

## Beyond Borders: Examining the World in Canadian YA

Canada is a nation with two official languages, dozens of recognized and respected First Nations communities, and an inordinate number of multicultural communities that bind themselves together through a heritage expressed in words. These communities helped CanLit in English to long ago shuffle off the notion of a uniform “national literature” based solely on a stereotypical Canadian landscape. Today, we embrace the landscapes and cultures of many groups of people who immigrated here in the past sixty years and help make up our nation’s rich cultural mosaic. Our national literature today is not limited scenes of harsh winters, frozen tundra, or rocky shoals, but includes settings and locations as widespread as Europe, Africa, India, and Asia.

Although Canadian young adult literature has also expanded to express these different settings, it has not been at the same pace as Canadian literature as a whole. Although Canadian YA is now considered to be “risky, thought provoking and contemporary . . . [since it] stretches across numerous styles and genres” (Steen, 2007, p. 2), it tends to live on the edge by ramping up its plotlines while remaining located in Canada. Heather Waldorf’s *Grist*, for instance, touches on taboos such as teenage sex and incest, but is located in Northern Ontario. Heather McClintock’s *Robyn Hunter Mysteries*, meanwhile, has characters dealing with parental divorce, physical abuse, and life in juvenile halls, but all set in the big city. Multiculturalism is infused within Canadian YA, but it remains difficult to find in bookstores and on library shelves.

Like Canadian adults, however, Canadian young adults now come from a wide variety of cultures and heritages. Multicultural YA offers the young adult reader a chance to read stories set in the places they or their families come from, or to read tales about people whose culture may be different from their own. In spite of this, there remains a dearth of Canadian multicultural young adult literature on the market. For instance, a consideration of Alberta’s Department of Education curriculum for students in grades 7 to 12, shows that only two of 100 recommended books have settings in Africa (Johnston, 2006). This small number doesn’t necessarily suggest that YA publishers or readers have rejected books with settings outside of Canada, but it does impart the importance of promoting literatures that present different people and different cultures in our schools and libraries.

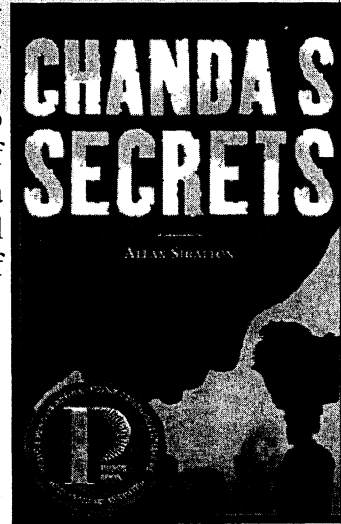


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## Beyond Borders: Recommended Reading

**Allan Stratton, *Chanda's Secrets*. Toronto: Annick Press, 2004.**

Readers of *Chanda's Secrets* will visit sub-Saharan Africa and see it for its beauty, as well as for its poverty, social abuses, and AIDS epidemic. 16 year-old Chanda Kabele must deal with successive stepfathers who have affairs, are abusive, and are alcoholic. When her last stepfather dies of AIDS, Chanda must find a way to care for her mother who has also become infected and maintain the dignity of her siblings and herself. Stratton's book shows us a world far removed from our own, but we are still able to resonate with the reader since so many of Chanda's struggles are our own struggles, too.



**Allan Stratton, *Chanda's Wars*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 2008.**

In this sequel, Chanda faces the question of teenage marriage to heal factions in the family and a war that takes her brother and sister away from her. The independent protagonist treks through a warzone to rescue young Iris and Soly from the ravages of war and an uncertain future.

