There is a large body of academic work devoted to the subject of censorship, including many books on censorship as a philosophical or moral issue, numerous historical reviews, and several studies of the censorship of specific works of literature. The overwhelming majority of these inquiries focus on censorship in Europe or the United States. This makes sense when we consider that official censorship dates back to the advent of the printing press in Europe and that the First Amendment has been an overwhelmingly important provision in American law. It also makes sense since the most notorious literary censorship cases have involved works – either of international stature, such as *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *Fleurs du Mal*, or of great popularity, such as *The Catcher in the Rye* – that are European or American. Understandably, then, thinking about censorship has come late to the Canadian academy. Canada has neither a history of official censorship nor an American-style preoccupation with free speech (the less glorified Canadian version of the First Amendment was ensconced in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms only in 1982). Furthermore, while Canadian schools and libraries have frequently participated in the banning of those foreign texts traditionally subject to censorship, there has been little to analyse from a uniquely Canadian perspective in these incidents. As a result, writing about censorship of literature in Canada has been limited,¹ consisting mostly of formal listings of texts that have come under fire in the classroom and the public library.²

There are several possible explanations for the dearth of detailed study of censorship involving English Canadian literature. First,
literary critics may have been reticent about undertaking a study that draws extensively on disciplines outside of literature, such as philosophy, law, and sociology (all of which I utilize in this book). With the emergence of interdisciplinary studies in recent years, however, this kind of analysis seems less unusual. Second, the relatively unified voice with which Canadian authors have condemned censorship attacks may have given critics the impression that the issues involved are clear, the conclusions foregone, and that these controversies therefore require little study. I will show that this impression is far from the reality. The third and most compelling reason, though, is simply that until comparatively recently Canadian literature had neither the status nor the reputation of foreign literature and was therefore not widely consumed in this country. Limited in its distribution, its chances of being subjected to censorship were limited as well.

Over the course of the last thirty years, however, there has been a dramatic change in the fate of literary writing in Canada. With the ascendancy of Canadian literature in quality and quantity since the 1960s—what Linda Hutcheon terms the “flowering of Canadian fiction” (1)—censorship has become an issue in Canadian writing for two reasons. First, more Canadian literature is stocked by libraries and more of it is taught in schools. An increase in the sheer volume of Canadian books used in these institutions has led in turn to more controversies in which Canadian literary works are the objects of censorship attacks. With these attacks happening in their own backyards, Canadian writers have taken notice and responded to the censorship attacks of their writing in their writing. Second, a rise in standing of Canadian literature internationally has given writers a sense of confidence in commenting on censorship issues more broadly, a feeling that writing about the Rushdie affair or pornography or changes to Canada's obscenity laws would wield some power in national and international arenas. Canadian writers, therefore, have recently had occasion to think deeply and write extensively about censorship. To put it briefly, censorship has become an issue within the Canadian literary establishment, if not yet among critics of Canadian literature.

It is this relationship between the growing stature of Canadian literature and the corresponding increase in the prominence of the issue of censorship among its writers that has led me to the three principal figures of my analysis: Timothy Findley, Margaret Atwood, and Margaret Laurence. Arguably among the five most prominent authors of English Canadian literature, these three writers, partly because of their stature, have all experienced attempts to censor their work, and all three have responded to these attacks on their work in
writing. Furthermore, all three have gone beyond defences of their own work to write about censorship in other contexts and in more general or philosophical terms. They have chosen to do this most directly through non-fiction (articles, memoirs, etc.), and one of the purposes of this book is to enumerate their explicit arguments, both to establish the writers' positions on censorship and to shed light on the role of censorship as it appears in their fiction. My close reading of their fictional works – The Wars and Headhunter by Findley; Bodily Harm and The Handmaid's Tale by Atwood; and a draft of an unfinished novel by Laurence – aims to uncover the positions on censorship implicit within these works.

Both explicitly in their non-fiction and implicitly through their fiction, these well-known authors invoke many of the most fundamental arguments regarding censorship. It is for these reasons that I have also chosen to examine the work of Beatrice Culleton and Marlene Nourbese Philip, who, though not yet considered to be "major" Canadian authors, have both experienced censorship of their writing, have commented explicitly on censorship, and, most importantly, have conveyed their ideas on the subject through their fiction (and in the case of Philip, through her poetry). The ideas on censorship of all these writers are key to the development of my position on the issue: by engaging the arguments that they raise, exposing weaknesses and underlining strengths, I present a new picture of censorship that aims to ease the acrimonious nature of many censorship disputes and offer suggestions for resolving some of the most troublesome controversies.