# THE CRISIS OF NON-FICTION

**ABSTRACT**

Myrna Kostash reflects on the lack of interest that nonfiction generates within the Canadian literary landscape. Given the genre's capacity to raise critical questions and to provoke constructive debates about important social issues, she argues, the extinction of his genre might considerably impoverish Canadian culture and society.

Once upon a time, I played a viola. In orchestras this means I sat right in front of the cellos, playing exactly a fifth higher than whatever they were playing. You can *see* us play – we're sawing up and down in the air while the cellists are sawing sideways – but you can never hear us. We don't count. We're the drones to the violin and cello melodists.

That's how writing nonfiction in Canada feels. Many of us who write it have been moaning and groaning about our status for years but have simply assumed – as the current affairs magazines disappear and the literary agents and publishers chase after the hot new novelists – that nobody but ourselves was taking notice of the distortion of cultural – not to mention civic – life that the absence of argument in our everyday discourses represents. For that is how I think of my genre: each nonfiction book is an argument the writer lobs into the public square.

I was lucky: I started out writing for magazines in Toronto in the 1970s when there was still a cohesive audience for popular journalism. That was the pre-post-modern era, of course, when it was still legitimate to seek to address unfragmented readerships gathered in a public space of the media. But with the institutionalization and glamourization of Can Lit and the Celebrity Novel, nonfiction has found itself marginalized in the "spaces" now turned over to fiction: the literary festivals, creative writing programs and schools, the sexy prizes, the book clubs, translation grants, international Canadian Studies conferences, and so on. I quote an established nonfiction writer (who wishes not to be named): "What does it mean when literary festivals from coast to coast are allowed to exclude nonfiction, when most writers-in-residencies are reserved for people who don't write nonfiction, when critics and academics routinely study and write about fiction and poetry to the exclusion of literary nonfiction [except, I may interject, when it is written by someone whose principal genre is fiction or poetry]? I can only conclude that no one cares."

In 2002 I was very busy reading 203 books of nonfiction that had been submitted to the jury of the Governor-General's Literary Award for Nonfiction. As you may or may not remember, or even heard, we awarded the prize to Andrew Nikiforuk for *Saboteur: Wiebo Ludwig's War Against Big Oil,* a masterful work of investigative and narrative nonfiction published by Macfarlane Walter & Ross. That jury experience and its aftermath have haunted me ever since, and have led me to believe that the genre of nonfiction in English Canada is in crisis.

Brian Bethune writing in *Maclean's* magazine (November 11/02) in the wake of the announcements of the Governor-General's prizes, argued on behalf of nonfiction that, for all of our fiction writers' accolades and celebrity abroad, "its [fiction's] global influence pales beside [nonfiction] works by Marshall McLuhan and Northrop Frye." This was cheering to hear. But six months later, Andrew Nikiforuk's publisher went out of business. And Nikiforuk was quoted at the same time as not being sure *he* could afford to stay in the business of writing. As Gary Ross put it in the *Globe&Mail* (April 23/03), "I can't believe how little winning the Governor-General's Award did for Nikiforuk." Well, I can't say I was surprised, although I was terribly disappointed to hear it. I was aware that among the people I know in Alberta, for instance, who read Canadian writing, there had been tremendous discussion about Guy Vanderhaege's new novel, *The Last Crossing,* which had *not* won a prize, and Carol Shield's *Unless,* which had also been overlooked, but precisely no conversation about the Nikiforuk book, which had not only won a national prize but had addressed a public issue of the first importance in Alberta, the environmental crimes of the oil patch.

In May 2003 the *Globe&Mail's* books editor, Martin Levin, wrote a column about the recent announcement of the winner of the Donner Prize for best book on Canadian public policy. Levin called it the Giller for Nerds, meaning that it had a shortlist "guaranteed to go unread outside

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specialized circles," which he very much regretted. After all, books about public policy are "important contributors" to national debate. As Daniel Stoffman, the runner-up to the Donner Prize argued, the publishing of deeply researched and analytical books about Canada is an "essential" activity in the development of a national debate about our collective well-being.

