

Listening to the Readers of “Canada Reads”

Across the developed world fewer people are reading more books. Perhaps we should be asking *how* they are reading them.

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An Introduction to Book History

Why does the idea of celebrities championing Canadian literature on CBC radio and television make academics laugh? During the lively discussions at the “TransCanada” conference in June 2005,¹ almost everyone giggled when Barbara Godard pointed out that the CBC chose pop stars rather than academics to appear on CBC Radio One’s “Canada Reads” series. Now, this reaction may have been a brief outburst of conference-induced mass hysteria, but it was also an intriguing moment. What was so funny? Was it the idea that Canada has produced celebrities? Was it the juxtaposed image of pop star (connoting popular, media-savvy, access to a mass audience) and Canadian literature that provoked amusement? Did the laughter indicate concern about a “watered-down” literary critique aired on radio by “unqualified” readers? How much professional anxiety about the impact of our role as teachers and thinkers on the world outside the university campus prompted our laughter? Or, was this the laughter of dismissal and the rejection of a popular program format?

Mass reading events such as “Canada Reads” and “One Book, One Community” programs have certainly attracted criticism for their vulgarization of a cultural practice (literary interpretation) and their pandering to “the prizes and showbiz mentality” that has “infiltrated” Canadian literary culture (Henighan 166).² Former editor and publisher Roy MacSkimming describes “the ‘one book’ craze” as “the *reductio ad absurdum*” of a “blockbuster culture” that generates a “fixation with competition and success” (373). Writer and critic Aritha Van Herk accuses the series of “reducing the

whole rainbow of Canadian Literature to Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*" (140). In one of only two published academic essays to engage with "Canada Reads," Smaro Kamboureli offers a trenchant critique of "the tropes that inform the culture of celebrity" (47). She illustrates how "Canada Reads," through its championing of Ondaatje's novel in series one (2002), inevitably enacts the logic of the "imperium of affect" (45). Meanwhile, Laura Moss implicitly recognizes the show's position within a global market economy and various institutional and ideological structures when she notes that the series "showcases Canadian writing, promotes Canadian writers, encourages literacy, and supports the publishing industry in Canada." Her unease lies in the framing and interpreting of Canadian writing with "depoliticized discussions" that "reinforce certain popular notions of Canadianness," such as global peacekeeping and an idealized multiculturalism. As she points out, this inclination alone is a good enough reason for Canadian literature critics to take the "Canada Reads" "game" seriously. But in her preoccupation with the celebrities, Guy Vanderhaeghe's "thinly-veiled dig at academic discourse,"³ and "the watered-down aestheticism" of the show's book discussions, Moss pinpoints the anxiety that some of us may feel about our own role as so-called "expert" or "professional" readers when Canadian literature is conveyed in so many popular cultural formations—book groups, radio "games," "One book, One Community" programs. Non-academic readers are missing from Moss' ruminations on "Canada Reads" and from most other commentaries on the state and status of Canadian literature.

In this essay I begin to consider that absence by examining both the reading practices promoted by "Canada Reads" on-air, and those adopted by readers participating in the series through book group discussions and on-line bulletin boards. I identify the notion of literacy that "Canada Reads" constructs through its representational practices, the reading practices that the show promotes, and discuss the responses of selected readers who "use" the practices and selected titles. Redefining "response" as "use" steers between the hermeneutic and affective definitions of reading favoured by reader-response theorists (Murray 163; Price 305). This shift is important, not only as part of the conceptual work that book history needs to undertake in order to advance reading studies, but also because the notion of the "personalized" response to literature and art is widely employed (with both positive and negative connotations) by media commentators and within many people's everyday conversations (e.g. Taylor). I argue that on-air

“Canada Reads” frequently favours interpretive practices shaped by canonical aesthetics and formalist hermeneutics. However, off-air readers exhibit both resistance to and conformity with the on-air reading practices. Further, between the first and fourth series of “Canada Reads” (2002-2005) there was a gradual shift on-air toward the vernacular reading practices and social dynamics common in many face-to-face book groups. If popular reading cultures and media formats are re-shaping the use of Canadian literature, then surely, as literary scholars, we should be taking those cultural formations seriously. There are lessons to be learned, not only from our laughter, but also from listening to readers engaging with the “game” of “Canada Reads.”

“Canada Reads” is a “game”: it is a radio show (and, less successfully, a television show) that adapts a popular reality-TV format (“Survivor”). It is not a university seminar, a literary journal, nor an academic conference. These obvious differences in media and in intended audience among these events are worth signposting. The producers of “Canada Reads” are neither academics nor literary reviewers: they are experienced mass media professionals who make radio programs for Canada’s public broadcaster. When, as literary academics, we cast our critical gaze upon a radio show, it is important to consider not only the implicit agenda of the producers and the discursive effect of the broadcasts, but also the context and materiality of the show’s production. I have commented elsewhere upon the production history of the show, its mixed success at constructing a media spectacle in an age of techno-capitalism, and the CBC’s historical involvement with the publication and promotion of Canadian literature (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo). Here, I want to begin my discussion of reading practices by briefly examining the production team’s selection of the on-air panellists.

“Canada Reads” was formulated during a period of upheaval at the CBC by an interdisciplinary production team drawn from a number of different production units (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 6-7; 15-17). Senior producer, Talin Vartanian, describes herself as a “keen reader” of Canadian literature, although not “a literary maven,” and nominates other CBC colleagues, including Ann Jansen, Jackie Carlos, and David Barnard—all of whom were involved in the first two series of “Canada Reads”—as more “widely read” (Vartanian and Barnard). When I asked Vartanian and Barnard about the format of the show, they linked both their choice of a balloon debate and their selection of panellists with their objective of increasing the size and demographic range of the audience for CBC Radio One:

TV: There are plenty of programs that deal with books in a serious fashion. . . . You have to come up with something that is unique and different. So, [we had] the idea of turning it into a little bit of a game. But also picking people to be the panelists who are not at all earnest. Who are playful. Who are unexpected.

