calgary Conference of 1978, sit them down at a table and ask them to remember the future. They would, more than likely, refuse, and direct me to their novels, although they would certainly invite me, as a mid-list writer myself, to join them in their speculations. After all, they would argue, it is in the peripheral that literary power lurks, in the sudden ambushes that leap toward illumination, the astonishing discoveries of what has been forgotten. If we can remember the future, we can remember that the past endures, and the writing of the past has carried us to the writing of the present, in all its radiant variety.

Books make more books.

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