

# Analysis of the Development for the Canadian French Children's Literature

Sha Hu

School of Foreign Languages, Yunnan University, Kunming, Yunnan, China

**Abstract:** *Canada is an immigrant country, with early settlers from England and France. Over time, people from various countries have continued to immigrate, forming different ethnic enclaves. Canadian French literature mainly refers to literature from Quebec, which is densely populated by French-speaking immigrants. Before French children's literature emerged, children mainly read reprints of French literature. After World War I, french children's literature in Canada began to emerge. Even though this type of literature has a short history, there is now a wide range of high-quality works, reflecting social, educational, and literary values. This paper will trace the development of Canadian french children's literature against the backdrop of Canada's historical development, and analyze the characteristics and influence of Canadian children's literature.*

**Keywords:** Canada, French, Children, Literature.

## 1. Introduction

Canada is an immigrant country, with the earliest immigrants coming from England and France. Over the past century, people from various countries around the world have continued to immigrate to Canada, leading to the formation of different ethnic enclaves within the country, each preserving their own languages and customs. As an immigrant country, Canada initially relied on book imports from Europe, as domestic laws related to knowledge copyright protection were inadequate and public awareness of copyright was weak. This resulted in a market flooded with various pirated books, which severely undermined the motivation of domestic authors [1]. In order to prevent this phenomenon from worsening, Gédéon Ouimet, the premier of Quebec, called for the promotion and encouragement of domestic authors to continue their creative work [2]. Henri-Raymond Casgrain created the "Casgrain" collection, which included selected literary works from various fields in Canada [3], to protect legitimate books. This created a favorable environment for the development of Canadian literature. Currently, Canadian French literature mainly refers to literature from Quebec, including a small number of works written in French by authors living in other regions [4]. This is because Quebec and the surrounding areas along the Saint Lawrence River are densely populated by French-speaking immigrants in Canada. Before the emergence of French children's literature in Canada, children mainly read reprints of French children's literature and adult literary works written by French immigrant authors such as Philippe Aubert de Gaspé, Patrice Lacombe, Joseph Marmette, and Laure Conan. It was not until after World War I, with the founding of the *L'Oiseau bleu* (The Blue Bird) magazine, that a large number of French literary works specifically created for children in Canada began to emerge. However, due to its relatively short development time, Canadian literature has often been ignored in elementary school classrooms in favor of better-known American and British books [5]. Compared to Canadian literature, Canadian French children's literature, both in terms of teaching and research, is an area that is more easily overlooked.

In fact, despite the short history of Canadian French children's literature, there is now a wide range of high-quality Canadian books available, including nonfiction and fiction, picture

books, and junior novels, for young readers. These works as part of the "Minor Literature," [6] or what Deleuze in *Pour une Littérature Mineure* refers to as "a major language literature engaged only by a small minority," not only involve the literary power and conditions of Canadian French children's literature in Canada, but also reflect the social, educational, and literary values that French children's literature carries in its development. But how exactly did Canadian French children's literature come into being and develop? What factors influenced its development? What significance do these works hold for Canadian society? This paper will explore the development history, characteristics, and diverse values generated by French children's literature in Canada, focusing on the above questions.

## 2. Development of Canadian French Children's Literature

Canadian French children's literature is a vibrant and diverse sector that focuses on producing works specifically tailored for young readers. Prior to 1923, Canadian publishers mainly reprinted children's books from France. However, in 1923, the Société Saint-Jean-Baptiste de Montréal published the magazine *L'Oiseau bleu*, which featured the serialized story *Les Aventures de Perrine et Charlot*. This story is considered the first Quebecois text written specifically for young readers [7]. *L'Oiseau bleu* brought together some of the best authors in children's literature, including Marie Claire Daveluy, Madame Conrad Bastin, and others. Since then, Canadian French children's literature has continued to flourish, with a wide variety of genres such as fairy tales, fables, poetry, and novels being written specifically for young readers. Additionally, works on science, history, and various other subjects are also specifically crafted for children.

