

Readers' Advisory

Craig Clark, Col. Ed.

Canadian Literary Fiction

US Versus Canadian Markets and a Primer on Important Authors

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Introduction

When comparing the United States with Canada, there is an "imbalance of knowledge and interest, which is to a large extent a reflection of asymmetric power relations."¹ Canadian culture, including that which relates to reading and literature, tends to be more heavily influenced by American culture than vice versa. This has implications for readers' advisory in both countries. Readers in Canada may be overwhelmed by the cultural focus on American content and prefer suggestions that prioritize Canadian content. Readers in the United States, on the other hand, might appreciate suggestions that introduce them to unfamiliar Canadian literature.

In both cases, investing time in developing an understanding of Canadian literature is advantageous for readers' advisory practitioners. This piece, revised from an assignment based on Wyatt and Saricks' *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction*,² addresses the current landscape of English Canadian literary fiction and discusses what is valued about the genre while highlighting some authors and titles of interest.

Although I use the category of Canadian literary fiction throughout this piece, please note that this label is not without issue, so be mindful of this in your own readers' advisory conversations. The category of "Canadian literature" has often excluded the contributions of authors whose language, culture, and experiences do not stem from Anglo-Saxon roots.³ In using it, I strive to make this resource findable and to disrupt the notion that Canadian identity is reserved for a certain type of White-European settler. However, I also recognize that not all authors living/working in/from Canada describe their work as "Canadian literature" or identify as "Canadian," given the constructedness of borders and the historical and ongoing violence of colonialism.⁴ My inclusion of works in this piece is not intended to label them or their authors as Canadian if they are not intended to be read as such and/or do not identify as such, but simply to recognize their significance to the literary landscape in Canada.

LitFic Readers

Literary fiction readers take reading seriously.⁵ They value it in an artistic sense, paying close attention to the way each work is crafted as well as the story it tells, and perhaps reflecting on

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the interplay between the two. They are deeply interested in character, arguably more than in the storyline, and do not expect characters to fall neatly into any archetypes. When it comes to choosing something to read, many readers of literary fiction are seeking an immersive experience. The use of affective language,⁶ attention to detail, and creative structuring are all factors that facilitate a reader's sense of immersion in literary work. Literary fiction can tend toward the experimental and is divisive at times. Readers may be drawn toward some creative choices but be put off by others, depending on what they find readable and interesting. For the literary fiction reader, an unsatisfying reading experience is often rooted not in insufferable characters or weird storylines, but in the feeling of "not getting it." These readers can be satisfied by the experience of reading books they disliked for other reasons, as this dislike can prompt reflection that is just as meaningful as that incited by really enjoying a book; however, being thoroughly confused and feeling as if you missed something is understandably less compelling. For the literary fiction reader, reading is a rich practice of reflection and philosophy.⁷

Consuming literary narratives, in all their richness and complexity, has been found useful for readers striving to develop worldviews that recognize the intricacies of social systems.⁸ Perspective-taking can be a key component of the literary reading experience for many fans.⁹ While many types of fiction are narrative and may require the reader to empathize with a different point of view, the lack of a formula for literary fiction reading forces readers to engage in a different way, which has been argued to contribute to a deeper understanding of those differences that are represented.¹⁰ In the Canadian context, much celebrated literary fiction has done the work of representing diversity in nuanced ways. For example, the titles selected as finalists for the 2024 Giller Prize, which celebrates excellence in Canadian fiction, address queerness, gender, society, class, colonialism, and diaspora.¹¹ Readers of Canadian literary fiction want to read stories that allow them to think about the social issues that structure their lives from the perspective of others who experience those injustices in different ways and/or to read stories that allow them to feel seen in their experiences of injustice. They take reading seriously not only in a stylistic sense but also in the choices that they make about what issues they want to spend their time reflecting on through the practice of reading.

