

"No Canadian Should Ever Be Surprised Again": An Interview with Reingard Nischik (September 30, 2009)

by Sarah Banting



Reingard M. Nischik is Professor and Chair of North American Literature at the University of Konstanz, Germany. She is among the pioneers of Canadian literature studies in Europe, with her first article on CanLit published in 1981. Her numerous books include *Gaining Ground: European Critics on Canadian Literature* (ed. with Robert Kroetsch, 1985), *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact* (2000; Best Book Award of the Margaret Atwood Society), *The Canadian Short Story: Interpretations* (2007), *Translating Canada: Canadian Literature in German/y* (ed. with Luise von Flotow), and *History of Literature in Canada: English-Canadian and French-Canadian* (2008), all published, with international contributors, in North America. Her most recent monograph, *Engendering Genre: The Works of Margaret Atwood* (2009), is about to be published with the University of Ottawa Press. Nischik was managing co-editor of the tri-lingual interdisciplinary journal *Zeitschrift für Kanada-Studien* from 1992 to 2005. As to teaching, Nischik is a recipient of the Baden-Württemberg Teaching Award and has to date supervised some twenty doctoral theses at the University of Konstanz, in the area of Canadian Literature, American Literature, and Comparative North American Studies.

Sarah Banting is a PHD student at the University of British Columbia. She is interested in the genres and stylistics of writing place in Canadian fiction and theatre.

Sarah Banting: So I'm sitting here with Professor Reingard Nischik, who holds the distinguished position of a Chair in American Literature at the University of Konstanz in Germany. She is credited with having been one of the pioneers—and being now one of the leading scholars—of Canadian literature studies in Germany, and in Europe more generally. For a number of years she held an editorship of a German-language, interdisciplinary journal in Canadian Studies. [Among many other works,] she has edited a prize-winning book on Margaret Atwood's works and impact, as well as contributing important chapters to that volume. In the last two years alone, she has published two major edited collections of literary

history and scholarship, namely, *The Canadian Short Story: Interpretations and History of Literature in Canada: English-Canadian and French-Canadian*, as well as co-editing a volume entitled *Translating Canada*, which collects critical work on the motivations, contexts, and effects of the translation of Canadian literature into German. Professor Nischik is visiting Canada on the occasion of *Canadian Literature's* 50th anniversary Gala, and she has graciously agreed to meet with me here in downtown Vancouver on a beautiful fall evening—although chilly—to speak about her work and about international scholarship on Canadian literature more generally. So, I'd like to welcome you very much to Vancouver!

Reingard Nischik: Thank you very much.

SB: I thought, perhaps, you wouldn't mind commenting on the origins of your own personal and scholarly interest in Canadian literature.

RN: Yes, if I can remember [laughing]—

SB: [laughing]—

RN: —because that dates back quite a while, but if I'm not totally mistaken it goes back to the end of the 1970s, would you believe, so that's quite a long time, really. Actually it must have been around the age you are in now, so I was in my late twenties. And I was, in a way, contemplating the topic of my PhD thesis, and it was going to be a thesis on general literature really, single and multiple plotting in English-language literatures. So it was really a general or comparative literature topic. And at the time I didn't have a clue about Canadian literature yet. But then I had a teacher and a colleague at Cologne University who were into Canadian literature already. And they drew my attention to it. In the process then of contemplating my thesis I collected works which were relevant for that particular comparative literature topic. And then Canada was sort of one of several national literatures I investigated, but not in the context of a national literature, but in the context of a theoretical kind of approach to literature in general. So, I investigated American literature, British literature, and Canadian literature as one of them. And as it turned out, then, I got a scholarship to Canada, which brought me to Vancouver for the first time—

SB: —Yay! [laughing]—

RN: —in 19—that must have been in 1978-79. And I spent a whole year, here in Vancouver, and that really made me a Canadianist. Because it turned out, eventually, that I think close to fifty percent of my text examples originated from or belonged to Canadian literature. But as I say, not really in the context of a national literature or identity questions, but really in the context of it being good literature, and which you could deal with in the context of questions of narrative. I was very much a narratologist at the time, more so than I am today, really. And this is how I became a Canadianist: via the comparative literature approach. And my first professorship also was a comparative literature professorship. And then, the older I got, the more specialized my professorships got, and, yeah, now I am at the University of Konstanz. Doing, officially speaking, American Literature—that's a very, very long story—but you know, unofficially I do North American literature, with a strong focus on Canadian literature, as far as research goes; but with respect to teaching, I also deal with American literature a lot.