The World War I made it difficult for Canadian readers to obtain European books. Fides and Paulines Editions then decided to publish many local works for children. The birth of television then encouraged the development of collections of tales written from synopses of television shows. This boom ended with the resumption of overseas publishing; the competition was so fierce that local publishers could not support the company operation. Since 1965, several children's

literature prizes even have disappeared, which discourages local authors from literary creation. The decline ended with the efforts of publishers and publishing subsidy programs in 1969. Paule Daveluy organized the establishment of the Communication-Jeunesse association. This association brings together various professionals in the book industry to evaluate the value of Canadian French children's literature and provide recommendations to the socioeconomic Conference for the culture industries of Quebec, in order to promote the recognition and social support for the French children's literature. As a result, the provincial government of Canada began funding children's literature creation through various initiatives, and the federal government provided assistance for publishing children's literature through the Canadian Arts Council. In 1978, two specialized journals on children's literature emerged in Canada: *Lurelu*, specifically focusing on Quebecois children's literature, and *Des Livres et des Jeunes*, encompassing all Canadian French literature. Most universities also started offering courses on children's literature. The 2000s witnessed a particular development in the Quebecois publishing industry for young readers, with numerous publishing houses producing French children's books, aligned with the french language education programs.

Canadian-French children's literature today boasts a collection of over 2,500 titles, with around 1,400 available in digital formats across various platforms. On one hand, Quebec produces an estimated 350 to 400 Canadian-French children's books annually, representing over a third of all published books in the region. On the other hand, since the 1990s, Canada has witnessed a significant influx of immigrants from Asia, Africa, and North America. Many of these newcomers have joined the francophone communities [8], leading to rapid changes in the population structure and creating a multicultural backdrop that impacts the environment and psychology of young Canadians. As cultural products, children's literature books targeting young readers reflect society [9]. Consequently, Canadian French children's authors have expanded beyond traditional genres such as science fiction, history, and fairy tales, turning their focus to the current realities of adolescent development. These books now take risks in their subject matter and illustrations, exploring sexuality in young adult novels, nudity in picture books, and tackling difficult themes like death or alcoholism in books for younger readers [10]. By exploring these issues, the authors aim to shed light on the challenges faced by teenagers during their formative years and draw attention to the mental health of children and adolescents.

### 3. Features of Development of Canadian French Children's Literature

#### 3.1 Cultural Influence from French Literature

During the initial period of European settlement, people of British and French origins were the largest demographic groups inhabiting Canada. Over the centuries, high fertility rates in Québec have helped maintain the demographic share held by those of French ethnic origins [11]. Many songs and poems were passed down orally by the early French settlers. The growth of Quebec patriotism and the establishment of a modern primary school education system played a crucial role in the emergence of French-Canadian fiction. Influential

French authors such as Balzac had a significant impact on the growth of this literary movement.

On the one hand, early Canadian French children's literature authors were mainly immigrants from France who had received a french cultural education and read french literary textbooks, journals, and classics. On the other hand, before the emergence of Canadian French children's literature, the french publishing companies held a monopoly in the Canadian French region, with children primarily reading imported books from France. Therefore, the content and form of early Canadian French children's literature were influenced by french literature. In popular historical novels at the time, readers could see the shadow of Alexandre Dumas, while in adventure novels, they could discover the writing techniques of Jules Gabriel Verne. In addition, french children's literature classics such as *Contes de ma mère l'oye*, *Histoire d'un casse-noisette*, *Les mémoires d'un âne*, etc., had a wide readership in the Canadian French region and were popular forms of literature enjoyed by children.

It was precisely because of the children's preference for these novels and fairy tales that the creative ideas of writers in Canada, for the french children's literature, were influenced to a certain extent. In order to cater to the children's preferences, these writers also imitated and created a large number of fairy tales and novels.

#### 3.2 Promotion of the Magazines and Publishing Houses

The Canadian French children's literature publishing houses and magazines have played an important role in guiding the development of children's literature in Canada. According to Bélisle Alvine, a pioneer of Canadian children's literature, in French Canada genuine children's literature came from magazines for children, and it is through these magazines that it started soaring ahead. Many authors for children were discovered through that medium and their contribution was stimulating [12].

