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Canada Day

What can we say about a country that defines itself by what it isn't and makes Joe and his beer ad a national icon.

Well, we can say, proudly, and in our own understated way, that we have carved a national character through conversation. We talk ourselves into and out of political dilemmas and identity crisis. But it is our writers who reveal our true identity - the relationships that both bind and separate us.

There are several theories as to why Canadians have always excelled at the most difficult of literary art forms - the short story. Self-deprecating as we are, for us, less is often more. Perhaps it's our connection to the land - whether it be the prairies, or the ice bergs or the urban sprawl that creates the backdrop for our vignettes. Or maybe it was the pioneer, pressed for time, that launched our long tradition with the short story. Whatever the reason, Canadian short story writers have achieved international recognition for their mastery of a form not always given its due.

The skill of the short story writer is compression and often brevity disguises the true substance of the material. From W.O. Mitchell to Alice Munro, Stephen Leacock to Guy Vanderhaeghe, our short story writers eloquently distill the powerful physical and the psychological landscape of Canada.

It's been a stunning year for Canadian short stories. Now an award-winning novelist, Alistair MacLeod's early short fiction, recently re-released in *Island, The Collected Stories*, mostly set on Cape Breton, is about isolation, and the melancholy of men and the work they once did.

Another Maritimer, now transplanted to the west coast, Lynn Coady's debut collection *Play the Monster Blind* houses 11 short stories she says were "born of necessity" as she needed to pay the bills. Her stories transcend locale, exploring family dysfunction, the hilarity that often masks brutality, and the most Canadian of themes - survival.

Pulitzer Prize winner Carol Shields, says a short story is like a hot air balloon – it will go up higher, but it won't go as far. A novel she says is more like a train. Her latest collection, *Dressing Up for the Carnival*, goes the distance with an amazing array of Shield's trademark relationship tales, and are laced with insight and gentle humour.

Novelist Katherine Govier's latest offering is called *The Truth Teller*, but her short stories, like those in *Fables of Brunswick Avenue* and *The Immaculate Conception Photograph Gallery* are some of the best glimpses of our urban selves. And, Bonnie Burnard, winner of last year's prestigious Giller Prize for her novel *A Good House*, displayed, in her 1994 collection, *casino & other stories*, her rare and extraordinary talent to make everyday people and everyday life completely absorbing.

Although it's not fiction, *Eminent Canadians: Candid Tales of Then and Now* by the saucy enfant terrible of the literati, John Fraser, still fits the bill. Fraser offers a brief but eloquent sweep of the identity debate and says the intent of his biographical essays was to "redeem the dismissed and humanize the demonized." His portraiture captures our reluctance to honour the deserving.

All of these splendid collections offer familiar reflections, some frightening, some comforting. So, when I read our short story writers I find myself uncharacteristically and boldly declaring: My name is Pamela and I'm proud to live amongst writers that can stir my patriotic soul, hard as it is to compete with Joe and beer and hockey.