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# Canada at the Belgrade Book Fair: Then and Now

**Vesna Lopičić and Vladislava Gordić-Petković**

## **Abstract**

The aim of this text is to briefly present the most significant points in the evolution of the Canadian book industry available to the readership in Serbia as presented at the annual Belgrade Book Fair. Award-winning Canadian illustrators, authors and publishers often exhibit at the Fair, which has become one of the Serbian brand names. A cross-section of these literary links between Canada and Serbia is given in four segments: "Canada as Guest of Honour in 2003," "A growing Canadian presence," "Seven years in a row," and "Canadian matinée at the 2017 Book Fair." This is a win-win situation in which Canadian authors become part of the Serbian reading experience.

## **Résumé**

L'objectif de ce texte est d'introduire brièvement les points les plus importants dans l'évolution de l'industrie du livre Canadien disponible au public Serbe, comme c'est présenté à la Foire internationale du livre de Belgrade annuelle. Les illustrateurs canadiens récompensés, les auteurs et les éditeurs exposent à la Foire qui est devenue une image de marque de Serbie. Un échantillon représentatif des rapports littéraires entre Canada et Serbie est donné dans quatre segments : « Canada comme l'invité d'honneur en 2003 », « Une présence canadienne croissante », « Sept années de suite » et « La matinée canadienne sur la Foire du livre 2017 ». C'est une situation sans perdant dans laquelle les auteurs canadiens deviennent partie de l'expérience de lecture serbe.



## Introduction

In recent decades, Canadian culture has witnessed a boom in Serbia. Award-winning Canadian illustrators, authors and publishers often exhibit at the annual Belgrade Book Fair, which has become one of the Serbian brand names, well-known at least to those within literary circles. This international book fair is one of the oldest and most significant literary manifestations in the Western Balkan region. Its main goal is to facilitate contacts between publishers, authors, bookstore owners, librarians, book distributors, multimedia companies, and all other interested stakeholders. The Fair has become a platform for the exchange of experiences, for making business deals, and for establishing other forms of business and cultural cooperation. All publishers from Serbia, the most respected publishing houses from the region as well as some exhibitors from other continents are given an opportunity to showcase their yearly publication production. Canada has been one of over twenty countries designated Guest of Honour at the fair.

The first Yugoslav book fair was organized at Zagreb in 1956 on the premises of the Zagreb fairground under the auspices of President Josip Broz Tito. Expectedly, the most significant and most popular Yugoslav authors of the time were present there, the Serbian Nobel Prize 1961-winner-to-be Ivo Andrić and the Croatian author Miroslav Krleža among them. Over 12,000 books were exhibited there that year by all Yugoslav publishers, and also by publishing houses from Austria, Czechoslovakia, the Netherlands, Great Britain, France, Italy, China, Hungary, Eastern and Western Germany, Poland, Romania, the USA, the USSR, and Switzerland.

In 1957 the Book Fair was moved to Belgrade, where an impressive modern fairground had been built and one of its wings made available to the exhibitors. Some 60 Yugoslav and 36 publishers from 16 countries in Europe, America and Asia presented their output for that year to curious book-lovers from all over Yugoslavia. The Fair was beginning to get its present-day shape, with a well-documented catalogue and a duration of six days at the end of each October. Its popularity was also growing, being marked on the calendars of all schools, most universities, and many companies as an event not to be missed. Bus-loads of excited school-children, of students and employees on a day trip from all over the country flooded the premises of the Book Fair and enjoy various activities, whose number continued to grow.

The International Belgrade Book Fair soon became the third largest book fair in Europe, after the ones in Frankfurt and Warsaw. Publishers from all the continents except for Australia have so far exhibited there, making the Fair a meeting ground for almost all world cultures. A tradition which was started in 2002 promotes the literature of one country or in one language as the Guest of Honour for that year. The literary output of the Guest of Honour is given a special place at the Fair, not only



in terms of space and location but also in the Fair's programmes: meeting authors from the country, organizing lectures, holding seminars, and generally promoting the literature and culture of the country at its stand and in other common spaces at the fairground. In this way, the Guest of Honour gets an opportunity to introduce its leading authors, translators, publishers, book distributors, and other stakeholders related to the world of publishing. This has become a significant institution of the Belgrade Book Fair and a very prestigious honour.

