

“A Book that All Canadians Should be Proud to Read”

Canada Reads and Joseph Boyden’s
Three Day Road

In 2004, Laura Moss described Canada Reads as taking its place “beside the 1978 Calgary Conference and the 1994 Writing Thru Race Conference as a recognizable point in Canadian literary history,” which successfully “expanded public readership and recirculated works of Canadian literature to a wider audience” (9). Eight years later, in its eleventh year on the air, the program continues to be a significant cultural phenomenon that not only provides insights into the ways that literature can be used as a ground to talk about cultural preoccupations, but is also an object lesson in the marketing and selling of contemporary fiction.¹ Scholars, however, have received the radio show with something less than the enthusiasm of radio audiences, book clubs, and publishers. For Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo, for example, the model of the nation put forward by the choice of texts and the debates is uncritically multicultural and ideologically conservative (7). Locating her unease about the program in the disjuncture between its rhetoric of nation-building and its tendency to depoliticize the texts, Moss argues that Canada Reads “has become a new instrument of culture formation,” intent on “drawing Canadians together by creating a shared cultural background” and “reinforc[ing] certain popular notions of Canadianness” (7). That these shared notions of nationhood are applicable to the whole country is emphasized by the show’s much reiterated tag line: its mission to find the book that “all Canada Reads.”

If the show never explicitly stakes a claim to the middlebrow for itself, its invocation of the entire population—“all Canada”—has generally resonated with the texts that have been selected as contenders: works of literary

fiction and occasionally poetry that are situated above the level of popular fiction but which remain accessible to a wider readership.² Virginia Woolf's famous 1942 dismissal of a middlebrow as an individual devoted to an undistinguished conglomerate of life and art "mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige" (180) has echoes in some contemporary responses to Canada Reads, which voice their suspicion of the way the program mixes literature with celebrity, personality, and promotion. These are domains that, though they influence considerations of what is valorized in academic settings just as they do for other institutions in the cultural marketplace, can be disavowed in favour of precisely those aesthetic questions that lie beyond the reach of untrained readers who could be thought of as the latter-day equivalents of Woolf's scorned middlebrow reader.³

If the middlebrow as a concept is useful for identifying historical antecedents of contemporary suspicions about Canada Reads, however, it also obscures the way that reading practices placed within its purview will always be heterogeneous and contingent, and that no clear line can be drawn to separate it from the categories of lowbrow and the highbrow. Another way to consider the interpretive modes that emerge around Canada Reads, then, is to think of them as being inflected to a greater or lesser degree by specialist academic training. Rather than Woolf's distinction, underpinned as it is with differences rooted in socioeconomic class, this designation takes a constructivist view of the differences between various reading practices, seeing them as arising from a specific habitus in which interpretive habits have been developed, and through which readers have been socialized into foregrounding some textual features in favour of others. Specialist readers, for example, could be thought of as those who have been taught how to recognize, and question, representations that make some claim to historicity, and who are aware that histories have elements of fiction and narrative within them, but who have also absorbed the lesson that the affective dimension of a text—its capacity to produce an emotional response—is generally not a valid subject for discussion. Of course, there is no hard and fast distinction to be made between reading practices inside and outside the academy either, a point made by Fuller when she observes that many of the comments about Canada Reads posted by academics to the scholarly CANLIT-L listserv echoed those of the readers posting on the Canada Reads discussion boards. Unpacking some of the reading practices that have been modelled on the program, Fuller argues that while academic reading

practices are not uniformly followed, endorsed, or rejected, they are certainly a presence, and that the way the show is edited reinforces their authority and reinforces their value. She also identifies the emergence of vernacular reading practices, which include valuing books for their ability to induce moral empathy and subjective identification, reading in order to understand different worlds, and reading as a way to provoke reflection on contemporary social issues (Fuller 12-26). These kinds of interpretive practices were also on show during the iteration of the program considered in this essay, but the ones I focus on here are those that connect, in some way, to the project of nation-building. As Renée Hulan points out, the capacity of Canadian literature to articulate truths about the country's peoples and cultures has been a central preoccupation of Canadian cultural critique (38-39), so the fact that this interpretive focus is shared by readers both inside and outside the academy is yet another indication of the porousness of the boundary between them.

