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From the Farmstead to the Condo:
Douglas Fetherling on Literature and Publishing in Canada

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Article abstract

Douglas Fetherling, the poet, writer and editor, began his literary life working for the fabled House of Anansi Press in the late 1960s. He speaks about the changing literary environment, noting that it has grown much more complex and cosmopolitan than when he started at Anansi in the 1960s. Fetherling discusses changes in book design and editorial work, and argues that ownership is crucial in the Canadian publishing industry. He outlines the rise of the literary agent in the 1990s and comments on the decline of independent bookselling. He notes that the Canadian canon has expanded over the years with the advent of disciplines such as gender studies, Native studies, postcolonial studies and the subsuming of literature into cultural studies, pointing out the fragility of Canadian literature.

From the Farmstead to the Condo: Douglas Fetherling on Literature and Publishing in Canada

SCL/ÉLC Interview by John Clement Ball

Douglas Fetherling, the poet, writer and editor, began his literary life working for the fabled House of Anansi Press in the late 1960s. Ever since, he has maintained an interest in publishing as well as in writing — as former literary editor of *The Toronto Star* and *The Kingston Whig-Standard* and, since 1996, as weekly books columnist in *The Ottawa Citizen* and *The New Brunswick Telegraph Journal*. He is the author or editor of fifty books and is Writer-in-Residence at the University of New Brunswick for 2000-2001. This interview was conducted by email during October and November 1999.

JB You've been involved in Canadian writing and publishing for about 30 years now. How would you compare the literary "scene" now to the one you found when you arrived?

DF The whole environment is much more complex and more cosmopolitan than when I started out at Anansi in the late 1960s. One generation has grown old and respectable (well, nearly respectable in my own case) and been joined, even supplanted, by another — inevitably. In writing, the emphasis has certainly shifted from poetry to fiction during that time. In publishing, the small literary presses are more commercial than they used to be (they've had to adapt to the withering away of government arts funding) while the commercial presses are, well, more commercial — but more numerous, too. There was a time not all that long ago when the death of McCelland and Stewart — I speak of here of the company as it was under Jack McClelland's ownership — would have been a national tragedy, reported on the national news broadcasts and the front pages of the morning papers, with all the attendant apparatus of obsequies and

analysis. By the middle or late 1980s that wouldn't have been the case at all, as a lot of other important players had joined in the task of publishing the important literary writers. The list of these companies changes from year to year, as the interest of their corporate owners fades in and out like a distant radio signal, but at various points the list would have to include not only the Canadian-owned Stoddart and Douglas & McIntyre but also Penguin Books Canada, Knopf Canada, Random House of Canada, Doubleday Canada, HarperCollins — one could go on. In the 1960s and 1970s our fear was americanization, today it's globalization. Penguin of course is British, but Knopf, Random, and Doubleday all are part of the Bertelsmann empire in Germany, while HarperCollins is whatever nationality Rupert Murdoch is projecting at the moment. Such is the present landscape. Is it better? Or worse? Well, it's different.

JB It seems to me that Anansi — which closed for a while in the late 80s and was then reinvented in the 90s as a kind of boutique imprint of a large mainstream press — serves as a fascinating case-study for some of the broader changes the industry has gone through. I see the two versions of Anansi as characteristic — perhaps even exemplary — of their times. What do you see when you compare the two?

DF Someone — I think it was Val Ross, the publishing reporter of *The Globe and Mail* — called small literary publishers the research-and-development arm of literature. 'Twas ever thus, at least in the age of late modernity, reckoned from about the 1890s on. The original Anansi, founded in 1967, served that function superbly, if also chaotically when viewed from the inside. It gave a forum, and an audience, to talents as diverse as Peggy Atwood, Dennis Lee, Marian Engel, Dave Godfrey, Rachel Wyatt, Graeme Gibson — the list is very long. The story has been told many times (and is about to be told again by John Metcalf, who's working on a descriptive bibliography of Anansi titles). I tell it myself, as well as I can recollect it, in a book called *Travels by Night: A Memoir of the Sixties*, which has a certain following among my fellow geezers. The present Anansi is probably serving the same sort of role by publishing Esta Spalding and Steven Heighton and … again, one could go on, citing an entire directory of names. The difference is that Anansi of old was cockily independent in ownership while the present Anansi is owned by Jack Stoddart who, in addition to his core companies, Stoddart Publishing and General Publishing, either owns or has equity in, let me see, Boston Mills Press, Cormorant, Quarry Press, Macfarlane Walter & Ross, Douglas &

