White Voices: The Dominance of White Authors in Canadian Literary Awards

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Abstract

An analysis of the past winners of Canada's three largest English-language fiction awards, as well as the non-fiction award with the largest monetary prize. This article examines the ratio of white authors to those of visible racial minority, and considers the cultural and economic impacts of awarding primarily white authors in a racially diverse country.

Keywords: Literary Awards

Literary awards have long been a way to shine a spotlight on exceptional authors and stories. A combination of attributed prestige, exposure and monetary reward, winning one of these awards can drastically alter the career of a writer. By effectively amplifying the voices of the authors who are awarded, these prizes select what and who Canadians will be reading, and contribute to the shaping of what we recognize as Canadian culture. Canada is known for being multicultural, a diverse mix of the different peoples who have come to inhabit the land, so it stands to reason that our list of award winning authors would reflect that. It does not. The archive of past winners is overwhelmingly white.

The oldest award in Canada is the Governor General's Award for English-language fiction, created in 1936 by the Canadian Author's Association, and taken over by the Canada Council for the Arts in 1959 (ggbooks.ca/about) . The winner receives a $25,000 prize. The deliberation process is carried out through peer evaluation, with other authors, often past winners themselves, choosing a winner of the finalists. The award has posted a list of all past winners on their website, and by examining biographies and interviews for those authors, it appears that

since the award was first presented in 1937, there have only been 6 years where the award went to a writer who could be identified as a non-white racial minority, making up only 8% of the 79 presented awards (ggbooks.ca). Further, 3 of those years went to the same author, Michael Ondaatje, meaning that only 4 unique authors of colour have ever won this prize. The first identified author of colour to receive the prize was Rohinton Mistry in 1991, for his novel *Such a Long Journey*.

One of the other large literary awards in Canada, the Scotiabank Giller Prize, shows a little more diversity in their attention. Also awarded in the category of English-language fiction, this is financially the largest prize in Canada. This prize was started in 1994 at $25,000, and after partnering with Scotiabank now awards an amount of $140,000 to winning authors. It was created by philanthropist Jack Rabinovitch in honour of his late wife, Doris Giller. Their first winner was M.G. Vassanji, who identifies as African and East Indian, and since then 38% of their awards have gone to 8 unique authors of colour (Vassanji received the award both in 1994 and 2003).

The third major English-language fiction prize in Canada is the Rogers Writer Trust Fiction Prize. It was created in 1997 by the Writers' Trust of Canada and sponsored by Rogers Communications. The prize amount is $50,000. Four of the 20 winners (20%) were people of colour, with no duplicate winners. The first prize in 1997 was awarded to Barbadian author Austin Clarke, though another non-white author did not receive the prize until 2007.

To further reflect on the prioritization of voices that these awards represent, I have included the largest English-language non-fiction prize as well. The Hilary Weston Writers' Trust Prize for Nonfiction was established in 1997 by the Writers' Trust of Canada and sponsored by a series of corporate partners at a $15,000 prize amount. Politician and philanthropist Hilary Weston began to sponsor the award in 2011, and raised the award amount to $60,000. In it's second year, the award went to a partnered work between Cree author Yvonne Johnson and Rudy Wiebe, titled *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman*, a recounting of Johnson's life including a prison sentence for murder. No other writers of colour have ever been awarded the prize, and as it stands, a writer of colour has never been the sole recipient.

Overall, of these four major awards in Canadian literature, 124 of the 143 awards have gone to white authors, a staggering 87% of all winners.

Why does this matter? The most obvious answer, simplified, is that Canadians turn to these awards to tell them what books are worth their time and money. Sales of the books that win, or are shortlisted, for any of these prizes, dramatically increase. The financial award to authors is not simply a matter of prestige either; for a new or unknown author it can mean the freedom to continue writing and producing new work, the viability of a career as an author. These awards amplify the voices and stories they are presented to, "[seeking] to affirm specific works as valuable to Canadian national culture" (canlitguides.ca).