DB: Yeah, it's surprising that they're [the panellists] talking about books because, "wait a minute, that person, I've never heard that person talk about books before."

DF: That was a deliberate choice then?

TV: Oh yeah, like deciding to pick people who we know to be readers but who are known primarily as politicians or musicians or in some other cases, actors. And putting them into the role of a reader and getting them to talk about it in a way that is compelling to a listener because they think, "oh, I get to listen to Justin Trudeau talk about something other than his dad." And so that, the curiosity factor, draws people to the radio. It's not to hear another book show. (Vartanian and Barnard).

Making radio that sounded lively, and that might generate some dramatic surprises (like Trudeau voting against his own book choice) were paramount concerns in the producers' minds. The choice of "non-professional" readers was deliberate, and so was the engagement with celebrity culture which, the producers hoped, would bring some new (and hopefully younger) listeners to the show precisely because it was not like a "serious" book review program.

In year one (2002), Vartanian brainstormed with her colleague Jan Wong, in order to select panellists who would work well together to produce "magic," "chemistry," and "good radio" in a studio discussion game (Vartanian and Carlos 2003). In subsequent years, other production team members were involved in these discussions. They consulted their contact diaries, thus drawing upon their own social and cultural networks. Some panellists in years two through five (2003-2006) were likely chosen as a result of being contacted in a previous year for the "Canadians Recommend" website feature. While this description of process suggests some of the limitations involved in selecting panellists (many of them were likely names and people already known to CBC insiders; each panellist had already to have some degree of media visibility), it also demonstrates the pragmatics of producing a radio show with a limited (and temporary) staff and restricted economic resources. Thus, selecting Olivia Chow as a panellist (2005) does not necessarily indicate the producers' endorsement of her political position (and, after all, Kim Campbell was a panellist in 2002), any more than choosing Jim Cuddy (2004) indicates the producers' preference for a particular type of popular music. What the selections may suggest is the Toronto-cen-

tric content of the average Front-Street-based CBC insider's Rolodex, and their sporadic efforts to find panellists from other regions.

"Canada Reads" was conceived for the medium of radio; its popular format was intentional, and it explicitly promotes the reading of Canadian literature. Via the show, the CBC is able to extend its role as a "literacy sponsor." According to Deborah Brandt's formulation, "literacy sponsors" "are any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way." (166, quoted in Hall 651). The tension articulated by Brandt between facilitating literacy and limiting it to a particular ideological formation is illustrated by R. Mark Hall's compelling analysis of Oprah Winfrey's career as a literacy sponsor. Hall argues that, "valuing literacy for transformation, as Winfrey does, means that other ways of reading—and consequences of literacy—don't register on "Oprah's Book Club" (661). By contrast, although the "Canada Reads" broadcasts have represented the view that reading is valuable because it can transform the individual, such literacy is not the primary or only type advocated. Implicit in the project and the original question, "What is the book that the whole of Canada should read?" (CBC 2002), and the amended version which omits the moral imperative implied by "should," is another model of transformation that marries the reading of Canadian literature to the development of a collective cultural literacy via the creation of an imagined community of readers (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 13-21). Informed by the liberal nationalist ideology driving the CBC's foundational mandate to "enlighten, reflect and connect Canadians," the model of cultural literacy imbricated in the content and format of "Canada Reads" is about producing "better," more culturally competent and socially aware, citizens. Of course, it is precisely this project of social improvement, and the exercising of the CBC's cultural authority that underwrites it, that irritates many critics of "Canada Reads" (Bethune 52; Gordon A18; Niedzwiecki 16). In sum, reading to learn about Canada and Canadians was an explicit, if secondary, theme of several broadcast discussions over the program's first four years. Since I have discussed the cultural work of national imagining that "Canada Reads" performs via its book selections and on-air discussions elsewhere (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo), my focus here is the series' representation and evaluation of scholarly and colloquial reading practices.

Although none of the "Canada Reads" panels has to date featured an academic, "the scholar's position of authority within the world of reading," or,

at least, the scholar's way of reading ("privileging the cognitive, ideational, and analytic mode," [Long, "Textual" 192]), seems irrepressible.⁴ At times this approach is satirized by the panellists: "Can I use the 'P[ostmodern]' word?" wondered writer Will Ferguson discussing *Sarah Binks* in year two (2003). Three others disavowed any academic reading: "I had to switch off my university head," declared rock musician Jim Cuddy in year three (2004).⁵ Notions of literary value associated with scholarly reading practices trigger anxiety about levels of cultural competency: "I'm just feeling intimidated now!" declared the then-Mayor of Winnipeg Glen Murray after the initial discussion in year three about the criteria panel members used to select their books. For the show's on-air readers, an academic mode of reading is associated with formal literary features, knowledge of stylistics, and a specialist vocabulary: these elements insistently return in nearly every radio discussion. Given that each year at least one panellist has taken literature at an undergraduate and/or graduate level, the employment of interpretative and evaluative models for considering literature that are common within the academy is not in the least surprising. What is more significant is the air-time that they are afforded, and the ways that editing the show for drama and pace, and to enhance the personality dynamics among the on-air panellists, references the authority, and even upholds the value, of scholarly reading practices.

Although no academic critic has been an on-air panellist, a few scholars of Canadian literature have acted as consultants, providing sound-bites about specific texts and/or producing materials for the show's website. Janet Paterson wrote the readers' guide for *Next Episode/Prochain Episode* (winner of the 2003 series); Terry Riegelhof prepared the guides for *Beautiful Losers* (2005) and *Cocksure* (2006) (at the behest of their publisher McClelland & Stewart), and Gwen Davies prepared the time-line website feature for the 2005 winner, *Rockbound*. All three scholars were excited that these books and their writers were gaining a wider audience through their exposure on the radio show (Davies, Paterson, Riegelhof). By deferring to these "expert" scholarly readers for interpretations of literary texts and their contexts, the producers of "Canada Reads" are acknowledging the value that they place upon "academic" reading practices—practices that are, in fact, given air-time, even when the panellists adopt some of the social behaviours more commonly found in many (non-institutional) book groups.⁶ Asking "professional" readers (as opposed to the "celebrity" readers) to produce the supporting website materials also reinforces the pedagogical imperative

embedded within the CBC's mandate to "enlighten Canadians"—an obligation that neatly meshes with the rhetoric of on-air readers who frequently describe what they have "learned" from the selected books.