While keeping in view the fact that categories such as “middlebrow,” “academic,” and “specialist” are far from objective and can function to elevate one group of cultural participants over others, I would still maintain that there *are* meaningful differences in the ways we read, and in the ways that various reading contexts call forth diverse kinds of interpretive practices. This essay aims to elucidate what the broader significance of these differences might be. As one such reading context, Canada Reads is an important site for reception studies not only for the insights it offers into the way literature can be co-opted for nationalist and ideological purposes, but also for what it reveals of the interplay of reading practices at different points on the continuum from specialist to non-specialist. Given that these kinds of reading practices are so often kept separate from one another—in classrooms, in book clubs, in the columns of book reviewers—exploring the collisions between them both casts light on the wider significance of Canada Reads as a cultural phenomenon, and also helps to illuminate how, and why, different interpretive modes might be segregated into different contexts.

To explore this clash of reading practices, I focus here on the interpretations of readers whose comments were featured on the CBC website in relation to one of the texts featured during the 2006 debates: Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road*. While this novel did not win the vote of the celebrity panellists, its popular appeal was such that it won the audience vote. As it deals in part with the legacy of residential schools and with the writing-out of First Nations peoples from mainstream history—focalized

through a narrative about two Cree soldiers fighting for Canada during World War I—*Three Day Road* offers the opportunity not only to see how readers engaged with a text that posed some troubling questions about the nation, but also to observe their reactions to questions that have preoccupied scholars of Canadian literature, particularly those that have emerged in conjunction with investigations informed by postcolonial theory and critical race theory. Critics including Linda Hutcheon, Herb Wyile, and Dennis Duffy have explored the ways Canadian fiction of the last several decades has questioned, deconstructed, and rewritten the nation's foundational narratives and grappled with the political ramifications of the fact that “to write history—or historical fiction—is equally to narrate, to reconstruct by means of selection and interpretation” (Hutcheon 231). Such texts reveal an anxiety about what can be “done” with the historical past when it is increasingly clear that not only is this history contingent, partial, and biased, but also that deconstructing it reveals the impossibility of making something meaningful of it (Gordon 119-20). For Wyile, novels from the 1990s and 2000s “seem less inclined to participate in creating a collective mythology than to question traditional narratives of Canadian history and any notion of a collective, consensual experience of the past” (6), and this shift has particular relevance for current debates about the place of First Nations within Canadian history. As Deena Rymhs argues, such historiographical questions resonate with growing attention to Aboriginal peoples' presence—and absence—within accounts of nationhood across a range of global contexts (105). Boyden's novel does not fit particularly comfortably into the category of historiographic metafiction: as a largely realist representation of a historical episode, it exhibits no particular preoccupation with its own fictive qualities or the relationship between its own constructedness and narratives of the historical past. But it is nonetheless worth examining its reception with this body of critical work in mind, not least because it serves as an illustration of the way that debates under the sign of Canadian historiographic metafiction have largely overlooked the ways in which readers other than professionally trained literary scholars have responded to texts that raise questions about how the historical past can be known.

Recuperating History or Reinscribing Stereotypes?

Boyden's novel tells the story of two young Cree men, Xavier and Elijah, who fight as snipers in World War I. The narrative of their time on the battlefields is interwoven with the story of Xavier's return to Canada,

wounded and addicted to morphine; his aunt Niska takes him on a three-day canoe journey and eventually heals him with stories from their shared heritage. The novel presents “a little-known history of Aboriginal presence in one of the grand master narratives of colonial construction that imagines Aboriginal experience as an absence” (Allan J. Ryan qtd. in Boyden, “Writing Survivance” 297-98), and is framed by its author and others as bringing to light elements of history that have been submerged in the written record. In an interview published in 2007, Boyden states that he wanted to address the way that Native soldiers were not given credit for their service:

I think it's one of the greatest overlooked parts of Canadian history that so many of us know nothing about and that shocked and amazed me . . . I didn't want to go into the novel thinking “I'm going to teach every Canadian about Native involvement in the war,” but it was definitely a passion of mine to want to shine a little light on a part of our history that so few know about. (“Pushing Out the Poison” 222)

