Reading <u>Canada Reads</u>

A thesis submitted to
the Department of English
Lakehead University
Thunder Bay, ON

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Arts in English

By Doug Diaczuk
November, 2009

Table of Contents

Abstract:

The CBC Radio One program <u>Canada Reads</u> launched in 2002 and has had a significant impact on the Canadian book industry from its beginning. The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the methodologies of <u>Canada Reads</u> and the various elements of the program that have enabled it to have a substantial impact on the marketing and reception of Canadian literature.

This thesis draws on first-hand interviews with those involved with the production of <u>Canada Reads</u>, notably its original and current producers and its current host, to provide a detailed look at the creation of <u>Canada Reads</u> and the considerations involved in the selection of texts and panelists.

The thesis explores the cultural and ideological implications of the program by providing a detailed examination of the content and structure of <u>Canada Reads</u>. In particular, the thesis examines the role of <u>Canada Reads</u> as a literary award and how it assigns literary value to Canadian texts; the program's use of celebrity culture and spectacle, which allows the program to become a popular public media event, and its impact on the content of the program; the conflict between the panelists' personal and critical reading practices, which are interpolated by the reading audience; and the ways in which the program is grounded in Canadian identity and national rhetoric through Canadian literary texts, yet is unable or unwilling to establish a concrete definition of Canadian identity as it is represented in Canadian literature.

Acknowledgments:

I would like to thank the many people who have helped make this thesis possible. Firstly, I would like to thank my thesis supervisor Dr. Douglas Ivison for all of his guidance and assistance during the researching and writing of this thesis. I would also like to thank the external examiners Dr. Anna Guttman and Dr. Jane Nicholas of Lakehead University.

I would like to thank my family for all of their help and support throughout this process. I need to thank J. Wylie for her constant support and encouragement from the beginning. I also need to thank Hanusia Tkaczyk for all her guidance during the more difficult times.

This thesis would not have been possible without the help from the many people at the CBC. I want to thank Talin Vartanian, Ann Jansen, and Jian Ghomeshi for taking the time to speak with me and assist me in my research. I also want to thank Dr. Kathryn Gretsinger at the University of British Columbia for arranging the interview with Jian Ghomeshi.

Finally, I need to thank Rosie Fernandez at the CBC and all those who helped her compile the Canada Reads audio onto CD as part of my research. This thesis could not have been completed without the dedication and help from all these people and I am very grateful for their support, guidance, and encouragement.

Preface:

In 2002 Canadians tuning into CBC Radio were introduced to <u>Canada Reads</u>, "the battle over Canadian books." The program airing on CBC Radio One is a game, a literary prize, and a nationwide book club, and has created waves throughout the Canadian literary and cultural landscape. The concept is simple: gather five well-known Canadians and allow them to debate the merits of five works of Canadian literature until only one remains that all of Canada should read. Throughout its eight-year run, however, the program has generated criticism from the academic and literary community that focuses attention on the cultural implications produced by this literary game and what it means to the institution of Canadian literature.

Currently, there are three academic articles that examine <u>Canada Reads</u> in detail. In her article "Listening to the Readers of <u>Canada Reads</u>," Danielle Fuller examines the reading practices utilized during the on-air debates and how the audience resists what she refers to as "interpretive practices shaped by canonical aesthetics and formalist hermeneutics" (Fuller 13). Fuller has also written the article "A Reading Spectacle for the Nation: The CBC and 'Canada Reads'" with DeNel Rehberg Sedo that looks at the program more generally and provides an ideological analysis of the cultural work performed by <u>Canada Reads</u>, including media spectacle and the model of the nation imagined by the content of the program. Critic Laura Moss has also written a brief editorial piece that discusses the impact of <u>Canada Reads</u> and why those working in Canadian literature should take the program seriously. My thesis will serve as a response to the criticisms developed by Moss, Fuller, and Sedo, by examining in detail how <u>Canada Reads</u> operates and the impact it has on Canadian literature and Canadian culture. The criticisms regarding the program are valid; however, I am interested in looking at some of the issues brought forward by the critics in more detail to see why <u>Canada Reads</u> has had such a significant

impact, as well as how it is able to achieve it. The thesis will also expand upon the research of Moss, Fuller, and Sedo, who focussed primarily on the earlier seasons of <u>Canada Reads</u>, while I will focus more closely on the later seasons.

One of the most prominent effects of <u>Canada Reads</u> is its impact on the book industry in Canada. According to creator and former <u>Canada Reads</u> producer Talin Vartanian, titles included on the program have seen major increases in sales propelling them to bestseller status. Reporting on the growing popularity of <u>Canada Reads, The Globe and Mail</u> wrote that Michael Ondaatje's novel <u>In the Skin of a Lion</u> experienced a jump in sales of 80,000 copies in 2002, while the relatively unknown novel <u>Rockbound</u> by Frank Parker Day, which usually sold roughly 200 copies a year, sold 7000 after it was shortlisted for the 2003 season (Caldwell R11). <u>Canada Reads</u> has also saved several books from obscurity through the inclusion of works that were once out of print, <u>Rockbound</u> being one example. <u>Canada Reads</u> provides a great deal of recognition and marketing for Canadian texts but book sales is not the only effect of this literary project and critic Laura Moss asks "why is it imperative that we, those who work on and in Canadian literature, take this game seriously?" (Moss 7). Moss raises an important question because the cultural implications of <u>Canada Reads</u> are extensive, and its influence within the institution of Canadian literature is being felt more and more. But it is not only those who study Canadian literature who are affected by <u>Canada Reads</u>. <u>Canada Reads</u> introduces issues of value and evaluation, understandings of cultural identity, interpretation and meaning through varied reading practices, and the role mass media events play in national pedagogy and the formation of cultural values. Expanding on Moss's original question, I will not only discuss why <u>Canada Reads</u> should be taken seriously, but also show how has it become so significant that it requires those who work in Canadian literature to take it seriously.

While it may just be a game, a prize, or a media spectacle, such things play a significant role in how ideological and cultural meanings are distributed and interpreted by the public audience. Using Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural production, it can be argued that <u>Canada Reads</u> is a site through which cultural capital is created and distributed. In the introduction to Bourdieu's <u>The Field of Cultural Production</u>, Randal Johnson outlines the two forms of capital important to the field of cultural production:

> Symbolic capital refers to degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity, consecration or honour and is founded on a dialectic of knowledge and recognition. Cultural capital concerns forms of cultural knowledge, competences or dispositions [. . .] Bourdieu defines cultural capital as a form of knowledge, an internalized code or a cognitive acquisition which equips the social agent with empathy towards, appreciation for or competence in deciphering cultural relations and cultural artefacts. (Johnson 7)

In <u>Distinction</u>, Bourdieu argues that "a work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded" (Bourdieu 2). Bourdieu argues cultural production occurs through education, both formally in institutions like schools or universities and informally through family and social encounters. <u>Canada Reads</u> as a form of cultural capital provides the audience with a form of cultural competence to decipher the code of Canadian literature.

<u>Canada Reads</u> is broadcast on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Canada's national broadcaster. The CBC itself acts as an institutional site of cultural production and serves to educate and inform the Canadian public. According to the 1991 Broadcasting Act, the CBC is mandated to:

(i) serve to safeguard, enrich and strengthen the cultural, political, social, and economic

fabric of Canada, (ii) encourage the development of Canadian expression by producing a

wide range of programming that reflects Canadian attitudes, opinions, ideas, values and

artistic creativity, by displaying Canadian talent in programming and by offering

information and analysis concerning Canada and other countries from a Canadian point

of view. (Broadcasting Act 1.1 Program Policies: Policy 1.1.1)

This mandate aims to provide the social agent or the Canadian public with appreciation for or

competences in deciphering Canadian cultural relations or artefacts. By highlighting Canadian

expressions, attitudes, ideas, values, and artistic creativity, in the hope that it will help to

safeguard the cultural fabric of Canada, the CBC, as an institution that decides what will be

highlighted or featured, determines what and how the public appreciates and deciphers these

cultural relations or artefacts. Canada Reads follows this mandate quite stringently by providing

educational or informative material that serves to enrich Canadians' understanding and

appreciation of Canadian literature.

Canada Reads participates in cultural formation and appreciation by developing

understandings of nation and identity as well as literary value and prestige. As a program that

celebrates and selects a work of Canadian literature that the entire nation should read, Canada

Reads functions as a determinant of value. Canada Reads is a type of literary award because it is

a competition but it differs from other literary prizes, such as the Giller Prize, in its intent and

structure. Other prizes are chosen privately by a jury and restricted to works published within the

current year, while Canada Reads utilizes public discussion and debate and can include Canadian

literary works published at any time. It is a broader, more transparent method of selecting a work

of literature that is not necessarily based on literary merit, as determined by those within the

institution of Canadian literature, but instead on what the panelists feel the nation should be reading, based on a range of widely differing criteria.

Canada Reads does more than simply select a book to be read collectively. The discussions featured on the program often deal with more than just Canadian books and the program touches on a variety of cultural and ideological understandings of literature and Canadian identity. The program participates in celebrating and even attempts to define Canadian identity and the nation, and national rhetoric frames much of the discussion. In doing so, Canada Reads engages in a form of identity production. Given the mandate of the CBC to enrich and strengthen the cultural fabric of Canada, it is no surprise that Canada Reads participates in this type of enrichment of Canadian culture. It utilizes Canadian literature to frame the discussions of nation and uses it as a means of constructing the elusive Canadian identity around representations and depictions in the national literature. The national rhetoric and identity construction found on the program goes beyond simply enriching the cultural fabric of Canada. Having the entire nation collectively read one work of Canadian fiction creates a sense of unity, developing what Benedict Anderson defines as an imagined community. The collective practice of reading one text, framed by the personal and critical reading practices featured on the program, provides the audience with a means of understanding and engaging with the text. However, the reading practices featured on the program may be embraced or rejected by the audience.

Canada Reads is not revolutionizing Canadian literature or Canadian culture. However, it is a relatively new site of cultural production and provides an interesting example of how literary recognition, marketing, and meaning take place within public discourse. As a result, it requires at the very least an examination of its role in shaping understandings of culture and literature in

Canada. Throughout this thesis, I will be examining the various ways <u>Canada Reads</u> participates in cultural formation and informs ideological understandings of Canadian texts and Canadian literature. Chapter One will include a detailed look at the background of <u>Canada Reads</u> from interviews with the two of the program's producers, and some of the criticisms regarding the program. In Chapter Two, I will examine how <u>Canada Reads</u> acts as a site of cultural production within a public discourse and assigns value to literary texts through its competition format. I will also examine the inclusion of canonical and non-canonical works on the program and how this contributes to reinforcing the canonical status of some texts or providing the process for other texts to potentially become canonical. Chapter Three will examine the use of media spectacle and celebrity culture by <u>Canada Reads</u> in relation to how it generates promotion and recognition of Canadian literature in the age of technoculture, and how <u>Canada Reads</u> as a cultural product operates in the mainstream media and allows public interaction. Chapter Four will examine the reading practices featured on the program and explain how they are used to interpret the texts and produce meaning both on the program and within the listening audience through an analysis of several key debates featured during the last two seasons. This chapter will focus on reading practices and provide a detailed look at how the program produces cultural meaning and uses Canadian literature as a means of describing or understanding Canadian culture. Chapter Five will look at the more widespread cultural impact of the program, such as the discussions of nation, and how the panelists use Canadian literature once again to formulate an understanding of national identity. The chapter will also look at the significance of the national reading exercise promoted by the program and its implications for the audience. This analysis of <u>Canada Reads</u> will involve a detailed examination of the discussions found throughout all eight seasons of the program, with particular attention placed on the later seasons, complimented with interviews I

conducted with a number of participants in the program, including producers, Talin Vartanian and Ann Jansen, and host Jian Ghomeshi.

Chapter One: Tuning in to Canadian Literature

"Radio for the people, of the people, by the people" - <u>Canada Reads</u> is born

In the first episode of the eighth season of <u>Canada Reads</u> host Jian Ghomeshi explained:

"For the past seven years <u>Canada Reads</u> has turned books into bestsellers. We're expecting no

less in our eighth season" (CBC 2009).[1] This past season saw a massive amount of promotion

through media events with panelists and authors, an extensive website complete with online

forums and videos, panelist and author interviews, and regional competitions throughout Canada.

The website, more developed than ever, provided listeners with the opportunity to voice their

own opinions in online forums and to discuss which book they wanted to see win in the weekly

people's choice poll. Since the program's inception in 2002 it has gone through a number of

changes over the years but the format has always been the same: five panelists, five books, one

winner. In 2002, Canadians were introduced to <u>Canada Reads</u> by comedian Mary Walsh, the

inaugural host, and during the first episode Walsh outlined the rules of the competition,

explaining:

> the name of this particular game is <u>Canada Reads</u> and the object is to do battle over
>
> books. Over the next five days a courageous and very cocky group of Canadians, yes they
>
> do exist, will forge their way to a new fictional frontier. They have been charged with the
>
> task of uncovering the literary loadstone of this fair land. The book we hope all
>
> Canadians will read together. (CBC 2002)[2]

---

[1] References to <u>Canada Reads</u> on-air discussions from the 2008 and 2009 season are taken from the <u>Canada Reads</u> website at www.cbc.ca/canadareads.

[2] References to <u>Canada Reads</u> on-air discussions from the 2002 season through to the 2007 season are taken from audio recordings on CD provided by the production staff at CBC Radio in January 2009.

Walsh's introduction focussed on the competition element of the program by referring to it as a

'battle over books,' but she also highlighted the innovation of <u>Canada Reads</u> as a way of forging

a way to a new fictional frontier, a frontier where a group of Canadians will determine the book

they hope everyone will read. This group of Canadians consisted of musician Stephen Page,

actor Megan Follows, authors Leon Rooke and Nalo Hopkinson, and former Prime Minister Kim

Campbell. Walsh did not refer to the panelists as celebrities but instead as a group of Canadians,

making the program appear more accessible to the listeners because they, not experts, are making

the choice.

The program was developed from an idea sparked by the One Book, One Community

Campaign that was occurring in several cities in the United States, beginning in Seattle. It

involved librarians selecting one book that everyone in the city should read together. In an

interview with me, Talin Vartanian, developer and senior producer of <u>Canada Reads</u> from 2002

to 2007, explained that originally she and co-host Sheila Rogers wanted to do a segment on the

One Book, One Community Campaign on the CBC Radio program <u>This Morning</u>. However, one

of the producers at the show wrote a letter to management proposing the idea of the CBC

running a One Book, One Community campaign of its own. The CBC management liked the

idea but no one knew quite how to approach it and Vartanian was given the task of developing a

format for the program. After speaking with librarians who worked on similar campaigns in the

United States, as well as publishers, bookstore owners, and authors, Vartanian questioned

whether the program should be similar or different from the campaign in the US.

Vartanian struggled with the challenge of developing the program on a nationwide scale

and she explained "that it is one thing to pick a book for a city, how can a group of people

possibly pick a book for an entire country and who is going to be on that committee and who is

going to make those decisions?" At the time, the reality show <u>Survivor</u> was very popular and

Vartanian wanted to develop some way of melding the two concepts together. Vartanian explains

how the program was developed from there:

> Instead of having a group of people within the CBC, some mucky mucks, making the
>
> decision on what book the whole country should read, what about instead of that way, we
>
> have a group of interesting people who get to make the decision, the actual selection of
>
> the book becomes the programming instead of what follows once the book is chosen like
>
> all these other communities were doing. I then thought about <u>Survivor</u>, [. . .] and came up
>
> with this idea of five people who were competing not for themselves, to kick themselves
>
> off the island, but to kick a book off the island so to speak each time they talk and we end
>
> up with a book Canada should read. The program didn't have a name at the time, I think
>
> the working title was 'The Reading Project' if I remember correctly. I wrote up a
>
> proposal and I came up with a whole rubric around it and how it would work and sort of
>
> designed it <u>Survivor</u> style and management loved it and decided to give it a try.

<u>Canada Reads</u> was now in development and the first season was ready to begin in 2002.

Vartanian said it was very difficult finding people willing to step up and defend a book in the

first season because the program was uncharted territory, something that had not previously been

done in Canada. In the first season Michael Ondaatje's novel <u>In the Skin of a Lion</u>, defended by

Stephen Page, was selected as the one book Canadians should read. Ondaatje was already a well-

recognized author with his novel <u>The English Patient</u> having won the Man Booker Prize for

Fiction in 1992, and this selection helped reinforce his canonical status. After Ondaatje's book

was chosen, it went on to sell upwards of 80,000 copies which was "quite a phenomenon. It just

made a real mark for the program. Clearly, from year one, Canada Reads became established as a

real player in terms of the Canadian book industry. Next to the Gillers, I'd say it's the next program that has the most impact" (Vartanian). From the beginning, <u>Canada Reads</u> established itself as a significant participant in the Canadian literary industry and its impact would continue to grow as the years went by.

The program has undergone several changes since the beginning. One of the most significant changes includes the selection process for texts included on the program. In the first two years texts were chosen by the producers. The process involved asking each panelist to suggest five books they would be willing to defend. A committee comprised of one person from inside the CBC and two people from outside the CBC met to discuss what mix of books would work best. From that list they assigned the panelist one of the books they included on their list. Vartanian explained they used this method because while she was researching the program, organizer Nancy Pearl from the One Book, One Community campaign told her: "don't give final control over the final list of five books to these people [panelists], because you might end up with a really bizarre mix." After the third season, however, there was a great deal of feedback from panelists who participated on the program, with particular attention to the process of selecting the books. A number of panelists said: "we wish we could pick the one book. Why are you making this choice for us?" (Vartanian). As a result, Vartanian decided to try giving the panelists the ability to choose what book they wanted to bring to the program. In 2005, each panelist was permitted to bring the one book they wanted to defend and this method has been used in every subsequent season of <u>Canada Reads</u>. Vartanian does not know if it is better "but it seems to have worked" (Vartanian) and the panelists "seem more passionate about being able to make the choice themselves. They approach it with more passion opposed to: you pick the book

for me that was my number four choice opposed to my number one choice. So in that way it is better" (Vartanian).

The producers still have some control over what texts are included on the program through their choice of panelists. Every year, about 10 or 15 potential panelists are approached in order to allow a wide mix of possible panelists. When it comes to the text they are willing to defend, Vartanian explains: "if their book choice is something I really felt was inappropriate for whatever reason, I could not pick them." While it was a rare occurrence to turn a panelist away because of his or her choice of text, Vartanian described a particular incident in which one potential panelist had to be passed over. The potential panelist was contacted and would only agree to appear if he could defend the novel Ha! by Gordon Sheppard. However, the second season included Hubert Aquin's Next Episode and Vartanian was worried the discussion of Ha! would be very reminiscent of the discussion of Next Episode and she decided not to include the panelist or the text. Vartanian's decision not to include Sheppard's text illustrates how Canada Reads and the selection of texts is influenced by its format as a radio program. In order to provide new and different discussions from season to season, Vartanian rejected a text selection to prevent similar discussions from taking place. In this example, the need to produce interesting radio took precedent over the selection of a text, demonstrating that the selection process is still determined by the production staff.

The selection of panelists is a very well-thought out process. Vartanian wanted "high profile people" (Vartanian) and the purpose of including these high profile Canadians was "the idea behind the whole purpose of Canada Reads" and it was meant to "encourage Canadians to embrace their fiction and draw them to the radio" (Vartanian). Vartanian notes that listeners are inspired by the panelists to read the books selected for the show:

The reason is that they may not have been normally enamoured of books or fiction but they love a specific person. So if you're really a fan of Jim Cuddy, you might listen to this program and turn onto the book he recommended because you love Jim, or similarly if you're a fan of Roch Carrier or Scott Thompson or any number of people. So I think that the star quality of the panel draws people who wouldn't normally listen to a book show. I think star quality is important.

But star quality is not the only feature producers look for in potential panelists. Vartanian wants people who are passionate about books and able to participate in lively debate: "I want people who do love books, who love fiction and enjoy reading. You want the star quality. And then beyond that you want articulate people who will be feisty in the debates. And you want people who will engage with each other and be respectful of each other and you want a mix." They never considered having a panel completely comprised of authors or academics because they "have a different quality of discussion [. . .] I don't want a pointy head discussion, I want an accessible discussion, the kind of talk you might have if you have a book club in your living room of people who just love reading" (Vartanian). The decision not to include academics or authors demonstrates how Canada Reads was constructed to be different from other literary programs available on CBC. The CBC already offered a number of literary programs such as Next Chapter or Talking Books; however, Canada Reads was intended to be "different" and "not like those." Next Chapter includes interviews with authors and writers and focuses on stories relating to Canadian writing. Talking Books, which is now off the air was described as an original on-air book club that included a variety of accomplished readers and writers from Canada and around the world. Vartanian describes Canada Reads as being "much more popular" and she explained that it was intentionally constructed "to draw in more Canadians to read

Canadian fiction and to make the show more accessible." The popularity Vartanian refers to is the result of the program's format and inclusion of celebrity panelists. Unlike the other programs that include authors and people from within the Canadian literary community, Canada Reads resists this format with the intention of drawing more people to the program.

As the program entered its eighth year, it had become much more than just a radio program. While the primary feature of Canada Reads is the on air discussion, the website has become a major part of the project in recent years. The program has always had a website but it was not always as interactive, and during the most recent season the website hosted blogs, forums, weekly polls, and many other means for the public to interact with each other to discuss the five texts. This year also included the online book club, which included a variety of featured material on the texts and authors, as well as forums allowing listeners to send questions to an author, and a featured reader section. In and interview with me, current senior producer Ann Jansen explains: "there is a lot of value-added material on the site about the book, everything from very extensive plot summaries, a refresher for people who have already read the book, and character sketches and all kinds of background material, and new material everyday from our archives."

The growing impact of Canada Reads on the Canadian book industry and Canadian literature was not something the producers expected. Their primary goal was to make great radio, or as Jansen put it, "radio for the people, by the people, of the people," but the program clearly has significant commercial impact. Host Jian Ghomeshi began one episode in 2009 by explaining how this prize "sells more books than any other award show in this country except for the Scotiabank Giller Prize, and we know they got glamour and galas on their side but we're very happy with what we've got: the panelist's passion and willingness to go public with their

opinions and their votes" (CBC 2009). Jansen shares these sentiments and adds: "I think it's an important prize because it's just so honest and interesting and everything is out on the table and it's a bit of a game and feeds into that sense of things are happening in real time [. . .] so whether or not anyone would assume it would become as an important prize as other prizes, I think we just hope to make great radio because that is where we started, it's a radio show to start with." The statements made by the production staff indicate that <u>Canada Reads</u> is primarily a radio program, constructed to draw listeners in and be interesting and entertaining. While Jansen does argue that the program has become an important prize, <u>Canada Reads</u> is still first and foremost a radio show and constructed as such, with its impact coming as a surprise.

<u>Canada Reads</u> and the Critics

Before examining the cultural implications of <u>Canada Reads</u> in more detail, it is important to look at some of the arguments raised by critics regarding its content and significance. Academics have questioned the legitimacy of the program and expressed concerns about its impact on Canadian literary criticism. Danielle Fuller asks why academics laughed at the format of the show: "Did the laughter indicate concern about a 'watered-down' literary critique aired on radio by 'unqualified' readers?" (Fuller 11), before going on to quote Stephen Henighan who has criticized programs such as <u>Canada Reads</u> as a "vulgarization of a cultural practice (literary interpretation) and their pandering to 'the prizes and showbiz mentality' that has 'infiltrated' Canadian literary culture" (11). The criticisms referenced by Fuller suggest that programs such as <u>Canada Reads</u> devalue literary interpretation, suggesting culture prizes that utilize spectacle are not fully capable of contributing to literary interpretation because they do not treat literary interpretation seriously enough or are not capable of participating in it. This infiltration, in part, is the result of the place cultural prizes hold within mass media and their

ability to reach a wide audience. Unlike other forums for literary interpretation, for example, universities, programs such as <u>Canada Reads</u> reach many more people and the impact is farther reaching, but as Laura Moss argues, they do not engage critically with literary texts. Henighan's description of programs like <u>Canada Reads</u> is accurate in the sense that it does pander to a culture of prizes and showbiz mentality; however, because it does have a significant impact on Canadian literature the position it holds within the Canadian literary world remains worth examining in more detail.

