

From Ink Lake



CANADIAN STORIES SELECTED BY
MICHAEL ONDAATJE

From Ink Lake

Canadian Stories

Selected by
Michael Ondaatje



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From Ink Lake

For Ken Adachi (1928–1989).
True believer.

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Introduction

*"The one-armed explorer
Could only touch half of the country"*

W. S. Merwin's lines about a nineteenth-century geologist seem an apt warning to anyone who would try to represent the best writing of a whole country in one book. An anthologist goes mad trying to be fair and dutiful and must at some point relinquish that responsibility. My intent in this collection is to give instead an angular portrait of a time and place.

When I began work on this anthology there was the challenge that it would have two purposes. It would be a book published abroad, where it would in many cases introduce writers to a new audience. But it would also be published at home – as an interpretation for Canadians who are already familiar with many of these writers, though perhaps not with these particular works. Who was I supposed to aim the book towards? Was this collection a cargo cult? Was it to be some strange structure on our beaches for passing planes from abroad to interpret? Or to establish a firm and distinct border between ourselves and the United States? Or was it to be the pleasure of mapping that the explorer George Vancouver performed on the West Coast?

In Europe, as the Canadian poet Ralph Gustafson says, "you cannot move without going down in history". Pablo Neruda, speaking of South America, said, "there are rivers in our countries which have no names, trees which nobody knows, and birds which nobody has described. . . . Our duty, then, as we understand it, is to express what is unheard of. Everything has been painted in Europe, everything has been sung in Europe." Canada, too, is still documenting and inventing itself.

This is a country of metamorphosis, where we have translated ourselves. *"Here was Beauty and here was Nowhere"*, as the poet Dionne Brand writes. The landscape the early explorers of Canada found was surreal and brutal. We brought with us the old wounds of Europe and Asia and we completed old feuds and battles here. We put on new clothes here. We came as *filles du Roi*, "daughters of the

king" – those girls of marriageable age, most of them Parisian beggars and orphans ill prepared for the hardships of life in Canada, who in the seventeenth century were shipped off to New France to provide the French army with wives. We came as exiles, or sometimes thinking Canada was just a conduit to the riches of the Orient or, later, a conduit to the United States – just "Upper America". We named fabulous mountain ranges and rivers after ourselves or the wives of English kings, labelled the landscape without any sense of irony.

The roughness and brutality of the land instead created irony about our worth. There was never a true sense of political or social or, until recently, literary confidence within our country. (Our vainglorious Prime Minister's idea of status is still to be photographed beside British or American leaders.) We make good horror movies. We tend to be known for our hockey players.

This is the surface image of the country. We must turn to our literature for the truth about ourselves, for a more honest self-portrait. Alistair MacLeod's *Maritimes* or Alice Munro's *Ontario* or Sandra Birdsell's *Manitoba*, Mordecai Richler's *Montreal*, Glenn Gould's *Northern Ontario* – these make up the true portrait of the country, which was what I wanted to catch in this collection.

The historical scope of the book ranges from a story by Sinclair Ross in the 1930s to the present. But even a contemporary story such as Alistair MacLeod's, which opens the book, reaches far back into the past, into fable and the roots of a curse in another country. The mythology of a place does not evolve chronologically. The past invades us. In Canada we attempt to rewrite it satirically, as George Bowering does, or we evoke it painfully, like Anne Hébert in *The First Garden*. The past is still, for us, a place that is not yet safely settled.

Our early novels had strange plots. In *Wacousta*, by John Richardson, a spurned Scottish lover follows a married couple to Canada, and, turning himself into a "firebrand Indian Chief", leads a bloody attack on the fort that houses them. Two hundred years later, in the early 1900s, Archibald Belaney turned himself into the legendary "Grey Owl" and claimed to be and was accepted throughout the world as an Indian. We wished romantically to become "Indian". Meanwhile we deprived the native peoples, the indigenous peoples of Canada, who already had distinctive cultures

and mythologies, of their own voices, tricking them into treaties that took away their lands and traditions. It is only in recent years that the First Peoples have represented themselves, told their own stories to the world – through writers such as Jeannette Armstrong, Minnie Freeman, Alice French, and the playwright Tomson Highway in his two wonderful plays *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*.

I have tried to present more than the usual Anglo-Saxon portrait of this country that gets depicted in the official histories and collections of fiction. In the second half of this century new immigrant writers have painted a different image of Canada that is also outside the Anglo-Saxon tradition. It appears in important and fine novels like *The Sacrifice* by Adele Wiseman, and continues among writers like Austin Clarke, Harold Sonny Ladoo, Josef Skvorecky, and recently Dionne Brand and Rohinton Mistry. From French and Scottish settlers to Englishmen to Europeans and Asians and South Americans, immigrant writing is a familiar and continuing tradition. The drama of entrance into a new land is central in our writing, as is the desire to get *out* of a social structure – comically portrayed in this collection by Mordecai Richler and Jack Hodgins. This tense rubbing together of two distinct worlds is perpetual in our stories – in Atwood's "The Man from Mars", in Keath Fraser's "The History of Cambodia", and in Chief John Kelly's haunting speech to the political and financial establishment about native land rights.