The rise of Canadian French children's literature is closely related to the establishment of the magazine in Canada - *L'Oiseau bleu*. At the time, popular Canadian French children's literature authors such as Conrad Bastin, Laetitia Saint-Pierre, and Marie Rose Turcot were active contributors to the magazine [13]. In the World War II period, many literary magazines were dedicated to publishing French children's literature works and critical reviews, which greatly encouraged the writers of the time. These literary magazines brought together children's literature authors and scholars from Canada, discovering and cultivating a new generation engaged in the creation and research of Canadian French children's literature. This provided favorable conditions for the flourishing of local children's literature, as writers and editors began to study children's issues and pay attention to children's literature and reading trends, greatly advancing the research on children's literature.

In fact, in Canada the vast majority of Canadians (68%) do not speak French at all, which means that if French-Canadian children's books are not translated into English, then 68% of Canadians cannot read them [14]. This situation makes it difficult for literary works from French-speaking areas of

Canada to be widely disseminated across the country. In order to allow more people to see these excellent works, publishers such as House of Anansi Press, Les Editions Quebec-Amerique, and Annick Press have not only focused on publishing the works, but have also been working to translate French-language children's literature into English. This helps break down the language barrier between French-speaking and English-speaking areas of Canada, and allows them to sell the translations to English-Canadian or American publishers for distribution outside of Quebec.

### 3.3 Support of the Associations of Children's Literature and Government

The decline of French-language children's literature in Canada after 1965 caused reflection and concern among people from all walks of life in the French-speaking region of Canada. In the 1970s, the calling to revitalize children's literature received an active response from associations in the French-speaking region and Canadian government departments. The Canadian French children's literature associations have done a significant and effective work in promoting children's reading, encouraging children's literature writers to create, and strengthening the understanding and connection between children's literature writers and publishing institutions. These associations have gathered the forces of children's literature writers, illustrators, publishers, librarians, booksellers, scholars, and educators. They have actively organized children's literature journals, held academic exchange activities, conducted writing training, and selected literary awards, which have led to the flourishing development of French-Canadian children's literature creation, publication, sales, and research.

The table below shows the main children's literature awards in the French-Canadian region and the corresponding literary genres.

prize	Association	type
The Governor General's Literary Awards	Delivered by Canada Council for the Arts	All genres of youth work; The most notorious price
Geoffrey Bilson Prize	Administered by the Canadian Center for the youth book	Historical novel
Mystery John Spray Prix	Administered by the Canadian Center for the youth book	Mystery novel
Arthur Ellis Prize	Administered by the Canadian Center for the youth book	Detective story
Sunburst Prize	Delivered by the Sunburst Society	Science fiction and fantastic novel
French teachers' literary prize-AQPF-Anel	Delivered by the Quebec Association of French Professors (AQPF)	Roman album

Under the tireless efforts of the children's literature associations, the government of Quebec has begun to support the development of children's and young adult literature. The Quebec government not only provides funding to Canadian French-language children's literature authors, but also to the publishers of Canadian French-language children's literature. For example, one of the most important developments in the history of Canadian translation was the Canada Council Translation Grants Program (CCTGP) Through this program, the government funds translations from one official language

to the other, covering the cost of the translator's fee. The Canadian federal government also provides funding for the development of Canadian French children's literature through the Canada Council for the Arts. For example, the government encourages various cultural activities related to children's literature, establishes "The Governor General's Literary Awards," supports the construction of public libraries and school libraries, and actively promotes Canadian French children's and youth books.

## 4. Values of Canadian French Literature for Children

### 4.1 Value Oriented Towards Society

With the different waves of feminism and sexism, preoccupied with the intensive fight against sexist stereotypes in Quebec society, *Le Plaisir de lire sans sexisme* was published in 1991, and children's literary works sought to highlight situations of gender equality among young people by touching Quebec society [15].

