

# [1] Writing a Canadian Literary Novella; why not?

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(The numbers in brackets refer to the number of a specific slide)

If you check your bookshelves at home, or go to a bookstore or even recall classic literary works you may have studied, you are bound to have come across literary novellas, distinguishable by their thin spines, whether you know it or not.

That Canadian writers have distinguished themselves quite well in prose is not a question, and thanks to writers like Morley Callaghan, Mordecai Richler, Alice Monroe, Alistair Macleod and many, many others, Canada has developed an international reputation of great writing in the short story format, *but* when it comes to Canadian novellas published as stand-alone books, the form is still an enigma, few people accept the genre or its authors.

[2] Why should they? When their own authors see the genre as a dirty little secret and deride the form. Stephen King calls it, "... an ill-defined and disreputable literary Banana Republic." Dan Rhodes, a champion of the novella says that he "... loathes the word novella... [because it is]... so frilly ...". He continues, "Call it anything, slim volume, short novel, anything but novella." The novella has been described as "Un-publishable in nature, too long for a magazine and too short for book publishing." Novella authors, more often than not, are either rejected outright or told to lengthen their work to a more marketable 'novel' size. Sympathetic large Canadian, British and American publishers, who do accept the genre, will often bundle the novella with other short pieces in order to add commercial bulk, or they mislabel them and call it a novel. As such the novella, as a stand-alone, find itself banished to niche and genre markets such as Romance or Mystery, while the literary genre languishes in obscurity, hidden in a Canadian literary closet of its own making. It is the same in the USA and the UK. The Guardian Books Blog from that country notices that, "Most publishers' upcoming catalogues continue to be dominated by books that adhere to the traditional long form. A lack of affection towards the novella endures." [3] It is interesting to note that *On Chesil Beach* by Ian McEwan was nominated and shortlisted for the 2007 Booker Prize but because it was only 160 pages and 40,000 words it created a controversy, especially after Ian McEwan called it a novella. Critics didn't think it should have been nominated. Even when articles are

written in admiration of the form, they ferment ambiguity like the title of an article in *The Writer* magazine, “The novella: Stepping stone to success or waste of time?”

This lack of recognition in Canada and in some countries, and literary paranoia about a genre that although fairly new, has solid roots in the world of literature, is a bit of a mystery.

[4] The term novella began as a Latin adjective meaning young or new, as applied to farming. From there it became an accepted term to denote anything that was new or young. Later it became a noun, where a “novella” denoted a newly planted tree. The bridge to a more modern definition is found with Emperor Justinian, when in the 6th Century the word “**novels**” was used to denote new laws that became known as Justinian Novels. They were part of the foundation of Roman Laws providing the roots to our present civil laws. It enters the Middle-Ages in Italy to mean “the news.” The term becomes part of the literary world with Boccaccio who uses the word in different ways such as, “a piece of news, a recently acquired story, or an unusual story.” At that point we first hear the term as a verb, “novellar” to tell a story.

[5] The early written short stories, and precursors of the novella as we know it, are found in the frame tales where the oral form of reciting stories begins to merge with the written one. I am sure you are familiar with three of the more famous one. Sometimes the frame is as, or more interesting than the stories:

In the frame;

- [6] Shahrazad telling the king, her husband, unfinished stories to stop him from killing her. It is interesting to note that the most famous and well-known stories, like Aladdin, Simbad, and Ali Baba, were added much later, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by Antoine Galland.
- [7] 7 women and 3 men escaping the Black Death of 1348, making their way to Florence, Each person tells one story for each of the ten days the group will be together. Here Boccaccio advances the art of public storytelling in Italian, a fairly new and unsophisticated language at that point.
- [8] In Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* written in old English, A story-telling contest, with a very diverse group of pilgrims telling 24 stories as they go from London to Canterbury competing for the modest prize of a free lunch. Here the story tellers are very different than those in the *Decameron*.

In these framed tales or short stories you get a hint of what is to come later, you have the length or expanse created by the frame and the compactness of the narratives.

