



Double-Voicing the Canadian Short Story

Laurie Kruk

Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2016, 240 pp. ISBN: 9780776623238 (paperback).

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Laurie Kruk's *Double-Voicing the Canadian Short Story* is one of those rare scholarly works that the reader might well enjoy more the second time around. I know I did.

Kruk is clearly juggling many a ball in her study of the short fiction of Sandra Birdsell, Timothy Findley, Jack Hodgins, Thomas King, Alistair MacLeod, Olive Senior, Carol Shields and Guy Vanderhaeghe. Readers looking for yet another academic tome on Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro must look elsewhere. My point is not to criticize Kruk's choice of authors; one can always kvetch about a writer not making the list. Rather, my point is to applaud Kruk's focus on authors who are, if not lesser-known, definitely less studied in Canada-focussed academia. (It is a sad sign of the times and of shifting trends that Kruk has to provide a footnote on who Mavis Gallant was, namely, a writer "who had a long career writing acclaimed short stories, beginning in the 1940s, while living in Paris, France since 1960" (24).)

The "double-voicing" in the title is, like irony or satire, an elastic term. Kruk glosses it thus: "The ability to speak in a double voice is intrinsic to expression within a subordinate culture, whether such subordination is due to gender, race, class, sexuality, nationality, or any other position" (2). The suspicious reader (i.e. me on first reading) might retort that mixing an elastic term with a hodgepodge octet of authors that have only the short story genre in common is forcing connections where no real ones exist.

Kruk, to her credit and to my delight, does not force parallels, even as she sniffs out links that may not be obvious – such as the fact that many of the writers she examines "reflect other languages, or other communication modes, within a supposedly monological medium of English" (17). But Kruk doesn't argue that, say, the occasional bits of Gaelic in Alistair MacLeod's work link him indelibly or inevitably with the "patwa" or "Creole" in Jamaica-born Olive Senior's tales. Indeed, even while connecting Findley, Hodgins and MacLeod in the chapter "Mothering Sons: Stories by Findley, Hodgins, and MacLeod Uncover the Mother's Double Voice," Kruk writes, "to bring these three 'sons' together is to acknowledge their differences" (45). There is



no fusing by violence here and Kruk is too intellectually honest to go in for simplistic merging.

If Kruk is juggling quite a few authors, she is also juggling a variety of approaches. Though Judith Butler and Jean Baudrillard make appearances, the leading theoretical force of this volume is Mikhail Bakhtin, especially his “theory of dialogism, which insists that every literary work contains multiple perspectives” (4). Kruk is clearly a formalist or narratologist at heart and she neatly achieves her stated goal of elucidating “the formal, technical construction of the of character-focalizer, narrator-focalizer, and implied author, which together make up what I call ‘story voice’” (4). Importantly, generously, and usefully, Kruk carefully defines her terms. Perhaps we should all know what “implied author” means, but Kruk’s endnotes make sure that no reader is left behind when it comes to “polyphony,” and “parody” and even the hobgoblin of “postmodernism” that has belatedly made the jump from academic articles to newspaper column and alt-right blogs.

Kruk is good at defining her terms, but she is even better at putting those terms and her theory to use, without becoming a slave to them (methinks she must be a heck of a teacher). For example, leaning on Judith Butler’s idea of gender as performance, Kruk quotes Timothy Findley’s story “Come as You Are,” in which a character dresses up as “a drag queen dressed as a college boy” (how’s that for a gender-bending mise en abîme?). I admit that “Come as You Are” is one Timothy Finley story I haven’t read and to which I – like many of us here in Central Europe – do not have easy access.

...which brings me to another fine part of Kruk’s book: she neatly interweaves quotations from the stories she examines, thus giving us all a sense of the voices or “double voices” that drive stories. All the explanations in the world of creole and cadence and code-switching cannot replace the pulsing fecundity of this line from Olive Senior’s “You Think I Mad, Miss?": “Is there is still Massa God up above me, is what I do why him have to tek everybody side against me?” I was also thankful for the slick overviews of stories that I don’t know. Again, Kruk does not leave the reader behind. How many among us have read all of Alice Munro, let alone the eight authors chosen by Kruk?

If Kruk keeps the reader in view, she also keeps the author around. Kruk cribs again and again from her 2003 *The Voice is the Story: Conversations with Canadian Writers of Short Fiction*, returning to the authors to help us see how stories come together. The “voice is the story” is an assertion by Jack Hodgins that, given the “continuing role within fiction of the dramatized speaker or storyteller,” voice is what the short story is all about. After all, you don’t tell a ghost story in the same way you crack a joke. Furthermore, Guy Vanderhaeghe has commented that “the biggest advantage of the first-person voice is intimacy. Because I’m interested in colloquial language, I’m drawn to the first person” (82).



This is not to say that a fictional first-person voice is necessarily natural and pure. As on the stage, and as in real life, one's voice depends on who is listening (politicians speak much differently when they think the mic is off). Narration is also a way of acting out events, even within the family, that intimate space where we "first 'perform'" our identities – "In a family, you are 'on stage,'" notes Jack Hodgins (62). Performativity and role-playing is not high theory and drag, it's also part of our daily, intimate routines.

A final example of Kruk's helpful recycling from her previous book, this time from Alistair MacLeod: "very often, when I write stories, I write the concluding paragraph about half-way through. And I find that this more or less helps me because I think of it as, "This is the last thing I'm going to say to the reader, this will be the last statement that I'll make—the last paragraph or the last sentence" (38). Elsewhere, MacLeod has described the short story as a trip, in essence wondering, *how do I get there from here?* Voice is important, but events are too.

Fittingly for a book that highlights voice, Kruk includes her own. Discussing a MacLeod story, she casts academic aridity aside and positively gushes: "This ten-page story truly is an amazing feat of compression, a testament to the power of short fiction, as it double-voices philosophically as well as culturally and linguistically" (81). Here we are reminded that Kruk is not only a critic but also a reader, given to the old-fashioned emotion of enjoyment.

