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The Life Raft

Canada Reads is an essential way for publishers to sell books—but at what cost to literature?

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LAST FALL, desperate Canadian novelists flooded email accounts, Twitter feeds, and Facebook pages with a single-minded, plaintive plea: please vote for our books on *Canada Reads*. A popular show broadcast each February on CBC Radio, *Canada Reads* usually involves a jury of five advocates, each championing the book they think deserves national attention. Episode after episode, volumes are voted off, in the style of the reality TV show *Survivor*. To mark the 2011 season, the program's tenth, the producers decided to do a twist on this format, adding an *American Idol*–inspired audience participation

By late October, after the top forty books were chosen, the goal of making the top ten inspired especially intense importuning. "Either vote INSIDE on *Canada Reads*, or I will strangle myself with your pearl necklace and call the police," tweeted Kenneth J. Harvey, the noted Newfoundland tough-guy writer, in an only half-joking parody of the many novelistic supplications circulating around the literary world. Harvey was equally sardonic when *Inside* failed, tweeting, "Now that #CanadaReads is done, I must find a new focus for my begging. Spare change? Got a smoke? You drinking that?" On her Twitter account, Lynn Coady, another sharp-tongued child of Atlantic Canada, cast a skeptical eye on the entire grubby election process, asking, "What if the #canadareads nominees end up being whichever authors are most shameless about soliciting friends and family to recommend them?"

Jeff Lemire's graphic novel *Essex County* made the top forty, inspiring his publisher, the American company Top Shelf Productions, to launch a campaign on the book's behalf. Top Shelf's shrewd publisher and editor, Chris Staros, notorious for his barefaced and brassy promotional tactics, pitched his appeal to US comic book fans (voting was open to anyone with access to a computer). "Let's rally as a comics community to put a graphic novel in the Top 10!" he exclaimed in a widely circulated press release. This pandering paid off for Lemire, who won a spot in the top ten, and eventually made it into the final five.

It's a measure of how profoundly *Canada Reads* has reshaped our literary landscape that the show has turned novelists—usually a rather introverted lot who spend their days locked away wrestling with sentences—into arm-twisting politicos eager to woo the crowd. The show's importance can be explained in simple economic terms. Only a small circle of Canadian novelists, such as

Canada Reads is a kingmaker in our literature. Like a fairy godmother, it has magically made princesses out of young writers like Heather O'Neill, whose debut novel, *Lullabies for Little Criminals*, won in 2007. Even more miraculously, it has brought back from the dead novels that had been buried in remainder bins and used bookstores. Hubert Aquin, Frank Parker Day, and Paul Quarrington were once names known only to coteries and tiny cults. *Canada Reads* gave them a second and more favourable look by a mass audience.

The resurrection of Day's 1928 novel, *Rockbound*, was an especially impressive feat. In early 2005, this story of communal strife on a small island off Nova Scotia had only a pallid half-life, kept in print by University of Toronto Press as a historical curiosity. On average, it sold 200 copies per year. Thanks to the forceful advocacy of novelist Donna Morrissey, *Rockbound* won *Canada Reads* and went on to sell more than 35,000 copies. Other, less obscure winners have done far better: the contest is credited with 80,000 new sales of Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*.

become to writers and publishers, it seems churlish to question the show. But the very power of *Canada Reads*, now a national public institution on many levels, demands that we give it greater scrutiny.

Those who work on *Canada Reads* tend to wave off criticism by offering a dismissive account of their own achievements. When I interviewed Jian Ghomeshi, who has hosted since 2008, he said it's wrong to take too serious a view of a show that was, after all, modelled on *Survivor*. But despite its origins as pure and unabashed entertainment, *Canada Reads* has become something larger: a harbinger of a changing literary landscape that the program has done no small part to transform.

If *Canada Reads* is an essential life raft, we need to ask who gets to make it on board. And where, exactly, is this shaky boat taking us?