McIntyre, and possibly others I'm forgetting. He's had to invest in these companies in order to get or keep them properly capitalized but also, I suppose, to give himself as broad a base as possible. That is to say, in an environment with so many well-fed foreign-owned houses, he's had to become a kind of smaller and Canadian-owned auto-conglomerate in order to stay competitive. But while the business functions have come together in new patterns like this, the old editorial functions — the editorial distinctiveness of each imprint — has remained the same to a degree that's remarkable in the circumstances. Or so it seems to me.

JB You mentioned the ownership question, and the original House of Anansi was, of course, part of a group of nationalist presses that founded the Association of Canadian Publishers in 1971. The ACP has always maintained as a core policy that Canadian writing, and Canadian culture as a whole, are best served by a strong, Canadian-owned publishing industry. Now, though, it seems the aim of many established and new Canadian novelists is to be published by whichever large firm offers the best arrangement, regardless of ownership. And, of course, leading Canadian writers are aggressively courted by foreign-owned publishers. So, has the ownership question become less important now that our literature has matured, or should we be concerned that the old argument may be falling on deaf ears?

DF Personally, I think ownership is crucial — to some extent. If you give up that criterion entirely, reading and writing become vassal forms — like Canadian film. Virtually no English-Canadian feature films — ones about actual Canadians in Canadian settings — get made because they can't get distributed here: the Americans own nearly all the screens, as they say in the trade, and Jack Valenti, the head of the powerful Hollywood lobby and a former key advisor to Lyndon Johnson during the Vietnam War, isn't going to permit any ragtag insurgent groups to compromise him this time. Yet it's true paradoxically that the big foreign-owned publishing houses, having more money and wishing to be good citizens, do much of the most interesting literary publishing — of writers who've first been brought out by the small presses (again, as of old). I guess many writers, unlike me, are star-struck by the possibility of also being published in New York. The problem with the foreign-owned publishers is that they have a kind of Attention Deficit Disorder. Penguin, to take an example, was the primary producer of interesting Canadian fiction in the 1980s but has backed away in the 1990s. In my lifetime, McGraw-Hill has supplemented its educational publishing by setting up

a Canadian trade-publishing arm but then lost interest in a few years when New York realized that huge profits weren't rolling in. A few years later, it's tried again. And yet again. Publishing requires stamina and stubbornness. You can't be throwing out your mission statement all the time. Also, this flitting round has an effect on reading habits because it precludes reader loyalty to particular houses. Look at the railway bookstalls in Britain and you'll still see paperbacks arranged in sections according to publisher: the Penguins over here together, the Corgis over there. The same is true in France. Readers learn to depend on certain publishers to keep them supplied with what they're looking to read. This notion has never taken hold in Canada because the publishers — even the small ones — keep altering their mandates, or, in the case of the foreign-owned houses, being ordered to do so. The fact that there isn't much variety in Canadian book-design plays a role in this situation as well. Some publishers' titles are well designed (those of Insomniac Press, say, or, in a different way, Douglas & McIntyre's) while others', those of the statistical majority, are not. Virtually nobody pursues a characteristic look (much less a format) that one can spot from across a crowded bookshop.

JB That's very interesting. I can think of some other small presses who have gone for a consistent look: Mercury Press, for instance, with their contemporary, urban-looking designs by Gordon Robertson from a few years ago; or Oberon, who have done some really ugly covers lately, though at least they have a uniform look! I wonder, though, whether those presses saw any increase in their profile and sales by doing this. McClelland & Stewart are going for a kind of series look with their recent paperback reprints, and of course have always done this with the New Canadian Library. It seems to me, though, that there are a lot of beautifully designed books out there — from publishers such as Goose Lane, Anansi, Cormorant, and others — that have no brand-recognition element besides the logo on the spine. Do you think they suffer as a result, or can they get by on their reputations and the names of their authors?