SB: And would you, would you say that you've preserved an interest in a comparative reading of narrative works?

RN: Yes, very much so. And not only narrative works, I've branched out a little bit further, but comparative literature, a comparative approach to Canadian literature has always been one of my favourite ones. Maybe it doesn't even show that much in my publications, but definitely in my teaching. When I teach Canadian literature I very often compare it in class to American literature. Or the other way round: when I have an American literature seminar, I always try to have side-glances, or comparative sessions, more or less officially, in connection with Canadian literature. So students who come to my seminars, they know after a while that no matter how they are called or what they are called officially, I always smuggle in Canadian literature somehow—

SB: [laughing]

RN: [laughing] —if it's not focused on Canadian literature from the beginning.

SB: Well I recall reading in some of your writing, for example about the development of the short story in Canada, the ways that you make your readers aware of the sort of comparison of its evolution, with occasional looks to the U.S.

RN: Right, yes. Yeah.

SB: Even when writing about Canadian literature. So, even in your publications that explicitly focus on a Canadian—

RN: —Yes—

SB: —body of work, there's the sort of background awareness of an international context that comes through.

RN: And you know, another reason for that being so, is, well, the institutional conditions in Germany, concerning Canadian literature. In all of Germany there is not a single professorship designated as Professor of Canadian Literature.

SB: Hm.

RN: Not even [often] North American Literature. It's usually American Literature, and as I said then we have to smuggle it in, and this is how we always have—or I always have: this kind of comparative view. So it's also an institutional reason for this to be the case.

SB: So among the works that I listed in my introduction was the book on Margaret Atwood, and I wondered at what point in your investigations of Canadian literature, and your growing interest in works from here, you sort of began to notice Margaret Atwood and pay attention to her.

RN: Ah, well. We could talk hours about this. [laughing]

SB: [laughing] Yes!

RN: Because Margaret Atwood, and Margaret Atwood and Canadian Literature, and Margaret Atwood and her international reception, is a truly fascinating topic, or, are truly fascinating topics, in plural. But since you ask me very personally when I got interested in her, well, again, that dates back to the end of the 1970s. And, well, that was just a few years

after she had published *Survival* in 1972, and her earliest novel *The Edible Woman* and then *Surfacing* and *Lady Oracle*, and then she took it from there. So she was really in the beginning stages of her career. And it's really fascinating, the relationship between Margaret Atwood and Germany, me being a German just being a case in point. Margaret Atwood had been rather popular right from the beginning of her career, in Germany, and it was especially in the year 1979, if I remember rightly, that was when the German translation of *Surfacing* appeared in Germany, and from that time onwards also the general readership became very much aware of Margaret Atwood. She was immediately, um, well I wouldn't call her a star, at that beginning stage, but she was immediately very, very popular. Nowadays of course she's a star world-wide. And, well, Canadian literature right from the beginning in Germany had always been associated, of course not exclusively, but to a large extent with Margaret Atwood. She was right from the beginning the leading figure in Germany, and there were several years—that's what publishers tell us—during which Margaret Atwood had more readers in Germany than she had in Canada, or in the United States, even. In the United States she became a big star from *The Handmaid's Tale* onwards, but in Germany she had been popular since *Surfacing* onwards. And so, that has always been a very special relationship. Then, my specific relationship to Atwood, well, really began while I was a doctoral student, because I dealt with her works in my doctoral thesis. And I also met her for the first time in Cologne, when she gave a reading. That was, you know, a very, very symbolic moment—

[A knock at the door! Interview pauses ... then resumes.]

