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## Reflections on identity

11 memoirs by literary, media stars. Examinations of what it means to be a foreigner, a writer, a Canadian – and all three

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In this new era of post-colonial migration and, one could argue, a recently embellished era of nationalism, the **immigrant** experience has acquired many new dimensions.

Today the familiar, seemingly researched-to-death phenomenon of voluntary and involuntary movement of people from diverse cultures and religions to perceived centres of wealth, liberty and the proverbial streets paved with gold is taking on new and troubling nuances.

Notions of cultural, economic, linguistic, political, ethnic and national loyalties are undergoing profound scrutiny and change. Witness the rah-rah, you're-withus-or-you're-not nationalism south of the border in the wake of the terrorist bloodshed in the United States last year. Witness – and perhaps lament – the sympathetic chest-thumping and denunciations of any form of criticism of American policies on our side of the border not only by your average ill-informed barfly but also by media barons and other powerful protagonists.

In this context, how refreshing, how insightful, how engaging it is to delve into the minds of 11 literary, publishing and media stars, all except one born elsewhere, as they examine what it means to be a Canadian with dual or multiple cultural identities. ·

Passages; Welcome Home to Canada is not about economic migration or globalization. Neither is it another tiresome analysis or study about demographics, declining birthrates and assorted factors affecting Canada or other **immigrant** nations like the **United States, Australia, New Zealand, Argentina** or, lately, Britain and rich European countries.

No, it's all about the explorations, a baring of the soul if you wish, of 11 creative *individuals who have imposed a distinctive stamp on Canadian letters and culture* in this country's immediate past. These are Americans, Britons, **Chinese**, Hungarians, Africans, **Argentinians**, Sri Lankans, Haitians and eastern Europeans

to (perhaps stupidly) label a few – "perhaps stupidly" because many of them have lived in other countries and have heritage's from outside these arbitrary pigeon holes

that have influenced their work and continue to do so.

Each delivers an extremely readable memoir that is often eloquent and sometimes poignant about arrival in Canada and the experience here. Each tries to examine and describe, with mixed impact, what it means to be Canadian.,

Thus we have Toronto novelist M.G. Vassanji, of Indian heritage, born in–Kenya, raised in Tanzania and who moved here from the U.S. to start his Canadian life as a post–doctoral fellow at the nuclear laboratory in Chalk River, Ont. ". On my–first day at work, when I was asked how I found my new surroundings, I answered I felt a bit like David Livingstone, meaning, like a foreigner among natives in a faroff jungle place. I don't know what shocked my hosts more, my estimation of the place or my inversion of the role of native,"

Contrast that with the erudite Alberto Manguel, who was born in Buenos Aires and worked in publishing in Italy, France, England and Tahiti before arriving in Canada in the early 1980s, "My memories are memories of memories; repetition has sorted them out, chronologically, and dusted off the cobwebs." Manguel grew up traveling even though "wisdom around me told that I should stop still and stand in one place. 'Kasmopolitt!' spat out my grandmother, to insult a cousin who had never sprung roots in any of the cities in which he had lived."

Listen to novelist Elizabeth Berry, who moved to Victoria from Virginia: when she was 7. "Having read Pippi Longstocking, I wondered if Canadians would walk backward or, even better, walk on their hands."

Passages is full of vignettes, anecdotes, asides and episodes in the lives of a diverse group, writing on request – the Dominion Institute and the Ministry of **Citizenship–and Immigration Canada** played a key role in the book's creation – about, in the publisher's words on the dustjacket, "what it means to be a foreigner, what it means to be a writer and what it means to be a **Canadian** – and what it means to be all three at once."

No less an eminent expert on these matters than Michael Tgnatieff introduces the writings, tackling issues that many of the contributors treat cautiously or gloss over. "Coming to Canada is not the passage from hatred to civility that we innocently suppose it to be. It never has been\_ Frankly, some hatreds – of oppression, cruelty, racial discrimination ... will be kept on our soil."

Dany Laferriere, who fled political oppression in Haiti, is one of the novelists who does talk about the issue of exclusion and stereotyping, although even his candid and delightfully raw ruminations are also infused by the humour and gentle thread of over–all gratitude that permeates the writings of his bookmates.

The last words go to Nino Ricci, who was born near Leamington, Ont., a few years after his parents moved here from Italy in the 1950s and whose novels reflect an Italian heritage that crystallized after he went to his parents' Old Country for a visit. "In retrospect, it almost seems to *me* that my real passage to Canada came exactly in that fictive voyage (a reference to his first novel *Lives of the Saints*), at the point when I was

finally able to imagine the place I needed to set out from, since without a point of departure, there could be no arrival,"