For example, the novels in the Mademoiselle Charlotte series by Dominique Demers, a three-time Governor General's Literary Awards financier and postdoctoral fellow in children's literature: in general, the characteristics of femininity are often illustrated by long eyelashes, long hair, full red lips and breasts. In the novels of the Mademoiselle Charlotte series, Mademoiselle Charlotte has nicknames such as large asparagus and large shallot, adorned with a large hat, large boots and a large bag. Because of her particular physiognomy, Mademoiselle Charlotte has a physiognomy which tends to move away from feminine stereotypes and is intended to be strong and assertive. Dominique Demers refreshed the children's literature by presenting this empowering image of the adult woman which helped to challenge existing sexist configurations.

### 4.2 Value Oriented Towards Pedagogy

For the Quebec Ministry of Education (MEQ), children's literature is a privileged means of raising awareness about the social, cultural, and political values of a country. Therefore, the government integrated it into school curricula as well as pedagogical guides, directories, and websites [16]. Children's literature is the course at school, primary school, special education and secondary school since the 1980s to educate and instruct children or illiterate people through comics by instilling values, behaviors and social feelings. Works of children's literature often serve as a school corpus, including moralistic stories and school novels on history, geography, science and others.

To protect and propagate french on a large scale in Canada, children's literature plays a role focused on the development of french skills and the learning of french during preschool and primary education. The Quebec Ministry of Education is launching a french teacher development program (PPMF), for primary and secondary schools [17]. These professional development programs offer practicing teachers modules in children's literature, devoted equally to poetry, stories, novels and strips.



According to its educational functions, children's literature represents much more than just a support for learning to read. It provides access to culture and constitutes a privileged means to promote the child's socialization.

#### 4.3 Value Oriented Towards Literature

Canadian French children's literature is often situated within the postmodern aesthetic space in recent years. The postmodernism originated as an aesthetic paradigm, invented in the 1970s by the American literary critic Ihab Hassan, to designate a form of hyper modernism in literature. The postmodern authors usually liberate themselves from the traditional cultural framework and the literary and artistic creation methods of traditional socialist realism through a series of postmodernist creation techniques such as satire, ridicule, fantasy, exaggeration, irony, absurdity and abnormality to deconstruct the meaning of works and the traditional narrative style, and reconstruct a new meaning in an aesthetic space of rupture and fragmentation [18].

For example, Elaine Turgeon's work, *Ma vie ne sait pas nager*, which won the Alvine-Bélisle Prize in 2007 and the Montreal Public Libraries Children's Book Prize in 2007. The adolescence is a period of self-construction, a period associated with an identity quest, nevertheless, this work is linked to the issue of suicide, which goes beyond the transition between childhood and adulthood [19]. This new situation is characterized by rupture and tearing, and the character is situated in the unspeakable, which corresponds to the notion of modern aesthetics that is in rupture with modern tradition.

Canadian French children's literature works nowadays are also structured around an atypical and discontinuous chronology to define the specialty of its forms. This type of literature often departs from a traditional linear narrative structure, experimenting with non-sequential timelines and fragmented storytelling techniques, setting it apart from more conventional literary works.

Following the example of *Le long silence*, a novel by Sylvie Desrosiers published in 2005, winning the Montréal Prize and The Governor General's Literary Awards. The novel recounts the childhood memories, the questions, the powerlessness, and the grief of two young teenagers: Mathieu, who has just lost his lifelong friend, Alice, who has chosen to take her own life. In this novel, time is in fact greatly dilated, as the entire book only sees the passing of an hour, during which the protagonist addresses his friend lying in a bed, dead [20]. The time gives the impression of being stretched, of passing much more slowly than what is actually in works. The time of the story extends over a longer period than the time of the narrative.