RN: —Well, I was speaking about this historical moment, as I like to call it, because that was on a day when Robert Kroetsch was visiting Cologne, where we sort of had the idea, or discussed the idea, of putting together a collection of essays by European critics on Canadian literature. So Kroetsch was at the seminar, and then we had a coffee or some snack afterwards, and I had to get away from that date pretty soon, because there was Margaret Atwood reading in the main library in Cologne! And this was when I first met her, personally—well, but from a distance of course, I didn't talk to her. And at the time, the audience in Cologne was not that large yet, but she came back again and again, and nowadays she only visits the big cities in Germany, like Berlin and Hamburg and Munich. I don't think she would even come to Cologne anymore.

SB: So, from those early moments of interest and from the earlier book, whose title I mentioned [*Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact*], I understand that you now have a new book, forthcoming, on Margaret Atwood's work—

RN: —Yes—

SB: —called *Engendering Genre: The Works of Margaret Atwood*—

RN: —Right—

SB: —as you of course know! And I wonder if your return to publishing about Atwood in book form marks a new set of interests on your part in her writing, or if it's a continuation of some of the things that interested you earlier.

RN: Mm-hmm... Both! [laughing]

SB: [laughing]

RN: As often in life, both are true. In a way, it is a continuation, because some of the chapters of this book, I had thought about the issues earlier on already. I think there are two chapters that are, well, revisions and updating of earlier articles I published in, for example, the *Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood* edited by Coral Ann Howells. So, it's a continuation that way, but on the other hand, the more I taught Atwood and read Atwood, the more I became aware that the two topics which are part of the main title, *Engendering Genre*, really explain a lot of her work, to her readers, in the sense that on the one hand she is a fantastic writer as to genre! I mean, I don't think there are that many authors around nowadays who have really dealt with so many genres, and also excelled in these genres, as Margaret Atwood has. So, in this book, I look at all the different—practically all of the different genres, you could never look at all of them, that she has tackled. And also I deal with her comics oeuvre, which has never been dealt with before, so that was lots of work but also lots of fun. [laughing]

SB: [laughing] Mm-hmm, well the cover, which I have the privilege of seeing in photocopy, has a hilarious portion from one of her...[comics]

RN: Yeah, well, yeah, I hope that whets one's appetite, to look at the comics. And then of course also her dealing with gender, and the next step, then, the way genre and gender are sort of intertwined. And I find, taking this approach, that the way she deals with genre from a gender kind of perspective to a large extent explains what is "Atwoodian," as we call it in Germany, about her works. Because the way she extends genre boundaries often, not always but often, also sort of combines with her being very, very gender conscious—not in a very programmatic way, but very often in an innovative manner. And I try to, sort of, trace this in this book. Well, how should I say, maybe one could say that Margaret Atwood's works have accompanied me all through my scholarly life. So she's really, ah, an isotope, so to speak, through my scholarly life. [laughing]

SB: [laughing] I notice, um, that this forth—well, out—coming book? Is it now in print?

RN: Well, it will appear, actually, in the "month of entry, month of descent," as Margaret Atwood would call it—that's her birthday month, of course—so it will appear in November. This year.

SB: Well, exciting! And when it appears in November it appears with Ottawa University Press—

RN: —Yes—

SB: —and the books whose titles, the titles of which!, I mentioned in my introduction are all published with Canadian and American presses.

RN: Yes.

SB: And I wondered, that in mind, or perhaps that aside, if you would speak a little bit about your sense of the audience for your own scholarship. I mean, it's—you're very broadly read! But if in your writings about Canadian literature, if there's an awareness of an attention to especially a German or European audience, or a Canadian audience, a global audience—

RN: —Yes—

SB: —does that inform your approach or your writing?

