CITIZEN READER: CANADIAN LITERATURE, MASS READING EVENTS AND THE PROMISE OF BELONGING

By Danielle Fuller

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CITIZEN READER: CANADIAN LITERATURE, MASS READING EVENTS AND THE PROMISE OF BELONGING

For some time, I have been involved in studying contemporary book cultures as a way of trying to understand the social and cultural importance of print texts and what I call shared reading at the beginning of the 21st century. A large part of that work has been pursued through a collaborative, interdisciplinary research investigation of eleven different Mass Reading Events – the name we decided to give to large-scale events which actively encourage readers to engage with selected books and with other readers. The events we selected for the ‘Beyond the Book’ study take place in three nation-states – the UK, Canada and the USA. Our mixed methods combined qualitative and quantitative approaches, resulting in over seventy interviews with event organizers, fifty-seven face-to-face focus groups with two hundred readers, participant observation of more than sixty event activities, and an online questionnaire which ran in each location generating more than 3,500 responses from readers. Many compelling stories and ideas about books, reading, and community emerge from the vast amount of data that the team gathered. The story that I have decided to tell you today is about one of the ways that some Canadians are turning to Mass Reading Events to help them ‘read Canadian.’ I also want to think about why so many readers want to read nationally and regionally. My focus falls especially, then, on affective connections and on the affective experiences of citizenship that are made possible through practices of shared reading.

I want to begin with a humorous example because jokes and laughter about reading Canadian Literature distinguishes the responses of Canadian readers in the ‘Beyond the Book’ focus group data from what their American and British counterparts have to say about reading regionally and nationally. Take Jean, for example. She is a middle-aged reader from Wolfville, Nova Scotia, and here she expresses her feelings about the dubious pleasures of reading Canadian Literature:

You know, I was reading in the Globe & Mail last year: …and they said, ‘If you really want to be depressed, let’s read the new Margaret Atwood book!’ You know? And I was like, ‘Oh yeah, let’s just go in – let’s take some Valium here and read some of these Canadian books for the summer.’ (29 April 2006)

Jean’s humorous juxtaposition of Canadian Literature’s icon, Margaret Atwood, with an anti-depressant drug is only funny and irreverent, of course, if you know who Atwood is. Even if you are not familiar with the writing of Canada’s most
celebrated author, however, Jean's satiric interpretation of the *Globe and Mail*’s summer reading recommendations clearly articulates her sense that Canadian books are not, at least in her experience, ‘feel-good’ reads. In spite of this, in a different part of the discussion, Jean is clear that she wants to know about contemporary Canadian writing, although I think we can be pretty certain that she is not one of the 33,000+ followers of Margaret Atwood’s Twitter feed described by the author in March 2010 as ‘like having 33,000 precocious grandchildren’ (Atwood 2010).

Jean’s desire to ‘read Canadian,’ and yet her humorous resistance to doing just that, is shared by many avid readers in Canada. Like her, they refer to cultural authorities such as the *Globe and Mail* and the CBC, as well as asking friends and family for recommendations, or going online and consulting blogs for information about possible book choices. The suggestions may be adopted, mocked or rejected but, in an era when the quantity of books being published in the English language has dramatically increased, readers are finding that they have to develop an efficient and trusted means of selection as they decide what they want to read next. Figure 1 shows how the Canadian respondents in our quantitative survey chose the books that they read, while figure 2 shows where they obtain books.

1. Favourite Author – 21%
2. Friend’s recommendation – 15%
3. Other – 15%
4. Cover of the book – 10%
5. Newspaper recommendation – 8%

Fig. 1. Top 5 methods via which the Canadians in our survey data choose their books.
Choosing and reading Canadian literature is, for some readers, an unproblematic expression of nationalist pride, as illustrated by this brief exchange between members of Judith’s Book Club from the South Shore of Nova Scotia:

Reader 4: …a lot of us read Canadian literature without the book club right? ’Cause I know for example, I read, pretty much read all of Alice Munro, all Margaret Atwood.

Reader 3: How can you be Canadian and not read, and not read them?

Reader 1: Yeah. (13 April 2005)

These readers, unlike Jean, appear to express no ambivalence about reading Canadian Literature, but perhaps that is because the ‘Can Lit’ produced by the authors that they identify – Alice Munro, Margaret Atwood – represents narrative worlds and social experiences that are familiar to this group of predominantly white, middle-class women.

Other readers feel decidedly ‘squeamish’ when confronted by the canonical version of ‘Can Lit’ or by the Canadian books advocated by institutions like the CBC. ‘Squeamish’ was a phrase used by Johnny, a thirty-six year old male reader in another of the focus groups from the Maritimes (Halifax, 25 April 2006). Humour and satire often accompanied a rejection of the ‘serious’ Canadian books selected by professional readers such as literary reviewers or by the media workers who produce CBC Radio 1’s ‘Canada Reads.’ As Jennifer, a thirty-year-old reader astutely asserted, ‘they decide what’s literature, and I find that aggravating because often the books they cut out as not being literature or not being considered are an excellent read and are well-written’ (Wolfville, 29 April 2006).