Boyden also concedes that elements of the novel come very close to cliché: “the storytelling old woman and the silent Indian who has this best friend who is a talkative Indian” (237), while the Cree characters are also connected to the supernatural via magical realist techniques not applied to the white characters.⁴ In other ways, however, the text is more radical: in code-switching between Cree and English, it explains some but not all of the Cree terms so that there are some things that the reader is not permitted to know about Xavier and Elijah's world. Neta Gordon sees the narrative as countering the pernicious trope of First Nations as a “dying race,” as the ending of the novel shows Xavier's descendants living on (125, 130). While the novel plays with historical reality—engineering a meeting between its two main protagonists and Francis Pegahmagabow, the decorated Ojibway First World War hero on whom they are partly based—it also contains a critique of the way Native soldiers' participation in the war was downplayed or omitted outright from historical accounts. Vikki Visvis gives an indication of the problematic nature of the novel's representational strategies: while inverting the discourse of savagery associated with the Windigo by exposing violence as a product of white colonial culture, it also “risks replicating the problematic discourse of savagery by uncritically mobilizing the Gothic sensationalism traditionally used to render Native aggression” (240).

This is all to say that the novel is a text that, while clearly critical of the way First Nations people have been recorded in history, also leaves itself open to critique. My aim here is not to propose an authorized critical

reading against which other readings can be measured and found to be wanting. Rather, I want to consider two kinds of readings that the text invites—the celebratory and the critical—and the tension between them. To do this, I examine the responses to the novel voiced by the Canada Reads panellists and by readers who wrote to the CBC about the book. I seek to explore the pleasures articulated by readers and how these might relate not only to cultural nationalism and what Smaro Kamboureli terms “national pedagogy” (39), but also to the kind of appropriative reading practices identified as problematic by scholars of ethnic and minority literatures. I argue that assertions that the novel is “a book that all Canadians should be proud to read” are worth attending to, as they suggest that instead of taking the book’s recuperation of previously submerged histories as symptomatic of a much wider set of issues in present-day Canada still to be resolved, they indicate a different kind of interpretation entirely: a sense of satisfaction at the telling of a history that can be appreciated uniformly across the nation.

Readers’ Reactions to the Novel and Its Paratextual Framing

In its paratextual framing, the edition of *Three Day Road* published several months prior to Canada Reads foregrounds the close relationship between the narrative and “real life.” The top-most quote on the cover, from Chippewa author Louise Erdrich, characterizes the book as “a devastatingly truthful work of fiction,” while the back cover states that the story was “[i]nspired in part by real-life WWI Ojibwa hero Francis Pegahmagabow.” Picking up on these putative mimetic qualities, the panellist championing Boyden’s text, filmmaker Nelofer Pazira, emphasized on several occasions during the debates why the novel appealed to her, in the process almost completely eliding the fictiveness of the text:

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| Nelofer Pazira | [<i>Three Day Road</i>] taught me something about Canadian history, that despite the fact that coming from outside and being very very sort of thirsty for wanting to know about this country, I had never heard about it before. . . . I really was not thought about, um, how an, an entire community of Canadians were, were, [with] the stories we have been sort of overlooking for quite a long time. Or we have been telling them from our perspective, of— |
| Bill Richardson | That community being . . . ? |
| Nelofer Pazira | The community being the Native, um, Canadians. Um, so this book taught me something about the involvement of the Native community in the larger history of, of this country. (“Canada Reads 2006,” Day One 12:00) |

This framing of the text as historically recuperative was in turn taken up by readers who wrote to the CBC and had their correspondence published on the “Your Say” page.⁵ Many of these responses celebrated the text for its corrective to Canadian history, with comments such as, “This story is a huge part of Canadian history” and “*Three Day Road* is real life,” presenting the novel not as a fictionalization of history but as a text that exceeded the fictive and that restored the historical record to a state of completion. Other responses characterized the novel as providing a resolution of sorts:

. . . I also felt very moved by Boyden’s *Three Day Road*. Even though I was saddened by the violence in the book it took me for an intense ride and made me want to read more. I especially appreciated that even though there was much trauma, as happens in life, the end ultimately showed the power of healing. (Kelly McLaren qtd. in “Your Say”)