    <u>Canada Reads</u> is not redefining or even necessarily participating in academic literary interpretation or criticism. Vartanian does not think of it as "an academic program or an academic exercise," she sees it as "a bit of pop culture." When Vartanian was asked about the program being 'watered-down literary critique by unqualified readers,' as it was described in the opening of Fuller's article, Vartanian responded by agreeing: "They're right, they're not qualified, but what does qualified mean?" The qualification of the panelists on <u>Canada Reads</u> is clearly not the same as those of an academic or literary critic. However, raising the question of what qualified means illustrates that the producers are not interested in the qualifications other critics may possess. For current senior producer Ann Jansen "anyone who reads is qualified to tell people what they think about a book" (Jansen). According to the producers of the program, it was not designed to be serious, even though "its impact is very serious because the book that is chosen benefits in a very big way" (Vartanian). The program was designed to be populist, fun, a game with 'personality.' Vartanian explains "the quality of discussion is different from what you would hear if you pooled together five professors of English literature. Now, if I put five professors of English literature on to discuss five books, do you think we would get the same number of listeners and that it would have the same impact? I would say no." Again, the

importance of creating interesting radio becomes the primary concern for the producers. Vartanian and Jansen are not literary critics or academics, they are radio producers and therefore their primary job is producing interesting radio. This is further emphasized by Jansen, who states: "it's not intended to be the final word on anything, it's not intended to be the great in-depth exploration of anything, I mean, I think it's intended to be a really great radio program that people will want to listen to because of the personalities and the stories they are talking about are all really interesting. They hope that there will be some light shed on the books and drawing people's attention to the books" (Jansen). The program has never featured literary academics on air, with the exception of "only those that have escaped from university" (Jansen). Jansen's use of the word escaped indicates that not only do the producers seek out non-academic panelists, but actually reject academic readers for the purposes of the program.

The quality of discussion featured in the on-air debates is not the critics' only concern regarding Canada Reads. Laura Moss explains briefly that Canada Reads acts as a public presentation of literature in Canada and that it is helping to open up Canadian literary works to a large market, that it has an impressive impact on the publishing industry, and "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" (7). These observations all appear to be positive for Canadian literature, so why is she so uneasy about the program? Moss explains "part of it lies with the immense cultural responsibility placed on the celebrity panelists. Canada Reads has become a new instrument of culture formation" (7). As Moss suspects, Canada Reads participates in constructing cultural values through its discussion of Canadian literature and recommending a work of literature to the entire nation. She also

argues that the program is "intent on drawing Canadians together by creating a shared cultural background" (7). Canada Reads is able to draw Canadians together and create this shared cultural background through its promotion of Canadian literature in a mass reading event. Sarah Corse demonstrates the connection between nation and national literature and the role that a national literature plays in the construction of nation: "Most importantly, the connection between literature and the nation is far more complex than simple reflection and, far from being 'natural' or obvious, the pairing of literature and the nation is in fact a social construction that performs powerful and important cultural work" (3). The shared cultural experience provided by Canada Reads, then, contributes to the construction of nation.

For the producers of Canada Reads, the nation-building rhetoric found on the program is the result of the more general struggle over what exactly is meant by 'Canadian.' Responding to a question about the nation-building rhetoric on the program, Vartanian explains: "when you say Canadianness, it's a question of what you consider to be Canadian." She also asks the question "what constitutes a Canadian writer?" Vartanian recognizes that this can be hazardous terrain because the definition of Canadian has changed so much over the years. Discussions involving what constitutes a Canadian writer have taken place both on-air and off-air regarding specific texts. For example, during the sixth season of Canada Reads host Bill Richardson asked whether the panelists felt Anosh Irani's novel Songs of Kahunsha, which is not set in Canada, should be on the list. Panelist Denise Bombardier responded by explaining: "it's not politically correct to say this, but I thought that when we were talking Canadian books it has something to do with Canada in a way or another. I was surprised because I could have chosen books from outside Canada from people who one day lived in Canada and went back and write about Africa or South Africa" (CBC 2007). For Bombardier, the purpose of Canada Reads is to highlight Canadian

culture and identity as represented through Canadian books that have a distinctly Canadian

context. This argument was not shared by all the panelists and Richardson added: "it is in many

ways the nature of our very contemporary literature that some of the most distinguished books

which are published in Canada are written by people who weren't born here, who come from

elsewhere and bring that perspective" (CBC 2007). Richardson argues that Canadian literature is

partially shaped by writers from outside the nation that provides a new perspective in developing

an understanding of Canada. Donna Morrissey, who championed Irani's novel, stated: "I didn't

think that Canada Reads is necessarily Canada reading about Canada" (CBC 2007), before

explaining that she chose Irani's novel because the story "transcended all boundaries" through its

story of the orphan and also how the novel is relevant to the current climate of fear and violence

in today's society (CBC 2007). Morrissey does not see the role of Canada Reads as being only

about Canada, and much like Richardson, she sees the perspective of foreign born authors as

being important in understanding Canadian literature and Canadian culture. However, she also

expands on this idea by pointing out how Irani's novel transcends boundaries, arguing that it is

not specifically about Canada or any other particular place or time, but more universal.

Vartanian explained Anosh Irani and a number of other writers from other parts of the

world who are now living in Canada were offended that Irani's Songs of Kahunsha was

questioned as a Canadian novel. Similar debates have occurred in other seasons of Canada Reads

and for Vartanian these discussions are a positive thing, as she explains: "I think because we are

the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and because we have a wealth of really good writers in

this country, it's important to highlight that and focus on that." Although debates around what

defines a Canadian writer or a Canadian text have taken place on Canada Reads, a concrete

definition of what constitutes a Canadian text is never actually reached. Current producer Ann

Jansen does not believe that because the program is on the CBC that the CBC's authority extends to the discussions or the selection of texts. However, as Vartanian explained, there is a level of control when selecting texts to appear on air, as is evident from her example of the exclusion of the Gordon Sheppard text. For Jansen though, the CBC does not have any official authority because it is not the CBC saying which book Canada should read "it's these five people in a room who come together and debate the five books and come up somehow with whichever one they think is the one people should read" (Jansen). Jansen too is disavowing any authority in the selection of the winning text; however, as the producer of the program, she does possess a degree of authority through her selection of the panelists. The panelists are responsible for choosing a winner, though their selections and debates are framed by the CBC through the broadcast of their discussions and the selection by the producers of who is chosen to be included on the panel, and by extension, what text.

Despite the fact that the program favours discussion over authority, Moss points out that there is a great deal of cultural responsibility placed upon the panelists. While the program does not create a definitive answer of what constitutes a Canadian text, though it may try, the impact of the program does have important implications. For Moss, it all comes down to the panelists on Canada Reads. Unlike other literary awards such as the Giller Prize or the Governor's General Award, the judges on Canada Reads are not experts, they are celebrities. Moss takes issue with this fact and observes "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" (Moss 8). It has already been determined that the producers' first goal is producing interesting radio and Moss is correct in her assessment that discussions do involve emotional responses to the texts. However, the level of discussion is not

necessarily as limited at Moss argues. In later seasons, discussions often involve debates about

social issues, historical significance, national identity, and critical understandings of aesthetics

and language, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four. The entertainment value

of the program is important, but for Ann Jansen the cultural responsibility of the panelists is not

as significant as Moss argues. Jansen recognizes the impact of the program but she sees the

responsibility of the panelists as "falling passionately in love with a book and wanting to

persuade other people" (Jansen). The panelists do take their role seriously according to Jansen,

and they bring a lot of passion to the discussions because they want to do well by the book and

the author and because they care about the book. But according to Jansen "they're not busy

creating a canon or they're not busy designing the books that will last a millennium. Their job is

just to find the book that we want to have all of Canada read [. . .] We don't define it for them,

we just get them to talk about it and every year they probably define it a little differently."

Despite Jansen arguing that the only responsibility of the panelists is falling passionately in love

with a book and trying to convince others to read it, it is important to recognize that the cultural

implications are actually much greater, as Moss argues.

       Moss argues that there is a distinct national rhetoric that exists on the program which, at

times, guides or even dominates the discussions. But what 'nation' is being represented through

the program? The nation discussed on <u>Canada Reads</u> is not necessarily a united one, but

unification is sometimes sought during the debates. Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo

argue that the program's "model of the nation imagined by the content of <u>Canada Reads</u>,

particularly in terms of text selection and the book's explicit framing on-air, is problematically, if

predictably, conservative (bilingual and uncritically multicultural)" (Fuller and Sedo 7).

However, they position this "ideological limitation against the potential for creative resistance

produced by the show's multiple modes of delivery" (7). The multiple modes of delivery refer to

the program's website, as well as its broadcast on television in 2004. Fuller and Sedo argue that

"the cross-platform presence of Canada Reads promotes a 'variety pack' approach to CanLit that

occasionally intrudes into the broadcasts themselves" and that "there is evidence that listener-

readers and on-air contributors are indeed making their own use of the series in ways that

reimagine and/or unsettle the national model constructed by the content of the show" (7). The

listener-readers and the panelists participate in reimagining or unsettling the national model

through their own construction or understanding of Canadian identity, which does not

necessarily fit into the nation constructed by the show. However, the nation that is constructed by

the show is not entirely clear. On the surface, Canada Reads predictably fits into the categories

outlined by Fuller and Sedo as determined by the mandate of the CBC; however, there is no one

national model constructed by the show. Canada Reads is actually a rather unstructured program

that does not allow for a national model to be constructed and maintained throughout the

seasons. While the producers have a degree of control over who appears on the program and the

texts they select, as well as discussion topics, the actual content of the discussions is often

determined by the texts themselves, meaning the content of the texts and the panelist's

understanding of them determines the content of the show, which does not allow for a

predictable or constant national model to exist. Therefore, the national model constructed by the

structure of the show is actually rather limited in determining the content of the program.

Further criticisms aimed at Canada Reads concern its game-show format and the fact that

it is preoccupied with entertainment value. Fuller explains: "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" (13). By utilizing this popular format, the program attracts a specific demographic to the program and Fuller and Sedo argue: "Given their [CBC] aging audience demographic, the desire to appeal to younger listeners by adapting a format that has been highly successful and globally popular in another medium is understandable – if not downright canny" (9-10). Fuller and Sedo discuss the format of the program further by saying:

> 'Media spectacle' elements of the show's production highlight the 'game' aspects of the show, its involvement with contemporary celebrity culture, and its function as 'infotainment.' By engaging with these cultural formations, 'Canada Reads' runs the risk of being seen as a pale imitation of more spectacular commercial media enterprises; but popular formations attract listeners and viewers, and public broadcasting corporations should be using and reworking 'fun' formats and genres to engage, involve, and provoke their audience. (30)

Fuller and Sedo point to a key aspect of Canada Reads, which is involving and engaging the national audience. By using a popular game-show format, the program is better able to draw in a larger audience, and perhaps even a younger demographic. The producers of Canada Reads are interested in attracting a diverse audience to get as many people as possible involved in Canadian literature but this has never been the goal of Canada Reads, according to producer Vartanian. She recognizes that the CBC has talked about drawing a younger demographic to the radio, but for Vartanian "it's not the goal of Canada Reads to draw younger listeners, the goal of Canada Reads is to excite people about books and draw them to radio. That's what it's about. It's not about getting more young listeners." The format chosen may provide a more populist form of entertainment, but the selection of panelists does not cater to any particular demographic.

Vartanian believes "if anything we've erred on the side of not having enough young people on" (Vartanian) because many panelists are in fact older.

However, the competition format has received criticism from Moss who calls the texts included on the program pawns in a 'game' (Moss 8) and there have been instances in the discussions, particularly during the voting stages, when the impact of the format of the game becomes apparent, with panelists voting strategically in order to save their book or someone else's, making the focus of the program the competition and not the criteria used for discussing the texts. It becomes obvious that <u>Canada Reads</u> is a game and the texts are a pivotal part of the game that is being played. In order to make the program more interesting, there needed to be this element of competition and the texts become trapped in that competition. One text must stand above the rest at the end of the broadcasts to be labeled as the one the nation should read. But how might this be different from other literary awards or competitions? There are several ways to look at this question. For example, the discussions of the texts included on <u>Canada Reads</u> are broadcast for the entire nation to hear, allowing listeners to understand how the winning text was chosen or how the game is played, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two. But in a way, all the texts included on the program are winners. While texts voted off early do not receive as much discussion, as a result of being included on the program they are still being exposed to a wide reading audience. Other literary awards are decided behind closed doors by literary experts and do not involve participation by the public. <u>Canada Reads</u> is providing an open discussion of Canadian literature and taking away the specialization or private judging found in other cultural prizes. However, because of the populist format of the program, which includes strategic voting and open debates and disagreements, the game aspect of the program becomes much more apparent, making the program appear less serious. While <u>Canada Reads</u>

may not be as serious as the Giller Prize, Moss notes that "Canada Reads is quickly becoming

one of the most important prizes in Canadian literature" (Moss 7-8) and Vartanian also believes

Canada Reads is becoming much larger and more significant than they expected it to be.

Chapter Two: Assigning Value and Awarding Texts

Are Canadians Reading? A Question of Value

"I think it's high time for the written word to become sexy again. We need to collectively show our leaders that books are something ordinary Canadians *do* care about. Something we want to buy or study or debate with our friends and, most of all, something we want to continue to read" ("Bringing Sexy Back" Canada Reads Blog).

In the above blog post Canada Reads blogger Lee expresses her desire to keep the written word alive and well in Canada, while taking a slight shot at current government funding cuts to the arts. She also highlights a key aspect of the Canada Reads project: celebrating Canadian literature and getting people reading. The blogger laments diminishing book sections in national and local newspapers and decreasing coverage given to Canadian literature in the media. She thinks this can change though, and that Canada Reads has the power to show how much Canadians still care about the national literature and the importance of reading. Like other awards, Canada Reads is an important tool for marketing literature to the public and assigning value to texts. As a cultural prize, Canada Reads provides works of Canadian fiction with value and legitimacy through its selection of the title that all Canada should read. The cultural value Canada Reads constructs places the text in a position of potentially becoming part of the Canadian canon or reinforcing its existing canonical status.

The Canada Reads blogger wants to make 'literature sexy again,' but it might be a more difficult task than simply reminding the powers that be that Canadians are passionate about Canadian writing. A survey conducted by Harris/Decima Research, commissioned by Canadian Heritage, found Canadians are not reading Canadian books, or reading much at all. According to an article by Sarah Schmidt in the National Post, the survey found "just 53% of respondents were

able to name a Canadian author. Just one-third of respondents said they feel very familiar or somewhat familiar with Canadian authors" (Schmidt). The survey revealed "almost two-thirds (62%) could not name a Canadian author in an unaided exercise" (Schmidt). Respondents who were able to name a Canadian author mentioned Margaret Atwood the most (22%), with Pierre Berton (8%), Farley Mowat (8%), and Michel Tremblay (5%) trailing behind. No other author, out of 400 available options, was mentioned by more than 4% of the respondents. The survey also found Canadians read an average of seventeen books a year, 22% written by a Canadian. The results of the survey are "dreadful but not surprising" (Schmidt) according to Adrian Stein of Books in Canada. Stein explains that it is "difficult for any country to maintain a literary culture when the vehicles that support this expression are disappearing, one by one" (Schmidt), clearly referring to his own publication, Books in Canada: The Canadian Review of Books, which has experienced a lack of funding. The results of the Harris/Decima survey are troubling to the institution of Canadian literature because they represent a failure, either on the part of the people or on the part of the institutions responsible for propagating and teaching Canadian literature.

A month prior to the release of the Harris/Decima survey results, literary giants in Canada were celebrating the recent Scotiabank Giller Prize award with a ceremony in Toronto. The Giller Prize was established in 1994 and is "dedicated to celebrating the best in Canadian fiction each year, and to enhancing the marketing efforts in bringing these books to the attention of all Canadians" (Scotiabankgillerprize.ca). During the gala event, 2009 winner Joseph Boyden stated: "This contribution to Canadian literature is just massive and just what Canada needs" ("Joseph Boyden Wins $50K Giller Prize" CBCnews.ca). Boyden received a cash award of fifty thousand dollars and his novel is now marketed as a Giller Prize winner, perhaps the highest

recognition for authors in English Canada. These two events, the Harris/Decima survey and the

Giller Prize, are rather interesting when looked at side by side. Joseph Boyden's statement that

the Giller Prize is a big contribution to Canadian literature and just what Canada needs is

exemplified by the dismal results of the survey because the results demonstrate a lack of

appreciation for Canadian writers among the general public. The goals of the Giller Prize,

particularly enhancing marketing efforts to bring the books to the attention of all Canadians, are

one way of addressing the lack of appreciation that exist. The Giller Prize and Canada Reads,

two large cultural prizes in English Canada, provide key elements for making a national

literature recognizable, including marketing and value judgement.

    A cultural prize is an important tool for providing literature with recognition and value.

The Giller Prize, for example, is heavily marketed and is a means of authenticating Canadian

literary talent through the process of judging literary texts as valuable. Cultural prizes such as the

Giller Prize and Canada Reads are systems for determining the value of literary texts and

distributing the texts to the reading public through their participation in marketing and media

events. James F. English argues that "there is no form of cultural capital so ubiquitous, so

powerful, so widely talked about, and yet so little explored by scholars as the cultural prize"

(English 109). James English discusses the role of cultural prizes in the circulation of cultural

capital:

    The game called culture is played differently than it used to be, with more diverse agents

    (institutional as well as individual agents) employing more complex and varied strategies.

    Those of us who are interested in what Pierre Bourdieu has called the rules of art would

    do well to put our habitual sneers aside and begin to inquire more systematically into the

    prize's functioning, both in the narrow sense, as a piece of objectified symbolic capital

(the sort of hard credential or qualification that is 'to cultural capital what money is to

economic capital') and, in a broader sense, as an instrument of exchange and conversion

with its own particular rules of operation, its own class of operatives or functionaries, its

own historical trajectory across the fields of culture. (110)

English argues that the functioning of the cultural prize requires examination with respect to how

it operates within cultural production. English asks "just what value do prizes carry in the

postmodern economy of cultural prestige, and how do they retain this value in the face of their

seemingly numerous and powerful detractors?" (110). Perhaps the most significant value cultural

prizes possess is the value they provide to literary texts. Texts that win a cultural prize are

automatically presumed to be valuable because they have been judged as valuable by a jury of

cultural figures. But are works that win a cultural prize such as the Giller Prize valuable because

they win or do they win because they already possess a certain level of value?

It works both ways. Using the example of the Giller Prize, the texts chosen generally

have a degree of value already attached to them. The list of jurors and the works shortlisted over

the years indicates this degree of value. On more than one occasion, a former juror has been

shortlisted and a former author shortlisted has in turn served as a juror. Shortlisted works retain

this value because the authors have been placed in a position of judging or determining value of

other literary texts. This shared value is demonstrated through Jack Rabinovitch's foreword to

the 10th Anniversary Collection of Giller Prize Winners, in which he writes that "[a] prize is only

as credible as the people who act as jurors, and over the decade our distinguishable jurors have

clearly established the credibility of the Giller Prize" (13). The credibility of the jurors is what

makes the award itself credible, and the credibility of the award extends to the works selected.

The credibility of the jurors is demonstrated by them having won the prize, providing them with their own level of value.

Cultural prizes place value on a literary text through the act of judging. The validity of literary judgements rest on those who make them and "the most valid judgements are commonly thought to be made by persons with certain appropriate qualifications, including acute literary sensitivities, wide literary experience, an adequate understanding of the meaning of the work, and freedom from the biases of personal interest or ideology" (Herrnstein Smith 180). In the case of the Giller Prize, those legitimatizing the validity of the works may possess literary sensitivities because of their wide literary experience and their role as authors. The judges, judging process, and intent of Canada Reads are quite different from that of the Giller Prize or any other literary award. While the Canada Reads panel does include authors who possess literary sensitivities, the panel is not solely comprised of these individuals. Canada Reads uses open discussion for determining the winning text in the competition as well as non-expert or common readers. During the 2009 season, host Jian Ghomeshi explained: "For most literary awards, juries make decisions behind closed doors and some of us regular folk are left shaking our heads wondering why one book won over all the others. Well here it's done out in the open. What you hear is what you get" (CBC 2009). Unlike the Giller Prize, where the public is not made aware of how the texts are judged and how a winner was chosen, Canada Reads allows the listeners to hear all the debates and know why a specific text was chosen, allowing for a uniquely transparent literary judging process. Furthermore, the intent of Canada Reads is rather different from the Giller Prize because it is not necessarily awarding a book for being the best, but rather, choosing a book the nation should read together. However, the intent of Canada Reads is not always entirely clear, particularly for the panelists participating in the project. Some panelists may see their role as

promoting texts that that have not received wide-spread recognition, while others look to the

quality or writing or the broader significance of a book as a deciding factor, ignoring a text's

current status in the public.

For example, some of the authors included on Canada Reads were already considered to

be widely recognized authors, such as Yann Martel. Martel's novel Life of Pi was already a

bestseller and won the Man Booker Prize in 2002, when it was included in the 2003 Canada

Reads. During debates some panelists felt that Yann Martel was already being read by many

Canadians and therefore did not need to be chosen as the winner. Following the airing of the

debates, panelist Will Ferguson wrote in a confessional article in the Globe and Mail: "I went

into the opening round intending to vote against Life of Pi right at the start, primarily on the

grounds that choosing it as 'the book that Canadians should read' would have been redundant.

Canadians already are reading Life of Pi" (Ferguson R1). Life of Pi defender Nancy Lee

explained during the debates that it was on her list before it won the Man Booker Prize and she

was not deterred because of the attention it had already received and that "when CBC said that

this is the one we want you to do, I thought about that and I thought, well we shouldn't hold it

against Life of Pi that other people have embraced it. I'm sure there are Canadians who haven't

read it and I'd love to get it into their hands" (CBC 2003). After the book was voted off on the

third day, Ferguson explained he voted against it because "honestly, Life of Pi has reached its

readers [. . .] I didn't see why we should be promoting it further" (CBC 2003). Nancy Lee saw

this as punishing the success of the novel, which was "a typically Canadian thing to do" (CBC

2003). Some panelists felt that because Martel's novel had already achieved such a great level of

success he did not need any more promotion. This demonstrates that some Canada Reads

panelists do operate in terms of book sales and in this season they wanted to see other texts that

had not yet achieved that level of success remain on the program. Fuller and Sedo note that in earlier seasons at least half the book selections could be described as canonical texts with very few that could be described as new or unknown. However, in later seasons, there have been more relatively unknown texts included and some panelists believe they should be selected because they have not achieved the same level of status as other texts. The shift to include lesser known authors could indicate that the role of Canada Reads is changing and it is becoming more of a promotional tool for unknown authors, a means of highlighting Canadian literary talent that may otherwise go unnoticed. This shift would alter the original structure of the program, which was designed to highlight Canadian fiction published at anytime. Currently, the producers do not see the role of Canada Reads as a promotional tool for unknown authors, but the panelists who select the texts that are included may see it as their role and select texts they feel need more recognition.

In the 2009 season Jian Ghomeshi pointed out the imbalance between the weight and history some books brought with them as opposed to others that were not very well known. He asked during the debates: "how much does the fact that a book is already a big award winner affect its competitiveness in this fight" (CBC 2009), using the example of Mercy Among the Children winning the Giller Prize and The Book of Negroes winning the Commonwealth Prize, and whether or not "that makes them more worthy of the Canada Reads prize than say, Fruit, a debut novel that has not won a big prize?" (CBC 2009). Ghomeshi's question raises the issue of Canada Reads' role and whether it should be a promotional tool for unknown texts, or reinforce the status held by already widely read authors. Jen Sookfong Lee expressed similar concerns that appeared during the debate about Life of Pi and she explained: "I feel that if a book is already in the consciousness of the Canadian public then why does Canada need to know more about it?

The Book of Negroes and Mercy Among the Children are already bestsellers. I don't feel I have

to tell more people about it" (CBC 2009). As in the case of Life of Pi, because these two texts

were already so well known, some panelists felt there was no reason to promote them further.

Avi Lewis, who was defending The Book of Negroes, responded to the question a little

differently: "I think all of us would love to take an unknown book and really make a career or let

someone find an audience who wouldn't otherwise have one, that's a huge appeal of doing this.