Jennifer’s resistance to the symbolic power of cultural arbiters who ‘decide what’s literature,’ also expresses her confidence in her own literary taste and value – standards and criteria that she has developed not only through her leisure reading, but also through sharing reading with friends. But perhaps the humour about Canadian Literature punctuating many of the focus group discussions is also illustrative of another type of confidence. Committed readers can question institutional evaluations of Canadian books precisely because they are confident in the consecrated position which Canadian Literature has established within the internationalized literary field of English-language texts. Canadian Literature, and especially the genre of Canadian
literary fiction, is a success story in terms of its ‘high culture’ status in Canada and overseas, particularly in foreign English-language markets, where Canadian-authored texts are frequently short-listed for prestigious literary prizes. And so, as many of the respondents note, readers already know it is a ‘good read’ when they see it, and they do not need an authority to tell them this. For some readers, then, the desire to ‘read Canadian’ is in tension with the ways that texts are packaged by the book industry and promoted by cultural authorities such as the Globe and Mail. But doubts about the commercial role and ideological function of Canadian books can exist alongside readers’ experiences and expressions of affective connections to ‘Can Lit’.

Investigating Mass Reading Events helps us to tease out how a contemporary formation of shared reading inspires and mediates the different ways in which readers desire, articulate and enact affective modes of belonging. In the next part of this presentation, I introduce examples of Mass Reading Events in order to illustrate what they are, what their organizers aspire to, and how they extend the ‘promise of belonging’ to readers (Berlant 2008, ix). Then, in the third section, I want to step back from Mass Reading Events to briefly consider the contemporary context within which they occur; specifically, the production and distribution aspects of the English-language publishing industry in Canada. By foregrounding how print culture is made and how it circulates I want to suggest how a ‘structure of feeling’ for book culture persists in an era of consumer capitalism (Williams 1977, 132). In the final part of the essay, I will return to a consideration of the ways that Canadian readers engage with Mass Reading Events. I argue that, in this era of neoliberalism when ‘people’s actual power over the material conditions of [their] lives has declined’ (Peck 2010, 12), participating in Mass Reading Events enables some readers to express a version of citizenship outside the public domain of politics.

‘Super-sizing’ Shared Reading: Mass Reading Events
‘Mass Reading Event’ is a term that my research partner, DeNel Rehberg Sedo, and I came up with as a name for models of shared reading that take place in public or semi-public places and which operate on a scale that is larger than a book club. We began our research collaboration because both of us were interested in what we call textual communities. That is, we wanted to know how communities of writers, publishers and readers form around print texts. For readers this might occur through the act of reading together, particularly when the reading happens on a larger scale. As a result of my literary studies’ education and a brief period working in the UK publishing
industry, I had a particular interest in cultural production and the book industry. My previous investigations into textual communities had focused upon writing and publishing communities in late twentieth-century Canada, specifically those in Atlantic Canada (e.g. Fuller 2004). I was, and remain, especially interested in the publication, circulation and evaluation of fictional genres written in English. DeNel, whose training is in the field of communications studies, has undertaken research about contemporary women’s book groups in Canada, both those which meet face-to-face in members’ homes, bookstores or libraries, and (transnational) book groups which meet online (e.g. Rehberg Sedo 2002; 2003).

The sharing of reading in book groups, study clubs, faith groups, literary societies and political associations has a rich history in North America and the United Kingdom. Aspects of that history have been ably examined by, among others, Elizabeth McHenry whose work focuses on African-American literary societies from the nineteenth-century onwards (2002); Elizabeth Long who is best known for the first full-length sociology of contemporary women’s book groups in the United States of America (2003); and, in Canada, Heather Murray and Fanie St-Laurent who have investigated the literary societies of nineteenth-century Ontario (Murray 2002) and francophone groups such as the Société d’étude et de conférences founded in Montreal in 1933 (St-Laurent 2007), respectively. As scholarship by book historians and sociologists demonstrates, then, people have been coming together to share reading and to discuss print texts of various genres, for several centuries. When literacy rates were low, members who could would read aloud to others. As literacy rates increased in North America and the United Kingdom from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, people from non-elite groups began to use study clubs, reading groups and debating societies as a means of self-education, and political empowerment. At the end of the twentieth-century, one particular model of shared reading – book groups – surged in popularity. In 2001 Jenny Hartley estimated that there were approximately 50,000 groups in the UK and 500,000 in the USA (2001, vii). Among the readers who responded to our online questionnaires which we ran in each of our field-work locations, 35 percent of the Canadians had belonged or currently belonged to a book group.

What DeNel and I both noticed around 2002 was the proliferation of a ‘new’ cultural formation of shared reading on both sides of the 49th parallel. The organizers of these reading events aimed to involve as many people as possible in reading, discussing or participating in activities associated with a selected book. An event might work like a book club but on a much larger scale: city-, region- or even nation-wide. Following in the wake of the astounding popular
and commercial success of Oprah’s Book Club on television, these twenty-first century versions of shared reading took the concept of people reading and talking about a book, ‘super-sized’ it, and transported it into public places and spaces. Significantly, these spaces were not confined to those where the meanings of reading have traditionally been made within northern industrialized societies like Canada and the United Kingdom – spaces such as public libraries, schools and city halls. While these locations were – and remain – common places to hold activities associated with city-wide reading programmes, work places like offices, and leisure spaces such as pubs, ice rinks and parks have also become temporary sites for shared book cultures. Sometimes these sites host activities such as singing, acting, making art-work, debating, or even eating a picnic or listening to a talk about Italian wine, none of which depend upon anyone reading a book.

What, we wondered, was going on? Why did people come together for these events? What cultural meanings about books and reading were being promoted and negotiated by organizers and by participants? Who were these events for and were they capable of generating any kind of social change? These were among the questions which quickly sprang to mind as we identified more and more examples of initiatives for sharing reading. What we wanted to reference through the use of the phrase, ‘mass reading event’, was not only scale (‘mass’) and spectacle (‘event’), but also the idea that an event promoting reading and the sharing of reading usually engages with one or more aspects of the mass media, whether in print, broadcast or digital form. Two of the case studies that we subsequently chose to investigate depended upon broadcast media for their primary delivery: CBC Radio 1 ‘Canada Reads’ (which first aired in 2001) and ‘Richard & Judy’s Book Club’ which was broadcast on UK TV’s Channel 4 from 2004 until autumn 2008 and then more briefly on a cable channel, UKTV, until July 2009.

