

Andreev, Andrej; Yankova, Eliza

**Reading Canada : the reception of Canadian writing in Bulgaria post-1990**

In: *Canada consumed : the impact of Canadian writing in Central Europe (1990-2017)*. Sparling, Don (editor); Kürtösi, Katalin (editor). 1st edition  
Brno: Masaryk University, 2019, pp. 17-25

ISBN 978-80-210-9368-3 (paperback); ISBN 978-80-210-9369-0 (online : pdf)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.81841>

Access Date: 02. 04. 2025

Version: 20250401

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.



# Reading Canada: The Reception of Canadian Writing in Bulgaria post-1990

**Andrei Andreev and Eliza Yankova**

## **Abstract**

The article explores the reception of Canadian literature in Bulgaria in the period 1990–2016, focusing on full-length works of fiction and non-fiction translated into Bulgarian during that period. This reception is evaluated by the number of works by Canadian writers published (based on data collected from the Bulgarian National Library and publishers' and booktraders' official websites), the prevalence of particular authors, titles and genres, and the conspicuous absence or minimal representation of others. A comparison is made between present-day trends, in terms of both numbers of books published and publishers' apparent preferences, and pre-1990 tendencies. The probable reasons for the selection of specific authors and works by publishing houses are investigated, as is the correlation between award-winning mainstream literature and mass-market commercial fiction. Conclusions are drawn based on number and range of titles, as well as on statements by publishers who kindly agreed to be interviewed.

## **Résumé**

L'article étudie la perception de la littérature canadienne en Bulgarie au cours de la période 1990–2016, en mettant l'accent sur les œuvres traduites en bulgare. Cette réception est évaluée par le nombre d'œuvres d'auteurs canadiens publiées (sur la base des données collectées à la Bibliothèque nationale et sur les sites officiels des éditeurs et des libraires), par la prévalence de certains auteurs, titres et genres, et par l'absence évidente d'autres. Une comparaison est faite entre les tendances actuelles et les tendances antérieures à 1990. Les raisons probables de la sélection d'auteurs et d'œuvres spécifiques par les maisons d'édition sont étudiées, de même que la corrélation entre la littérature grand public primée et la fiction commerciale de masse. Les conclusions sont tirées en fonction du nombre et de la gamme des titres, ainsi que des déclarations des éditeurs qui ont gentiment accepté d'être interviewés.



## Introduction

The aim of this article is to explore the reception of Canadian literature in Bulgaria after the sociopolitical changes of 1990. It will focus chiefly on full-length works of fiction translated into Bulgarian in that period, although in order to present a more comprehensive picture, works of non-fiction and shorter literary pieces will also be considered. The reception will be judged by the number of works by Canadian writers published, based on data collected from the Bulgarian National Library and publishers' and book traders' official websites. It should be noted that, unfortunately, sales figures will not be considered, as most publishing houses in Bulgaria – and probably elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe – avoid divulging such information or deliberately lower their figures for taxation purposes.

The article will explore the prevalence of particular authors, titles and genres on the Bulgarian market, and the conspicuous absence or minimal representation of others. A comparison will be made between present-day trends, in terms of both numbers of books published and publishers' apparent preferences, and pre-1990 tendencies. The possible reasons for the current selection of specific authors and works by publishing houses will be investigated, as will the correlation between award-winning mainstream literature and mass-market commercial fiction. Conclusions will be drawn on the basis of literary reviews, guest readings and book launches by Canadian writers and, where possible, personal interviews with representatives of publishing houses. The period under observation runs to 2017.

## Translations of Canadian literature before 1990

Three main periods can be outlined in Bulgarian publishing policies regarding Canadian literature up to 1990, based on socio-political and cultural developments in the country leading to changes in the choice of books to be published: from the beginning of the twentieth century to the end of the Second World War; the 1950s and 1960s; and the 1970s and 1980s (for more details cf. Yankova and Andreev 2012).