[9] The development of the novella really takes flight about 250 years later with Miguel de Cervantes author of *Don Quixote* who also wrote a book called *Exemplary novellas* (1612). There are 12 novellas in the collection but the frame is now gone, the stories stand on their own and they are much longer, some at 70 pages are closer in length to the modern novella, the stories become less about nobility and more about the common man and woman, relying less on the retelling of past stories and more in the creating of new narratives and capturing the personalities and dialogues that surrounded the author. Cervantes boasts: “I am the first who has written novels in the Spanish language, though many have appeared among us, all of them translated from foreign authors. But these are my own, neither imitated nor stolen from anyone; **[not really since he stole a couple from one of his contemporaries]** my genius has engendered them, my pen has brought them forth.” Some of the stories have a more contemporary, more realistic plot and characters, as well as current and local dialogue, and he uses irony to a greater extent. But, still not a novella.

[10] A hundred and fifty years later we find Voltaire’s *Candide* written in 1759. That one and other French “Conte”, in particular, *Conte Philosophique*, short story/novella hybrids of that time continue to bridge the gap between the short story and the novella. By structuring the very popular *Candide*, as a novella, which by the way was written in only a month, Voltaire avoided the strict format of the classical literature of the day. The story in that book is of a journey where Candide, the main character, goes from a world of innocence to a world of experience. The theme can be summarized by Voltaire’s belief that, “life is inevitably bad, but we cannot give up hope of making life a little better.” Here we can see more of the novella development. Within 40,000 words or 100 pages, Voltaire’s masters the twists and turns of the narrative, with action, wit and irony to keep the reader interested until Candide’s epiphany at the end which underlines Voltaire’s themes. Yet, the time frame, action and plots are not quite there as a novella.

[11] It is truly with the German Novella, beginning in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with writers like Kleist and his complex and controversial *The Marquise of O.* and continuing into the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century with writers like Thomas Mann, that the modern literary novella gains its strength and unique place

in literary history. It gains a form and a structure that goes beyond length since they could be from as little as 500 words and as much as 30 000 words. It is with the German novella that strict rules of narrative and composition are created and followed. It had to have a single, suspenseful, event, situation, or conflict, leading to an unexpected turning point providing a logical but surprising end. As important, the themes of these German Novellas explored the dark elements that lurk within civilization, as well as the struggles of man against himself. Therefore, a short, concise literary arc that can adequately deal with the visceral. In effect, what became the classic three act play structure, with introduction and setup, conflict and confrontation and climactic resolution, of course the genius is in how to build that structure with fresh style and ingenious creativity.

[12] Since then, the novella has blossomed and matured, moving into many directions. There are so many examples of well-known classic and contemporary novellas. [13] I am indebted to journalist Nava Atlas who wrote a small article reminding us of the great classic women writers of novellas. If you read some of them, like “*the yellow wallpaper*” for example. You will find that their themes are no less visceral than their male counterparts. On a side note, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* 1818 version was a novel length while the 1838 version edited to a novella length became popular. [14] In all these classic novellas we find a number of commonalities. For the sake of brevity, I will focus only on a few of them to illustrate these shared features but I could say the same for all or any of them.

[15] **Its length.** The modern novella retains what is its most visible and recognizable feature, as well as its strength, its length. Although widely debated, there is now a general consensus that the lower limits are about 15 000 words and an upper limit of about 50 000 words, and that translates into a book of 60 to 150 pages. Word count is more accurate but page numbers help to better visualize length. And it is at that word count that we find the following classic novellas, *Of mice and Men*, by John Steinbeck at 100 pages, *l’étranger/the outsider* by Albert Camus, at 120 pages, *Death in Venice* by Thomas Mann at 73 pages, *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad at 97 pages, *The old man and the sea* by Ernest Hemingway at 125 pages, *Billy Budd* by Herman Melville at under 100 pages and last but not least a Canadian novella *Bear* written by Marian Engel at 115 pages. *Bear* won the GG for literature in 1976. [16]

The use of **characters** is another important feature of the novella. Limiting the number of interesting characters is very important to this genre. A novella needs only one main character, maybe two, and we tend to remember them. [17] Who can forget George and Lennie in *Of mice and Men*, Meursault in *the outsider*, or Aschenbach (in *Death in Venice*,) Marlow and Kurtz (in *Heart of Darkness*,) Santiago better known as the old man, (in *The old man and the sea*,) Billy in *Billy Budd*. And maybe the less well known Lou and bear in *Bear*. [18]