DF I'm glad you mention Gordon Robertson. He's designed three books of mine and is one of the two Canadian book-designers whose work I know best (the other is Barbara Hodgson in Vancouver). Even allowing for the constant change in taste that's the essence of design, to compare these people with those who passed for designers twenty years ago is risible. Anyway, yes, I agree, there are many handsomely designed books (and yet, oddly, no conspicuous annual award for book design —

this in a country that is suddenly gagging with literary awards of every conceivable sort). But I don't think individual examples of outstanding design, rather than an overall approach to design, could lead to reader loyalty and thus influence a firm's sales overall. Of course, this isn't to deny that, particularly in the case of art books and near-art books, design helps to create word-of-mouth sales, the same sort of buzz that, when applied to a literary text, can make a particular novel, say, a hot property — though I add that in my own experience and observation there's a clear difference between buzz in the media and buzz in the bookstores: the one doesn't always lead to the other.

JB Let's move from design to editing: what do you think of the current state of literary editing in Canada? Are Canadian presses better or worse at this than they were in your early days?

DF Generally better, once you make allowance for the problems that accompany the new technologies and the general lowering of literacy. Bev Daurio of Mercury Press, which you mentioned a moment ago — certainly one of the most serious and consistently excellent small presses — told me with a sigh recently that editorial work is a dying art. As one-half of what's only a two-person shop, she prefers to confine the titles that require close editorial work to the autumn, so as to give herself a lighter load with the spring books. Publishing is a business that's somehow never quite made the transition from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar: its year still begins in March, not January. In virtually every case except Mercury, this is because of the hope of high Christmas sales and the expectation of a high level of returns soon afterwards. Only at Mercury, as far as I'm aware, does it have to do with the quality and sophistication of the prose! I like that! As for the commercial houses, in recent years the tendency in editorial, just as in publicity, has been to have fewer staff with benefits and more freelancers working on a job-by-job basis. Outsourcing, as the business journalists say. This has turned some managing editors' offices into something like union hiring-halls for merchant seamen. The result has been an inevitable unevenness. When the original Coach House Press was a co-operative, I admired the way they used to list the board member who had edited the book for the press. This encouraged pride in craft rather than the hiding of blame. Predictably yet paradoxically, the most dedicated small presses, some of which publish the fewest titles, and the two biggest academic presses, University of Toronto Press and McGill-Queen's University Press, which publish the most Canadian titles, have

the loftiest editorial standards. By loftiest I guess I mean most thoughtful and consistent. That's not to say that their house styles are devoid of charming eccentricities. Taking the straight-aways with the round-abouts, I'd say that Canadian books are less rewritten in-house than are U.S. books (this applies to magazines as well—see Paul Theroux's essay on the subject) but that there's not so much freedom for the author here as there is in British publishing (which is perhaps why British books still tend not to distinguish *that* from *which*).

JB Editing, of course, is a largely invisible craft as far as most readers are concerned. But awards and the media, which you mentioned a minute ago, can make a big difference to a book's impact. Let's start with awards: you suggested that we have seen a proliferation of these, and I agree — as we speak we're right in the middle of it, with the Giller Prize and Governor General's Award shortlists out but the winners yet to be announced. Have these prizes, and others such as the various provincial and local awards, the Commonwealth Book Prize, and so on, helped raise the profile of Canadian literature in general, or do they simply benefit the particular publishers and authors that are nominated? And do we have too many awards, do you think?

DF A while ago the Writers' Union decided to set up web pages for its members. A sort of template was included with the application. It said: "List book awards received and prizes won (please limit yourself to only five)." As someone who's never won a book prize, I felt so intimidated and ashamed that I didn't even return the questionnaire. I guess that's why I'm often asked to be a juror: no chance of a potential conflict. There are now so many literary awards for Canadians — city, provincial, regional, national, Commonwealth, international and disciplinary ones — that there's a web site that keeps track of them all. I suspect that the ones with the consistently higher standards — the BC Book Prizes, the Giller, the GGs of course, particularly in fiction, the Orange Prize and the Booker — do increase the stature and sales of the winners, maybe even of the short-listed titles as well. But the prizes whose low standards carry over from year to year — such as the City of Toronto Book Awards — or those whose primary concerns are inoffensiveness and folksiness— the Leacock Award — bring neither prestige nor profit. The bright note about awards is that they provide a fair-sized lump of cash for writers, which is all the more necessary given the cut-backs in arts funding by the granting agencies. As a disinterested party, though, I've often felt that the winner-take-

all approach is cruel. How much fairer it would be to emulate the pari-mutuel system of horse-racing and divide the purse into win, place and show.

