

Title of Panel:

Re-Encounters: Politics, Practices and Problems within Contemporary Event-based Cultures of Reading in North America and the UK

Abstract:

Our panel aims to examine and theorise various types of encounter between contemporary readers and popular fiction in North America and the UK. Specifically, the presenters focus upon readers and cultural workers involved in large-scale city- and nation-wide reading events which, since 1998, have 'massified' the model of a reading group in order to encourage citizens to share the experience of reading a selected book (or series of books). The ideological and discursive work performed by these contemporary reading events is investigated by panellists from the standpoints of participating and non-participating readers, event organizers, and the various institutions which sponsor them. By doing so, we elucidate not only the politics of mass reading events, and the meanings of reading which they generate, but also some of the social, cultural and textual practices of shared reading which they make possible.

Each paper employs different case studies in its analysis of readers' encounters with books and reading events: 'Richard & Judy's Book Club' (UK) & 'Canada Reads'; 'One Book, One Community' programs in Seattle (US), Liverpool (UK) and Huntsville (US). Further, we explore a variety of extra-, inter- and intra-textual encounters which are variously mediated through mass media and digital technology; through face-to-face reader interaction, and through particular community events. The interdisciplinary research informing the presentations has been undertaken using a combination of textual and empirical methods which, we believe, enables a multi-layered investigation of contemporary cultures of reading. Our goal then, is not only to analyse aspects reading practices, reading events and their respective politics, but also to demonstrate the necessity of evolving methodologies appropriate to research on contemporary book cultures.

Details:

DeNel Rehberg Sedo

Close Encounters of a Mediated Kind: Rethinking Book Audience through 'Richard & Judy's Book Club' and 'Canada Reads.'

In his important *First Steps Toward a History of Reading*, Robert Darnton argues that 'throughout most of history, books had audiences rather than readers' (p. 169). He was referring to gatherings of people who would listen to readers while working on practical tasks such as spinning, making cigars and sewing. But, what does book audience mean in the twenty-first century? This presentation uses an analysis of the UK's 'Richard and Judy's Book Club' and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's (CBC) 'Canada Reads' to evaluate the construction and negotiation of symbolic meanings of reading in a mediated culture that suggests that literary fiction reading is moving out of high culture

into popular culture and the everyday. Our first point of inquiry is the readers who participate in the events. Participation includes watching or listening to the program, interacting with other readers in f2f or online environments, and reading and responding to the texts.

The research for this presentation is gleaned from quantitative data collected from more than 2000 online survey respondents in the UK and Canada, and qualitative data collected through f2f focus group interviews with readers in the two nation-states who participate in these reading events and those who do not. The analysis of this data suggests that readers cannot be neatly labeled as inexpert, middle-brow readers, but rather as complex participants in contemporary cultures of reading who use media to inform, enhance and enrich their reading experiences. Reader participation reflects not only a re-encounter with literary texts, but also shifting social practices that may be unique to the digitized spaces of twenty-first century life where readers can connect with authors, publishers, event producers and each other in ways that were not possible when Darnton wrote about readers as audiences 20 years ago.

Anouk Lang

One Book, Whose Community? Encountering Others through Mass Reading Events

The 'One Book, One Community' reading event model continues to be taken up by increasing numbers of cities, communities and educational institutions, particularly in North America. The US National Endowment for the Arts, for example, has since 2006 been funding The Big Read, and in November 2007 announced that grants totalling \$1.5 million would be given to 127 communities and institutions to continue the programme into the first half of 2008.

The way these community events are framed by their organisers (in promotional materials, press releases, reading guides and other ancillary documents) suggests that reading, and reading together, is expected to be capable of achieving a great deal, particularly in the area of social cohesion. Press releases characterise the UK citywide read Liverpool Reads as capable of 'enhanc[ing] social capital through the building of networks across the community' (http://liverpoolreads.com/small_island/launch_press_release.htm), while the One Book, One Vancouver programme 'cultivat[es] a culture of reading and discussion in Vancouver by bringing people together around one great book' (<http://www.vpl.ca/MDC/news06/obov2006announce.html>). This paper looks at the range of objectives which community reading programmes from three countries project themselves as aiming to accomplish, and explores the extent to which they succeed. It takes as its particular focus the citywide reading project Seattle Reads, and examines its use of three texts (Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor was Divine*, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*) in order to build up a picture of a community reading event which, through its choice of texts dealing with cultural and ethnic 'others', opens up spaces in which transformative

encounters might potentially occur. I suggest, too, that Seattle Reads' approach to community reading compares favourably with other models in terms of achieving the kind of social 'work' One Book events are so frequently framed as having the potential to accomplish.

Danielle Fuller

Labours of Love – A Reader-Researcher's True Story.

'Labours of Love' considers a series of 'extra-textual' encounters: between cultural workers (such as librarians) and their local community; between event organizers and readers, and between researchers and cultural workers.

My paper will focus on the problematic of investigating and theorising the labour of the cultural workers who organize mass reading events, in particular those programs which employ the 'One Book, One Community' model originated in 1998 by Nancy Pearl and Chris Higashi via the Washington Center for the Book, Seattle. Drawing upon interviews and participant observation research conducted as part of a large-scale collaborative study of contemporary mass-mediated reading events, I will focus upon an issue that is both unsettling and intriguing to us as researchers: how to critique and conceptualise the labour of cultural workers without being 'literally critical' of them - that is, devaluing their work as cultural mediators? This is an ethical question with both practical and intellectual consequences that I will examine as I work towards a more nuanced understanding of the ideological, material and emotional labour expended by reading event organizers. Their shared !

and explicitly declared 'passion for reading' is, I will argue, an epistemological clue that I will pursue through two brief case studies: 'One Book, One Huntsville,' (US) and 'Liverpool Reads' (UK).

In addition to analysing a key aspect of contemporary cultures of reading, this presentation also argues for the situation of contemporary book cultures' research within a disciplinary matrix of book history, cultural studies and women's studies.