Are "less schooled" ways of reading that are not so "text-intensive, ideational, and analytical" represented and legitimated on-air (McGinley and Conley 219)? The short answer is "yes" they are represented, but they are not always legitimated. A variety of "nonaesthetic systems of value" (Long, *Book Clubs* 150) have been articulated on air by some panellists and on-line through the discussion boards and the celebrity recommendations web feature. Practices include reading as a politically transformative practice and valuing books for their "ability to create moral empathy" (Long, *Book Clubs* 150). Reading in order to understand and empathize with different worlds is also represented (Long *Book Clubs*; Rehberg Sedo "Badges"), as well as reading as a form of subjective identification (as when readers seek connections to their personal experience). Non-aesthetic or vernacular reading practices are not necessarily apolitical or devoid of aesthetic appreciation, although they are often so perceived. On-air reader Glen Murray proved to be a skilled and politically engaged vernacular reader, for example. In 2004 he claimed that, "I like novels that move me outside my comfort zone . . . I want to get annoyed and angry when I read." His advocacy of Thomas King's novel *Green Grass, Running Water* supported a reading practice oriented toward political transformation: it required questioning his own values as well as seeking to understand the novel's "non-European framework," King's "satire of Christian values," and his use of indigenous oral tradition. During a verbal battle with the other panellists who variously described and downgraded the novel as "too didactic [and] slight," (Jim Cuddy) "NativeLite—humour without the danger" (Zsuzsi Gartner), and "a little cute" (Francine Pelletier), Murray found an ally in Measha Brueggergosman. In her declaration that *Green Grass* was "the book that Canadians should challenge themselves with," Brueggergosman echoed Murray's notion of reading as potentially politically transformative.

Similarly, in series four (2005), Toronto City Hall politician Olivia Chow framed Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* as an environmentally-engaged and politically topical book that provokes reflection upon and engagement with scientific advances and contemporary social issues. Chow also presented the novel as a useful tool in the project of increasing literacy among young men: the sector of the population whom librarians in all northern industrialized countries are most actively attempting to involve in reading

(Barrs and Pidgeon; Carnell; Jones). On a number of occasions, she explicitly sought the support of fellow panellist Roch Carrier, former National Librarian of Canada, for this project. The “game” format of the show meant that Carrier was initially reluctant to back Chow on this point, since his role was to promote *Volkswagen Blues*, but there was also an implicit clash of reading practices at play in their encounters. Carrier’s eloquent advocacy of Poulin’s novel centred on aesthetics, while Chow’s interpretations of all five novels were directed by a highly mimetic reading practice. Subsequently, *Beautiful Losers* with its non-linear narrative and ludic engagement with genre codes was a “difficult” read for Chow, whereas for Carrier, Cohen’s novel “still smack[ed] . . . of the new, and the outrageous and the revolutionary.” While Glen Murray’s political advocacy of King’s novel was upheld by at least one panel member, Chow’s political reading of Atwood’s novel lost ground as the other panellists devalued her other contributions to the discussions. Chow was gradually made to appear less intellectual and astute than the other panellists. Donna Morrissey corrected her “mis-reading” of Cohen’s representation of women, and the novel’s champion, Molly Johnson, cited the various “experts” whom she had consulted about the historical literary value of the novel (including, ironically enough, Margaret Atwood). The comments of Carrier and host Bill Richardson about the “ground-breaking” form, content and literary brilliance of *Beautiful Losers* were given considerable air-time.⁷ *Beautiful Losers* thus became the test-case through which the 2005 panellists proved their critical mettle and Chow failed the test.

Panellists who read and interpret through non-academic frames tend to get side-lined, especially if they are women. In 2003, actor Mag Ruffman’s vernacular reading practice was predicated on the desire for immersion in, rather than analysis of, the text. Compared to the other panellists, Ruffman came across as distinctly un-schooled in literary criticism and the art of debate. Her comments frequently seemed banal and unengaged—and I admit that I found this irritating and unsatisfactory, particularly in regards to her “failure” to make a compelling case for Helen Humphrey’s *The Lost Garden*. The journalist Brian Bethune interpreted Ruffman’s stance (ironically?) as a comic performance: “From early on Ruffman decides to play the ditz, a part she takes on with shrewdness and comic timing” (Bethune 52). On closer examination, however, Ruffman’s performance as a reader hints at a colloquial reading practice that is given time and credence within many face-to-face book groups (Long, *Book Clubs* 152). Her introductory com-

ments to *The Lost Garden* emphasize the necessity of accessibility and a compelling plot that enable a reader's immersion in a fictional world, and she hints at the importance of believable characters to reader identification with that imagined reality: "My book is very easy to read—you go through it quite fast. . . . It's a great book because you can't put it down. . . . It's a book that I've lent to five or six people and they've read it in one sitting. . . . It's a lovely book and the characters are great and the story is great." Note too, that Ruffman has shared this book with other readers—maybe with what scholars of book clubs term her "trusted others" (Rehberg Sedo "Badges") in an act of "social exchange" (Hartley 91).

Unfortunately for Ruffman (and Humphrey's novel), the "Canada Reads" panellists do not recognize her commentary as the beginnings of a non-aesthetic evaluation and, furthermore, the *Survivor*-style competition militated against them reading "with" her in the collaborative and collective style of book group book talk (Hartley 137; Long *Book Clubs*; Rehberg Sedo "Badges"). Instead, presenter and chair Bill Richardson cut into Ruffman's introduction to add information about the book's setting, as if to correct her style of commentary. In a later broadcast, writer Nancy Lee mounted an eloquent literary defence of the novel that brought its presentation into line with the promotion of the other novels. Colloquial reading practices are present in the radio shows but the demands of the show's contest format, editing, and the need to produce a dramatic "spectacle" frequently conspire with the cultural authority of aesthetic interpretation to contain them (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 13-4).