During the first period, no more than about fifty titles by Canadian authors were published in the country, including second, third and fourth editions, and often translated not from the original, but from editions in languages other than English or French (chiefly Russian). Lighter, entertaining reading exploring the exotica of North America seems to have dictated publishers' choices: nearly forty of these titles were the adventure tales for young readers of Ernest Thompson Seton, while second in popularity were the travel writings and shorter fiction of Sir Charles G.D. Roberts.



In the first three decades after the end of the Second World War, with the diminished cultural exchange between the European Communist countries and the Western world, only six Canadian titles were published in Bulgaria, five of which were by Seton. Only after 1975, with the process of détente started by the Helsinki Final Act, did the situation gradually begin to change. Besides the renewed cultural exchange between East and West, the growing international recognition of Canada's cultural achievements after the 1960s (Riendeau 2000, 288) is another reason for the shift in translation policies in Bulgaria. A total of twenty-one titles by Canadian authors were published – at least according to the data in the CEACS Translation Project database – in the two decades before 1990; these included works by renowned writers such as Margaret Atwood, Farley Mowat and Stephen Leacock, as well as the first title of French-Canadian fiction – the Goncourt Prix winner *Pélagie-la-Charrette* by Antonine Maillet – and the first collection of Canadian poetry.

## Translations of Canadian literature after 1990

Even a cursory look at the statistics reveals a striking difference in the volume of Canadian titles translated into Bulgarian in the period since 1990: if for the whole period from the beginning of the twentieth century to 1990 they were about eighty in total, in the years under discussion their number has increased manifold. Over 360 works translated from English (although these include a few reprints or retranslations) and 34 translated from French. Naturally, such a development can generally be attributed to the new opening up of Eastern Europe to the Western world in the post-Cold War years, as well as the intensified exchange between countries and cultures, further facilitated by the advance of communication technologies, in the modern global world. The continuous rise of Canada on the international culture scene is also a factor that cannot be ignored, as is the heightened interest of the Bulgarian reading public towards literary works from cultures which previously were scarcely known. Thus, the years after 1990 have marked a boom in the translation of Canadian authors in Bulgaria, especially in the first decade and a half of the twenty-first century. And if in the period up to 1990 only three Canadian authors were represented on the Bulgarian market by more than one title (Ernest Thompson Seton, Charles G.D. Roberts and Farley Mowat), at present there are over ten times as many, some of whom (such as Arthur Hailey, for instance) with their complete body of work translated.

In choice of titles and subject matter, it would appear that Bulgarian publishers are attempting to diversify by introducing a variety of authors and genres to the reading public. While some publishing houses opt predominantly for mass-market blockbusters or the recently trendy self-help literature, others are making an effort to



popularize both previously untranslated classics and critically acclaimed contemporary works.

Translated Canadian literature will now be discussed under the following categories, which appear to deserve special consideration, according to the data gathered on numbers of titles published in the period under investigation: literary fiction, commercial fiction, children's and adolescent fiction, and Francophone Canadian literature.

## Literary fiction

This term refers to mainstream, non-genre literature – usually the work of renowned, award-winning writers – in order to distinguish it from commercial, mass-market fiction. While, as can to a certain extent be expected, literary fiction does not top the list in terms of sheer number of titles published, it has certainly made a niche for itself on the Bulgarian market, with publishers trying to acquaint readers with the truly big names in Canadian literature. Thus, three novels by Carol Shields – uniquely, a recipient of both the Governor-General's Award for English-language Fiction and the Pulitzer Prize – have so far been translated: *The Stone Diaries*, *The Box Garden* and *The Republic of Love*. Multiple-award winner Jane Urquhart has also had three titles published: *Away*, *Stone Carvers* and *The Underpainter*. As well, three novels by Gail Anderson-Dargatz, one of the most popular contemporary Canadian writers, are already a Bulgarian fact: *The Cure for Death by Lightning*, winner of the Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize, *A Recipe for Bees* and *A Rhinestone Button*. Timothy Findley, founding member of the Writers' Union of Canada, Officer of the Order of Canada and another winner of the Governor General's Award for English-language Fiction, was first introduced to the Bulgarian public via his novel *Pilgrim* in 2001, to be followed by *The Piano Man's Daughter* in 2005. That same year also saw the publication of *Fifth Business* by award-winning author Robertson Davies. All but one of acclaimed modern writer Nino Ricci's five novels have also been translated into Bulgarian in recent years: *Lives of the Saints*, *Testament*, *In a Glass House* and *Where She Has Gone*.

