



# Good News for Canadian Writers

by Julie H. Ferguson

Freelance writer and author of two Canadian naval history books, Vancouver-based Julie Ferguson leads seminars and workshops on writing and publishing for writers' conferences, a community college, school districts, and businesses. For more information contact Beacon Literary Services at [info@beaconlit.com](mailto:info@beaconlit.com). You are also invited to visit her website at <http://www.beaconlit.com/>

Glazed eyes usually result from a surfeit of statistics but Canadian writers' eyes will pop out on stalks when they realize the implications of recent data gathered about the Canadian publishing industry, which include the 1996/97 StatsCan Survey of Canadian Book Publishers and Exclusive Agents. Although readily available, many writers seem unaware of these heartening facts. For example, having spent three days with 450 delegates at the Surrey Writers' Conference in British Columbia in October 99, I found no-one knew about the statistics, including some publishers and agents. The figures give hope to all of us who are trying to get our work published north of the 49th parallel.

Canadians tend to assume that our publishing industry is a miniaturized version of the American, but nothing could be further from the truth. In the fiscal year 1996/97, the StatsCan survey, which included both French and English publishing firms, reported that:

- † There were 511 publishing houses in this country, 490 of which are Canadian- controlled, including 137 with revenues of less than \$50,000.00;
- † Publishers produced 11,400 new titles and 7,541 reprints;
- † Ontario and Quebec publishers dominated the industry, earning 95% of the total revenues of \$1.98 billion;
- † Publishers in the Maritimes and the Prairies collectively lost money;
- † Forty-seven houses in BC collectively made a profit, but accounted for only 2.9% of our publishing revenues;
- † Federal and provincial government grants to publishers totalled \$40 million;
- † Text books and trade books are enjoying substantial growth; and,

† 9% of new titles were children's books (1026 of 11400).

Now here are some more encouraging facts gleaned from the industry:

- † In North America, women buy more fiction than men and over 70% of all books purchased;
- † Men read more history, biography, and other non-fiction than women;
- † Although mergers are taking place in Canada, there are no major publishing conglomerates here like those that dominate the US scene;
- † In 96/97, 75% of Canadian titles (8550 of 11400) were non-fiction;
- † Non-fiction is growing in popularity in Canada;
- † There are only 12 literary agencies in Canada; and,
- † Publishers only acquired 10% of Canadian titles through an agent in 1996/97, meaning 10,260 books were published without an agent, often by first-time authors.

These figures explode several myths. The idea that publishers prefer fiction has now gone the way of the dodo. Non-fiction is the "thing" and, for those of us who work in this area, it looks certain that the market will continue to grow. Speculation as to why revolves around the aging of the population and the drive of baby-boomers to improve themselves in every way, from cooking to spiritual reawakening.

Another myth rampant among aspiring authors in Canada says that writers must have an agent to have any hope of getting published. With about 10,000 titles/year being published without the involvement of agents, Canadian writers have something to crow about that our American cousins do not-direct access. In fact, Canadian publishers are remarkably accessible to writers, even the leading houses, and a writer can often expect to talk on the telephone with an editor about their ideas before sending a query letter. Not always, mind you! But it's more likely than not.

Publicly owned publishing conglomerates that dominate the American industry are driven by their shareholders. Their motivation when accepting manuscripts is purely financial-the books that they select must be capable of selling tens or hundreds of thousands of copies. Also important to know, is the big boys' source of manuscripts-it is exclusively via agents and this is where the myth comes from. Small and medium houses are independently owned and can choose manuscripts for less pressing reasons than the bottom line. If they believe they can successfully promote an author or his/her book on radio and television, for example, it could be the reason they issue a contract; another one would be because the editor has a "mission" and wants a series of books on a certain topic. These publishers use agents only 10% of the time and they are the only type of publishers we have in Canada, which is excellent news for writers here.

The Canadian publishing grants mean that, even if we write for a very narrow market like I do, we can get published here. The grants ensure that publishers can at least break even on small print runs of books that are highly specialized or are so regional in scope, the readership is limited. These grants are one of the reasons that Canadian publishing maintains its "voice" among the deluge of books that pour in from south of the border. Many books that are about Canadian subjects or by little-known Canadian writers would never see the light of day without grants.

So, assuming you write well, have a good idea, and present yourself as knowledgeable and professional, your chances of being published in Canada, especially in non-fiction, are relatively good. At last, statistics that delight, rather than glaze!

*Sources: "Sizing up the book industry," Quill and Quire, October 1998. StatsCan website at [www.statcan.ca](http://www.statcan.ca). (The original survey has given way to new postings about the industry.)*

Copyright ©1999 Julie Ferguson.