‘Canada Reads’ – probably the best-known example of a Canadian Mass Reading Event – completed its tenth anniversary series in February 2011. The show is an annual five-day radio series during which five Canadian celebrities each champion a work of Canadian literature in order to select one book that ‘Canadians should read together’ (CBC 2001). In a Survivor-type format, the books are debated on-air and then one book is voted off the show on each subsequent twenty-three-minute programme. Debates and the voting results are broadcast on CBC Radio 1 daily and the shows are also available as podcasts on the ‘Canada Reads’ website. As even this briefest of descriptions suggests, here is an example of a Mass Reading Event which is overt about offering a
promise of national belonging, not only in its promotional rhetoric, but also through its format and multi-platform delivery. Since ‘Canada Reads’ began, there has been a noticeable year-on-year increase in opportunities for listeners to interact with the show through online votes for the ‘People’s Choice’, Readers’ Forum, blogs, and, most recently, by employing social media such as Facebook and Twitter. As I have argued elsewhere, ‘Canada Reads’ performs the cultural work of national imagining through its book selections and on-air discussions in ways that align with the liberal nationalist ideology informing the CBC’s foundational mandate to ‘enlighten, reflect and connect Canadians’ (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 2006, 13-21). However, readers who interact with the show on- and off-line use ‘Canada Reads’ in a range of ways, some of which involve affirmations of an un-problematised Canadian identity, and others that involve critiquing such constructions (Fuller 2007).

The most popular model for a Mass Reading Event, however, and the one upon which much of our research effort has been focused is ‘One Book, One Community.’ The co-creators of ‘One Book’ were two public librarians from Seattle, Chris Higashi and Nancy Pearl, who began their annual city-wide reading project in 1998 using a grant that they won from the Wallace Foundation. When they initiated ‘If all Seattle Read the Same Book…’, Higashi and Pearl hoped to connect up the numerous book groups proliferating within the Seattle public library system (Higashi 2006; Pearl 2006). They also intended to reach beyond that network of over 400 groups to other readers in the city by programming a series of activities across a four-month period including book discussions, film screenings, and exhibitions inspired by a selected book. Two additional features of the Higashi-Pearl model have been taken up in many subsequent adaptations of ‘One Book, One Community’: the first is the dissemination in print or online of a reading guide. The guide typically includes an interview with the author of the selected book, contextual information that is often historical and geographical in nature, further reading suggestions, and advice about how to organize a book group discussion.6

The second element of the ‘Seattle Reads’ model which has proven to be popular, especially in the Canadian versions, is the public appearance of the selected book’s author at a series of events over three or four days. In Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge, for example, the author’s visit always marks the culmination of a five-month programme when he or she arrives in late September for three days of intensive media interviews and at least four large-scale public events. School gyms, skating rinks and theatre auditoria are among the spaces in which these events take place, each of which can accommodate
at least three hundred participants. Even when capacity audiences participate in these events, the atmosphere is not necessarily formal, however. Nino Ricci, the author of the 2004 selection, described the ‘more personal, more intimate’ connection he felt with the audiences who participated as compared to audiences at other types of literary-professional events (Ricci 2004). He recognized that this was in part due to the sense of investment that some readers had developed in his book, *Lives of the Saints* (1990). Or, as Ricci himself expressed it, the frank questions and knowledge demonstrated by readers gave him ‘a sense that the people sort of grappled with the book’ in ‘communion’ with other people (2004).

The programming in Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge has always been diverse and creative, influenced by the different professions of the people on the organizing committee – booksellers, local city councilors, teachers, librarians and a literary editor. Various types of encounters with the selected book thus become possible, depending on people’s interests, age and income – in common with many ‘One Book’ programmes some activities are free of charge and others involve a fee. In the case of Ricci’s novel people could choose to participate in ‘One Book, Three Pubs’ (a type of literary pub-crawl), a literary bus tour visiting places associated with the novel and Ricci’s family, or, events that emphasized the Italian contexts of the novel – historical talks, travel accounts and even wine-tasting, for example. The author visit and final gala – which included a performance by an Italian choir – were the capstone for a varied programme. Author events like these bring writers literally face-to-face with readers’ various desires, including a desire for intimacy with the person behind the text. Such a desire may be coupled with a reader’s urge to authenticate the text via knowledge of the writer’s life, or to authorize and re-contextualize the text as a culturally valuable object either for themselves, for a particular cultural group or, as occurred in the events featuring Nino Ricci, for their local community.

Over the years, the ‘One Book, One Community’ model has been widely replicated and adapted, not only in the United States and Canada, but also in Europe, Singapore and Australia. Although it is impossible to provide an exact figure, we estimate that more than five hundred ‘One Book’ programmes take place annually around the world.7 The number of city- and state-wide reads and the longevity of the model in the United States are significantly affected by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) ‘Big Read’ programme. In 2005 the NEA seized upon the ‘One Book, One Community’ model as a ready remedy for the ‘decline in literary reading in the US’ reported in their 2004 ‘Reading at Risk’ study.8 Between 2006 and June 2010 the NEA Big
Read programme gave eight hundred grants to communities in the USA. The title of their 2009 report, ‘Reading on the Rise,’ suggests that the organizers of the Big Read believe that the ‘quick fix’ worked. In both Canada and the United States, educational institutions have also employed the ‘One Book’ model as a means of inducting university freshman or, as in the example of ‘Western Reads’ in London, Ontario, in an attempt to strengthen campus-community relations and to celebrate the University’s 125th anniversary. Although there are far fewer annual Canadian versions of ‘One Book’ than US American events, city-wide read programmes have taken place in diversely located cities of different sizes, including Toronto, Edmonton and Medicine Hat in Alberta, Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, and Hamilton, Ontario.