Likewise **setting** usually sets it apart. The compactness of the novellas is created by having the story take place in a minimum number of settings or a confined space, and more importantly, within a short time frame.[19] For Example, in *Of mice and Men*, you have the farm and xxxx in terms of time, in *l'étranger*, you have Algiers, its beach and jailhouse in the time span of a year but mostly a 4 weeks narrative. A beach hotel and Venice in a summer month, in *Death in Venice*. We have a riverboat, and the Congo Jungle within a matter of months in *Heart of Darkness*. We have *the Old man and the Sea* taking place on a small fishing boat in 2 or 3 days. Someone telling a story on a large ship and most of the tale takes only a matter of weeks in *Billy Budd*. And a house on a deserted island in Northern Ontario also for one summer in *Bear*. [20]

The novella offers a concentration of **plot**, with one situation and no subplot, as well as a wealth of **serious themes**, heavy themes that explore the underbelly of society, of humanity, of evil and good in an individual and in society, innocence and experience, madness and sanity. We can see this in all the classic novellas. It is important to remember the words of Calvino here, “A classic is a book which has never exhausted all it has to say to its readers.” [21] For example in one xxxxx  
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In another, we have Meursault, who does not cry at his mother’s funeral, goes to the beach and the cinema, kills an Arab and is condemned to death more for the former behavior than the later murder. Camus called it, “The story of a man, who without heroic pretensions, agrees to die for the truth.” In another, the story of Aschenbach, a famous writer who departs from his usual fastidious routines, falls in love with a beautiful young boy, and gets caught up in a subtle downward spiral of questionable indulgence and passion. It explores the relationship between art and life, love and death. Travelling through colonial Congo, Marlow is send to pick-up a gifted and profitable trader who may have gone mad. The limits of human experiences, as well as the nightmarish realities of imperialism are some of the themes here. Santiago endures and successfully survives his supreme

ordeal of catching the big fish and then losing it, fighting the timeless battle of man vs. fate. In Billy Budd we have a tragic incident at sea with the handsome and innocent Billy and Claggart his cruel tormentor who falsely accuses him of mutiny. Biblical good and evil and sexual themes abound there. Lou, a woman living a sheltered life goes to northern Ontario to catalogue the contents of an estate and has an unusual sexual experience with a bear. The New Yorker says that *Bear* is about much more than having sex with a bear, it is many things including the liberation of womanhood and the facing of personal truths. In the afterword of one edition, Aritha Van Herk says, “The sexual and intellectual tension in the novel are handled brilliantly with deftness and finesse. The very brevity of the book (a perfect novella) speaks to its physical pleasure and the timespan of the story (one brief summer) enriches the sexual intensity it projects. Of course I like it when people agree with what I am thinking. To repeat, like Calvino, said these are themes that invite endless, timeless debates. [22]

The same can be said of any of the novellas I have mentioned or projected on the screen. And there you have 4 key elements, the length, 50-150 pages, the setting, one or two locations, the time frame, the shorter the better, the plot with one conflict, exploring life’s contradictory mysteries, all within a well-defined narrative arc. It’s that simple to write a great novellas. If only it was.

I agree with Judith Leibowitz in her book, *Narrative Purpose in the Novella*, when she says that the primary feature of the novella is “*Its unique ability to combine the economy of the short story,*” which she calls intensity, “...*with the openness of the novel*” which she calls expansion. [23] When you read a good novella, you know immediately that it is the right length for its content. Something clicks; there is a ha-ha moment when the reader gets that full impact. You know intuitively that if it was shorter, it would not have seemed right, the development would have felt truncated, but you also know that if it had been longer by another 100 pages the impact would have been diluted. Only the novella gives you that perfect length to develop and tightly intertwine the themes, characters, narrative, plot, and to crank up the tension until it is at its highest so that it can create that sudden reversal of fortune or that great epiphany, all within 100 pages. It is because **all** those literary ingredients are still fresh in the reader’s mind, that when done well, they can blend to perfections by the time you reach that last page.

**Why write a novella? Because it is the perfect format! For whom?**

[24] **For the reader**, as I have said, at its very essence, it's a short read, up to a 6-hour read, not unlike the amount of time spent watching a couple of long movies or binge watching a season's worth of a series on Netflix, and probably more rewarding. It fits in quite well with the lifestyle of the modern reader who wants compact literature of great quality. It allows the reader to get maximum exposure to great literary prose. Because a literary novella is thematically driven to explore serious and often dark and difficult issues, a longer read might be too depressing and/or lose its impact. As well, an overlong humorous and/or satirical work would tend to wear thin after a while, imagine *Animal Farm* at 300 pages. As well, and as important, readers can sample novellas in translations where they can get a bite-size introduction to a foreign author, a foreign literary sensibility.

