

## Questions for Felicia

### 1. What brought you to Canada? Was it a conscious decision on your part?

F.M.: I left Romania in 2000 after publishing three books that enjoyed an excellent reception. I was also working as journalist for the biggest Romanian newspaper, I was in love after a painful divorce, and I was happy. However, ten years after the fall of the communist regime I felt that we as a nation were not following the right path. An individual could not do much against a society ruled by corruption, lack of democratic practices, resentment and discrimination against women, minorities and religions. The problem, I think, with people that have lived for too long under a dictatorship is that they do not know the truth about themselves, nor about the world for that matter. Worst of it, they are not eagerly accepting any criticism whatsoever. In a way we were still living with the feeling we are the bravest, the smartest. Ceausescu did not completely die. He had taught us we were the best nation in the world and we were not willing to let it go. I felt disarmed, powerless in the face of this persistent ideology, so I decided to leave the country at least for a short period of time. Or maybe, I just wanted to try something else, to do better or just to prove that I'm really a good writer not only according to Romanian standards.

### 2. What were your first impressions of the country? How do you think Canada has changed since your arrival?

F.M. I knew from the beginning that it would take time to be happy in Canada. It felt cold, lonely, and foreign. I had an accent, I had a job I could not practice, I had to start again with education, language, life. In March 2000 when we landed in Montreal, there were still mountains of snow on the street, while in Romania it was sunny and warm. I think no migrant knows a lot about Canada upon making the choice to move here. All we know is Canada is the best place to settle when you are not quite WASP. We know that in Canada discrimination exists as well, but less than anywhere else. Somehow, migrants awe at living in an English-speaking country and all that British background, the Queen as the head of state, the maple leaves, the landscape. A joke goes like this, "How do you get three drunk Canadians out of the pool? You tell them: "Please, go out of the pool". We have a lot of those insightful clichés about Canada. Your accomplishments and success,

however, depend of your capacity to pass over your deception and build your own Canada. The whole world has changed in 20 years, not only Canada. There is growing racism, xenophobia, hateful discourses and the possibility to openly and publicly express these, including politicians. The good part is that Canada is still better than many other countries. Somehow, we succeeded in keeping a certain civility in our interracial relationships, not allowing ourselves to trespass the frontier to hateful speech. For the first time after 21 years I appreciate being in this place. I understand what a real, authentic democratic mechanism could do to keep people human and prevent them from becoming beasts led by basic instincts, and how much wise laws and honest practices could support minorities in time of crisis.

**3. How did you become a writer and where did the inspiration come from for your first novel?**

F.M. I started as a journalist and the newspaper offices, working in a rush and deadlines taught me the art of writing fast and keeping it to the essential. No wordiness, no useless details. Most importantly, never wait for the inspiration. It never comes all by itself. Ideas come while composing the text. My first advice to any beginner is just write and keep it simple. Talk about what you know best. Be casual. Then you will see what comes out of it. At the age of 30 I had finally finished my undergraduate programs, as I studied French for five years and Chinese-Dutch for four, while working to provide for my daughter. I was a single mom and desperately in need of a job. But when I finished school, I suddenly felt I had a lot of time on my hands. Amidst my job at the newspaper and my messy private life in a tiresome city, I just started jotting down details about me, my family, my frustration as a woman in a misogynistic and patriarchal country. And it worked. It was natural, it was true and people loved it. They felt the pain and frustration in my writings. This was *The Country of Cheese*, a book that sold well even in Canada. My methods and ideas come unconsciously. I've never taken creative writing classes, I've never had a mentor. I wrote what I would have liked to read. Real books about real people. To me, a good book has to deal with truth and some uncomfortable topics. This is not the rule for everyone I suppose, but it is to me. A book has to unsettle some stiff structures, ideas, myths.

**4. Among your own works, do you have a favorite one?**

F.M. First one is *The Country of Cheese* because it speaks about a country ruined by 50 years of dictatorship which turned the meager democratic structure settled between the two world wars upside down. After WWII Romania entered a dark age, mostly in the rural area. The action is set in a deserted village where the female narrator tries to heal her wounds. The second one is *Dina* which also speaks about a young Romanian woman abused by a Serbian customer during the civil war in ex-Yugoslavia, at the border between the two counties. Dina is a metaphor for many Romanian women who could not succeed by themselves, trapped as they are by tradition, family and a lot of prejudice. Very often, it is not due to the men they cannot succeed but because of the women around them, mothers, neighbors, aunts, cousins. Always careful not to break with the tradition. The best place for a woman is still the kitchen. There is also another one called *Confession to a computer*, about an abandoned woman who tries to regain her confidence in herself by imitating her ex-husband behavior, trying to conquer as many partners as possible. The irony is that those one-night stands facilitate her meeting of some nice and gentle men who help her overcome the humiliation of being cheated on and abandoned.

