Reviewed by Tim Podolsky

FAMOUS CANADIAN AUTHORS: DEVELOPING ENGLISH SKILLS

By Mohammad Hashemi, Alice Johnston-Newman, and Jaklin Zayat. Pearson Longman, (216 pages), ISBN: 978-2-7613-2562-2

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Tim Podolsky has a Bachelor of Arts degree (Manitoba) and a Masters degree in Teaching English as a Second Language (McGill). He has taught English in Japan, in Quebec, and at Nunavut Arctic College. Currently, he is the program coordinator at the English Language Centre at The University of Manitoba.

Famous Canadian Authors, a new publication by Pearson Longman, is described by the publishers as an intermediate and advanced text that provides ESL learners with "the opportunity to enhance their reading skills, develop and expand their vocabulary, reinforce language structures while gaining an appreciation for Canadian language culture". The book is primarily a reading textbook, although it does contain some discussion activities, writing exercises, and there is a great potential to incorporate listening components, by viewing film clips of the stories that are featured in the book, since most of the featured authors, seem to have had works adapted for television or film. It would be an excellent resource for instructors, who would like to incorporate more literature into their classrooms, and for those who are constantly searching for books that contain more Canadian content.

The book contains nine chapters, each one highlighting a different Canadian author. The chapter readings include a short biography of an author and two excerpts from one of the author's novels. Each chapter has scanning activities, extensive vocabulary development exercises, comprehension questions, and a different grammar reinforcement section. There is also a composition question and socio cultural discussion questions at the end of each chapter that are designed to explore themes related to the readings in the book.

The authors highlighted in this book include: Lucy Maud Montgomery ("Anne of Green Gables"), Morley Callaghan ("All the Years of Her Life"), Farley Mowat ("Never Cry Wolf"), Mavis Gallant ("The End of the World"), Mordecai Richler ("The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz"), Alice Munro ("Carried Away"), Carol Shields ("Unless"), Margaret Atwood ("The Blind Assassin"), and Michael Ondaatje ("In the Skin of a Lion"). One might ask oneself, what about Margaret Laurence, Gabrielle Roy, or Robert Kroetsch?

There are definitely many other excellent Canadian authors, who could have been included in this collection, but it appears that the creators of this textbook are trying to present perspectives from a variety of regions across Canada, and Carol Shields has obviously been chosen as the lone representative for Manitoba. To illustrate this point, the text contains detailed maps of Canada and the world that pinpoint each location mentioned by each of the various authors, providing a very useful visual aid for international students, who may be unfamiliar with Canadian geography.

I think that this book is an excellent tool for exposing international students to Canadian culture and content. The only difficulties that I can see are that the excerpts are short, and that it might be hard to provide the complete context of each story from the samples that are included. The authors do an adequate job of setting the stage, but the samples often left me feeling that I wanted to read more, and at times I wondered why short stories weren't included, as some of the readings.

Furthermore, there are many excellent younger contemporary Canadian authors, who could have been included in this collection, such as Douglas Coupland, Yann Martel, Miriam Toews, or Vincent Lam. All of the authors included in this book definitely deserve to be there, but I felt that there was both room to include more writers, and that some of the emerging Canadian talent could have been better represented. That might make the book a little more appealing for younger students, who may already be struggling with the foreign cultural contexts in each story, let alone the added complexity of trying to comprehend the historical details in some of the period pieces.

As for the learning features in this book, I was very impressed with the depth and variety of vocabulary activities that were used throughout. Each chapter contains activities that focus on vocabulary through context clues, etymology, word usage, and the different parts of speech. Key words and expressions are highlighted in bold, making it easy for instructors and students to focus on vocabulary acquisition. Each reading also contains either scanning questions or more detailed comprehension questions, although the text could probably use a few more comprehension questions overall.

I think that this book would be an excellent starting point for exploring each author in more detail or, in general, for exploring Canadian literature further, if that is indeed something that relates to one's classroom goals. Each chapter contains a different online activity that could be used to encourage students to explore and research any of the themes discussed by the authors. For example, the on-line assignment for the chapter on Carol Shields asks students to find plot summaries for any three of her novels, and to then write summaries in their own words. There are a variety of other research ideas that could also be explored, based on the content that is included in this book.

The book sells for $44.95 through Pearson Longman's English Language Teaching division. It is listed under the category of "Literature", along with a reading and writing text called "Style and Substance" that is designed to teach the English language through literary analysis of Canadian poetry and short stories. As mentioned before, "Famous Canadian Authors" might be a text worth exploring, if one is looking to include more literature and/or Canadian culture into their English language curriculum. It is listed as being for high intermediate to low advanced students, and it is one of very few books that explore language teaching through this type of method.

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