

Reading, Writing, Texting

Margery Fee

I was wondering if you had any books.

Any *what*?

Books. Y'know—about so big and full of words arranged in a specific order so as to give the effect of reality?

You mean DVDs?

—Jasper Fforde, *Thursday Next: First among Sequels*

Thursday Next is a Jurisdiction agent in the Book World; here she is at Booktastic!, a bookshop in the “real” Swindon, UK, looking for a book. Four years after *Thursday Next* was published, its fiction seems more and more like our reality. First the small, quirky purveyors of a specialized range of new books went under to the giant stores (*Women in Print* vanishes, *Chapters* rises), and now the chains that mainly sold remainders are on their way out (Book Warehouse is going out of business in Vancouver). The UBC Bookstore recently tried to change its name to UBC Central, because, as the manager put it, “we sell so much more than books,” but this proposed name change touched a nerve with booklovers (the same nerve that was touched when the old library became a new learning centre). We are now making our visits to used bookstores in a haze of nostalgia, certain that these dim and messy sanctuaries run by eccentric bibliophiles will soon be replaced by sparkling coffee shops with bad pastries.

And yet, these coffee shops, in their early incarnations an important site for the emergence of what Jürgen Habermas called the “public sphere,” are now filled with students and would-be writers linked to a new public sphere by the

Internet. The force that is closing real bookshops is at the same time creating a broader and different space for reading, literary comment, and many other forms of social connection. Now communities are forming world-wide. Despite the scams, viruses, and porn, many of these communities do manage to make progressive social changes, which is why bad governments work hard to repress social media.

All in all, it's exciting to be around when the mainstream communication technology is in a period of rapid change, for good or evil (or, as I'm forever trying to get my students to consider, maybe both). Not only are the media that transmit and produce text shifting, but so are what can be called reading technologies—or, if you like, literary-critical methodologies. Franco Moretti has been called heretical because he argues that close reading of the literary canon provides a limited view—"it's a theological exercise—very solemn treatment of very few texts taken very seriously." Instead, he argues for "a little pact with the devil: we know how to read texts, now let's learn how not to read them" ("Conjectures"). Instead of "close reading," the new technology permits "distant reading," reading that mines textual data for patterns that would be otherwise undetectable: his book, *Graphs, Maps, Trees* (2005) begins to tackle how this process might unfold. Although he dramatizes this move as "a pact with the devil," researchers have always used whatever tools they could to make arguments. Early concordances, painstakingly compiled by hand, modelled one of the most useful tools for literary analysis, and were quickly adapted for computers. My dissertation analyzed literary criticism written between 1890 and 1950 about the notion of a Canadian national literature; it took me years of reading to notice recurrent themes that I would have found faster if all those texts had been easier to find and search. I still have my handwritten notes—hours of peaceful labour now rendered nearly obsolete—Early Canadiana Online will get through all of this material soon enough. Recently I searched two massive novels by John Richardson, *Wacousta* (1832) and *The Canadian Brothers* (1840), for all references to Pontiac, Tecumseh, Indians, etc. (And yes, I *have* read them both in the usual way!) Such simple word searching is a productive exercise, to be sure, but the mere tip of the iceberg in Moretti's eyes. His interest in world literatures and the *longue durée* means that he is interested in devising ways to use computers to see, for example, how literary genres or the use of free indirect discourse emerge and decline in various literary traditions.

Like data mining, periods of technological change render visible what we formerly did not, perhaps could not, notice. Only recently did I learn

what a codex is, which I am treating as an indication of the invisibility of the dominant form of narrative transmission rather than as a personal failing. Now formerly neglected aspects of books, such as the ways that readers mark them up, are under scrutiny (Jackson). Book history came to Canada in the six-volume *History of the Book in Canada* project, completed in 2007, perhaps another indication that Minerva's owl flies only at dusk. Attention is now also turning to the future, to making digitized and "born-digital" material accessible and to providing new tools for analyzing it. The Canadian Writing Research Collaboratory / Le Collaboratoire scientifique des écrits du Canada has been funded to establish an online infrastructure for literary research in and about Canada. And Canada has been the site for many other path-breaking ventures in the digital humanities. The resources these projects are providing and the critical approaches they are modelling will help link researchers and help them take the best advantage of new technologies.

