

The birth of CanLit

Taking my BA at UBC, I majored in English Literature, a category that in the late sixties excluded the literature of Canada. Most of my English professors, including Geoffrey Durrant (Shakespeare) and the great John Hulcoop (The English Novel), as well as Errol Durbach (Modern Drama) were British. (And male. Through my entire Bachelor's degree, I had only two women professors.)

The term Canadian Literature had yet to come into vogue, although the Father of CanLit, [Hugh MacLennan](#), had been publishing for some twenty years. He was then teaching at McGill in Montreal, as Canada's incomparable humourist [Stephen Leacock](#) (1869-1944) had before him.

CanLit's Mother has to be one of the two Margarets. We'll say [Margaret Laurence](#), since Canada's other great Margaret is younger, and still very much alive. Indeed, the feminist novel [The Edible Woman](#), by Margaret Atwood, was making the rounds when I lived in rez, though not then recognized as actual literature.

Since MacLennan (1907 -1990) and Laurence (1926-1987), Canada has experienced an uninterrupted literary flowering. The arrogant prediction of [Hugh Hood](#) in a radio interview in the seventies that his generation would produce no more great writers couldn't have been more wrong. Hugh Who? You may well ask. A solid short story writer he may have been, (b 1928 d 2000) but his name has long since been overshadowed by a Pantheon of literary giants.

In the [Bi and Bi era](#), Hugh MacLennan's work revealed the the other solitude to English Canadians (more of that later) while [Roch Carrier](#) became a beloved storyteller of Quebec tales in English Canada. A passage from his classic story, *The Hockey Sweater*, can be seen with its illustration of the national game on the \$5 bill. Another Quebecker, [Michael Ignatieff](#), (1947--) wrote both moving fiction and thought-provoking non-fiction, long before entering politics as the Liberal member for Etobicoke.

As multiculturalism went mainstream, CanLit began to disseminate a dazzling variety of stories by people with roots from all over the world. Toronto poet turned novelist [Michael Ondaatje](#) penned thrilling tales of early Canada as well as portraying his original home, Sri Lanka. From Brampton, Ontario, [Rohinton Mistry](#) (1952--) rocked the reading nation with profoundly moving tales set in his native India.

Women joined the fray too--of that more to come.

Carol Tulpar, October 16, 2011