**5. Which work of yours would you especially recommend to Central/ Eastern European readers?**

F.M. : I think these three books particularly speak a language that people could understand in this part of the world. The post-communist era left a lot of wounds in our hearts and daily life. We long for something good, we want to be better, but we do not know how to achieve it. We cannot accept we are not ready for this life because democracy, civility, good practices come with time, respect, and trust in law and order. People are mistaking rudeness for courage, freedom of speech for hurling offence at everyone, corruption for entrepreneurship. I think many Eastern European countries struggle to become better, but they are pulled down by corrupt regimes, racism, xenophobia.

**6. Where do you get your characters from?**

F.M. Most of my characters are inspired by real people. They could be my entourage without naming them, they could be people I met occasionally or people whose stories I heard about. My books are a map of the present time, with characters that could also be very much real, with their dreams, mistakes, failures. Maybe tomorrow my stories would mean nothing. Or they could still be something like an authentic chronicle of our struggles, in the same way Arianus wrote about Alexander the Great's campaign in Asia. I also have a slight inclination to make my characters a little cynical. As we say in Romanian, they are people who do not get drunk with cold water. My characters are sad just because they know the truth and could not accept the illusion that everything is fine when it isn't. I think that side of my writing comes from Dutch literature. As a student of Dutch, I read a few strange novels coming from this very astonishing country. I mostly remember Multatuli, Simon Vestdijk, Harry Mulish or Herman Teirlinck, Cees de Jong. I think the Dutch literary influence is the most persistent in my writing practice. Cynicism is not irony. The first one is about yourself, the latter is about others. My characters are tearing up their own hearts.

**7. Do you prefer to write in French or in English?**

F.M. : I could not say. I'm a different writer in the two languages. French allows me to be more detailed, to portray human feelings and contemplation more accurately. English came quite late in my life and I have not mastered it that well, my vocabulary is poor, so I have to stick with the facts and try to be funny. However, not knowing a language too well can also be an advantage. It keeps you safe from excess content and wordiness. I learned to be different and to reinvent myself with every new language. Many important things are stated through simple words. My dream is to write shorter but true books. English helps me a lot to achieve this briefness, even though my most recent book contradicts me. One of my longest novels, *Pineapple Kisses in Iqaluit*, is written in English. My excuse for that is that I was up North and I had a lot of time on my hands.

**8. How do you select the works you translate from Romanian into French or English?**

F.M. : Except for the first novel, it usually starts with a publisher's interest in my books. When I came to Canada I chose to translate *The Country of Cheese*, first published in 1999 in Romanian, just because I believed it was good enough to help me get published

in Canada. Then, in 2016 I did *The Darling of Kandahar* in French when Linda Leith Publishing opened a French branch to her English publishing house and she invited me to translate it. The same book will soon be published in Italy, but this was not really my achievement, but my publisher's. In 2020 I published *A Second Chance* in Romanian for the first time after 20 years, a book that was first published in English in 2014, then in French in 2018. All of them are my work; written in English translated into French then into Romanian. The same is true for *Dina*: first it was published in French in 2008, then in Romanian in 2021. Recently, I have been translating my books into Romanian or into English on a regular basis, but only the books that deal with present stories. The historical novels have to wait for better times and for a solid offer from a foreign publisher.

**9. Can you think of some instances when the process of translation could be especially challenging? What caused the challenge?**

