

THE FUTURE OF FICTION: FROM HISTORICAL TO DIGITAL
The Hugh MacLennan Memorial Lecture 2011

Kate Pullinger

Today I'm going to talk about the Future of Fiction; in fact the title of this lecture is derived from a lecture given by Hugh MacLennan in 1959 to mark the Golden Jubilee of the University of Saskatchewan: 'The Future of the Novel as an Art Form'. But I'll begin by talking a bit about the past - my own past. Bear with me.

I've been writing stories since I first learned to hold a pencil; I began publishing short stories and novels in the late 1980s, when I was in my mid-twenties. Just as it is a literary prize that has redefined my writing life over the past eighteen months, it was a literary prize that enabled me to get started in the first place. In 1986 my story 'The Micro-Political Party' won a magazine short story competition. This prize brought my work to the attention of an editor who wrote to me to ask if I would be interested in publishing a book of short stories. That letter arrived on Christmas Eve.

It is a cliché that in the life of a writer nothing can beat that first contract for that first book; like many clichés, this is true, although winning the GG, and being invited to give this lecture, have been completely thrilling as well.

But let's begin by talking about failure - failure is always so much more interesting than success. I grew up in BC. We lived in a small snowy town in the Rocky Mountains until I was ten; then we moved to the rainy west coast, to Vancouver Island and a semi-rural suburban community on the sea outside Victoria. I was the last child of parents who were in their forties when I was born; my three siblings were between ten and sixteen years older than me and had all left home by the time I was seven. I had a happy bookish solitary childhood and began to write at a young age; writing was the only academic

and creative activity that really interested me. Like many teenagers I felt I was living the wrong life at the wrong time in the wrong place; my cultural life consisted of watching 'Saturday Night Live', and reading and re-reading F. Scott Fitzgerald's 'The Great Gatsby'. Music was my other primary interest. I didn't find out about punk until it was already over, but the Sex Pistols, the Clash, Magazine, Joy Division and their godfather, David Bowie, sustained me. I consumed months old copies of the NME and it was this passion for British music that led me to conceive of the idea that the place I really belonged was London, England. When I was sixteen I wrote a novella about a girl who runs away from the back of beyond to live in London to go to gigs and become a writer.

At seventeen I finished high school and was accepted on a generous scholarship to McGill University. If London was 6000 miles from Victoria, Montreal was nearly half-way. I had great expectations of university life; like many people my age these expectations had been somewhat inflated by watching 'Brideshead Revisited' on TV. However - this will annoy the McGill people in the audience - what I found both disappointed and challenged me. In 1979 McGill was an Anglophone university in a Francophone city; the 1970s were not an happy time in the city and political ill-will meant the university had been starved of funding for a number of years and was somewhat moribund. Professors were often ancient and detached; much of the teaching was done by inexperienced teaching assistants. The English department in which I was enrolled seemed to offer nothing of interest to me (there was no sign of Hugh MacLennan, for one thing). One of my professors conducted seminars with his cowboy boots up on his desk, surrounded by copies of fishing and hunting magazines; he liked to go on about how Hemingway was a real man while Scott Fitzgerald was not. This offended me mightily. Remember - I was seventeen.

I transferred to the Philosophy Dept but was soon out of my depth; I read Kierkegaard aloud to my friend Sara, but that didn't mean either of us understood it. In my small high school off the Metchosin Road I was one of the brightest kids in class; at McGill I was yet another monolingual cretin from the unformed west. So I began to pursue non-academic interests, including alcohol, drugs, and parties. At the end of the first year I lost my prestigious scholarship; half-way through the second year, I dropped out completely.

During my non-illustrious stint at McGill I did, however, take two classes that had a profound effect on my subsequent writing life: I studied Latin for one semester, having never studied it before, and this both fuelled and supported my love of words and language, and I took a course on Canadian Literature. In this course I read Hugh MacLennan, Mordecai Richler, Robertson Davies, Mavis Gallant, and Leonard Cohen, all writers who had felt it necessary to live outside of Canada during critical periods of their writing lives for both economic and cultural reasons. A younger generation of writers, including Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro, were busy proving this was no longer true, and the world of Canadian literature is now such a well-established international powerhouse that it seems extraordinary to think that, in the past, for a writer to succeed in Canada they had first to succeed elsewhere.

However, the idea that a writer needed to abandon the country in order to find their true voice confirmed my own growing conviction that it would do me good to leave.