The notability of authors in the literary fiction world fluctuates. A large group of writers can lay claim to authorship of literary fiction, and as such, their relevance is often dependent on who has published most recently and what works are trending on book-related social media (e.g., BookTok).¹² Literary fiction's focus on style, language, and character allows it to encompass a wide range of stories and, by extension, a wide range of authors. The quality and style focus of literary fiction means that not all works by the same author will necessarily be understood as falling within the genre. It's also important to recognize that this ambiguity may be applied inconsistently across authors based on dominant perceptions of quality writing that are grounded in racist and colonial constructions of what "quality" entails. Strive to critically evaluate and diversify your reference sources for Canadian literary fiction so that your readers' advisory practices do not contribute to the perpetuation of these harmful constructions.

Recently Relevant

Some authors who have been topical recently for their literary fiction works include the following:

Anuja Varghese, whose short story collection *Chrysalis*¹³ won the 2023 Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction,¹⁴ a Canadian literary award administered by the Canada Council for the Arts. Varghese artfully plays with genre in her work, which centers on the experiences of women of color and engages intersections of community, family, sexuality, and cultural expectations.¹⁵

Conor Kerr, whose novel *Prairie Edge*¹⁶ was shortlisted for the 2024 Giller Prize.¹⁷ *Prairie Edge* is simultaneously a crime story, a critique of modern activism, and an imagining of the possibilities of LandBack. Since then, Kerr has published *Beaver Hills Forever*,¹⁸ a poetic novella that artistically represents the limitations that resource extraction and the colonial Canadian education system impose on the lives of Métis people in the prairies.¹⁹

Emily Austin, a Western University MLIS graduate whose *Everyone in This Room Will Someday Be Dead*,²⁰ *Interesting Facts About Space*,²¹ and *We Could Be Rats*²² have generated significant interest in the past few years. Austin's writing is deeply personal, highlighting the nuances of experiencing mental health challenges through each of her lovably strange protagonists. Her newest novel *Is This a Cry for Help?*,²³ the story of a librarian who returns from medical leave to find her library branch navigating challenges to their collection and equity, diversity, and inclusion programming, will surely be of interest to library users and staff alike.

Joshua Whitehead, a Lambda Literary Award winner²⁴ described by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) as "one of the most exciting and important new voices on Turtle Island."²⁵ Whitehead's debut novel, *Jonny Appleseed*,²⁶ is a whirlwind story of a young Two-Spirit Indigiqueer person's week of preparations for returning from his life in the city to his former life on reserve. Covering themes of love, trauma, kinship, and ambition, this novel won the 2021 Canada Reads competition,²⁷ designating it as "the title the whole country should read [that] year."²⁸

Michelle Good, whose novel *Five Little Indians*²⁹ won the 2020 Governor General's Literary Award for fiction,³⁰ as well as the 2022 Canada Reads competition.³¹ Good's novel chronicles the story of five residential school survivors as they come to terms with the past and figure out what the future has in store for them.³² Good is also the author of the essay collection *Truth Telling: Seven Conversations about Indigenous Life in Canada*.³³ Her essay addressing the history of Indigenous literature in Canada³⁴ is critical reading for anyone who wishes to develop their understanding of the Canadian literary context.

Other names that pop up regularly in conversations about Canadian literary fiction are Alice Munro, David Adams Richards, Dionne Brand, Shyam Selvadurai, and Suzette Mayr. All of these authors have published several literary fiction works at various points and have been highly recognized for the quality of their writing.

Key Authors

Although the vastness of the field makes it difficult, some authors can be highlighted as centrally associated with the genre. The following authors are represented for the richness of their work and the thoroughness with which they represent the ideals and appeals of literary fiction in Canada. Their relevance is demonstrated by not only the accolades their works have received but also by the interest they have garnered in both popular and academic spheres. These award-winning authors all make creative use of style, language, and character to deal with serious and timely topics.