In 2013 the Canadian and New Zealand author Eleanor Catton won the Governor General's Award for English-language Fiction as well as the Man Booker Prize for her intricate novel *The Luminaries*, and its Bulgarian translation came out only months later. All three previous Canadian Booker Prize winners – Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*, and Yann Martel's *The Life of Pi* – were also relatively quickly made available to Bulgarian readers. The fact that *The English Patient* has twice been reissued since the first edition in 1996 is in all likelihood linked to the success of the film version of the novel. It is worth noting that these award-



winning novels are not the only titles by the three authors translated into Bulgarian: there is also Ondaatje's *Divisadero* and *The Cat's Table*, Martel's *The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios*, and Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, *Surfacing*, *Alias Grace*, *The Penelopiad* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. Finally, Alice Munro's winning the Nobel Prize for Literature (on top of her many previous awards) in 2013 resulted in the publication of her most recent collection of short stories, *Dear Life*, in Bulgarian in 2015; previously, there had been translations only of individual short stories published in different literary magazines and gazettes.

As part of the "Canada Consumed" project, this article was originally intended to focus not only on the general reception of Canadian literature in Bulgaria in the period after 1990, but also on the reception of three particular authors: Margaret Atwood, because of her reputation as probably the most widely read Canadian literary author worldwide, Alice Munro, because of her being awarded the Nobel Prize in 2013, and Leonard Cohen, because of his death in 2016. A study of the data collected reveals, however, that for reasons unknown little has changed regarding the presence of these authors on the Bulgarian market since the completion of "Translating Canada" the first CEACS translation project, in 2012. Up until 2016, the most recent translation of an Atwood novel was *The Penelopiad* in 2006 – although, in 2017, one publishing house hit the Christmas market with a luxury hardcover edition of *The Handmaid's Tale*. This editor's choice was probably inspired by the worldwide success of the TV series based on the novel, even if in Bulgaria it was not aired on any national television channel, but only on HBO GO. The publishers of Munro's *Dear Life* could not be reached for comment as to whether they are planning to bring out more works by the author. And strangely, despite the immense popularity of Leonard Cohen as a musician and the fact that his death was reported by all Bulgarian media, since the publication of *Beautiful Losers* in 2009, no other title of his has appeared on the market – although one publishing house, Fama, has announced tentative plans of bringing out a volume of selected lyrics by him in English, side by side with their Bulgarian translations. It remains to be seen, however, when or even whether such a volume will be published.

Despite the above, it is evident that in the past decade or so, certain Bulgarian publishers have chosen to focus on Canadian titles of high literary merit and international recognition. Three particular publishing houses seem to stand out in this respect: ZhAR Publishers, who have launched their Contemporary Canadian Writers series (with the Canadian flag decorating each book cover) and who have introduced readers to authors such as Jane Urquhart, Gail Anderson-Dargatz, Caroline Adderson and Jeffrey Moore; Lege Artis, who brought Timothy Findley, Robertson Davies and Anne Michaels onto the market; and Arka, who publish at least one translation of a Canadian literary work a year, and have managed to popularize writers such as Frances Itani, Alice Cuipers, Julie Lawson and Jean Little. When asked about the particular



reasons for choosing to publish Canadian writers, representatives of the three houses, although interviewed separately, all pointed out the following: Canadian literature is not elitist and can be both high quality and entertaining; it is an excellent alternative to the dozens of American titles which seem to dominate the translation market; and last but not least, the publisher can obtain at least partial sponsorship from the Canada Council for the Arts.