Despite these examples, I would like to suggest that, with each series, "Canada Reads" has given increasingly more on-air time to vernacular reading practices, including shared reading practices that mimic the form and function of face-to-face reading groups. In 2005 (series four), for example, a range of reading practices (as well as diverse interpretations) were undertaken, tested out and, in some cases, rejected by the five panellists in favour of alternative interpretive modes. These included both passionate, personalized and identificatory readings, such as writer Donna Morrissey's vivid anecdote about her father's experience in the Newfoundland fishery as part of her promotion of Frank Parker Day's *Rockbound*. Singer Molly Johnson commented upon the failure of identification as a sustained form of reader engagement in relation to Mairuth Sarsfield's *No Crystal Stair*: "I wish there had been books around about being black in Canada when I was 17. My mother knows Mairuth. . . . I had lots of points of entry into this book but I

didn't think the story was that great." In both cases, Johnson and Morrissey offered other ways of reading the same texts. Morrissey's advocacy of *Rockbound* involved the invocation of humanist values (she refers to the "age-old questions of humanity" that Parker Day explores, for example); a political and environmental reading of the text in terms of the contemporary destruction of the Atlantic fishery; and an interpretation of the novel informed by western generic conventions of "fable," "myth," and "romance." Johnson referenced a series of approaches to *No Crystal Stair*: the consideration of narrative form; a socio-political reading that established the book as an important articulation of "Black community and disappeared history," and the socially valuable capacity of the novel to generate "book talk" among friends even if, as an individual reader, Johnson was not particularly engaged by either the characters or the story: "I had really great conversations with the women in my world," she enthused.

There were other ways in which "Canada Reads" series four sounded more like a book group discussion than a "knock-out" contest. Although the *Survivor* format of the show demands that individuals champion a specific book and vote off another each day, the panellists in 2005 were far more reluctant than those in previous programs to dismiss or condemn each other's books, despite Bill Richardson's prompting. Richardson made repeated references to book debate as boxing but, rather than taking each other on, the 2005 "Canada Reads" panellists occasionally ditched the rules of the game. In broadcast four, Roch Carrier underlined his view that all the books were "good books" that listeners could enjoy, while in the final broadcast, Olympian fencer Sherraine MacKay added, "they're only rejected because we're playing this silly game." She then proceeded to initiate what might be described as a "Peggy Atwood love-in" among the discussants. The "Canada Reads" panellists adopted other book group-type behaviours that were given extended air-time. Notable was Olivia Chow's presentation of her research into the origins and images of "Oryx." Instead of allowing the pace and drama of a debate to drive editorial decisions, in this instance the producers retained Chow's discourse on *Oryx*, which became somewhat disconnected from her analysis of the novel. Whereas Chow's comments on *Beautiful Losers* were dismissed by the other panellists, her contextual research on Atwood's novel was not. Her diversion away from the text would have been familiar territory to any listener-reader who belongs to a book club: the ways that books can prompt members to research both relevant and tangential material and then share it with the group is a common component of "book

talk” (Long, *Book Clubs*; Rehberg Sedo “Badges”). Equally striking in this regard, was Chow’s description of a “Canada Reads” “feast” that she had held with friends (themed dinners being a staple of many book groups [Hartley 16-7]); Johnson’s narration of her reading history of Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers* and her seeking out of “expert” opinion on it as part of her preparation for the show (note that she asks writers rather than academics); and the exchange of familial stories of physical work and rural communities that occurs between Morrissey and Carrier in a discussion about *Rockbound*. While this group of panellists did not consistently exhibit book group behaviours, they were more accommodating of vernacular reading practices than previous on-air readers.

Allowing book group behaviours to blur the spirit of competition may, of course, be a smart move on the part of the show’s producers who are aware, via their outreach work, that many listeners are precisely the type of people who belong to book groups (Vartanian and Barnard). I also suspect that the gender of the panellists in year four (2005)—the only year across five series of “Canada Reads” in which four out of five panellists have been women (Johnson substituted at a late date for Rufus Wainwright)—impacted on the social dynamics of the group, and that this in turn shaped the editing of the show. However, media representations of book groups in Canada are not particularly positive (e.g. Daspin; Robbins). Journalist Kate Taylor criticized the type of critical practices highlighted on-air in 2005:

[“Canada Reads”] accelerate[s] the trend toward the personalization of all criticism; the notion that artistic value lies mainly in our personal interaction with art, one particularly heightened if the art echoes our own memories or experiences.

While I recognize that highly personalized interpretations of literary texts can erase the wider social and political issues that a writer may be raising, not all affective reading practices or those which begin with personal identification operate this way. To further this argument it is necessary to turn to the interpretive work undertaken by off-air readers of “Canada Reads.”

Through its online presence and the local activities it inspires, “Canada Reads” offers scholars of Canadian literature an opportunity to investigate the uses that readers make of the show and its book selections.⁸ Specific demographic data for “Canada Reads” is not available, but data relating to the audience for CBC radio as a whole suggests that the majority of listeners are over 35 with age groups of 50 years and over recording the highest weekly listening hours (between 20 and 25) (Friends). Feedback received by the producers of “Canada Reads” has included e-mails from teachers, high school

students, and other readers under 35, suggesting that the show has to date attracted a small number of younger readers/listeners (Vartanian and Barnard). While it is difficult to determine whether or not the show creates new readers for Canadian literature and, if so, how many, sales figures for selected titles suggest that the series is successful in creating a wider readership for the featured books (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 28). More significantly for my purposes in this essay, postings on the show's website in the second, third and fourth series of "Canada Reads" (2003-2005) offer evidence for a range of reading practices, not all of which are determined by the on-air discussions or by the medium of expression.