Esi Edugyan is a two-time winner of the Giller Prize,³⁵ only the third author to receive the award twice. Her historical literary works are described as contributing to Black Canadian literature's interest in simultaneously engaging "fictions of belonging" and "the fiction of belonging."³⁶ More specifically, her works consider diasporic Black experiences and the ways that they are obscured by dominant ways of knowing and keeping history.³⁷ Metaphorically rich, Edugyan's writing speaks to and challenges world literature narratives.³⁸ Nationalist cultural policing has led to challenges of the conceptualization of Edugyan's work as "sufficiently Canadian"³⁹; however, the fact that her writing

represents stories that are not widely included in Canadian literature should be understood as a sign of the need to better represent her writing, and the writing of other Black Canadians, in readers' advisory practices and conversations about Canadian literary fiction.

Washington Black,⁴⁰ winner of the 2018 Giller Prize,⁴¹ would make an excellent starting point for those interested in reading Edugyan. The story of Wash, a boy born into enslavement, his relationship with the brother of his enslaver, and their travels in search of freedom, *Washington Black* is about self-invention, betrayal, love, and redemption. Beautifully written and praised for its engagingness,⁴² this book offers a good introduction to Edugyan that aligns meaningfully with the dominant appeals of literary fiction. Those who don't want their experience with this work to end will be pleased to know that it has recently been adapted into an eight-part streaming show.⁴³

katherena vermette is a poet, novelist, and author for young people.⁴⁴ As the 2017 winner of the CODE Burt Award for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Young Adult Literature,⁴⁵ her work is recognized for its quality and cultural relevance.⁴⁶ Much of vermette's writing addresses the violence of settler colonialism and its impact on Indigenous women and girls, "giv[ing] readers glimpses into the silences and the invisibility Indigenous girls experience."⁴⁷ Writing from multiple thoroughly developed perspectives, vermette invites readers to deeply engage with the inseparability of individual harms and systemic injustices.⁴⁸

The Break,⁴⁹ the work that positioned vermette as a prominent voice in Canadian literary fiction,⁵⁰ is a good place to start. An intergenerational family saga, *The Break* takes place in the wake of a crime in Winnipeg's North End. This work is an excellent demonstration of vermette's literary capabilities, particularly characterization, as well as the navigation of difficult but important themes, like the violence experienced by Indigenous women in Canada.⁵¹ Readers will likely also be interested in vermette's follow-ups, *The Strangers*⁵² and *The Circle*.⁵³

Madeleine Thien is a short story writer and novelist⁵⁴ who is highly recognized for the way that her work reflects the transcultural nature of Canadian literature and deeply engages with the diaspora.⁵⁵ Much of her work plays with the language and imagery of the life sciences using scientific knowing as a framework for her narrativization of "the intersection between historical trauma and contemporary risk society."⁵⁶ Thien was awarded the 2024 Writers' Trust Engel Findley Award, a testament to the "masterful" quality of her entire body of work and her embodiment of the modern ideals of Canadian literary fiction.⁵⁷

*Do Not Say We Have Nothing*⁵⁸ was the winner of the 2016 Giller Prize⁵⁹ and the Governor General's Award for Fiction.⁶⁰ It was also long-listed for the Booker Prize.⁶¹ A story about storytelling, *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* is a blending of history and fiction that, through the reflections of immigrant characters on the written records of their families' pasts, considers the power of language.⁶² As Thien's most acclaimed work,⁶³ this novel is likely the best starting point for avid fans of literary fiction interested in exploring her writing. If *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* is well received, consider also highlighting Thien's 2025 novel, *The Book of Records*.⁶⁴

An overview of Canadian literary fiction would be incomplete without addressing **Margaret Atwood**. Atwood was pivotal in the recognition of and distinguishing of Canadian literature as its own field.⁶⁵ Perhaps best known for *The Handmaid's Tale*,⁶⁶ Atwood has an extensive body of work that focuses primarily on themes of power, gender, and environment.⁶⁷ Much of Atwood's fiction work falls into the speculative fiction genre; however, it can be simultaneously understood as literary fiction due to its intentionally stylistic and political uses of language and attention to characterization.⁶⁸ The recipient of numerous prestigious literary awards in both Canadian and international contexts,

including multiple Booker Prizes,⁶⁹ Atwood describes her fiction writing as a moral examination of society.⁷⁰

