

ISHMAEL REED

What's American About America?

The African-American novelist, poet, editor, and essayist Ishmael Reed was born in 1938 in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Known for his satiric wit, Reed abolishes time and rearranges history in his novels to create and revive a special kind of black folklore that includes magic and voodoo. With the aesthetic he calls "Neo-HooDoo" he has parodied genre fiction such as westerns and mysteries. *Flight to Canada* (1976) is a farcical treatment of slavery; *Japanese by Spring* (1993) satirizes academic posturing over multiculturalism, among other issues. Besides editing and publishing several volumes of poetry and essays, Reed has produced a video soap opera and founded a publishing company devoted to the work of unknown ethnic artists. He is currently a senior lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley. "What's American About America?" is reprinted from the March-April 1989 *Utne Reader*. A longer version originally appeared in Reed's *Writin' Is Fightin'* (1983).

As Reed suggests in this essay, the United States is not the WASP (white Anglo-Saxon Protestant) society of Norman Rockwell paintings. Indeed, white Americans may become a minority in the twenty-first century. Census statistics show that already one out of four Americans is nonwhite or Hispanic. Immigration and birth rates indicate that by the year 2000, the collective population of Hispanics, Asians, and blacks will have doubled, while the white population will have increased by only a few percent. In some parts of the country — California schools, for example — a nonwhite majority is already a reality. As more and more Americans recognize the diversity of our population and heritage, questions such as What language do we speak? What holidays do we observe? and Who are our heroes? challenge the Anglo-Saxon bias in our culture.

An item from the *New York Times*, June 23, 1983: "At the annual Lower East Side Jewish Festival yesterday, a Chinese woman ate a pizza slice in front of Ty Thuan Duc's Vietnamese grocery store. Beside her a Spanish-speaking family patronized a cart with two signs: 'Italian Ices' and 'Kosher by Rabbi Alper.' And after the pastrami ran out, everybody ate knishes."

On the day before Memorial Day, 1983, a poet called me to describe a city he had just visited. He said that one section included mosques, built by the Islamic people who dwelled there. Attending his reading, he said, were large numbers of Hispanic people, 40,000 of whom lived in

the same city. He was not talking about a fabled city located in some mysterious region of the world. The city he'd visited was Detroit.

A few months before, as I was visiting Texas, I heard the taped voice used to guide passengers to their connections at the Dallas Airport announcing items in both Spanish and English. This trend is likely to continue; after all, for some southwestern states like Texas, where the largest minority is now Mexican-American, Spanish was the first written language and the Spanish style lives on in the western way of life.

Shortly after my Texas trip, I sat in a campus auditorium at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee as a Yale professor — whose original work on the influence of African cultures upon those of the Americas has led to his ostracism from some intellectual circles — walked up and down the aisle like an old-time Southern evangelist, dancing and drumming the top of the lectern, illustrating his points before some Afro-American intellectuals and artists who cheered and applauded his performance. The professor was “white.” After his lecture, he conversed with a group of Milwaukeeans — all of whom spoke Yoruban, though only the professor had ever traveled to Africa.

One of the artists there told me that his paintings, which included African and Afro-American mythological symbols and imagery, were hanging in the local McDonald's restaurant. The next day I went to McDonald's and snapped pictures of smiling youngsters eating hamburgers below paintings that could grace the walls of any of the country's leading museums. The manager of the local McDonald's said, “I don't know what you boys are doing, but I like it,” as he commissioned the local painters to exhibit in his restaurant.

Such blurring of cultural styles occurs in everyday life in the United States to a greater extent than anyone can imagine. The result is what the above-mentioned Yale professor, Robert Thompson, referred to as a cultural bouillabaisse. Yet members of the nation's present educational and cultural elect still cling to the notion that the United States belongs to some vaguely defined entity they refer to as “Western civilization,” by which they mean, presumably, a civilization created by people of Europe, as if Europe can even be viewed in monolithic terms. Is Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, which includes Turkish marches, a part of Western civilization? Or the late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century French paintings, whose creators were influenced by Japanese art? And what of the cubists, through whom the influence of African art changed modern painting? Or the surrealists, who were so impressed with the art of the Pacific Northwest Indians that, in their map of North America, Alaska dwarfs the lower forty-eight states in size?

