

And the Journey Prize goes to... Expanding the Canadian Short Story Canon

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The short story is a popular literary genre in Canada with a long tradition, dating back to the first half of the 19th century. Val Ross remarks in a playful tone that one of the reasons this “short genre” is so widespread in Canada is the Canadian climate: the Canadians have learned to master the writing of “glimpses-as-fiction”; they only need to “poke their head out of the warm” to quickly form an impression of what they see and write it down with a “quick eloquence” (Ross 921). However, as Robert Weaver remarks, it was only after the 1960s that the Canadian short story really began to thrive. In the following two decades, the most distinguished Canadian short story authors emerged, such as Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, Mavis Gallant, Rudy Wiebe, Alistair MacLeod and Guy Vanderhaeghe (Weaver 1058-61).

Geoff Hancock points out that the Canadian short story became widespread especially in the 1980s and the 1990s, with the increased number of collections and anthologies being published, and the organization of numerous workshops, writing schools and literary competitions to encourage the writing of short stories (Hancock 1062). Ross argues that the reason why the short story is so strong in Canada is the support that the literary magazines publishing short fiction and “nurturing” new short story writers get from the Canadian Council (Ross 921). One such literary competition encouraging young emerging writers of short stories is the Journey Prize competition. The Journey Prize has been awarded since 1989, thanks to James A. Michener's donation of his royalties from his 1988 novel *Journey*. The winning story is selected from among the stories of the current volume of the anthology entitled *The Journey Prize Stories*, which is published yearly by McClelland & Stewart (McClelland).

This paper provides insight into the short stories which have won the Journey Prize award in the last few years. Particular interest is paid to the parallels that can be drawn among these stories as regards the narrative voice, themes, and narrative techniques used, in order to define if and in what way these stories fit into and expand the Canadian short story canon and in order to discover whether there exists a “recipe” for writing a winning Journey Prize story. I have examined the following winning Journey Prize stories: the 2003 story “My Husband’s Jump” (by Jessica Grant), the 2005 story “Matchbook for a Mother’s Hair” (by Matt Shaw), the 2006 story “BriannaSusannaAlana” (by Heather Birrell), the 2007 story “Ozy” (by Graig Boyko) and the 2008 story “My Three Girls” (by Saleema Nawaz). The 2004 winning story is not included in my research because at the time of my research the 2004 volume was unavailable in Slovenia as well as in the Austrian libraries from which I borrowed the other volumes.

In analysing the five winning Journey Prize stories, I have found that parallels can be drawn particularly between the three stories written by women, on the one hand, and the two stories by male authors, on the other, especially as regards the narrative voice and the themes. In terms of narrative techniques, I have found that no such grouping can be made; therefore this will be discussed separately.

Let us first look at the three stories written by women to define their similarities. “My Husband’s Jump”, “BriannaSusannaAlana” and “My Three Girls” can be roughly classified as women’s writing, in that they feature predominately women characters (the rare male

characters only have minor roles in the stories), and that they are written from a female point of view, presenting a female perspective on life as well as exploring women's world and women's reality. In the stories, emotions, feelings and thoughts are present to a greater extent than mere actions. The narratives tend to explore the inner life of the protagonists. Both "My Husband's Jump" and "My Three Girls" are also told by a female first person narrator, while "BriannaSusannaAlana" has a detached omniscient narrator.

As regards the themes, the three stories cover predominately themes which are more characteristic of the women's world, such as mother-daughter and male-female relationships, sisterhood and motherhood. "My Husband's Jump" highlights a male-female relationship. It is a story about a woman whose husband, an Olympic ski jumper, mysteriously disappears while taking a jump at the Olympic Games. Along with wonder, which is succeeded by grief, the narrator is faced with other people's implication that her husband's disappearance is due to his dissatisfaction with their marriage. To be able to reject such accusations, she starts looking for proof of his affection in the memories of their past life. We are let into the woman's inner life, where she has to deal with confused emotions, the feeling of loss, loneliness, and disappointment in order to be able to continue living without a logical explanation of what has happened to her husband. Finally, she turns to God, which seems to be her last hope, and indeed this brings her comfort, only to learn that the so called believers do not believe that her husband's disappearance could be one of God's miracles. Unfortunately she is left alone to face the mystery of life and death.