In 2003, only a year after the tradition was established, Canada was named Guest of Honour. This was the first time the country was represented at the Fair, but the Canadian presence has continued since then, and over the years a host of Canadians have come to Belgrade for the Fair - authors, translators, publishers, and representatives of official bodies. A special role has been played by authors of Serbian background who have become Canadian citizens. In 2004 one of them, the novelist and short story writer David Albahari, was asked to formally declare the Book Fair open. He has returned since on many occasions. As he says, "The Book Fair is a wonderful meeting point where I can not only meet the writers I already know, but where I can also browse books and check the publications of all local publishers. This is why this period of year – the time when the Book Fair is held – is for me the most beautiful time in Belgrade" (Albahari 2018). And the Canadian experience at the Belgrade Book Fair over the past fifteen years has mirrored that of David Albahari. In the following four sections we will try to show the variety of programmes related to Canada's involvement with the Fair.

## Canada as Guest of Honour in 2003

Following Norway, which has special WW II-ties with Serbia, Canada was chosen to be the second Guest of Honour at the international Belgrade Book Fair. This was in 2003, when the media announced that a 'Canadian expedition' was coming to Serbia. Among approximately 500 exhibitors from Serbia and 30 more from abroad, Canadian literature and culture were given a special place at the Fair. At the head of this 'expedition' was David Albahari, an author renowned in Serbia and just building his reputation in Canada, followed by two Canadian authors of Serbian origin, Ljubica Milićević and Négovan Rajic, then the caricaturist Dušan Petričić, authors Naïm Kattan, Frank Cunningham, William Patrick Woodcock, Lucy Page, and Morris Lemur, all of them backed by Stephen Quick, head of publishing at Canada Heritage, responsible for Canadian government support for the arts and culture.

The honour to welcome all present at the Book Fair in the name of Canada went to Naïm Kattan, who used his trip to Serbia to visit three Serbian towns: Novi Sad,



Loznica, and Belgrade. In his words, “Canada enjoys exceptional respect in Serbia, and I noticed that the interest in my country, Canada, does not come down to mere curiosity but is rather a desire to discover and get to know Canada. Men and women I have met and those people who have already been to Canada or have relatives and friends there have shown me how much they respect and highly esteem my country. They keep pointing out that our two countries share many similarities, especially when it comes to the diversity of Serbs and Canadians” (Kattan 2003).

As is the custom, being Guest of Honour meant that Canada was presented in various side programmes. For the whole duration of the Book Fair, the visitors had an opportunity to see a selection of Canadian movies at a special film retrospective, opening with *Mr. Rice’s Secret*, directed by Nicholas Kendall and featuring David Bowie and Bill Switzer. The audience also saw *Set Me Free*, by Léa Pool, featuring Karine Vanasse and a famous Serbian actor, Miki Manojlović; then *eXistenZ*, a science fiction horror film, and *Spider*, a psychological thriller-drama, both directed by David Cronenberg; *The Last Stop*, by Mark Malone; *Waydowntown* by Gary Burns; and a Serbia-Canada co-production, *Boomerang*, by Dragan Marinković. This was a free-of-charge film-feast, presented courtesy of the Embassy of Canada to Serbia.

