

Canada Reads

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Between April 15 and April 23, 2002 CBC Radio hosted a series of five half-hour panel discussions called Canada Reads. It was a game, as host Mary Walsh called it, to find the book that all of Canada *should* read. Five prominent Canadians each championed a single title. Former Prime Minister Kim Campbell chose Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* because of the "good sex"; Stephen Page, of the *Barenaked Ladies*, championed Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* as a "beautiful book about the immigrant experience"; Winnipeg writer Leon Rooke selected Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* because Hagar Shipley is still "the reigning queen of Canadian literature"; science fiction writer Nalo Hopkinson nominated George Elliot Clarke's *Whylah Falls*, describing it as a passionate and celebratory love poem; and actor Megan Follows favoured Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, an "extraordinary novel about four people in India."

Over the course of the week, the panelists "voted off"—to use the language of the reality TV show *Survivor*—one short-listed book per day, leaving a final showdown between *Whylah Falls* and *In the Skin of a Lion* at the end of the week. In the end, Canada's National Librarian Roch Carrier announced the victory of Michael Ondaatje's novel as the "Canada Reads Champion." The contest was so popular that *In the Skin of a Lion* is said to have sold approximately eighty thousand copies more in 2002 than in 2001.

Canada Reads has become an annual literary event with three subsequent versions of the contest—two in English Canada on CBC, Radio One (now also broadcast on Newsworld television), and one in Quebec on Radio Canada ("Le Combat des Livres").¹ There have also been three interactive "People's Choice" contests on the CBC website.² The goal of Canada Reads is to choose one book that Canadians could read together in book clubs or

classrooms, in Starbucks or Tim Hortons. According to a CBC press release, “Canada Reads is a program that embodies the CBC tradition of developing radio programming that enlightens, reflects and connects Canadians.” While promoting literacy, as a government-funded program also called “Canada Reads” has done since 1988, the game has had far greater economic, social, and cultural impact than anyone could have imagined at its inception.

Why is it imperative that we, those who work on and in Canadian literature, take this game seriously? As a public presentation of a literature that is depicted as coming of age, Canada Reads has helped to open up Canadian literary works to a large market. Over the three years, it has brought eighteen writers’ names into prominence in the public domain. (Margaret Atwood and Yann Martel are listed twice.) It has become an important indicator of public support of the literary arts in Canada. Executive Producer Talin Vartanian comments that “Canada Reads has made a big splash across the country in three short years, and librarians and publishers have told us this program has had an impressive impact on people’s interest in Canadian fiction.” Certainly, the Canada Reads contest has helped to solidify a popular understanding of the quantity and quality of works of Canadian literature. The contest has tapped into the increasing recognition of Canadian literature locally and the growing popularity of Canadian literature globally.

Canada Reads showcases Canadian writing, promotes Canadian writers, encourages literacy, and supports the publishing industry in Canada. So, why am I a bit uneasy about the game? Part of the answer lies in the disjuncture between the program’s nation-building rhetoric and its depoliticization of the literary works. Part of it lies with the immense cultural responsibility placed on the celebrity panelists. Canada Reads has become a new instrument of culture formation. It is intent on drawing Canadians together by creating a shared cultural background. The winning titles reinforce certain popular notions of Canadianness. *In the Skin of a Lion* appeals to a sense of a multicultural Canada. *Next Episode* enacts the tension of Quebec in Canada. *The Last Crossing* is an epic of Western history. The Radio Canada winner, *Un dimanche à la piscine à Kigali*, places Quebec and Canada on a world stage shouldering the responsibilities of peacekeeping and global citizenship. Host Bill Richardson termed the Canada Reads debates a “search for nationhood.” Although he was referring directly to the 2003 finalists, *Colony of Unrequited Dreams* and *Next Episode*, Richardson clearly conveyed the enduring preoccupation of the game.

Canada Reads is quickly becoming one of the most important prizes in

Canadian literature. It may not be high on prestige, but the economic and cultural spin-off is enormous. Discussing Derek Walcott's winning of the Nobel Prize, Paula Burnett notes that "literary prizes are, of course, both products and transmitters of cultural value systems with obvious canonical implications." She goes on to discuss the postcolonial implications of a Caribbean poet winning such a prize and in the process creating a sense of national pride in St. Lucia. By linking national pride with the process of canonization through prize-giving, Burnett makes a potent claim for the power of the literary award as a purveyor of cultural values.

What distinguishes Canada Reads from other Canadian literary prizes such as the Giller Prize or the Governor General's Award is that the judges are not experts. They are celebrities. Their fame in and of itself does not mean that they cannot be astute readers. However, the level of discussion rarely goes beyond character development, plot, or emotional response to the texts. Canada Reads is primarily a "game" where the entertainment value of the discussion takes precedence. Guy Vanderhaeghe, whose historical epic swept the 2004 Canada Reads contest and the People's Choice contest, enthused that "it was a great pleasure to have the books debated in such a passionate, intelligent, and decidedly *not* sombre fashion."

Such a thinly-veiled dig at academic discourse leads to another concern I have with Canada Reads. It celebrates the shortlisted novels rather than engaging critically with them. Or it damns them on spurious grounds. The novels are pawns in a game. With the watered-down aestheticism of the readings, most often it has been the politics of the novels that is lost in the commentary on the texts. The depoliticized discussions have effectively joined the "aesthetic / humanist and the national" ideologies that Frank Davey argues divert readers, critics, and writers from the political dimensions of literature.

