

A Question of National Will



In February of this year, the Ontario Ministry of Education announced a commitment of \$80 million over four years to improve the collections of elementary school libraries across the province. Soon after the announcement, I accompanied a group of Canadian publishers to meet with ministry officials to discuss the importance of making sure that the money would be used to buy Canadian books. The ministry officials told us they were hearing the same message from all quarters – librarians, educators, and others – and that they were surprised by it. Weren't most of the books now in Ontario schools Canadian books? No, actually.

In British Columbia, the Ministry of Education has recently mandated that every high school English curriculum must include at least one Canadian novel. Again, many parents were surprised. Weren't their kids already required to read Canadian novels for their English classes? Again, no, not necessarily.

These recent developments in two provinces demonstrate a substantial gap between what people think Canadian children encounter in schools and what is actually available to them. Why does this gap exist? And how can it be eliminated?

There is no shortage of excellent Canadian books for children of all ages, in all categories. Over the past 30 years Canadian authors and illustrators have produced an outstanding body of children's literature, and children's publishing has been one of the great success stories of Canadian culture. But many of them will not find markets outside Canada; for some books, their greatest asset is that they are written expressly for Canadian readers. That limits their potential for large sales, which in turn limits the scope for large-scale promotional campaigns, and thereby limits their ability to compete in the retail market, and also, in the market arena where children encounter books most often – in school.

Canadians have always understood the economies of scale. Our small population spread across our big geography makes our country a difficult market to serve for all kinds of products. American goods produced on a much larger scale can support much more comprehensive promotion and marketing. Kids are reading a lot of American books for the same reason they watch mostly American TV, see mostly American movies, and play mostly American video games. It's because those are what is most readily available and, above all, what are most heavily promoted. American books, and to a lesser extent UK books, are the books most thoroughly marketed to children and to school librarians, teachers and board staff through wholesalers, book fairs, reviewing media and other promotional activities and through retail bookstores.

One response to that imbalance for Canadian producers of books and other cultural products is to compete with American producers in the US market, and thereby enjoy the same economies of scale. For many books, that is a highly viable option: American children are as delighted by Franklin the Turtle, as moved

by *Hana's Suitcase*, as Canadians are. But books that are specifically about Canada – whether it's the history of our flag or a novel about life on a Saskatchewan reserve – will always be of greater interest to Canadians; they simply do not have the same export market potential as books that are less rooted in place.

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And yet those books that are rooted in place, whether by subject matter, voice or perspective, are hugely important for our kids to read. As publishers, we believe that children should be exposed to the wide world, to the rich diversity of literatures and points of view that can be uniquely experienced through books from many different countries. (It's for that reason that Canadian book publishers have never sought to have tariffs imposed or other barriers created to impede the free flow of book importation from the US, the UK or anywhere else.) But children need, above all, to encounter their own realities and see their own faces in the books they read. They need to hear Canadian stories, told in Canadian voices, to learn the history and culture of their own country, and to understand the issues that shape their own communities. That need is not reflected in the educational marketplace.

Perhaps the concept of schools as marketplace is at the heart of the issue. Publishing is, after all, a business, and schools are our customers, either directly or through the wholesalers who sell our books to schools and boards of education. But schools are not customers in the sense of a consumer or other entity who can freely source what they want to buy

wherever they want. Schools are public property and are governed by policies and regulations designed to ensure public accountability in areas that sometimes conflict. This is true of all government entities, who balance needs such as public safety or the protection of local jobs with the need to stretch taxpayers' dollars.

Many Canadians (most, I think) believe that the past 15 years have seen governments lose that balance and sacrifice far too much quality of education in return for reduced costs. Canadian publishers have seen that most starkly in the collapse of school book budgets and the concomitant elimination of teacher-librarians from many, many schools. It is time for the interests of education – of children, and of the society that depends on schools to develop future leaders, foster good citizenship, promote tolerance and anchor strong, stable communities – to climb back to the top of the public policy priority list. And one of the fundamentals of quality Canadian education is reading skills – skills that are best supported by Canadian books that reflect the lives of the readers.

Both the provincial initiatives mentioned above are steps in this direction. The BC initiative declares the need for students to encounter the literature of their own country, albeit to a very modest degree. The Ontario initiative promotes reading in general, and backs it up with a significant financial investment, but makes no firm commitment to Canadian books. That would be an excellent next step because, without it, the \$80 million investment will not generate its full potential return in social capital. There is much more that government can do to make sure that Canadian children are reading Canadian books. Consider Ireland: a small, English-speaking population, next door to a very large English-speaking country with huge publishers that inundate Ireland with books. It's a very familiar scenario to Canadians. But the government of Ireland has mandated that schools must use Irish books in the classroom and today more than 90% of textbooks in Irish schools are written by Irish authors. In the words of

Tony Farmar, an Irish publisher who presented this information to a gathering of book industry professionals in Toronto last June, “It's just a question of national will.”

We can find other examples in other industries closer to home. Does this story sound familiar? A small-market country, swamped with recorded music from its much larger neighbour, passed a law 40 years ago requiring all radio stations to devote a substantial portion of air time to music that was written, performed or produced by its own citizens. Within 10 years, the country had developed a stable and prosperous music industry of its own, and its own musicians were becoming international stars.

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In Canada, broadcast regulations are a federal responsibility, so a federal government with a particular vision was able to establish the Canadian content regulations that opened our airways to our own musical creators and producers. For books, however, the most likely equivalent channel would be school classrooms and libraries, and education is in the hands, not of one government in Ottawa, but of 13 provincial and territorial governments. The Ontario and BC programs are examples of two very different kinds of

initiatives, each positive in its way, but neither one is the kind of transformative instrument of cultural development represented by the Cancon radio rules established in the 1960s.

In September, New Brunswick announced a program of its own, intended to achieve such a transformation for its own literature. Citing both the cultural and economic importance of the book sector, the provincial minister of culture presented the program's six objectives of promoting reading across the entire population, and New Brunswick books specifically. A three-year action plan will address those objectives. Along with Quebec, which has for many years had a policy of promoting its own books and reading in general, New Brunswick is showing Canada how it can be done.

With these models before us, it's time for Ottawa to assume its crucial role. A committed federal government can establish a climate in which reading is promoted and the intrinsic importance to Canadian children of Canadian books is recognized and valued. It can partner with provincial ministries of culture and education to support programs that foster literacy at all ages – that introduce young families to libraries, that make sure Canadian books are front and centre in schools and public libraries. There is a wealth of models from other countries – Mexico, the Netherlands, Brazil – and now within our own borders, in New Brunswick and Quebec – to inspire our federal lawmakers in developing a national commitment to reading and to Canadian books.

It's just a question of national will.

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