Are the Russians, who are often criticized for their adoption of "Western" ways by Tsarist dissidents in exile, members of Western civilization? And what of the millions of Europeans who have black African and Asian ancestry, black Africans having occupied several European countries for hundreds of years? Are these "Europeans" a part of Western civilization? Or the Hungarians, who originated across the Urals in a place called Greater Hungary? Or the Irish, who came from the Iberian Peninsula?

Even the notion that North America is part of Western civilization because our "system of government" is derived from Europe is being challenged by Native American historians who say that the founding fathers, Benjamin Franklin especially, were actually influenced by the system of government that had been adopted by the Iroquois hundreds of years prior to the arrival of Europeans.

Western civilization, then, becomes another confusing category — like Third World, or Judeo-Christian culture — as humanity attempts to impose its small-screen view of political and cultural reality upon a complex world. Our most publicized novelist recently said that Western civilization was the greatest achievement of mankind — an attitude that flourishes on the street level as scribbles in public restrooms: "White Power," "Niggers and Spics Suck," or "Hitler was a prophet." Where did such an attitude, which has caused so much misery and depression in our national life, which has tainted even our noblest achievements, begin? An attitude that caused the incarceration of Japanese-American citizens during World War II, the persecution of Chicanos and Chinese Americans, the near-extirpation of the Indians, and the murder and lynchings of thousands of Afro-Americans.

The Puritans of New England are idealized in our schoolbooks as the first Americans, "a hardy band" of no-nonsense patriarchs whose discipline razed the forest and brought "order" to the New World (a term that annoys Native American historians). Industrious, responsible, it was their "Yankee ingenuity" and practicality that created the work ethic. 10

The Puritans, however, had a mean streak. They hated the theater and banned Christmas. They punished people in a cruel and inhuman manner. They killed children who disobeyed their parents. They exterminated the Indians, who had taught them how to survive in a world unknown to them. And their encounter with calypso culture, in the form of a servant from Barbados working in a Salem minister's household, resulted in the witchcraft hysteria.

The Puritan legacy of hard work and meticulous accounting led to the establishment of a great industrial society, but there was the other side — the strange and paranoid attitudes of that society toward those different from the elect.

The cultural attitudes of that early elect continue to be voiced in everyday life in the United States: the president of a distinguished university, writing a letter to the *Times*, belittling the study of African civilizations; the television network that promoted its show on Vatican art with the boast that this art represented "the finest achievements of the human spirit."

When I heard a schoolteacher warn the other night about the invasion of the American educational system by foreign curricula, I wanted to yell at the television set, "Lady, they're already here." It has already begun because the world is here. The world has been arriving at these shores for at least 10,000 years from Europe, Africa, and Asia. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, large numbers of Europeans arrived, adding their cultures to those of the European, African, and Asian settlers who were already here, and recently millions have been entering the country from South America and the Caribbean, making Robert Thompson's bouillabaisse richer and thicker.

North America deserves a more exciting destiny than as a repository of "Western civilization." We can become a place where the cultures of the world crisscross. This is possible because the United States and Canada are unique in the world: The world is here. 15

GISH JEN

Helen in America

Gish Jen's original first name was Lillian; an affinity with movie star Lillian Gish led to the switch. Born in 1955, she grew up in one of the few Asian-American families in Yonkers and then Scarsdale, New York. Although Jen was not much daunted by racism at the time, she later observed: "If you are a minority, you never know when the rug is going to be pulled out from under you — whether or not you have education, dignity, or accomplishment." Jen started writing as a Harvard University undergraduate. At her parents' urging she went on to study business at Stanford University, but she took off a year and a half to work at Doubleday Publishing Company and never returned to finish her degree. Instead she taught English in China, then earned her M.F.A. in the writing program at the University of Iowa. She has taught and lectured at Tufts University and the University of Massachusetts and now lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Jen's novel *Typical American*, from which "Helen in America" is excerpted, was published in 1991. In it, Jen uses italicized English for characters' conversations in Chinese.