TO UNDERSTAND the impact of *Canada Reads*, we need some historical perspective. Book discussions on the radio are almost as old as broadcasting itself. In the '30s and '40s, American shows such as *The Lively Arts* and *Information, Please!* tried to bring genteel high-mindedness to radio listeners in deliberately accessible and ingratiating ways, often with a dash of chummy affability. Typical was *Sunday Evening at Fannie Hurst's*, where the then popular novelist invited friends over for coffee to discuss books with her. "All book shows strove, one way or another, to entertain as well as enlighten," cultural historian Joan Shelley Rubin noted in her 1992 book, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*. "Nonetheless, they constituted a particular *kind* of amusement that, to varying extents, mingled ideals of character and liberal learning with elements of fantasy, 'fun,' and the veneration of personality. Like other middlebrow forms, such programs also oscillated between the association

we've also had a vital counter-tradition, best exemplified by the storied career of Robert Weaver, who worked at CBC from 1948 until 1985. In 1954, he proposed that CBC do "a literary magazine prepared for radio presentation." While the network brass worried that such a show would be too abstruse for average Canadians, he nonetheless received the go-ahead. His program, *Anthology*, would play a central role in nurturing the unequalled flowering of Canadian literature that blossomed from the '50s through the '70s, providing a venue for writers like Alice Munro, Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood, Mordecai Richler, Norman Levine, and many others. Among the show's devoted listeners was critic Northrop Frye, who called it "irreplaceable." Thanks in large part to Weaver, CBC served as one of the great patrons of Canadian literature for several crucial decades.

In an interview published in a book devoted to Weaver's career, Janice Kulyk Keefer asked a troubling question: who at CBC can step into Weaver's shoes? While CBC has many fine literary programs, there is now no real counterpart to Weaver at the network. Eleanor Wachtel's show, *Writers and Company*, to take one example, is superb, but she's more invested in the canon of world literature than in discovering new Canadian talent. Surely given that CBC's mandate includes an educational function, the absence of a contemporary Weaver figure constitutes a notable failure.

C*ANADA READS*' key innovation is that it brought the sensibility of modern celebrity culture to an ostensibly literary program. It never presents a discussion that features just writers; nor does it ever use professional literary critics. Although such eloquent authors as Leon Rooke and Lisa Moore have been jurors, they've had to rub shoulders with a wide variety of non-literary celebrities, including musicians (Jim Cuddy of Blue Rodeo), politicians (Kim

accused it of relying on "the tropes that inform the culture of celebrity." Talin Vartanian, developer and producer of the show from 2002 to 2007, has argued that using celebrities has been crucial in helping it garner a wide audience, now numbering more than two million listeners annually.

"We try to be more populist, and sometimes we get criticized for that," Vartanian told the *Globe and Mail* in 2005. "Yet I think the fact that it's not a highbrow debate, that we're not getting into intricacies of literary styles or plot developments in the way a book club might, and that we're using celebrities who are not in their usual comfort zones, attracts a different kind of listener… We don't pretend to be highbrow." She has even argued that star jurors are instrumental in selling books, citing the possibility that fans of Jim Cuddy will pick up the ones he recommends.

If you listen to *Canada Reads*, it's actually much better than either Vartanian's defence or Kamboureli's condemnation suggests. Jim Cuddy, for example, turned out to be an astute and careful reader in both of the years he participated. If he helped Guy Vanderhaeghe's *The Last Crossing* become a bestseller, it's not because brainwashed Blue Rodeo fans were willing to buy everything that won his stamp of approval, but rather because he made a forceful case that the novel combined its accuracy of historical detail with archetypal resonance.

LITERATURE THRIVES on acrimony, on argument, on the tug-and-pull of competing visions. Whatever else you can say about *Canada Reads*, it has fostered lively talk about books. It is, at its best, superb radio: the voices on the show are impassioned, idiosyncratic, entertaining, and contentious. Even when they lack a sophisticated literary vocabulary, they bring real emotional intensity

talk of non-bookish people. It's no surprise that different readers bring different values to the table, and the resulting interplay and clash sometimes produces fruitful debates. Politicians such as Kim Campbell often see reading as a form of civic engagement. For Campbell, the value of Margaret Atwood's *A Handmaid's Tale* is that it would get Canadians "talking about issues of our time that affect our shared future." Literary writers, of course, often bristle at this sort of pragmatic, utilitarian view of fiction. When we're all united on the Elysian Fields, it'll be fun to introduce Campbell to Vladimir Nabokov, who wrote in his introduction to *Bend Sinister* that "there exist few things more tedious than a discussion of general ideas inflicted by author or reader upon a work of fiction… I have never been interested in what is called the literature of social comment (or in journalistic and commercial parlance: 'great books')."

Often jurors resort to the personal connections they feel with a novel. "What I'd just like to say about this book is I really related to the realism of this novel and how it related to my father's past," Donna Morrissey said in a heartfelt petition on behalf of *Rockbound*. "My father is a very beautiful man, and he's always talking about the past with such love. Not nostalgia, just love. Because he spent so much time alone in the woods and in the sea. When he talks about it, his eyes soften, and there's such love in him for those days… These were the kind of men who built nations. I would just want to share with Canada these proud Atlantic Canadian men from our past." This touching display of filial piety goes against the grain of academic literary analysis, which tends to emphasize formalist properties over personal connections. In a persuasive and deftly argued chapter of her doctorial thesis, literary scholar Susanne Marshall sees the celebration of *Rockbound* as part of a larger tendency to promote "primitivist, nostalgic and static representations of the Atlantic region."