The material examined includes comments posted on the CBC's on-line discussion boards, which were active for approximately six weeks during the 2003 and 2004 series of "Canada Reads." In 2005 the discussion boards were replaced by a new version of the "People's Choice" award. For two months, readers were invited to post short commentaries about the book they would recommend to Canadians, rather than simply entering a title on a ballot (as in 2002) or voting for one of the five featured books (2003 and 2004). The 2005 People's Choice feature produced an interesting series of reading narratives, many of which were highly autobiographical in content. Taking part in a written form of exchange may be one factor that encouraged participants to borrow from the textual genres of memoir and autobiography, and to respond to each other's contributions by mimicking the content, semi-formal register, and narrative structure of previous postings. A majority of the commentaries articulate the emotional and/or intellectual role that a particularly beloved book has played in the reader's life, for example. Nearly all readers chose books that have not yet been featured on "Canada Reads," and several took issue with the show for failing to highlight a particular author (such as David Adams Richards) or genre of writing (notably fantasy and children's fiction, genres that are often marginalized by academic critics).

The postings suggest that the "Canada Reads" producers are neither responding to nor particularly paying attention to what Canadians really read and want to read "together." Readers' nominations of books, genres, and authors can also be interpreted as offering some resistance to the canonical approach that underwrites at least half of the "Canada Reads" book choices. A sizeable number of readers make no reference at all in their postings to the show or its literary selections. It is tempting to interpret these commentaries as a rejection of the CBC "nannyism" cited by Hal Niedzviecki in his disparaging remarks about "Canada Reads" and "One

Book, One Community” programs (16). Further, the articulation of alternative Canadian literature lists within a medium provided by the CBC could be interpreted as a meaningful form of public engagement with (and negotiations of) hierarchies of literary value.

The format of the “People’s Choice” forum mediates the reading practices recorded there and the language used to describe “value.” Many postings expressing opinions about the post-ers’ reading histories and preferences adopted the style of a reading diary or, more appropriate to the medium, a reader’s blog. The reader/blogger both notes and reflects critically upon their reading habits, while seeking to influence those of other readers who may use the web as a resource in selecting books to read (Rehberg Sedo “Convergence”).⁹ Several readers of this type employ the language of avid, voracious book readers to articulate the pleasure they gain by consuming Canadian fiction: “the chapters I had devoured” (Crystal Walsh, St John’s); “I was consumed by the story” (Karen, St John’s); “I would recommend [this book] to anyone seeking a taste of Canadian literature” (Alison Lennie, Edmonton). This discourse of consumption not only reflects the pervasive consumer-oriented organization of contemporary Western societies, it also expresses a visceral reading experience that “feeds” both imaginative and bodily needs. Perhaps this pleasure is replayed for readers who share their reading experiences with others through online postings or blogging?

Discussion boards mediate reading practices differently from the People’s Choice format. By inviting post-ers to debate directly with each other, albeit in a written rather than an oral form, the “Canada Reads” discussion boards elicit more overt examples of readers negotiating with notions of literary value, and reflecting on the role that reading plays in their everyday lives. In the two years that the “Canada Reads” team ran the on-line discussion boards (2003 and 2004), the moderator was also kept busy refereeing the eloquent outbursts of outrage and support for the show’s format, the quality (or not) of the book chat on-air, and the various conspiracy theories about the “political agenda” of those running the show. Additionally, readers used the boards to explain the value that specific books held for them. There were overt expressions of the “identity work” that readers were undertaking with and through reading, sometimes alone, but also within groups (Turner 102). These ranged from the feel-good affirmation of an un-problematized Canadian identity, to critical reflections upon notions of national and regional identities. A reader in Waterford, Ontario exemplifies the celebratory, affirmative reading experience, one apparently shared by members of their book group:

Our group has read a number of the Canada Reads selections and our choice is *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* by Wayne Johnston. This tale embraces the spirit of "Canadianism." We felt Canadian reading it and believe this to be the ultimate compliment to a Canadian book and its author. We are enjoying the lively panel discussions taking place on the CBC this week and believe Canada Reads is a great way to celebrate Canada Book Week and the wonderful Canadian Literature that is available. We look forward to next year's list. Kudos to the CBC! (23 April 2003)

The irony of adopting Johnston's anti-colonial historical fiction of Newfoundland, a book that laments the province's lost chance of becoming a sovereign state, is invisible here, just as it was on-air when, championed by Justin Trudeau, it was held up as a great example of Canadian federalism (Sugars 169 n.1) I am particularly struck by the willingness of readers in Ontario to "embrace" a Newfoundland story as the epitome of all things Canadian, thereby neatly inverting the usual cultural function of Newfoundland as central Canada's marginalized "other"—the "handout province" requiring too much taxpayer's money. A reversal of this sort may well be inflected by nostalgia for the lost world of small rural townships that Johnston represents in *Colony* as well as his evocative passages of lyrical landscape description that fulfil an urban longing for apparently cohesive communities (Fuller "Strange" 22).

This particular group of readers, in common with a number of other post-ers, employ the "Canada Reads" selections as a resource through which to build their shared reading list. They also use the books to celebrate being "Canadian" through a literature that they regard as high in quality if and when it affirms their sense of a collective identity. While these uses of Canadian literature may not coincide with the motivations of many of the "professional readers" who teach and research it, they should not all be dismissed out of hand as "un-politicized" (Moss). At times, as noted in the Waterford example, on-line readers perform readings that uphold dominant nationalist ideology, but these readings can offer scholars insights into the relation between mainstream representation of Canadian literary culture and the perpetuation of normative values. Further, from the perspective of cultural politics at least, the state funding of Canadian literary culture post-Massey-Lévesque Commission to the early 1990s appears to have paid off. The post-ers on the "Canada Reads" website demonstrate an awareness of Canadian writing in various genres, and most readers celebrate the fun involved in reading these books. Indeed, the various pleasures derived by these Canadians in their reading of Canadian literature suggest another area

for critical investigation that has been under-researched by literary scholars.