The question is: do you not want to recommend a book to every one of your fellow country folk

just because it has already been loved? I couldn't in good conscious do that" (CBC 2009). For

Lewis, it is not an issue of recommending a book people already know, but rather recommending

a book based on its merit. In this season some panelists saw their role as recommending a book

that is not well known in order to provide it with recognition, though some panelists still point to

the text's quality as a major selling point. Sarah Slean, in her defence of the best-selling novel

Mercy Among the Children, did not believe that because it was already a best-selling novel that

it was more worthy of winning. It is not surprising that the two panelists who defended best

selling novels would not see pre-existing recognition as a problem in determining the winner of

Canada Reads. However, Nicholas Campbell made a rather interesting observation when he

intervened with his thoughts that "prizes are such crap anyway." He said that "the whole idea of

prizes is a promotional thing [. . .] you got to find some way to promote it [books] in the best

possible circumstances" (CBC 2009). Campbell went on to say he would not privilege a book

that is less known over one that is a bestseller.

Campbell's comment regarding prizes generated a lengthy discussion in the online

forums from listeners who questioned the role of literary prizes and whether or not Canada

Reads can be considered a serious literary award. In the online forums JohnMutford wrote:

"Nicholas Campbell apparently thinks the other literary prizes are more 'crap' than Canada

Reads. Why is Canada Reads supposedly more noble or relevant than the others? You can

guarantee that the publisher of this year's winning book will immediately run the promotion

circuit just as the winner of this year's Giller or GG [Governor General's Award]" (Canada

Reads Forum). This post is correct in pointing out the importance prizes have in terms of

promotion, as Canada Reads' selections often add promotional stickers much like the Giller Prize

or Governor General's Award. JohnMutford points to Campbell arguing that Canada Reads

offers a panel composed of people Canadians may know which he believes is more relevant to

the average Canadian than the Giller Prize that is composed of judges from the literary world and

sees this aspect of the program as acceptable and adds: "the implication is that we don't need the

literary elite judging our books. Maybe we don't want our recommendations from scholars,

professional critics and other authors" (Canada Reads Forum). Canada Reads does not provide a

recommendation from critics or academics, but a group of Canadians that 'people may know.'

Campbell's comments also sparked a debate about whether or not Canada Reads is a serious

literary award. JohnMutford wrote: "I agree a lot of the show's appeal is the fun, light side of

things, but ask the publishers of these books, ask booksellers, if there isn't a serious side to this

annual event" (Canada Reads Forum). The people participating in the online forum relate Canada

Reads' seriousness to the impact it has on book sales as the producers and participants have

done. However, the debate continued with JohnMutFord asking:

> Can Canada Reads not be considered a 'serious' award (because of its phenomenal effect
>
> on booksales), but still be an entertaining game? I commented about this yesterday not
>
> because I want Canada Reads to have more or less prestige than the Gillers or the GGs or
>
> any other prize, but because I wanted to explore Campbell's comment that literary awards

are 'crap' and that <u>Canada Reads</u> had more relevance. The comparison to these 'serious

literary awards' was inherent in his statements. (<u>Canada Reads</u> Forum).

Barbara@CBC replied to this previous post with: "I think that Nicholas Campbell feels <u>Canada</u>

<u>Reads</u> has more relevance than literary awards because the discussion about the shortlisted books

is out in the open – so the public actually witnesses how the decision on the winning book was

made" (<u>Canada Reads</u> Forum). Again, the transparency of <u>Canada Reads</u> appears to separate it

from other literary awards, but does this aspect of the program make it more relevant? The poster

argues: "I should point out that CR [<u>Canada Reads</u>] is *not* an award. But it's taken as seriously

as the major literary awards by the public – who buy the books – and by the publishing industry,

because of its impact on sales. So, no, it isn't 'just for fun'" (<u>Canada Reads</u> Forum). This debate

raises some important issues regarding <u>Canada Reads</u>' role as a literary award. While the

program was not designed as a literary award, and its structure more closely resembles that of a

game, the impact it has on book sales places it in a similar category of other literary awards like

the Giller Prize.

   In terms of the actual criteria used for judging texts, <u>Canada Reads</u> differs rather

significantly from other literary awards. While it is not explicitly stated what criteria the Giller

Prize jury uses when judging a work, its inclusion of authors and literary elites indicates that

literary merit is given precedence because of the jury's 'acute literary sensitivities.' For <u>Canada</u>

<u>Reads</u> judgement relies less on literary value in the critical sense and more on personal

engagement with a text and the social issues raised by the text and how they relate to the

common reader, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four. But does this indicate

that as a result of apparent literary sensitivities the jury of the Giller Prize holds more value and

authority compared to the panel included on <u>Canada Reads</u>? On the surface, the answer is yes,

the judges of the Giller Prize are more able to assign literary value to a text because of their position as members of the literary elite. On a more general level, however, the evaluation of a literary text by the Canada Reads panel is no less authoritative than any other jury in terms of the implications of that evaluation on the given text, being primarily the recognition it receives from the public. Canada Reads is second only to the Giller Prize in terms of book sales, making the significance of its selections nearly as important as the Giller Prize in commercial terms. Furthermore, the determination of literary value and evaluation does not necessarily rely on acute literary sensitivities alone.

The issues of value and valuation "tend to recur whenever literature, art, and other forms of cultural activity become a focus of discussion, whether in informal or institutional contexts" (Herrnstein Smith 177). For Herrnstein Smith, literary evaluation is "no longer thought of as confined to the discrete verbal statements of journalistic and academic 'critics.' The evaluation of a work is seen, rather, as a continuous process, operating through a wide variety of individual activities and social and institutional practices" (181). Canada Reads participates in individual, social, and institutional practices where value is assigned by an individual panelist as well as the program itself. Outlining various other methods for literary evaluation, Herrnstein Smith includes: evaluations of a work by its author, covert, usually nonverbal, evaluations that an individual makes, such as choosing a specific text; implicit evaluation performed by people and institutions who publish, purchase, preserve, display, quote, cite, translate, perform, parody, allude to, or imitate; overt, verbal judgements of a work in informal social contexts by readers and others; institutional forms of evaluation as in professional activities of scholars, teachers, academic or journalistic critics (181-182). Value and valuation are determined by a variety of factors, ranging from the individual reader to institutional authorities such as academics or

judges. Therefore, value is not a simple or definitive process; cultural prizes represent one form of literary value and evaluation, separate from academic or critical evaluations. However, the cultural prize reaches beyond personal or individual evaluations and occupies a specific cultural space, meaning it serves as an overarching process of legitimization and validation by persons acting as an authority and participating in cultural formation.

The process of evaluation found on <u>Canada Reads</u> falls into the category of 'overt, verbal judgements of a work in informal social contexts by readers and others,' the others being the panelists and the social context being the program itself. However, the program itself is not entirely informal as it is structured by the moderator and the producers, as well as edited for broadcast. Furthermore, the producers also shape the program through their selection of the panelists and the texts that are included. Nonetheless, the discussions found on the program are rather informal at times and represent a more personal discussion of value and meaning regarding a specific text. However, it should be noted that the panelists themselves and the CBC as a site of cultural production still hold a level of authority for determining the value of a literary text. While it may appear to be more informal than that of the Giller Prize selection process, its participation in spectacle, and the use of cultural figures in selecting a work carries with it a level of authority that goes beyond simple individual evaluations.

Turning books into best-sellers:

Reinforcing and updating the Canadian canon

<u>Canada Reads</u> was designed to allow any work of fiction published at anytime the opportunity to win a prize and establish a wide reading audience. Over the past eight years, <u>Canada Reads</u> has featured a mix of both canonical works of Canadian fiction, and works that are relatively unknown. Because the program has such a significant impact on book sales, it is

important to look at the impact this has on a text's status, whether it is canonical or not. The producers of <u>Canada Reads</u> recognize the impact the program has had on Canadian literature, but are quick to explain that canon construction is not part of their agenda. Jansen explained that the panelists involved on the program are not "busy creating a canon or they're not busy designing the books that will last a millennium or any of that sort of thing," though the producers do point to works included on the program that were previously out of print, including <u>Rockbound, King Leary, No Crystal Stair,</u> and English versions of <u>Next Episode</u> and <u>Volkswagen Blues,</u> as examples of the impact the program may have on canon revision. Vartanian responded to the question of whether <u>Canada Reads</u> is helping to update the Canadian canon by explaining that "I do think it's having that kind of influence, but again, it wasn't the reason we created the show." While the producers did not intend or expect to have any influence on the Canadian canon, the influence the program has is beyond their control. The producers point to the success of the program and the impact it has on book sales, also known as the "Canada Reads effect." This effect is important in determining what impact the program is having on canon revision in Canada. The producers of <u>Canada Reads</u> cite the dramatic spike in sales of Michael Ondaatje's novel <u>In the Skin of a Lion</u> after it won the first season of <u>Canada Reads</u> as being an example of the influence and success of the program. Michael Ondaatje was already considered a canonical author and during the first season Stephen Page explained: "The thing about Michael Ondaatje as an important writer in this era is, both he and Margaret Atwood are two of the best known internationally of Canada's authors. I think if we haven't spent enough time examining our own writers and our own artists, now is the time to do it" (CBC 2002). For Page, it is important to highlight and examine the most important authors in Canada, despite the recognition they have already received. Page pointed to Ondaatje's past success with his novel <u>The English</u>

Patient, which won the Booker Prize, and he stated: "In the Skin of a Lion is the book before that

[The English Patient] and it often gets overlooked because of the magnitude of the success of

The English Patient. And I think it's a better book" (CBC 2002). During this season, a canonical

author won, but his canonical status did not necessarily play a role in his selection. While Page

did point out Ondaatje's status as an important writer and his past successes, he did not use that

as an argument for why In the Skin of a Lion deserved to win. In later seasons, the past successes

of an author were debated, but again they did not play a role in selecting a winner, and more

attention has been given to texts and authors who are not well-known or canonical. Furthermore,

the number of texts brought out of obscurity by being included on the program also points to its

impact, suggesting the program's influence on the reproduction of the Canadian literary canon or

the creation of a new, updated canon.

In order for a work to be considered part of the canon, it must possess some form of

cultural value that relates to the dominant cultural values that exist at the time. The Canada

Reads' debates involve discussing and uncovering the cultural value of a given text and why it

should be read by the public. Similarly the selection process for a canon relies on value and who

determines that value and this process is "grounded in the consensus of a particular community

where, for the members of such a community, such values function as though they were

absolute" (Guillory 26). This process of consensus creates a problem for determining a definitive

canon because different communities of readers may develop their own values by which to judge

a work of literature. Judgements do not abide by one specific set of universal norms or values,

and, therefore, "judgements can always be grounded in some community or other" (27).

However, a consensus reached by a community of readers leads to what looks like "a state of

mass delusion" in which "valuation can proceed without reference to any constraints imposed by

the social function of the school itself or by the difficulty of constituting a community sufficiently homogeneous in its interests or identity to operate by consensus" (27). Those who are not part of the consensus rely on other forms of cultural value that exist within another cultural group. According to Guillory, "an individual's judgement that a work is great does nothing in itself to preserve that work, unless that judgement is made in a certain institutional context, a setting in which it is possible to insure the reproduction of the work, its continual reintroduction to generations of readers" (28). Individual reading outside of any institutional framework does not have the power to preserve a work. For Guillory, the institution or school is needed in order to preserve it and to frame the consensus that establishes it as canonical and legitimizes its place. The canon is not simply a selection of texts; it acts as a means for preserving and reproducing those texts and requires the authority of cultural, social, and academic institutions to do so.

Canada Reads relies on individual readings during its on-air debates. The panelists read the texts and debate each other as to why their book is the one everyone should read. These discussions are heavily grounded in individual readings; however, it is the program itself airing on the CBC that provides a means of preserving the texts in the larger social context. Like the Giller Prize, Canada Reads titles are marketed as 'winning' texts, which provides them with recognition and preservation. Therefore, Canada Reads utilizes both individual readings for determining value, but also utilizes the authority of the CBC as a producer of cultural capital for preserving and promoting a work of Canadian fiction. While this does not necessarily mean Canada Reads selections automatically earn a space in the Canadian canon if they were not already part of it, it still provides a method of providing recognition and preserving the work in the public sphere.

The act of preservation relies on the authority of the institution that provides the recognition for the text; in this case the institution is <u>Canada Reads</u> and the CBC. According to Kaplan and Rose, who quote Richard Ohmann, literary journals alongside 'cultural elite' publications such as <u>The New York Times</u> serve as "gatekeepers" for determining "new talent and new ideas" (Kaplan and Rose 70). There are a number of factors that determine how a work of fiction achieves bestseller status or a place in the canon, one of which is the common reader. Ohmann believes that the common reader does not "freely choose its favourites from the total number of novels written in a given year but rather from the small proportion of those novels published and promoted by a powerful circle of agents, editors, advertisers, and journals" (Kaplan and Rose 73). However, only those who have their "fingers on the pulse of the 'common reader'" those who are "educated, urban, middle and upper-middle-class" play the most crucial role in giving a novel the status as "a bestseller and, beyond that, as a potential work of 'literature'" (73). In order for a text to be embraced by the common reader, the 'gatekeepers' need to be "in tune with the needs and desires of the common reader" (73) because the common reader "looks to novels for 'personal meaning, for some kind of map to the moral landscape,' out of a need to 'reinforce or to celebrate beliefs already held'" (73). For a text to become canonical after it has been determined to represent the desires and values of the common reader it can be placed in the canon by the academic institution. Kaplan and Rose mark this as a moment in literary history "when some professors read as common readers always have, asking 'what does this book say about my life?'" (79). When looking at <u>Canada Reads</u> as part of this process, it is crucial to note the complications that arise. Kaplan and Rose stress that the 'gatekeepers' are highly influential and must be in tune with the desires of the common reader. The panel consisting of cultural figures on <u>Canada Reads</u> may not be considered the most influential group,

particularly in terms of determining literary value. However, their status as cultural figures is an important factor when considering what it means to be in tune with the common reader. Because the panelists on <u>Canada Reads</u> participate in personal readings of the texts and can themselves be considered 'common readers,' there is a strong connection between the listening audience or the readers and that of the panelists's recommendations. Furthermore, once a text is determined to be canonical the question arises of what it means for the common reader. Kaplan and Rose believe that "all we can assert with confidence is the volatility of the reader. Once a work has been certified for study – for reason – it becomes a wild card" (87), meaning academics may use the texts for study for varying reasons and look at it from a variety of viewpoints.

It is clear that there exists a connection between a text's acceptance by the common reader through book sales and recognition and its status as canonical. Before continuing, it is important to note that not all best-selling books become canonical, but such success does not prevent a novel from achieving canonical status. Returning to the connection between the common reader and canonical status, the implications <u>Canada Reads</u> has for this structure can be clearly seen. The audience members participating in <u>Canada Reads</u> through listening to the on-air debates and reading the texts included become the 'common reader.' As the producers have stated many times, the program has had a significant impact on book sales and awareness. As Jian Ghomeshi has stated, <u>Canada Reads</u> turns books into bestsellers, but does it turn them into canonical works? It is clear that it definitely plays a role in establishing texts that are seen to represent the collective desires of the nation. Furthermore, because <u>Canada Reads</u> and the CBC serve as a type of 'gatekeeper' for providing the texts with value, the texts become representations of the collective values of the common reader. <u>Canada Reads</u> includes texts published any time, not just within a given year and the selection process is random, which may

complicate the role it plays in determining best-seller status of a particular text. However, when looking at the results of the program, particularly regarding book sales and recognition, the connection between the common reader and the canonical status of texts becomes clearer and Canada Reads role as a limited 'gatekeeper' is established. Therefore, it is creating a way for books published in the past to become bestsellers once again, and in turn allowing them a chance to be a part of the Canadian canon or reinforcing the position they already hold there. While Canada Reads may not be creating its own canon, it definitely plays a role in revisiting or revising the existing canon.

Chapter Three: Media Spectacle and Celebrity Culture: The (Glitz) and (Glamour) of

Canada Reads

Do musicians make the best book backers?

"What will be more decisive in determining the winner of this year's Canada Reads, which runs today to Friday on CBC Radio? The merits of the winning title, or the artistic credentials of the book's advocate?" (Wagner E03). Vit Wagner points to past seasons of Canada Reads that "suggest the latter has had more than a small role to play, if you consider that a book's chances of winning have been greatly enhanced by having a musician in its corner," as five of the last seven seasons of Canada Reads were won by a musician. Whether being a musician does in fact provide an advantage, Wagner's observation does point to an important aspect of Canada Reads which is its use of high-profile, or celebrity, panelists and its participation in media spectacle.

In some respects the panelists themselves are just as important as the texts under discussion on Canada Reads. Throughout its evolution Canada Reads has expanded from a nation-wide reading project to a rather large media spectacle complete with launch events, news coverage, promotional material involving authors and celebrities, and, of course, spiking book sales. This kind of promotion of Canadian literature was not always as prevalent and not long ago writer's unions and guilds were lobbying the mass media and education ministries for wider representation of Canadian books (Kamboureli 36). Today, much has changed and some Canadian writers have gained both national and international renown. The promotion of literature in mass media includes national newspapers' book reviews and interviews with authors, public radio broadcasts, including talk shows devoted to fiction or dramatic readings, and the broadcasting of award ceremonies on television and radio across the country. Canadian

literature has become entangled in media spectacle and the culture of celebrity, which is very beneficial for creating an audience. The mass media comes into play when sufficient exposure propels literature through the use of spectacle into the world of popular culture that can then be appropriated and consumed by the public. In Canada, the use of marketing through mass media has allowed literature to bridge the gap between high art and popular culture. Canada Reads is a perfect example of how media spectacle affects the status of a text and allows large scale recognition through its inclusion in a popular culture media event. Based on the elements of media spectacle found on Canada Reads, including celebrity panelists, staged events, and promotion, the texts included achieve wide-spread recognition that produces literature as popular culture ready for consumption. The shortlist of texts is released months prior to the broadcast to allow listeners a chance to purchase and read the texts and the texts themselves are heavily marketed; book stores have Canada Reads displays and promotions. These marketing efforts allow for mass consumption of the texts and contribute to their commodification.

This consumption could not take place without the mass media to provide the recognition and exposure needed for literature to be appropriated by the public. Of the mass media efforts to promote Canadian literature, the Giller Prize is perhaps the most prominent. It is the most prestigious literary award in Canada, is heavily marketed, participates in a limited spectacle through its gala event, which is broadcast on Canadian television, receives a great deal of coverage in the news media, and also carries with it a large monetary prize. Unlike other literary awards, such as the Governor General's Award, which does not receive the same level of coverage, the Giller Prize utilizes the practice of spectacle to achieve recognition. Literary awards or cultural prizes utilize media spectacles and are given extensive coverage because they are a determinant of value for a given cultural product – if something is worthy of winning a

cultural prize, it must be worthy of coverage and consumption. Cultural prizes participate in spectacle in order to achieve this coverage in mass media, which then translates to marketing efforts and the commodification of literature.

Canada Reads participates in a spectacle of its own. In fact, it can be argued that Canada Reads operates almost entirely as spectacle. Canada Reads is a prize, but first and foremost, it is a radio program. In order to create great radio, the producers needed something to draw listeners to the project, and utilizing celebrity panelists and a popular competition format provided the spectacle needed to draw more people to the program. But it is not just about making great radio, as Canada Reads utilizes a range of media to create a media spectacle that extends to various media outlets. Douglas Kellner explains that "new multimedia, which synthesize forms of radio, film, TV news and entertainment, and the mushrooming domain of cyberspace become extravaganzas of technoculture, generating expanding sites of information and entertainment, while intensifying the spectacle form of media culture" (Kellner 1). Canada Reads has become a media event mixing radio, internet, and television as part of its spectacle, which is not seen in other literary programs to the same degree. Its website is expanding rapidly and contains a variety of information, interactivity, and promotion for the week-long program. There is also a mix of entertainment and information on the program that separates Canada Reads from other literary spectacles. The spectacle found in Canada Reads includes promotion both on air and on the internet, its competition format, and its use of celebrities as panelists, this being perhaps the most prominent element of spectacle on Canada Reads.

The program includes five panelists from various areas of Canadian culture, including but not limited to musicians, actors, politicians, and writers, all of whom have at least some degree of recognition. The recognition certainly varies from panelist to panelist, with some individuals

being very well known in Canadian popular culture and others relatively unknown. A review of the panelists reveals that the selection of Canadian celebrities include well-known Canadians such as musicians Jim Cuddy of the band Blue Rodeo, Stephen Page from the Barenaked Ladies, Molly Johnson, John K. Samson from the Weakerthans, and Dave Bidini from the Rheostatics; actors including Megan Follows, Mag Ruffman, Scott Thompson, and Zaib Shaikh; politicians Kim Campbell, Justin Trudeau, Glenn Murray, and Olivia Chow; authors Leon Rooke, Nalo Hopkinson, Will Ferguson, Zsuzsi Gartner, Donna Morrissey, Roch Carrier, Susan Musgrave, and Lisa Moore; as well as a variety of lesser known journalists, filmmakers, columnists, broadcasters, and one Olympic fencer and one astronaut. (For a complete list of panelists, see Appendix). Although they may not all be widely-known celebrities, their role as cultural figures lends them, at the very least, some degree of celebrity. The inclusion of these cultural figures, however well known, is very simply a means of drawing as many people as possible to the program who otherwise might not listen to a book show on the radio. But using celebrities to recommend a work of Canadian fiction plays a more significant role than simply drawing an audience. Certain institutions serve as 'gatekeepers' that allow a work of fiction to become a bestseller and the CBC is one of these 'gatekeepers' because of its authoritative role in culture production through its collection of and distribution of cultural capital. These highly influential and authoritative gatekeepers possess the power to propel a work of fiction to the top of the bestseller list because of their status as respectable purveyors of the desires and values of an audience. The celebrity panelists on Canada Reads serve as another set of gatekeepers and their status as celebrities not only draws people to listen and participate in the program as they also possess another separate level of authority and respectability within celebrity culture that reinforces their recommendation of a specific text and its popularity.

Critical discussions of <u>Canada Reads</u> have pointed to the use of celebrity panelists instead of academics on the program and this has been an area of contention. Danielle Fuller's story of academics laughing at <u>Canada Reads</u> because of its inclusion of 'pop stars' rather than academics points to how some were quick to question the use of celebrities on a radio program about literature. Fuller's characterization of the panelists is rather limited as the <u>Canada Reads</u> panel has gone well beyond the music and television industry to include individuals who can hardly be considered 'pop stars,' such as politicians Kim Campbell and Olivia Chow, political commentator Avi Lewis, Olympic fencer Sherraine MacKay, and journalists Francine Pelletier and Zsuzi Gartner. Clearly there are cultural and ideological implications attached to <u>Canada Reads</u>, as Fuller argues, and this is exemplified through its operation as a media spectacle in popular culture. Fuller and Sedo discuss the media spectacle and culture of celebrity being utilized by <u>Canada Reads</u> in its promotion and on air debates and they argue that "in its promotion of five books and its employment of a celebrity panel, the show is in danger of reinforcing both the 'blockbuster' culture of contemporary publishing and the media-generated cult of celebrity at the expense of its public-service mandate to inform and educate its audience" (Fuller and Sedo 7). <u>Canada Reads</u> clearly fits into the category of a media spectacle and reinforces the 'blockbuster culture of contemporary publishing.' It is given a great deal of promotion, its game-show format is designed to be populist and fun, and its use of a celebrity panel is designed to draw people to the radio. The claim that this is at the expense of its 'public-service mandate to inform and educate is audience' needs to be examined further to see how the use of media promotes and may actually strengthen the mandate to inform and educate the audience.