In a way, Montreal was my first step away from the Canada I'd grown up in. While my experience of university didn't live up to my expectations - or perhaps - it's taken me thirty years to figure this one out - I didn't live up to the university's expectations of me - Montreal itself did, absolutely. As you know, Montreal has a very distinct and original character as a city: it's got the

shabby-chic thing down pat, along with a nonchalant glamour and complexity. The most interesting cities are the cities with secrets, and Montreal has plenty. Coming here was my first step towards making life difficult for myself – which is something I’ve always done, the thing that I’ve concluded is where my energy for writing comes from. I’m only happy – I’m talking creative happiness, not personal happiness, though they are often one and the same – if I’m slightly the wrong person in slightly the wrong place at slightly the wrong time – a moment too early or, indeed, a moment too late.

In fact, you could argue that it is this very thing that has become the primary subject of my writing life, as well as my main *modus operandi*.

Here’s an extract from one of my first published short stories, a story I wrote in my early twenties, called, of course, ‘In Montreal’:

In Montreal Christine was foreign for the first time. She had never been outside the enormous and empty western province in which she had grown up. In fact, she had hardly been away from the small, mountain town where her family lived. To Christine, Montreal seemed as romantic and distant as Paris. Ever since she was a small girl and had seen Quebec on the television, watched those gritty politicians with their gravelly voices and thick accents, she had wanted to go and live there. So, when she was seventeen she packed her bags and, with the money she had made car-hopping in the summer at the Drive-in Restaurant, she boarded an aeroplane and began her adult life.

In Montreal Christine could not speak the language. When she arrived in the terminal and asked for directions to the city in her high school French, she knew immediately that she was out of her depth. The woman at the information desk replied to her in English. But that did not stop Christine. She was brave, determined and stubborn, as only seventeen-year-old girls can be.

Christine knew exactly what she was going to do with her new life in Montreal. She had told her parents she was going to get a job, save some money and then go to university, but she had no intention of doing anything as mundane as that. Christine was going to speak French, dress in black, smoke Gauloises, live by herself, and, best of all, become a lapsed Catholic. In the small town where she had grown up most people were either Presbyterians or members of the United Church, a distinctly Canadian mixture of protestant religions that resembled a sort of extremely low Anglican. Christine was bored with that now. She wanted a religion with some dignity and mystery so that when she rejected

it, as she knew she would, she'd have the pleasure of rejecting something particularly rich.

Within a week of her arrival Christine had a job wiping tables and clearing dishes in a cafe in the bottom of Les Terraces, a shopping complex on St Catherine Street in downtown Montreal. It was one of those totally plastic little places that Montreal enterprise is so bad at, a sub-American kind of dive, decorated in orange and lime-green with mushroom-like tables sprouting out of the concrete floor and dingy mirrors on the walls. Les Terraces, like much of downtown Montreal, is indoors and underground. At Le Hamburger the ventilation worked against the heating and the result was a very hot hamburger bar with grease hanging in the air. But, to Christine, the most extraordinary thing about Le Hamburger was that, despite all appearances, everything about it was absolutely Quebecois. 'Un hamburger, s'il vous plait.'

Along with the job, which paid much less than the legal minimum wage, a fact she didn't have enough French to complain about, Christine found somewhere to live. From an advert in the window of a small corner tabac she rented a one-room apartment at the top of four flights of stairs down by the river in East Montreal. The windows were cracked and the small radiator hissed and sighed while it pumped out heat. The hot-plate in the corner was coated with grime, and the mattress was lumpy. The obligatory bare lightbulb hung from the ceiling in the middle of the room. Christine loved it, of course. It was all hers.

Montreal was all hers as well - Christine felt this as she strolled along the city's streets. The churches, the parks, the cafes, the bar-restaurants that stay open all night, even the taverns on the corners that still did not allow women through their doors; in those first months she often felt like embracing it all. But Montreal was much slower to accept Christine. More often than not when she greeted its inhabitants with her very bad but enthusiastic French she would be answered in English or not at all. The Canadian Language War was at its height and Christine frequently became an unwitting casualty of the hostilities. But youth, determination, and zeal protected her as she calmly got on with her life.

And now I'm going to read you a few paragraphs that mark another arrival, this time for Sally Naldrett, the lady's maid at the heart of the story of 'The Mistress of Nothing', my most recent book.

The bump, when ship nudged dock, gave me a quick shock, a spark of life: at last, Egypt. I turned to my mistress who was beside me at the rail, looking out at the city smeary with smoke and heat, and said, 'We are here.'

She smiled. 'They say that Alexandria isn't really Egypt at all.'

'No, my Lady?' I said, and though I knew this already, I still felt disappointed.

'An in-between place, Mediterranean, African, and European, full of phantom monuments that have long since disappeared.'

I looked at my Lady, unsure of what she was saying, the tone of her voice harsher than I was expecting. On the journey she had seemed as excited as me to be travelling to a place of such antiquity. I was reminded once more of all she had left behind. No doubt arriving at our destination had reminded her as well.