The other reading practice which dominated the “Canada Reads” discussion boards was more critically self-reflexive:

I read to be a little unsettled, to have my perspectives called into question, so that I am reminded to tread carefully in my interactions with others. The world is not simple, issues are not black and white. The energy and creativity in life lie in the grey areas, the realm of the ambiguous—the uncomfortable domain of *Next Episode*. (Mark, March 2003)

The textual, written medium of the discussion board (less “instant” than on-line chat, for example) combined with the ability of the commentator to re-read and reflect upon previous postings carefully, can lead to more developed analyses than are sometimes given space on-air. Another post-er wrote a more extended analysis of self-transformation, perhaps encouraged by the example of earlier contributors such as Mark:

I believe it was a brave move of the panel to select *Next Episode* [as the winner] not only because it was a French Canadian novel, but because terrorism and separatism is something that effects us all [sic] . . . and no matter where we are in Canada—it is better to try to understand each other through the perspectives of our regionality than to dismiss the value of our diverse Canadian experience. I myself was sure *Colony of Unrequited Dreams* would win—but I am glad *Next Episode* came out on top because it is important to understand the many different perspectives Aquin gives in this novel—the insane, the desperate, the separatist, the Quebecois, and, ultimately the Canadian. The decision was not about politics, it was about having an open mind—trying something new and different and uncomfortable because you might enjoy it anyway. (Angela, April 2003)

While Angela’s commentary veers between a liberal discourse of diversity and a more ideologically radical stance that seeks to recognize and value differences within the Canadian polity, she is certain about the value that Canadian literature has for her.

Mark’s and Angela’s notion of reading books in order to have your identity and assumptions “unsettled” was echoed by many readers on the discussion boards in both 2003 and 2004. By contrast, only one on-air example from those two years adopts a similar stance: the occasion in 2004 when Glen Murray and Measha Brueggergosman mounted their passionate defence of Thomas King’s novel. This example shows that the reader-listeners of “Canada Reads,” empowered in part by the more reflective, written mode of communication available to them on-line, sometimes read against the grain of the show’s tendency to default to a reading practice structured by canonical aesthetics. Although postings on discussion boards can be a

frustrating source for investigating reading practices since post-ers frequently do not provide their location, gender, age, or other detail about their lives, the “Canada Reads” postings demonstrate readers “at work” negotiating with literary texts, with the cultural authority of the CBC, with the on-air discussions, with different constructions of “Canadian” identity, and with each other’s opinions.

Meanwhile, academic readers have also responded to “Canada Reads” through various media. Some scholars of Canadian literature posted brief critical comments on-line via the CANLIT-L listserv, or, via personal blogs (e.g. “scribbling woman”). Many of the CANLIT-L postings echoed the content and concerns of the “non-academic” readers who posted on the “Canada Reads” discussion boards. Issues featured on CANLIT-L included the negative criticism of selected books necessitated by the “Survivor” format of the show; the “dullness” of conversation during year one (2002), the sensationalist mis-representation on-air of *Prochain Episode* as a novel “whose hero is a terrorist” in year two (2003) (Forsyth), and, most provocatively, whether or not the series showcases Canadian literature in a way that is laudable. The latter theme elicited a small handful of largely positive responses from post-ers in February/March 2005 who felt that “any show that promotes literature and gets people curious and reading” (Lesk) or “that gets Frank Parker Day read” (Dean) had some cultural value. Perhaps not surprisingly, post-ers identifying themselves as librarians also shared this view, and were particularly quick to express their support for the show during the first year (2002). Academic dis-ease with “Canada Reads” has, to date, focussed on its perpetuation of the culture of celebrity and global commodity capitalism (e.g. Kambourelis; Lynch). Via the CANLIT-L listserv, Gerald Lynch has twice expressed his dissatisfaction with “Canada Reads” and literary awards as vehicles of consumer capitalism focussed on “selling one thing a lot” (2003). In other words, academic readers have been pre-occupied with the wider cultural, ideological significance and structural situation of “Canada Reads,” and, perhaps surprisingly for people whose training privileges textual criticism, they have been rather less concerned with the actual content of the show, the on-air discussions and the books selected.

Finally, a small but growing band of academic readers wish to “use” or respond to “Canada Reads” by engaging with the show more directly and inter-actively. English and library faculty members at UBC, UNBC and the University of Winnipeg, among others, have been involved with tie-in events

such as panel discussions or book displays on-and off-campus during the radio series. Other academics have incorporated critical readings of the show, its book selections and its construction of a reading public into their undergraduate teaching of Canadian literature (Moss “correspondence”; Rifkind). The former “hands-on” responses to “Canada Reads” might be described as a particular vernacular reading practice: they are certainly socially-oriented in their direct engagement with non-academic readers, and in their possible contribution to better “town/gown” relations. The pedagogical responses, meanwhile, are clearly influenced by cultural studies approaches to literary-cultural production and reception. They also represent dynamic pedagogical strategies through which to engage the interest of students whose reading competencies have been developed on-line as much as they may have been learned through reading print texts.

Undergraduate students in a Canadian literature classroom or posting in a Virtual Learning Environment can, of course, be considered to form a reading group, albeit one that is framed and structured by institutional educational imperatives. The final reading practices that I want to consider are those of people who also demonstrably and regularly read together and who, arguably, do not require a series such as “Canada Reads” to recommend Canadian writing that they might enjoy. Established book groups have their own rules of selection and modes of discussion and evaluation which, while not as “free” or “anarchical” as one scholar of reading has suggested (Petrucci 367), are by no means enslaved to the hierarchies of value consecrated by universities and literary review editors (Hartley 45-71; Long, *Book Clubs* 116-30). Take two different book groups located in the same part of Nova Scotia.¹⁰ Both groups decided to read one of the 2005 “Canada Reads” books, *Rockbound*, before it won the on-air competition. Members of the “Red Tent group” were motivated to read Frank Parker Day’s 1928 novel by a local CBC Radio-Halifax competition in which book groups in Nova Scotia were invited to demonstrate why their discussion of *Rockbound* should be selected for broadcast. The Red Tent group won the competition and their discussion of the novel was aired on *Maritime Noon*, with extracts broadcast nationally on *Sounds Like Canada*. The other book group, “Judith’s Book Club,” had no direct involvement in the production of either local or national “Canada Reads” programmes. Their “act” of reading *Rockbound* had a different context, although both groups share the same geographic “place” (Cavallo and Chartier 2), and are composed primarily of women ranging in age from 30 to 60. Listening to the groups discussing both