## 5. Conclusion

The French-language children's literature in Canada has experienced over a century of evolution, from its pioneering stage to the development and flourishing stages, leading to its current robust state. Today, a large contingent of children's literature authors has emerged in French-speaking regions of Canada. The establishment, growth, and prosperity of

specialized children's literature associations, journals, and publishing houses have acted as catalysts for the development of Canadian French children's literature. The creation and implementation of various children's literature awards have not only significantly increased the quantity of works but also driven the improvement of their quality. It is the convergence of these various forces that has enabled Canadian French children's literature to achieve remarkable accomplishments, making it an indispensable component of Canadian children's literature.

While children's literature is written for young readers, it can also reveal many social and mental issues of the adolescence. After all, children are in the developmental stage of their lives and are more easily influenced and receptive to new ideas compared to adults. Due to its enlightening and educational functions, children's literature often becomes a tool used by adults to guide the development of children. It not only reflects the complexity of Canadian culture, society, and language from multiple perspectives, but also showcases Canadian multicultural coexistence character. Moreover, it plays a crucial role in shaping the thoughts, psychology, spirituality, and values of children.

## References

- [1] Luneau Marie-Pier, *Louvigny de Montigny à la défense des auteurs* (Montreal: Leméac, 2011), pp.5-10.
- [2] Brunet Manon, Henri-Raymond Casgrain et la paternité d'une littérature nationale, *Voix et Images*, 22: 2(1997), 205-224.
- [3] Maurice Lemire & Aurélien Boivin, *La Vie littéraire au Québec* (Laval: Presse de l'Université de Laval, 1991), p. 209.
- [4] Tailai Wang, Canadian French literature, *China academic electronic publishing house*, 3: 3(1981), 38-43.
- [5] Bainbridge Joyce M, The role of Canadian children's literature in national identity formation, *English Quarterly Canada*, 34: 3/4(2002), 1-5.
- [6] Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *Pour une littérature mineure* (Paris: Minuit, 1975), p. 29.
- [7] Aubrey Irene, Littérature jeunesse de langue française (Toronto: *Historica Canada*, 2014), pp. 1-10.
- [8] Dionne Anne-Marie, *A critical exam of the ideologies in multicultural children's literature* (Brighton: Official Conference Proceedings, 2013), pp. 37-50.
- [9] Dionne Anne-Marie, Étude des stéréotypes sexistes à l'égard des parents dans la littérature jeunesse canadienne, *Revue de l'Université de Moncton*, 38: 2(2007), 111-143.
- [10] Landreville Ginette, La table ronde des createurs: Propos transcrits et mis en forme, *Lurelu*, 26: 3(2003), 1-5.
- [11] Boyd Monica. Ethnicity and race in Canada: Past and present. *The International Handbook of the Demography of Race and Ethnicity*, (2015), 23-45.
- [12] Bélisle Alvin, Children's Literature in French-Speaking Canada, *Canadian Children's Literature*, (1976), 59-65.
- [13] Gutierrez Laurent, L'Oiseau bleu: histoire d'une revue rédigée par des enfants pour des enfants (1922-1929). *Le Télémaque 2* (2007), 111-124.

- [14] Cobban Michelle, Bridging the two solitudes: translated French-Canadian children's literature from 1900 to 2004, *University of British Columbia*, (2006), 3-4.
- [15] Coulombe Johanne, Michelle Provost, and Sylvie Gamache. *Le plaisir de lire sans sexisme: répertoire des livres québécois pour la jeunesse*. (Montreal: Coopération à la condition féminine, 1991), pp. 3-9.
- [16] Pouliot Suzanne, Regards sur l'enseignement de la littérature de jeunesse au Québec, *Le français aujourd'hui*, 2(2005), 55-63.
- [17] Hopper Chris & Larry Miller, Margaret MacLean Christine Gordon. *International handbook of reading education*, (1992), 45.
- [18] Ihab Hassan, *From Postmodernism to post modernity: the local global context, Philosophy and Literature*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 4.
- [19] Turgeon Éline. *Ma vie ne sait pas nager*. Vol. 64. (Montreal: Québec Amérique, 2006), pp 20-35.
- [20] Rodgers Julie, *French Studies: French Canadian Literature*. The Year's Work in Modern Language Studies 76 (2016), 82-89.