JB The media play a big part in bringing these awards to the public's attention, and a cynic might say that some awards exist only as publicity vehicles, rather than some loftier aim of inspiring and rewarding excellence. But the media covers books in a lot of other ways. When I worked in publishing in the late 1980s, people were fond of saying that the three best ways to sell a book in Canada were "Gzowski, Gzowski, Gzowski." That wasn't completely true, of course, and with the end of CBC's Morningside it's certainly not the case now. As an author who also does an enormous amount of reviewing, what are your thoughts on the ways the media covers books — especially literary ones?

DF That literary journalism is in a wretched condition is one of those statements that one can make at any point along the timeline of our lives without fear of uttering a falsehood. It's like saying that the CBC is in decline or that the railways are being unfair to farmers. One reason is that book-reviewing has always been an entry-level activity. Very few of my contemporaries (Katherine Govier comes to mind as an exception) seem to enjoy the give-and-take of the higher journalism as a normal part of the business of being a citizen-writer. Much of the blame lies with the daily newspapers. You could be sure that they would take books much more seriously if books accounted for as much advertising linage as movies do.

Every author can tell you horror stories that are truly, well, horrendous. I once published a travel book about the rise of democracy in Taiwan. In one of the Toronto newspapers it was reviewed by a paid propagandist of the People's Republic, with no acknowledgement of this conflict being made anywhere. Most book reviews, even in the specialized media, are full of words such as "good" and "bad" and "like" and "dislike": it's quite unbelievable the levels of subjective inarticulateness to which most reviewers sink. And I say this as one who's sat on both sides of the fence, having done my time as the harried book-review editor of a couple of daily newspapers. I agree with the late George Woodcock who complained to me once that a scathing review will kill the sales of a book but that a laudatory one of the same specific gravity will not elevate sales. I've reviewed books constantly since I was a teenager, as a means of continuing my education, of keeping up with what's being written and published, and as a way of being a party to the larger discourse. My rule of thumb is to be kinder to others than they are to me, hoping (vainly for

the most part) that someone will notice the good example. No, that makes me sound sanctimonious, which I hope I'm not. I guess what I mean to say is that only sophisticated readers make surefooted reviewers. The number of persons who know how to approach a text qua text has probably declined significantly since the generality of people from Christian backgrounds stopped trying to make sense of the hodge-podge that is the Bible. This is not a religiously inspired statement, you understand, but simply an observation that the reading public's familiarity with various ages of prose has faded, along with their comfort level in reading texts translated from other languages.

As for your question about the electronic media's coverage of books, it seems to me that they must approach publishing as a very minor part of show-biz. Television and even radio cover books on the false premise that ideas and language can be made to sound like sporting events. The call-in radio shows that so predominate in the West are the worst. No wonder that authors who do the tour are notorious among publishers for leaving behind them a single unbroken trail of empty mini-bars from one ocean to the other.

JB I assume, then, that you're not too keen on what passes for the literary star system in the country. Lately it seems to me that beyond Atwood it's the fresh faces — the hot young (and usually Toronto-based) prospects, often first novelists — who get the fawning attention of the media, which of course is also mostly Toronto-based. Perhaps I'm just becoming hyper-conscious of this, now that I've moved from Toronto to Fredericton …

DF Nobody *likes* Toronto. Certainly not the people who live there. Despite a good deal of decentralization in recent years, however, it *does* remain the book-publishing centre, the home of the national newspapers, and so on — just as it once had a near monopoly on pork-packing. Once it was Hogtown, now it's Booktown. This in itself signifies no improvement in the city as a place to lead daily lives nor in the sophistication of its citizenry. If my meagre resources would permit, I would live full-time, rather than just for stretches, in BC, because that's where the creative juice is—a much different commodity than publishing pull. Or, if not Vancouver, then possibly Amsterdam. I don't know anyone in Amsterdam and no one knows me. But I seem to be the spitting image of about seventeen per cent of its adult male population, thus making it very difficult for anyone to give the police an accurate description of me.

JB Agents, presumably, have something to do with the hype that's out there. But they're also helping some writers, including a few brand new ones, make some good money. Is the rise of the literary agent in the 1990s having a good or a bad overall impact on writing and publishing in Canada?