Rockbound and “Canada Reads” offers some fascinating insights into the ways in which readers interpret texts in a face-to-face group discussion. Members are aware of the conventions that frame how literary fiction is represented not only by a national broadcaster but also by academic “experts”; they understand the exigencies of radio as a phatic medium that must engage and hold the attention of the (often-distracted) listener, and they employ and value their local and experiential knowledge as an interpretative resource. It would, therefore, be incorrect and overly simplistic to label their shared reading practice as an example of the “trend” for “personalized” criticism (Taylor R1).

One of the most compelling aspects of the Red Tent discussion is their analysis of how their regular reading practices were changed and mediated by the editing strategies and agendas of the local CBC radio show producers. The group rehearsed; they created a stage-set; they turned the meeting into something of a celebratory ritual featuring food and wine. Their regular social practice as a reading group was transformed into an event. Several non-members were present at the taping, including the writer Donna Morrissey who championed *Rockbound* on “Canada Reads.” Another one-off participant was local CBC Halifax radio host, Don Connelly, who turned out to have some pre-conceived notions of book groups that inflected the questions that he asked, the editing that took place after the recording, and the point at which he stopped the taping. Connelly had asked them, for example, whether they belonged to the book group for primarily social reasons—which they energetically refuted. Here are members of the group recalling how they performed a book group discussion of *Rockbound* for the radio:

Pam: We did *Rockbound*! We did it two nights before [the taping of the radio show]! To rehearse amongst ourselves, just to chat about the book—so that we didn’t sound completely stupid.

Pat: We don’t usually have a meal. We did a meal—we thought, “we’ll roll up the carpet.” It was at Gail’s—we went into Gail’s living room and there was all these huge honking microphones and all the air was just sucked right out of the room. Like there was this gas! And it wasn’t like a normal discussion.

Marlene: Although we’d had lots of normal discussion around the table while we ate. I thought that we had great discussion in the kitchen and we had good talk in the kitchen.

Hilary: We had good wine too!

[laughter]

Pat: And I thought that Don Connelly cut us off just as we were starting to get going. I was ready to go and he said, “that’s a wrap!” We were just starting . . .

(Red Tent)

Not only did the Red Tent feel that their “normal discussion” was cut short and restricted to what they regarded as preliminaries, they also articulated how they allowed the radio-friendly controversy about the reception of *Rockbound* by the inhabitants of Ironbound (the community that Parker Day visited while researching his novel) and Connelly’s directorial agenda to hi-jack their usual textual pre-occupations:

Marlene: [The discussion] was fascinating and we’ve had lots of conversations when we’ve really diverged and gone off on a tangent and we’ve still gotten something out of it at the end of the night. But I remember there was one point when [Don Connelly] said, because we’d been talking about the Ironbounders and this and that and we were very wrapped up in [the controversy] and people’s connections to this, and then he said, “Let’s talk about setting.” And we went “huh?”

[laughter] (Red Tent)

Rather than debate characterization, setting, language, and the historical contexts for the book as they normally do, the Red Tent’s “Canada Reads”-mediated discussion focussed largely on the dramatic controversy surrounding Frank Parker Day’s fictional representation of actual people and events. Admittedly, this is a controversy that still has some force on the South Shore of Nova Scotia 80 years later, and hence knowledge about the local reception of Day’s novel could be referenced by book group members from family and community memories. Talk about the Ironbounders’ upset over Day’s novel in the 1930s thus served the dual purpose of providing engaging radio, and allowing the group members to exchange their local knowledge (drawn not only from local gossip but also from meeting Donna Fink, former Ironbound resident).

Although the context and act of reading *Rockbound* was different for Judith’s Book group, their shared reading practices as a group are well established and not dissimilar to those of the Red Tent group. While Judith’s Book group gave some space to the discussion of the *Rockbound* controversy, its treatment on radio, and their envy of the Red Tent group’s brush with media stardom, they spent most of their time discussing plot, characterization, and the dialect Parker Day employs in the novel. In common with the Red Tent, many members of Judith’s Book group used the “Afterword” (written by Gwen Davies, University of New Brunswick) in order to connect fictional place-names and family names with their local knowledge of the South Shore. They did so as part of their examination of Maritime mores and values, which was prompted by the book’s depiction of a small rural community in which privacy is impossible, the work ethic is predominant,

and moral rule-breaking is punished. They recognized this world from their own experiences, and members of this group exchanged stories about their family history, demonstrating not only a staple of book group talk, but also the trust they have placed in each other (Rehberg Sedo “Badges”). Unlike the Red Tent, some members of Judith’s group appeared to desire a truthful representation, and they pointed up what they see as moral inconsistencies in the fictional world of the novel, by referring to their familial and local knowledge. The readers in this group have confidence in their reading practices. One participant’s comment captured the group’s belief in their interpretive agency as readers—and as possessors of local knowledge:

P8: But this is Frank Parker Day’s gaze on a place, right? This is not necessarily the way it was, this is the way he saw it, but we’re reading the book right? (Judith’s Book group)

This comment helps to contextualize members’ assessment of the use-value that the “Canada Reads” series has for them. They reported that it generates discussion for their meetings, but does not necessarily influence what they select to read together:

P2: I think we have to say our involvement with “Canada Reads” is that we discuss it. Like when “Canada Reads” is going on we have incredible discussions around it.