The CBC does have a mandate to educate and inform the public regarding all things Canadian, demonstrated by other CBC projects, such as The Greatest Canadian, that seek to unite the nation around popular notions of Canadianness. However, the celebrity culture and media spectacle found on Canada Reads do not necessarily run counter to this mandate; in fact, they serve as a means of heightening and promoting the mandate even further. As can be seen in other CBC projects, such as The Greatest Canadian, which also utilized Canadian celebrities to advocate specific individuals as the greatest Canadian, the use of high-profile individuals is a method of attracting an audience to a program that creates what is known as 'infotainment,' the combining of information and entertainment into a single media event. According to Fuller and Sedo the CBC "does not have the resources to achieve media saturation and thus produce a 'true' media spectacle with Canada Reads" (10), but they point to how the program is symptomatic of an 'infotainment society.' While Canada Reads may not be able to achieve a true media spectacle, its participation in a limited spectacle still provides it with the power to reach a wider audience than if it did not utilize spectacle at all. Fuller and Sedo quote Kellner's definition of media spectacle: "we are entering a new form of technocapitalism marked by a synthesis of capital and technology, and the information and entertainment industries, which is producing a new form of 'infotainment society, and spectacle culture" (quoted in Fuller and Sedo 10). The mandate of the CBC states that "the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, as the national public broadcaster, should provide radio and television services incorporating a wide range of programming that informs, enlightens, and entertains" (Broadcasting Act 1.1 Program Policies: Policy 1.1.1 CBC Mandate). While the inclusion of celebrity culture is evident on Canada Reads it does not appear as though the program is in danger of reinforcing this culture at the expense of its mandate to educate and inform. The debates and the books are the primary focus, with the

panelists serving as the means for bringing that content to the public. Therefore, <u>Canada Reads</u>' use of media spectacle and 'blockbuster' celebrity culture does not necessarily infringe upon the mandate of the CBC.

According to current producer Jansen, promotion for <u>Canada Reads</u> involves a great deal of on-air promotion on other CBC programs, author and panelist interviews, and regional events at public libraries across the country. The website is the key tool for promoting the program. It has links from many CBC website pages and according to Jansen, is the second most popular site in terms of hits throughout most of the year (Jansen), even though the program only airs on radio for a week. In the most recent season of <u>Canada Reads</u> promotion reached its highest level. During the 2009 season, there was a large launch campaign that began with the announcement of the five texts several months prior to the broadcast. The website also revved up with content featuring author interviews, forum discussions, blog postings, contests, and online polls. This has been standard procedure for the launch of past <u>Canada Reads</u> seasons, but in 2009, for the first time, authors and panelists met during a staged media event as part of the official launch. During the launch, host Jian Ghomeshi pointed out the extravagance of the event, but explained the impact of <u>Canada Reads</u> as being reason enough for the grandiose nature of the spectacle. However, while reading from a piece of paper, Ghomeshi explained: "I am instructed to say <u>Canada Reads</u> is not about galas and glitz because as we all know, those are pejorative terms now, so we're not allowed to say those words now. We are about people reading the books and joining in the discussion, coming out to events across the country, listening to the shows, and we invite five people who are passionate about books to defend their favourite fiction and that makes for one of the liveliest book clubs on the planet" (<u>Canada Reads</u> 2009 Launch Video). During this spectacle of announcing the panelists and the authors, Ghomeshi highlighted how

Canada Reads is different from other literary events, despite the spectacular nature of the launch. However, while introducing each panelist, a list of their credentials and accomplishments was given before an excited announcement of the name was greeted with applause from the sizeable crowd. Even though Ghomeshi explained that Canada Reads is not about glitz and galas, this event marks the spectacular nature of the program and demonstrates how it still utilizes the glitz of celebrity along with media events to promote its infotainment through technoculture and the culture of celebrity.

Speculating on Media Spectacle: Celebrity Culture and Canada Reads

Producer Vartanian agrees that Canada Reads is a bit of a spectacle and that it is "a staged media event," but she argues that this is not a problem, pointing out that the panelists still engage in fascinating discussions of the books and nothing is lost in the spectacle (Vartanian). It is clear that during the show's creation the producers did not shy away from creating a media spectacle. There was a deliberate decision on the part of the producers to include high-profile Canadians as panelists. Vartanian explained that when choosing panelists she wanted "high-profile people," because according to her "the whole purpose of 'Canada Reads' was to encourage Canadians to embrace their fiction and draw them to the radio" (Vartanian). She continues by explaining how people who may not have been interested in a work of fiction will consider reading it if the panelists are people they are already interested in and she thinks that the "star quality of the panel draws people who wouldn't normally listen to a book show. I think star quality is important" (Vartanian). However, this belief is not necessarily shared by all those listening to the program. The online forums provide evidence that some listeners are not drawn to the celebrity panelists and even reject this element of the program. JohnMutford wrote in the Canada Reads forum in 2009: "I think that the producers mistakenly believe people would tune

out without celebrities" (<u>Canada Reads</u> Forum). He adds: "Until <u>Canada Reads</u> allows a non-celebrity panelist, the relevance still leaves something to be desired. It's fine to suggest that we'd like our book judges to be more representative of the average Canadian, but CBC's constant and unnecessary reliance on celebrities (or at least media professionals, if you should think 'Canadian celebrity' is an oxymoron), is a poor substitute for a representative cross-sample" (<u>Canada Reads</u> Forum). This comment questions the producers' claims that celebrity panelists are more representative or accessible than 'expert' panelists because there is resistance on the part of some listeners regarding the use of celebrities. Other people participating in the online forum agreed with this idea of including a non-celebrity panelist, or at the very least allowing more public participation in the actual on-air debates.

If <u>Canada Reads</u> is compared with other book programming on the CBC, the use of media spectacle becomes much more evident. Programs such as <u>The Next Chapter</u>, which highlights Canadian writing, <u>Between the Covers,</u> promoted as 'Story time' for grown ups, and <u>Writers in Company</u> which highlights writers from around the world, are not media spectacles. Besides interviews with authors and others within the publishing industry, these programs do not contain elements of celebrity culture to the same degree as <u>Canada Reads</u>. Celebrity culture as part of the media spectacle found on <u>Canada Reads</u> plays a significant role in creating what the producers refer to as 'great radio.' <u>Canada Reads</u> capitalizes on the culture of celebrity and the public's response to it as a way of educating the audience about Canadian literature, as well as aiding the publishing industry by creating awareness of Canadian writers. Within the current climate of technoculture and mass media, celebrity culture has become a fundamental part of popular culture and popular media. Graeme Turner explains that "celebrity becomes a key site of media attention and personal aspiration, as well as one of the key places where culture meanings

are negotiated and organized" (Turner 6). Turner goes on to explain the role of celebrity culture in terms of commercialism and he notes that the "celebrity is also a commodity: produced, traded and marketed by the media and publicity industries. In this context, the celebrity's primary function is commercial and promotional" (9). Celebrity has become a tool of marketing and publicity because it is widely recognized within the mass media and people are drawn to celebrity because of this attention. One way of looking at this trend is through Smaro Kamboureli's assessment of the culture of celebrity and national pedagogy. Regarding the culture of celebrity in Canada, she argues that "despite its varied domains of performance and production, what I call the culture of celebrity here participates in the same syntax of national pedagogy, thus sharing, in a fashion, a similar ethos and ideology with respect to its relation to the nation" (Kamboureli 43). For Kamboureli the culture of celebrity transforms national pedagogy into a public spectacle which functions in "the manufacturing of public memory" (46).

Similarly, another CBC program that sought to 'educate and inform' the Canadian public about Canadian identity, The Greatest Canadian which aired on CBC Television in November 2004, also capitalized on celebrity culture to draw audiences to CBC television, in this case, to watch Canadian celebrities defend their candidate for the greatest Canadian. Julie Rak explains that "the celebrity gave the vignettes a competitive edge that made them look more like episodes of 'Canadian Idol' [. . .] the presence of celebrities was also supposed to make the program more appealing for younger viewers" (51). This appeal to younger viewers can be seen with youth orientated CBC talk show host and former MuchMusic personality George Stroumboulopoulos advocating for Tommy Douglas as the greatest Canadian. In both shows, the panelists hold a place in Canadian popular culture and the producers at CBC utilize that celebrity status to create

interest in Canadian items or individuals. The question to be asked, then, is whether the use of celebrities and spectacle hinder the quality of discussion, as some of the critics have argued.

I have already noted Laura Moss's concern about the quality of the discussions on Canada Reads several times so far because it is a key criticism aimed at Canada Reads. As already mentioned, the producers do not believe that the quality of the discussion is affected by the fact the panelists are not 'qualified' readers; in fact, they even argue that their lack of qualifications allows for more interesting and entertaining discussions. In the case of The Greatest Canadian project, however, the inclusion of celebrity advocates did result in "many media pundits [deciding] that The Greatest Canadian was not to be taken seriously" (Rak 52). As in the case of The Greatest Canadian some academics have decided that Canada Reads should not be taken seriously because of its inclusion of celebrity readers who they have deemed unqualified. But what does the quality of discussion have to do with celebrity panelists? There are several ways of looking at it: critics like Moss see the panelists as unqualified readers because they are not academics or trained in literary interpretation; and they also appear to be tools in the media spectacle. These claims are both true, but this argument is not necessarily justification for discounting Canada Reads as a significant producer of cultural capital or a means of heightening awareness of the national literature. The understanding of 'qualified readers' by the producers of Canada Reads simply involves the panelist's ability to discuss their book with others in a passionate and convincing manner. The definition of 'qualified readers' applied by the producers of Canada Reads is quite different from Moss's because the intent of the program is to be accessible and entertaining. However, unlike Moss, the producers fail to recognize the cultural implications of the celebrity's discussions. As Moss stated, there is a great deal of cultural responsibility placed on the panelists, which is not necessarily reflected in their on-air

discussions. To expand on Moss's criticism, the panelists themselves play a significant role in the prevalence of the cultural implications, such as identity formation, which extend beyond their discussions of the texts on-air. In order to understand the specific impact of the celebrity culture on the audience we must return to the theory of celebrity culture and more specifically its para-social implications.

Celebrity culture has become ingrained within the mainstream media and even become a part of people's daily lives. Celebrities are not just individuals whom people admire, respect, and aspire to be, celebrities are also linked to an individual's own social structure, which is defined as para-social interaction. Para-social interaction is "used to refer to relations of intimacy constructed through the mass-media rather than direct experience and face-to-face meetings. This is a form of second-order intimacy, since it derives from representations of the person rather than actual physical contact" (Rojek 52). Individuals can then turn to celebrities because they "offer peculiarly powerful affirmations of belonging, recognition and meaning in the midst of the lives of their audiences" (52). Para-social interaction between an audience member and a celebrity allows them to feel connected through a sense of intimacy despite not having any real physical contact. But this can be extended beyond associations of intimacy to the world of commercialism, as celebrities are frequently used as commodities to sell products. The intimacy that exists in the interaction between celebrity and consumer creates a sense of trust and respect that translates to trusting product endorsements. In the context of Canada Reads the para-social interactions between the audience and the panelists creates this dynamic through the on-air debates. Essentially it can be argued that the texts are a product, and the celebrity panelists are endorsing them. Fuller and Sedo point to the culture of celebrity and the media spectacle of the program and argue: "its presentation style and content tied the show ever more firmly into the

structures of contemporary media spectacle and its dependence on a commodity capitalism sustained by global economic structures and media trends that operate transnationally" (12). Canada Reads participates in commodity capitalism through its 'selling' of literature as a product, both nationally and internationally. It has undertaken various methods of increasing its reach, including one season that was broadcast on CBC television, which was not very successful and has not been continued. With Canada Reads operating within 'commodity capitalism' the celebrity panelist role includes endorsing a text in the hopes listeners will read the selection. The panelists are endorsing the books through their defence and the books become a commodity to be marketed and purchased by the listening audience. The use of celebrity panelists plays an important role in this endorsement because the public is more likely to listen to a recommendation from a celebrity, particularly if a para-social relationship exists between celebrity and audience member.

To understand the theory of para-social interactions between the panelists and the audience, we can consider the comment made by the producers that a listener may read a particular text because a certain panelist is defending it. An audience member may share the same opinions or draw the same meanings from a text based on the audience member's para-social interaction with a particular panelist. But there may be a problem with applying para-social theory to Canada Reads because the para-social theory is most often applied to high-profile celebrities. Graeme Turner uses the example of the reaction of many people following the death of Princess Diana who felt a strong connection to her and even felt a sense of loss (24). In a case such as this, the para-social relationship between the celebrity and the public is so strong and so widespread that the death of Princess Diana was a monumental moment in history, something many felt personally. This occurred because of the scope of Princess Diana's status as

a celebrity. The celebrities included on <u>Canada Reads</u> do not hold that same degree of celebrity and some of the names included on the program are not even that well known and may not be considered celebrities at all. It can be argued then, that this lessens the relevance of the theory of para-social interaction to <u>Canada Reads</u> and the panelist recommendation of the texts. Kate Taylor wrote in the <u>Globe and Mail</u>: "this being Canada, the <u>Canada Reads</u> celebrities aren't very famous (champion fencer Sterraine MacKay, jazz singer Molly Johnson, Toronto city councillor Olivia Chow and writers Roch Carrier and Donna Morrissey), but they still maintain the principle that this contest to recommend reading material for the whole country is not being decided by the ivory tower or the newsroom cabal" (Taylor R1). Taylor recognizes that the celebrity found on <u>Canada Reads</u> is not exactly of the highest order; however, the program still provides a means of determining the value of literary texts that exists within a popular rather than elite discourse. The key point for Taylor is the fact that a <u>Canada Reads</u> recommendation is not coming from traditional sources, such as literary reviews or academics, but from a source outside the traditional venues. The panelists' celebrity status does not appear to be all that important for Taylor; it is the fact that they are different from traditional recommendations that makes <u>Canada Reads</u> unique.

The "Canada Reads Effect"

During the 2009 season, host Jian Ghomeshi coined the term the "Canada Reads Effect," describing the ability of the program to turn books into instant bestsellers. While many of the texts included on the program are written by well-known Canadian authors who can already be considered literary celebrities, such as Michael Ondaatje, Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence, Rohinton Mistry, Yann Martel, and Timothy Findley, some of the authors included are not very well known if they are known at all and their inclusion on the program heightens their literary

status. Following the first season, some critics were not surprised that the novel <u>In the Skin of a Lion</u> by Michael Ondaatje, a leading literary figure in Canada, would be chosen as the one book to read. Other authors included, however, were less well known, particularly to the general public. For example, in the third season, the winner was Frank Parker Day's novel <u>Rockbound,</u> which according to Fuller and Sedo is "neither a canonical novel nor a 'blockbuster'" (21), but nonetheless, it " romped to victory on a wave of nostalgia and idealism about regional cultures whipped up by the celebrity panelists" (21). While Frank Parker Day was not a well-known literary figure in Canada, as a result of the selection of <u>Rockboud</u> he has achieved more wide-spread recognition than if he had not been included on the program. However, a book's existing popularity does not necessarily have an impact during the debates on <u>Canada Reads</u>.

The focus on the authors themselves was given the most prominence during the launch of the 2009 season when the panelists met the authors during a media event for the announcement of the texts. This was the first time in the program's history that panelists and authors met face to face. The panelists were first introduced by host Jian Ghomeshi and the panelist then introduced the text they were defending and the author. In this event, both the authors and panelists were used to sell the program. Furthermore, unlike previous seasons, the authors were given nearly equal treatment to the panelists. The website contained a variety of audio and video clips of the authors and the panelists discussing their respective vocations. Previously, the texts have always been at the forefront of the program's promotion and content and the panelists, of course, came second, with the defence and promotion of the text they have selected. In the 2009 season, however, the authors were placed in a more prominent position through their presence on the program and online materials. If this promotional trend is to continue, it may cause a change in what texts are included on the program, as it favours authors who are still living or lesser known

in order to serve as a promotional tool for authors and their work. Though this increased focus on the author was somewhat limited to their appearance during the launch and the online materials, their increased recognition still exists with their text being included in the competition. Canada Reads is basically a very extensive marketing tool for the authors.

The status of authors has long been an important means of marketing their work. E. Holly Pike writes that "the marketing of books as commodities (already in the 1890's) included the author as part of the commodity, to be shaped to the public taste, just as the book was" (244). In the commodification process, the authors become a product along with their work. In the latest season of Canada Reads with the promotion of the authors alongside the panelists, we can see how the authors are becoming part of the marketing of their texts. The author's role in marketing coincides with authorial persona, which is used to allow the public to identify with the author personally, to feel that the world of the author's persona could be that of the individuals (246). This authorial persona is "developed through the placement of advertising and reviews, both of which can be used to direct a work towards a particular audience through the types of publications in which the advertisements and reviews appear, whether newspapers, literary journals, family magazines, or children's annuals" (246). Pike argues that promotional materials for an author and their work, particularly personal information about the author, reinforce personal connections between the author and the audience because it links the fictional world the author has created with the real world. Canada Reads and the CBC are venues for an authorial persona to develop, particularly in the most recent season in which the authors were part of the launch event. The Canada Reads website also contains short author bios and 'fun facts' about the author's personal life. This visibility of the authors helps establish their authorial persona because they are included in an actual event, separate from their text. This inclusion further

establishes their literary status because of the separation between author and text. It is no longer

the text itself that is highlighted, but the authors, allowing them to be part of the spotlight.

Chapter Four: Reading <u>Canada Reads</u>

Critical and personal reading practices

The act of reading can be a very private personal engagement with a book, but it can also be a public act involving participation in discussions, debates, displays, and competitions. In an article that appeared in the <u>Globe and Mail</u>, Rick Salutin comments how "reading is now an article of conspicuous consumption [. . .] a possession bestowing prestige and establishing social superiority" (A23). He mentions how books were once objects that provided social status and "it is no longer enough to read, you must be known to read, and the way to do that is to publically discuss what you read, or tune in one of the book shows, which you then discuss with others, mutually confirming ownership of the desired item: well-readness" (A23). This mutual confirmation of ownership is achieved by joining a book club or participating in some other public discussion so "you read what people who count are reading" or "you vote in CBC Radio's 'Canada Reads' contest" (A23), thus participating in the larger act of public reading.

A group of people, whether large or small, reading the same text and in some cases discussing it openly with each other allows the connection between literature and interpretation to be seen more clearly. Literary discussions are not restricted to the classroom setting or lecture halls; they can exist anywhere. Book clubs can be more than simple discussions of literature among a group of like-minded people with similar literary tastes, they are a means of determining literary value, propping up the publishing industry, and developing shared reading practices that determine whether or not a person is 'well-read.' In some cases, book clubs or reading campaigns have become massive literary awards that combine the discourses of personal interpretation and critical analysis. Two prominent examples, Oprah's Book Club and CBC's <u>Canada Reads</u> are large scale book clubs that resemble a literary award because of the

recognition the winning title receives following its selection. While Oprah's Book Club does not involve any kind of competition, the ramifications of its selection are still quite significant. Book sales alone are enough to suggest the substantial impact of these awards. However, these programs are not like other literary awards, nor are they like other book clubs. A program such as <u>Canada Reads</u> utilizes the personal reading experiences of an individual reader during an open discussion of the texts as might be seen during a book club conversation, as well as utilizing critical discourse for analysing and debating the merits of a particular text for nation-wide recommendation and prestige. Promotion for <u>Canada Reads</u> focuses on its candid discussions about Canadian books and its openness in allowing the listeners to know why a book was chosen as the winner.

The open debate does more than allow a window into the selection process or propagate the public act of reading and consuming, as Salutin claims; as I will show later, it also formulates particular reading practices that are conferred upon the reading audience. During the on-air discussions, the panelists formulate reading practices based on their own personal experiences with the texts, thus resembling a book-club discussion more than a critical analysis one might find in a literary journal or conference. The discussions are structured by the producers and host to be both personal and critical, relating literature to personal experiences as well as social or political issues. This allows the discussion to be more accessible to the listeners who can relate their own personal experiences to the texts or understand how the texts address social issues. However, because the interpretive practices utilized by the panelists are based on personal observations and experience, the listening audience are not able to fully adhere to the panelists' interpretations because they are based on personal experiences unique to the panelist. Online discussions on the <u>Canada Reads</u> website demonstrate how listeners both engage with and resist

the reading practices on the program. The reading practices exhibited by the panelists go beyond a personal style of reading and they often engage critically with the texts in order to support their argument that their text is the one that is most relevant and applicable to the reading public. The competition format of the program offers a lively debate at times, with panelists debating the merits of the texts based on a variety of criteria, such as national identity, personal meaning, structure, and writing. The combination of personal and critical reading practices creates a reading campaign that is designed to simultaneously promote the acts of private and public reading, in which meaning is established for the reader by the panelists' reading practices, as well as created by the readers themselves when they choose to accept or reject the practices provided for them.

Before turning our attention to the discussions and reading practices found on Canada Reads, it is necessary to discuss how book clubs operate and how readers create meaning through the act of reading, either privately or publicly. Large-scale book clubs that basically allow large numbers of people to read the same book are quite different from the more common understanding of a book club, in which a small group of people meets to talk about a book they all read. Smaller book clubs focus on personal expression among members regarding their engagement with a book. Ann H. Addington investigated the differences between an graduate English seminar discussion and a graduate English education book club course discussion and she found that "the two master's level courses allowed me to watch as the world of book clubs and English classrooms veered unusually close to one another" (213). She outlines several reader roles that adult readers exhibit:

> First is the reader as interpreter who studies literature either as a teacher or student and
> views literature in terms of organized principles of inquiry, rules of evidence, a sense of

history, and perhaps critical theory. But more common among adults is the pragmatic

reader who combines many different roles and purposes to meet his or her own particular

needs: 'to escape, to judge the truth of experience, to gratify a sense of beauty, to

challenge oneself with new experience, to comfort oneself with images of wisdom.'

(214)

She continues by explaining that when discussions move away from a classroom setting to a

book club setting, "participants presumably feel more freedom to choose among the reader roles

or stances that seem most useful or interesting to them at any given point in the conversation"

(215). She found that when book club style discussions are utilized, participants build a more

personal connection with the text and engage in multiple ways of talking about it. This type of

personal reading experience becomes "a knowledge source for literature discussions" (216).

Addington quotes Rosenblatt's theory that reading is a "transaction between the reader and the

text [. . .] readers take an *aesthetic* stance when they focus on what they are living through during

the reading event. In aesthetic reading the reader pays selective attention to certain parts of the

text and brings in personal experiences, connections, and alternate understandings to create the

poem" (213). During a personal discussion with other readers, these understandings and

connections are shared more easily between members of the reading group because this is a more

open discussion in which members are free to share their personal connections to a text and

create meaning based on that personal reflection.

In the interests of examining Canada Reads and the reading practices found on the

program, it is necessary to examine the reader and the interaction of the reader with a literary

text. Prominent examinations of the role of the reader include Wayne Booth's analysis of the

way in which the text shapes the reader, Peter J. Rabinowitz's discussion of how the reader can

become aware of how they are shaped by cultural rules of reading, and Stanley Fish's notion that

the text is malleable and meaning is produced from the cultural assumptions given to the reader

from the interpretive community they are part of. In addition, critics have examined

psychological and sociological factors and how they inform a reader's interpretation of a text.

With the many different ways of interpreting texts, as well as the differences between each

individual reader, "after listening to a group of people discussing a text, we sometimes wonder if

they have all read the same words" (Richter 969). However, when the individual act of reading is

placed within a social context, for example, a classroom or a book club, "the private response is

'negotiated' into meaningful knowledge via the individual's sense of the group's purposes. In the

course of articulating a response to a text under the social pressure of the group, the reader

prunes away, or at least brackets off as private or irrelevant, those aspects of the response that

may not apply to others or that are inconsistent with the aim of the class" (971). Therefore,

reading is not a private act once it is placed in the context of a group that is informed by a variety

of ideologies at work.

David Bleich's sociological perspective as well as Fish's theory of interpretive

communities will provide insight into Canada Reads. Bleich's emphasis on the social context of

interpretation is demonstrative of how a reader's interpretation can be shaped by the ideologies

of those around them (969). While the reader's own personal interpretations still exist, they are

transformed or shaped to resemble that of the collective group. Fish's theory of interpretive

communities expands Bleich's idea; however, it privileges the reader as an 'informed reader.'

