

North of Tourism

Canada and Latin America meet in the critical fiction of Stephen Henighan.

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Lost Province: Adventures in a Moldovan Family

Beach Holme, 2002
208 pages, softcover
ISBN 0888784325

When Words Deny the World: The Reshaping of Canadian Writing

The Porcupine's Quill, 2002
192 pages, softcover
ISBN 088984240X

North of Tourism

Cormorant Books, 1999
173 pages, softcover
ISBN 1896951139

The Places Where Names Vanish

Thistle-down Press, 1998
181 pages, softcover
ISBN 1895449774

Nights in the Yungas

Thistle-down Press, 1992
128 pages, softcover
ISBN 0920633978

Assuming the Light: The Parisian Literary Apprenticeship of Miguel Angel Asturias

Legenda, 1990
217 pages
ISBN 190075519X

Other Americas

Simon & Pierre, 1990
303 pages, softcover
ISBN 0889242186



Recent events in New York and the growing pressures for international awareness brought by globalization and conflict have given more urgency to creative explorations of Canada's links with other worlds and other peoples. Latin America, in particular, has been in the news with the economic crisis in Argentina, which is one symptom of a set of problems typical of fledgling democracies. Latin American countries are confronting the political, social and economic problems that trigger large-scale emigration. Many argue that things will not improve until more is spent on scientific and technological training, and trust can be rebuilt between governments and citizens. Capital is scarce, and richer countries have not freed their markets for Latin America's farm, textile or steel exports.

A Canadian writer who creates imaginative understanding of the Canadian-Latin American axis is Guelph-based novelist and critic Stephen Henighan, whose new set of essays, *When Words Deny the World*, has just been published. Henighan's work deals with geographic and intellectual borders: between North and South America, Canada and the United States,

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isolation and commitment, autonomy and assimilation.

At Guelph's Bookshelf Café last year, I interviewed Henighan, who teaches in the School of Languages and Literatures at the University of Guelph. In this informal setting, he admitted that novels such as his *Other Americas* (1990) are designed to ask questions rather than answer them. He feels that the Canadian perspective on Latin America is different from both American imperialism and European romanticism: the Canadian perspective finds similarities in Latin American marginality, a sense of being culturally on the edge. Although he has seen some of the differences dissolve over the 15 years of his Latin American connections, mainly through Canada's tourist and business connections with Cuba and Mexico, he feels that people in Latin America have had little sense of Canada as distinct from a North American conglomerate.

Novels such as *Other Americas*, which narrates with moving thoroughness the process of two brothers growing up on an Ontario farm and then seeking a sense of relevance within a broader international arena of popular struggle in Colombia, help to break down parochial boundaries, mental and material. Henighan says that his treatment of Eastern Ontario life grew out of his own childhood and adolescence as an insider/outsider, part of an immigrant family of English and Celtic origin that moved into the rural Ottawa Valley where life was fairly traditional. He wanted to discover how

rural Ontario fits into the world, and to portray dynamic connections with other cultures, a fictional strategy that he thinks is different from Alice Munro's, which sees Ontario as self-contained. *Other Americas* was in part a response to free trade, and sought a broader, imaginative engagement with Latin America.

At the Bookstore Café, we discussed some of the parallels and differences between revolutionary cultures and eras: South Africa's negotiated revolution, Spanish America's embrace of economic liberalism and the existence in Canada of powerful minorities such as the English Family Compact and the Quebec-based Château Clique. Economic liberalism, Henighan argues, is an oppressive model for many southern countries, and for some classes within the United States and Canada. We also talked about the left intellectual tradition of engaging with civil wars and popular struggles, which goes back to Malraux, Hemingway and Orwell. The difference, for Henighan, is that Canadians engage with those popular liberation struggles from the position not of a dominant or imperial culture, but of another marginal and colonized culture, one with regions of great economic hardship as well. This makes for complex entanglements and forms of understanding.

A topic that emerges very strongly in Henighan's stories and novels is language itself, and the pathways to international understanding that language learning creates. Marta, the protagonist of his second novel, *The Places Where Names Vanish* (1999), is a literate person from Ecuador who emigrates to Montreal, and her story sympathetically recreates the economic and psychological hardships such a woman would encounter. I was interested in the final story from his short story collection, *Nights in the Yungas* (1992), a story that deals with Quechua as an unwritten language and the site of Inca tradition. Henighan believes that it is important to recognize linguistic complexity in Latin America, and that many people are one or two generations away from a native or European language.

I asked Henighan about representations of violence in these fictions, as some countries suffer from stereotyped perceptions of thuggery and violence. In regions under guerrilla control, still the case in Colombia where the region south of Bogota has been re-militarized in a build-up to congressional elections, there is obviously an overspill of violence onto unwary tourists and travellers, but he also noted a more generic "obscene transaction" that is sometimes needed when privileged North Americans encounter starving Latin American peasants, an exchange of economic goods for indigenous forms of knowledge, or at least a better understanding of poverty. This forms the basis of his fictional episodes of violence or armed robbery.