The characters in "Helen in America" fled China after Communists led by Mao Zedong took control in 1949. Japan's defeat in World War II had ended its long effort to wrest China away from Nationalist forces led by General Chiang Kai-shek. Civil war followed between Chiang's Kuomintang government, backed by the United States, and Mao's Communist rebels, backed by the Soviet Union. The victorious Maoists forced the Kuomintang into exile on Taiwan and began restructuring China's economy on the Soviet model: Private property was turned over to collectives, and central planning replaced markets. In 1966 the decade-long Cultural Revolution began, glorifying workers, peasants, and soldiers and purging "bourgeois" intellectuals and officials — including Deng Xiaoping, who would become Mao's successor after his death in 1976. Today tight Communist political control continues: In the Spring of 1989, student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square for faster-paced and wider-ranging governmental reforms were dispersed by the army, and hundreds — perhaps thousands — of unarmed protesters were killed. Deng's government has fended off reprisal from the United States by continuing to loosen economic restrictions on free enterprise and trade with the West.

For more background on China, see page 97.

Helen's life in China had been in every way perfect. Though a girl, she had been preceded by a twin sister who had died, so that her own touch-and-go start was cheered breath by halting breath; and in later life, she'd been blessed by just enough lingering, sometimes serious illness, to win her much fuss. Well — maybe some of the fuss she could have done without, for instance the sort that involved her grandfather firing doctors; her mother was always hiding with embarrassment, or else whispering at the edge of Helen's bed, in a voice so low that Helen felt the words more than she heard them. They were a sensation, a stirring, something she could not have sworn came from outside herself.

Still she was content, so sweet-natured that her two sisters and three brothers, who might have resented her, instead vied in their efforts to please. They carried her up and down the stairs, sang her songs. She was a family pastime. Her life ambition was to stay home forever. The way Americans in general like to move around, the Chinese love to hold still; removal is a fall and an exile. And for Helen, the general was particularly true. The one gnarl of her childhood was the knowledge that, if she did not die of one of her diseases, she would eventually have to marry and go live with in-laws. And then she'd probably wish she *had* died. How faint she felt, just listening to the stories other girls told — about a neighbor's daughter, for example, who walked all the way home from Hangzhou, only to be sent back. That was extreme, of course, but how about her friend's cousin who, married away into the countryside, was made to take baths in a big copper vat? Over a pit fire, as though she were a pork joint, in water that had already been used by her father-in-law, her husband, her husband's seven brothers, and her mother-in-law. *Don't worry*, Helen's parents reassured her, *we'll find you someone nice, someone you like too. No one's going to beat you.* But at best, Helen knew, she would be sent to scratch out some new, poor spot for herself, at the edge of a strange world, separated from everyone she loved as though by a violent, black ocean.

Now, America. For the first few months, she could hardly sit without thinking how she might be wearing out her irreplaceable clothes. How careful she had to be! Theresa could traipse all over, searching out that elusive brother of hers; Helen walked as little and as lightly as she could, sparing her shoes, that they might last until the Nationalists saved the country and she could go home again. She studied the way she walked too, lightly — why should she struggle with English? She wrote her parents during class, every day hoping for an answer that never came. She went to Chinatown three times a week, thinking of it as one more foreign quarter of Shanghai, like the British concession, or the French. She learned to cook, so that she'd have Chinese food to eat. When she

could not have Chinese food, she did not eat. Theresa (who would eat anything, even cheese and salad) of course thought her silly. "In Shanghai you ate foreign food," Theresa said (*da cai*, she called it — big vegetables). "Why shouldn't you eat it here?" Still, for a long time, Helen would not, which they both thought would make her sick.

She was not at home enough, though, even to fall ill.

This could not go on forever. Eventually, faith faltering, Helen studied harder, walked more, bought new clothes, wrote her parents less. She did continue to spend whole afternoons simply sitting still, staring, as though hoping to be visited by ghosts, or by a truly wasting disease; but she also developed a liking for American magazines, American newspapers. American radio — she kept her Philco in the corner of the living room nearest the bedroom, so she could listen nonstop. She sang along: "The corn is as high as an el-e-phant's eyyee . . ." She did not insist on folding all her clothes, but used the closet too. She began to say "red, white, and blue" instead of "blue, white, and red" and to distinguish "interest" from "interested" from "interesting." She caught a few colds. And she married Ralph, officially accepting what seemed already true — that she had indeed crossed a violent, black ocean; and that it was time to make herself as at home in her exile as she could.

Not that Helen would ever be at home anywhere but her real home. And yet sometimes she couldn't help but be infected with a bit of Ralph and Theresa's enormous enthusiasm for their new arrangement. How right it all did seem! That Ralph should marry her, friend of Theresa — it was just as their parents would have had it.

