

# An allegory about Canada keeps finding new life

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COMMENTS





Canadian astronaut Robert Thirsk reading French and English versions of *The Hockey Sweater* aboard the International Space Station in 2009.

COURTESY ROBERT THIRSK

He was told to pack light – though weight would be irrelevant for the 187 days Robert Thirsk would be spending aboard the International Space Station.

The issue, rather, was space – so little individual space in limitless outer space – and the Canadian astronaut would have to choose carefully when it came to personal items he would take along on his record-setting 2009 journey.

He took some photographs and various mementos of family and friends, some departed, and then he added two books: the French and English versions of Roch Carrier's *The Hockey Sweater*.

Thirsk, five years removed from his life as an astronaut and most recently chancellor of the University of Calgary, now lives in semi-retirement in Ottawa, where Friday evening he and wife Brenda attended the opening night of the National Arts Centre's musical adapted from Carrier's beloved children's book. The production runs through Dec. 23.

The choice of outer-space reading material, Thirsk says, was a no-brainer. He wanted to send photographs back of him with the books so that schoolchildren all over Canada would be inspired to read – and where better to begin than with the Thirsk family favourite?

“Literacy is very important to us,” the former astronaut says. “We always read to our children. The whole family loved *The Hockey Sweater*. You’re barely into it and you can relate to the boy’s anguish.”

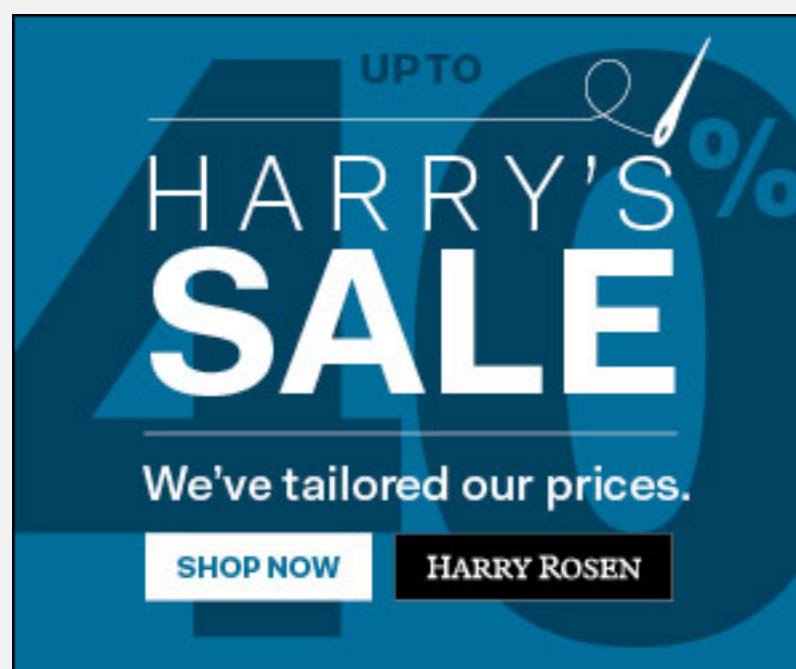
Thirsk grew up in British Columbia, loving the Montreal Canadiens and idolizing Jean Béliveau just as all the boys in Carrier’s book idolized the earlier Montreal star, Maurice (Rocket) Richard.

“My wife is from Montreal,” Thirsk adds, “and she says ‘It’s not just a book – it’s an allegory about our country.’ Both Roch and the book are true Canadian icons.”

It has been 40 years since Carrier sat down and in less than a day penned this simple story with its evocative, memorable opening: “The winters of my childhood were long, long seasons. We lived in three places – the school, the church and the skating-rink – but our real life was the skating rink ...”

*The Hockey Sweater*, under a different title, began life as a radio broadcast, then as but one tale in a collection of short stories. Soon it became a much-awarded National Film Board animated feature, then a stand-alone illustrated children’s book that has, in its various printings and permutations, sold hundreds of thousands of copies. It has had orchestral treatment with Carrier and another Montreal Canadiens legend, Ken Dryden, sharing narration. For more than a decade a snippet of the story graced the back of the Canadian five-dollar bill.

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A decade back, when *The Hockey Sweater* turned 30, then-prime minister Stephen Harper said the book “still touches the hearts of Canadian hockey fans, young and old. This short story, born in small-town Quebec, is undeniably a Canadian classic.” Justin Trudeau, who would become Prime Minister, called it “an iconic depiction of a truly Canadian experience.”

There is no “spoiler alert” required here, as virtually every Canadian knows the gist of the story: Young Roch outgrows his Rocket Richard Canadiens sweater, his mother sends away to Eaton’s for a new one, Eaton’s delivers a dreaded blue Toronto Maple Leafs sweater the boy is forced to wear, much to his humiliation and, sent by a priest-referee to church to atone for his on-ice sins, ends up asking God “to send me right away, a hundred million moths that would eat up my Toronto Maple Leafs sweater.”

Carrier, now 81, remains astonished at the success and longevity of his little story.

“I have no clue,” he says from his home in Montreal. “No clue. I try not to understand.”

The genesis of the story is almost comical. It was the late 1970s and he was a young, published author – his first novel, *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* came out in 1968 and had been an instant bestseller – who was, he now thinks in retrospect, a bit too full of himself.

“I was *on my way!*” he chuckles. “I was an important young writer.”

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But he also had a young family to feed, as well as car payments to meet. When the CBC called from Toronto offering him \$150 to pen a short essay for the morning radio program, he leapt at the opportunity.