One indicator that these Canadian programmes are successful is the fact that they have all been repeated several times. There are also at least four Canadian ‘One Books’ which have been running for seven or more years: ‘One Book, Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge’ and ‘One Book, One Vancouver’ (both of which began in 2002); ‘London Reads’ (which evolved from Western Reads) and ‘First Nations Communities Read’. The latter programme has been co-ordinated by Patty Lawlor for the Southern and Northern Ontario Library Services since 2003, although it has existed in some form since 1999 which makes it the longest-surviving version of the ‘One Book’ model in Canada. ‘First Nations Communities Read’ is an interesting example, not only because it is aimed at and co-organized by a specific cultural group of Canadians, but also because it operates within a much larger geographic area than a city-wide read. This version of a ‘One Book’ programme circulates within communities across the province of Ontario. Each year First Nations librarians get together with Lawlor to select a title. The featured book is always one that has been written or illustrated by an aboriginal writer or artist and, unlike most ‘One Book’ programmes, First Nations Communities Read usually highlights a children’s book rather than an adult novel or work of non-fiction. The genre choice is linked to the programme’s explicit aims of promoting shared reading within families, along with ‘intergenerational storytelling’ and ‘intergenerational information sharing’ (Lawlor 2003). Lawlor then tries to secure sponsorship from publishers who are prepared to donate a quantity of books that can be used as give-aways to libraries, schools and families. Copies are also purchased for branch libraries that serve both indigenous and non-indigenous populations.

Although First Nations Communities Read is predicated on an expansive definition of ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ inflected by cultural practices which are both oral and written, the programme is also underwritten by values which
other Mass Reading Events share. There is an assumption on the part of many organizers that reading books enables learning, social bonding and, potentially, even some kind of transformation. The American co-creators of the ‘One Book’ model, for instance, believe that the sharing of reading, especially literary fiction, can promote self-understanding for the individual reader and help readers ‘to develop a sense of shared humanity’ (Higashi 2006). The liberal humanist politics of their ‘One Book’ model speak to both the ‘liberating’ and ‘civilising’ projects that have historically been attached to reading. In the United States of the twenty-first century an emphasis on the ‘civilising’ effects of book reading upon the individual, underwritten by a functionalist notion of literacy that equates it with economic productivity (Brandt 2004, 3), goes some way to explain the appeal of the Higashi-Pearl ‘One Book’ model for the National Endowment for the Arts ‘Big Read’ programme, for example. As sociologist Wendy Griswold and her colleagues have highlighted, cities and government agencies support book programmes because of the ‘extraordinary value’ that society places on reading (2008, 59) and the ‘almost unquestioned assumption that reading and talking about reading is a social good’ (2005, 135).

An unquestioned ideological investment in reading as a social good helps to explain the optimism that many ‘One Book’ organizers, including Canadians, articulate about the ability of sharing reading to improve social cohesion within and across communities. Janice Douglas, who led the ‘One Book, One Vancouver’ team until she retired in 2008, commented:

I’d…say there’s an aspect of community building about the whole process. You know, I see the library as a – you know, a place that helps build community and, you know, just the feeling of everybody reading this one book together: ‘We’re this community; we’re Vancouver.’ (13 June 2006)

Douglas’s invocation of an imagined community, ‘the feeling of everybody reading this one book together,’ articulates not only a desire to ‘build community’ in ways that may become actualized at the library or other physical sites during event activities, but also an affective pleasure that may be engendered by ‘One Book’. Todd Wong, a writer and member of the organizing committee for the first ‘One Book, One Vancouver’ which featured Wayson Choy’s The Jade Peony (1995), suggested how partnerships between the public library and community organizations can support communities ‘beyond the border of the library’ and even facilitate cross-cultural dialogue in material ways. Wong observed, for instance, that ‘having Wayson [Choy] read at the Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Gardens – you get a double hit from the
[Chinese-Canadian] community because you’re supporting the community activities’ (Wong 2006).

For Tricia Siemens, the independent bookseller who initiated ‘One Book, One Community Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge,’ shared reading also has a social objective. Her vision of the promise of belonging extended by ‘One Book’ is less inflected by an ideal of cross-cultural understanding than Wong’s and Douglas’. Rather, Siemens suggests, ‘One Book’ offers a ‘shared experience.’ ‘“Once people have read the same book,” Siemens observes, “They talk to friends and neighbours about how the story resonates in each of their lives”’ (The Record.com 2004). The promise of belonging extended here appears to involve less disruption to the status quo in socio-political terms, promoting instead a notion of a community building outwards from the domestic centre of the family. In Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge the choice of activities such as children’s art and writing competitions has often supported this aim, even though the book selections are deliberately targeted at older teen and adult readers. For Mass Reading Events of the ‘One Book’ variety who belongs to the community you are trying to create depends in part on the genre of book you select. Figure 3 shows the favourite genres of Canadian respondents to our quantitative survey.

![Genre of Canadian Reader's Reading](image)

*Fig. 3.* The genre that Canadian readers in our survey data read the most.
Producing Canadian Readers
In common with ‘One Book, One Vancouver’, the organizers of the Kitchener-Cambridge-Waterloo programme have consistently selected Canadian-authored books, many, but not all of which, have been works of literary fiction. Genre fiction such as science fiction and non-fiction titles – *The Corporation* in Vancouver (Bakan 2004), *100-Mile Diet* in the Waterloo region (Smith and MacKinnon 2007) – have also been selected, although much less frequently, and often with the explicit aims on the part of the organizers of appealing to a more diverse constituency of participants, especially male readers.

