

Is Canadian Publishing Post-Queer? All Quiet on the Northern Front

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Abstract

Canada's queer literary history is not what you would call well documented. One key event usually shows up in the threadbare handful of existing historical accounts – the [censorship of Jane Rule](#) in the 1960s. Other accounts do not even mention the Little Sister's Book and Art Emporium battle with Canada customs in 1990, where Rule's books were seized, and the author defended the bookstore in court. Lack of discussion around the issue makes it appear on the surface that there is no homophobia in Canadian publishing. Can that be true?

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One such publication – that surprisingly (or not) omits the story and makes no attempt at curating a comprehensive queer literature history - is *Canadian Literature* magazine, the “leading journal in the field,” which features in its online archives only two articles dealing with censorship of queer literature. These are part of its educational supplement “*CanLit* Guides” to the topic of Gender, Sexuality and Canadian Literature. The two short pieces boast headlines implying investigations far greater in magnitude and wider-ranging than they deliver: “[Canadian LGBTQ* History: An Introduction](#)” and “[Queer Theory in Canada.](#)”

Apart from a brief mention of censorship in the introduction to a special issue of *CanLit* in 2010 titled *Queerly Canadian* discussing a 2009 UBC conference of the same name that “foregrounded an interdisciplinary body of scholarship that critically rethinks modernist discourses located at the nexus of Canadian nationalism and critical considerations of sexualities and genders in their multiple configurations,” which I guess is one way of saying “celebrated Jane Rule,” histories and analyses of the body of Canadian queer literature are nowhere to be found. A search of the *CanLit* website for “queer literature” does not return any academic articles on the topic – a conspicuous omission from the field’s leading journal.

To be sure, there is no shortage of theoretical musing on the meaning of an intersectional queer, Canadian identity.

Goldie’s *Pink Snow* entices the reader to engage with canonical Canadian texts from a queer perspective as Goldie rethinks Canadian classics at the borders of national discourses in order to redefine perceptions of Canadian culture. Playing with the trope of snow as a major international identifier of Canada, Goldie challenges this iconic image with a playful merging with queerness: “snow is very important, especially when it is pink” (2). *Sexing the Maple* likewise provides a reconsideration of the Canadian literary landscape that insists that sexuality matters. Cavell and Dickinson explore national ideology at the varied intersections of sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity (and other key axes of difference) across an extraordinary range of Canadian literary, theoretical, and historical texts.

- Stewart, 2010.

But the lack of significant acknowledgement of the embattled history of queer books in Canada by institutions is suspicious. Industry insiders appear deeply reticent to interrogate their own role in the cultural gatekeeping that marginalized (/marginalizes) queer writers. What’s more, there is very little complaining to be found. A quick Google turns up plenty of outrage by authors, academics and audiences alike over [racial prejudice in Canadian publishing](#); some users on Twitter are apoplectic that Indigenous author Eden Robinson did not with the 2017 Giller Prize; but there is almost nothing, anywhere, calling out homophobic

gatekeeping in Canadian publishing that isn't a reference to bygone border censorship.

Is it not a thing? Is Canadian publishing post-queer?

Certainly, Canadian audiences are not – look no further than the 2015 controversy whipped up mostly by National Post columnist and professionally outraged conservative Barbara Kay where she called for Raziel Reid's *When Everything Feels Like the Movies* to be stripped of its Governor General's Award and balked at its inclusion in *Canada Reads* that year. But the book's international success and reception by more credible literary critics gave a sense that the Canadian publishing industry itself was, as it so often does with literary prizes and spectacles, patting itself on the back for including a token entry from a marginalized community.

But if these questions are not probed in *CanLit* magazine, and publishing becomes a mere supporting example of anti-gay culture in Canadian queer theory writing, where are the histories? Where are the analyses of the Canadian queer literary oeuvre asking, "what do these stories tell us about the queer Canadian identity?" Who is asking "which queer books sell and why?" Are writers and stories embraced as if government seizures of "obscene" queer-themed material from the 1960s through 1990s never happened?