By proffering a textual “solution” to the suspense that builds throughout the latter part of the narrative as Xavier’s enforced morphine withdrawal approaches, the text drew this reader’s attention away from other unresolved issues. Not all responses, however, latched onto the “happy ending” or the recuperation of overlooked history as a resolution device. The two readers below signalled a recognition that there were still things left undone, and unsaid, in the relationship of First Nations to Canadian history:

. . . Given that we just finished celebrating the year of the veteran and First Nations communities across this country had also celebrated and honoured their veterans, perhaps the timing of bringing all of Canada’s attention to this book could not be more appropriate. We often forget the sacrifices First Nations made to forge this country despite Canada’s treatment of the First Nations. . . . (Trevor Sinclair qtd. in “Your Say”)

. . . How many Canadians know that the First Canadians were not even entitled to a pension if they returned from the conflict? This story is a huge part of Canadian history. It demands to be told and to be heard. *Three Day Road* must win on the subject alone. For how long are we going to neglect our history and our identity? (Jim Gray qtd. in “Your Say”)

Readers do differ, evidently, and the CBC’s selection of correspondence acknowledges that difference, to a limited extent. These two commentators draw attention to the fact that although Boyden’s book goes some way towards addressing some of the gaps in the historical record, it does not solve the problem. They were, however, in a minority compared to the more celebratory responses.

Reading these miniature reception narratives, one question that arises is the extent to which Canada Reads might itself have contributed to these

ways of reading the novel. The paratextual material produced by the CBC included a reader's guide and various other kinds of information provided online, which framed the novel—unsurprisingly—as a text which restored to history missing details about First Nations peoples' achievements in World War I. A further prominent element of this paratextual framing was an emphasis on Boyden as an authentic Native informant. The reader's guide quotes him as follows: "I split my life between the Gulf of Mexico and the gulf of the Arctic. . . . My heart is part Irish, part Ojibwa. I'm a Canadian in America. I'm grounded by history, and I am inspired by legend" (qtd. in CBC n. pag.).⁶ As well as an exemplar of multicultural hybridity, Boyden positions himself—or is positioned by the mechanisms of the publishing industry—as a legitimate interpreter of First Nations life and literature to other Canadians. In the reader's guide, he is asked, "What is life like for the Cree people in Canada today?" and "Are there any writers of Cree or Ojibwa ancestry you would recommend to your readers?" He also describes how pressure was put on him by his editors to "Aboriginalize" his narrative:

In different conversations with the editors Marc Cote and Francis Geffard, as well as speaking with my wife, Amanda, it struck me that I was applying a Western style of storytelling to an Aboriginal story. And so I thought about what is important to the Cree and Ojibwe. Life evolves around a circle. . . . The seasons travel through spring, summer, autumn, winter, and back to spring again. . . . And so I decided to begin this story near the chronological end and then trace through the circle around to where I started. . . . (qtd. in CBC n. pag.)

The form of the novel is now, we are told, more "authentically" Native—circular rather than linear (see also Boyden, "Writing Survivance" 303).

These questions of authenticity and appropriation came up during the radio debates. Two of the other panellists, lawyer and activist Maureen McTeer and poet Susan Musgrave, voiced critiques of *Three Day Road* for presenting a "noble savage" stereotype of Native people, and for drawing attention to Boyden's ethnic background on the book's cover:

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| Bill Richardson | Let's talk about the portrayal of Native characters in this book . . . How did you react to the portrayal of Xavier and Elijah . . . ? |
| Susan Musgrave | Well, initially I was put off by the fact that it's not usual to put an author's ethnic background on the book. So when I was told that Joseph Boyden was part Métis I felt I was being given that political correct, "It's OK for him to write about this because he has Métis blood." And I was annoyed. I thought, "Why do I need to be told this? I'm not a stupid reader." [interjections from other panellists] . . . Now that's not the fault of the book at all, or his fault—some publicist or publisher |

has decided to do this 'cos it's going to help. But I'm aware, as a reader, of all, of taking all these things in. I felt that the book was written by a twentieth-century white man. I didn't feel the Native-ness of those characters. . . . I didn't have a huge feeling of First Nation-ness from these characters. [*interjections*] . . .