"Don't you think she's just like our little sister?" Ralph asked Theresa once.

"There's a resemblance," said Theresa.

Helen blushed.

"Such a coincidence," said Ralph. "You know, someone at school was talking the other day about a person who took his house apart, and moved it, and then rebuilt it, just the way it was."

"That's like us, and our family," Theresa agreed.

"The odd thing was that that house had a leak. So why did the man move it, if it had a leak? That's the question. Also, he had always hated the inside of it. Too small."

"Well," said Theresa, "leaks or no leaks, maybe he was used to it."

"I guess," said Ralph, uncertainly.

Helen sighed. At home, room had always been made for her in the conversation; people paused before going on, and looked at her. Here, she had to launch herself into the talking, for instance during a lull, as now.

"You know that saying about a wife's ankle?" she put in softly.

"What?" said Ralph.

"Don't interrupt," said Theresa. "She's talking."

"I can't hear her."

"That saying," Helen said louder. "Do you know that saying, about a wife's ankle? Being tied to her husband's?" 20

"Of course," encouraged Theresa. "With a long red string. From the time she's born."

"Well, I think maybe my ankle was tied to my husband's and sister-in-law's both."

"Ah no! To both? To my ankle too?" Theresa protested, laughing. Then, in English, "Are you trying to pull my leg?"

They all laughed. "Good joke!" cried Ralph.

"Good one!" Helen agreed. 25

Weren't they happy, though? At least until it was time for them to move to a run-down walk-up north of 125th Street, whose air smelled of mildew and dog. It was the kind of place where the poorest of students lived, where the differences in housekeeping between the halls and the rooms were as dramatic as the occupants could manage. An economy. Ralph and Helen and Theresa had agreed on it. Yet they were belatedly shocked. So many Negroes! Years later, they would shake their heads and call themselves prejudiced, but at the time they were profoundly disconcerted. And what kind of an apartment was this? This apartment sagged. Theresa poked a finger in a soft spot of plaster, occasioning a moist avalanche. "We're not the kind of people who live like this," she said.

But their super, it seemed, thought they were. That Petel! He expected them to stand endlessly in his doorway, his half German shepherd jumping up on them as he rambled on about the boiler. As for their situation — Was it an "urgency"? he'd ask. Only, yes or no, to not be coming — not to see about their plumbing problems, not to see about their ceiling problems, not to see about the crack in the back bedroom wall that seemed quite definitely to be widening.

"Leaks," said Ralph, batting the dog away. "Paint come down. Big crack." Politely at first. Then, with more vigor, "You do nothing! This building falling down!" The result was that Pete once said he'd "swing by sometime," once explained that his boss, the owner, had some months ago done a bit of work on the roof.

"So?"

"Well now, I don't know that ever'thing a body says has got to have a point," he said. 30

Fan tong, Ralph called him — rice barrel. Helen and Theresa laughed. And here was the most irritating thing: fly open, feet up on his legless desk, dog at the door, he'd often be thumbing through course

catalogs, exchanging one for another, sometimes working through two at once. Should he be a lawyer? A doctor? An engineer? As if he could be an engineer! As if he could get a Ph.D.!

A man, Pete said, was what he made up his mind to be.

"*That man is fooling himself!*" Ralph shook his head.

Helen, meanwhile, hired a plumber, scraped the loose paint so it wouldn't hang, walked Ralph's file cabinet into the back bedroom to hide the crack. Could this place ever be a home? Next to the file cabinet she put a tall bookcase, and straddling them, a small, wide one that only just cleared the ceiling.

"*Smart,*" admired Ralph.

"*I saw it in a magazine,*" she told him. "*This is called wall unit.*"

"Wall-unit," repeated Ralph. And later he observed that it was exactly in solutions like hers that a person could see how well the Changs were going to do in their new life.