One of the striking aspects of Canadian Mass Reading Events which contrasts with American and British versions is the fact that they all feature Canadian-authored books. This aspect of Mass Reading Events makes them very valuable marketing tools for their publishers who can, in the case of ‘Canada Reads’, for example, expect sales to rise by as much as 4200 percent when the short-list is announced in late November or early December (Booknet Canada 2007). If a public library system in a city the size of Vancouver orders between 600 and 1,000 extra copies of a ‘One Book, One Vancouver’ (OBOV) selection at a specially brokered ‘deep discount’ price of 50 percent, and the organizing team receives one hundred complimentary copies to give away as prizes, a publisher can still expect to sell as many as 6,000 copies in British Columbia (Douglas 2006; programme website). That means that as many as 7,000 copies are put into circulation through public libraries and bookstores – far more than would normally be the case without the event. The inaugural OBOV book, *The Jade Peony* (Choy 1995), was checked out over 7,000 times, incidentally (website). Moreover, the quantity of free publicity generated by event activities, displays in public libraries and bookstores, and media coverage (especially when the author comes to town) more than compensates for any free books which organizers may have persuaded away from the publisher’s warehouse. Or, for that matter, for the contributions which publishers often make in-kind or as part-payment for the production of ‘One Book’ branded bookmarks, posters and a small amount of advertising in local newspapers.

I have been very careful about the placement of the word ‘Canadian’ in these last few paragraphs because, while Mass Reading Events in Canada proudly feature books written by Canadian authors, the publishing houses which produce those books are rarely wholly Canadian-owned. In the Canadian book market, in fact, with only a few exceptions, the largest firms are foreign-owned, while Canadian-owned firms are on average noticeably smaller – the majority making profits of less than $200,000 per annum (Turner-Riggs 2008). A research study about the book industry commissioned by the Department of Canadian Heritage and
published in 2008, states that, ‘Despite their smaller numbers, foreign-owned firms accounted for 59% of domestic book sales [in 2004]...[and in the late 2000s] foreign-owned publishers produce roughly 23% of the Canadian-authored titles published each year. The majority of new, Canadian-authored titles, however – the remaining 77% of the total – are produced by Canadian-owned publishing firms’ (Turner-Riggs 2008, 49).

There are several important economic realities here that I want to foreground. First, most Canadian publishers are small potatoes in terms of profits and print-runs, and, for this reason, the organizers of both the Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge and Vancouver ‘One Book’ programmes have rarely worked with small independent publishers (Douglas 2006). The second economic reality is that big potatoes are produced by foreign-owned firms who are especially active in relation to top-selling titles in Canada. Best-sellers in Canada, regardless of genre (self-help, gardening, history, literary fiction) or category (trade, education) are generally the products of foreign-owned publishing houses. For example, of the top five Canadian-authored books across all categories which BookNet Canada reported as bestsellers for 2008, four were published by foreign-owned presses (BookNet 2008). The publishers were Penguin Canada, New World Library, Windblown Media, and HarperCollins. The fifth-ranking title, a novel, was Elizabeth Hay’s *Late Nights on Air* published by McClelland & Stewart. That would be ‘the Canadian publisher’ that is 25% owned by Random House – and that is the part that its President, Avie Bennett, retained after giving 75% away for free to the University of Toronto in 2000.

The third important economic reality from the point of view of putting books into circulation in Canada is that distribution remains, as it always was, a huge headache, especially for Canadian-owned publishers who are, as mentioned above, economically small players in an expensive game. Their lack of financial clout means that they have very few options for distribution because, surprise!, print (and now digital) distribution in North America is dominated by large foreign-owned companies such as Ingram, HarperCollins and Random House for whom it is not ‘financially viable’ to deal with companies making less than $500,000 per annum. (Turner-Riggs 2008, 53). The result is that the majority of Canadian-owned companies, who produce 77% of Canadian-authored books, cannot access the most efficient distribution systems on the continent.

Why are these economic realities significant to my discussion of Mass Reading Events in Canada and the promise of local, regional or national belonging that they extend? For one thing, it underlines in what I think are pretty stark terms, not only the ideological aims bound up in highlighting Canadian-
authored books through these programmes, but also the material advantages to the Canadian book industry, including retailers. The team behind ‘One Book, One Vancouver,’ for example, has tried from the beginning to work with independent bookstores because in Janice Douglas’s view, ‘they’re the ones that provide the backlists and the really big customer – like, you know, the customer service for real readers. So…we have attempted to, uh, support the small independents, yes. That would be our first choice’ (Douglas 2006). The same team, remember, pick books by the larger foreign-owned publishing companies because they need the financial support that those companies can provide such as free copies and ‘deep discounts’.

Giving away free books, incidentally, is probably the most effective way of bringing low-income participants or reluctant or returning readers into a Mass Reading Event, especially readers under twenty years of age. Thus, contributing to the purchase of books to be given away, an activity that is fairly common in the US American programmes such as ‘One Book, One Chicago,’ can be an attractive option for commercial companies such as Boeing who wish to promote themselves as ‘literacy sponsors’ (Brandt 2004, 4). In Canada, the federal government acts as the economic sponsor for the ‘First Nations Communities Reads’ which has received publication subventions in order to be able to produce and distribute sufficient quantities of the featured title – thereby overcoming some of the economic and structural difficulties facing small-scale Canadian publishers. Even without these directed state-supported funds for production, the significant sales and publicity to be garnered from a ‘One Book’ selection motivates most publishers to contribute towards the costs of a living Canadian author visiting Vancouver or Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge. But these costs are much easier to meet if you are HarperCollins Canada rather than NeWest Press.