Maureen McTeer . . . One of the things that really concerned me about the book was when we got to the point where we did the noble savage number—

Susan Musgrave Mmhm, mmhm.

Maureen McTeer —where in fact we had to have the scalps—

Susan Musgrave Mmhm.

Maureen McTeer —and of course we were going to blame that on the whites, because they're the ones who made us have the idea in the first place, to show our manliness. But I just felt there was a point where the gratuitous sniping—

Susan Musgrave Mmhm.

Maureen McTeer —took away from the history, which was a noble history of First Nations people's involvement in both world wars. ("Canada Reads 2006," Day Three 11:30)

Part of what is interesting about McTeer and Musgrave is that they occupy ambiguous positions as readers. The reading practices on display here have affinities with academic hermeneutic habits: pointing to the way the paratextual material essentializes "Native identity" and locates it in Boyden; identifying the trope of the "noble savage" and its function as a stereotype, which is to say locating these representations in the context of a particular tradition of representation; and attending to the instrumentality of portraying certain groups of people in certain ways. Moreover, as literary celebrities, McTeer and Musgrave occupy a different position in the literary field to academic readers, and as Canada Reads panellists they have an additional imperative: to point out the flaws in the other books in order to increase their chances of winning. Pazira objected strenuously to their critique, and her defensive response was echoed by many readers. Whether or not one agrees with Musgrave and McTeer, it would seem that putting these issues on the table for discussion is a legitimate thing to do on a program that devotes five half-hour slots to discussing works of literature. Yet in their responses on the CBC website, readers demonstrated their unwillingness to engage with these critical questions that asked them to think beyond the recuperation of history, even where the consideration of the politics of representation was legitimized as a reading practice by being put forward for discussion by the moderator—for example, "Let's

talk about the portrayal of Native characters in this book.” Other readers, dismissing Musgrave and McTeer’s critique, indicated that far from a feeling of culpability at the treatment of First Nations people, the book had imbued them with a sense of national pride. For one reader, for instance, the novel appears to have occluded the possibility of thinking further about how Native peoples are represented, rather than opening up questions about where else the written record may have been less than reliable:

. . . I didnt agree with Maureen Mcteer’s criticism that the book portrayed natives in a stereotypical way. It makes me wonder if she really read it seriously. I think this is a book that Canadians can be very proud of. I agreed with Nelofer’s passionate defense of the book. It transcends the Canadian experience and tell us and the world about who we are. I won’t soon forget the relationship between the two young men and the aunt. The war story was imaginative and riveting and the first nations story was especially pleasing for the dignity and magic it transmitted. As a Canadian I am very proud of this novel. (William Caithness qtd. in “Your Say”)

As a book for Canadians to be “very proud of,” the novel is presented as generating a reassuring image of the nation that acts as a rallying point behind which “all Canadians,” their differences ironed out, can feel themselves unified. The fact that this national “unity” excluded the Cree characters in Boyden’s text—a point repeatedly made by the narrative in its depiction of the prejudice Elijah and Xavier face on and off the battlefield—is an irony that goes unnoticed by this reader. I read this reaction—pride and warmth—as evidence of the powerful influence of Canada Reads in recontextualizing the novel within a nationalist multiculturalist framework, where the project of national unity mandates the erasure of meaningful differences. In their discussion of the framing of the 2002 winner, *In the Skin of a Lion*, Fuller and Rehberg Sedo identify similar processes at work: potentially disconcerting questions raised by Michael Ondaatje’s novel about race, power, and difference were passed over in favour of interpretations that asserted a normative portrait of a happily multicultural Canada (23). Another reader also mentioned being “proud” of *Three Day Road*:

. . . This is a book that all Canadians should be proud to read. It is a book that is difficult to put down and yet difficult to keep reading. It brings to the forefront once again what the ordinary soldier was asked to experience day after day while fighting in the trenches and how that experience is life changing if not fatal. No wonder drug addiction for returning soldiers is so prevalent. (Robert Dionne qtd. in “Your Say”)