'But you are right, Sally,' she said, turning toward me and laying her hand on mine, as though to reassure me, 'we are here. Egypt.'

Our first journey through the city horrified us both; nothing we had seen in the Cape last year had prepared us for this. Filth. Wretched little children begging for money every time the carriage came close to stopping, which was frequently given the terrible congestion in the narrow streets. One child came too close as the carriage moved forward – I saw a man pull him back off the road to the safety of a doorway where he began to beat him with a slipper he'd removed from his foot for that very purpose. The language ran past our ears, slippery, unmanageable, full of unfamiliar shapes and growls and wheezes. "I'll never learn a single word!" I said and, as the carriage jerked forward yet again, I saw my Lady go pale as though the precious health she'd regained during our sea voyage had left her body and flown out the window, up into the hard blue-white sky.

Two people, out of time, out of step, out of place. When writing this essay I was quite startled to find this marked symmetry between the story I wrote more than twenty years ago, and my most recent novel – two characters happily sending themselves into exile. Thankfully, the more recent writing is better – a little smoother, a little more sure of itself. But what both extracts also remind me of is my own completely inability to learn another language – French in the case of Montreal, and Arabic in the case of the six months of one-to-one lessons I had while I was writing my novel.

In his lecture 'The Future of the Novel as an Art Form' Hugh MacLennan deconstructs the notion of literary criticism by saying all opinion is subjective: 'In talking about the novel I am like any other writer: I cannot be superior to my own tastes, experience and problems.' He goes on to discuss what makes

the novel distinct among art forms; he says a novel is 'a communication in story form' and that its chief value 'lies in its capacity to entertain, and in its characters'. He says that a good novel consists of 'a continuing rain of accurate detail', and that the novel's 'subtlety' comes from a combination of 'this rain of detail' and the novel's 'roominess' – the novel's length. 'A satisfying novel must also hold all of its characters, all of its descriptions, dialogues, ideas, arguments, scenes and actions, within a whole which is harmonious, within a whole where the surprises are seen in retrospect to have been inevitable. And in the supremely satisfying novels, as in all good words of art, there is finally a mystery.'

As I said earlier, the most interesting cities are the cities with secrets – enigmas and mysteries; the most interesting novels are the novels with mysteries.

But, MacLennan continues, 'Now I must change the key. The novel, which has bestrode the literary field for more than a century, which has ruled almost without a rival, is now in jeopardy.'

Hmm. To the writers, publishers and booksellers in the audience tonight, MacLennan's words will sound, well, rather familiar. The book is in jeopardy. At least, we hear this said often enough that it must be true. For MacLennan, in 1959, the threats to the continuing viability of the novel as an art form were as follows: the rise of the cheap mass-market paperback on the one hand, but, more importantly for MacLennan, the rise of non-fiction. He says, 'Biographies of real people used to be as dull as obituaries; now they are fascinating. Accounts of historical and current events used to be handled in the prose of scholars and reporters: now they are handled with consummate art and a wealth of artifice.' He continues, 'For all I know, this really is the age of non-fiction'. MacLennan cites Rachel Carson's 'The Sea Around Us'

and says the real reason it, and other words of nonfiction like it, have 'become best sellers is that they are entertaining.'

MacLennan then goes on to cite another enemy of the modern novel which was, of course, in 1959, television. However, interestingly, MacLennan did not feel that television posed a serious threat to reading because, in his view, television content was too beholden to commercial sponsors and thus, as he says, 'most of its fare is, and must be kept... free and harmless... It can not permit too much truth to come out in its plays and stories.' In other words, the risks of offending the sponsors are too great for television to be allowed to broadcast real stories, the types of stories that are the territory of the novelist, stories full of 'the continuing rain of detail', stories remarkable for their truth. So for MacLennan television posed no serious threat to his art form; for him, the only real threat posed by television is the claim that it makes on our time.

Scot forward fifty years to 2011. If we look at the popular cultural forms that occupy our time today - forms that require a real investment of time to be properly enjoyed - the novel remains a serious contender for first place. When we think of how fragmented our 'entertainment' time has become since 1959, and how many different media platforms compete for attention in our lives, from tv to smartphones to the internet, you might claim it is remarkable that the novel has survived as well as it has done. After all, the fundamental thing that a novel requires from its reader, above and beyond the ability to read, is a large investment of time.