As Linda M. Scott has recently argued, the book industry in North America has never actually sunk much money into book promotion compared to other manufacturing industries and it relies heavily on the free promotion that Mass Reading Events provide (here, think: ‘Oprah Effect’ on a smaller scale). It is only in the twenty-first century that most publishing houses employed marketing specialists or formulated any kind of marketing plan to advertise their books. Just to drive that point home, and for the cringing joy of any economists in the room, let me quote Scott on the top ten American publishing companies which, she notes, ‘control more than 50 per cent of adult trade book production’ (2009, 77). In 1999 they spent, Scott observes, ‘a combined total of $23 million to advertise all their books. By comparison Procter & Gamble put $91 million behind a single brand of laundry detergent the same year’ (77).

But books are not laundry soap I hear you cry! Or, perhaps, like some of the
students in my ‘Reading and Popular Culture’ module in Spring 2010 you think books should be free at the point of use? As I pointed out to them, if you want writers to get paid for their work and you would like to hang on to your beloved codex (most of them would), then the paper, binding, print, not to mention editors, printers, literary agents etc., all have to be paid for somehow. Books in their current material form are also expensive to produce and difficult to distribute effectively, especially in Canada as I have already emphasised. Books, it is important to remember, are commodities which are part of an economy of production, even if we only ever receive them as gifts or borrow them from libraries. Many readers – including many participants in our research – would certainly regard books as ‘special’ commodities, and many, particularly the readers we met during our focus group work around ‘Richard & Judy’s Book Club,’ would like to disavow the economics involved in the making of a cultural artifact that to them variously denotes pleasure, learning, entertainment, and cultural capital. For, possessing and demonstrating a ‘feeling for books’ is still granted a good deal of prestige within societies that have a ‘reading class.’ The ‘reading class’ is sociologist Wendy Griswold’s term for the elite groups who have the time, money and education, not only to buy and acquire books, but also to pursue book-centred activities (2008). Figure 4 shows the amounts of money that readers in our quantitative survey spent on books in one year. Significantly, lack of time was the key reason why all the participants in our online survey did not choose to participate in Mass Reading Events. Those who provide books to such people are sometimes, as Janice Radway pointed out, also those who have a ‘feeling for books’ that connects the idea of selling books to the idea of reading them (1997). In both cases, ‘feeling’ something connected to books and reading is what matters.

Figure 4: Money that readers spent on books per year. Left-hand scale shows percentage. Right-hand key shows amounts spent in Pounds Sterling = GBP
Readers in our study demonstrated their ‘feeling for books’ in a variety of ways, most of which will not surprise anybody in this room because most of us are members of the ‘reading class’. Many readers articulated their fondness for and emotional investment in their physical book collections, for example. In the case of one middle-aged female reader from Ontario, the materiality of books inspired a sensuous response and she spoke passionately about her wild enthusiasm for the ‘smell and feel of paper.’ Others spoke about the joy of sharing their favourite volumes with friends and family members, especially, in the case of older women readers, passing them on to grandchildren – a particularly vivid example of how certain values about book reading and reading practices are socially reproduced.

A Feeling for Books is, of course, the title of Janice Radway’s brilliant analysis of the ways in which the Book-of-the-Month Club constructed an ideal of literary taste that satisfied the middle-class desire of its socially and economically aspirant members during the middle decades of the twentieth century (1997). ‘A feeling for books’ is thus an apt and multivalent phrase that helps me to make my point here. What I am suggesting is that, in an era of consumer capitalism and digital technology, ‘a structure of feeling’ for printed books persists in industrialized societies like Canada. It is a structure of feeling experienced by a relatively small group of people who maintain an active relationship with print book cultures whose artifacts are produced and circulated in the ways that I outlined earlier. That structure of feeling is not only inflected by time, place, gender and generation, but also, as in Raymond Williams’ classic formulation, it is unevenly distributed through society (1977). This is partly because access to educational institutions is uneven, but also because not all groups within Canadian or British society privilege print culture above other forms of communication such as oral modes of expression. However, the emotional and social attachment of book readers to printed books often characterizes their lived experience of the quality of life.

Perhaps ‘a feeling for books’ – the emotional attachments in particular – are more visible or have become easier to articulate because we live at a time when some readers perceive the printed book to be under threat from digital media and the new formats it enables. By contrast, some book readers (not necessarily those under twenty years of age) are excited by new media and actively engage with it – creating literary blogs, contributing to fora on their favourite author’s website, cataloguing their entire libraries on LibraryThing. Many see social opportunities emerging from the ways in which literary culture is re-packaged as various popular cultural formations via television, radio, film adaptation and Mass Reading Events. However, others interpret popularization and the ‘blockbuster culture’ of bestsellers as a vulgarization of their ‘special’ and ‘distinctive’ relationship to books and to literary culture. A feeling for books and feelings about books run deep among keen readers.
By foregrounding aspects of the organization and economic operation of the book publishing industry in the third section of my presentation, I wanted to suggest the often subtle, but nevertheless tangible, ways in which the production and circulation of books effects their reception. In the final section I want to return, via some of the Canadian readers in the ‘Beyond the Book’ data, to the ‘promise of belonging’ and to the concept of the ‘citizen reader.’