Fish argues that "interpretive strategies are not put into execution after reading: they are the

shape of reading, and because they are the shape of reading, they give texts shape, making them,

rather than, as is usually assumed, arising from them" (Fish 13). In response to Fish's theory of

interpretation, Karin Littau asks "how can Fish make the text disappear and give the reader free interpretive rein, while at the same time asserting the stability of the interpretive process?" (Littau 113). This problem is addressed by Fish's claim that readers belong to interpretive communities. Fish writes: "since the thoughts an individual can think and the mental operations he can perform have their source in some or other interpretive community, he is as much a product of that community (acting as an extension of it) as the meanings it enables him to produce" (14) and "the meanings and texts produced by an interpretive community are not subjective because they do not proceed from an isolated individual but from a public and conventional point of view" (14). Fish explains that "members of the same community will necessarily agree because they will see (and by seeing, make) everything in relation to that community's assumed purposes and goals; and conversely, members of different communities will disagree because from each of their respective positions they 'simply' cannot see what is obviously and inescapably there: This, then, is the explanation for the stability of interpretation among different readers (they belong to the same community)" (15). Interpretation of a text lies in the "institution of literature, a communal system which precedes us, which we inhabit and which inhabits us" (Littau 114), allowing the reader within an interpretative community to participate in a 'stable' interpretation of a text. This understanding of interpretive communities can be related to Bleich's suggestion that private interpretations adhere to the ideologies of a public group. Interpretive communities will share their own ideologies, as well as be shaped by meanings already existing within the communal system of interpretation. Therefore, the act of reading, particularly when it becomes a public act of consumption, is shaped by the ideologies of the interpretive community in which the reader participates, the meaning already established in

the institution of literature, and the reader's own social or ideological background within the interpretive community.

People may read for pleasure, to excite the senses or experience a deep personal emotion created within the text. They also read to escape real life, to become lost in the fiction of a made up world. There is a definite correlation between the act of reading and the reader's emotional state. Karin Littau explains that "literature affects us, insofar as it excites the passions; it also has certain effects on us, namely our reform or betterment. What come together here are two poles, one to do with aesthetics, the other with ethics" (Littau 89). The aesthetic appeal of literature affects the reader through sensations and passions internally, but it can also be experienced externally by affecting behaviour and actions. Littau writes of the emotions experienced during reading and how "one moves inward, the other outward. One is played out in the realm of private sensations; the other manifests itself in public actions" (89). Producing meaning from reading is often based on personal reading practices; however, it can also manifest itself in outward actions and behaviours in public. This can be referred to as the two responses readers undertake when they engage with literature, through "sensation and sense-making" (100). These two responses exist together and literature provides the reader the opportunity to "transform fantasies not merely into pleasurable but also into socially acceptable forms" (101). Readers have the potential to gain a great deal of personal pleasure from engaging with a text that is translated to outward actions and behaviours, but how readers actually produce meaning has been a topic of debate for critics. Borrowing from deconstruction theory, Littau argues that the reader is no longer passive, but active where the goal of the text "is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (104). Therefore, there is always a risk of misreading or misunderstanding a text, which is not necessarily a failure on the part of the reader as "correct reading is a fallacy"

because misunderstanding is "necessarily possible" (106). The production of meaning through reading exists in a variety of forms and interactions between the text and reader. These varied interactions between the text and the reader become evident during the on-air discussions on Canada Reads as the panelists debate the merits of their texts based on the various ways they interact with the texts to produce meaning.

It's not just about aesthetics: How Canada Reads reads

The reading practices found on Canada Reads include both critical interpretations of the texts and informal discussions that resemble that of a face to face book club. It should be pointed out that discussions may be somewhat different from a normal book club because the participants are not discussing a single book, but instead debating several different books. The conversations often sound very personal and at times the panelists share how their reading is informed by personal experiences with the texts. This is not to say that discussions do not involve a critical element. One panelist, author Will Ferguson, writes: "this was not a chat show; we were asked to look at each book critically and carefully. If a novel is presented as a story that will 'make you believe in God,' we need to ask what that means. And if a novel is about history – about the way it defines us, surrounds us, affects us – then shouldn't we also look at how the author himself treats history?" (R1). Ferguson's account demonstrates that Canada Reads is not simply an informal chat about books, as the panelists are willing to take the conversation into deeper territory beyond emotional experience or aesthetic appeal. Danielle Fuller argues that although the program has not included an academic on the panel who would "'privilege' the cognitive, ideational, and analytic mode" (Fuller 16) of scholarly reading, the program still acknowledges the value placed upon academic reading practices, "practices that are, in fact, given airtime, even when the panelists adopt some of the social behaviours more commonly found in many (non-

institutional) book groups" (16). She argues that reading practices that are non-aesthetic or

vernacular in nature, are represented, but not always legitimated. These reading practices

include: "reading as a politically transformative practice and valuing books for their 'ability to

create moral empathy.' Reading in order to understand and empathize with different worlds is

also represented, as well as reading as a form of subjective identification (as when readers seek

connections to their personal experiences)" (17). Fuller states that throughout the first four

seasons of Canada Reads an increasing amount of on-air time was given to "vernacular reading

practices, including shared reading practices that mimic the form and function of face-to-face

reading groups" (19). This reliance on a book club style discussion made the program drift away

from its format of a 'knock-out' contest, with panelists favouring open discussion and even

rejecting the competition element. In season four, Olympic fencer Sherraine MacKay

commented that texts are only being rejected "because we're playing this silly game" (CBC

2005), illustrating some panelists are reluctant to reject texts based solely on the format of the

program. Fuller states that "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"

(Fuller 21). This may be true, but by rejecting the competition element of the program, the

panelists are also able to engage more with the texts on a critical level, not just a personal one,

because they do not seem completely focussed on the idea of a book winning a competition.

While the panelists are not able to completely reject the format of the program and are required

to vote a book off at the end of each broadcast, rejecting the competition format during the

debate portion of the program allows the panelists to discuss not only their own book, but the

other books as well. By not being distracted with the need to defend their book within the

competition and discount the merits of the other texts, the panelists are able to discuss them more openly and critically, touching on topics that are not to be debated but rather discussed.

The type of reading that is most prevalent on a given season depends on the panelists and the reading practices they bring to the program, as well as their reaction to the other reading practices utilized by other panelists. The panelists on Canada Reads do not follow a prescribed set of criteria for interpreting their text. While the producers and host do steer the discussions in certain directions based on the texts included, it is the panelist's preliminary readings of the texts that informs the majority of his or her interpretive practice. During the first day of debates, the panelists are asked to describe their book and why they chose to defend it. The reasons vary but many times the panelists relate how the book touched them personally and at times they fall back on how the book was aesthetically appealing to them. While aesthetic readings may indicate a critical interpretation of a text, and some panelists do utilize aesthetics on a critical level, others do not necessarily apply aesthetics in a critical manner, instead focusing on how the aesthetics found in a text appeal to them individually and personally. For example, a panelist may use a critical aesthetic reading by focusing on the structure or language of the writing as being well-crafted or appealing, as Lisa Moore did when discussing Mavis Gallant's writing in season seven. On the contrary another panelist may focus on how the writing or imagery within a text is personally touching, as Jemini did when arguing against Icefields, also in season seven. Critical interpretations are not necessarily lost in the discussions; however, they are often combined with personal reading practices that the panelists favour in their interpretation and recommendation of a text.

In order to demonstrate this mixture of reading practices, I will examine the two most recent seasons of Canada Reads. In season seven, the social and cultural themes within the texts

informed some of the panelist readings, while others relied on a more personal reading. For example, actor Zaib Shaikh, who championed Not Wanted on the Voyage by Timothy Findley, highlighted how Findley is "pouring his entire imagination into one work. He is pouring the idea of spirituality and what it means to be human and what it means to be divine" (CBC 2008), as well as what it means to be a man and a woman and the impact of humans on the environment. Shaikh focused his reading on the theme of spirituality and humanity and the overarching tropes of social awareness and feminism. Author Lisa Moore, whose most important criteria was excellent writing, introduced Mavis Gallant's text From the Fifteenth District by pointing to how "each story is rich, complex, and emotionally engaging" and how the stories are "beautifully crafted" (CBC 2008). Musician and author Dave Bidini outlined his defence of King Leary by Paul Quarrington a little more personally by explaining:

> I thought I would champion this book on a personal level. When I read this book when it came out it literally made me the writer I am today [. . .] it shaped my destiny as a creative person. On a personal level, this book has a great force because it shaped me with that force and I want the nation to feel that force too. (CBC 2008)

Bidini did mention that on a literary level the book achieves a great feat by being both sad and funny, but his primary reading deals more with how it affected his life personally. This differs from the other panelists' interpretations of their texts, which focused on both grand social themes and what that means to the wider audience, and the aesthetic appeal of the writing.

As part of the decision-making process, Canada Reads allows the panelists to debate the opinions others express regarding their texts, allowing panelists to react with differing reading practices as they attempt to apply their own reading practice to the other books or reject the other reading practices. For example, Dave Bidini did not agree with Lisa Moore's aesthetic reading of

Mavis Gallant's text explaining how he "wasn't moved by this book" and while he thought the "writing was staggeringly beautiful" for him "that might be part of its problem. It's so precious and fine that I found it impenetrable in a way and I find it didn't pull me in. It was almost like tapping against glass" (CBC 2008). For Bidini, Gallant's text did not affect him on a personal level and this was partially due to Gallant's writing, which did not allow for a personal reading. Shaikh offered his own take on Gallant's writing, explaining that he felt Gallant's text was well-written, but not unique, saying: "I've seen this before." In response, Moore fell back on a critical interpretation of how the text creates an emotional response within the reader: "the reader is given the freedom to feel what they want to feel. It's a complex read and it takes time" (CBC 2008). Moore was participating in an aesthetic reading practice, one to which other panelists did not adhere and even rejected. Because Moore focused on Gallant's writing and the emotion it is able to create and not her own emotional response to it, the other panelists were better able to challenge her interpretation and provide their own critical understandings of Gallant's text and reject it. The panelists were not able to refute Bidini's reading of <u>King Leary</u> as easily because he made such a personal defence, which demonstrates Bidini's success at forging a personal reading as a strong defence. Instead, they ended up focusing on the writing and the subject matter found in Quarrington's novel, with only Bidini using his personal experiences with the text as a way of arguing its merit.

When panelists use this kind of personal reading, other panelists are less able or likely to argue against it opposed to a panelist who uses a critical readings. For example, Lisa Moore had difficulty accepting Shaikh's and Ghomeshi's understanding of Findley's text and its feminist retelling of the story of Noah's Ark. Moore explained how she felt the "feminism in this book is a little too simplistic" and she used the example of the women rebelling on the Ark as a

simplistic representation of feminism in which the men are bad and the women are good (CBC 2008). Shaikh responded rather simply by arguing that is the point of the novel, to which Moore replied: "but that's too easy a point" (CBC 2008). Lisa Moore, who advocated the complexity found in Gallant's collection of short stories, was quick to refute the simplicity of Findley's text. This discussion is indicative of how the panelists react to specific critical elements of a text. Moore felt Findley's representation of feminism was too simplistic and attempted to explore this issue further within the discussion; however, Shaikh was unable or unwilling to elaborate on the representation of feminism and simply explained the simplistic representation of feminism was the point of the novel. Therefore, a critical discussion was started by Lisa Moore, who felt it was important to examine this critical element of Findley's text, but was not developed further by the other panelists, who chose to disregard this topic.

Throughout the rest of the debates, Ghomeshi steered the discussion towards two reading practices introduced on the first day, one that emphasized social critique and one that emphasized personal responses to the text, and asked the panelists which book provided the strongest social critique. Some panelists questioned whether that should be part of the criteria for recommending a book to the nation. Bidini argued it should not be part of the criteria because for him "art should stand on its own terms, whatever those terms are" (CBC 2008) and he pointed out how Quarrington's text does not have anything to do with social critique, "It's just a damn fine story" (CBC 2008). Lisa Moore provided a more detailed account of the role social critique plays in literature, explaining: "when you're reading fiction, social critique is about empathy that's created for characters. It's the imaginative act of knowing what it feels like to be somebody else, where your desires are not the most important thing. Any book that moves me from being Lisa Moore and makes me be a cat or whatever it is, changes me, I'm a different

person. And that is a social, critical, act" (CBC 2008). Moore continued by explaining that

Brown Girl in the Ring may do that for her, despite the fact that it does not have the best writing.

Moore's take on social critiques was somewhat different than the other panelists. Moore saw the

social critique of a novel as a more personal experience, where empathy is created for the

characters within the reader and where the reader can understand or experience the same things

as the characters do. However, the discussion of social critique took on a more general tone in

the case of Thomas Wharton's text Icefields and its treatment of the receding glaciers. Defender

Steven MacLean explained that he chose the book because he felt a "certain fragility about the

climate change that could occur." However, he recognizes that Wharton is not writing about

large scale environmental change, but "this is a story that takes place in Jasper that happens to be

pertinent because of the keen observing nature of Byrne and you see it's fiction but there are

historical parts to it" (CBC 2008). The panel agreed that a text can become relevant based on the

social context in which it is read. As Lisa Moore pointed out, "a book changes every time it's

read. It's a completely different thing in every reader's hands and every year it changes. That's

what magical about literature, there's no containing it, there's no holding it, there's no defining

it. This book [Icefields] is changing before our eyes just like the icefields" (CBC 2008). Dave

Bidini disagreed with Moore's understanding and again returned to his personal reading practice:

"The person who reads Huck Finn on the week it comes out has the same reaction as the person

who reads Huck Finn tomorrow. That is the strength and beauty of that book and most books. I

think when you're inside the book the outside world falls away and that's one of the reasons we

read, to escape into the imagination of the writer no matter what is happening in the world"

(CBC 2008). The two points raised by Moore and Bidini represent a profound difference in

interpreting literature. Moore's argument demonstrates how meaning in a text is malleable and

the reader and the social context from which the text is read is the primary source of producing meaning. Bidini argues the opposite, pointing to the text as the sole source of meaning, not taking into account the reader.

This disagreement illustrates how two very different reading practices are employed by the panelists, which informs how they interpret their own text and the other texts as well. Jemini also disagreed with Bidini and argued: "We'd like to just disappear into a book but I do believe that outside factors, you know, you can't help but be changed by who you are, where you live, and what time you read it" (CBC 2009). Expanding on Moore's comments, Jemini argued that the current context in which a book is read shapes how the book is interpreted by the reader. This debate focussed on the reader's ability to 'get lost' in the book and the imagination of the author and whether this has an impact on the social relevance of a particular text. For Shaikh, discovering the social relevance of a book is not the purpose of reading, he explained that it is not something that he wants to be pointed to, but rather be surprised by. Ghomeshi found this to be surprising because Shaikh was defending Not Wanted on the Voyage and while Shaikh explains he was aware of the social critique found in Findley's text, he focussed more on the story and the writing. These differences often caused disagreement as one panelist does not employ the same reading practices as another, as was the case with this particular debate. However, it provides an insight into how the panelists bring various reading practices to the program and how those practices conflict with others, providing a number of different ways a text is read and interpreted. In the end, the social relevance of a text did not help determine the winner of the contest. As Jemini explained: "I don't think just because it's socially relevant means it's the best book. But I think it's fair to ask that question" (CBC 2008). Nonetheless, it

becomes clear that the panelists are still engaging with their own set of reading practices, which either rejected or embraced the role of social critiques.

On the last day of debate, with <u>King Leary</u> and <u>Not Wanted on the Voyage</u> the only two books remaining, Ghomeshi took the debate to a more personal level, asking the panelists which book moved them the most. Many of the panelists chose <u>King Leary</u> as the most moving of the two texts, with Jemini offering a somewhat different view by explaining that <u>King Leary</u> 'charmed' her the most, but Findley's text was the most moving (CBC 2008). At the end of the debates, with a change in voting patterns by Steven MacLean who consistently voted against <u>King Leary</u> but decided not to during the final vote, <u>King Leary</u> was chosen. None of the panelists were very surprised that it was chosen and Ghomeshi commented that it was the one book that was generally well received throughout all the debates. In the discussions during this season, the focus on <u>King Leary</u> was mostly related to its humour, its characters, and the emotional response from the reading panel, without the deeper discussions of social or political criteria generated by the other books. This may point to personal reading practices winning over critical ones; however, it would be difficult to make this argument. It cannot be said that personal discussions of <u>King Leary</u> monopolized the debate; in fact, the discussions of the text were somewhat sparse at times, with the other texts being more deeply scrutinized. Perhaps by escaping the discussions of aesthetics or social and political critiques, the text was able to come out on top, based on the emotional and personal experiences the panelist obtained from the book. The panelists in season seven appeared to stress the importance of personal reading and the act of reading for pleasure, and thus it is not surprising that they selected a book that would elicit the strongest emotional experience for the reading public. It is clear that there is a definite

combination of discourses at work during the broadcast, with both critical and personal readings in conflict.

During the most recent season of <u>Canada Reads</u> these two discourses were at work again, only this time, the critical one appeared to win the day. As in season seven, season eight featured a great deal of discussion around both the universal meaning of literature, and the personal. On the first day, singer Sarah Slean, who defended <u>Mercy Among the Children</u> by David Adams Richards, opened by explaining her reading practice for all the texts: "I tried to assess all of these novels through the lens of what should literature do. I think that it should show us or get at truth. I think that David's book points to the fact that truth revolves inevitably around how we decide to relate to the infinite universe" (CBC 2009). Slean's reading practice was critical in the way she looked at what literature should do, but also personal in looking at how her specific text and the others made her feel as a person. She is taking literature as being a representation of truth and moral values, which she interprets based on her own personal understanding of how they apply to her as an individual, demonstrated by her reading of Richard's text. In contrast, Avi Lewis introduced the novel <u>The Book of Negroes</u> by Laurence Hill with the explanation:

> It delivers one of the key things that we want from fiction, which is a sense of discovery about a subject that we think we already know. It gives a new dimension to this titanic human experience of slavery which is sort of reducible in our minds to an image of someone in chains. They're not real people. It injects humanity into this huge historical event and I think that's the greatest gift fiction can give. (CBC 2009)

Lewis viewed the text as an example of moral empathy, a site of learning, rather than personal meaning.

Other panelists, however, chose to focus solely on personal readings and how they relate to the story or characters. Jen Sookfong Lee's defence of Brian Francis's novel <u>Fruit</u> took on this personal tone. She opened her discussion by explaining: "The reason I chose it is really simple. <u>Fruit</u> is a book that compels the reader to fall in love with both the story and with Peter Paddington. We feel what he feels, his joy, his despair, his gut-wrenching humiliation. To me, reading <u>Fruit</u> is like entering an all consuming romance where you feel every emotion under the sun and come out the other side firmly and irrevocably in love" (CBC 2009). While Sookfong Lee explained what she thinks the text does to the reader, she applied her own personal reading to the greater audience, which may not apply to everyone. She utilized her own personal experiences of growing up and related them to that of Peter. Sookfong Lee explained: "I really, personally struggled with all those things. Body image and sexuality and what the hell is my body doing today" (CBC 2009). Unlike Slean and Lewis, Sookfong Lee relied more on her emotional response to the text as formulated by her own experiences. But again, one panelist's own reading practice often conflicted with that of another. When asked by Ghomeshi which novel resonated the least with the panelists, Sarah Slean said <u>Fruit</u> did because she felt: "I didn't learn anything, I didn't feel my humanity come to light in any way" (CBC 2009). Utilizing the lens of literature teaching a universal truth and applying it to the other texts, Slean demonstrated how her reading practice favoured a particular novel, while discounting another. She was also unable to create a very personal response to the text as Sookfong Lee did because she did not have the same emotional experience with the text. The other panelists felt Richards' text resonated the least because as Lewis explained: "I had a difficult time relating to that sort of passive way of life, even though it's incredibly virtuous" (CBC 2009), referring to Sydney's character. Unlike Slean, Lewis could not relate to the book on a personal level nor view it as

teaching universal moral truths. Another example is Sookfong Lee's personal reading practice

that could not be translated to The Book of Negroes. She explained "if the characters aren't

there, aren't popping out of the page, I don't care, which is why I love Fruit so much because

Peter Paddington is so real to me. He could be me if I was an overweight boy with talking

nipples and that's why I love it so much" (CBC 2009). Sookfong Lee's reading of Fruit did not

apply to the other texts; therefore, she did not view the other texts in the same way the other

panelists did. However, is the inability to utilize the same reading practice on different novels a

result of the panelists themselves or the content of the text? The Book of Negroes is a very

different novel from Fruit and it might be impossible to read the two texts in a similar way.

However, based on the discussions of some of the panelists, it is clear that they did not read the

texts in different ways, but instead utilized the same reading practice for all the texts, indicating

that their particular reading was to strengthen their argument for their novel, and not the others.

The opening debate involved primarily personal reflections on the texts, with Ghomeshi asking

the panelists which book or character resonated with them the most. This type of discussion

carried on throughout most of the debates, with most attention being given to how the panelists

personally engaged with the texts.

Sarah Slean's reading of Richards's text as a way of teaching a universal truth did not

appear to resonate with the other panelists and her book was the first to be voted off. Most

panelists chose to focus their reading of Richards text on the character development and the

writing. While one critical interpretation was disregarded, another critical reading of a text

became much more prevalent. With The Book of Negroes the debate shifted to a more critical

discussion when Ghomeshi asked what the panelists thought the book says. The panelists related

the themes of slavery in the book to contemporary social issues, with Avi Lewis noting how

there "are invisible people everywhere" (CBC 2009), as well as its representation of minorities

and how it "pokes a hole" in a history that was thought to be well known, such as the racism

experienced by African slaves in Nova Scotia. Building upon this topic, the discussion resembled

one raised the previous year when Ghomeshi asked how important social issues are when

recommending a book. Sookfong Lee again returned to her personal reading style and explained

that she did not choose Fruit because of any social issues the book raises, but because of her

relationship with the character Peter. The panelists during this season decided not to tackle this

question with the same ferocity as the previous year's panel. Ghomeshi was interested in hearing

what Avi Lewis had to say regarding the social commentary of a book, most likely because of

Lewis's background as a political commentator. However, Avi Lewis explained that social issues

are "the kiss of death for recommending a book" and the social issues found within a novel are

"a bonus, it's not a reason to read it" (CBC 2009). Lewis argued that recommending a book

based on its social relevance was like "granola," that it would be "too dry" an argument.

However, Lewis also explained that The Book of Negroes was full of historical commentary that

is important but it never once felt like an important book, much in the same way Fruit never

teaches the reader about what it means to be gay (CBC 2009). In the interests of this particular

debate, Lewis argued that recommending a book based on its social commentaries would not

allow for an interesting enough discussion, despite the fact that he feels these elements are

extremely important when reading a book. Therefore, for Lewis, social commentary may be

important when reading a book, but not as important when recommending it. Lewis also

commented that "we're here to recommend a book on its novelistic merit, not its social

commentary" (CBC 2009). But that novelistic merit was not defined very clearly. During this

season, however, some panelists felt a text's novelistic merit was more important than its social

commentary, demonstrating how they engaged in differing reading practices, both critical and personal, embracing and rejecting the two. In the end, The Book of Negroes won the contest over the surprising runner-up Fruit. The panelists appeared to favour a more universal reading over a personal one, with some panelists not engaging as personally with the novel Fruit as Sookfong Lee did and rejecting any universality found in the text. Lewis, who advocated The Book of Negroes as having a universal message of human struggle, thought this was not the case with Fruit: "I hesitate to recommend it to everyone I know [. . .] does everyone want to dwell in the reality of a thirteen year old? [. . .] does it have the universality of vision and pathos and impact [. . .] does everyone I know want to live in that universe" (CBC 2009). They all agreed on the universality of the character Mina and the scale and scope of The Book of Negroes but rejected or denied the universality of the thirteen year old voice of Peter Paddington. This reading was then thrust upon the reading public, asking it to reject the universality of Peter Paddington, but accept it as represented in Mina.