DF Big-time, big-talking agents came to Canada comparatively late in the day — the late 1980s. That's a century, nearly, after Conrad was represented by the famous Pinker (while his friend Ford Madox Ford came to be handled by David Higham). In New York, the agent was an indispensable part of the equation in the 1920s. But in Canada it was possible for a writer (I offer myself as a typical example) to be unagented until the early 1990s, because the community was small enough that one could know or at least have met everyone of importance. I once spent a day at what were then called the Public Archives of Canada looking at the cartons containing the records of the first Macdonald government. So little paperwork, so small a bureaucracy. I daresay Sir John A. probably knew everyone of the remotest importance in, for example, the post office department. Similarly, I knew all the publishers and editors a dozen years ago. Now that's no longer possible, not even remotely. Another thing about agents — I find this comes up frequently in workshops and seminars — is that non-professional writers misunderstand the agent's role almost totally. The function of the agent is not as it's shown in that awful early 1960s movie "Youngblood Hawke," based I believe on an equally awful Herman Wouk novel, in which the literary agent, played by Suzanne Pleshette, solves the personal problems of her promising young client-author, portrayed by someone like Troy Donahue. The job of the agent is to field offers, negotiate contracts and collect amounts owing, in exchange for fifteen percent of the book so long as it remains in copyright. That's actually quite a good deal for the recidivist writer who produces a steady body of work. Without an agent, such a person might easily find herself losing fifteen percent of her book income to weak negotiation and another fifteen percent to bad debts. So to pay an agent fifteen percent in order to gain thirty percent is a blessing. A publisher may be able to play fast and loose with an individual author but not with an agent, since there are perhaps only twenty or so important ones at any given time and they represent a rather high proportion of the pool of publishable authors. But the main reason that agents exist is that the publishers, who are business executives, are glad to pay a few more dollars (the increase is passed on to the consumer anyway) for the comfort of dealing with another business person rather than with someone they perceive as an egotistical bo-

hemian know-nothing. My experience is that few publishers *like* writers much, as a sociological type.

JB Could you comment on the current state of bookselling in this country, and the effect it's having on our writers and publishers — especially the rise of Chapters and the Internet booksellers?

DF The ruination of independent bookselling by Chapters (Indigo is not only much smaller but seems less voracious) has been a tragedy for this country equal to if not surpassing the decline of the press into gossip and other trivialities. The public think they're getting a bargain but the extra discounts that Chapters are able to squeeze out of their suppliers, the publishers, are simply passed along to the customers as higher book prices, which puts people off. At a time when the national inflation rate is, what?, about two percent give or take, the annual inflation rate on retail book prices is — I can't begin to calculate. Certainly a far, far higher figure. This helps no one. As for electronic bookselling, amazon.com is certainly a great *American* resource, though I fear that it's dissipating its usefulness by selling too many other types of merchandise in addition to books. The Canadian equivalents, which should be the most accurate and up-to-date sources of information about Canadian titles, are not up to snuff. I looked myself up on the Chapters site not long ago and found several book that are years out-of-print listed as "shippable in 24 hours," ones in-print called "no longer available", several non-existent books attributed to me, one book written by someone else attributed to me, and one I'd written alone (my second volume of memoirs, in fact) listed as a collaboration between me and my friend Christopher Moore, the chair of the Writers' Union, who of course had no hand in the book whatever. Such a site is not only worthless as a bibliographical or reference tool, I can't see how it can be that helpful to the bookselling business. To be fair, this is a new (and huge) undertaking. Bugs are inevitable. But imagine a source of information even less accurate than the old "Canadian Books in Print"! If Chapters were smart they would poll Canadian writers, asking for corrections. No doubt the situation will be fixed by the time this interview appears in print.

JB Uh, sure. If you say so. Of course, by then Y2K may have confounded everything even further, and maybe they'll be attributing the collected works of Douglas Adams to you. (I suppose you wouldn't mind that if you also got his royalties...) You sound gloomy about the independents, but surely there's still a place for hands-on booksellers who actually select their stock personally, know their books and their custom-

ers well, and who host readings and launches and book clubs and the like. We have a couple of fine independents in Fredericton, and though we've now got a Chapters, the smaller stores seem to be holding their own and keeping their customers.[1]

DF The surviving independents are society's true heroes, like single mums. But the trend seems to be for only the most specialized to prosper — those dealing exclusively in travel books, say, or art books or cookery books. I think the general independent bookseller faces a rough future unless, as some experts have suggested in the press, Chapters have already reached a saturation point in terms of the number of sites. But then of course Chapters, in their turn, are as much threatened by the larger on-line booksellers as the independent shops are by the so-called big-box megastores. As CEOs like to say in their annual messages inside annual reports, "It has been a year of transition…"

JB All these recent developments we've talked about — in bookselling, design, reviewing, awards, marketing, agenting, ownership and so on — are they having an impact on the kind of writing and reading being done in this country? Are these various contexts affecting Canadian literature in any ways general enough to be called trends?