“This was when the topic of the moment was ‘What does Quebec want?’ ” he remembers. “They wanted something on that. I thought about it for a while but then I thought I couldn’t do what so many others were doing. I was thinking, ‘I can’t do that – I am too much an important writer.’ ”

A few days later, on a Wednesday, he called Toronto to say he had changed his mind: “I told

them 'I couldn't do that.' They said 'Write what you want – we have a Monday time slot all set up for you.' ”

All day Thursday, he thought about what he might write. “I was thinking about identity,” he says. “I asked myself, ‘When was it in my life that I was me, Roch, and not my father’s son, and not my big brother’s little brother – but just me?’ It came just clear to me that it was when I got my skates and my pads and my sweater and I stood up on the carpet in the kitchen and I was taller than my mom. I wanted to write about that.”

On Friday he sat down to write, working in his first language. He titled it *Une abominable feuille d’érable sur la glace* (*An abominable maple leaf on the ice*) and it would only become *The Hockey Sweater* (*Le chandail de hockey*) years later. On Saturday, he took it to his long-time translator, Sheila Fischman, who spent much of the day turning Carrier’s French into English.

“It wasn’t too difficult,” Fischman recalls. “It was rushed, but it wasn’t torture. We had known each other for years and he had told me some of the anecdotes. I enjoyed the story a lot.”

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On Sunday they had to record it in Montreal. Carrier was nervous, both for the story and, even more so, for his English. He asked Fischman to accompany him to the CBC studio in Montreal.

“I was sort of hiding under a table so that I wouldn’t be a distraction to him as he read,” she remembers with a laugh. “I’d never done anything like that before, but I was there to give him confidence and be his English-language coach. I helped with some of his pronunciation.”

The story was played on Monday morning and listeners responded as millions have since. “They told me they received *bags* of mail,” Carrier says. “Since then it has never stopped. Never a day goes by without something. Every day there’s something.”

Fischman, who herself came from a very small rural community, Elgin, in Southwestern Ontario, thinks she knows why the story has not only survived but is more treasured today than ever.

“It’s just something that exists in the Canadian mentality,” she says. “There’s something about that that resonates with Canadians. Most of us have a link of some sort to a small town. But it’s also about hockey, and that’s one of the things that defines us. Small-town Canada speaks the language of the country.”

One of those listening to that Monday morning broadcast was Marrin Canell, a young filmmaker with the National Film Board. He thought it would make an ideal animated short. A couple of animators were approached but showed little interest. Another filmmaker, Wolf Koenig, suggested Canell check out a young illustrator named Sheldon Cohen, who had been working on very short, usually no more than 30 seconds long, features.

Cohen, who had attended McGill University with the intention of becoming a dentist, was different from other illustrators in that he had no classical art training.

“Primitive’ is kind of my middle name,” he says.

An arrangement was made to have Cohen meet Carrier and to come with some sketches of what he might do with the story. He decided to draw the mother opening the package from Eaton’s and revealing the Maple Leafs sweater to a crying young Roch.

“I was so nervous the night before the meeting I couldn’t sleep,” Cohen remembers.

But there was no reason for concern. Carrier loved the simplicity of the art. The two of them travelled to the little village, Sainte-Justine, where the story is set. They visited the church and Carrier's boyhood home, where his elderly mother was still living.

"I come from such a different background," Cohen says. "I'm from the city. I'm Jewish. This is a Catholic story set in a small town. But it shows just how universal the story is. It touches so many backgrounds. The story has a life and a magic to it that transcends this little village."

Cohen's work on the NFB film – which entailed some 10,000 drawings – and on the 13 scenes depicted in the illustrated book were pivotal to the growing popularity of the story. Its appeal to children is obvious, but it has also come to mean a great deal to adults.

"I was giving a talk in a library in Manitoba, maybe around 1992," Carrier recalls. "And there was this man at the back of room. He was big and strong, looked like a truck driver or construction worker. And he seemed very nervous, agitated. I thought maybe he wanted to ask me a question. But he never asked a question.

"I went up to him after and I said, 'Sir, you have a question to ask?' 'No,' he said. I asked him why he was there. 'Women talk,' he said. 'It's easy for women to talk. But for men it's difficult. I don't talk easily to my son. But then he brings me the book and we read it together and we look at the pictures ... and we talk.' "

Carrier smiles at the memory: "That's the best compliment I ever got."

Two years ago in Montreal, *The Hockey Sweater* began its move to the stage. The Segal Centre for Performing Arts is now sending it off to Ottawa with the help of the NAC's National Creation Fund, which has invested \$200,000 in the production. Former professional ballerina Donna Feore directs and choreographs the musical, with book and lyrics by Emil Sher and music and lyrics by Jonathan Monro. The cast of 17 features eight 11- and 12-year-old kids.

Carrier regularly attended rehearsals in the lead-up to the Ottawa production.

"We've been so lucky to have Roch guiding us and telling us stories," Feore says. "This has been a dream working with him right there in the room. You do Shakespeare and you can't



ask him questions, he's dead. But we can ask Roch what exactly he was thinking of here.”

Carrier, however, says there is another, far more personal reason for him to be there, whether *The Hockey Sweater* is a short story, an animated film, an illustrated children's book or, now, a full-blown musical in the country's capital.

“It's important to me,” he says. “It's my *revenge*, you see. I was not a very good hockey player. I wasn't going to be another Rocket Richard or anything. That was my one dream. My other dream was to sing in the church choir but I could never make the choir. I get to perform my little story with an orchestra. Now it's a musical.

“So I have my revenge.”

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