The online forums offer an interesting look at how the readers listening to the debates respond to the various reading practices utilized by the panelists. For example, deannehiscock commended Slean's defence of Mercy Among the Children and wrote: "I think that the winning novel should make us feel deeply and move us to think of life in a new way" (Canada Reads Forum). Much like the on-air debates, other participants disagreed with this take on reading. One poster wrote that they hoped Richards' text would last past the next day so the beauty of the language could be discussed in more detail. Another participant, elbandito, wrote: "To me a good book, specifically fiction, will take me away from the reality of life, for a brief moment letting me forget about the world and atrocities that the human race commits on itself everyday [. . .] good fiction lets the reader feel part of the story" (Canada Reads Forum). This comment

demonstrates a key example of a personal reading style that is both included on the program and rejected. It is also similar to Bidini's point that fiction takes the reader away from his or her own world and places them in the world created within the text. Other people participating in the online forums had a problem with the discussions of social issues the texts raised and whether or not that should be included in the criteria for recommending a book to the nation. Riverchi55 wrote: "what about recommending a book because it is well-written and ENJOYABLE??? Would that be a terrible thing?" and elbandito wrote: "All this talk of a book not being worthy because you need to find some sort of truth in it seems like the same pretentious criteria that keeps giving awards to Margaret Atwood" (Canada Reads Forum). What is interesting about these online forums is that they provide the reading public the opportunity to voice their own comments and opinions regarding the books and their take on the debates. Secondly, they demonstrate how the reading practices employed by the panelists on-air are both embraced and rejected by the reading public. A majority of the online postings include reactions to how the texts are interpreted and discussed on air, as well as what is not discussed. Many of the online participants are displaying their own reading practices which they want to share with the other readers, practices that were not included on air. Therefore, the reading practices found on Canada Reads both inform how the participants interpret the texts and provide the opportunity to formulate new reading practices that are a reaction to what is not included during the debates. In order to understand how reading practices are developed and used by the panelists, it is important to examine the interpretive backgrounds the panelists come from that inform how they read a particular text.

The Interpretive <u>Canada Reads</u> Community

<u>Canada Reads</u> can be understood using Fish's theory of interpretive communities. <u>Canada Reads</u> itself is an interpretative community, as those who participate in <u>Canada Reads</u> become part of its reading community and engage with its interpretive strategies. They read the books that are recommended and may interpret them based on the panelists' own reading strategies. Because the panelists are recommending the texts based on how they interpret them, inevitably the audience will be influenced by some of those reading practices, as I discussed in the previous section. The panelists themselves come from different social and cultural backgrounds that determine how they interpret the texts on-air which relates to Bleich's theory of reading being socially and culturally informed.

For Stanley Fish, meaning is not produced by the text itself, but instead by the reader and the interpretive strategies they already possess before reading the text. These strategies exist prior to actually reading the text and therefore "determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around" (171). With various interpretative communities existing, different interpretive strategies will be employed resulting in different meanings being produced, creating disagreement among different interpretive communities. However, according to Fish, interpretive communities grow larger and decline and readers move from one to another. Therefore, "while the alignments are not permanent, they are always there, providing just enough stability for the interpretive battles to go on, and just enough shift and slippage to assure that they will never be settled" (172). Because the interpretive strategies are learned and not universal, interpretive communities are not more stable than the texts themselves. Fish then asks, because interpretive strategies are learned and do not stem from the text alone, "what is it that 'utterers'

(authors, critics, me, you) do?" (172). Fish assumes that the utterers create "prefabricated meanings" that are "encoded" in a "world independently of the individuals" (172).

Canada Reads establishes an interpretive community in which listeners are able to employ the interpretive strategies put forward in the discussions. The reading public become Canada Reads Readers, which means they do not draw meaning from the text alone, as demonstrated in Fish's model, but instead utilize the reading practices used by the panelists to create meaning as seen by online discussions where the public agree with or reject how a particular panelist interprets a text. One way of examining how the reading public interacts with the reading practices found during the on-air debates is by looking at the discussion topics the program returns to during every season. The host often establishes a dialogue involving similar discussion topics each season, including emotional responses to the text, the text's social relevance, and recurrent aspects of the different texts such as narrative voice, style, or themes. Fuller's research of earlier seasons found that groups of readers "employ the Canada Reads selections as a resource through which to build their shared reading list" (Fuller 24). These reading groups borrow the interpretive strategies of the program and apply it to a similar set of texts. However, based on the comments individuals post in the online forums, it is clear that the reading strategies employed by the panelists are not always embraced, and at times are even rejected. This demonstrates how those participating in the program utilize their own interpretive strategies that exist in separate interpretive communities. Fuller writes that the fact the reader-listeners of Canada Reads "sometimes read against the grain of the show's tendency to default to a reading practice structured by canonical aesthetics [. . .] 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" (25). Fuller offers an important observation regarding the reading

practices utilized by the listeners of <u>Canada Reads</u>. As Fuller points out, there are a number of

agents that produce meaning on the program, from CBC to the texts themselves. With all these

areas influencing how meaning is produced during the on-air debates, the listeners are left with a

multitude or meanings to interpret and respond to. Fuller also argues that the discussions posted

in the forums were often more "critically self-reflexive" (25). Online postings during the most

recent season demonstrate a similar pattern of reading by the public. Some posters reject how the

panelists interpret and discuss the texts. For example, in earlier seasons many people posted their

frustrations over the program not highlighting a particular author such as David Adams Richards.

When he was included in the most recent season, listeners both commended and criticized

Slean's defence of him. Readerman posted on the online forum: "I was disappointed with

Sarah's defence of <u>Mercy</u>. Although it is not my favourite, I still feel that this is a fine piece of

writing and well worth reading. I didn't get the impression that Sydney was noble in any way. In

fact he struck me as rather cowardly" (CBC 2009). The online forums are a way for the audience

to participate in the program, and as one person wrote, they are part of the game. However, these

contributions can be considered somewhat passive, as they do not make it to air and thus do not

influence the actual debates. Nonetheless, they illustrate how the listening audience responds to

the reading practices found on the program. Other people participating in the forum had major

issues with Slean's comment about not reading for enjoyment, as demonstrated by this poignant

response by Nigel Spencer: "P.S. to Sarah Slean: Sorry, but your statement about literature

shows that you don't know the **first** thing about it, which is that literature that does **not** entertain

(whether good, bad, or indifferent) is NOT LITERATURE. I'm truly sorry you had such awful

teachers" (Emphasis his, <u>Canada Reads</u> Forum). However, some came to Slean's defence and

agreed with her assertion. Pamela323 wrote:

> My 17 year old daughter hated this statement too. For her, it represents her English
>
> teachers digging so deeply into the meaning of texts that they mar the surface enjoyment
>
> of the books. As an English teacher myself, I understand what Sarah is saying: literature
>
> is not just about entertainment; literature is also about truth, perhaps even with a capital
>
> T, truth about humans, our circumstances, our world, whether that truth is palatable or
>
> not. Is the willingness to work through difficult or painful texts a matter of maturity? Or
>
> is it a matter of students discovering this level of reading for themselves, without having
>
> teachers beat them over the heads with it? (<u>Canada Reads</u> Forum)

These two examples demonstrate how listeners both rejected and embraced a panelist's reading

of a text. The first responder sees literature as a source of entertainment, while the English

teacher agrees with Slean's understanding of literature as a tool for establishing truth and moral

values. It also demonstrates the variety of readings that can be applied to one text or a variety of

texts. Much like the panel on <u>Canada Reads</u> those listening to the program also debate how a text

should be read and whether one reading is more valuable than another. The last post referenced

demonstrates how the reader, coming from the interpretive community informed by institutional

understandings of literature being about truth, welcomes Slean's defence of the novel, while

another interpretive strategy used by her daughter or in the individual in previous post

demonstrates how their reading practice may reject such a defence. Therefore, the interpretive

strategies utilized by the panelists of <u>Canada Reads</u> are not always accepted because those

participating in the program possess their own interpretive strategies based on their own reading

practice which conflict with those of the others.

Panelists on <u>Canada Reads</u> employ various interpretive strategies that they use in defence

of their text. Part of the program is to debate the texts and these debates are heightened based on

the degree to which the panelists' reading practices, formulated from their social or professional

background, are brought into conflict. An example of this includes Scott Thompson's defence of

Mordecai Richler's novel <u>Cocksure</u> in season five. Thompson, coming from a comedic

background, focussed his attention on the humour in Richler's text, humour which was not

always embraced by the other panelists. Thompson introduced Richler's text by explaining he

chose it because "I think it's hilarious. I think that Canadian letters are devoid of comedy and I

think there's a prejudice in this country towards comedy and I think it's quite sad and self-

destructive. I think we produce the funniest people in the world and then we give them nothing to

do. I think Mordechai Richler was a humorist as great as Mark Twain [. . .] I consider myself a

satirist like he is. He doesn't spare anyone and he's hardest on himself, and I think that's the

mark of a great comic artist" (CBC 2006). Furthermore, host Bill Richardson, winner of the

Stephen Leacock Medal for Humour, broke away from his role as host to offer a plea before the

first vote when he addressed the panel: "Think about humour because there has been a history on

'Canada Reads' and if <u>Cocksure</u> is the first to go it will be part of an honourable tradition of

humour being voted off the list first" (CBC 2006). Maureen McTeer cut in with "That's if you

think <u>Cocksure</u> is funny." Richardson continued to explain that he would like to see it last past

the first round, which was not greeted well by the rest of the panel, including Thompson.

Richardson's pleading did not seem to impact the vote and <u>Cocksure</u> was the first book to go.

These two advocates for Richler come from a background focussed on humour, and therefore

their interpretive strategies reflect how their social and cultural backgrounds shape their

interpretation, giving importance to the comic element of the text. There are many other

examples that point to how the panelist's background informs their interpretive strategies for defending a text. For example, Avi Lewis, a political commentator, focused on the larger themes of human injustice represented in the Book of Negroes, author Lisa Moore's primary criteria was language and a well-written story, politician Justin Trudeau read The Colony of Unrequited Dreams through a federalist lens, musician and writer Dave Bidini saw King Leary as an inspiration that fuelled his own creative work, and Newfoundland writer Donna Morrissey related Rockbound to her own personal experiences living in Eastern Canada. Because these interpretive strategies often clash, the panelists will disagree and debate why their interpretation is stronger. While sometimes panelists will be swayed, oftentimes they refuse to shift from their own interpretive understandings, and their interpretation is seen as the only correct one. The interaction between the on-air debates and the online forums provide interesting insight into how meaning is produced through the 'book club' that is Canada Reads. Examining how both critical and personal readings create meaning demonstrates the complex nature of the on-air debates and discussions that go well beyond aesthetic appeal.

Chapter Five: Is there a text in this country? Canada Reads and National Identity

Sex in the Cold: The CBC and National Identity

She crawls out of the tent and he stays behind, thinking it's too late to come out after her, like an adoring dog chasing her heels. He watches through the open tent flap as her slender, pale body disappears down the green meadow. He lies back on the blankets and closes his eyes, hears a splash and her shriek.

- Yow!

She laughs, calls out to him, but the wind carries the words away. He lies still, sunlight pulsing red on his eyelids. He imagines he is in a tent on the edge of a desert of sand. She comes back in like the sun, her face burning. But when she moves into his arms her body is ice.

- There, now *I'm* arctic. (Wharton 113)

The above passage from Thomas Wharton's novel <u>Icefields</u> describes the characters Hal and Freya during a love scene in a tent near the icefields of Alberta. Panelist Dave Bidini explained in season seven of <u>Canada Reads</u> that the "reason the scene galvanized me as a reader is it comes in a very very cold climate. Hot sex is even hotter when it's snowy and minus thirty-four and icy outside" (CBC 2008). Before he could finish his description, astronaut Steve MacLean, who championed <u>Icefields,</u> cut in by saying that "all Canadians can relate to that," with Bidini agreeing, comparing it to a gathering in "a hot club to see a band and it's freezing outside and the experience is all the more tactile and emotional."

Although this discussion of sex in the cold was cut short, it reveals a common theme that arises in all seasons of <u>Canada Reads</u>: what does it mean to be a Canadian and how do the five books represent popular notions of Canadianness? While sex in the cold may be just one small

example of how the panelists take a specific passage in a text and identify it as a universal

Canadian experience, the program involves, at the very least, a discussion of what constitutes

Canadian identity. The premise of finding one book the nation should read together exemplifies

the desire to unite the nation around one work of Canadian fiction, creating what Benedict

Anderson defined as an imagined community in which people are connected despite physical or

social boundaries. However, unlike other CBC projects that aim to establish a concrete definition

of Canadian identity, such as The Seven Wonders of Canada, Canada Reads allows a dialogue

and discussion to take place that changes based on the ideological understanding of the texts by

the panelists on the program, which reveals the instability of achieving a concrete definition of

Canadian identity framed through Canadian literature. It also reveals an assumption about the

role of a national literature in the construction and reproduction of national identity.

Airing on the national broadcaster of Canada, it is inevitable that Canada Reads will

contain a dialogue around national identity. The mandate of the CBC states programming should

"serve to safeguard, enrich and strengthen the cultural, political, social, and economic fabric of

Canada" (Broadcasting Act 1.1 Program Policies: Policy 1.1.1 CBC Mandate) and Canada Reads

is just another means for the public broadcaster to foster debate and provoke thought for

Canadians regarding what it means to be Canadian. Laura Moss argues that the program is intent

on "drawing Canadians together by creating a shared cultural background" and that the winning

texts "reinforce popular notions of Canadianness" (Moss 7). While many of the winning texts do

exhibit popular notions of Canadianness, such as cultural identity, climate, geography, and social

context, it is not always clear what these notions are or how they represent Canada. For example,

Paul Quarrington's novel King Leary, which won season seven, can be seen as stereotypically

Canadian because of its inclusion of hockey. However, the novel that won the previous year,

Lullabies for Little Criminals by Heather O'Neill, does not appear to exhibit any clear popular notions of Canadianness, with the exception of its Montreal setting. Therefore, while Moss may be partially right in her assessment that winning texts reinforce popular notions of Canadianness, it is not always the case, demonstrating that Canada Reads is not fully intent on or capable of bringing Canadians together around one concrete definition of Canadian identity.

Fuller and Sedo discuss the idea of nationalist rhetoric on the program more generally by noting how "book programming on CBC Radio has played an active part in this process of national identity formation through its promotion – and publication – of Canadian writing" (17). Fuller and Sedo outline how the CBC, particularly CBC radio, played a significant role in creating a nationwide audience for Canadian literature during a crucial period of its development by airing short stories, plays, poetry, and criticism (18). Fuller and Sedo argue that "the CBC has accrued tremendous cultural capital and authority" and they cite polls that found the CBC is "seen by Canadians as the mass media most responsible for taking a leading role in building a strong Canadian identity; more so than, in descending order, newspapers, book publishers, and private broadcasters" (17). At the time of the CBC's creation in 1932, radio was becoming a very important tool for communication and entertainment. Prime Minister Bennett recognized the importance of this new industry and Mary Vipond explains that "while newspapers were local, magazines middle-class and movies purely entertainment, radio appealed to all classes, in all parts of the country, and could be successfully used not only for entertainment but for informational and propaganda purposes" (43). Bennett believed that a public broadcasting company "could be the longed for twentieth-century equivalent to the CPR, utilizing the latest communications technology to unite and bind the nation. This, like the railway, radio was a special case, necessitating government involvement beyond the normal North American notion

of the state's role in economic or cultural matters. American domination of radio was simply not acceptable" (43-44) and privately owned broadcasting companies would inevitably fall victim to Americanization, something a strong nationalist such as Bennett would not allow. From its beginning, the CBC was used as a tool for establishing and enriching Canadian identity. As a publicly run media outlet, the CBC would primarily feature Canadian content and would not be subject to American programming as was the case with other private broadcasters.

As Ross Eaman argues, "it has long been maintained by cultural nationalists that high levels of Canadian content in the mass media are essential for the development of a distinctive national identity" (12). But Eaman questions the role of Canadian content when it comes to forming a unified national identity and explains that "a national identity comprises several layers of culture or shared patterns of thought and behaviour that have meaning or value for a society" (13) and Canadians are exposed to many forms of culture through foreign media sources, which is both beneficial and problematic. This exposure can make Canadians more cosmopolitan, but it can also cause them to lose focus on their own cultural identity. Eaman argues that a nation cannot be expected to establish a national identity if the public is unable to influence the distribution of cultural capital and "in addition to adequate means of production and distribution, there must also be channels whereby the public can help shape what is produced. In the final analysis, the only meaningful measure of cultural identity is the degree to which all members of society are engaged in the joint process of cultural production" (13). Therefore, the public media does play a very significant role in establishing a national identity, but the public who are responsible for abiding by that definition must play a role in its production. Public involvement is something the CBC has tried to engage in recent years, with varying degrees of success.

Throughout the twentieth century the CBC was a staple of Canadian mass media. While its significance and popularity may have waned in recent years, the cultural capital and authority it produced during its time as the leading voice in Canadian media remains to this day, making it, as Fuller and Sedo argue, one of the media outlets most responsible for building a national identity. This authority and cultural production is sustained by the programming found on the CBC as part of its mandate. In recent years the CBC has featured programs that attempt to build and define a strong and unified national identity. Such programming events include <u>Canada: A People's History</u>, <u>The Seven Wonders of Canada</u>, <u>The Greatest Canadian</u>, and <u>Test the Nation</u>, the last two being adapted from similar projects developed by another public broadcaster, the BBC. These programming events on the CBC unite Canadians around what it means to be Canadian. They also generate discussion in which all Canadians can participate, with many of these programs being interactive, allowing the public to cast votes in online polls or compete in quizzes alongside Canadians across the country. Though these programs still possess a degree of authority when defining what best represents Canadian identity, usually stemming from the CBC itself, they still offer an arena for public involvement that is both embraced and resisted by the public audience.

An examination of <u>The Seven Wonders of Canada</u>, which aired on CBC television in the summer of 2007, reveals the problems that arise from attempting such a massive national unification event. Inspired by a similar project to rename the Seven Wonders of the World, the goal of <u>The Seven Wonders of Canada</u> was to find seven distinct representations of Canada. Throughout the summer of 2007, Canadians cast votes on the website, choosing the 'seven wonders of Canada' from a very extensive list that included physical landmarks, technological marvels, and natural sites, as well as the option to write in entries. When the voting was

complete, the CBC selected three judges to choose from the entries that received the most votes and name the seven wonders of Canada based on the following criteria: "1. Essential 'Canadian-ness' – historically significant, character filled, valued, 2. Originality/uniqueness of pitch and place, 3. Spectacular physical site or amazing human creation, 4. Ability to inspire, 5. Range within the final seven – diversity of location, type of wonder, 6. Results of the online vote" ("Seven Wonders of Canada Criteria"). The judges included musician Ra McGuire of the band Trooper, Roy MacGregor an author and columnist, and Roberta L. Jamieson, Chief Executive Officer of the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation and former Chief of the Six Nations.

While the project was in keeping with the CBC's goal to unite the nation around symbolic representations of a unified identity, the project was not without problems. In their analysis of the program, James F. Cosgrave and Patricia Cormack argue that "while the project aimed to invoke wonder, it ultimately produced disenchantment and incoherence because the mechanisms (the form) of management came to overshadow the sensuous and magical practice of collecting (the content). While the project's stated goal was to encourage a national dialogue about the country, it rather ritualistically reaffirmed the administrative-symbolic role of the CBC as necessary arbiter and collector of things Canadian" (7). Due to this administrative-symbolic role of the CBC, some audience members participated in the project by questioning the role of the CBC "as a legitimate organizer of their own collective self desire" (8). Cormack and Cosgrave argue that because much of Canadian identity has been controlled by the state since at least the 1950's, "agents such as the CBC should be directly challenged in order to draw attention to a long taken-for-granted aspect of living as a Canadian" (8), which some Canadian participants did during the Seven Wonders of Canada project through subversion and disruption, particularly through the inclusion of joke entries.

There were also issues with the authority being exhibited by the CBC and the judges they selected. The CBC did not state by what criteria the judges were chosen, but according to Cosgrave and Cormack, "the presumed expertise of the judges is supported by the social and cultural capital they have generated through their production of Canadian symbolic goods; their achievements and identities within Canadian culture are recognized and made official here through their designation as judges" (12). The selection of judges places a great deal of authority with the CBC. Despite these concerns, the project was not a passive exercise for Canadians. Votes came in by the millions and there were a great number of responses following the final decision. Once the final decision was made, many participants were angry with the structure and methodologies of the program. These included questioning why the final decision was to be made by judges instead of simply relying on the popular vote; the authority given to the CBC and the judges seemed to discount any conversation or opinions of the nation. Cosgrave and Cormack argue that "clearly the producers are arguing that they, CBC generally and the judges must hold authority to vouchsafe representation, assuming the regional differences will inevitably overshadow the capacity of conversation and dialogue to generate extra-regional alliances. If conversation and the like cannot be trusted as methods to generate identity and celebration of Canadianness, why were they invited in the first place?" (19). Clearly, the Seven Wonders of Canada project was greeted with anger and hostility on the part of some participants, mostly arising from the CBC's authoritative role in defining what symbolic items represent the entire nation of Canada without completely acknowledging input from the public during the process. This project appeared to grant the population a role in the production and distribution of a cultural identity, but the public was ultimately left out because of the CBC's own authority and position as symbolic collector and distributor of Canadian identity.

Being a program primarily about Canadian literature, <u>Canada Reads</u> contains discussions involving nation and many debates included on the program explain what it means to be a Canadian and how the texts represent specifics notion of Canadianness, which will be discussed later on. But because the texts and the panelists change from year to year, this definition is always changing to coincide with the panelists' own ideological understandings of Canadian identity, as well as the text's representation of Canada. The competing visions of Canada range from cultural pastimes such as hockey, to place, to historical understandings of nationhood. Therefore, unlike the other projects found on CBC that seek to establish a concrete and authoritative definition of Canadian identity, <u>Canada Reads</u> generates a discussion of Canadian identity based on the ideological framework of the panelists and their understanding of a particular Canadian text. This does not create the same level of authority on the part of either the panelists or the CBC as other programs because no concrete consensus is ever reached. While authority does not necessarily require consensus, because <u>Canada Reads</u> leaves the definition of nation open, the authority that is found on other CBC projects is not found on <u>Canada Reads</u> to the same degree. Furthermore, it demonstrates the instability of formulating such a definition of Canadian identity because identity is not a homogeneous entity that is comprised of a set criteria or definition. For <u>Canada Reads</u> producer Ann Jansen, finding a book to ask all Canadians to read is not purely an exercise in cultural formation and the producers or the CBC "don't tell them what that means, we don't say: well the book that Canada must read is such and such. We don't define it for them, we just get them to talk about it and every year probably define it a little differently" (Jansen). Allowing the debate to proceed without the establishment of any criteria negates the level of authority that was seen in other projects, reinforcing the instability of defining Canadian identity.

A National Reading Campaign for the Common Reader

"Canada Reads is not a search for the best Canadian book. It is a search for the best book to ask everyone to read" (CBC 2002).

The Canada Reads website states: "in this annual title fight, five celebrity panelists defend their favourite work of Canadian fiction. One by one, books are voted off the list, until one panelist triumphs with *the* book for Canada to read this year" (Canada Reads.ca). By asking the entire nation to read *the* book together, the CBC is creating a unified reading event for the national audience revolving around one work of Canadian fiction, which fits nicely with the mandate of the CBC. But this reading event is not just about celebrating or recommending a work of Canadian fiction. Host Jian Ghomeshi sees this recommendation as a big task for the panelists and he explained to me that as the host "one of the things that is important to me is, for everybody to really think about this question of the influence this show has over what people are going to end up reading" (Ghomeshi). He continues by explaining that it is important for the panelists who ultimately get to decide what book Canada will read to "really think about the consequences of what they're choosing and what they really believe Canada should be reading" (Ghomeshi).

Promotion of Canada Reads usually revolves around the texts, the panelists, and the on-air debates, with the concept of an entire nation reading collectively in the backdrop. The underlying premise of asking the nation to read collectively provides the program structure and the national unity pretext found in many CBC programming initiatives. Selecting the one book that all of Canada should read is the primary task given to the panelists, who utilize their own reading, passion, and interpretation of the text to appeal to the greatest number of people. While it may be difficult, if not impossible, to find something that is relatable to such a vast and varied

audience, the audience itself is key to understanding how this nationwide reading campaign works and what its impact is.

The goal of Canada Reads, to find the one book for the entire nation to read, is a method of unification that contributes to what Benedict Anderson calls an imagined community, a term he coined to explain how despite massive distances and differences between regions, a population is still able to feel like a collective community. The nation defined in the debates changes from year to year, but the nation-wide reading campaign establishes a collective community, one that is bound together through the act of listening to the radio and reading the one book that is chosen. Anderson defines a nation as "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 6). Anderson argues that a nation is not a community of members existing together because there is no way for them to be physically or intimately connected. Instead, a nation creates an imagined community between people and places through the desire for a unified experience. Fuller and Sedo also apply Anderson's concept to Canada Reads, explaining: "Once again, Anderson's imagined community appears to spring to life to an uncanny degree here, as participation in popular processes (listening to the radio and reading a book in common) are posited as acts that will 'forge a bond' and unify people across space and social difference" (19).