The championing of *Sarah Binks* ignored historical context: for example, no mention was made of the derogatory depiction of vanishing "Indians" with gin bottles. *Green Grass, Running Water* was called "Native Lite" by panelist Zsuzsi Gartner, diverting attention from the strategic use of Cherokee or the relevance of King's rescripting Western movies. There was a notable dearth of discussion about First Nations peoples in *Last Crossing*. The cautionary feminist apocalypse of *A Handmaid's Tale* was sidelined by titillating discussions of sexuality. *A Fine Balance* was dismissed by panelists, who admitted to not having finished it, because of the flashbacks to pre-Emergency India. *Whydah Falls* was fashioned as a universal love story with little mention of its

Africadian context. Contrary to Aquin's own positioning as a radical Quebec separatist, *Prochain Épisode* was rather ironically reconfigured as a "bridge between the literary solitudes of French and English Canadian literature." The commentary on Ondaatje's book focused either on the beauty of its prose or its characters' representative Canadianness. Beyond Leon Rooke's comment that *In the Skin of A Lion* is "Michael's blue collar novel," there was little mention of the implications of Ondaatje's historical revisionism.

The following exchange took place on the opening day of the first program.

Stephen Page [SP]: I was looking for a book that had resonance with Canadians, by or about Canada. If we are looking for one book, we are looking for a "uniquely Canadian experience in our reading."

Megan Follows [MF]: My book is not set in Canada but is by a Canadian author who emigrated from India.

SP: That's part of the Canadian experience.

MF: What is so wonderful about Canada is the diversity that we have, so many people coming from different countries who bring different cultures and their experiences and that's what makes Canada truly a multicultural place. I was really impressed with the list of books and the diversity . . .

SP: One of our greatest strengths as Canadians is our ability to view the world in ways other nations don't, particularly Americans . . .

MF: Absolutely.

SP: Although we share similar culture we have a different perspective and a different point of view [than] the rest of the world.

Kim Campbell: This range of books reflects the range of Canadians . . . each book represents one facet of a multifaceted [nation].

(My transcription)

It is no wonder, after this discussion, that *In the Skin of a Lion* won the inaugural Canada Reads. In the popular imagination, *In the Skin of a Lion* quintessentially depicts the growth of Canada as a multicultural nation. Page's representation of Ondaatje as a marginal writer who links us all in our immigrant status is at odds with the cultural capital that Ondaatje actually holds as a member of Canada's literary elite (with a speaking fee of \$12,500 US, for example). Before Canada Reads, Ondaatje held a central position in the Canadian canon. After it, his position is unassailable.

In the validation, recognition, and support it has focused on a few works, Canada Reads stands beside the 1978 Calgary Conference and the 1994 Writing Thru Race Conference as a recognizable point in Canadian literary history. It has expanded public readership and recirculated works of Canadian literature to a wider audience. The Canada Reads canon is an eclectic mixture of books from an eclectic mixture of writers. It does not replicate past canons. Discussions of canon formation tend to oscillate

between privileging texts based on representativeness or artistic merit. In Canada Reads, the choice is not whether a novel best represents a region/ author/ era/ ethnic group/ subject, or whether it is qualitatively superior, but whether it is the most durable depiction of Canada and whether it is championed by a persuasive and popular advocate.

When it organizes a contest to pick one book all of Canada should read, is the CBC really any more culpable than when I pick a book that all of my class should read? It is a truism to say that we are always creating and recreating canons. But while we must make choices, it is always necessary to remember what informs us and how political those choices are. The Canada Reads project needs to recognize that although the program may be “just a game” as senior producer Talin Vartanian told me, it is a game played with cultural, social, and economic consequences.

The fact that George Elliot Clarke’s *Whylah Falls* was runner-up in the first Canada Reads contest signals the prominence of Clarke as a Canadian writer and cultural commentator. The Africadian context of the prose poem, absent from Canada Reads, is addressed in this issue of *Canadian Literature* beside meditations on orality and orature, politics, influence, and citizenship. Some of the matters elided in the Canada Reads contest are highlighted in the issue at hand as the contributors engage critically with work by black writers in Canada.

NOTES

- 1 The 2003 short list is *Next Episode (Prochain Épisode)* by Hubert Aquin, translated by Sheila Fischman, chosen by Denise Bombardier (winner); *Sarah Binks* by Paul Hiebert, chosen by Will Ferguson; *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel, chosen by Nancy Lee; *The Lost Garden*, by Helen Humphreys, chosen by Mag Ruffman; *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, by Wayne Johnston chosen by Justin Trudeau.
 The 2004 short list is *The Last Crossing* by Guy Vanderhaeghe, chosen by Jim Cuddy (winner); *Le coeur est un muscle involontaire (The Heart is an Involuntary Muscle)* by Monique Proulx, translated by David Homel and Fred A. Reed, chosen by Francine Pelletier; *Barney’s Version* by Mordecai Richler, chosen by Zsuzsi Gartner; *Green Grass, Running Water* by Thomas King, chosen by Glen Murray; *The Love of a Good Woman* by Alice Munro, chosen by Measha Brueggergosman.
 - 2 Le Combat des Livres 2004 short list is *Un dimanche à la piscine à Kigali* by Gil Courtemanche, chosen by Laure Waridel (winner); *L’histoire de Pi* by Yann Martel, chosen by Louise Forestier; *La petite fille qui aimait trop les allumettes* by Gaétan Soucy, chosen by Micheline Lanctôt; *Une histoire américaine* by Jacques Godbout, chosen by Gérald Larose; *La servante écarlate* by Margaret Atwood, chosen by Julius Grey.
- 2 The winners were Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* in 2002, Wayne Johnson’s *Colony of Unrequited Dreams* in 2003, and Guy Vanderhaeghe’s *Last Crossing* in 2004.