F.M. I think that the translation process could be very challenging when you have no affinities whatsoever with the book you work on. My piece of advice to a young translator would be never to accept a contract before reading the book. And even if you like it, you should be sure that your style, or your literary affinities go in that direction. I would never accept to translate Proust for example, or Joyce. This kind of divagation and language excess is not in my DNA. I like stories told with few words, in short and accurate sentences. I like writers who have been journalists as well. They inform more than entertain. As a publisher I first chose to translate Josip Novakovich's novels into French, a Croatian-born Canadian who writes in English and who was on the short list for the Man Booker Prize. Then, it was a novel signed by David Demchuk, set at the Ukrainian border during the WWII. The most enjoyable was translating the collection of testimonies published in Scotland under the title *Nasty Women*, the term once used by Donald Trump to address Hilary Clinton. I adored working on women's writings, authors who are for the most part in the writing industry, speaking about their stories of abuse, discrimination, racism. It was easy to read, easy to translate. The most challenging is the perfect equivalence for certain terms. This is why it helps when you know the place, the time, the setting, the history. For example, David Demchuk used the term *soup* in his novel for what Ukrainian peasants could possibly eat at that time. David's parents were Ukrainians but he grew up in Toronto, so he did not know much about Ukrainian cuisine. I told him that most probably people were eating *borsch*, and he agreed. Knowing

the traditions first hand, it was a very easy and pleasant work to do for me. Translators cannot always select books they are familiar with, but when they can, this is the first step to a fully achieved work.

**10. Have you tried to translate Canadian literature into Romanian?**

F.M. The only Canadian book I translated into Romanian so far are mine, except for a queer novel by Vincent Fortier. The three of them, *A Second Chance*, *Dina*, and *Natural Phenomena* came out in 2021 in what is now Hashtag Collection in Bucarest, a co-edition project with Vremea Publishing house, a very prestigious institution in Romania. We agreed to publish four Hashtag titles every year in translation from French. I hope that one day we could extend this project to other Canadian authors. The next two titles on my list are Josip Novakovich and David Demchuk and I am really looking forward to translating them. I almost know their books by heart and I'm certain it will be a very pleasant job.

**11. Can you say a few words about your experience of teaching in Nunavut in 2017-18? How do you think this experience has shaped your writing?**

F.M. My first experience in the Arctic region dates back to 2009, when I worked in Schefferville, an Indigenous community of 800 people in the Northern Quebec, close to Nunavik for one year. Almost 10 years later, in 2017 I felt the urge to take a break again and go into another kind of exile, at -52 degrees. For one year I taught French to small kids and it was one of my most beautiful year as teacher. From our windows we were watching Frobisher Bay frozen for almost 10 months a year, the hunters crisscrossing the ice on their skidoos, and sometime polar bears entering the community looking for food. With my pupils, I could do what no principal would allow in a big city: teaching them knitting, sewing buttons, mending socks, singing classical opera, letting them stay outside as much as they wanted at -40, carving tunnels in the snow and hiding there. Back home, during the long weekends or blizzard lockdowns, I was reading a lot on all kind of northern topics, such as Inuit songs and legends, the history of British expeditions looking for the Northern Passage. This is how I got the idea to write a book in English about a woman trapped in the ice of her own soul. People come up north looking for money and maybe some solitude after struggling with life down south. But the arctic life

teaches you how important is to stay close to people, to tolerate others and make yourself tolerable. It was one of the experiences I'm the proudest of. Up north there is a different Canada, the one I've never thought about: Inuit people, the everlasting memory of Franklin's expedition, scarcity, and tolerance in the most intolerable climate. Meanwhile, it is also increasingly about migrant stories because Nunavut is now a multicultural society in spite of the distance. People from all over the place are coming looking for job opportunities. As the youngest Territory created in 1999, Nunavut has seen a real economic boom. It could be contradictory sometimes as Inuit people have to adapt to so many customs, languages coming from afar, but they are very resilient and open to novelty. The problem is never to forget we are on their land and be grateful for that.

**12. Multiculturalism is often listed/ cited as a dominant and discernible feature of contemporary Canadian society. If one has a look at the recent Canadian book prize winners, many have a multicultural background. In your view, how have multicultural writers helped rethink/ redefine the genre of the novel in Canada/ Québec?**

I think that the latest development in the academic world is the focus on how we address people according to their gender or color, and that is going to change the literary landscape. Writers, teachers, journalists are very careful now with what and how they write, and I salute the fact that we have to be aware of historical injustice against some very marginalized groups. I salute the fact that minorities get more visibility in the literary field. Most of the books coming from the multicultural minorities wouldn't have been published a few years ago, let alone awarded. Discrimination was a longtime plague and if we deplore now the presence of too much diversity in the literary, artistic, cultural field then one should walk a single day in the shoes of an artist, author, comedian coming from multicultural communities. These new narratives give a fair idea about the real Canada. Literature or art has never kept pace with the real social issues. Migrant stories or Indigenous stories are finally in the spotlight after neglect or censorship in the past.

