

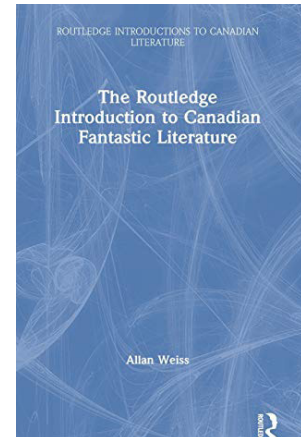
The Routledge Introduction to Canadian Fantastic Literature, edited by Allan Weiss



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Canada's literary history is as bleak as it is illustrious. This is a bleakness which also permeates the global—and even local—reception (or, perhaps more accurately, the relative lack thereof) of many Canadian texts. Despite laying claim to a raft of innovative and influential authors, Canadian productions are often overlooked in broad literary discussions. Part of the problem arises from historical publishing and distribution limitations; Canada's literary art has long been perceived to be a peripheral one, denied consecration in the hallowed halls of the major publishing houses. But this bleakness also manifests in the content of Canadian texts themselves, and, indeed, Canada's literary output has become inflected with its own idiosyncratic tendencies, the most prevalent theme of which is, simply, perseverance, or, as Margaret Atwood once more famously phrased it, "survival" (1972). Allan Weiss's latest non-fiction work, *The Routledge Introduction to Canadian Fantastic Literature* (2021; henceforth *CFL*) is an attempt to redress this imbalance as, from its opening sentence, it promises "an overview" (1) of its titular topic, and is complete, in this instance, with the backing of a major international publisher.



And an overview is precisely what the text delivers: *CFL* is a well-indexed and extensively-researched historical contribution to the field, replete with a survey of neglected or otherwise forgotten primary texts. Such a synoptic approach unquestionably has its benefits, particularly because, as Weiss notes midway through the book, "Canada did indeed have a tradition of fantastic literature, but it was largely invisible to Canadian culture as a whole" (100), not to mention to a broader international audience. Indeed, it would be difficult to find a title with such a detailed bibliographic knowledge of its subject as is to be found here: *CFL* will surely function to acquaint a broad array of readers with new (and old) literary works, and will likely provide a useful starting point for further research in the field. But its greatest benefit is simultaneously its greatest shortcoming: while *CFL* functions as an extensive directory of primary texts, it is one that tends to include only metadata. While the title certainly demonstrates an encyclopaedic expertise—and performs an ambitious archiving—of large swathes of Canadian 'fantastic' literary texts, the critical

analyses offered of its entries are lacking in any corresponding ambition. Rather than endeavour to elucidate the idiosyncratic inflections apparent in Canadian ‘fantastic’ literature, *CFL* more often seems content to catalogue its products with little by way of an attempt to appraise their significance.

CFL, that is, basically comprises a list of primary texts that are in turn loosely related to periodized historical moments. The title thus functions according to a paratactic logic wherein its argument is implied via the accretion of the various informational fragments it provides being placed in close proximity. *CFL* is, then, “deployed in order to order,” to follow Liam Cole Young’s reflection on the role of categorisation: providing a database of potential knowledge, rather than establishing any of its own (30, emphasis in original). The theoretical ambition in *CFL* is thus etherised by the tabular form that it both performs and inhabits: an effective text does not arise from a combination superficial plot recounts; implicit alignments with broader (global) cultural and artistic trends; a re-treading of well-established theoretical ground, including total reliance on existing secondary scholarship to propel its narrative; and an unspoken expectation that the cited Canadian texts are of importance, without convincingly arguing that this should, in fact, be the case. And so, mileage may vary with regard to the use-value of this title: for those interested in adding to their collection another introductory text of the type that tends to dominate science fiction and fantasy (SFF) criticism, *CFL* may indeed offer a comfortable read, and provide a useful recital of primary texts that have likely remained heretofore unobserved; for those who are more demanding of extended critical insight, the title is almost certainly destined to represent something of a missed opportunity.

I suspect this dichotomy may also be the case for Weiss himself, given both his background as one of the leading scholars of Canadian SFF and the astute scholarly writing released throughout his career, of which flashes remain observable throughout *CFL*. Indeed, sections of many chapters contained within *CFL* are excerpted from material that has been published in singular form before, but the decision to jettison much of the rigorous critical analysis that marked these more focussed articles leaves much to be desired: collation is one thing, but condensation that results in a lack of insight is a very curious move for an academic title. There is certainly enough material here for a much longer—or another—book, because there is simply no way that the space limitations allow for a properly comprehensive survey. Another hangover of this partial compilation of previously published materials is that there is some repetition of content across the chapters, but, all things considered, this may be a net benefit to *CFL*, given that its individual chapters are relatively self-contained as a result, and could thus be easily set on introductory tertiary reading lists in isolation rather than assigning the title as a whole.