Citizen Readers and Affective Belonging
What did I mean by the term ‘citizen reader’ in my title? What I meant was something simple but significant, namely, the ways that some readers use their reading to reaffirm their sense of belonging to a nation. The ‘nation,’ however, is not always identified with the political nation-state of Canada because readers tend to articulate the sense of belonging they derive from their reading in terms of other forms of affective attachment – to place, to region, to a cultural community, for example. Here are just three Canadian readers talking about how the representation of region or place inspires a mode of affective belonging.

First, David, a reader who lives in Vancouver but grew up on the prairies, was clear about the sense of connection that he experiences in his mind and memory when he reads about his home-place:

… if I pick up a book about Saskatchewan, the lights go on because I – I compare their impressions with my impressions.
(12 June 2006)

Secondly, here is Emma, a younger reader in her twenties who is a student of tourism, talking about how she makes imaginative, if mimetic, comparisons between the Halifax of her everyday life and her favourite genre of historical fiction:

When I'm not reading for course work, I do like historical fiction. Especially Thomas [Raddall]. Because I can associate with all the places. They talk about Halifax Harbour, or Halifax, or McNab’s Island, and places like that, and I know where those places are. It’s really exciting to hear a story about a place that you know about.
(26 April 2006)

These mimetic interpretative practices and affective responses can be enhanced during Mass Reading Events, especially ‘One Book’ events, which select titles and activities with a local relevance. Trudy, a woman in her fifties who participated in the literary bus tour, a feature of the Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge programme for several years excitedly explained:
I really enjoyed *The Stone Carvers* by Jane Urquhart (2001)] and the bus tour really bought that book alive...because you went to places that were described that were part of the book and somehow it seems real, you know – I know it was a novel, but just, you know you could see the characters, you see the places...you felt that what was described could have happened and you were where it, you were where these places were. (25 September 2004)

In the presence of other readers, Trudy feels herself entering the world of the book in an almost embodied fashion. Not only did the tour bring the book ‘alive’ for her, but her description of how she re-experienced her ‘local’ place suggests a further dimension to the type of affective belonging that Mass Reading Events offer and mediate for some readers.

The expression of an affective mode of belonging to place, locale or to the history of a particular community might be preferable for many Canadian readers because defining a Canadian identity as attached to an idea of the state is too problematic. For some Canadians, for example, experience has shown them that rights are not bestowed equally upon citizens. Or, it might be because it is hard for many citizens to ‘see’ the state when they live in the midst of a neo-liberal democracy which conceptualizes the state as having a minimalist role to play in social services and, I would add, in the cultural sector too.

What I also intended to signal in my title by the placing the term ‘citizen reader’ in relation to ‘Mass Reading Event’ was the added social and public dimension that a shared reading event can bring to these experiences of and possibilities for belonging. Or, to put it another way, a Mass Reading Event may provide semi-public moments when the expression or enactment of affective modes of citizenship appears more possible than it does in everyday life, because other people are present to hear or witness its articulation. The fantasy of connection between people who are at once private and public persons, can, however fleetingly, become realized as a book becomes subject to a re-reading or the point of departure for the sharing of emotional knowledge. One of the great surprises of the research for me, for instance, was how many readers were satisfied by ephemeral experiences of community. Mary, a member of a book club in Nova Scotia, described it thus:

I think it really is important to talk about books and to talk about Canadian books. We certainly don’t focus on Canadian books, but we do quite a few of them because they are being talked about. Probably one of the good things about Canada Reads and all of
these other reading programs is that a book gets talked about, and then, for example – for me, if I’m having lunch with a friend or even sometimes traveling and I’m sitting with somebody with a book on a plane, they often will have read the same book as me. Because it’s been on Canada Reads or it’s been talked about, so it gives us a common topic to discuss. It’s great! (28 April 2006)

Mary’s sense of connecting with others – strangers as well as friends – via a book featured in a Mass Reading Event was echoed time and again by other readers. ‘Just seeing someone on the bus holding the book made me smile’ was a phrase we heard several times, for instance. Even those who participated in events not by reading the book, but by attending a different activity, could derive a feeling of pleasure from belonging – however tenuously – to a community of readers.

Here, I have come close to Lauren Berlant’s definition of an ‘intimate public sphere’ produced by the consumption of ‘common texts and things’ which appear to articulate a shared emotional knowledge and thus proffer the fantasy of ‘emotional contact’ with others (Berlant 2008, viii). I certainly think that books and shared reading can produce in readers a powerful sense of connection not only with certain narrative representations, but also with other readers. Berlant’s ‘intimate public’ is more of an imagined entity than a physically experienced social reality and its texts are encountered by individuals as part of ‘women’s culture’ – in the form of ‘chicklit’ and cinematic melodrama, for example. Nevertheless, in Berlant’s definition, an intimate public is a location where ‘what is personal is threaded through mediating institutions and social hierarchy’ (10). In other words, it is a sphere that is at once outside the public domain of politics yet shaped and engendered by it. As Julie Rak observes, Berlant’s work is helpful for thinking about the cultural and affective dimensions of citizenship because she explores ‘the citizen as a state of being rather than a sense of being in relation to the state’ (2010, 10-11).

Following on from this idea of an intimate public, I think that expressions and enactments of affective modes of citizenship are important because they are the part of being a citizen that we attempt to claim for ourselves within our everyday lives. When readers choose to participate in Mass Reading Events by going to an event to share an experience inspired by the book, they are sometimes able to access a more embodied version of an intimate public. We could also make sense of readers’ attraction to affective modes of belonging in terms of a desire for agency in the face of neo-liberal democracies in which ‘people’s actual power over their material conditions has declined’ (Peck 2010, 12). Some cultural
commentators certainly make that argument to explain the symbolic and emotional power of contemporary popular cultural texts. For example, Janice Peck partly attributes the appeal and success of Oprah Winfrey's self-transformation narratives to the sense of material and political disempowerment experienced by her audience in their daily lives.