Those interested in beginning to read Atwood, particularly those who are disinterested in dystopias, might enjoy *The Edible Woman*.⁷¹ As the book that "put [Atwood] on the literary map," this surreal literary novel is a natural starting point for reading her work.⁷² A satirical exploration of consumerism and emotional cannibalism, *The Edible Woman* includes much of the literary appeal that Atwood is known for: biting critique elegantly framed by metaphorical language and nuanced female protagonists.⁷³

Michael Ondaatje is the author of fiction, essays, and poetry, with much of his fiction work falling into the historical category. He has won numerous awards for his work, including the Giller Prize,⁷⁴ the Booker Prize,⁷⁵ and the Governor General's Award for Fiction.⁷⁶ Ondaatje's power as a writer has been described as resting on "his ability to undermine his own narratives, to cast shadow on the validity of the narrative act."⁷⁷ His style has evolved throughout his writing career, starting with dramatized subversion of expectations, moving to representations of rebellion that were explicitly political, and finally taking a more sentimental turn, reflecting deeply on trauma.⁷⁸ Consistent throughout each of these stages, however, is Ondaatje's attention to aesthetics and intermediality.⁷⁹ Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the many collections of poetry that he has published, Ondaatje's writing is very thoughtfully styled.

An exploration of Ondaatje's work might be best started with *The Cat's Table*,⁸⁰ noted as one of the best examples of his ongoing focus on aesthetics and intermediality.⁸¹ This historical fiction work depicts the adventures of a boy who embarks on a sea voyage, along with the miscellaneous group of other travelers he meets on board the ship. It is popular for its beautiful style and extensive use of literary devices.⁸² Less fragmented than many of Ondaatje's other works, *The Cat's Table* is an ideal entry point for those new to his writing.

Miriam Toews is a writer whose work primarily engages questions of how communities shape the identities of those who belong to them,⁸³ often focusing on Canadian Mennonite communities specifically. As Toews stated in her keynote address at the 2012 International Festival of Authors:

Good fiction does not reinforce our complacent self-image; it makes us aware of identities outside our own. It brings to life complex characters who resemble real people, provides new points of reference, reclaims old territories and invents new ones, magnifies familiar moments into epiphanies.⁸⁴

These values are clearly evident in Toews' work, which focuses intensely on the seemingly mundane, inviting the reader to see the beauty and importance of what they might have otherwise overlooked. Her work is praised for its readability and humor, but above all, for the compassionate and nuanced approach she brings to each of her characters.⁸⁵ Like Thien, Toews was a recipient of the Writers' Trust Engel Findley Award, winning the prize in 2010.⁸⁶

While *Women Talking*⁸⁷ has been popular recently, making the top ten in Canadian paperback sales for 2023,⁸⁸ those interested in starting to read Toews might find *A Complicated Kindness*⁸⁹ to be a more satisfying entry point. *Women Talking* is written in a meeting notes format, which, while a compelling strategy of telling the story in question, is more difficult to access than the traditional narrative format employed in *A Complicated Kindness*. Toews' third novel, *A Complicated Kindness*, depicts a curious teenager's coming-of-age in a small Mennonite prairie town, exploring themes of family, grief, and identity. The novel's receipt of the 2004 Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction⁹⁰ emphasizes the quality and relevance of its writing.

Conclusion

This article addresses only a small sample of the wonderful body of writing that is Canadian literary fiction. Think of it as an invitation to explore this genre further—to not only incorporate these titles into your readers' advisory repertoire but to strive to stay up to date with the Canadian literary landscape. Your readers will appreciate it!

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