

RAYANNE HAINES

IS CANLIT STILL CANLIT IF IT IS GENRE FICTION?

Books that question gender roles, identity and power structures reflect the Canadian experience

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I was offered two publishing contracts in 2016. One from a Canadian university press specializing in feminist literary work. The second, a four-book deal with a midsize American mass-market press specializing in romance.

After accepting both, I went about the task of learning how to market the two writing sides of myself. I spoke with everyone I could, questioned established authors and hired a branding consultant. In the end, my brand remained true to who I am—a feminist who writes poetry and romance.

If I could write both, weren't there readers who wanted both? I decided to acknowledge we are all complicated beasts and celebrate that in my writing. I constantly question my decision. I write poetry and urban fantasy (or is it paranormal romance?). But depending on whether I ask my editor, publisher or PR specialist, the brand changes.

Neil Gaiman, speaking at the 2018 Edmonton Public Library Forward Thinking Speaker Series, when asked what writers could do to be successful, replied: “Don't do what I've done. Pick a style and stick with it.” While clearly being facetious, as his multiple bestselling, yet vastly different books attest to his success, writers are told repeatedly to write to brand. Moreover, if they plan to write in multiple genres, they should do so under a pen name (as a marketing tool? or for clarity?). To be

clear, Gaiman, despite writing in varying genres and styles, has managed to remain part of the literary fiction establishment.

CANLIT AND DIVERSE GENRES

Historically, CanLit has been described as Canadian literature produced by Canadian writers (living anywhere in the world) that has a cultural impact on Canadians. Beyond this, there is no easily definable structure binding Canadian literature together. Increasingly, there are ongoing conversations drawn out of the vast diversity of people, lands, histories and stories in which we exist. What is often dismissed by the CanLit canon is genre fiction like romance, science fiction, crime fiction and graphic novels.

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What is the Canadian experience anymore? This question is rife with even more questions and speaks to the challenge of defining all aspects of diversity in Canadian literature. To help me better understand these layers, I spoke with three wall-breakers about genre fiction versus CanLit, and branding, diversity and why we do what we do.



PHOTO CREDIT: REBECCA LIPPIATT

S.G. Wong is a writer, editor, speaker and community organizer. She writes short stories and novels in the crime writing and speculative fiction genres and speaks about the craft of writing and editing and on the business of being an author. She's also a vocal advocate for diversity in CanLit and supporting writers of all genres.

When asked if she sees crossovers between what is considered literary fiction, CanLit and genre writing, Wong told me that "inherent in this question is a certain unspoken hierarchy about genres. Namely, that genre fiction is somehow lesser-than literary work. To my mind, such classifications have little to do with the quality of the work."

Wayne Arthurson is a First Nations author best known for his crime fiction, the Leo Desroches series. A journalist, freelance writer and the author of more than a dozen books, Arthurson was the 2016 Writer in Residence at the Edmonton Public Library. He says he doesn't see genres when looking at literary work. He focuses his attention on supporting local authors, whether they write literary, crime, poetry, and so on.

Arthurson sees the question around diversity in CanLit as one that is about more than the push to hear from writers from marginalized groups and includes the push for CanLit to open up to other genres.

When we talked about the need for more diversity in both CanLit and genre, he noted with interest what we understand as diversity. "Most of the big writers writing Indigenous crime fiction aren't Indigenous at all," he said.

Danielle Metcalfe-Chenail describes herself as an historian, author and researcher who specializes in telling hidden histories. She recently completed the second draft of a contemporary mainstream fiction novel and has an aviation children's book coming out this summer. She says she struggles with the publishing industry trying to put her in a box. "I realize as a white settler woman, if I have an idea, I have to decide what the most appropriate role is for me—as an editor to create space for other voices, as a co-author, or a sole author of a mainstream novel, writing people like me with secondary characters reflecting the diversity all around me," she said.

Metcalfe-Chenail says the advice to write to brand is great if you only want to write one thing, but she wants to explore all facets of writing to the best of her ability. She has always used her full name for her various aviation and history writings yet has considered using a pen name for branching out to mainstream fiction because the books may have more adult themes and may be too much of a disconnect from her other work. She stresses it would not be because she wants to stay anonymous, but to help gatekeepers from getting confused, and to help with the consistency of her branding.