RN: Yes... Well, I think again that one develops, one takes steps in one's development, sometimes conscious, sometimes not so conscious, and I think it makes sense that when you are a scholar in Germany and trying to find your place in academia—which is not easy, of course, because there are very few professorships in Germany compared to North America, for example—I think UBC has forty-one professors of English, American, and Canadian literature and Konstanz, we have more students, but we only have three professors. So I'm one of three. So, when you try to find your place in such an institutional context, you probably start out writing in German, because then you are published with German publishers, which is probably less difficult than to be published internationally, with Canadian or American publishers. So I started out a little bit publishing in German, but since I've always taught in English right from the beginning—I think, you know, if students deal with English or American or Canadian literature, they should also, being Germans, learn the language—and you do that best, of course, by using it, and speaking in English about literature. So I've always taught in English, and so it only made sense that very soon then I started to write in English as well. Yeah. Well, I think the first book I published in Canada was the one with Kroetsch [*Gaining Ground*], and then, well—it's actually a very good question, the one you put, but I think that we as Germans, well I as a German, publish in English because I want my work to be read not only by Germans. I mean, if I deal with Canadian literature and American literature, of course, then my immediate colleagues are also in Canada and the United States, and if I write in German I would write myself into a niche, so to speak, or into a corner. So, nowadays I publish my books only in English and practically only with North American publishers, and by now I do this very much consciously.

SB: Well, it's—, for a scholar like myself, who writes only in her native language, it's such an impressive oeuvre. I wondered, and not to put this in uncomfortable terms, but maybe since this gathering for the *Canadian Literature* Gala is drawing scholars, like yourself, from the international world as well as local ones, if we could speak a bit about the relationship of the scholarly community abroad to the scholarly community in Canada.

RN: Mm-hmm...

SB: If you wouldn't mind I would quote [or paraphrase] briefly from part of the introduction to your *History of Literature in Canada: English-Canadian and French-Canadian*—

RN: Mm-hmm, yes...

SB: —and that introduction speaks about the importance of, from your perspective, of combining those two literatures and treating them with even hands, in the telling of the history of literature. In the sort of concluding, personal note of that introduction, you have a small segment called "Gaining Ground" [actually, more optimistically: "Gained Ground"] in which you recount an anecdote—which is very embarrassing to myself as a Canadian, Canadian scholar—of some time back. Since then, you note, we've gained ground, I hope that's very much true, but: of two Canadian participants in a conference, who were heard muttering to each other, about why German scholars would not just stick to German literature! So, with those sorts of experiences, and with the hope that we've gained ground since those comments were made, in mind, my question then was about the relationship of the critical communities abroad and—

RN: —Yes...—

SB: —perhaps eventually we could talk about what the position of a critic from abroad, what that might offer, in terms of a privileged view or a special view, but more generally too.

RN: Yes. Well, I mean, you as a Canadian are of course highly privileged, in the sense that you live here, you live where the literature is written, you are in a much better position to meet the writers themselves, you have many professorships, as I mentioned earlier, so you can get in a wonderfully intense dialogue and conversation here about Canadian literature. In Germany that's very far away, of course; as I said, there are only a few people interested in, relatively few people interested in Canadian literature. So I think this also stamps your consciousness perhaps, or stamps Canadians' consciousness perhaps, to some extent, that we are very far away, that we don't speak English as our native language, and that we are, sort of, maybe, dealing with Canadian literature from off-center, you know, not from the middle of developments. But I think—as perhaps with Canadian literature in general—the off-center view, a marginal kind of standpoint or perspective can also add new ideas—