"*Not like that Pete,*" he said. "*He's fooling himself.*"

Entertainment: Ralph took to imitating Pete's walk. He'd slump, a finger cleaning his ear, only to have Theresa gamely cry out, "*No, no like this,*" and add a shuffle, turning out her knees as Helen laughed. They studied the way Pete blew his nose, that they might get it right; they studied his sneeze, his laugh, the self-important way he flipped through his calendar. "Well, now, let me have some look-sce," growled Theresa. "Typical Pete!" Ralph roared in approval. "Typical, typical Pete!" Ralph even mimicked Boyboy, Pete's mutt — strutting around, barking showily, calling himself "Ralph-Ralph." He paced back and forth, guarding the door with wide swishes of a brush tail; he jumped up on Helen and Theresa as they tried to dodge by with grocery bags. And pretty soon, no one knew quite how, "typical Pete" turned "typical American" turned typical American this, typical American that. "Typical American no-good," Ralph would say; Theresa, "typical American don't-know-how-to-get-along"; and Helen, wistfully, "typical American just-want-to-be-the-center-of-things." They were sure, of course, that they wouldn't "become wild" here in America, where there was "no one to control them." Yet they were more sure still as they shook their heads over a clerk who short-changed them ("typical American no-morals!"). Over a neighbor who snapped his key in his door lock ("typical American use-brute-force!"). Or what about that other neighbor's kid, who claimed the opposite of a Democrat to be a pelican? ("Peckin?" said Ralph. "A kind of bird," explained Theresa; then he laughed too. "Typical American just-dumb!") They discovered stories everywhere. A boy who stole his father's only pair of pants. A mother who kept her daughter on a leash. An animal trainer who, in a fit of anger, bit his wife's ear off.

"With his mouth?" Ralph couldn't believe it. +0

But it was true. Helen had read it in the American newspaper, which was honest enough to admit, one day, that they were right. Americans had degenerated since the War. As for why, that was complicated. Sitting in the green room that was the living room and Theresa's bedroom both, she read the whole article aloud. Ralph and Theresa listened carefully.

"That's what we were saying," Ralph commented finally. He looked to Theresa, who nodded.

"Americans want to loosen up now, have a good time," she said. "They're sick of rationing."

"Would you read it again?"

Helen would — glad, she supposed, to have in the family at least this +5
one rickety seat. And sure enough, there it was once more, evidence of how smart they were. Imagine that — that they could see, in a foreign country, what was what! Above them, the ceiling light dropped haloes in their hair as they listened on. Everything, they heard, was going to be okay.

A View from Canada

Margaret Atwood is one of Canada's most distinguished novelists, poets, and critics. Born in Ottawa, Ontario, in 1939, she was educated at Victoria College, University of Toronto, Radcliffe College, and Harvard University. She has taught at colleges and universities in Canada and the United States and has received more than a dozen literary awards and fellowships. Since her earliest poems and her first novel, *The Edible Woman* (1969), Atwood has been noted for her themes of distance and defenses and for her poignant characterizations, particularly of women. Her virtuosity with language ranges from wildly passionate (*Surfacing*, 1972) to coldly controlled (*Life Before Man*, 1979). Her ironic futuristic novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986) was made into a motion picture. The author of several volumes of short stories, as well as occasional plays and children's books, Atwood currently lives in Toronto. "A View from Canada" comes from a speech given at Harvard University in 1981 and reprinted in *Second Words* (1982).

Canada, the world's second-largest country (after Russia), extends from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean and from the North Pole to the U.S. border. The French explorer Jacques Cartier claimed it for France in 1534. Settlers followed, starting in Acadia (now Nova Scotia) and moving into Quebec. As the English colonies to the south became more established, conflicts arose over hunting, trapping, and fishing rights. In the early 1700s the English took over Newfoundland, Hudson Bay, and Acadia. Many of the evicted French speakers migrated south to Louisiana, where "Acadians" became slurred to "Cajuns." Various British colonies united in 1867 as the Dominion of Canada, which stayed subject to British rule until 1982. Although today Canada's head of government is an elected prime minister, its head of state is still the British monarch. Ottawa, the nation's capital, lies in a narrow section of Ontario between New York State and Quebec, a province where French remains the predominant language. Tension continues between Canadians of English and French heritage, with Quebec periodically threatening to secede. In 1990 the Meech Lake accord, which would have given Quebec the protection of distinct constitutional status, failed to win national approval.