Besides the physical presence of Canadian authors and their publishers, another fair-related event was a special edition of the contemporary world literature journal *Pismo*, with the writer Raša Livada as editor-in-chief, dedicated to Canadian short fiction. David Albahari as guest editor compiled and translated a selection of fifteen contemporary Canadian authors writing either in French or in English: Lise Bissonnette, M. A. C. Farrant, Douglas Glover, Barbara Gowdy, Guy Vanderhaeghe, Monique Proulx, Bill Gaston, Diane Schoemperlen, Mark Anthony Jarman, Elisa Levine, Leo McKay, Lisa Moore, Paulo Da Costa, Michael Barry, and Annabel Lyon. This small anthology of short stories in translation gave an insight into the state-of-the-art of the genre as practised in Canada, and allowed Serbian readership a better view of Canadian issues.

## A growing Canadian presence

In 2006, nine Canadian publishers and eight Canadian writers visited the Belgrade International Book Fair: Elizabeth Abbott, Pan Bouyoucas, Hélène Dorion, Cecile Gagnon, Guy Gavriel Kay, and George Melnyk, among others. Kay used the occasion to launch the translation of *Sailing to Sarantium* – his first work to appear in Serbian. In 2007 Canada significantly increased the cultural delegation representing it at the Belgrade Book Fair, expanding its activities to introduce many writers, illustrators, publishers and titles translated into Serbian. That year Belgrade was visited by writ-



ers Marie-Louise Gay, Gilles Pellerin, Norman Ravvin, Pan Bouyoucas, David Homel, Elizabeth Abbott, Tecija Verbovski and David Albahari, as well as by two Canadian book-illustrators, Stéphane Jorisch and Dušan Petričić. Besides them, there were seventeen publishing houses with two travelling book collections and a collection of Canadian classics. This was also an opportunity for Claire Grenier, a representative of the Quebec International Book Fair, which had signed a cooperation agreement with the Belgrade Book Fair two years earlier to bring a delegation of five to Belgrade.

This spectacular presence of Canadian authors and books the following year offered an opportunity for thirteen book launches in the course of the five fair days. The Canada stand was busy all the time between 23 and 27 October, and Serbian readers got to meet and talk to all the guests, including representatives of a number of publishing houses: Dominique et Compagnie, Tundra, Second Story Press, Leméac, Les Allusifs, and L'instant même. Their contacts with some Serbian publishers led to the publication of many translations of Canadian books into Serbian. The Belgrade Book Fair also became the best place for the promotion of Canadian culture through a new activity known as School Day at the Canada stand. This was a platform for organized school visits to get to know Canada better by taking part in various quizzes and winning awards, and also to learn about studying in Canada. It may be said that the presence of Canada at the Fair caused a stir and motivated other countries to follow suit. This was a climax which was not easy to reach again.

## Seven years in a row

Speaking at the 54<sup>th</sup> Belgrade Book Fair in 2009, the then Ambassador of Canada to Serbia, His Excellency John Morrison, pointed out that this was the seventh time in a row Canada had participated. What is even more significant is that in the course of these seven years, well over 180 Canadian titles were translated into Serbian, some in more than one edition. This impressive number shows the interest of the Serbian public in things Canadian, a reflection of what the Ambassador termed “the deep cultural and intellectual passions of the Serbian people” (Morrison 2009). He also announced the coming of ten publishing houses from Canada and the launching of 15 new titles in translation. This was an achievement reached through cooperation between the two countries at the governmental level and in agreement with the Canada Council for the Arts, which offered functional models for helping Serbian publishers translate Canadian books.

The guests from Canada were welcomed by the Fair’s programme director Vladislava Gordić-Petković, who wished them even more success in the coming years regarding cultural cooperation. She took the occasion to mention the development of Canadian



Studies in Serbia and praised the fine generation of Canadianists that had been created, pointing out their role in promoting Canadian culture in Serbia. And in fact the Belgrade Book Fair is also an excellent opportunity for Serbian Canadianists to meet writers they are doing research on. In 2009 they had a chance to talk to Pan Bouyoucas, who was at the Fair for the fourth time. The occasion was the translation of his novel *Anna pourquoi*. There were also the fantasy fiction writer Claude Lalumière, Andrew Davidson, the author of *The Gargoyle*, and Teo Spychalski, a Quebec-based director and artistic director of Théâtre de La Veillée. Lalumière professed his immediate enchantment with the Belgrade Book Fair, which surprised him with its huge number of publishers and books displayed – a common reaction of Canadian guests to the Fair.