Henighan's literary career has been involved in the shifts that have taken place in the Canadian literary scene, from regionally based publishing and readerships to a postmodern sense of deracinated writers and readers.

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These changes are not always helpful to a writer's career. After his first two volumes in the early 1990s he was perceived as an anglo-Quebec or Montreal writer, because he was published there as a novelist and journalist. But west coast Canadians also have an interest in Latin America, partly because they, like others, have direct contact and partly because they have absorbed the Californian obsession with Latin America.

During the 1990s, the Canadian literary world became much more commercially driven and also more Toronto-centric. This has not helped writers from other regions, especially with cuts to the Canada Council affecting small presses. With his second story collection, *North of Tourism* (1999), Henighan entered the postmodern international world as the book was taken up by a new generation of young travellers. Perhaps the idea of a pan-Canadian writer is a myth, especially when writers from multicultural Canada so often choose, as do Rohinton Mistry, Michael Ondaatje, Rudy Wiebe and Janice Kulyk Keefer, to write about the complex histories of Canadian origins in other cultures in Europe and Asia, processes of expulsion, emigration and urbanization that happened over many generations.

I was curious about the traces of Africa found in Brazilian culture, expressed in the female experience of racial denigration and spirit possession that links *The Places Where Names Vanish* to the Caribbean fictions of Erna Brodber and Jean Rhys. Henighan explained that the influence

Birthday

The world: sillage. Light dumped on our heads,
we become heaven's compost. Our thoughts,
like insects, chew through eternity's lost
causes, hours and days, time's least
digestible fibres. We take in what heaven can't
or won't put up with. Living and dying,
the incomplete virtues of strength and weakness. It's not true
there is no fear in heaven: the gods keep
watch over us, are afraid of the losses
we hold, afraid to die. They don't trust
their own endlessness. You are the natural outcome
of immortality's inability to conceive. The one thing
it can't bear, which is why it needs you so.

Sue Sinclair

Sue Sinclair's book of poems, *Secrets of Weather and Hope*, was published by Brick Books in 2001. Her writings have appeared in *The Malahat Review*, *Fiddlehead*, *Grain*, *Descant*, *Event* and *The New Quarterly*.

of Africa is especially strong in the state of Bahia in northeastern Brazil. Ecuador has a black minority of about 12 percent, who are much further away from African traditions, but constitute an unacknowledged source of racial tension. The Latin American's immigrant transition there, as *The Places Where Names Vanish* describes it, is one from an animist world to a fast-paced, somewhat intolerant materialist society in Canada.

Henighan's stories and novels often create female narrators and protagonists, a feature that he feels gives a dramatic and critical angle to Latin American societies. These female commentators also become the barometers of the shifts in national, cultural and social identity that he sees as being at the core of his vision as a novelist. I asked him to comment on the reversal of perspective from that of Canadian visitors and development workers in Latin America to the view of a Latin American immigrant woman in Montreal. He replied that this change was directly related to his critical response to the Canadian literary scene in the mid and late 1990s, when enthusiasm for NAFTA and globalization seemed to be accompanied by novels detached from the realities of Canadian society and its internal difficulties, such as Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*. The misery on the street was ignored in such rarefied fictions, which pandered to bourgeois evasions of economic problems and deprivation in Canada. The immigrant's views of Canada can shake such complacency.

The tension between private and public commitments in Henighan's work is especially well worked out in a historical story called "The Alliance of Tiny Kingdoms," the concluding story in *North of Tourism*. This story uses the history of Europe during World War I as a coda for the tension among different Americas in Henighan's work generally. It ends with a powerful vision of foot soldiers and faith that catches the sense of revolutions that happen in ordinary time and demand great sacrifices. Henighan argues that the history of Montenegro, unconquered by the Ottoman Empire, became a fictional vehicle to grapple with the dissolution of the nation-state in our time, and to portray it as both cherished and yet suffocating. The mixture of exhaustion, irony and jubilation that accompanies war victories is well caught in the concluding scene of the story.

Henighan's fiction will be increasingly relevant in a world where economic globalization and a revolution in communications require greater imaginative participation in other societies and a greater understanding of other cultures. In Latin America, as in other new southern democracies, there is a complex struggle between economic liberalism and forms of populism, and leaders are learning to trust democratic process rather than large loans from the International Monetary Fund, charismatic leaders and military solutions to social problems. His polemical work also keeps alive a critical rather than self-congratulatory spirit in discussing Canadian literature, which encourages an economic understanding of social problems within Canada. Comparisons between marginal societies can disclose forms of understanding that help move us toward peaceful understandings of the same world, the one we all live in. ☺