However, in 2011 there are other media types that require a similar investment of time: computer games - for example, a game like 'Assassins Creed', a sophisticated political allegory set in a remarkably real simulacrum of Renaissance Italy, complete with appearances from Machiavelli - can take many hours to complete, just like reading a novel, requiring a similar level of concentration. As well as that, television drama has become increasingly

novelistic in its approach to form and story; long-form series like 'The Sopranos' resemble nothing more than a complex work of fiction, with its extraordinary 'rain of detail'. Viewed in boxed DVD form, those commercial sponsors no longer dilute or interrupt the experience.

But, despite the competition, the novel survives, more than half a century after MacLennan wrote his essay, people continue to read.

And yet, reading is changing, publishing is changing, the book itself is changing rapidly. Digitisation is upon us: the hardcover or paperback book is now an analogue outcome of an almost entirely digital process, from the word processing programmes writers use to digital workflows in the publishing industry. Six weeks after *The Mistress of Nothing* was published in the US in January this year, sales figures I was given included the fact that 25% of the total sales were ebooks – 25%. Book retail– a sector that saw an enormous expansion in the decades after MacLennan wrote his lecture, with mall chainstores followed by book superstores, followed by the big box stores selling books - is changing yet again as bricks and mortar bookshops find it harder to survive. Book marketing has been altered beyond all recognition by television book clubs, literary festivals, book bloggers and social media. There's been an explosion of reading and writing online and the changes we are currently witnessing are as great as the change brought to society by the invention of the printing press itself.

And I'm optimistic about what this change can mean for the future of writing and reading: I'm optimistic about the future of fiction as an art form.

The book has a venerated position in our culture. As the photograph of the author in his or her book-lined study demonstrates, the book is a status symbol of a very particular type, indicating erudition, learning, seriousness, taste, and authority. When aspiring authors say they 'want to be a writer'

they often don't mean they want to do the hard graft of learning a craft in order to produce art but rather that they want to be the person in that photograph, as rich as JK Rowling, as venerable as Hugh MacLennan. However, while writers write for a variety of motives, most readers read fiction for two reasons: stories and ideas.

When readers worry about the future of the book, they frequently describe their fears in terms of worrying about a world without pbooks – the term publishers use now to refer to ‘print books’ as opposed to ‘e-books’ - a world where you can no longer read a book on the beach or in the bath. The book itself is a lovely piece of technology – portable, cheap, a neat and familiar content delivery system. However, while there will always be people with a particular attachment to the physicality of the pbook itself, most people read for the pleasure afforded by a good story. As MacLennan said, we read for characters, we read for entertainment, we read to be immersed in worlds other than our own. We read to learn, we read to acquire culture, we read to escape, we read to be moved and enlightened. We don't read in order to support the publishing industry; at the end of the day the vast majority of readers do not read so that they have another book to put on their shelf or take back to the library. Digitisation means that the book is evolving and, in the unlikely event that the pbook disappears completely, people will continue to want to be told stories; it is up to writers who are involved and invested in crafted text delivered through both the long-form prose narrative and newer forms to ensure people keep wanting to read.

To tell the truth, I think that the long heralded arrival of ebooks and ereaders, enhanced ebooks, and books-as-apps, is the least interesting aspect of fiction in the digital age.

For the past decade, as well as writing novels and short stories, I've been involved in creating digital fiction and electronic literature projects. To

explain: my definition of the term 'digital fiction' is 'works of fiction whose material existence is dependant upon computers' – in other words, the 'born digital'. These are works that often combine media, including images, sounds, music, video, animation, even games, to tell a story. Text remains a vital element of this hybrid form – text is present on the screen and, in fact, in digital fiction text remains the primary engine of storytelling. For me this is most definitely a type of literature – a hybrid form, no doubt, but literature nonetheless.

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Working in this emerging field has led to me think about both the nature of storytelling as well as the nature of reading. When you think about the history of humanity, you're thinking about a history of storytelling; stories are a fundamental element of what makes us human – the stories we tell each other, as well as the stories we tell ourselves. We use words to conjure pictures. Sometimes we use pictures to conjure words: it's possible to see those extraordinary cave paintings hidden away in Chauvet, southern France, as the world's first ever powerpoint presentation – here are the wild horses, there are the bison, here's me clutching my spear in the firelight. In the context of our human urge to tell tall tales, you could argue that the book itself, in particular the novel – the fixed, unchanging, long-form narrative – is simply one of many steps in a long evolutionary process, the evolution of storytelling. It's not a case of either/or, pbook vs ebook, novel vs television, or even fiction vs nonfiction; as the fifty years since MacLennan wrote his lecture have proven, it's 'as well as', even 'and'. We are living in a golden age of reading and writing; access to books as well as access to information is greater now than at any stage in our history. Around the globe the new technologies are enabling literacy in new and innovative ways. It's possible, for once, that we are indeed the right people, in the right place, at the right time.

