

give A little.

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The local in international fiction

By Russell Smith
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Let's be honest: We lose the Canuck references to sell books to Americans

A new Canadian novel begins with a description boldly situated in a real place: "The long black car faced west on Queen, straddling Broadview Avenue in the east end of Toronto, Ontario, Canada." This is the second line of Andrew Kaufman's clever allegorical novel *The Waterproof Bible*, just published by Random House. The rest of the novel, whose action travels across the country, is similarly unsparing about the use of actual Canadian locations. This novel has already been sold in a couple of other countries - Germany and Britain so far - and will doubtlessly be translated into many more languages, just like Kaufman's first cult-hit novel, *All My Friends Are Superheroes*. Its audience is international. Is the name of the intersection important?

This novel includes a great many fantastic events and characters - including a large human-like frog - but those exist in a recognizable universe. That universe has slightly different laws of physics and biology, but those rules are nevertheless consistent. That coherence is what defines verisimilitude, even in fantasy and science fiction. The settings are both fictitious and real: a mention of Portage and Main does rely to a certain extent on a knowledge of what that actual intersection looks like. Or does it?

That naming of a real intersection is a daring act and one that is controversial in Canadian publishing. Here is the issue: When situating fiction in your hometown, you risk relying on street names as a kind of shorthand, a code for those in the know who will immediately situate the characters and action in terms of social class and ambience. But that relies on what's called extratextual knowledge on the part of the reader. I know Queen and Broadview as rather seedy, for example. I have done this rather lazily in my own fiction: I have mentioned Yorkville, a shopping district in Toronto, as shorthand for rich, which is a message lost to anyone who doesn't know Toronto. I have had editors suggest I take out street names to make the city a less specific one: If you replace College Street with "a street of cafés near the large university" you sum up the atmosphere of the place in a way that's accessible for a foreigner.

But then you also lose a certain amount of pride. Let's be honest: We all know the primary reason for such erasures. It's to make the book more saleable to Americans. We all want our books and films and TV shows to be published in the United States, and we know a large proportion of their entertainment-consuming population is not interested in looking beyond their borders. The story might be set in Ottawa, and it might be recognizable to Canadians as Ottawa, but if the Americans think it's a nameless northeastern U.S. city, they're more likely to buy it, so let's not scare them off by naming it. Toronto in particular is a good stand-in for urban U.S. life anywhere, as we've seen in a thousand movies; you just blur out the CN Tower and you've got instant everywhere.

It's pretty common to run into Americans, even at literary conferences, who love Alice Munro and who have not yet realized her Midwestern settings are in a foreign country. She doesn't always identify her settings as Canadian, but one does recognize them if one is from here. It's an extra layer of meaning that's available to you, but you can be moved by the story without it.

In French literature, names of Parisian streets and squares can be dropped without hesitation or description. France is so centralized everyone has had to go to Paris, and everyone knows the basic layout. If you mention a street in the Latin Quarter, your scene is instantly situated in terms of social milieu. You used to be able to do the same anywhere in the British Commonwealth with London, and I suspect you can name parts of New York - Wall Street, the Village - and have them serve a metonymic function for readers in Des Moines and Frankfurt. But no Canadian city is as well known as these.

Kaufman's solution is an elegant one: He names the real place, but painstakingly explains that it is in "Toronto, Ontario, Canada" - as if acknowledging that a foreign reader might not know even where this city is. I asked him whether he had thought about this issue. He says he wants to set his fictions in real Canadian places, but that knowledge of those places is not necessary for reading them. Basically he is creating a mythical Canada that is eerily co-existent with or superimposed on the real one. Something all fiction does, really.

I once heard a French expert on crime novels say that he had grown up with a romantic association with "Hollywood and Vine" - an intersection he had never visited and never needed to visit. He had had that place created for him by Raymond Chandler novels. He had come to the point of being afraid to see the real thing. If we produce enough international-selling Canadian novels with our streets named in them, we will ourselves mythologize our own locales into glamorous and familiar kingdoms for an international audience.

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