The particularities of Elijah’s and Xavier’s situation are again elided in favour of a putative universal experience: as a novel about “the ordinary soldier,” “all Canadians should be proud to read” it. To claim Native experiences as

common to all Canadians in such a way is, as Margery Fee observes, to dodge any acknowledgement that structural racism privileges those who occupy the demographic mainstream (686). What this response also reveals is that in making heroes of Canadian soldiers in general, the narrative can be read as more broadly nationalistic. Thanks in part to their skill as snipers, Xavier's and Elijah's unit succeeds in winning ground from the Germans where the English and French forces have failed, and while there are some losses on their side, the Canadians are generally portrayed as the most accomplished on the field of battle. No wonder, then, that all Canadians should be proud of this book, as it demonstrates their superiority over other nations.

Elsewhere in the "Your Say" responses, another reader deployed the "universal" elements in the text in an attempt to refute McTeer and Musgrave's critique:

. . . Maureen McTeer's commentary was all over the map—yet continually wrong. I did agree with Susan Musgrave that drawing attention to Joseph Boyden's aboriginal heritage on the cover was off-putting.

However, Musgrave & McTeer completely missed the point. It was not a book about native (or white) stereotypes. Only you, Bill, even touched on the primary theme of the novel: the Wendigo. It was about the way adversity (particularly war) can make a monster of anybody. It was about the way, when Evil abounds, good people must sometimes take extreme steps—even at the costs of their own lives or souls. (Derek Broughton qtd. in "Your Say")

For this reader, the reminder of First Nations specificity on the book's cover is "offputting." What is offered in its place is yet another reference to a heritage which is unproblematically shared by all Canadians. Phrases from the responses of other readers such as "For how long are *we* going to neglect *our history* and *our identity*?" and "bringing *all of Canada's* attention to this book could not be more appropriate" (emphases mine) function to subsume individual and group identities under the one umbrella of the nation. One final comment is worth quoting in full, as it touches on many of the themes discussed above while performing the familiar depoliticizing move whereby the aesthetic elements of the text ("the writing" and "the story telling craft") are prioritized over the subject matter ("First Nations people"):

. . . Best book of the bunch. Best because of the writing, and the story telling craft not because it is about First Nations people. Of course it is violent. It deals with war and the racist treatment of First Nations people. Too bad if we can't just read "happy happy" stories. *Three Day Road* is real life. The ending of the book is a great sense of hope after so much darkness. Boyden is a great novelist. . . . (Boyd Drake qtd. in "Your Say")

This return to textual resolution forms an insistent pattern in this collection of responses: as narrative tension is resolved—the “darkness” superseded by “a great sense of hope”—so the problems with history recede from view. Debate over questions of identity and representation disturb this sense of closure, so it is not surprising that readers voiced their disapprobation of them so strongly.⁷

By bringing the interpretive practices of non-specialist readers into visibility, these responses flesh out the critique that Canada Reads depoliticizes the texts through its rhetoric of nation-building. Rymhs argues that similar processes are at work in public “performances” of reconciliation, suggesting that the ideological function of such events may not lie in deconstructing national master narratives so much as it does in reimagining the nation by reconstructing national imaginaries (105-06). She sees public reconciliation processes—such as the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples and the Marshall Inquiry—as forming part of one such reimagined national narrative and acting as “a discursive balm for historical injustices that have profound, and potentially unsettling, political implications” (107). In their articulation of a master narrative in which *Three Day Road* occasions patriotic pride, the readers considered here take the novel as precisely this kind of “discursive balm” in lieu of engaging with the more discomfiting ideological implications of its narrative. Here, the questions posed by Laurie Kruk in relation to First Nations literature—who is reading it, and for what purposes?—take on a particular force. Do these readers, and do we, seek “to engage honestly and fully with its differences or difficulties? Or, to seek out a reflection of our own needs, questions, concerns?” (304). The responses considered here lend weight to Kruk’s claim that we routinely read in search of reflections of ourselves (304). Encounters with others are welcomed, but they are used in the service of reinforcing national unity: a liberal, multicultural unity in which difference is neutralized as the sign under which everyone is brought together.