In 1981, the Canada Council for the Arts and the then Department of External Affairs established the International Translation Grants Program. The programme encourages translation of Canadian literary works and their publication abroad by covering a certain amount of the translation costs, prioritizing works which have been awarded or have been nominated for Canadian or international literary prizes in the categories of poetry, fiction, drama, children's literature, and literary non-fiction. According to the majority of Canadian media, the Council was the least affected of Canadian cultural institutions by the severe budget cutbacks introduced by the Conservative government of Stephen Harper in 2012, and is now enjoying budget increases under the present government of Justin Trudeau. A search on the Canada Council official website shows that at no time during the period 1990–2016 did the programme stop awarding grants to Bulgarian publishers – a total of twenty-five grants, nine of which were awarded to seven publishing houses between 2011 and 2015.

Besides partial sponsorship, what has helped make contemporary Canadian authors of literary fiction more familiar to Bulgarian writers is visits to the country – organized by the respective publishers – on the part of certain authors to promote translations of their work. The first such visit was in 2004, when Jane Urquhart was in Bulgaria for the launch of *The Stone Carvers*. This was followed by Yann Martel coming to the country in 2005 for the release of *The Life of Pi*; Jean Little in 2006 for *Orphan at My Door*; Andrew Davidson in 2009 for his debut novel *The Gargoyle*; and Jeffrey Moore in late 2017 for *The Memory Artists*.

## Commercial fiction

Not surprisingly, in sheer numbers of titles and editions, commercial genre fiction overshadows mainstream literature. At the top of the list of writers for adults is Arthur Hailey, who wrote eleven novels in his lifetime, which have all been translated into Bulgarian and published by different publishing houses and at different times in no fewer than thirty-three editions. This staggering number does not even include those translations of Hailey's thriller dramas that came out before 1990 – a curious fact in itself, as the ideological climate then did not encourage the popularization of such mass-market blockbusters. This may, however, explain the author's enduring



popularity to this day. A representative of Bard, the publisher of some of the more recent editions – and of numerous other thriller writers, aiming at producing at least two new titles per month – admitted that with Hailey, as with their other Canadian genre authors, they do not advertise his connection to Canada, except in the notes about the author section, and most Bulgarian readers probably would not even recognize him as a Canadian writer.

Other authors of thrillers and crime novels also rank high in the list of most translated or most published. Right behind Arthur Hailey is internationally bestselling David Morrell, with an impressive thirty translations of his novels published or reprinted. Joy Fielding also seems to be a safe choice for publishers, as she features with seventeen titles, the latest one published in 2015 – and, unlike with Hailey or Morrell, only one of these is a new edition of a previously published novel. Both Morrell and Fielding were introduced on the market by Bard as well, and as with Hailey, their worldwide popularity rather than their Canadian origin seems to have governed the publisher's choice.

Speculative fiction – science fiction and fantasy – is also well represented. All ten volumes of Steven Erikson's fantasy series *Malazan Book of the Fallen* are now available in Bulgarian, as are four novels – *Starplex*, *Flashforward*, *The Terminal Experiment* and *Factoring Humanity* – by Robert Sawyer, winner of a multitude of awards for science fiction. Six titles by fantasy writer Guy Gavriel Kay have been translated – *Ysabel*, *The Fionavar Tapestry* trilogy and *The Sarantine Mosaic* duology – as have two novels by Peter Watts, *Blindsight* and *Beyond the Rift*; Watts himself delivered a talk at the Ratio popular science forum in Sofia in mid-2017. Six novels by William Gibson, winner of the most prestigious science fiction awards, can now be read by Bulgarian fans of the cyberpunk genre.

Finally, those who enjoy more female-oriented commercial fiction can now acquaint themselves with the work of Charlotte Vale Allen, one of Canada's most financially successful writers. Six of her novels dealing with, broadly speaking, the difficulties facing young women in the modern world, have been translated into Bulgarian: *Night Magic*, *Sudden Moves*, *Painted Lives* (in two different editions), *Parting Gifts*, *Mood Indigo* and *Time/Steps*.