"BriannaSusannaAlana" deals with sisterhood and girls growing up, with special emphasis on their precocity. The story portrays three sisters, Brianna, Susanna and Alana, who have an ordinary sisterly relationship. The younger two, Brianna and Susanna, are still children, but already have to face potential dangers of growing up as girls. The oldest, Alana, is very protective of her two siblings, although the responsibility for the younger sisters sometimes becomes a burden for her, since she has become interested in boys and has just had her first sexual experience. However, when the middle sister is about to get into serious trouble, Alana is there to save her. The story's plot is more dynamic in comparison with the other two stories. The narrative actually evolves around a murder which has happened in the girls' neighbourhood. A few days after the murder, the three sisters try to recall what they were doing on the day of the murder. Thus, we get a recollection of their activities from an omniscient narrator, yet their feelings, emotions and reflections seem much more important than the actions described in the story.

"My Three Girls" is a story dealing with several women's topics, such as a mother-daughter relationship, a relationship between two sisters and motherhood. The narrator as an adult daughter fails to establish a satisfying relation with her mother, who is distant and cold, undoubtedly because of the loss of her baby daughter. The reader gets the impression that he or she has been let into the narrator's inner life, her mind and her rather obese body. Her obesity seems to be a means of protecting the people she loves from harm, because she feels that since her baby sister's death, the whole family has been stricken by calamity and that pure happiness is denied to the family members. This belief is intensified by her mother, who is always predicting misfortune and always expects the worst to happen. The narrator, who later in life is strongly affected also by her other sister's illness and premature death, and her father's sudden death, would like to keep everybody safe inside her body, just as she was able to protect her baby girl before she was born. The fact that the narrator also takes care of her sister's baby after the sister's premature death, breastfeeding it as if it were hers, shows a very affectionate relationship between the two sisters. The story also features minor women's topics such as pregnancy, babies, breastfeeding, and breast cancer.

Several parallels can also be drawn between the two narratives written by men, "Matchbook for a Mother's Hair" and "Ozy". Both stories have a male first person narrator.

Ozy is a 43-year old man remembering his boyhood, while “Matchbook for a Mother’s Hair” is told by a mentally disabled teenager, Gordon, which means that the reader does not get an ordinary teenager’s perspective. Both narratives describe the outside world much more accurately than the stories written by women. We get accurate descriptions of the surroundings, the events, and the actions. Dialogue is more frequent than in the women’s stories, and reported speech appears more often. The protagonists of the two narratives do not dwell much on their feelings and emotions; however, Ozy does mention the disappointment he felt as a child when he found out that the video game scores would not last forever. Gordon from “Matchbook for a Mother’s Hair” has a limited ability to understand and express his emotions, so we only learn about what makes him comfortable and uncomfortable and what he likes and does not like.

The topics of these stories are male oriented, particularly in “Ozy”, where the narrator (Ozy was his nickname when he was a child) is remembering his boyhood and the video games that used to mean everything to him and his mates when they were children. He lets us into the world of nicknames, boy fighting, competing for scores and dropping out of school. “Matchbook for a Mother’s Hair” also deals with growing up, yet a different kind of growing up, since Gordon is not an ordinary teenage boy, and his first sexual experience is not consciously sought but is abuse by one of his mother’s friends. Gordon’s story is of a developmentally disabled person abused by “normal” adults of the opposite sex rather than a story of a teenager growing up. His mother abuses him by the way she treats him, by pulling out his hair and burning it in front of his nose if he talks when he is not supposed to during a game of cards his mother plays with her friends every day, or if he is quiet when he is supposed to talk. His mother’s friends, who meet at his mother’s place every day, take advantage of his mental disability and abuse him sexually when he walks them home. Gordon’s story is a cry for help by someone who does not understand exactly why what is happening to him is wrong, but he feels that it is wrong.

Despite the fact that I have classified the stories either as women’s writing or men’s writing, they have some common characteristics. All the stories are realistic, dealing with everyday life (with the exception of the mysterious disappearance of the ski jumper), such as family life (“My Three Girls”, “BriannaSussanaAlana”), growing up (“BriannaSusannaAlana”, “Ozy”, “Matchbook for a Mother’s Hair”) and everyday events. Thus it can be argued that these narratives in a way continue the realistic tradition of the Canadian short story. In her survey of the Canadian short story, Michelle Gadpaille theorizes that since the 1960s, this genre has had the tendency to “go beyond” the postmodernist deconstruction to become created “out of everyday life” and to represent “a force of exploration, understanding, and healing” (Gadpaille viii). Besides talking about everyday life, most of the stories discussed indeed offer an insight into the human condition and carry a deeper message, such as the reflection on mortality in “Ozy”, a cry for help by an abused mentally disabled teenage boy in “Matchbook for a Mother’s Hair”, or the question of faith in “My Husband’s Jump”.

