

Reading Matters: The Commodification of Contemporary Book Cultures in the UK & North America

Session Organizer

Danielle Fuller
Dept. of American & Canadian Studies
University of Birmingham
Edgbaston
Birmingham
B15 2TT
UK

Description of panel

“Reading Matters” addresses a significant (yet repressed) knowledge-gap within cultural studies: the contemporary production and popularity of literary print culture. The intensely mediated processes of literary production within globalised English-language publishing and media structures have reconfigured the relations among readers, writers, producers and books. Readers have become fans. Publishers often act as brand managers. The media represents reading as a popular pursuit and writers as celebrities. Book groups and mass reading events have proliferated in the UK and North America over the last 10 years. The rising popularity of book groups (face-to-face, online and broadcast) has also prompted a fascinating range of responses and interventions from book publishing companies, book event producers, and the various cultural and educational agencies that are invested in the promotion of reading and literacy.

We interrogate the matrix of communication and commodification that shapes various English-language contemporary book cultures in the early 21st century in three nation-states. The session will examine the production, reception and commodification of key popular formations within contemporary print culture, namely book clubs and mass reading events. What do contemporary cultures of reading look like? What cultural work does shared reading perform – and for whom? To what extent have book clubs and contemporary reading practices from word-of-mouth recommendation through to interpretive strategies become commodified? Who are the resisting readers and how do they operate?

Our interdisciplinary session employs a series of empirical case studies in order to answer these questions. Drawn from wider research projects on contemporary cultures of reading and the production and marketing of contemporary fiction and non-fiction, we examine “One Book, One Chicago,” the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s nationwide book group, “Canada Reads,” and publishers’ relationships with book clubs in North America and the UK.

“Puppeteers & Marionettes”: The Business of Book Clubs

DeNel Rehberg Sedo. denel.rehbergsedo@msvu.ca

Department of Public Relations & Cultural Studies program, Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Canada.

Major shifts in the twentieth-century book publishing industries of the US, the UK and Canada have been well documented. The documentation available to cultural studies scholars interested in the complex matrix of communication within contemporary print culture continues to grow: the demise of small publishing houses or their amalgamations into multi-national media conglomerates; the resulting changes in business operations and staffing practices; evolving audience/reader considerations; and social and technological changes both within the industry, and in society more widely. This paper considers in detail how these shifts affect book club readers in particular. Based on research carried out by Claire Squires of Oxford Brooks University, Danielle Fuller of the University of Birmingham, and myself, I provide a critique of the relationship between book club readers and publishers, and an analysis of reading and community as a commodified social practice. Using the findings from interviews with book club members, an online study of readers in both face-to-face and virtual book clubs, interviews with publishers and other cultural workers in both Canada and the UK, the paper examines the complex framework of book distribution, marketing, consumption and reception in the three nation-states at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries. I argue that the relationship fostered by publishers is one that book club readers both readily accept and are sometimes resistant towards. The title of the paper, with book club members questionably posited as ‘puppeteers’ and publishers as ‘marionettes,’ hints at this. Through an analysis of the relationship between publishers and book club readers, the broader processes of literary commodification are brought into focus.

Book City Blues: “One Book, One Chicago”

Danielle Fuller. d.fuller@bham.ac.uk

Department of American & Canadian Studies, University of Birmingham, UK

Although not the first “One Book, One Community” program to be staged in the USA, “One Book, One Chicago” has rapidly become a model for mass reading events, not only in North America, where there are over 130 city-, state-, province- and region-wide programs, but also in the UK where it was the direct inspiration for the BBC’s “The Big Read” (2003) and Bristol’s “Great Reading Adventure” (2003ff.). Running twice a year, propelled by substantial city funds and a veritable army of cultural workers, “One Book, One Chicago” operates as a prestige brand that sells a particular notion of literacy and community as well as many copies of the selected books.

What meanings does this particular mass reading event lend to the reading of literary fiction in the twenty-first-century? How are relationships between cultural mediators such as librarians, book publishers, the retail book trade and readers re-configured by large-scale shared reading events? “Book City Blues” interrogates the production and reception of “One Book, One Chicago” to determine the discursive and ideological work that this program performs, and to elucidate the processes of commodification tangled up in the promotion and performance of shared reading. The paper will draw upon primary research conducted in October 2004 and October 2005 using a variety of methodologies

including: qualitative interviews with organizing agencies, participant observation, focus group interviews with readers in various parts of the city, and textual analysis of media representations of the program.

Reading Around the Nation?: Reader Reception of the CBC's "Canada Reads"
Anouk Lang. a.e.lang@bham.ac.uk
Department of American & Canadian Studies, University of Birmingham, UK

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's annual celebrity literary showdown, "Canada Reads," provides a rich terrain for exploring some of the vernacular reading practices which emerge from this and other mass reading events. This multimodal event allows access to the experiences and responses of "real" (i.e. non-professional) readers via a number of channels, including audio recordings of the celebrity panellists' debates, framings of the texts and debates on the CBC website, internet discussion boards, letters from readers to the CBC, representations of the event in the national print media, the texts themselves, and focus group discussions with readers who have both participated and chosen not to participate. In this paper, I will use material from these various channels to investigate what readers take out of this national reading event, why they participate, what kinds of pleasure are involved, and how these personal experiences chime with the ideological currents that may be seen to circulate around "Canada Reads."