

Reading for the Nation: The CBC's "Canada Reads" and the Politics of Reading CanLit

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The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's radio show "Canada Reads" (2002-2006) is an annual series broadcast on CBC Radio 1 that aims to select a work of Canadian Literature "that all of Canada should read together." Predicated on the CBC's official mandate to "[develop] radio programming that enlightens, reflects and connects Canadians," the show attempts to create a huge, cross-country reading group (CBC Press Release 2003). Adapting a "Survivor" type format, five celebrity panellists each defend a text and then vote off one book on each subsequent program. Debates and the voting results are broadcast on radio and TV daily for five days, while summaries, additional features and the radio broadcasts are published on the show's website. On-line discussion boards and a "People's Choice" ballot offer listeners the chance to participate. In 2005 half a million listeners tuned in to the radio show alone. Viewed by some cultural commentators as further evidence of the "middle-broving" of the CBC (Niedzviecki 2002: 16), the show has also been criticized for presenting "depoliticized discussions" of books that explicitly interrogate official histories of nation-building and immigration such as Ondaatje's *In the Skin of A Lion* (Moss 2004: 6).

This paper will challenge and complicate this latter accusation through an analysis of selected examples of book discussions that have taken place on-air among panellists and on-line among readers. I will argue that, while the show's on-air format often promotes a problematic and racially exclusive notion of a "Canada" that "reads," there have, nevertheless, been important instances of contestation that unsettle homogenizing notions of "multi-culturalism" and "nation" - and that consequently re-politicize the reading of CanLit.

Making Strange: CanLit, Canada Reads and the Alterity Fetish

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The dislocations arising from the ruptures of migration can be seen as enabling a particularly compelling kind of critique: a critical distanciation brought about by the oblique positioning of those caught between cultures and categories. Reading migration as a geopolitical, cultural, and epistemological extension of the Russian Formalist concept of *ostranenie*, I use a selection of twentieth-century Canadian novels to explore the potential positive values of the idea of migration, and the otherness it repeatedly figures: not only movements across nations and cultures, but boundary-crossings and transgressions of other sorts.

Literary criticism has tended to identify such alterity as positive: Shklovsky championed the defamiliarising of ordinary life as a means of revitalising

perception. But what happens when such texts are taken beyond the realm of the textual into that of the political? In this paper, I explore the fetishising of alterity in the novels chosen as selections for the CBC's Canada Reads program, and examine the way this otherness is used in attempts to endorse and promote some texts and some versions of 'Canada' over others. If the 'making strange' capacity of transgressive movements can be read as a liberating and enlightening force, what is at stake when this is co-opted as, paradoxically, a norm and an ideal?