Reading Practices and Readerly Desires

What these responses suggest to me is the importance of accounting for readerly desires in order to understand the appeal of this text and, indeed, other texts. In her investigation of why regionalism has such a strong appeal for readers, for example, Wendy Griswold maintains that the regionalist aesthetic—with its “rural settings, wise-but-unsophisticated characters, suspicion of outsiders, pastoral escapism, nature and weather” and other

factors—resonates not with readers’ experiences but with their desires (174). For Tabish Khair, too, desire is a central optic for understanding contemporary novels with cultural otherness at their centre, such as Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* and Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*. Discussing the feel-good sensation engendered by these texts, Khair argues that their naïve portrayals paper over the problems of a world “undergirded by the myth of multiculturalism,” and in so doing, pander to readers who do not wish to confront the problems of history but rather want to feel good about who they are. A knowledge of history, Khair remarks, does not always deliver the requisite sense of pleasure (2). Lurking behind many of the Canada Reads responses is something akin to the experience Khair describes, which is seen in responses such as this: “Albeit violent, Joseph Boyden’s version of WW1 is a part of Canadian history and needs to be told. It was especially refreshing to read about First Nations. . . . This is such a wonderful event to connect Canadians from coast to coast” (Clare Dugas qtd. in “Your Say”). What I see emerging from this and the other interpretations I have been considering is a desire for history to be put right, and for the opportunity to achieve some kind of symbolic redress without needing to face up to the economic and material realities of atonement.

In a different national context, Kim Middleton Meyer examines the rising popularity of books about Japanese and Chinese people such as *Memoirs of a Geisha* and *Snow Falling on Cedars*, seeing this phenomenon as evidence that book club culture in the United States has fostered similarly conservative reading practices. Finding in the popularity of these “neo-Orientalist” books evidence of a sincere desire to learn about cultural others, Meyer sees these kind of texts as fostering appropriative reading strategies in putting forward representations of non-Europeans that are mythic rather than real, and in which stereotypical qualities are overvalued. The cachet that accompanies awareness of multicultural difference in contemporary North America comes with a certain irony, given that

members of reading group culture prize their multicultural awareness and their understanding of difference, which, enhanced by these novels, provides the very information they depend upon to set them apart; the form of multiculturalism that they practice, however, is simply a more subtle kind of the behavior that they purport to disdain. (91-92)

On the other side of the Atlantic, the UK book club members surveyed by Jenny Hartley also bore this out. One group who read *Memoirs of a Geisha* reported, “We were fascinated (and at times horrified) by the exposition of

this closed world and we were amazed that a male author could have ‘got inside the skin’ of his female character so convincingly” (69). Evidently, these are not the same kinds of cultural differences as those showcased in *Three Day Road*, and the national projects differ in significant ways: settler Canadians are much more intimately bound up in the ongoing relations of inequality that structure the relationship between Native and settler Canadians, while British and American readers have more historical and geographical distance from the nations of Asia. What these contexts share, however, is the ability to satisfy readerly desires for knowledge about the unfamiliar other in an expression of the same underlying impulse to dominate. Meyer observes that this search for “authentic” knowledge of Asian cultures is simultaneously hampered and spurred on by the inscrutability of the mysterious East, and the desire to comprehend it and possess it (91), an analysis that also holds for the inscrutable Indian. If part of the pleasure of reading *Three Day Road* derives from the sincere wish for historical accuracy, her findings suggest that another aspect of that pleasure may derive from knowledge about Native peoples that can function as “an object of value to be possessed by the multiculturally literate” (106). These impulses can be connected back to the middlebrow through their promise to separate readers from mass culture. If knowledge of cultural difference is expected of “educated” people living in multicultural nations, these texts hold out to readers the enticing possibility of enhancing their positions in the symbolic economy of multicultural awareness (92, 103).