## Children's and adolescent fiction

This category has been dedicated a separate short section simply because of the great number of titles addressed to young readers that the collected data reveal. In fact, from a numerical perspective, the list of most translated and published Canadian works is topped by the *Franklin the Turtle* picture book franchise created by Paulette





Bourgeois: no fewer than forty-nine titles written either by Bourgeois only or in collaboration with Sharon Jennings, plus another ten authored by Jennings only. Thus, the franchise alone accounts for about one sixth of all Canadian works published in Bulgaria in the period under examination. Also available to young readers are six titles by Bryan Perro, creator of the *Amos Darragon* fantasy series, four by Richard Petit, and selected titles by Jean Little and Lisi Harrison. Adolescent readers finally also have at their disposal Bulgarian editions of Lucy Maud Montgomery's hugely popular *Anne of Green Gables* and its sequels *Anne of the Island*, *Anne of Windy Poplars*, *Anne's House of Dreams*, *Anne of Avonlea* and *Anne of Ingleside*, as well as *How Don Was Saved*, a collection of stories by the same author.

## Francophone Canadian literature

The translations of English-speaking authors still vastly outnumber French-speaking ones, about tenfold: 360 titles were translated from English between 1990 and 2016 as compared to 34 from French. Nevertheless, given the fact that in the whole of the twentieth century prior to 1990 there were a mere two titles representing Francophone Canadian writers (by Antonine Maillet and Hedi Bouraoui), even thirty-four can be considered somewhat of an achievement, albeit a humble one. The selection of authors also seems to demonstrate an attempt at diversity. Besides the children's books of Bryan Perro and Richard Petit and the self-help guides of Lise Bourbeau, translations from the French feature two novels by Kim Thúy, including her debut *Ru*, winner of the Governor General's Award for French-language Fiction in 2010. Four titles by acclaimed writer Nancy Huston have been published – two of her controversial non-fiction works and two novels, among them the 2006 Prix Femina winner, *Lignes de faille* – as have three titles from the teachings of Jungian analyst Guy Corneau. These choices seem to be a step in the right direction where Francophone Canadian literature is concerned, although much still remains to be desired.

## By way of conclusion

The growing number of translations of Canadian literature on the Bulgarian market can be regarded as a remarkable feat, given the following factors: the steadily decreasing population of the country, due to the low birth rate and still high level of emigration; the rising publishing and printing costs – cover prices of translations now almost equal those of the original titles in the foreign-language bookstores; and the ludicrously low print runs – 300 to 500 copies sold is now considered a true success, as compared to



print runs in the thousands or tens of thousands years ago – brought about by the low purchasing power of the population and the effects of the global recession in the last decade. Nonetheless, it is obvious that Bulgarian publishers persist in enriching the book market with translations of Canadian literature, with a growing emphasis on works of high literary quality and international acclaim – no mean achievement for a market that caters to a relatively small readership in comparison with other more populous Eastern or Central European countries

## Works cited

- Canadian Council for the Arts. <http://canadacouncil.ca/about/public-accountability/proactive-disclosure/grant-recipients?form=submitted&page=2&year=2010&discipline=all&program=International+Translation+Grants&recipient=&province=all&city=&area=all&riding=all&Sort1=Recipient&Sort2=Recipient&Sort3=Recipient>.
- Riendeau, Roger. 2000. *A Brief History of Canada*. Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside.
- Yankova, Diana and Andrei Andreev. 2010. "Canadian Literature in Bulgarian Translation: An Overview." *Language and Literature*, LXIII/1–2, 188–94.
- . 2012. "Translation of Canadian Literature in Bulgarian: Changes in Editors' Choices." In Katalin Kürtösi and Don Sparling (eds), *Canada in Eight Tongues: Translating Canada in Central Europe / Le Canada en huit langues : Traduire le Canada en Europe centrale*. Brno: Masaryk University Press, 23–30.

