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Brian Moore (BLACK ROBE) is one of the most successful Canadian novelists in getting his work transferred to film.

Many Canadian writers are waiting expectantly for the premiere of Anthony Minghella's \$30-million film version of *The English Patient* next autumn. The novel of the same title, which won its author, Michael Ondaatje, the highly prestigious Booker Prize in 1992, has been widely hailed as an important recent landmark in Canadian literature. The fact that it has virtually no Canadian content hasn't hindered this perception. Instead, the success of Ondaatje's novel lends further legitimization to the outward-looking attitude that has come to the formerly nationalistic Can-lit world in recent years, but has always been an important part of Canadian cinema.

Until recently anyway, most Canadian writers, who have their own pipelines to the readers, have wanted to tell Canadian stories and respond to what they perceive as Canadian reality. By contrast, our filmmakers, with no way to exhibit their movies

except through the foreign-controlled distribution system, either have had to avoid Canadian subjects altogether or disguise Canada and Canadians as something else. The rest of the world followed suit anytime Canada was involved. Remember how we sighed when Margaret Laurence's Manitoba novel *A Jest of God* became a 1968 Paul Newman/Joanne Woodward vehicle called *Rachel, Rachel*, set in New England?

The whole notion of Hollywood North has been based on lower production costs here, not on the abundance of indigenous literature, to which foreign and domestic filmmakers generally remain aloof. In every other cinematic culture, whether Japan, India, Germany, Britain or, of course, the United States, filmmakers have returned time and again to their country's literature as a source of material that gives off a bright glow of recognition and practically cries out for reinterpretation through the medium of the camera.

Forty years ago, Gerald Pratley asked: "Why does Canada, alone among the major countries, have no studios producing full-length films for theatre distribution?" Well, we know the answer. The answer lies in money and cultural politics. But to Pratley's question, one might add another: "Why has Canada, when it has made films, drawn on its own literature so seldom?" In his alter ego as Marshall Delaney, the film critic, Robert Fulford once ran through Canadian novels in his mind, suggesting a number that were ripe for screen treatment. That was 25 years ago, before Alice Munro, Barbara Gowdy, Rohinton Mistry, Audrey Thomas and so many other of today's important fiction writers had started to create or had made their reputations.

Precedent would seem to suggest that, while several such authors may receive some windfall money from an option or a rights sale, and one or two may actually get to view a film made of their work, the record will, for the most part, continue to be spotty in the extreme.

Brian Moore (an Irish-born Canadian citizen, now a resident of California) has probably been the most successful of our living novelists in getting his work transferred to the screen, from *The Luck of Ginger Coffey* in 1964 (with a very young Robert Shaw) to *Black Robe* in 1991—with many other attempts in between, which for one reason or another never quite got made or released. Margaret Atwood, the best-known living Canadian writer around the world, has had all the same frustrations, going back to 1969

and a film of *The Edible Woman* that almost but never quite went into production. The only feature films of her work to date have been Claude Jutra's *Surfacing* (1981) and Volker Schlöndorff's version of her dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1990), as adapted by Harold Pinter. Clearly, the second is a more important film than the first, but even taken together they scarcely do justice to one of the few true national literary treasures. Like Moore, Atwood has herself adapted a number of her own and other people's works as screenplays, including an unproduced version of Marie-Claire Blais's *Mad Shadows*. (Now that would be interesting to see up on the screen.)

The Canadian novelist with the most experience as a screenwriter is probably Mordecai Richler, with credits going back at least as far as *Life at the Top* in 1965. But of his own works for adults, only *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, the 1974 version by fellow Canadian Ted Kotcheff, is available on the screen as passable evidence of his life on paper.

All and all, the record of the above generation was at best haphazard and misleading and far from representative. These days, opportunities seem slightly better in some ways, but, based on long experience, one should always be skeptical awaiting the results. Right now, with the Booker, the Governor-General's Award and the Pulitzer Prize for *The Stone Diaries* (an unprecedented triple crown of thoroughbred novel-writing), Carol Shields is also, perforce, the great hope of Canadian literature on the screen as well. At this writing, three films of her work are underway: *Swann*, *A Mystery* from a British producer, Anna Benson-Jones, with a screenplay by the Canadian writer David Young and starring Miranda Richardson; *Republic of Love*, starring Bridget Fonda; and finally, of course, *The Stone Diaries*, which is being made into a feature by Cynthia Scott of the NFB.

All these will be interesting for film people and book lovers to follow. But much more optimism is riding on the outcome of *The English Patient*, because Michael Ondaatje is, after all, the most film-oriented of all major Canadian writers; he's the only one who's made some famous short films of his own and is a graduate of the Canadian Film Centre to boot. He's also someone whose writings—whether prose or poetry or the form in between which he seems to have helped invent—are among the most filmic and visual, the least lineal and literary in the Canadian canon. So, we'll wait and see, and watch. ■