Aritha Van Herk also argues that contemporary Canadian short stories show “a yearning for the canonical 1950s, for “realism’s contemplative satisfaction”. According to her, the Canadian short story still seems to be “measuring itself into a Munroesque costume”, and the authors considered as masters of the genre are being “contiguously realistic”, paying a kind of “imitativehomage” to Alice Munro and Mavis Gallant combined with “revisionist determination” and “modernist transfusions” (Van Herk 925). As Michelle Gadpaille points out, the dominance of women authors, such as Gallant, Munro and Margaret Atwood in the Canadian short fiction in the last few decades is seen in the stories’ turning “inward, towards the body, the emotions”, and the mind (Gadpaille vii). The turning inward and the emphasis on emotions and feelings is indeed strongly present in “My Three Girls” and “My Husband’s

Jump”, and the three stories written by women seem to place a strong emphasis on the female experience. “My Three Girls” is, however, the story which can be most easily associated with the writing of the great Canadian short story writer Alice Munro¹.

The winning Journey Prize stories discussed can all be placed in the realistic tradition of the Canadian literary genre, some with the emphasis on “female experience”; however, they use quite different narrative techniques. We can argue that the stories written by women authors have weak plots, and only “My Husband’s Jump” has a linear narrative structure – a woman relating the story of her husband’s disappearance. “My Three Girls” is told in flashes, similar to snapshots of certain moments in life, of certain past events, and it is easy to become disorientated in time. The story begins with an old photograph which takes the narrator back into the past. The evoking of the past by using a photograph and the flashbacks are indeed reminiscent of Munro’s style as defined by Michelle Gadpaille (Gadpaille, 58-61).

“BriannaSusannaAlana” is not linear either but uses a chain technique. The narrative has an introduction, which is followed by the respective stories of the three sisters, also told by an omniscient narrator, which intertwine throughout the narrative. One sister’s story stops at a certain moment in time and another sister’s story begins. When the latter stops, the third sister’s story begins. At the conclusion of the third story, the first sister’s story continues, and so on. And so the narrative continues up to the moment when the three sisters meet again. “Matchbook for a Mother’s Hair” and “Ozy” both have linear structure, although “Ozy” is told from a retrospective point of view, talking about boyhood from the standpoint of an adult man. Gordon’s description of sexual intercourse with his mother’s friends in “Matchbook for a Mother’s Hair” deserves special attention, because it is reminiscent of stream of consciousness:

/.../ she pulled the seats back and climbed on top and it was noisy the sounds of saws and wood the sound of pain and work and effort and the vice clamps closed and it was noisy and she moaned and I screamed and it was nothing new but it was and she said move why aren’t you moving so I moved a little (Matt 80).

The combination of the realist tradition with the modernist and postmodernist narrative strategies has also been a characteristic of the Canadian short story since the 1960s (Gadpaille 99). Some of the stories discussed use modern narrative techniques; none of them, however, can be classified as postmodern.

One last question remains to be answered: is there a “recipe” for writing a winning Journey Prize story? This is difficult to answer after analysing only a few winning stories. However, in the introduction to the 2005 volume, the editors (James Grainger and Nancy Lee) do reveal their criteria for a well written short story. According to them, the story should offer “an insight into the human condition” and portray in an accurate and honest way “a specific dilemma and its outcome” (Grainger x). Furthermore, the authors should “honour emotional and psychological realism”, meaning that the characters they portray should be as complex as real people. The writers should pay attention to their process of writing, and the narrative needs to make sense in such a way that it possesses an adequate degree of “sequentiality, logic, maturity and insight” (Grainger xi). The stories need to contain a conflict, so that the “drama” can move forward. The use of dialogue in the narrative can offer rich possibilities to reveal the characters and the story (Grainger xii). Portraying children with their natural curiosity and playfulness offers a good example of “human psychology in action” (Grainger xiii). Last but not least, the writers should not tell what a character is feeling or how grave the situation is, but rather show it (Grainger xiv). These are rather conservative concepts, quite

¹ For more information on Alice Munro's work see Gadpaille 57-81.

alike the prescriptions for the well-made story in the American realist tradition. Harry Hansen, the editor of the *First Prize Stories*, which is an American anthology of the O. Henry Award stories from 1919 to 1960, mentions in his introduction similar criteria the judges used for the selection of the stories, such as originality, excellent characterisation, skilfully organized plot and powerful emotions (Alley 36).