Wong, too, is not a fan of pseudonyms. "I don't agree with the argument regarding multiple pen names for multiple genres, or really, with any argument that reduces the intelligence of my readers to such a degree," she said. "I'm certain that anyone who picks up a book with my name on it will also read the blurb about that book."

She added: "In terms of differentiating between the genres I publish in, that's what book covers are for. Covers signal the book's genre at a glance. Cover design is an art/science that all marketing departments (and self-published authors) are well-

attuned to, if not necessarily always successful at ... But as to Neil Gaiman's example, I think it's worth saying that he had the opportunity to build his career over many years, with the leeway to explore different genres and media."

All the authors I spoke with suggested the idea of being promoted as genre versus CanLit versus literary fiction is more about the marketing department versus what we're writing.

"Branding and marketing are distracting," Arthurson said. "The pressure on upcoming authors to brand or market

can take away from what you need to do, which is finish your book. Finish the book you want to write, not the book you think you should write. Readers are smarter than publishers give credit. They can and do like different stuff."

It's all about marketing. "Labels such as literary or science fiction, mystery, romance or young adult, are created by marketing departments and publishers as a way to sell books to prospective readers," Wong said. "They're shorthand to help readers efficiently search for something to read. That's really all that genre labels are—marketing tags."

After chatting with each of the authors, I come to the same conclusion. Marketing and branding aside, what is important is to not get hung up on genre. Write your story, write it well, share authentic, diverse space and ignore the temptation to write only one way. ■

Rayanne Haines is an award-winning fiction author and poet, co-host of the poetry podcast, Let's Get Lit and the executive director of the Edmonton Poetry Festival. In 2018, she was named a featured artist with the Edmonton Public Library. She's had work published in Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom.

WINNERS OF THE KEMOSA SCHOLARSHIP FOR FIRST NATIONS, MÉTIS AND INUIT MOTHERS WHO WRITE

The Writers' Guild of Alberta (WGA) and Dr. Nhung Tran-Davies are pleased to announce the winners of the 2nd Annual Kemosa Scholarship for First Nations, Métis and Inuit Mothers Who Write.

First established in 2017 by Tran-Davies in partnership with Tlicho Dene author Richard Van Camp, the Kemosa Scholarship offers an opportunity for First Nations, Métis and Inuit mothers to obtain resources to help them complete the work on their writing—whether that be a novel, a collection of stories, poems, or whatever form their writing might take.

This year, there were many entries for the Kemosa Scholarship, and it was a challenge for the judges to choose the winners from among them. After much thought and careful deliberation, here are this year's recipients along with some words from jury member Van Camp:

FIRST PLACE (\$3,000)—FALON CHRISTINE

"Incredible. WOW! So riveting. She is free!! This story will help so many readers. I'm humbled by the strength it took to write and share this. *Mahsi cho.*"

SECOND PLACE (\$1,500)—AMBER D. BOYD

"This writer is destined for greatness!"

THIRD PLACE (\$1,000)—SHELLEY WIART

"Completely compelling. Great poetry and prose. This writer is fearless!"

HONOURABLE MENTION (\$300)—ANGELA HALL

"Works of devotion and so sensual and loving. This writer is destined for greatness."

HONOURABLE MENTION (\$300)—KALI STEWART

"Bravo! Further proof that writing is soul medicine. A voice to cherish. Bravo!"

We would like to thank Jeananne Kirwin, Q.C., the Rotary Club of Spruce Grove and Laurel Deedrick-Mayne for their generous support in helping to give voice to Indigenous mothers and for sharing the vision of effecting positive changes through stories.

Thanks also to Van Camp and Dr. Jenny Kay Dupuis, a proud member of the Nipissing First Nation, for being this year's judges.

Last but not least, we wish to thank everyone who submitted their writing to this year's Kemosa Scholarship. Thank you for sharing your beautiful words and stories, and we hope that all of you will continue to write and to give voice to the stories and poems that you have to tell.

For more information, please contact the WGA at mail@writersguild.ab.ca.