Canadian media has coined the term "Giller Effect" to describe the rapid rise in sales of shortlisted or winning books after the announcements are made. This is demonstrable, and has been documented for titles like Johanna Skibsrud's *The Sentimentalists,* which sold tens of thousands of copies after being announced as the 2011 Giller Prize Winner, while having sold only a few hundred copies total previous to the win (Barber, 2011). An analysis of Booknet sales statistics in *Quill & Quire* found that "on average, sales of the books [shortlisted in 2008] … increased by 195%" (MacDonald, 2008) between when the books were announced on October 7th and the statistics were released on October 22.

The article notes that this effect appears to be amplified on titles which were selling modestly previous to being nominated, such as Anthony De Supa's *Barnacle Love*, which saw a rise in sales of 350% only 5 days after his nomination was announced, or Marina Endicott's *Good to a Fault*, which saw a sales increase of 280% in the same time frame (MacDonald, 2008). Short-listed titles from the same year which had already been selling reasonably well, such as Joseph Boyden's *Through Black Spruce*, saw much more moderate sales increases, in Boyden's case of 16%.

Book chains like Indigo prominently feature shortlisted and winning authors in large displays at the front of their stores, and large orders are made to fill those. Grocery stores and drugstores and the many other retailers that carry a small but convenient array of books stock their inventory largely from these lists. These are

the books that shoppers see when they are considering what they might like to read next, what might be a good gift. Canada is being sold stories overwhelmingly by white authors. In the case of the Governor General's award, and implicitly with the others as well, the prizes are considered an investment in Canadian culture. The prize money is, as described by McClelland & Stewart editorial director Ellen Seligman, "…tremendously significant. That's part of a year's work on a new book" (Quill & Quire, 2004). With the peer evaluation process as the determinant for winners, there continues a cycle of white voices promoting white voices and proliferating stories from white perspectives. Two of these 143 awards have gone to First Nations authors, which raises the uncomfortable question as to whether or not they are considered authentically Canadian voices to the culture shapers and opinion makers in and outside of the industry.

While the sales effect of literary awards is a large part of the draw and impact for authors and publishers, there are other, less tangible effects reported as well. Evan Munday, a publicist for Coach House Books, described the feeling of shortlist announcements for the Giller Prize as "sucking up a lot of the of the oxygen, and if your title is shortlisted or included, your book suffers somewhat" (Medley, 2012). This is due to the symbolic significance of receiving or being nominated for a prize such as the Giller. Phyllis Bruce, the editor 1994 nominee Bonnie Burnard, felt "the novel might never have existed if it weren't for the Giller: 'It first of all gave her recognition for her writing and secondly gave her the encouragement she needed to go for a big novel'" (Quill & Quire, 2004). Further, Bruce noted a longevity in sales in the nominated title, *Casino and Other Stories*, that she described as "rare for a short story collection by a relatively unknown author" (Quill & Quire, 2004). Seligman list other ways the award impacts authors as well, noting that the raised profile of authors like M.G. Vassanji actually increased sales for older titles, and that "for any author to be chosen by those judges creates an immediate interest…People's eyes open" (Quill & Quire, 2004).

In the same article, Vassanji himself felt that it was the panel of 'credible' figures in Canadian literature that gave the award cultural weight. As the panel is nearly always made up primarily of past winners, it would seem there is a self-

perpetuating cycle of credibility in publishing being bestowed on winners by winners. As such, it is not particularly surprising that the list of past winners is not particularly diverse, though that certainly does not make it less problematic.

Clearly, the lack of diversity in Canadian literary awards is part of a larger, systemic lack of diversity in Canadian publishing as a whole. This is not to say that there is a lack of diverse authors, but the publishing opportunities available to them mirror the number of nominations they receive for literary prizes. The narrow focus of award recognition is simply a reflection of cultural attitudes from within and outside what is colloquially referred to as CanLit. Areas like education only reinforce this issue with the titles included in primary and post-secondary education reading lists. Writer and activist Léonicka Valcius has paid special attention to diversity in CanLit. In a 2014 article, she cites a report on diversity in children's publishing put out by the Cooperative Children's Book Center, which shows that barely 15% of newly published books submitted to the organization per year were by authors of colour (Valcius, 2014). She goes on to explain the significance of this, and the same lack of diversity in other genres in publishing:

> "The lack of diversity and equity in the publishing industry is not a theoretical issue for us to intellectualize over coffee. It is an injustice. The destruction of libraries and burning of books has historically been used to strip peoples of their history and culture. Those in power continue to limit the ability of those they have subjugated to share their stories. They retain ultimate control of the narrative and their power.
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> The publishing industry creates and disseminates stories. The fact that the industry neither includes marginalized people in those stories nor gives marginalized people enough access to share their own stories makes the industry itself oppressive." (Valcius, 2014).

And to those who say this white majority representation is simply a product of there being a larger white population in the United States and Canada, Valcius has this to say:

> "There are more white people in the US and Canada because the US and Canada were established using the systematic genocide of Native peoples,

> the theft of Native lands, and the labour of enslaved peoples in the past and immigrant peoples currently who were and are never meant to stay or survive." (Valcius, 2014).

Of course, Léonicka Valcius is not the only writer speaking out about the direness of the marginalization of people of colour in the publishing industry. Scholar and children's writer Zetta Elliot comments on the same statistics by the Cooperative Children's Book Centre as Valcius, noting that "though people of colour make up 37% of the [U.S.] population, only 10% of the [children's] books published annually have multicultural content" (Elliot, 2014). The whiteness of authors proliferates the whiteness of stories, and starting at a young age, this will impact how readers view themselves, and the world. It is crucial that children can grow up seeing themselves represented in literature and film in order to build healthy relationships with their and others' racial identities, and Elliot adds that "it's also damaging for the white children…if a child grows up seeing themselves over and over and over again and never see anyone else, they almost begin to think of themselves as the center of the universe" (2014, Elliot). In the divisive times we are currently experiencing, raising tolerant and culturally empathetic children is a responsibility we can ill afford to be neglecting. Clayton Childress posits literary agents and acquisition editors as the gatekeepers of the industry and "they are the gatekeepers, and across the U.S., the gatekeepers of publishing are 95 per cent white. If those gatekeepers had their own state, it would be the whitest state in the U.S. If they had their own country, it would be the whitest country in the world" (Childress, 2017). His research is based on the American publishing industry, but it is often discussed that the two nations publishing industries are "deeply intertwined, and more often than not are actually the same industry" (Childress, 2017). Does such a homogenous makeup of gatekeepers necessarily mean that these agents are selecting only stories that represent themselves? No. Yet the statistics suggest that is, ultimately, the case. In his research, Childress noted that "about 38 per cent of the 1,200 literary agents in the United States I've studied show an equal interest in representing 'general' fiction. But when that fiction covers topics of ethnic and multicultural diversity, white agents run for the hills, with only 15 per cent willing to even take a look" (2017). Further, the content

that does make it through initial screening is picked apart, "with racialized authors…describ[ing] a process in which their novels were ping-ponged back and forth between being 'too racialized' at first, and then not racialized enough" (Childress, 2017). This is a failing of white agents and editors to appropriately handle racialized content as human stories. Author Alexander Chee looks at the role writers take as "world builders in a different sense than we use that phrase – they're building the culture we all live in, or with" (Chung, 2015). Through this funnel of whiteness that the publishing industry has always been, that culture is being sterilized, and it does not represent or serve the population for which it speaks.

There is a race problem in the Canadian publishing industry. It is present in the whiteness of our literary awards, and our children's stories and nearly every other aspect of publishing. Awareness of this issue has become slightly more prevalent in recent years. There are important conversations happening, as writers and publishers discuss important questions. Why are we painting such a white picture of such a diverse, multiracial country? In a country so unsure of its culture, what will our national identity become if the voice given to it continues to grow so vastly detached from and incongruous with the people it speaks for? There aren't easy answers, but it seems there are some leaders, like Léonicka Valcius and Alexander Chee and Elliot Zetta, who are willing to take the industry by the hand in the right direction.

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