I chose stories rather than authors. I chose stories that in some way mapped the geographical, emotional, and literary range of the country, from fable to chronicle to intimate moment. And while I agree with William Trevor's description of a Chekhov short story as "the art of the glimpse", I am drawn also to stories that seem to have whole novels contained within them. (Mavis Gallant's "The Moslem Wife" has more going on in it than five novels.) Or stories which descend deep into a psyche – like Leon Rooke's "The Only Daughter" or David Adams Richards' "Blood Ties". I chose what I felt was wonderful writing. These stories stand, first of all, as good literature, as part of what I think of as the best writing of our time. We are contemporaries of John Berger and Anita Desai and Peter Handke and Toni Morrison and Russell Banks and Graham Swift and Marilynne Robinson. These stories are the work of writers

truthful both to themselves and to a subtle, believable country.

The book is a collage. I wanted to present an historical mix, a diverse assembly of forms and techniques and voices. Perhaps because I have never written a short story, and probably never will, I wanted a collection that was more relaxed in its rules of entry. I wanted to suggest a wider social context, to consider a larger literary range. Non-fiction – from the journals of the first explorers to the recent writing of Farley Mowat and Marshall McLuhan – has been a central and essential literary form for this country. It is the twin of fiction. We are a country swamped by British books and American movies and media and their version of history, and the non-fiction writers help us to hold on to our truths.

So I have included several works which are “outriders”, to give the more traditional stories a context and to help place them within a real map. I have included a chapter from Wallace Stegner’s *Wolf Willow* – a seminal book in its influence on our fiction writers – as well as part of a memoir by the Inuit writer Alice French, and Chief John Kelly’s speech which is a stunning piece of writing and moral argument.

Memoir and history and fiction blend in many of the works. The documentary quality in the novelist Hugh MacLennan’s description of the Halifax Explosion in 1917 is there thirty years later in Joy Kogawa’s horrifying fictive memoir, *Obasan*, about being Japanese Canadian during the Second World War. In such works the barrier between fiction and document has been erased, creating an even more powerful form. And what is fact and what is imagining in Stegner’s reconstruction of the surveying of the US–Canadian border? Where is fiction and where is memoir in Gabrielle Roy’s “The Well of Dunrea”, which to me has the power of that other great memoir novel – Willa Cather’s *My Antonia*?

And as for Glenn Gould’s comic deconstruction of Petula Clark, it seems to me as fictionally playful and literary-wise as the fiction of Julian Barnes in *Flaubert’s Parrot* or the “Drover’s Wife” stories by contemporary Australian writers. Gould’s fictional critique is not that far away in intent and style from George Bowering’s outrageous version of the explorer George Vancouver – who in his travels is surrounded by Indians who speak like eighteenth-century Englishmen.

And when we look at the stories, from Rudy Wiebe to Alistair MacLeod to Austin Clarke to Leon Rooke, there is the preoccupying image of figures permanently travelling, portaging their past, still uncertain of where to settle in this country which, in Elizabeth Smart's phrase, is "waiting, unselfconscious as the unborn, for future history to be performed upon it". We are all still arriving. From the *filles du Roi* to Dionne Brand's new Canadians is a minuscule step. Here was Nowhere, a terrifying new place:

Shanti Narine spat food into her napkin . . . It was what white people ate and she wanted to get the taste for it, but it made her ill. It was the kind they put on aeroplanes to confound immigrants and third world people . . . They never let up, did they? If you thought you had their lingo down, they gave you spinach quiche to remind you that you didn't know anything. Then they threw in something with whipped cream on it so you couldn't tell whether to eat it or shave your armpits with it. (Dionne Brand)

*

After two years of reading many books and stories and making this selection, I realize, looking back at the table of contents, that it is still only just half the country, possibly no more than a third. There are well-known writers I very much admire who do not appear here, and there is a burst of writing by talented newer writers, some of whom are already admired abroad, who have been left out unfairly because of space and an imposed time-period that was needed to contain even this large selection. If the title hadn't already been used I would have called the book *The Story So Far*. What is probably needed now is a sequel, a follow-up. As I emphasized at the start, this anthology is more a reader, a sampling, than my attempt at an official canon.

In a beautiful story called "Voices in the Pools" Gabrielle Roy talks about reading and writing:

All round me were the books of my childhood which I had read and re-read, in a dancing beam of dusty light . . . And the happiness the books had given me I wished to repay. I had been the child who reads hidden from everyone, and now I wanted myself to be this

beloved book, these living pages held in the hands of some nameless being, woman, child, companion, whom I would keep for myself a few hours.

In the end, as all irresponsible anthologists discover, with only one hand I could hold on to just some of the things that I loved.

Michael Ondaatje
January 1990, Toronto

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