The Broader Cultural Significance of Canada Reads

As academics’ interest in Canada Reads—as both scholars and readers—shows no sign of abating, it is worth continuing to try and grasp its broader cultural significance within the literary field, both as a structure that mediates literary value and as a dynamic cultural artifact in its own right. One element that *Three Day Road* brings into visibility is that Canada Reads complicates the view of popular culture that derives from Frankfurt School suspicions that the commodified products of the culture industry are incapable of fostering critical awareness on the part of their readers. For one thing, as we have seen, the ability of Canada Reads to draw readers from a range of backgrounds into its orbit demonstrates that the line between popular and what might be termed “hermeneutically challenging” literature is far from clear. What the case of *Three Day Road* also suggests is that the desire for resolution articulated by readers—the “great sense of hope after

so much darkness”—can be taken as evidence of an awareness that there is much that is *not* settled between First Nations and other Canadians. The need to insist that historical wrongs have now been put to rights, I argue, would not be expressed in such definitive terms if the power relations between Native communities and settler Canadians were more equal. Even as it provides an occasion on which to claim that the gaps in the historical record have been adequately closed, then, the reading context for *Three Day Road* provided by Canada Reads reveals readers’ awareness of this gap.

There are of course limitations to this small-scale study. Without being able to more fully contextualize the readers considered here—by specifying their socio-economic position, gender, education, location, and other demographic detail, much less identify how Canada Reads fits into their daily lives—this analysis is not generalizable to a wider body of readers. Moreover, my own re-narrativizing of these responses has shaped and made them meaningful in ways that illustrate my own perspective and preoccupations. As decontextualized as they are, however, these responses are able to illustrate something of the way “texts constitute readers through the seductive education that makes us social subjects” (Sommer 547): how the everyday activity of listening to a favourite radio program might shape the way a reader makes sense of a text. Clearly, taking a single book as a case study is insufficient for addressing a sociology of literature question, especially as little can be known about the demographic positions of the readers. Rather than a representative study, then, I offer the above as an example of how a sociology of literature approach can be productive in illuminating how readers engage with ideas around nationalism, identity, and history, questions with which scholars of Canadian literature and culture have long been concerned. I offer it also as a provocation of sorts, to foreground the need for more work in the area of reception study in order to more precisely understand the cultural meanings of texts such as *Three Day Road*, which receive wide exposure through cultural programming disseminated via the mass media.

NOTES

- 1 Adams provides some indicative statistics from BookNet Canada. When *Lullabies for Little Criminals* by Heather O’Neill won Canada Reads in 2007, its sales jumped by 192 per cent; in the month following its win, sales were up 621 per cent compared to the previous month. Another winning novel, Frank Parker Day’s *Rockbound*, had been selling about 200 copies a year prior to its win in 2005; since its win it has sold over 35,000 copies (n. pag.).

- 2 One exception to this was Hubert Aquin's *Next Episode*, championed by Justin Trudeau in 2003, which provoked strong reactions from readers and panellists alike due to its stylistic difficulties.
- 3 The relationship between literary taste preferences, middlebrow reading practices, and structures of cultural production in the US has been most thoroughly investigated by Janice Radway in *A Feeling for Books*. In the Canadian context, Candida Rifkind has written about how the bestselling poet Edna Jaques was relegated to the margins of literary history for being perceived as too closely aligned to a middle-class female readership. An extensive bibliography of other work on the middlebrow can be found in the bibliography of the Middlebrow Network website, www.middlebrow-network.com.
- 4 In his interview with Herb Wyile, Boyden states, "I'm fascinated by magical realism, in small doses, and I wanted to apply my own kind of magical realism to this text, but not in a big way. I wanted it to be a small but underlying part of the novel. . . . Niska's epileptic fits . . . are a doorway for her to see into the future a little bit, which is part of where her power comes from as a medicine woman, as a healer" ("Pushing Out the Poison" 236).
- 5 These responses originally appeared at www.cbc.ca/canadareads/yoursay.html. An archived version of this page as it appeared on 26 May 2006 can be found at the Internet Archive. I have retained the original spelling and orthography of these digital postings.
- 6 In their interviews with Boyden, both Wyile and Ryan remark on his ethnic background and note that he has Irish, Scottish, and Métis ancestry ("Pushing Out the Poison" 219; "Writing Survivance" 298).
- 7 In a different reception context, I have written about how the desire for narrative resolution can be a powerful influence on readers' interpretive strategies ("The Status is Not Quo!").

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