Books of fiction and poetry are a strange mix of object, market commodity, and narrative. More attention could certainly be paid to the impact of paratextual elements such as blurbs, cover art, typography, binding and paper, as well as to marginalia, sales, copyright law, etc. However, our primary focus on the narrative makes sense—this is what matters most to most of us. So how much does it matter that fictional narratives and poems are now travelling to us in new ways? The reading of print, unlike speech, has to be taught and reinforced with children, who often prefer to be watching something brightly coloured on a screen. Does the decline of the bookshop and the rise of YouTube spell disaster? Books leave a lot for the imagination to fill in; surely that's good? But of course, films are also "good to think with." There is a reason that most literature departments also teach film and cultural studies. Nor do I want to imply that people will ever stop reading for pleasure. This risks creating a "moral panic," which places intense focus on one group as a danger to the social order, usually a group that is easily demonized, like non-reading teenagers. Nor should we assume that reading and literacy practices of the kinds we are familiar with are or should be a universal technology or cultural practice. Although theorists like Walter J. Ong have made claims for print literacy that equate it with civilization, progress, and science, it is now possible to conceive that there have been many sciences and many cultures, each with different ways of preserving and communicating knowledge.

What people work at remembering are culturally important narratives: the ways they have done (and do) this take many forms. Nor do all oralities work in the same way (see Carlson, Fagan, and Khanenko-Friesen). The form of

orature most familiar to literary scholars in English is the “bard and formula” oral epic, practiced by Homer and in many other European traditions. The singer produced stories on the fly by putting together formulae, that is, useful bits of narrative that fit the rhythmic requirements of a line or part of a line. “Rosy-fingered dawn” served nicely to mark the passage of time, for example. But Athabaskan storytellers remember stories by using abstracts that can be expanded for audiences that don’t know the story (children and cultural outsiders), or shrunk for expert audiences (Scollon and Scollon). Now literary scholars are moving into a field formerly dominated by anthropologists in order to read the textualized orature of storytellers such as Harry Robinson (Okanagan) and the great Haida storytellers, Skaay and Ghandl, retranslated and retextualized by Robert Bringhurst.

Less well known are the different literacies used in the New World, in part because they were not recognized as writing. The Mi’kmaq, the Cree/*nêhiyawak*, the Ojibwe/Anishinaabe, the Inuit, and other Indigenous groups adopted syllabic and other writing systems as soon as they were introduced by missionaries. Father Christian Leclercq noted the existence of Mi’kmaw hieroglyphics on his arrival in 1677, and indeed, it has been suggested that syllabics may have proved so successful because they built on extant Indigenous writing systems (Edwards).

Thus, when I see someone in the Skytrain casually hanging on with one hand while busily texting with the other, I marvel at the speed with which we adapt to complex new technologies that allow us to “talk,” to read, and to write about reading. Then I get out my paperback.

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Lost and Found

We are delighted to announce a new section of *Canadian Literature* called “Lost and Found” that will introduce little-known documents of literary interest, digitizing, tagging, and archiving these on our website. If the document is a long one, we will publish only the introduction in our print issue, but put the document itself on the website, where it will be openly accessible. In this issue, Mary Chapman presents a short news story written by Sui Sin Far (Edith Maude Eaton [1865-1914]). We welcome submissions to this section.

Basil Frederick Stuart-Stubbs (1930 – 29 May 2012)

We pay tribute to his life full of accomplishment. The eighth University Librarian at UBC and tireless supporter of Canadian letters, he was one of the founders of *Canadian Literature* and its first circulation manager.