Do these answers not exist because it is impossible to study queer Canadian literature without acknowledging ongoing homophobic cultural gatekeeping in publishing?

CanLit's "History" article briefly raises the issue of biased critical reception of queer authors, but parks its two examples squarely in the 1960s, with Jane Rule and poet Dayl Hine. *CanLit* stops short of providing any recent examples, data or links to same that would criticize the status quo by finishing the piece with the line: "[N]ot only can writing about LGBTQ* desire limit the market for a writer's works, it can have further economic, social, and political consequences." The implied unanswered question dangles in the air: how do you know?

The most frank, comprehensive discussion addressing any of these questions appears to be Michael Walter's "A Brief History of Queer Publishing in Canada...and Censorship" in *Plenitude Magazine*. Walter methodically explains how 20th century censorship law and practice laid foundations for anti-queer discrimination in publishing today, and how digital technology might challenge those barriers.

"Canada Customs seized books for decades, arbitrarily confiscating publications they decided were obscene, particularly if the books in question were being sent to a bookstore or distributor that catered to the LGBTTQI community," says Walter. "In a famous example, a shipment of Jane Rule's novel *The Young In One Another's Arms* en route to Little Sister's bookstore in Vancouver was confiscated by customs agents in 1990 (the novel deals with lesbian themes). It seemed to make no difference that the book had been sold regularly in Canada for the previous thirteen years."

Walter has even found contemporary examples of anti-queer gatekeeping in the Canadian publishing industry:

[A]uthor Jessica Verday was told a short story couldn't be included in an anthology because it included a gay relationship; Sherwood Smith and Rachel Brown were offered a deal by an agent on the condition that they change or omit the sexual orientation of a gay character; Brent Hartinger was told by agents and editors to abandon his novel *Geography Club*—not on its merits, but because there was "no market" for a young-adult book about gay characters; a *Publisher's Weekly* article reports authors' fears of being "blacklisted" if they publicly reveal the pressure they experience from editors and agents to change the sexual orientation of their characters.

Vikki Vansickle claims queer characters need to show up as early as possible in children's literature, so she writes about them in books for the middle-grades. Still, she felt she had to wait until her third book with Scholastic Canada to introduce a main character's homosexuality: "It was always my intention to address Benji's sexuality but it needed to be at the right time. I am thankful to Scholastic Canada for giving me three books to develop his character and bring him to a place where he can admit such a deeply personal and scary thing to his best friend."

While that's a realistic coming-out experience for a young teenager, and while not every gay character needs to fling the closet doors open and barge out, defiantly waving a rainbow flag, the unintended implication is that the character's sexuality would be a turnoff if young audiences and parents hadn't already fallen in love with him over two books. Once his humanity is established, then he can be gay – but he can't be both gay and lovable up front.

It's unfortunate that Walter's, in my opinion, definitive critique of the publishing industry vs. queer authors lives in *Plenitude* – all tea all shade, *Plenitude* is valuable in its contribution to the promotion of queer authors and literature, but I know what they pay for 2000+ words, and Walter deserves applause for tackling the issue with the depth and effort he manages to muster up for that paycheck. One can only wonder what he could have done with compensation befitting a qualitative scientific study.

Where academia and the publishing industry's own institutions fail, indie queer literature enthusiasts take up the slack. Bloggers, independent publishers, reviewers and small awards committees have taken to compiling lists of must-read queer books and honouring outstanding works.

Queer Canadian literature is young, due to its suppression until recently. However, the more the nation and its laws have opened up to LGBTQ folk, and the more we discuss racism and sexism in publishing, the more conspicuous seems the relative silence on queer-themed literature. The most successful and celebrated books do not feature LGBTQ main characters, so it should be no surprise that the major corporate publishing establishment is not taking the lead in social progress any more than with Indigenous authors and writers of colour. Small, independent presses are the only ones putting out these queer books – by definition, a marginality. Where is the public discussion on homophobia in publishing? Queer authors have won major awards for their books, but not for books about queer themes and characters – these, with the singular exception of Reid, are absent from the Canadian publishing mainstage. Doesn't that mean something worth questioning?

It's quiet. Too quiet.



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