**13. Is there such a thing as an Eastern European lens/ optic in the case of Canadian multicultural writers of this background? If your answer is positive, what are the most important characteristics of this optic/ lens?**

F.M. I haven't read too many Canadian authors with an Eastern European background, except for Josip and David who became Hashtag authors mostly for that reason. But I think that there is no difference whatsoever between us and any Iranian, Indian, Chinese author, between our way of writing about our conflicting relationship with our past, our new life, the way we complain about our many challenges to adapt to, survive and eventually thrive in this new country. I suppose we all speak in the same way about how history, tradition, family values have fashioned us and how we bring these anywhere we go. They too have certainly written a novel like *Dina*. They too have left their own Country of Cheese just because they could not live according to its values any more.

**14. Can you think of some emerging Québec writers whose work you have come across as a publisher and would recommend it to an international/ specifically Central European audience?**

F. M. : When I founded Hashtag in 2018 I was thinking more of a publishing house dedicated to ethnic minorities. I was specifically thinking of what is generally called audible minorities, which means people with white skin and a heavy accent. I have found that one's accent could be more discriminatory than skin color when it comes to job opportunities. For a long time, there were no other criteria to fill in on official documents except for the color of one's skin. If your skin is white, you should do well as migrant. However, visible minorities are sometime privileged in getting jobs because, luckily, the government settled positive discrimination criteria for them. It was not much the case for linguistic or sexual minorities. Or, the truth is that gender (being trans or queer) or an Eastern European accent could be a very difficult obstacle to overcome even in Canada. It was not until I became a publisher that I discovered how many criteria of discrimination exist and how minorities based on gender or accent have difficulties in publishing or getting recognition. When we said that Hashtag wanted to publish discriminated authors, the first titles sent to us were not coming from ethnic groups but from the LGBTQ+ community. Some of the first authors published were trans and queer. Since 2018, however, I can see how things are changing, and how the publishing industry privileges more of those who once were forbidden and neglected. I'm happy to be part of this revolutionary endeavour. So, I am very



much interested in reading what this new, young generation has to say, a generation with less prejudice than us. This is how we chose authors such as Vincent Fortier, Sébastien Émond, Sandrine Sevigny, Émélie Provost, or Miruna Tarcau. They are very young, still unknown, but very original.

**15. Who are the writers you look up to/ appreciate?**

F.M. My tastes have been very much influenced lately by my work as publisher. Now I'm very much interested in books written by Indigenous or Inuit people such as Lisa Bird-Wilson and Thomas Highway or Tania Tagaq. I have taken to reading non-fiction works, essays on social or historical issues, such as the ones written by Noah Richler or Kamal Al-Solaylee. After reading Canadian literary classics such as Munro and Atwood, there are books that helped me better understand contemporary Canada.

**16. What are you working on right now?**

F.M. The last years I was very much into translation, from and into three languages. For the first time I have translated books written by others, and this was a very exiting experiment to me. As a self-translator I took more liberties with my own books; I went as far as rewriting some of the paragraphs. When it is about others, you have to be as close as possible to the original work and this was a challenge to me. I think that this new challenge made me a better author, as well. I had the courage to start a new book called *The Bigamous Woman*, about a migrant woman living in Montreal who divorces her husband for the man she loves, but she remains stuck between them. She is alike any migrant person who lives between the past and the present. I would also very much like to write a book in Romanian again, but as easy as it could seem, it would take me a lot of time to get used to my mother tongue again as a creative and literary tool. Maybe I should stay in Romania for a while to hear the street dialect, to read new authors. I must say that I'm postponing this moment by fear that this could be my last book, as if I was finally coming home, through body, spirit and language.

**17. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your work as a writer and publisher?**

F. M. The pandemic did not affect me very much as a writer, if not for better. As a publisher I was more affected due to the lockdown and the bookstores closure. But as a

writer I thrive. I had more time to stay at home which I've always longed for. Or maybe this was a way to protect myself, to stay away from the turmoil, to not get depressed or scared about the future. Luckily, my family and I were spared from sickness or death. I had a job and a nice home where I could spend the long winter lockdown. I am so grateful for this, because not many people in the world had the chance to spend the lockdown writing and reading in a cozy place. The pandemic made me realize once again how lucky I was to live in Canada. I felt protected, I felt safe. In the time of crisis, you understand where your allegiances go.

By Eniko Sepsi

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