P1: But only because we’re doing *Rockbound* are we here [laughter and over-talk]. Has “Canada Reads” ever influenced our book group? And, so far, the answer is no. (Judith’s Book group)

However, some members had bought books selected by “Canada Reads” to read outside the group, such as *Whylah Falls* (attracted by the Nova Scotian connection), and *Next Episode* (because it won in 2003). Here, they were relying on the CBC’s well-established cultural authority and its long history as a promoter of Canadian writing (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 18-9). They were, in fact, using “Canada Reads” and the CBC as a “trusted other”—that is, a resource for finding pleasurable and intellectually stimulating books that they would enjoy (Rehberg Sedo “Badges”). The on-line readers I have discussed often used the show and its website in a similar way, perceiving the CBC to be a trustworthy, although not perfect, cultural authority. As book group members, the Red Tent and Judith’s Book Group also used the “Canada Reads” radio debates to stimulate discussion, but did not necessarily allow themselves to be directed by either the interpretations or reading practices that they heard on-air.

What lessons are to be learned from listening to the on-air, on-line, and

book group readers of “Canada Reads”? With respect to the radio series, the vernacular practices favoured by book groups seem to be combined with selected elements of a more “academic” mode of reading. This mix suggests to me the importance of developing nuanced analyses of non-academic reading practices and theories capable of explaining the pleasures, politics, and social relations that reading practices both shape and resist. Some off-air readers are clearly looking to CanLit for “a kind of mimetic account of national experience” (Hulan 38), and yes, some of them are reading in the “un-politicized” and “personalized” ways that mirror the practices of some on-air celebrity readers (Moss; Taylor). However, not all readers use “Canada Reads” or Canadian Literature in the same way. As my brief consideration of on-line readers suggests, some readers are not simply imagining a unified Canadian community; they are, in many cases, questioning that nationalist construction. Others, like the book group readers, re-embed the series and the books within their established selection procedures and interpretive practices. For the two groups I considered, reading *Rockbound* can involve drawing upon familial and local knowledge as well as familiarity with literary genres and narrative strategies. Gender also appears to be significant: the on-air readers of “Canada Reads” who employed affective reading practices were usually women, as were the majority of members of the two Nova Scotian book groups.

Reading Canadian literature as a shared social practice requires our attention as literary critics. The social dynamics and social rituals of shared reading were briefly illuminated when the Red Tent book group became radio stars. We could also profitably interrogate how far the media of radio, television, and the Internet shape and legitimate the various reading practices demonstrated by the readers of “Canada Reads.” Smaro Kamboureli is right when she argues that the culture of celebrity “remains loudly mute about the ideology of the knowledge it transmits” (46). Rather than laughing anxiously (or dismissively) about celebrities undertaking literary interpretation, scholars need to identify and critique the ideological work that is being performed in the name of reading Canadian literature. More generally, we should examine what “happens” to the interpretation of literary fiction when it moves through the communicative strategies that structure and characterize mass media and the Internet. When we undertake any of the investigations I have suggested, we also need to be self-reflexive about our own position, power, and responsibility within processes of knowledge production and consumption. We need to be prepared to shift our ground out-

side our disciplinary training, and in our relations with and attitude to “non-academic” readers. Investigating and reaching a better understanding of contemporary book cultures and events like “Canada Reads” may enable us as “professional” readers to participate more directly, more provocatively, and more creatively in popular readings of Canadian literature.

NOTES

- 1 The first TransCanada conference—“TransCanada: Literature, Institutions, Citizenship”—was organized by Smaro Kamboureli (University of Guelph) and Roy Miki (Simon Fraser University), and was held in downtown Vancouver at the Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue, 23-26 June 2005.
- 2 The research informing this essay forms part of a collaborative interdisciplinary project, “Beyond the Book: Mass Reading Events and Contemporary Cultures of Reading in the UK, USA and Canada,” funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK; grant number 112166). For more information about the project, visit <www.beyondthe-bookproject.org>. I wish to acknowledge the invaluable contributions of my research collaborator, DeNel Rehberg Sedo (Mount Saint Vincent University).
- 3 I believe that Moss is referring to Vanderhaeghe’s comment quoted in a CBC press release announcing the winner of the 3rd series, ‘Canada Reads *The Last Crossing*’ (February 20, 2004): “For me, it was a great pleasure to have the books debated in such a passionate, intelligent, and decidedly *not* sombre fashion.”
- 4 It is helpful to remember that, in the academy, the “scholar’s position of authority within the world of reading” nominated by Long is confirmed and practiced through both oral and written media. With regards to the attainment of prestige, advancing scholarly claims through written discourse is, however, privileged over oral communication within most Euro-American institutions. Scholarly written texts adopt a very different mode of communication from the type of conversational radio discourse we hear on “Canada Reads.” While the on-air panellists do not, of course, reproduce the rhetorical strategies of scholarly written discourse in their broadcast conversations, they employ elements of academic literary discourse in order to demonstrate their own cultural capital and ability to judge literary texts.
- 5 Recordings of the radio broadcasts can be accessed via the “Canada Reads” website: <<http://www.cbc.ca/canadareads>> where former series are archived, e.g. 2004 website <http://www.cbc.ca/canadareads/cr_2004/index.html>.
- 6 I am not claiming that *all* book groups which meet outside the classroom adopt identical modes of social interaction or textual interpretation. Studies by Long and Hartley do, however, indicate that there are some social practices and interpretive strategies that recur among many groups, and I am drawing upon their insights when I discuss colloquial reading practices in this article.
- 7 Also notable was the cultural authority accorded to Carrier as a writer, critic, and “national” figure by the other panellists (all women) who deferred to him, and commented upon his seniority.
- 8 For a list of spin-off activities relating to “Canada Reads” see Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 30-31. Some of the postings are archived on the various “Canada Reads” websites (see n. ii).

- 9 Some examples of readers blogging can be accessed at: <<http://www.chekhovsmistress.com>>; <<http://lbc.typepad.com/blog/>>; <http://noggs.typepad.com/the_reading_experience/>
- 10 The Red Tent discussion was facilitated by DeNel Rehberg Sedo, while Judith's Book group kindly recorded their discussion for us. Quotations are taken from transcripts of recordings. Names of participants have been changed for the Red Tent and removed for Judith's Book group.

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