> *Bidini: Aren't those characters a little small? I would have liked to have known more about the characters. I would have liked to have gotten into the heads of those characters a little bit more. But as a writer he doesn't dwell on that; he dwells on them lighting out and discovering.*
> *Moore: No, because there are silences here, there are spaces here, where the reader brings something to those characters.*
> *Bidini: I don't want to bring anything.*
> *Moore: Well, then you're lazy. You're a lazy reader.*
> *Bidini: Is that right?*
> *Moore: Yes.*
> *Bidini: No, the writer spends his or her time in their rooms bleeding over a book so you don't have to when you read it.*

Here we see in stark form two different ideologies of reading: Bidini's populist love of accessible fiction clashing with Moore's call for strenuous reading. My sympathies are with Moore, but I appreciate Bidini's bold statement of his case. In a regrettable reversion to Canadian standards of politeness, Moore later apologized for insulting Bidini—a shame, since this exchange is precisely the type of lively literary discourse we need.

Canada Reads choices are never passively accepted by the country at large. Rather, they tend to provoke intense debate and counterproposals. "What we've determined here is there really isn't a consensus," Jim Cuddy wisely noted in 2004. "We have five books, and they are all worthy. Of all the people working here, you couldn't get the same list of five in a row. Reading is more often than not a solitary pleasure, or least one shared with people of similar mind." It's hard to dispute these words, and the failure of consensus should be seen as a

than choices by the Governor General's Award or the Giller Prize. At worst, some *Canada Reads* winners tend to be a little too middle of the road, a bit too full of life lessons and pressing political issues. Lowbrow genre works—thrillers, romances, fantasy—never make much headway (although spoken word artist Jemini gamely made the case for Nalo Hopkinson's zombie-infested *Brown Girl in the Ring*). Only once did a barbed-wire highbrow novel, Hubert Aquin's *Next Episode*, carry the day, an event that provoked much consternation. Still, the superior middlebrow novel is, in fact, a Canadian specialty. *Canada Reads* is doing nothing more nor less than replicating our nation's existent literary values.

What can and should be deplored is the way *Canada Reads* reinforces the hegemony of the novel as our most popular literary form, at the expense of poetry and the short story. The novel is an easily discussable form: it's no trouble to take the plot of a typical novel as a jumping-off point discuss family life or politics. However, if you are going to talk about them at all intelligently, the short story and poetry both demand the focus and exactitude offered by the specialized vocabulary of literary criticism. But in recompense, they offer much more intense and concentrated verbal and narrative pleasures. I'd argue that the short story, in particular, is the aesthetically pre-eminent Canadian literary form. Shamefully, panellists on *Canada Reads* invariably give the short story short shrift and poetry a put-down. Dave Bidini, for instance, compared Mavis Gallant's collection *From the Fifteenth District*—as great a book as any Canadian has ever written—to "a museum visit" where "you admire these paintings on the wall, but after a while you want to go home to your hotel room and put on *Gilligan's Island*."

JIAN GHOMESHI, the genial host of *Canada Reads*, has a musical background. His old band, Moxy Früvous, is still fondly remembered by many. Reflecting on *Canada Reads*' importance in selling books, he told me that even with all the problems of the music industry, pop stars still have more opportunities to sell their wares than novelists do. There's an infrastructure in place for selling music that the publishing industry lacks.

Canada Reads has brought the youthful energy and enthusiasm of pop culture to our literature. Given the anemic state of our publishers, this infusion of fresh blood is desperately needed. CanLit is like a decaying, deindustrialized city with half the downtown buildings boarded up or caged. In this town, the locals can find hope only in lottery tickets and the newly opened casino. Sometimes, a lucky soul hits the jackpot by winning a Giller Prize or a *Canada Reads* competition. These strokes of good fortune are mistaken for evidence of prosperity. But a lottery economy is never a sign of health.

In a robust literary culture, *Canada Reads* would be one of many ways to sell good books. Our reality is far short of that ideal, so we rely heavily on the show, a small life raft that doesn't have room for all the good authors who deserve to be saved. Thus the question remains: how do we build a literary culture worthy of the often-splendid books our writers give us?

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