I spent a large part of my childhood in northern Quebec, surrounded by many trees and few people. My attitude toward Americans was formed by this environment. Alas, the Americans we encountered were usually

pictures of ineptitude. We once met two of them dragging a heaving metal boat, plus the motor, across a portage from one lake to another because they did not want to paddle. Typically American, we thought, as they ricocheted off yet another tree. Americans hooked other people when they tried to cast, got lost in the woods, and didn't burn their garbage. Of course, many Canadians behaved this way too; but somehow not as many. And there were some Americans, friends of my father, who could shoot a rapids without splintering their canoe and who could chop down a tree without taking off a foot in the process. But these were not classed as Americans, not *real* Americans. They were from Upper Michigan State or Maine or places like that, and were classed, I blush to admit, not as Americans but as honorary Canadians. I recognize that particular cross-filing system, that particular way of approving of people you as a rule don't approve of, every time a man tells me I think like a man; a sentence I've always felt had an invisible comma after the word *think*. I've since recognized that it's no compliment to be told you are not who you are, but as children we generalized, cheerfully and shamelessly. The truth, from our limited experience, was clear: Americans were wimps who had a lot of money but did not know what they were doing.

That was the rural part of my experience. The urban part was somewhat different. In the city I went to school, and in the early years at any rate the schools I went to were still bastions of the British Empire. In school we learned the Kings of England and how to draw the Union Jack and sing "Rule Britannia," and poems with refrains like, "Little Indian, Sioux or Cree, Don't you wish that you were me?" Our imaginations were still haunted by the war, a war that we pictured as having been fought between us, that is, the British, and the Germans. There wasn't much room in our minds for the Americans and the Japanese. Winston Churchill was a familiar figure to us; Franklin D. Roosevelt was not.

In public school we did not learn much about Americans, or Canadians either, for that matter. Canadian history was the explorers and was mostly brown and green, for all those trees. British history was kings and queens, and much more exciting, since you could use the silver and gold colored pencils for it.

That era of Canadian colonialism was rapidly disappearing, however. One explanation for the reason it practically vanished during the postwar decade — 1946 to 1957, say, the year I graduated from high school — is an economic one. The Canadians, so the theory goes, overextended themselves so severely through the war effort that they created a capital vacuum in Canada. Nature and entrepreneurs hate a vacuum, so money flowed up from the United States to fill it, and when Canadians woke up in the sixties and started to take stock, they discovered they'd sold their

birthright for a mess. This revelation was an even greater shock for me; not only was my country owned, but it was owned by the kind of people who carried tin boats across portages and didn't burn their garbage! One doubted their competence.

→ Looking back on this decade, I can see that the changeover from British cultural colony to American cultural colony was symbolized by what happened after school as opposed to in it. I know it's hard to believe in view of my youthful appearance, but when I was a child there was no television. There were, however, comic books, and these were monolithically American. We didn't much notice, except when we got to the ads at the back, where Popsicle Pete reigned supreme. Popsicle Pete would give you the earth in exchange for a few sticky wrappers, but his promises always had a little asterisk attached: "Offer good only in the United States." International world cynics may be forgiven for thinking that the same little asterisk is present invisibly in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights, not to mention the public statements of prominent Americans on such subjects as democracy, human dignity and freedom, and civil liberties. Maybe it all goes back to Popsicle Pete. We may all be in this together, but some of us are asterisked.

Such thoughts did not trouble our heads a great deal. When you were finished with Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse (and Walt Disney was, by the way, a closet Canadian), you could always go on to Superman (whose creator was also one of ours). After that it would be time for Sunday night radio, with Jack Benny and Our Miss Brooks. We knew they talked funny, but we didn't mind. Then of course there were movies, none of which were Canadian, but we didn't mind that either. Everyone knew that was what the world was like. Nobody knew there had once been a Canadian film industry.

After that I went to high school, where people listened to American pop music after school instead of reading comic books. During school hours we studied, among other things, history and literature. Literature was still the British tradition: Shakespeare, Eliot, Austen, Thomas Hardy, Keats and Wordsworth and Shelley and Byron; not experiences anyone should miss, but it did tend to give the impression that all literature was written by dead Englishmen, and — this is important — by dead Englishwomen. By this time I wanted to be a writer, and you can see it would be a dilemma: Being female was no hindrance, but how could one be a writer and somehow manage to avoid having to become British and dead? . . .

In history it was much the same story. We started with ancient Egypt and worked our way through Greece, Rome, and medieval Europe, then

the Renaissance and the birth of the modern era, the invention of the steam engine, the American revolution, the French revolution, the Civil War, and other stirring events, every single one of which had taken place outside Canada.

