

This Is Us

Evoking Canada through its literary soul
Compiled by Athena McKenzie

THE WRITER RUDY WIEBE once said, “Only the stories we tell each other can create us as a true Canadian people.” Through these following fragments – a minuscule sampling, let it be said – some of our country’s talented fiction writers capture its history (the good and the bad), its landscape, its passions, its diversity and, yes, even its weather, creating a mosaic of this beautiful and complicated country.

What a land. What power these rivers were already yielding, far beyond her sight. Even a map of this country – lines arranged in an arbitrary way on a long rectangular piece of paper – stirs the imagination beyond imagination, she thought, looking at the map, as other lines differently arranged in relation to each other have not the power to stir. Each name on the map says, “We reached this point, by broken trail and mountains and water; and when we reached it, thus and thus we named it. —*Swamp Angel* by Ethel Wilson, New Canadian Library ►

PHOTOGRAPHY, RICHARD WEAR



The winters of my childhood were long, long seasons. We lived in three places - the school, the church and the skating rink - but our real life was on the skating rink. —***The Hockey Sweater*** from ***The Hockey Sweater and Other Stories*** by Roch Carrier, House of Anansi Press



Perhaps some scientist of the future, Murray thought, would be able to analyse the nature of the chain which bound Canada to England. Certainly no one could do so now, for the links were tenuous. Hardly anyone in Canada really understood the legal obligations of his own country to England. Hardly anyone cared. Yet the chain was stronger than the sceptics guessed, for twice, within the last fifteen years it had pulled Canada into England's wars, and Canadians had offered their lives without question. —***Barometer Rising*** by Hugh MacLennan, New Canadian Library

If Canada had a soul (a doubtful proposition, Moses thought) then it wasn't to be found in Batoche or the Plains of Abraham or Fort Walsh or Charlottetown or Parliament Hill, but in The Caboose and thousands of bars like it that knit the country together from Peggy's Cove, Nova Scotia, to the far side of Vancouver Island. —***Solomon Gursky Was Here*** by Mordecai Richler, Penguin Canada ▶

PHOTOGRAPHY, VISUALCOMMUNICATIONS (HOCKEY); INSTANTS (BEERS); SEAN GLADWELL (PLANES)





There were no Depression jobs for such men. They had been deserted by the railroad companies and betrayed by the many labour contractors who had gone back to China, wealthy and forgetful. There was a local Vancouver by-law against begging for food, a federal law against stealing food, but no law in any court against starving to death for lack of food. —**The Jade Peony** by Wayson Choy, Douglas & McIntyre

Rendezvous is our winter festival, held each February since the Gold Rush, they say, to fend off cabin fever and give frostbitten and exhausted miners a chance to cut loose.

We have flour-packing and log-sawing contests, dog sled races, sourdough pancake breakfasts, a longest beard contest for the fellas, and a hairy leg contest for the ladies. It is winter in the Yukon, after all. —**One Man's Trash** by Ivan E. Coyote, Arsenal Pulp Press



PHOTOGRAPHY, JOSIANE FARAND (MAPLE SYRUP), JAMES O'NEIL (SKYLINE); DANITA DELIMONT (ROYAL CANADIAN MOUNTED POLICE)



I could not stop looking at the old constable, standing at the back of the drawing room of Government House with tears streaming down his cheeks. It was April Fool's Day, 1949. The old man, who, for decades, had worked at Government House, stood rigidly at attention, fists clenched The new lieutenant-governor was given by the secretary of state a mahogany-framed certificate of Canadian citizenship. Newfoundland the country ceased to be. —**The Colony of Unrequited Dreams** by Wayne Johnston, Vintage Canada ▶



He was born into a region which did not appear on a map until 1910, though his family had worked there for twenty years and the land had been homesteaded since 1816. In the school atlas the place is pale green and nameless. The river slips out of an unnamed lake and is a simple blue line until it becomes the Napanee twenty-five miles to the south, and, only because of logging, will eventually be called Depot Creek. "Deep Eau." — *In the Skin of the Lion*, Michael Ondaatje, McClelland & Stewart



A few nights of the right weather, and I'm talking thirty-below, teeth-aching and nose-falling-off type weather, and the canal would grow about a foot of ice. Hard as marble, and just as smooth. Strong and true. It gives me goosebumps just thinking about it, Looksee there, see how goose-bumped I am right now. I can't remember lacing on blades for the first time. Like-wise with hockey. I've got no idea when I first heard of, saw, or played the game of hockey. —*King Leary* by Paul Quarrington, Anchor Canada

All of them were sitting in the three rows of seats at the back of the streetcar; and she figured they were men going home from a long day of temporary, unskilled labour. But how did she know this? she asked herself. She knew because she was once like them. That was what used to be called "Canadian Experience." Yes! She was sure that when they said, "You do not have Canadian Experience," they were using the code word for "You black." —*More* by Austin Clarke, Dundum Press ▶



PHOTOGRAPHY, G R TAYLOR PHOTOGRAPHY (CABIN); SWISSMEDIAVISION (ELK); ANYDIRECTFLIGHT (STREETCAR)



It was one of those days that have no mercy on your toes, that are oblivious to the suffering of your ears, that are mean and determined to take a chunk of your nose. It was a day to remind you that you can shiver all you want, sniff all you want, the universe is still oblivious. And if you ask why the inhumane temperature, the universe will answer you with tight lips and a cold tone and tell you to go back where you came from if you do not like it here. —**Cockroach** by Ravi Hage, House of Anansi Press

They arrived by train in Toronto in 1923. At Union Station, they were met by a minister of the A.M.E. Church in Toronto. He and his wife put up the Canes for two nights. They visited the waterfront. Walked on Yonge Street. Sat, to their amazement, next to white folks in an Italian restaurant. They were assured, however, that not every restaurant and not every hotel would admit black people. —**Any Known Blood** by Lawrence Hill, HarperCollins Publisher



PHOTOGRAPHY, PAUL SOUDERS (ICEBERG); LEONARDO PATRIZI (PEOPLE ON STREET); KEITH LEVIT/DESIGN PICS (CAMPFIRE)

As if from thin air, a grinning Father Lafleur appeared behind the brothers and, with a gentle touch to Jeremiah's left shoulder, purred.
 "Now, Jeremiah. You know you're not to speak Cree once you're off the plane." Jeremiah felt a choke breaking against his throat. Small brown suitcases in hand, the Okimasis brothers silently trudged up the grassy slope, past a dying clump of fireweed. —**Kiss of the Fur Queen** by Tomson Highway, Anchor Canada ▶





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PHOTOGRAPHY: SHAUN L

How lonely now and distant these lives and deaths of my grandmother's early life. And how different from the lives and deaths of the three sons she has outlived. Men who left the crying gulls and hanging cliffs of Rankin's Point to take the road into the larger world to fashion careers and lives that would never have been theirs on this tiny sea-washed farm. —**"The Road to Rankin's Point"** from ***Island: The Collected Stories of Alistair MacLeod***, Emblem Editions 