Those participating in Canada Reads, either through reading the texts included during the season, posting comments on the website, or simply listening to the program, are participating in a shared experience along with countless other people across the country. In essence Canada Reads is a nation-wide book club, with the panelists, host, the production team, producers, and

the CBC serving as the moderator. However, according to Fuller and Sedo, the audience being

targeted is rather limited and they believe that "the 'national' community being hailed appears to

consist largely of white, literate individuals with a university education" (23). Producer Talin

Vartanian agrees that "the demographic of who listens to the CBC tends to be a more educated

person" (Vartanian), but the program was designed to be "much more popular and it was

intentionally constructed to be that, to draw in more Canadians to read Canadian fiction and to

make the show more accessible" (Vartanian). After producer Ann Jansen took over in season

seven, there was also a conscious effort to draw in a younger audience by including panelists that

might appeal to that demographic, such as singer Sarah Slean in the most recent season. But even

the panelists raised the issue of the 'educated audience' during season two while discussing <u>Next</u>

<u>Episode</u>. Panelist Nancy Lee thought that <u>Next Episode</u> is "a very important book, I think it's a

book people should read, but perhaps it's a book that's more suited for curriculum than it is for

all of Canada to read. I think that of all the books it's probably the least accessible" (CBC 2003).

Lee explained further that the "book is about more than just madness and politics. It's very

academic," although Denise Bombardier who defended the text did not understand what was

meant by academic. Justin Trudeau responded that "you have to be smart to understand it" but

Bombardier said "you don't have to go to school to be smart" (CBC 2003). Lee continued by

explaining that the book contains "a lot of literary theory, there's a lot of metafictional stuff

going on in here that I think would be lost on the regular reader" (CBC 2003). This seems to

suggest that the panelists are constructing a particular audience, one which is not versed in

understanding the metafictional content of the text, which discounts the reading audience's

understanding of such a reading. Despite these concerns that the text would not be relatable to

the regular reader, <u>Next Episode</u> won that season of <u>Canada Reads,</u> which could indicate that the

panelists did not discount the audience's ability to interpret and engage with a text that exhibits these literary elements, and the panelists may have privileged an educated reader over a regular reader.

Literature itself is a form of high culture and therefore its interpretation and understanding is based on an individual's cultural upbringing, as Pierre Bourdieu explains: "scientific observation shows that cultural needs are the product of upbringing and education: surveys establish that all cultural practices (museum visits, concert-going, reading etc), and preferences in literature, painting or music, are closely linked to educational level (measured by qualifications or length of schooling) and secondly to social origin" (1). Thus, a show devoted to Canadian literature and reading will inevitably be aimed at a more educated audience. Now, I will examine how the content of the program caters to an audience versed in elite culture, but is not so inaccessible that it reaches beyond the average listener. While the program does contain elements of elite culture, in presenting discussions of literature that will target a more educated audience, the structure and content of the discussions resemble that of a book club which offers a more personalized interpretation of the texts rather than an analytical one, an interpretation that is more accessible to a wider audience.

Jian Ghomeshi, who has hosted the program for the last two seasons, explained during an interview with me the process for preparing an episode of <u>Canada Reads</u>. Ghomeshi and the production team get together and "plan out an arc or how we might think things could go. Possible questions, possible flow of debate, we anticipate what panelists might say, who's going to react how to what book" (Ghomeshi). Producer Ann Jansen also explained the process for preparing for an episode: "We do a lot of prep work in advance in talking about the books and what might happen and what questions might be interesting. And then we go into studio with a

script that is very simple, it's usually just the beginning and the end that's really set" (Jansen). Once the program begins, however, things may change a little. Ghomeshi explains that once the show starts taping "they kind of leave me alone" which for him is ideally the way he likes to conduct interviews, "which is to prepare as much as I can, have a sense going into the interview about what the question arc is going to be, and sit and really focus on looking in the person's eyes and having a conversation with them and reacting and interacting as an interviewer with my subject. That's ideally what I do with Canada Reads too" (Ghomeshi). According to Jansen, Ghomeshi is the one who has to make a call about what discussion topic to pursue or what direction to lead the discussion in and "he has the freedom to take the conversation where it needs to go. And then we're working to make sure all the points that need to be covered be returned to in other conversations in future episodes" (Jansen). The host is basically the moderator and his or her role differs from a professor in a seminar because unlike a professor, the host does not hold the same level of authority. Furthermore, the intent of Canada Reads is quite different from a university seminar in that the participants are not there to learn but to participate in debate and competition in order to select one text over the others.

Once the program begins taping, its structure begins to resemble a more informal book-club style setting. The debates are structured to a degree to allow all desired topics and questions to be covered as determined by the production staff, but they are also left open to allow for a more spontaneous and personal conversation about the texts. The CBC's role as arbitrator of cultural and symbolic capital becomes evident because the production staff is structuring the debates around what they believe should be discussed. However, the panelists and hosts do not necessarily have to abide by that structure and are able to take the conversation in the direction

they choose. This allows for a more personalized discussion of the texts, as the producers intended.

But do these structures relate to the audience assumed by Fuller and Sedo? The simple fact that the program deals with a topic that is already a part of elite culture indicates that the audience too will be part of that cultural group. The structure of the on-air debates resemble a more personal and less formal book club style that does not necessarily seek to educate in the same way a university seminar might, but rather entertain and inform the audience. The issue of audience is very complex and no one audience can be determined for any media event. Any audience cannot be given a specific label because audiences are not a homogeneous entity, and "any concept of or even reference to 'the audience' must be abandoned in favour of a more sensible conceptualization according to which audiences must always be understood in the plural" (Clarke). According to Ien Ang, "actual audiences are whimsical, unpredictable, constantly changing their preferences, and therefore the attempt to describe the audience in terms of neatly defined categories is in itself absurd" (quoted in Clarke).

Another point made by Ang, that "private broadcasters see audiences as consumers to be sold to advertisers while public broadcasters see audiences as citizens to be educated and informed" (Clarke) does begin to clarify the target audience of the CBC. CBC Radio is not funded by private advertisers and does not contain advertisements during or in between broadcasts. The programming offered on the CBC reflects a definite desire to 'educate and inform' the nation, particularly with respect to all things Canadian, which is reflected in programs that encourage the audience to participate in defining Canadian identity. But Ang also states that both types of broadcasters "lack insight into the behaviour of their viewers" (Clarke), negating any real understanding of who is tuning in. Because categorizing the potential audience

of <u>Canada Reads</u> is not possible, how might an understanding of who is listening be achieved? One way is by referring back to the idea of who is being interpolated by the program. Fuller and Sedo argue that "if 'Canada Reads' is a 'national cultural event,' then the nation it imagines in terms of its content foregrounds the bilingual conception of the Canadian nation-state with Anglophone Canadians clearly the primary audience" (21). <u>Canada Reads</u> obviously targets an English-speaking audience because it is broadcast in English and its promotional materials are all in English. But its inclusion of French novels translated into English and Francophone panelists reflects the ideology of bilingualism present in CBC programming, representing the two official languages of Canada. What needs to be looked at in more detail is the nation that is imagined. <u>Canada Reads</u>, very generally, is interpolating the nation through its nation-wide reading campaign. The nation is the audience, comprised of an extensive list of 'audiences' who participate in the program.

"'Canada Reads' isn't necessarily Canada reading about Canada:" Debating national identity on <u>Canada Reads</u>

Discussions on <u>Canada Reads</u> frequently address, either explicitly or implicitly, national identity. Though the panelists do not attempt to define Canadian identity in an authoritative way, because literature is so closely related to national identity, the discussion inevitably arises in all seasons of the program. In the first season, for example, Michael Ondaatje's novel <u>In the Skin of a Lion</u>, defended by Stephen Page of the Barenaked Ladies, was voted the first book all of Canada should read. Before debate could even begin, the panelists took some time to discuss the methodologies of the program and questioned whether non-Canadian texts should be included. Stephen Page provided his take on the question: "If we are doing <u>Canada Reads</u>, it should be a book that has some resonance, particularly with Canadians. Either that's a book by Canadians or

about Canadians and I think what we're looking for is a uniquely Canadian experience right now in our reading" (CBC 2002). Megan Follows agreed and pointed to her book, A Fine Balance by Rohinton Mistry, which takes place outside Canada, but is written by an author who immigrated to Canada, which represents for her "the diversity that we have and that we have so many people coming from different countries who bring their cultures and their experiences and that's what makes Canada a truly multicultural place" (CBC 2002). A similar debate took place in season six concerning Anosh Irani's novel Songs of Kahunsha. The debate that took place in the first season can be expected as the structure of Canada Reads was new and the panelists were negotiating what constitutes a Canadian text. However, the fact that a similar debate took place once again six seasons later demonstrates that the program does not provide a concrete framework for what constitutes a Canadian text and how that represents Canadian identity.

During the first season, much of the discussions around nation were centered on regionalism and what text the national audience will find most engaging. Following a brief summary of In the Skin of a Lion, former Prime Minister Kim Campbell thought the book was "a tad local" for her and she explained when looking for a book that it is important to pick something that "really generates a national conversation" (CBC 2002). She felt In the Skin of A Lion would not generate the same kind of interesting national conversation as Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale. Megan Follows returned to the idea of In the Skin of A Lion being too local. She explained that localism can be detrimental to Canadians because according to her "we segregate ourselves and I don't think that helps us in terms of the national identity" (CBC 2002). Host Mary Walsh jumped in during this explanation and using a reference to Hugh MacLennan's Two Solitudes stated: "that is our national identity and we are proud of it, we are a series of regions, we are not just two solitudes, we're ten solitudes" (CBC 2002). Walsh's statement

reminds us of Northrop Frye's statement that "the question of Canadian identity, so far as it affects the creative imagination, is not a 'Canadian' question at all, but a regional question" (Frye xxii). Frye goes on to explain rather fittingly:

> when the CBC is instructed by Parliament to do what it can to promote Canadian unity and identity, it is not always realized that unity and identity are quite different things to be promoting, and that in Canada they are perhaps more different than they are anywhere else. Identity is local and regional, rooted in the imagination and in works of culture; unity is national in reference, international in perspective, and rooted in a political feeling. (xxii)

In their concerns about In the Skin of A Lion being too local or too focused on Toronto, the panelists discounted the importance of regionalism in the formation of identity. It would seem that their definition of identity relates more to unity, something they argued was not represented in Ondaatje's text.

Another aspect of Ondaatje's text that was overlooked in terms of national identity is its retelling of a forgotten history of Toronto. The panelists focused more on the setting and neglected the text's vision of immigrant history in Toronto. While this topic was touched on briefly, for example Stephen Page pointed out that the text represents a Toronto that does not exist anymore, and Leon Rooke mentioned the immigrant workers and the role they played in the building of the city, this was overshadowed by the book's local setting. Interestingly, prior to this discussion, on the first day Megan Follows pointed out how Canada is made up of diverse peoples with their own cultures and experiences. Yet, not all panelists recognize the diversity of cultures and experiences represented in Ondaatje's text, which could be interpreted as being a Canadian experience. The failure of some of the panelists to acknowledge the immigrant

experience as part of Canadian identity and the regional historical representation in Ondaatje's text demonstrates instability in generating a definitive understanding of a Canadian national identity, in which conflicting representations do not allow for a complete understanding of Canadian identity. While other programs on the CBC such as <u>The Seven Wonders of Canada</u> seek to provide regional representations as part of a collective Canada, on <u>Canada Reads</u> regionalism is both a positive and a negative attribute in a text the entire nation should read.

In <u>The Skin of A Lion</u> was not the only text that raised issues of locality in this season. Mary Walsh asked whether George Elliott Clarke's book of poetry, <u>Whylah Falls</u>, suffers from the same problem of being too local. Nalo Hopkinson was quick to refute this claim: "I'm not buying into this argument that because some place is local that it's not a place that all of Canada can take interest in" (CBC 2002). While Clarke's text is very local in nature, the panelists focussed on the writing as a way of preserving its universality and the language found in Clarke's writing was seen as something relatable to all Canadians. Kim Campbell, however, asked what national conversation would be generated by Canadians reading <u>Whylah Falls</u> and described herself as a "recovering politician" who was still very seriously engaged with what is going on in the world and would like to see "a conversation about big broad brush issues" (CBC 2002). Campbell feared that <u>Whylah Falls</u> would promote a deeply personal conversation that should be enjoyed within "the privacy of the boudoir." Hopkinson responded by pointing to Clarke's language and argued that "the book will generate a deeply personal conversation," that people will use Clarke's language during "lover's quarrels" (CBC 2002). While this does not appear to relate to the issue of regionalism, Hopkinson believes that despite the book's local setting, its language extends to all Canadians because it is so deeply personal. In this discussion, Campbell felt a text needed to touch on broad social issues, while a text that is too personal will

not allow for a national conversation to take place. The panelists did not agree with Campbell's argument about national conversations and argued that a work of literature that is personal and local can be universal through language and experiences such as love and loss. Clarke's text Whylah Falls escaped the issue of being too local, but much like In the Skin of A Lion, the discussion of an unrepresented racial group, this being the Africadians represented in Clarke's text, is left out. The exclusion of such debates demonstrates how the panelists do not discuss all aspects of a text. The limited time of the broadcasts, as well as the direction of the host may not allow for these topics to be covered; however, it also demonstrates how these topics may not coincide with discussions of Canadian identity. The debate around locality in these two texts may not have played a significant role in determining the winner but when examining the discussions of national identity, what is included in the debate, as well as what is omitted, it becomes clear that the panelists are not able to completely generate a distinct notion of Canadianness. Not all of the panelists sought to achieve such a definition, but Campbell's comments in particular directed the conversation into a national territory though her question of what text will generate a national conversation. Campbell's conception of a national conversation is somewhat ambiguous; however, this question raised issues of national identity within the debates. While some pointed to aspects of Canadian identity including multiculturalism, regional solitude, and language, no consensus was reached.

In season two, there was a much broader discussion of nation that revolved around two key texts, Next Episode by Hubert Aquin and The Colony of Unrequited Dreams by Wayne Johnston. Near the end of the debates, host Bill Richardson stated that the two remaining books were essentially "books about dreams of nationhood" (CBC 2003). Justin Trudeau who championed Johnston's work, explained that "to understand the scope of the dreams of Joey

Smallwood is to understand so much about what it is to be Canadian" (CBC 2003), citing

Newfoundland joining confederation and the idea that a person can be both a Newfoundlander

and a Canadian. Unlike the debates in the first season around the setting of Ondaatje's text and

its being too local, in this season the panelists saw texts that represented the struggles of two

distinct regions or groups as being the best ones to recommend to the entire nation. During the

debates they pointed out how all of Canada lived through the October Crisis together and how

Newfoundlanders and Quebecers are similar in how they are distinct from the rest of Canada.

The discussion of nation within these two texts revolved around the representation of a desire for

nationhood and split identities, which Trudeau argued constitute a form of Canadian identity.

However, Danielle Fuller notes 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"

(24), an aspect that was absent from the on-air discussion as an expression of national identity.

Despite the text's nostalgia for Newfoundland sovereignty and its antipathy toward split identity,

Trudeau's own split background, both French and English, allowed him to establish this concept

of nationalism in Johnston's text, as he explained: "Newfoundlanders have always had such a

connection with Quebecers. Both feeling distinct and different from the rest of Canada and

misunderstood on a lot of levels. As a French Canadian that really helped in my understanding of

Colony" (CBC 2003).

The panelists associated these two texts with representing a definition of the nation

through their representation of a quest for nationhood and hyphenated identity; however, they

neglected how they also represent examples of anti-federalism in Canadian history. It would

seem odd that they would want Canadians to embrace this aspect of Canadian history as a

representation of a collective Canadian identity. The panelists, particularly Justin Trudeau, son of

an iconic federalist Prime Minister, applied the notion of a unified Canada represented through Newfoundland and Quebec being part of Canada as representing what it means to be Canadian. This sentiment reinforces the idea of bringing Canadians together around a unique national experience of unification, or ironically through the denial of unification. Despite using the nationalism ideology, they utilized the two texts to generate a concept of Canadian identity, in this case, as a search for nationhood. But because the texts offer conflicting understandings of nationhood and the panelists neglect to include this in their discussions, no real definition of Canadian identity is achieved and their authority as collectors of Canadian history and identity is not definitive. While Denise Bombardier did not believe Next Episode would generate a discussion of Quebec's role in confederation, Bill Richardson's question: "Do you think that this book is going to potentially ignite a kind of discussion again about Quebec's role in the federation?" (CBC 2003) allowed that discussion to take place in the national audience. This demonstrates how Canada Reads raises questions regarding nationality and how Canadian literature can be used to frame these types of discussion, as was the case with Aquin's novel.

In later seasons of Canada Reads discussions of nationalism became more focused on universal aspects of Canadian writing and how a specific author or text speaks to all Canadians. In season five, a great deal of attention was given to poet Al Purdy. As Susan Musgrave, who was championing Purdy's Rooms for Rent in the Outer Planets: Selected Poems 1962-1996, explained: "so many poets speak to who we are as Canadians. So what is a book I would like Canada to read, it's a book that places us on kind of a soulful map and Purdy mapped the soul of who we are as Canadians" (CBC, 2006). Musgrave positioned Purdy as the quintessential Canadian or "the voice of the land" because he "loved Canada so much" (CBC 2006). She referred to an observation made by Purdy himself and explained: "he talked about how there was

no question about Canadian identity, he thought that was an oxymoron, he said: 'We know who we are' and poetry tells us who we are, poets distill life" (CBC 2006). Musgrave adamantly defended Purdy's work and his devotion to Canada. The unifying nature of Purdy's poetry is expressed by Musgrave when Richardson asked her to situate Purdy's work in the country and Purdy's thoughts on Canada. Musgrave explained that "Al brings in the names of towns and places from all across Canada [. . .] there's nowhere he hasn't been" and explained further that "Al talks about our lives, poetry is the distillation of life. He gives us distillations in this book of our Canadian experience. I think he tells us what it is to be us. Poetry he says connects us the way the CBC connects us to one another [. . .] The CBC creates Canada and poets create Canada" (CBC 2006).

Unlike previous discussions of the nation on the program, which focused on specific historical or geographic concepts like split identities or regionalism, the discussion of national identity in reference to Al Purdy was not very specific at all. Musgrave claimed that Purdy loved Canada and that poetry is a universal language of distilling identity. Yet, she did not explain what national identity Purdy's text created, just that it is universal and unifying because of its vast and varied content. When looking at the CBC's role in the production of national identity and unity, as the panelists even stated, the CBC creates Canada, but what Canada is being created? The answer is not made clear during the 2006 season of Canada Reads. Instead an iconic Canadian literary figure is simply assigned the role of speaking to all Canadians because of his own love of the nation and the conception that a Canadian identity does exist. This is very similar to the Greatest Canadian program aired on CBC television, on which finalist Don Cherry was defended by wrestler Bret Hart who asked that "Cherry's patriotism and blunt speech, which is also part of his on-screen persona as a tough hockey coach, be taken seriously because those

are the values of 'ordinary' Canadians" (Rak 64). Hart uses Cherry's patriotism to appeal to all

Canadians as he argues they are the values of 'ordinary' people in Canada. This is similar to

Musgrave's argument about Purdy's love for the nation and how that represents a value used in

establishing a Canadian identity. Therefore, while the CBC may be responsible for 'creating

Canada' as the panelists explain, Canada Reads does not establish what that Canada is or how it

was created through concrete definitions, but rather uses vague and unstable understandings of

what it means to be a Canadian as represented in the texts.

In season seven of Canada Reads, perhaps one of the most populist and stereotypical

notions of Canadianness was the focus of discussion and the subject of the winning book, Paul

Quarrington's novel King Leary, a hockey tale that is both comedic and touching. Musician

Dave Bidini described the book as "the great Canadian novel" (CBC 2008). But not all the

panelists were convinced that this text and its subject matter was representative of all Canadians.

Lisa Moore, for one, said: "I hate hockey," which was greeted with laughter and host Jian

Ghomeshi's response "you've won the nation with that statement, no doubt" (CBC 2008). Moore

suggested that it seemed too predictable to pick a book about hockey for the nation to read. Zaib

Shaikh agreed saying: "I'm not sure that hockey or a hockey character would be identifiable to

Canada or today's Canada" (CBC 2008), suggesting that the multicultural landscape of Canada

may not be so interested in or accepting of hockey. The panelists questioned the predictability of

choosing a book about hockey, but Bidini stated that "you don't have to like hockey to enjoy the

book" (CBC 2008) pointing to the characters and writing as strong characteristics of the book.

While the hockey theme was an often discussed aspect of the book, Jian Ghomeshi asked

whether, given that King Leary represents a past Canada, it represents Canada today. Jemeni

responded by explaining that present-day Canada was missing from Quarrington's novel and "if

we are choosing a book that is going to somehow represent Canada today, if that's what we're thinking about doing, probably an impossible thing to do, but that is missing for me" (CBC 2008). The reference to today's Canada relates to Shaikh's argument of the multicultural landscape of Canada and how the theme of hockey may not relate to all Canadians. Although King Leary won, it seems that it did so not because of its inclusion of hockey. The panel was mostly interested in the characters, the writing, and the humour, with the hockey aspect in fact being a point of contention. This points to the idea that while the text may have won, not all the panelists on the program were so willing to embrace that 'popular notion of Canadianness' and in fact found that to be the weak point of the book. This discomfort with embracing the subject matter of hockey in Quarrington's text creates problems with Moss's argument that the program reinforces popular notions of Canadianness. The panelists in this season illustrate that they are not so willing to embrace these popular definitions and even reject them. This demonstrates the instability in creating a definition of Canadian identity that Moss fails to recognize on the program. While earlier seasons may have been more willing to embrace such popular definitions, this is not always the case, and the panelists are willing to reject and question what Moss believes to be popular notions of Canadianness.

During the discussion, Jian Ghomeshi expanded on the idea of Canadianness by posing a more general question to the panel and said: "I want to ask you all about Canadianness [. . .] three of these books have a very Canadian feel in terms of the setting, the Toronto locale in Brown Girl and the Ring, the hockey arenas in King Leary, and specifically Alberta's glaciers in Icefields. Does that give these books an edge for a book that Canada should read?" (CBC 2008). Dave Bidini responded first by saying yes and added that "it is important for Canadians to read about Canada, especially in a country that is so young and our art is still evolving and our

country is largely inarticulate in terms of culture and how we understand each other" (CBC, 2008). Astronaut Steve MacLean said that he wanted to attack this question a little more subtly and explained: "it's not just whether or not it's Canadian, it's whether or not it's important to Canadians. And I think that's a question you need ask [. . .] I definitely feel that the icefields are important to Canadians but I don't think I picked the book because of that. I picked the book because of its pertinence and because you see through the eyes of these different characters who are real and credible what actually is going on" (CBC 2008). Jemeni felt that her book, The Brown Girl in the Ring, was a Canadian story and it does represent Canada and "you have to change the face of what is a Canadian story that represents Canada and how does that sound and I think that is continuing to change" (CBC 2008). Zaib Shaikh had a different take on the question and said:

> I disagree. [. . .]. For me, the reason I picked Not Wanted on the Voyage is because it actually has more of a global and epic feel. It transcends a place, it actually reaches out to what it means to be human, what it means to be a person, and I think Canadians are not made up of their landscape, they're made up of the people that are reflected through the landscape and how they feel the world around them, and that is very much what Not Wanted on the Voyage is about. (CBC 2008)

Jian Ghomeshi turned to Lisa Moore who was also championing a book that did not fit in with the other books that had a 'Canadian feel' and asked if her book lacks an edge because the setting of Mavis Gallant's stories is outside Canada. Moore took a different position from the panelists this year, and many of those in previous years explaining:

> I think Canadianness is a problem. It feels like an agenda to me and I don't want to read a writer who has a visible agenda. I don't want to be told anything. I want to discover it

when I'm reading. As soon as I see a book about hockey I'm thinking: oh, now we're

going to build a nation and it's going to be something. And I don't want to be a part of a

nation. I don't want to be a Newfoundlander, I don't want to be white, I don't want to be

a woman when I'm reading. I want to be borderless, and nation-less, and sexless, or

multi-sexual. So as soon as I get any hint of an agenda I don't like that. (CBC 2008)

Lisa Moore raises some very interesting arguments regarding identity formation in Canada. She

rejected both the concept of Canadianness as well as the act of having that definition created by

others. For her, literature should not be a tool for establishing a national identity. Moore's

comments illustrate a very specific act of reading, in which the reader is allowed to formulate

experiences and identities on his or her own, without the influence of any agenda found in the

text. However, it also points to a rejection on the part of a panelist about looking for a definition

of Canadian identity. Ghomeshi introduced the question to create a dialogue among the panelists

about how they feel a text represents Canada. Moore, however, rejected this question and

provided an alternative understanding of how literature and identity work based on her own

reading practices. All the panelists had different conceptions of the importance of Canadianness.