Those of us working in the genre, as writers, publishers and editors, don't need to be persuaded of that argument. The real crisis lies in the apparent indifference of the large majority of readers and media to the national discourses on society that circulate as our nonfiction. It was the *National Post's* Noah Richler who wrote acerbically about the alternative: "Our writers of prose fiction are Canada's literary celebrities, singing the landscape, often badly, and revealing our history to us in dollops generally swallowed without too much pain." [Nov 27/02] Compared to the novel as entertainment, does our nonfiction seem somehow too difficult to read, not action-packed enough or lacking a dramatic story to keep us interested? How many times have I heard otherwise thoughtful people, literate citizens, claim never to read nonfiction as a matter of some principle: they find it too "depressing" or "fatiguing" to read at the end of a stressful day. Richler believed that the imbalance in the market for literary fiction and nonfiction was almost "perverse" and invited us to consider what it says about ourselves that, while literary fiction flourishes and is nurtured at every level of production from writing grants to business-sponsored prizes to proliferating workshops to protective criticism, we do not support a national public affairs magazine in this country, the sort of magazine like *The New Yorker,* or *Harper's* or *Granta,* that is the seedbed of our next generation of nonfiction writers? (Nov 27/02)[1]

When we ignore the nonfiction article or book – don't talk about it, create no buzz, do not review it or interview its author, do not include it on reading lists or in syllabi, do not seek to translate it or otherwise launch it overseas – how in fact do we conduct a national conversation about ourselves "other than in mostly anodyne novels"? "It's really tough to publish nonfiction in Canada," Jan Walter said of her failing enterprise. "We are in a time when fiction is in the ascendancy and nonfiction has to compete with newspapers, magazines and television."

Forums that might be expected to have a lively curiosity in Canadian nonfiction – the book review sections of newspapers and journals, say – are vastly more interested in the cult of the novel and foreign nonfiction (as a routine reading of the *Globe & Mail's* book review section will attest); the Toronto International Literary Festival while under the aegis of impresario Greg Gatenby notoriously and pointedly excluded Canadian nonfiction except for literary biography; Canadian Studies as preached abroad seems to have been overwhelmed by the study of the current novel.

I note that concurrent with this panel is a session titled "One Book, One Community" – an ambition I consider problematic in the extreme, not just for its perverse will to reduce the reading public to a single, monomaniacal fan club but also for its – surprise! – desire to corral us all into reading a novel and nothing but. I echo writer Hal Niedzviecki's alarm, as he wrote a couple of weeks ago, that libraries, of all civic spaces, should be zones liberated from the commercial activity of book-industry marketing: "All books should be considered equal regardless of how much press an author is getting or what awards are dispensed" (G&M Oct 27/03).

Nevertheless, Vancouver Public Library has a campaign to get the entire city to read one novel; visitors to Toronto's public libraries cast their own votes for the Giller winner; CBC radio hosts "Canada Reads" which, through a process of triage (one book overboard each day of the week), resolves in a single "winner" we are all meant to rush out and read. Grant MacEwan Community College in Edmonton has been running The College Book Project for several years, in which a recently-published Canadian *novel* is chosen as a focus for discussion and activity within the college community and with the community-at-large, as they put it. So thin is our sense of nonfiction that most people assume its topics – history, class struggle, sexuality, place, identity, theology – will be better articulated by fiction writers who have been granted a kind of dispensation to handle the big stuff. Or, as journalist Sandra Martin put it, "fiction writers are the only people asking questions." (Hello? I give you Erna Paris, Susan Crean, Marni Jackson, Gordon Laird, Stan Persky, Brian Fawcett *inter alia* if you want great big fat questions!) As a friend wrote who recently published a bold work of creative nonfiction: "Actually, my experience of being reviewed as a writer of literary nonfiction was that none of the questions I posed in my book – about Canadian cultural nationalism, modernism, gender, racism – were even mentioned."

I'm fond of citing Anthony Burgess's Introduction to an edition of Daniel Defoe's *Journal of a Plague Year.* Burgess argued that Defoe is England's first great novelist because he was at the same time a great journalist, and as a journalist, he was great because he came not from literature but from life. Something like that. And this reminds me of Tom Wolfe's "manifesto" of some years ago in which he deplored what was happening in creative writing schools: wannabe writers, that is novelists, were treating literary texts as "real" and the real world as "so-called."

And that's where Canadian public life and discourse are headed, I fear: where, in the absence of the debate of ideas that serious nonfiction provokes, Canadian society and culture shrivel to the dimension of the so-called. And fictions "R" Us.

**Note**

1 Since he wrote, Walrus has appeared.