DF I believe you would have to say that some of them are *supporting* certain trends, such as that of Canadian fiction writers especially to reach out beyond Canada's borders. This is guess-work on my part, but I would suggest that the foreign audience now reads Canadian literature for its urbanity or urbanness rather than for its reflection of mock-wilderness, as of old, in the great arc that stretched from the very beginnings to Grey Owl to Farley Mowat. An older generation of, for instance, Germans, may still read such fur-bearing stuff, but a different age group is now eagerly consuming Anne Michaels or Evelyn Lau, to take merely two names that pop into mind. They do so in search of shared sensibilities rather than some idealized vision of the frontier. Mind you, whenever I've received one of those dreaded calls from Foreign Affairs to ask if I'll have lunch with a visiting Estonian poet or Armenian playwright, the question the visitor is most likely to ask is, "Why do I see none of your aboriginal people on the streets when the streets themselves, and most of the towns and rivers, have aboriginal names?" (Answering this is a long process.) And also, as I've said often before, Canadian lit fares very well indeed as part of British and Commonwealth lit (perhaps the only field in which the Commonwealth might be said to have genuine tangible worth). Yet,

paradoxically, Canada thrives culturally within such a group because (in my crackpot theory of the universe) it is the only economically large nation whose literature has gone from the rural to the postmodern without (a few individual exceptions — mostly in Montreal — notwithstanding) passing through the age of urban industrialization. The movemen from the farmstead to the condo has been so quick and abrupt that we suffer a permanent nostalgia for the former, which is forever just beyond the reach of experience but never out of sense-memory. This is why W.O. Mitchell, for example, was a public personality in his day, or why Stuart McLean is one today. Faux-folk, I call it. Of course, this is also true outside of the Commonwealth context. Unlike Japanese literature of the late modern period, for example, there are few skyscrapers, streetcars and nightclubs in Canadian literature, only barnyards and, more recently, bistros.

JB That's a very interesting idea — and I think particularly interesting in the way you explain the general shifts you're seeing in Canadian literature as functions of its places and settings. That's an old tradition identified most prominently with the thematic critics of the late sixties and seventies — Canadian literature as the settler's response to a specific experience of a (vast, forbidding, baffling, alien, etc.) place and landscape. That tradition often encouraged us, I think, to see ourselves as a literature of rural and wilderness spaces. If we're becoming more urban, I think, as your comments imply, we're also becoming more cosmopolitan: the urban spaces in our literature aren't just Toronto, Montreal, Paris and London, as of old, but lots of other Canadian cities, as well as Prague, Bombay, Dar es Salaam, Port of Spain … the international list goes on and on as well. If our literature is becoming more cosmopolitan, presumably that has to do with three major factors: what writers are writing, what readers are reading, and what publishers are publishing. If I can ask a rather complicated question, in what ways do you see these three activities affecting or influencing each other to create the current climate of literary production and consumption? Who in this system is influencing whom, and how?

DF I honestly can't say who's influencing whom, but it's certainly clear to me that the development we've been describing is indeed a long equation of the sort you propose. However much they deny it, most writers work at what they hope they can get published, and most publishers publish what they believe they're most likely to sell — particularly when they can sell subrights in the US, the UK and elsewhere. At

least that's true for a growing number of houses. While I applaud this with one hand (yes, one hand clapping), I deplore it with the other, because this new cosmopolitanism has naturally enough led to a new parochialism as well. In the *National Post* the other day I was reading a piece by a reviewer who said he thought Canadian books that couldn't get published outside Canada were by their nature inferior. This seems to me a rather rapid return to the colonial mentality of old, for the logical extension of such thinking is, "How can stuff written here be of any value?" But I suppose the tension between internationalism of outlook and its opposite has always been one of the sources of fuel in Canadian writing — just like the tension between the rural and the urban. This is culture we're talking about, not cholesterol: it doesn't come in just two distinct varieties, the one called Good and the other Bad. The body of the nation produces both and they must always fight it out for the creative life, the energy, to continue.