And do the five stories discussed observe the criteria of the 2005 volume? They certainly offer an accurate and honest portrayal of the characters' dilemmas and depict the characters realistically and in a complex way, as if they were real human beings. The stories all make sense; in other words, they are plausible. They all give an impression of moving forward instead of being static. Smith even characterises "My Three Girls" as a "tightly written piece" which manages "to condense a novel's worth of sorrows and joys into a few pages" (Smith xxvii). The dialogue is particularly rich in "Ozy" and "Matchbook", but is also vivid in other narratives to reveal something about the characters or the story itself. Children are portrayed in "Ozy" and in "BriannaSusannaAlana"; Gordon from "Matchbook for a Mother's Hair" cannot really be considered a child, although he is a teenager. All the stories can also be said to reveal the characters and situations through the characters' actions, thoughts and feelings, more than through the authors' direct words.

We have seen that the five winning Journey Prize short stories do continue the realistic tradition of the Canadian short story, dealing with everyday life in a realistic way. In addition, one of them is particularly reminiscent of Alice Munro's writing. However, they are unique either in the way they deal with everyday themes, in the choice of narrative technique, or in the combination of both. Aritha Van Herk claims that the best contemporary Canadian short stories are those which acknowledge "the edgy inconsistency of their time and place" and are aware that time is not "linear" or "focal", but "artful" and "disguised", which also distinguishes them from the "traditional" or the "imitatively modernist" short stories (Van Herk 925). According to this criterion, the five stories can be placed among the best contemporary Canadian short stories because they seem timeless and are not connected to any particular country or continent. Michelle Gadpaille wrote in her survey on the Canadian short story published in 1988 that at the end of 1980s, the genre was far from being in a "unified state", but rather in a "forward movement" (Gadpaille 118). The same can be said of it today.

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Povzetek

Kratka zgodba je priljubljena literarna zvrst v Kanadi. Njeni začetki segajo v prvo polovico 19. stoletja. Danes k njeni razširjenosti pripomorejo številne literarne revije in natečajji, ki spodbujajo mlade obetajoče pisatelje. Eden takšnih natečajev je natečaj za nagrado Journey Prize, ki jo podeljujejo od leta 1989. Založniška hiša McClelland & Stewart vsako leto izda antologijo kratkih zgodb *Journey Prize Stories*, med katerimi je najboljša nagrajena. Članek ponuja vpogled v kratke zgodbe, ki so prejele to nagrado v letih 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007 in 2008. Posebna pozornost je namenjena podobnostim med njimi in vprašanju, na kakšen način zgodbe sledijo tradiciji te zvrsti v Kanadi oziroma jo presegajo. Odgovoriti želimo tudi na vprašanje, ali obstaja »recept« za pisanje zmagovalne kratke zgodbe.

Z raziskavo ugotovimo, da najdemo podobnosti predvsem med tremi kratkimi zgodbami, katerih avtorice so ženske, in med zgodbama, ki sta ju napisala moška. Ženske avtorice opisujejo žensko izkušnjo in ženski pogled na svet ter obravnavajo teme, značilne za žensko literaturo. Njihova težnja po ponotranjenju in poudarek na čustvih, občutkih in razmišljanju – kar je še posebej vidno v eni od zgodb – kaže na podobnost z deli velikih avtoric kanadske kratke zgodbe Mavis Gallant, Alice Munro in Margaret Atwood. Zgodbi, ki sta ju napisala moška, imata moška pripovedovalca in obravnavata teme, značilnejše za moški svet; poudarek je na zunanjem dogajanju in ne na čustvih in občutkih. Ne glede na takšno razdelitev pa lahko zgodbe označimo za realistične, saj govorijo o vsakdanjem življenju in tako nadaljujejo tradicijo realistične kanadske kratke zgodbe. Različni pristopi k obravnavanim temam in različne pripovedne tehnike, v katerih so zgodbe napisane, pa vendar kažejo na njihovo inovativnost in svežino ter potrjujejo dejstvo, da se ta literarna zvrst nenehno razvija.