SB: —Surely!—

RN: —or new aspects. I think, to some extent, perhaps, Canadians—first of all, to put it that way, Canadians are still sometimes a little bit surprised to see or to become aware to what extent Canadian literature has become an interesting discipline abroad. And we are sometimes surprised ourselves to see how surprised Canadians are! [laughing] But on the other hand, the fact, for example, that you invited me for this Gala event shows that you are aware, after all, that Canadian literature nowadays is a global event, a global discipline, and that more and more countries, associations, scholars, not only take note of Canadian literature but also make it sort of a central issue of their research, and teaching, to some extent. And to come to the other issue, what non-Canadians maybe do differently from what Canadian scholars do when they deal with Canadian literature, I do see some differences there. And to some extent that can be traced back really to *Gaining Ground* again, because one of the reasons why Kroetsch and I did *Gaining Ground* at the time was not only that we happened to meet each other in Cologne and got talking and drew up this idea to edit this book together, but also that we found, even at the time, and to some extent I think it's even true nowadays, that the approach to Canadian literature is different, from inside Canada, compared to from outside Canada. One difference I see is that Canadians, really going back to Atwood's *Survival* to some extent still, of course—of course!—use their literature also as a way of seeing yourselves, right? What does it tell us about our own culture, what are pressing problems, what are the main themes, the different kind of ethnic groups who, which have come to the foreground, etc. Whereas we from abroad, let's take Germany as an example, we do that of course also to some extent because when you try to introduce a new national literature to your students you also ask the question, well, what is idiosyncratic about this literature, what is Canadian about Canadian literature. But we've never done this to a similar extent as Canadians did, especially during the period of thematic criticism, you know, where we really got a little bit frustrated, abroad, about this kind of approach—because it did away, for us, with almost anything which is interesting about Canadian literature apart from themes, you know: whether this is good literature, how it is written, from which narrative point of view and in which style. And I think, because English for us, for me, is a foreign literature, we are very much aware of style. Because we have to grapple with the language everyday ourselves we are, I think, very, very style-conscious. So one very important approach we take to Canadian literature is, well, the narratological perspective. We are very much interested in structure, and in style, and also in a comparative approach to Canadian literature. And, I would argue, altogether more so than Canadians are. When I look at the last issue of *Canadian Literature*, for example, that proves my point to some extent because it's titled "Strategic Nationalisms." You have to do it that

way, in a way, I mean, it's your literature: you are surrounded by it, it affects you much more personally than it does us as foreign scholars. We are not affected by it personally. We study it from a greater distance, and thereby we tend to see different things. And I don't want to evaluate, at all, that one is better than the other! It's just I think a very fruitful kind of complementary kind of approach, which—and I think I will also argue this during the conference, at least at some point, when I give my paper—which could, perhaps, also be combined more often in order to sort of be fruitful in a two-sided way. I think we can both learn from each other. Of course we can learn more from you Canadians, but I think to some extent also the exo-Canadianist perspective, the perspective on Canadian literature from abroad, also has something to offer.

SB: Oh, well, I think so too! [laughing]

RN: [laughing]

SB: And I won't ask you to spoil the secrets of your talk which you will give on Friday. But since we're gathering to celebrate a particular journal, to extrapolate from that into the question of, sort of, media of communication, is there, um, do you see any particularly exciting forms emerging for that international conversation? I guess the conference itself as a meeting-place of people is, will always be foremost for academics—

RN: —Yes...—

SB: —But do you see any exciting new developments in the media...

RN: ...for this kind of conversation? Well, first of all I would like to say that, since you started out with a question pointing me back to the past, that *Canadian Literature* also abroad has always been the main journal to take note of for Canadianists abroad. So when I was introduced to Canadian studies at the time, I was told, "Here is *Canadian Literature*," and we also stock this in our library in Cologne and all the other universities I taught at. So—a basic approach would of course be to stock these journals also abroad, but especially at the University Library in Konstanz we digitalize a lot now; we can get at these things very quickly, at articles very quickly by just typing—well, my students do it, I never do it, but I know when I ask for a specific article I have it on my screen within a few hours. So that of course enormously enhances scholarship and the velocity of, the speed of how you get at information. So, the stocking of libraries, the electronic, technical possibilities to get at articles published abroad. And then another thing is of course conferences, and we always invite Canadian scholars and also authors to our annual conference in Grainau in the Bavarian Alps. And I think to some extent, as this conference shows, you also do it the other way around, that you tend to invite, maybe more and more, also scholars from abroad to your conferences and also to your editorial board, to *Canadian Literature*. I think that's a very, very good sign, that Canadian literature sort of opens up to the international dimension. And in a way that's only logical because the Canadian government has invested so much money to make Canadian literature known abroad. And culture is more than ever now also a factor of branding a country, of selling a country, and connecting economics and trade and culture. So the Canadian government has done a very good job about this—up to the Harper government [laughing]—

SB: [laughing]