The somewhat idiosyncratic use of the phrase ‘fantastic fiction’ in the title is subsequently posited as an all-inclusive term for non-realist/non-mimetic texts, and Weiss tells us:

That is why fantastic fiction is a better umbrella term than speculative fiction. It covers all the genres that involve the creation of a secondary world, whether speculative or not. Some of the fantastic genres, the ones we categorize as speculative fiction, highlight the differences from our real world and consider the implications of the change, while others accept the secondary world as a given and focus on other things. (12)

Maybe so; there is certainly nothing intrinsically wrong with such a distinction, particularly as it does attempt to bring together potentially conflicting generic definitions. The chapter from which this extract is taken, however, also engages in a short-shrift dismissal of existing terminology—the sources ranging from Atwood to Wikipedia—directly prior to its own attempted restructuring of generic nomenclature in *CFL*. As it happens, Weiss has previously lamented that “it seems that any book-length [criticism] of science fiction requires an introduction that reviews the various definitions of the genre, and sets out the scholar’s own” (2005, 48); the irony is that from the very first major chapter (“Terminology”) this current book-length study is swiftly bogged down in precisely this definitional dilemma, and *CFL* never really recovers from its initial theoretical stall. Furthermore, the initial intensive focus on definitions most markedly involves an extended discussion of the ostensible distinctions between ‘science fiction’ and ‘speculative fiction.’ One of the ramifications of this strategy is that science/speculative fiction is de facto made effectively synonymous with the entire ‘fantastic’ field across the remaining chapters, which is detrimental for the breadth of the analysis. Relatedly, the recurrent laundry lists encapsulating sometimes dubious subgeneric distinctions (and their attendant tropes) quickly becomes tiresome.

Chapter 5 (“The Flowering”) is by far the most interesting chapter of *CFL* overall, given that it speaks directly to the development of an infrastructure of national genre literature; it is a more technically-minded chapter, providing some solid and more specific recapitulation of the major players and publishing opportunities in the Canadian territories (for example, publishers; anthologies; magazines). Though each of the remaining chapters have their highlights, they are unfortunately of varying quality. This is partially related to their inconsistent length and oddly modular internal arrangement, with the latter issue being most evident where transitions between sections are jarring and/or unmarked. Some further thought should have been given to the scope, scale, and arrangement of the text. Weiss makes multiple concessions to the former issue, noting, for instance, that the overview of selected primary texts “does not come close to being exhaustive” (154), and that “it will be necessary to pick out only a few representative figures... while cautioning that many more could have been included had space permitted” (182-183). I certainly take Weiss’s point that “it has become far more difficult in recent years to make generalizations about Canadian fantastic literature overall due to its increasing size and diversity” (206), but I cannot help but wonder about the contents left on the editorial cutting-room floor; about the justification for the authors and works that did make the final cut (given *CFL* itself does not attempt to establish this); and, perhaps most significantly, if the broadly archival approach is particularly productive in the first instance, given the obvious length limitations. Beyond these concerns, though, there is also an odd tendency to take recourse in intentional fallacy at times; a

recurrent fallback into phrasal and logical faults (including the aforementioned moments where fleeting comments are made without outlining their significance, and gestures are made toward outside sources rather than making an argument explicit in the text itself); and some incredibly awkward slippages in language. For an example of all three issues manifesting in a single compact quote, when Weiss introduces contemporary author Larissa Lai, he writes: “As a lesbian, she writes about gender themes” (194). Such comments reflect poorly on both the critical and the editing process, and there are other such missteps across *CFL* as a whole.

“A word,” writes one of my favourite Canadian writers, “has power” (Weiss 2016, 12). Not all collections of words are equally powerful, however. In *CFL* Weiss writes clearly and efficiently for the most part, but there is little by way of the wit, verve, and wordplay that defines his excellent fiction and, to a lesser extent, his previous scholarly work. Indeed, the straightforward nature of the prose draws attention to some of the other weaknesses of the text: most markedly its argumentative contradictions and its general lack of theoretical ambition. The project is clearly a labour of love, but it does not add anything particularly substantial to our understanding of either the Canadian instantiation of SFF (which reads almost as an afterthought at certain points), or, more broadly, to our understanding of SFF itself. But it is always important to judge a text on its own merits, and what *CFL* does offer is an extensive reading list, and viewed in this light—as a kind of lightly annotated bibliography of Canadian primary fantastic texts (and history)—it is a useful addition to the corpus of SFF criticism that motions toward some important but historically overlooked texts that have remained peripheral to both popularity and criticism. Ultimately, for a title professed as an introduction to the field of Canadian fantastic literature, Weiss’s text is only partially successful, and I cannot but wish that the text was more consistently ambitious in its approach. It will be interesting to see whether survival is, in fact, on the cards for this style of criticism, and the book series (Routledge Introductions to Canadian Literature) of which *CFL* represents the inaugural entry.

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