While King Leary did win the season, Timothy Findley's novel was the runner up, despite the

fact that it lacked the edge of being identifiably Canadian. Lisa Moore's take on national identity

as a problem separates Canada Reads from other programs on the CBC that strive to create an

authoritative definition of Canadian identity. Moore's comments point to the program's primary

premise, a discussion of literature. While some of the books included have strong undertones of

Canadianness, Moore argued that the reader should not be told what that is, but rather, they

should be able to discover it for themselves. Some of the panelists say it is important to read

about Canada, but Canada Reads, while providing diverse conceptions of Canadian identity, does

not provide a specific definition of what that Canada is for the audience. These varying definitions, along with Moore's rejection of Canadianness, demonstrate that the definition of Canadian identity on the program is unstable.

Along with arguing that the winning texts promote popular notions of Canadianness, Laura Moss also explains: "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" (Moss 10). However, Moss was writing in 2004 and was only discussing the first three seasons of Canada Reads. The seasons that followed do not necessarily fit this model. Looking at some of the winning texts in the years following 2004, such as A Complicated Kindness by Miriam Toews, Lullabies for Little Criminals by Heather O'Neill, and, most recently, The Book of Negroes by Lawrence Hill, durable notions of Canadianness do not necessarily apply because they are not as explicit as in other texts in which the discussion of Canadianness was much more prevalent. Many of the other books in the competition also do not exhibit durable notions of Canada. Therefore, while Canadianness does play an important role in the on air debates, it does not appear to be the deciding factor for selecting texts that are included or those that win based on the content of winning texts that do not exhibit durable notions of Canadianness as Moss argues. Furthermore, when Canada Reads is examined alongside other CBC projects such as The Greatest Canadian or The Seven Wonders of Canada, it becomes clear that Canada Reads does not create an authoritative or concrete definition of Canadian identity. Rather, the ideologies of the panelists, their own conceptions of the nation, and the texts they choose to defend, allow for an evolving discussion to take place from year to year. They generate discussion, not definition. Based on what they choose to discuss and what they omit from the debates, it becomes clear that their understanding of national

identity is unique to their own ideological and personal understandings of Canada. As producer

Ann Jansen explained, 'we don't define it for them,' and the panelists do not define it for the

audience either.

Afterword:

In order to understand how <u>Canada Reads</u> came to be and how it operates from year to year, I contacted the producers responsible for the program's creation and continuation. Producers Ann Jansen and Talin Vartanian provided a detailed look at how <u>Canada Reads</u> was created, how books and panelists are chosen, and their reactions to certain criticisms the program has received. The structure and methodologies of the program were quite straight-forward, but the producer's reactions to the criticisms of <u>Canada Reads</u> were rather interesting, and even a little surprising. I was intrigued to hear most of the criticisms greeted with laughter or even indifference. They explained that <u>Canada Reads</u> at heart is a radio program designed to get people discussing and reading Canadian literature. As Jansen explained, "it's not meant to be the last word on anything," it is meant to be "great radio." The producers agreed that the program does have a rather substantial impact, but there was little agreement as to whether this affected the quality of discussions or harms Canadian literary criticism. <u>Canada Reads</u> was designed to be a populist program, mixing entertainment and information to draw readers to the program to get them talking about Canadian literature. Because it was not meant to be a university discussion and has not included academics during the debate, the program has been able to maintain this populist format, which the producers think critics of the program may not realize. With this information at my disposal, I was now prepared to take on the more difficult task of answering the question regarding the impact the program has had on the institution of Canadian literature.

Throughout the course of my research I discovered that the program's primary measurable impact has been on the Canadian publishing industry. While it is fair to conclude based on increasing book sales that the program is definitely providing recognition for Canadian writers, I became more interested in the cultural significance of the program and the methods it

uses to interpret texts. This project began by examining how <u>Canada Reads</u> is revising or even updating the Canadian canon but I realized that it is impossible to determine whether a text included on the program that is not part of the Canadian canon will automatically earn a place in the canon. There are too many factors that determine a text's canonical status, such as academic study, contributions to Canadian literature, and of course, time. It is too early to say if <u>Rockbound</u> by Frank Parker Day, a once relatively unknown novel from 1928 will be studied in English classrooms across the country or will remain well-known for years to come. However, I was not completely ready to discount the similarities between <u>Canada Reads</u> and the Canadian canon. <u>Canada Reads</u> provides an extensive mix of canonical and non-canonical texts and I was most interested in the non-canonical texts. During broadcasts and launch events for <u>Canada Reads</u> the host mentioned how the program has saved several books from obscurity, taking books that were once out of print and propelling them to best-seller status. There were several examples of this phenomenon, but just because a book is published once again and even becomes a bestseller does not automatically place it into a national canon; however, it does provide one of the first steps in the canonization process, which is recognition. By creating wide-spread recognition for a text in the reading public, the text gains an audience and is therefore assigned value within that community. Determining value is a key step in the canonization process as texts are deemed valuable to the nation and preserved as such. There exist similarities between canon formation and cultural prizes because they are both systems of assigning value to literary texts. While <u>Canada Reads</u> may only represent a small sample of texts and cultural values, it provides a look at how cultural values are applied to texts and how this process takes place within a public discourse. Assigning value to literary texts has often been an academic or critical undertaking, but <u>Canada Reads</u> has become another means for assigning value that is more open and more

interactive, in which the public can hear how the process works and even contribute their own opinions.

My other interest in <u>Canada Reads</u> arose from Fuller's point about academics being more interested in the cultural and ideological significance of the program. Before examining the cultural and ideological impact the program has, I felt it was necessary to discuss the context in which the program operates, which is of course mass media. <u>Canada Reads</u> is, in a limited sense, a media spectacle utilizing various elements of mass media culture including, radio, the internet, and even television. Perhaps the most prevalent use of mass media arises from <u>Canada Reads'</u> use of celebrity culture. This was a difficult argument to make because some of the panelists on <u>Canada Reads</u> are not exactly 'celebrities' in the popular definition of the term; in fact, many of the panelists are not even that well known. However, they still hold a position in Canadian culture as cultural figures, and their status, whether very great or very limited, still contains elements of celebrity culture because of the position they hold. The producers expressed their desire to include high-profile individuals on the program who will generate interesting and passionate discussions about Canadian fiction to draw as many people as possible to tune in. Drawing people to the program was an important part of the program's media spectacle and I related this concept to the theory of para-social interaction between audience member and 'celebrity.' This argument provided an understanding of how the panelist's 'celebrity' status is important for drawing listeners who will listen to their recommendation based on the 'intimate' bond that exists between the listener and the panelist.

The authors also became wrapped up in the media spectacle of <u>Canada Reads.</u> However, this did not happen until the most recent season when authors and panelists were involved in a rather extensive staged media event to launch the program. The authors were paired with their

respective panelist and the entire event highlighted the literary celebrity of the authors and the general celebrity of the panelists. It will be interesting to see if this one launch event and the inclusion of authors will alter how texts are chosen in the future, perhaps giving preference to living authors so they may take part in such events. Furthermore, the instant recognition an author receives as a result of being included on the program demonstrates the impact the program has on determining celebrity for authors and their texts. The level of recognition the author receives certainly changes once they are included on the program and as the most recent season demonstrates, the authors have been thrust into the spotlight that not only provides recognition to their work, but themselves as well. However, an author's celebrity also played a role in the debates involving their text, and at times even hindered their chances of winning the contest, as demonstrated in the case of Yann Martel's best-selling novel Life of Pi. This calls into question what some of the panelists view as their role on the program, as some panelists have demonstrated that they see Canada Reads as a tool for providing recognition to lesser known authors and texts, not highlight novels that are already best-sellers. This is not the case for the entire Canada Reads project, because well-known texts have won a number of times, demonstrating the program is not set on selecting lesser-known novels to provide them with recognition, just that some panelists feel that is their purpose on the program.

In order to examine the cultural and ideological significance of Canada Reads I wanted to outline how the panelists interpret the texts and produce meaning. There was a definite combination of reading practices utilized by the panelists, involving both personal readings and critical readings. The personal readings made the program resemble a more informal book club in which participants share how a book touched them on a personal level or relate it to an experience in their own life. The critical reading practices were much more significant because

they related the texts to broader social issues and revealed how some panelists saw the books as representations of the cultural and social conditions of the nation or the wider global community. The texts were used as a way of determining what Canadians should be reading and how it can be applied to understanding more general social issues. It did not appear as though one reading practice dominated another; however, personal readings were more difficult to argue against than the critical ones because it is difficult to formulate an argument against someone's personal interaction with a text. The interpretive methods utilized by the panelists were also key to analyzing the listening audience's response to the on-air debates. The online forums and the responses left by listeners demonstrated that the reading practices articulated during the on-air debates were both embraced and rejected. The online forum provided a look into how those participating in the program are influenced by the on-air debates and either apply the reading practices used by the panelists themselves, or reject them in favour of their own interpretive strategies.

Furthermore, Canada Reads reflects a diversity of perspectives, as can be seen in the various interpretations utilized by the panelists. The panelists themselves come from a variety of backgrounds allowing many different interpretations of the texts to take place, with no single interpretation being a definitive one. These conflicting interpretations allowed debate to flourish during the on-air debates at times, as well as in the online forums. I also argued that Canada Reads itself becomes its own interpretive community because it is a system of interpretation and reading practices on a more general level. Similar to a book club, the texts are chosen for the audience and topics for discussion are already determined. Therefore, those participating in the program will be reading the same texts and applying the same interpretations based on the discussions found in the debates. The program produces meaning based on the reading practices

of the panelists and those participating in the program, and how the panelists use the texts as a means of defining and determining the significance of the social, political, and cultural situation of Canada as represented in the texts.

Finally, perhaps the most significant and obvious cultural and ideological impact of the program involved discussions of nation. The CBC has broadcast many different programs that deal with the concept of Canadian identity and Canadian culture, though <u>Canada Reads</u> was quite different in how it discussed these ideas. It was interesting to see that <u>Canada Reads</u> did not have a definition of Canadian identity from the beginning, but rather, it used Canadian literature as a way of framing an understanding of identity. These understandings changed from year to year, but during every season of <u>Canada Reads</u> there were distinct discussions of the nation and how the texts included represent a definition of Canadianness based on the panelists' understandings of Canadian culture. A definition established by one panelist was often in conflict with that of another panelist and no single definition was ever agreed upon. As a result, <u>Canada Reads</u> demonstrated the instability of formulating a concrete definition of Canadian identity.

The actual structure and goal of <u>Canada Reads</u> demonstrates a strong nationalist objective, which is drawing the nation together around one work of literature. This is a rather large undertaking that reinforces the role of the CBC in establishing Canadian identity and culture. Through this reading campaign and the imagined community it creates, the nation is united around the cultural product of literature. Whether this unification takes place is difficult to say; however, the project itself demonstrates the desire on the part of the public broadcaster to bring Canadians together and, at the very least, create a discussion around the national literature and how it relates to greater concepts of identity and culture. The listening audience, reading one book collectively that is framed by a specific set of cultural values developed during the on-air

discussions, is interpolated into an imagined community. <u>Canada Reads</u> was not meant to be a program devoted to national identity and Canadian nationalism; however, discussions of the national literature often forced the debates into discussions of nation, where it became framed and constructed around the books included but still remained unstable, undefined, and open for debate.

The research involved in this thesis project was rather extensive, but also presented a number of problems. Perhaps the most prevalent was the scope of <u>Canada Reads</u> itself. The program has been running for eight years and while each season is only a week long, there are still lengthy discussions and a great deal of information found in each broadcast that needs to be examined more closely. In the interest of this project my focus was limited to selected seasons and discussion topics. While this did not hinder my research, it would have been very interesting and worthwhile to examine in more detail the many other discussions during the on-air debates to see how they also contribute to the cultural and ideological impact of <u>Canada Reads</u>. Furthermore, it would have also been useful to examine the online forum discussions in more detail to get a better understanding of how the public interacts with the program, specifically the individual texts and discussions.

<u>Canada Reads</u> provides a very interesting look at how Canadian literature is read, interpreted, and used in a public discourse. There are many cultural and ideological aspects of the program that have an impact on the institution of Canadian literature and Canadian culture. As I mentioned before, the program is not revolutionizing Canadian literature, nor is it revising the Canadian canon; however, as a growing cultural prize it has become another site for determining value of literary texts and providing recognition for authors of varying celebrity. While some in the academic community express unease with the program and its treatment of

Canadian literature, it would be wrong to completely discount it as unimportant to how literature operates within this public discourse. Canada Reads is not revolutionizing Canadian literature, but it might be changing the way it is studied, interpreted, and appreciated in the public and academic discourse. While some academics laughed at the concept of Canada Reads, maybe it is time the laughter stops and we begin to look at this event more closely to see where it is taking Canadian literature next.

Appendix

Canada Reads Finalists 2002-2009

Season 1 (2002)

Winner:

In the Skin of a Lion by Michael Ondaatje, championed by Stephen Page

Finalists:

The Stone Angel by Margaret Laurence, defended by Leon Rooke

A Fine Balance by Rohinton Mistry, defended by Megan Follows

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood, defended by Kim Campbell

Whylah Falls by George Elliott Clarke, defended by Nalo Hopkinson

Season 2 (2003)

Winner:

Next Episode by Hubert Aquin, championed by Denise Bombardier

Finalists:

Sarah Binks by Paul Hiebert, defended by Will Ferguson

Life of Pi by Yann Martel, defended by Nancy Lee

The Lost Garden by Helen Humphreys, defended by Mag Ruffman

The Colony of Unrequited Dreams by Wayne Johnston, defended by Justin Trudeau

Season 3 (2004)

Winner:

The Last Crossing by Guy Vanderhaeghe, championed by Jim Cuddy

Finalists:

Green Grass, Running Water by Thomas King, defended by Glen Murray

The Heart Is an Involuntary Muscle by Monique Proulx, defended by Francine Pelletier

The Love of a Good Woman by Alice Munro, defended by Measha Brueggergosman

Barney's Version by Mordecai Richler, defended by Zsuzsi Gartner

Season 4 (2005)

Winner:

Rockbound by Frank Parker Day, championed by Donna Morrissey

Finalists:

Beautiful Losers by Leonard Cohen, defended by Molly Johnson

No Crystal Stair by Mairuth Sarsfield, defended by Sherraine MacKay

Volkswagen Blues by Jacques Poulin, defended by Roch Carrier

Oryx and Crake by Margaret Atwood, defended by Olivia Chow

Season 5 (2006)

Winner:

A Complicated Kindness by Miriam Toews, championed by John K. Samson

Finalists:

Rooms for Rent in the Outer Planets: Selected Poems 1962-1996 by Al Purdy, defended by

Susan Musgrave

Three Day Road by Joseph Boyden, defended by Nelofer Pazira

Deafening by Frances Itani, defended by Maureen McTeer

Cocksure by Mordecai Richler, defended by Scott Thompson

Season 6 (2007)

Winner:

Lullabies for Little Criminals by Heather O'Neill, defended by John K. Samson

Finalists:

<u>Natasha and Other Stories</u> by David Bezmozgis, defended by Steven Page

<u>Stanley Park</u> by Timothy Taylor, defended by Jim Cuddy

<u>Songs of Kahunsha</u> by Anosh Irani, defended by Donna Morrissey

<u>Children of My Heart</u> by Gabrielle Roy, defended by Denise Bombardier

Season 7 (2008)

Winner:

<u>King Leary</u> by Paul Quarrington, championed by Dave Bidini

Finalists:

<u>Brown Girl in the Ring</u> by Nalo Hopkinson, defended by Jemeni

<u>From the Fifteenth District</u> by Mavis Gallant, defended by Lisa Moore

<u>Icefields</u> by Thomas Wharton, defended by Steve MacLean

<u>Not Wanted on the Voyage</u> by Timothy Findley, defended by Zaib Shaikh

Season 8 (2009)

Winner:

<u>The Book of Negroes</u> by Lawrence Hill, championed by Avi Lewis

Finalists:

<u>The Fat Women Next Door is Pregnant</u> by Michel Tremblay, defended by Anne-Marie

Withenshaw

<u>Fruit</u> by Brian Francis, defended by Jen Sookfong Lee

<u>Mercy Among the Children</u> by David Adams Richards, defended by Sarah Slean

<u>The Outlander</u> by Gil Adamson, defended by Nicholas Campbell

Works Cited

"About the Scotiabank Giller Prize." Scotiabank Giller Prize.ca.

http://www.scotiabankgillerprize.ca/about.htm.

Addington, Ann H. "Talking about Literature in University Book Club and Seminar Settings."

Research in the Teaching of English. 36.2 (2001): 212-248.

Anderson, Benedict. Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of

Nationalism. 2nd Ed. London: Verso Press, 1996.

Bourdieu, Pierre. Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste. Trans. Richard Nice.

Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984.

"Bringing Sexy Back: Welcome to Canada Reads '09." CBC.ca. 2008. "Canada Reads: The

Book Club." 22 October 2008

http://www.cbc.ca/canadareads/2008/10/bringing_sexy_back_welcome_to_1.html.

Broadcasting Act. S.C., 1991, c. 11. 31 July 2009. http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/ShowFullDoc/cs/b-

9.01//20090817/en

Caldwell, Rebecca. "CBC fishes 1928 novel out of obscurity: Rockbound, the story of an island

community off Nova Scotia that was selling 200 copies a year, beats Atwood bestseller."

Globe and Mail 26 February 2005, R11.

"Canada Reads." 2009. CBC.ca, CBC Radio One, www.canadareads.ca.

"Canada Reads." 2008. CBC.ca, CBC Radio One, www.canadareads.ca

"Canada Reads." 2002-2007. Canada Reads Audio CD. Canada Reads Production Staff.

January 2009.

"Canada Reads 2009 Launch Video." CBC.ca. "Canada Reads Video." 2009

http://www.cbc.ca/canadareads/audio.html.

"Canada Reads Forum." CBC.ca. "Canada Reads: The Book Club." 2009.

    http://www.cbc.ca/forums/?plckForumPage=ForumDiscussion&plckDiscussionId=Cat%

Clarke, Debra. "The Active Pursuit of Active Viewers: Directions in Audience Research."

    Canadian Journal of Communication. 25.1 (2000): 39-60.

Corse, Sarah M. Nationalism and Literature: The Politics of Culture in Canada and the United

    States. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Cosgrave, James F. and Patricia Cormak. "Disenchanted Wonder: Collecting Canadian Identity

    through the CBC 'Seven Wonders of Canada' Project." Topia: Canadian Journal of

    Cultural Studies. 20 (2008): 5-22.

Eaman, Ross A. Channels of Influence: CBC Audience Research and the Canadian Public.

    Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994.

English, James F. "Winning the Culture Game: Prizes, Awards, and the Rules of Art." New

    Literary History. 33.1 (2002): 109-135.

Ferguson, Will. "Secrets of a Book Panelist: Outraged e-mails. Paranoid Mutters about 'Hidden

    Agendas.' Would I do it again? No, but I'm Looking Forward to Hearing Next Year's

    Canada Reads Debates, Will Ferguson Writes." Globe and Mail. 12 May 2003: R1.

Fish, Stanley. Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities.

    Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980.

Frye, Northrop. The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination. Toronto: Anansi, 1971.

Fuller, Danielle. "Listening to the Readers of 'Canada Reads.'" Canadian Literature. 193 (2007):

    11-34.

Fuller, Daneille, and DeNel Rehberg Sedo. "A Reading Spectacle for the Nation: The CBC and

    'Canada Reads.'" Journal of Canadian Studies 40.1 (2006): 5-36.

Ghomeshi, Jian. Telephone Interview. 27 January 2009.

Guillory, John. <u>Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation</u>. Chicago: University

of Chicago Press, 1993.

Hermstein Smith, Barbara. "Value/Evaluation." <u>Critical Terms for Literary Study</u>. 2nd ed. Ed.

Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Jansen, Ann. Telephone Interview. 25 February 2009.

Johnson, Randal. Introduction. <u>The Field of Cultural Production</u>. By Pierre Bourdieu. New York:

Columbia University Press, 1993. 1-25.

"Joseph Boyden Wins $50K Giller Prize." <u>CBC.ca</u>. 2008. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

11 November 2008 http://www.cbc.ca/arts/books/story/2008/11/11/08giller-prize.html.

Kamboureli, Smaro. "The Culture of Celebrity and National Pedagogy." <u>Homework:

Postcolonialism, Pedagogy, and Canadian Literature</u>. Ed. Cynthia Sugars. Ottawa:

University of Ottawa Press, 2004. 35-55.

Kaplan, Carey and Ellen Cronan Rose. <u>The Canon and the Common Reader</u>. Knoxville: The

University of Tennessee Press, 1990.

Kellner, Douglas. <u>Media Spectacle</u>. London: Routledge, 2003.

Lakritz, Naomi. "Canlit's Survival Needs Readers' Can-do Attitudes." <u>Calgary Herald</u> 2 January

2009

http://www.calgaryherald.com/entertainment/Canlit+survival+needs+readers+attitudes/1

132981/story.html.

Littau, Karin. <u>Theories of Reading: Books, Bodies and Bibliomania</u>. Cambridge: Polity Press,

2006.

McClelland, Jack. "To Al Purdy." 11 February 1977. Imagining Canadian Literature: The

    Selected Letters of Jack McClelland. Ed. Sam Solecki. Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1998.

    222-224.

McLaren, Leah. "The Plight of the Almost-Famous Canadian Celebrity." Globe and Mail. 10

    May 2003: L3.

Moss, Laura. "Canada Reads" Editorial. Canadian Literature 182 (2004): 6-10.

Pike, E. Holly. "Mass Marketing, Popular Culture, and the Canadian Celebrity Author." Making

    Avonlea: L. M. Montgomery and Popular Culture. Ed. Irene Gammel. Toronto:

    University of Toronto Press, 2002. 238-252.

Rabinovitch, Jack. Foreword. Prize Writing: The 10th Anniversary Collection The Giller Prize.

    Ed. Gary Stephen Ross. Toronto: The Giller Prize Foundation, 2003.

Rak, Julie. "Canadian Idols? CBC's 'The Greatest Canadian' as Celebrity History."

    Programming Reality: Perspectives on English-Canadian Television. Ed. Zoe Druick and

    Aspa Kotsopoulos. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008. 51-69.

Richter, David H. Introduction. "Reader-Response Theory." The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts

    and Contemporary Trends. 3rd Edition. Ed. David H. Richter. Boston: St. Martin's Press,

    2007, 962-981.

Rojek, Chris. Celebrity. London: Reaktion Books, 2004.

Salutin, Rick. "Canada Reads, For Show." Globe and Mail. 28 April 2006: A23.

Schmidt, Sarah. "Half Unable to Name a Canadian Author: Poll." National Post. 30 December

    2008 http://www.nationalpost.com/arts/story.html?id=1124628.

"Seven Wonders of Canada Criteria." CBC.ca. "The Seven Wonders of Canada." 2007.

    http://www.cbc.ca/sevenwonders/criteria.html

Taylor, Kate. "Cultural Contests out of Control." <u>Globe and Mail</u>. 23 February 2005: R1.

Turner, Graeme. <u>Understanding Celebrity</u>. London: Sage Publications, 2004.

Vartanian, Talin. Telephone Interview. 7 January 2009.

Vipond, Mary. <u>The Mass Media in Canada</u>. 2nd Ed. Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 1992.

Wagner, Vit. "Musicians Make Best Book Backers." <u>Toronto Star</u>. 2 March 2009: E03.

Wharton, Thomas. <u>Icefields</u>. Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2007.