RN: —so, in a way, one should reap the fruits, so to speak, now, which were sown for decades. Now you see the results! [laughing]

SB: I thought as a sort of concluding topic we could speak a little bit about your conception about genre. You've mentioned stylistic attention as a feature of your own work and perhaps of, uh, German I'll say, criticism—

RN: —Yes, mm-hmm—

SB: —and your new book really engages with work with genre, and, you've already said, the flexible, perhaps genre-bending work of one particular author. But before we leave the topic of these international scholarly conversations, I perhaps would just remark that one of the abilities you have as a scholar, from your perspective and from your depth of learning, is, it seems to me, in your writing to occasionally point to Canadian work as a genre. So I read, in some of your work, you talk about the occasionally—about the Canadian short story as a genre in itself, or its coming into being as a genre, or elsewhere in your discussions of the novel written in English language in Canada, its coming into being, especially lately, as a genre that deals, in the case of your discussion, with sort of transcultural identities and things. Would you be willing to comment on your conception of genre in that sense, the possibility of framing works within a national genre?

RN: Yes. Well, since you refer to the approach to the Canadian short story, I think what you mean there is that I argue in this book that the short story in Canada, one, has always been very popular, and has been a very, very strong, foregrounded genre, and so much so that one could even call it—scholars have done so-call the Canadian short story almost a national genre of Canada. And that's also the view I take from abroad. I mean, once I even got a scholarship to deal with that, simply to focus on the Canadian short story. And it's amazing how many anthologies there are. It's amazing how many prizes and competitions and multitudes of publications there are in this genre. Of course, for a German unusually so, to some extent or to a large extent also state-subsidized. You know, that's different in Germany, for example, there you can only publish books which the publisher thinks will sort of bring in the money you invest. And here to some extent publishers are of course subsidized. But leaving that aside, nevertheless, there's lots of quality around. So that would be one conception of a national genre, that the short story in Canada has been very prominent. And all major—practically all major Canadian writers, writers who are well known internationally, with very few exceptions—I think Robert Kroetsch would be one exception, at least if you don't look too closely—they all deal with the short story. They all have their short story collections. Does that answer your question? [laughing]

SB: Sure! Yes, thank you. And if you're not exhausted of the topic of genre—it's a personal interest of mine as well—would you be willing to speak briefly again about your conception of genre, especially in your book about Margaret Atwood's writing?

RN: Yes. Well, genres are nothing for all times. But they are bounded to specific time periods and to specific locations. So they are also of course subject to change, and I think Margaret Atwood is a perfect writer to investigate such issues. Because to some extent, of course, genres are convention-bound, but only to some extent, because you can bend these borderlines and Margaret Atwood does so all the time. And she does so within a Canadian context but she also does so within a context that goes beyond Canada. For example, in her shorter fictions, she re-writes Baudelaire. Or she gets into inter-textual dialogues with Shakespeare, she gets into inter-textual dialogues with the format of the dramatic monologue. She keeps extending

generic boundaries all the time. So that when you write a book about genre in connection with Margaret Atwood, you have to re-define the term all the time! [Genre] is a text format which can be defined to some extent, which is convention bound, but Margaret Atwood can never be pinned down. [chuckling] You always have to be flexible to follow her along. And she's usually way in front of her critics.

SB: And often way in front of me! But I remember just recently finally reading *The Blind Assassin* and noticing the way that she works with several different genres within that book, weaving in a sort of science fiction telling and these multiple layers of story-framing, within one text. So, quite a marvelous writer.

RN: Yes, exactly. You can be very proud of her. You can be very proud of having Margaret Atwood, but also of having so many other wonderful contemporary writers. And you should never be surprised again, no Canadian should ever be surprised again, that international scholars, scholars from abroad, take a large interest in your literature.

SB: Well, I think we all appreciate that attention, and value the scholarship. I'd like to thank you very much for meeting and speaking with me today—it was such a pleasure. And welcome again to Vancouver! And enjoy the conference.

RN: Thank you very much. And thank you for finding me here, in this beautiful hotel with this beautiful view.