JB Do you think our notion of what belongs in a Canadian canon has changed a lot over the past decade or so?

DF Yes. Partly because of larger forces at play, such as the rise of disciplines like gender studies, Native studies, postcolonial studies, and the subsuming of literature into cultural studies — and partly because of smaller forces — business decisions actually —such as the shrinking of the New Canadian Library. Some or all of these factors seem to have come together to give greater importance to genre at the expense of individual works (until now, the essence of the very notion of a canon). Are there canonical works in the field of Canadian life-writing, for instance? Or is Canadian life-writing merely one genre in a canon that's now made up of genres rather than specific, permanently fixed texts? To the extent that I have a view of what the canon is from where I sit, I seem to believe that it's being renewed, refreshed, certainly expanded. Surely that's no negative development in and of itself. Which doesn't mean that poor benighted students are going to be forced to cease suffering through Grove's "Over Prairie Trails." It means rather that they're likely to endure that pain in a different context than that in which their parents managed it. The core texts are like folk songs rather than pop songs. They survive underground and every so often they resurface. They're studied both above ground and below, at different times, by different people.

JB Are Canadians, by and large, adventurous readers or conservative readers?

DF: I believe that Canada, of all spots on earth, is probably the one about which it's hardest to answer such a question. Here's a place with a quarter fewer people than Burma; very rich indeed as societies are measured, but with the tradition of humanist education, with literature as its core, lying in tatters and disrepute; where Chinese is now edging out French as the second most widely spoken language; where the people who were born here read the English-language newspapers for people who were born here and those who weren't read other English-language ones entirely; and which has only three large cities — a francophone one, another that's the craziest experimental polyphonic conurbation since Shanghai between the wars, and a third that, if it were a style of music or cuisine, would be called Asian fusion. In this situation, somehow, and I sometimes marvel at just how, a few thousand sophisticated readers of literature manage to constitute an audience in an atmosphere further distinguished by regional animosities and the national disease of constitutional hypochondria. I find this a fascinating spectacle to observe and to participate in to the extent that my limited abilities permit. I'm also interested in, and repelled by, the low rank of the writer and scholar, and the general mockery made of Can lit by most of the media. If any other country had produced Atwood, Munro, Findley, Davies and Ondaatje in one generation, citizens of that nation would be permitted to use an Author, upper case, as a guarantor of passport applications, instead of having to get a chiropractor or gym teacher to vouch for their existence. I once wrote a poem with the lines, "If this is the forest / then we must be the animals."

JB We began by comparing the present state of publishing to the scene a generation or so ago. I wonder if we could end with some thoughts about the future — say the next ten or twenty years. What do you foresee for Canadian literature and Canadian publishing in that time? Given the general disrespect for literary endeavour that you've just mentioned, are we in danger of losing what we have?

DF Yes, I think the danger of losing all that we've gained with such love and labour is constant and very real. Such a fragile being, Can lit — for all its muscle tone. I worry about this a great deal but find it difficult to tell to what extent I'm witnessing simply the seasonal eclipse of one generation by the next — the natural order of things — and to what extent I'm watching the beginning of the new Dark Ages. Maybe I should have written, "If this is the new Dark Ages, / then we must be the monks." Listen to me. I sound like some old man in a brown cardigan, hanging

round the barber shop because he has nothing else to do but mutter among surviving friends. Pass me that copy of *Maclean's* there, will you fella, the one with Don Messer on the cover?

JB If you could wave a magic wand, is there anything you would like to change about the contexts and structures of Can lit production that would improve its chances of thriving for another generation or more?

DF Long ago I took a vow never to use my magic wand for evil but only for good. I think I would have to start with getting the provinces to mandate a certain amount of Can lit be taught in schools at all levels. Everything else — publishing, bookselling — must proceed from that, I should think. Mind you, getting the provinces to agree on much of anything is not God's way.

NOTE

[1] Alas, this part of the interview is now out of date. One of Fredericton's two independent bookstores, Kingfisher Books, closed its doors in April 2000; owners Eric Aubanel and Frances Giberson attributed their inability to remain in business to the opening of a Chapters store in Fredericton a year earlier.