

# The foremothers of Canadian literature

By John Sinopoli  
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TORONTO (CUP) - In the early-1980s, Rosemary Sullivan was tired of the lack of respect offered to female writers.

To her, it seemed only the usual suspects were honoured - Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro, Mavis Gallant, Audrey Thomas and Margaret Atwood.

But a quick look at the contribution of women to the history of Canadian literature showed this lack of respect was not warranted.

So, during the '80s, she edited two anthologies of Canadian female authors.

Much has changed since then.

Today, Sullivan is one of Canada's pre-eminent literary biographers, having penned biographies on Margaret Atwood, Elizabeth Smart and Gwendolyn MacEwan.

Her book on MacEwan was especially successful, winning a Governor General's Award, a Canadian Authors' Association



Margaret Atwood

Award for Non-fiction, a City of Toronto Book Prize and the University of British Columbia Medal for Canadian Biography.

And if this weren't enough, she has edited several anthologies and is an award-winning poet.

Her new poetry book, *The Bone Ladder* (Black Moss Press), is expected later this month.

All this work has allowed Sullivan to counter the previous lack of respect for Canadian female writers.

"Alice Munro has commented that when she started to write in the '50s, women didn't write," she said. "There was a kind of anti-intellectualism in her part of traditional

southern Ontario."

But compared to other countries, says Sullivan, Canada has produced a large number of female writers.

Margaret Atwood has been quoted as saying Canadian writers have "foremothers rather than forefathers," a fact that can hardly be disputed in relation to the literary histories of other nations.

Yet for Sullivan the truth doesn't lie with one gender.

"We have fore-parents because there are both male and female antecedents," she said. "When you look to the 19th century you have Catherine Parr Traill and Susanna Moodie and a lot of women writers, but you also have the poets of Confederation, such as Thomas Chandler Haliburton, at the beginning of the century."

In contrast, she points out, the United States literary history is dominated by men.

Besides Anne Bradstreet and Emily Dickinson, the literary past south of the border is primarily male.

Not so in

Canada.

"One thing that has always been unique to Canadian literature is that the women have been at the centre of the cultural experience," said Sullivan.

They share that space with male writers."

Sullivan says the '60s were the foundation of Canadian literature, and poetry was the engineer of that change. During this period, poetry readings in coffee houses were very popular.

"The '60s were a watershed for Canadian literature," she said. "It was a period of self-reflection when writers were tired of feeling colonial in terms of the influences that determined their style of writing in Canada."

Sullivan quotes Michael Ondaatje as saying he felt a wonderful sense that writers at the time were underneath an official culture.

The increase in Canadian literature during this period was also due, in part, to the Canada Council and the establishment of government support programs for the arts.

Literary periodicals began to appear, including *Canadian Fiction Magazine*. The formation of professional societies such as the Writers'

Union of Canada and the League of Canadian Poets also helped solidify the importance of writers and their work.

The literary community, and the arts community in general, has continued to grow ever since.

"Due to the infrastructure that was created in theatre, in publishing and even with visual arts, you suddenly had a professional group of artists living and working in Canada," said Sullivan.

In the '80s, this crop of literary talent began to be recognized around the world, when writers like Robertson Davies and Margaret Laurence become renowned around the world.

Sullivan credits Margaret Atwood's novel, *Survival*, as the book that made her officially Canada's pre-eminent writer.

The book, say says, explained Canada's unique cultural place.

"She was also well known amongst the feminists of the United States," added Sullivan. "She is an example, which is quite wonderful for her and I think quite a shock to her, of one of the writers who translated to an international context very quickly."