Introduction

*A History of Canadian Fiction* identifies the major trends and problems that aided – and sometimes damaged – the steady growth of fiction in Canada. It also includes reflections on the British and American inspirations behind the blossoming of original and distinctive fiction writers within the Canadian borders. An overarching account of the development of fiction, this book records its growth from colonial times to the present, where Canadian-born and naturalized Canadian writers combine to create our country’s fiction.

In February of 1982 I was lecturing on Canadian fiction in Sweden. Per Gedin, head of the publishing firm Wahlström & Widstrand, the foremost publisher of English-language titles in Swedish, and author of *Literature in the Marketplace* (1975), explained to me that his agents used to fan out to London and New York to learn what was happening every fall season. Now, however, he had stopped sending them. He was more interested in Australia, South Africa, and Canada. Australian Patrick White, he stated, had won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1973; consequently, Australian literature was being discovered. South Africa had apartheid, and this precarious situation was commanding attention to itself and its writers. Canada, on the other hand, had no defining interest to the outside world – it had never won a war, it had no major problems to demand world attention, yet Canadian fiction was growing without the steady and sometimes overpowering gaze of the outside world. This last fact merited Per Gedin’s attention.

As I put together this *History of Canadian Fiction*, the first detailed history, I have often thought of his wise reflections about the steady and unnoticed growth of Canadian fiction. Today we have major authors, Margaret Atwood and Rohinton Mistry, Alice Munro and Michael Ondaatje, and so many others, reaching out to national and international audiences. This book brings together the many individuals who have created this impressive history, using their texts, their words, and relevant
Introduction

criticism. Many writers comment on their fiction-writing background, and I have utilized their reflections as I write this story.

Much more than a century ago, a few fiction writers published highly regarded and incredibly popular books. Writers such as Ernest Thompson Seton and Marshall Saunders, Ralph Connor and Stephen Leacock, Nellie McClung and Mazo de la Roche had enormous sales. In his first three books, Connor, for example, registered sales of more than five million copies, though not in Canada alone.

Then came the early-to-middle years of the twentieth century when the outside world knew little about what was developing in Canadian fiction. The writings of Morley Callaghan, rooted firmly but not avowedly in his native Toronto, appealed to American audiences; the writings of Sinclair Ross and Hugh MacLennan, W.O. Mitchell and Ernest Buckler, whose first novels appeared from American publishers, were coming forward. And Ethel Wilson bordered the line between these writers and the new writers of the 1930s. Much of the writing was done inside Canada with the rest of the world paying little attention.

In the 1950s, Robertson Davies and Mavis Gallant, Mordecai Richler, Abraham Moses [A.M.] Klein, and Sheila Watson launched their literary careers with singular works which summoned praise inside and even outside the country. The 1960s saw first books by Atwood, Munro, and Ondaatje, the explosion of fiction that decade also producing the first fiction by Austin Clarke, Leonard Cohen, Marirn Engel, Timothy Findley, Robert Kroetsch, Margaret Laurence, Jane Rule, Audrey Thomas, and Rudy Wiebe, and anticipating Richler’s permanent return to Canada. The 1970s brought forward such new writers as Alistair MacLeod, Carol Shields, and Richard B. Wright. During this time the outside world began to heed what was happening in Canadian fiction. By 1982 it had developed steadily, as Gedin said, without the outside world’s interfering gaze.

After World War II, writers from outside Canada began to arrive. Although there had been few immigrant writers coming to the country, such newcomers as Henry Kreisel, Clarke, and Rule became part of native-born Canadians as well as foreign-born Canadians, the two groups melding into fiction’s multicultural world.

Since – and even before – 1982, Canadian fiction was slowly commanding attention from internal and then external sources. The Governor General’s Awards were first presented in 1937, for example, the Writers’ Trust Awards in 1973 and the Giller Prize in 1994. Fiction also began to reap international awards. Established in 1969, the Booker finalists often...
include Canadian writers, the award won four times by them. Established in 1994, the Dublin IMPAC Literary Award, later called the International Dublin Literary Award, has had even more Canadian finalists, the award being given twice to Canadian novels. And the Nobel Prize to Alice Munro is final testimony to the stature of contemporary Canadian fiction.

The history of Canadian fiction is not so old — not so old as that of European countries, not so old as that of American fiction. It begins in the nineteenth century, it blossomed in the mid-twentieth century, and it accepted its position on the world stage in the later twentieth century.

For the earliest writers, Canada was a colony, where there must be the centre for the colonial mind. For them, here, unknown and undefined, remained unexplored, a colonial and a critical preoccupation. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century attempts to probe the meaning of here were grounded in the colonial understanding of Canada’s place as a settler colony in relation to its mother country. By the mid-twentieth century, there were constant denials of the existence of this colonial status. Then, as the twentieth century moved to its close, there was now a multicultural and multiracial world in Canada where Canadian-born writers were increasingly augmented by naturalized voices unafraid to write about their own chosen landscapes far from the supposedly safe world that is Canada.