Finally, in the very last year, by which time many future citizens had dropped out anyway, we got a blue book called *Canada in the World Today*. It was about who grew the wheat, how happy the French were, how well the parliamentary system worked for everybody, and how nice it was that the Indians had given us all their land in exchange for the amenities of civilization. The country we lived in was presented to us in our schools as colorless, dull, and without much historical conflict to speak of, except for a few massacres, and nobody did *that* any more. Even the British war of conquest was a dud, since both of the generals died. It was like a hockey game in which both teams lost.

As for Canada in the *World Today*, its role, we were assured, was an important one. It was the upper northwest corner of a triangle consisting of Canada, the United States, and Britain, and its position was not one to be sneezed at: Canada, having somehow become an expert at compromise, was the mediator. It was not to be parochial and inward-looking any more but was to be international in outlook. Although in retrospect the role of mediator may shrink somewhat — one cannot quite dispel the image of Canada trotting back and forth across the Atlantic with sealed envelopes, like a glorified errand boy — there's a little truth to be squeezed from this lemon. Canadians, oddly enough, *are* more international in outlook than Americans are; not through any virtue on their part but because they've had to be. If you're a Canadian traveling in the United States, one of the first things you notice is the relative absence of international news coverage. In Canada, one of the most popular news programs ever devised has two radio commentators phoning up just about anyone they can get on the line, anywhere in the world. Canadians live in a small house, which may be why they have their noses so firmly pressed to the windows, looking out. ¹⁰

I remember *Canada in the World Today* with modified loathing — “Canada comes of age,” it trumpeted, not bothering to mention that what happened to you when you came of age was that you got pimples or a job or both — and still not a year passes without some politician announcing that Canada has finally grown up. Still, the title is significant. Canada sees itself as part of the world; a small sinking *Titanic* squashed between two icebergs, perhaps, but still inevitably a part. The States, on the other hand, has always had a little trouble with games like chess. Situational strategy is difficult if all you can see is your own borders, and beyond that some wispy brownish fuzz that is barely worth considering.

The Canadian experience was a circumference with no center, the American one a center which was mistaken for the whole thing.

A few years ago I was in India and had occasion to visit both the Canadian and American enclaves in New Delhi. The Canadian there lived in a house decorated with Indian things and served us a meal of Indian food and told us all about India. One reason for going into the foreign service, in Canada anyway, is to get out of Canada, and Canadians are good at fitting in, partly because they can't afford to do otherwise. They could not afford, for instance, to have the kind of walled compound the Americans had. We were let in to do some shopping at the supermarket there, and once the gate had closed you were in Syracuse, New York. Hot dogs, hamburgers, cokes, and rock music surrounded you. Americans enter the outside world the way they landed on the moon, with their own oxygen tanks of American air strapped to their backs and their protective spacesuits firmly in place. If they can't stay in America they take it with them. Not for them the fish-in-the-water techniques of the modern urban guerrilla. Those draft dodgers of the sixties who made it as far as Canada nearly died of culture shock: They thought it was going to be like home.

It's not their fault, though. It's merely that they've been oddly educated. Canadians and Americans may look alike, but the contents of their heads are quite different. Americans experience themselves, individually, as small toads in the biggest and most powerful puddle in the world. Their sense of power comes from identifying with the puddle. Canadians as individuals may have more power within the puddle, since there are fewer toads in it; it's the puddle that's seen as powerless. One of our politicians recently gave a speech entitled, "In the Footsteps of the Giant." The United States of course was the giant and Canada was in its footsteps, though some joker wondered whether Canada was in the footstep just before or just after the foot had descended. One of Canada's problems is that it's always comparing itself to the wrong thing. If you stand beside a giant, of course you tend to feel a little stunted. When we stand beside Australia, say, or the ex-British West Indies, we feel more normal. I had lunch recently with two publishers from Poland. "Do Canadians realize," they said, "that they live in one of the most peaceful, happy, and prosperous countries on earth?" "No," I said. . . .

Americans and Canadians are not the same; they are the products of two very different histories, two very different situations. Put simply, south of you you have Mexico and south of us we have you.

But we *are* all in this together, not just as citizens of our respective nation states but more importantly as inhabitants of this quickly shrinking and increasingly threatened earth. There are boundaries and borders,

spiritual as well as physical, and good fences make good neighbors. But there are values beyond national ones. Nobody owns the air; we all breathe it.