## Canadian matinée at the 2017 Book Fair

In 2017 Canada was one of 17 countries represented at the 62<sup>nd</sup> Belgrade Book fair; they brought 116 out of the 519 exhibitors that year, almost one-quarter of the total. David Homel and Marie-Louise Gay were the only Canadian authors present; their jointly written book *The Travelling Circus* was promoted at the Fair, where it was launched on 24 October. David Homel is a journalist, filmmaker and teacher who has translated many works by Quebec Francophone authors into English and received numerous awards, including two Governor-General's Literary Awards for translation. Marie-Louise Gay is a Canadian children's writer and illustrator who "fell in love with children's books and the idea of weaving words and images, poetry and colour to create stories" (Gay, "My Life So Far"). One of the programme highlights at the Fair was the Canadian matinée. Organized on 23 October, it attracted a large crowd.

This was a composite event at which sixteen Diaspora authors were presented under one slogan, "Under the Maple Leaf." They are a sample of the ever increasing number of Serbs writing in Canada about their contemporary Canadian experiences. The authors came to talk to the audience and showcase their books, three of which were in fact launched at the Fair. These publications belong to different genres – poetry, short fiction and humour – as if to illustrate the variety of the creative output of the Serbian Diaspora in Canada. The central title at the Canadian matinée was *Zašto smo otišli* [Why We Left], by Gordana Petković Laković. This is a collection of interviews with some of the leading intellectuals from the former Yugoslavia as well as with people from all walks of life, who describe the reasons why they left the country. The editor explains: "Most of us ended up in Canada, for which it is fair to say that it is a microcosm of sorts, so that immigrants don't feel like complete strangers or second-class citizens. For this project I have chosen individuals who have most colourfully painted



this post-Yugoslav Canadian mosaic” (Laković, “Zašto smo otišli”). This launch was an occasion for other authors and the audience present at the Fair to explain why they stayed in Serbia. All in all, the Canadian matinée offered a unique opportunity not only to strengthen links with the very strong Serbian literary diaspora in Canada but to help create an awareness of Canada as welcoming and supportive, and hence promote the Canadian presence in Serbia generally and the reception of Canadian literary products in particular.

## Conclusion

Since 2003, Canada’s presence at the International Belgrade Book Fair has been consistent, versatile, carefully structured and well organized. Myrna Kostash, who was there in 2004 recorded her impressions in the official project report:

The next day, October 20, I participated in a Press Conference at the Book Fair, made some remarks about my experience of being translated and published in Serbian – and so becoming a small part of Serbian literature, which moves me very much considering the twenty years of contact I have had with cultural activists in Serbia – and was interviewed by a young journalist (of Ukrainian origin!) from *Danas* newspaper whose observations about me and my work were reprinted in the Fair bulletin, *Vodich*. (Kostash 2004)

This is a win-win occasion in which Canadian authors become part of the Serbian reading experience.

Serbian has been among the most important languages in the Canada Council’s translation support programme for the past several years. Canadian books published with support from this source form a significant part of the hundreds of Canadian titles that have been translated into Serbian in recent decades. And the Belgrade Book Fair has played an important role in this phenomenon. It is a common saying in Serbia that many people write books but few people read them. Still, the Belgrade Book Fair will undoubtedly continue to be popular, with thousands of visitors coming to browse, leaf through, and buy books. On his visit to the Fair in 2006 the author Guy Gavriel Kay, three of whose books have been translated into Serbian by now, noted that “the Belgrade Book Fair on the Saturday I signed was more crowded ... than any book thing I have ever seen” (Kay 2006). And past statistics suggest that one of the most frequented attractions will continue to be the Canada stand.





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