Readers’ articulations and experiences of belonging offer us provocative clues about the desires of ‘citizen readers,’ especially women, to find ‘something to hold on to’ aside from institutionally sanctioned ideas of national citizenship. Even if what is being offered is imbricated with conservative fantasies such as a nostalgic yearning for small-town community, what is felt is no less ‘real’ to the citizen reader, as Trish, a reader from Nova Scotia in her late twenties explains:

I often find myself reading books that take place in small towns, regardless if it’s Canadian or American…being from a small town…it … makes me…really appreciate what I have, because it’s something to hold on to… (27 April 2006)

Mass Reading Events in Canada appear to engage with and play in to these desires to ‘hold on’. Using Canadian texts, they hold out the promise of belonging offering an occasion for, and even the location of, affective community.
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Footnotes

1 The major primary research phase of ‘Beyond the Book: Mass Reading Events and Contemporary Cultures of Reading in the USA, UK and Canada,’ was funded by AHRC grant no. 112166 (2005-8), see www.beyondthebookproject.org. Early stages of the research and a pilot study were funded by a British Academy International Partnership grant and by a Canadian Studies Faculty Research Award from the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. The co-director of the project was my research partner, Dr DeNel Rehberg Sedo, a communications scholar from Mount Saint Vincent University (Halifax, Canada). During 2005-8, Dr Anouk Lang worked as a full-time Post-Doctoral Research Fellow, while Dr Anna Burrells was a part-time Administrative Assistant for the team. Since 2008, Lindsay Engel has acted as a statistics consultant. Their hard and careful work helped to make this presentation possible, but any mistakes or interpretative errors are my responsibility.

2 Our research sites/selected Mass Reading Events are: (Canada) – Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge ‘One Book, One Community’; ‘Vancouver Reads’; ‘Canada Reads’; (USA) ‘One Book, One Chicago’; ‘One Book, One Huntsville’; ‘Seattle Reads.’; (UK) ‘Great Reading Adventure’ (Bristol); Birmingham Book Festival; ‘Richard & Judy’s Book Club’ (Channel 4 – TV); ‘Liverpool Reads.’

3 Quantitative data was derived from convenience sampling so it cannot be generalized to the entire Canadian population. For example, 88% of the Canadian respondents were women. However, the statistical data employed in this presentation is suggestive of the behaviours and values of Canadian readers and, when combined with qualitative data, facilitates a more in-depth analysis of specific contemporary cultures of reading.

4 Recent examples include: Lisa Moore’s nomination for the 2010 Man Booker prize and International IMPAC Dublin literary award long-lists; sixteen Canadian writers were among the 162 authors on the IMPAC longlist for 2010, while Alistair MacLeod and Rawi Hage won the prize in 2001 and 2008, respectively. Anne Michaels and Carol Shields were both winners of the Orange Prize for Fiction and Canadian writers have been on virtually every short-list since the prize began in 1996.

5 For a brief history of these cultural formations in Canada, see various entries in the three volumes of The History of the Book in Canada published by the University of Toronto press in 2004 (volume 1), 2005 (volume 2) and 2007 (volume 3).

6 Examples of these materials can be seen and downloaded from the ‘Seattle Reads’ website, www.spl.org/default.asp?pageID=audience_current_seattlereads.

7 No complete record of ‘One Book, One Community’ programmes exists, but the Center for the Book at the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. registers some that have taken place in the USA, Canada, Australia and the UK, see www.read.gov/resources. By June 2010 the NEA had awarded more than 800 grants to community programmes since the launch of the ‘Big Read’ initiative in 2007 which suggests that nearly 300 events take place annually in the USA alone. See www.neabigread.org/.
9 See www.neabigread.org/publications.php.
11 The rhetorics of reading as ‘liberating’ or ‘civilising’ are not mutually exclusive, nor are they inherently conservative nor inherently radical in ideological terms. US American examples of reading as a politically ‘liberating’ and socially uplifting exercise include the accounts of reading contained within the published narratives of enslaved African-Americans, women’s literary societies, consciousness-raising book groups within the era of Second-Wave feminism, and the African-American societies studied by McHenry (2002). For an overview see Rubin (2009). Brandt argues that in the USA after the Second World War, ‘literacy was irrevocably transformed from a nineteenth-century moral imperative into a twentieth-century production imperative’ (2004, 1). Brandt also notes Jefferson’s associations of literacy with citizenship (3), while Augst historicises the role of the public library in promoting literacy and reading, from Franklin’s explicit and liberal use of the language of a ‘civilising mission’ (2001, 7) to Carnegie’s more conservatively inflected language of ‘moral uplift and social control’ (11).
12 This is the average sales rise for the five short-listed titles for ‘Canada Reads 2008’ in the week ending 2 December 2007 as quoted in a press release from BookNet Canada (the non-profit agency which monitors book sales in Canada).
13 Library Thing is an online self-styled ‘book club’ with over 1 million members which enables readers to catalogue their books, write reviews, blogs and contribute to discussions. See www.librarything.com.
ECCLES CENTRE FOR AMERICAN STUDIES PLENARY LECTURES AT THE BRITISH ASSOCIATION FOR CANADIAN STUDIES ANNUAL CONFERENCE

2006 Abenaki People From Where the Sun Rises, by Alanis Obomsawin (unpublished presentation)


2008 Governance, Globalization and Unruly Populations: Governing the Aboriginal Cross-Border Economy in Canada, by Jane Gilmore-Dickson

2009 Mouthy Enemies: Canadian Writers and the Power of Being, Belonging and Celebrity, by Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson

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