[25] **For the author**, as we have seen, it is a genre that sustains literature. There is no better way to explore the restlessness, alienation and inner turmoil of a main character. On a practical level, the novella affords the author the opportunity to experiment with style and content without investing too much time on any one project. For example, in **Against God**, by Patrick Senécal, which I had translated and published with Quattro, the novella is one long incredibly exciting sentence. As an author, it takes much less time to finish and edit a novella, and it creates the possibility of quicker publication.

[26] **For the publisher**, it can be cost effective and can be priced affordably. It also lends itself much better to E-publishing. It allows a publisher to produce more authors with a greater diversity of narratives. It is the perfect length to use as a teaching tool for literary studies. Filmmakers like to mine novellas for film ideas.

## WORKSHOP ON ACTUALLY WRITING THE NOVELLA

1. Idea or theme to explore. It needs to have a universality that is identifiable by the reader in some ways, even if it is a topic that the reader is not well knowledgeable in its regard.
  - a. Examples from selected books
2. You need a climax, an epiphany something very important for the characters, for the narrator and for the author. This comes close to the end.

3. How will you end it, will there be one last small but important punch or just a conclusion or an abrupt ending at the end of the climax
  - a. Examples from selected books
4. The time frame
  - a. The shorter the better
5. How many characters
  - a. Fewer the better
6. Type of narration
  - a. Pros and con of each

The question is: If you write it, will it get published? [27] **Yes, no, maybe!**

There are efforts being made by a small breed of American and Canadian publishers who believe in the novella as a viable literary genre. I'll mention a few.

[28] Melville press, a small independent Brooklyn based publisher focuses on novellas as stand-alone works. Although as you can see from the slide, they mostly produce reprints of classic novellas, under their section called the Art of the Novella. Notice that they also poke fun at it, “Melville House celebrates this renegade art form and its practitioners”

*Nouvella*, is an American independent publisher dedicated to novellas by emerging and established authors, founded in 2011. Publisher Deena Drewis says, “Our emphasis is on helping launch the career of new writers specifically utilizing the novella format”. *Nouvella* publishes 4-6 novellas each year.

[29] At Quattro Books, of which I was the primary novella editor and co-publisher, we were truly the **Home of the Novella**, that genre was front and center in **all** our publishing and marketing, we wanted to raise the awareness of the novella in Canada. We made the Novella the heart of our press and we published over 80 contemporary novellas in 11 years. I am sorry, I left the press. And I am even sorrier that it seems to have disappeared.



Another direction for publishing novellas is in digital books, *The Massachusetts Review* publishes novella e-books (7,000 to 25,000 words), and Ploughshares publishes digital-only Solos (7,500 to 20,000 words).

I must also commend Canadian small and independent presses that without paying specific attention to the genre and/or calling them novellas, have published their fair share of that particular form.

[30] Another way to get a novella published is through contests. The Drue Heinz Literature Prize in the USA, one of the larger ones, encourages novellas as submissions for their prize of \$15,000 and publication by the University of Pittsburgh Press. And yet they undo their goodwill by saying that submissions must include, “*Two or more novellas to be bundled.*” In Canada, *The Malahat Review*, from the University of Victoria, in BC invites entries for a biennial Novella Prize, of \$1,750 and be published in the magazine, 10,000 words to 20,000 words. While Quattro Books also had a novella contest, when I was with them. In the USA, the Miami University Novella Prize is awarded annually to a novella-length manuscript of original fiction (18,000–40,000 words). The winner receives \$1,000, a publishing contract and 20 copies of the book. There are many others. Search and you will find a home for it.

[31] In defending the novella, literary critics have said that, “*Novellas require an intelligent author and an intelligent reader to appreciate the power of brevity.*” To that I might add that the novella also requires intelligent editors, publishers, booksellers, and finally intelligent reviewers. [33] Maybe it is time to take a second look at this rogue genre and drag the novella out of the Canadian literary backroom and position it front and centre in our conversations about great Canadian Literature.