Canadian Young People and their Reading Worlds: Conditions of Literature in Contemporary Canada

—Margaret Mackey

Consider these observations on the current literary scene for young Canadians:

- Writers, illustrators and publishers produce wonderful books for children and adolescents.
- Contemporary young people achieve basic literacy and also develop sophisticated literary understanding through their exposure to clever, appealing, and subtle literature created just for them.
- The output of Canadian children's publishing is extensive and varied when compared to what was available for children of a couple of generations ago.
- Those who work with children and their literature have a job that is both significant and special.

I actually believe all the statements in this list. But this rosy account of affairs is also very partial. As Peter Hunt puts it, "children's books may look sweet and innocent, but they cannot be—and nor can their critics" (154). The world of children's literature cannot be sealed off in a bubble; it exists in a context of real children and their institutions (family, school, library—which are not emotionally, pedagogically, or financially equal), of publishers and booksellers driven by commercial considerations, of rapid cultural and technological change that affects children as much as or more than older citizens.

I am an academic working in the area of literature for young people. Although I am very interested in the literary qualities of texts for youth, I also firmly believe that those who work with children's literature should make a point of reading the business news. Market conditions, institutional pressures, technological developments—all impinge on how literature is created, distributed, and presented to young people.

Curious about conditions in contemporary Canada, I set out to establish some facts and figures re-

lating to the children's book world in this country. Readers will soon perceive that I am neither a social statistician nor a book historian. But the picture of the contemporary scene that I uncovered, while partial, is also illuminating.

What the numbers tell us

The books

Publishing figures tell an interesting story. Hundreds of new books for children are appearing every year in Canada. In a single generation, the quantity of production has increased exponentially. The details provided by the figures are telling; the contrast between 1968 and the present is startling.

Announcements of new children's books for 2004 in *Quill & Quire* break down as follows:

2004 publication announcements, *Quill & Quire*

	Spring 2004	Fall 2004	Totals
Fiction	119	146	265
Non-fiction	116	129	245
Picture books	66	77	143
Totals	301	352	653

Between them, the two lists amount to more than 650 new books (not all new titles, since the list includes paperback editions, re-issues, etc.) that could be added to bookshop and library shelves in just a single year ("Children's Announcements: New Books" 24-32; "Children's Announcements: Fall Books" 14-23).

Such a total for a single, not especially outstanding, year offers a stark contrast to the situation of 1968. As Roy MacSkimming reports, Sheila Egoff's statement to an Ontario Royal Commission outlined the disparities between Canada and other English-speaking countries at that time:

> In 1968, Egoff reported, American publishers had issued 3,874 children's titles and British publishers 2,075; Canadian publishers had produced 47. That figure was equal to only 1.2 percent of the American total, in contrast to the numbers for school textbooks, of which Canada had produced 207 compared with the Americans' 2,210, or nearly 10 percent, a closer reflection of the difference in population. In fact, Egoff pointed out, Canada was the only country of the three that published more textbooks than children's books. (274)

For those of us who remember 1968, that mention of the discrepancy between textbooks and literature rings true; when I was a child, Canada was certainly something you could learn about, but not something you read about for enjoyment.

Since then, that ratio between textbooks and children's books has altered drastically, though textbooks

still represent the larger number. In the two-year period of 2000-2001, according to Statistics Canada, 2,011 textbooks were published in Canada, and 1,421 children's books ("Profile of Book Publishing"). It is a radical change in a short time.

The publishers

The number of Canadian children's publishers is certainly greater than it was thirty years ago. The website of the Canadian Children's Book Centre provides a picture of diversity and plenty. The site offers links to sixty-two publishers, mostly in English. A perusal of the sixty-two links makes fascinating reading. I counted several duplications and dead-ends, one publisher that seemed to be entirely American, and one publisher with only one book to feature. Of the remaining (still well over fifty), there are publishers of fiction and of educational texts, regional publishers, publishers with a particular cultural emphasis (on the North, for example, or on Métis culture), and a museum publisher. The initial impression is of vibrant cultural life flourishing in all parts of the country and in many different fields of interest. According to a study of the Canadian Children's Book Market, conducted in 2001, sales of children's books in English in 1999 amounted to more than $44 million (Evans and Company 4). Overall, publishers sold $59,342 of Canadian children's books in all languages in 1999; acting as exclusive agents, they sold another $146,023 of imported books, for a total of $205,365. The total for all books sold in Canada in 1999 was $994,244, so children's books represent 20.7% of total book sales in Canada (Evans and Company sec. I, 1). These are big numbers and, at face value, represent a triumphant success story.

The reality is more complex and more disheartening. A reduction in the Canadian market (estimated by some to be as high as a fall of 35% in the years leading up to the millennium [Strauss M1]) leads to pressures to sell in the United States instead. Orca Books, for example, saw its American sales move from less than 10% of the total to 60% in just five years (Strauss M1). American buyers generally prefer generic content to material that is specifically Canadian, so publishers feel the pressure to make their books more neutral.

Groundwood Books could be perceived as a flagship Canadian children's publisher. MacSkimming describes its founder, Patsy Aldana, in glowing terms:

> Recognized on three continents as a superb children's publisher, Aldana has produced a wide range of remarkably original work, distinguished by sophisticated text and art and amply honoured by a long list of national and international awards over a quarter-century. (287)

But Aldana finds the current national situation dis-

couraging. At present, "exports now [account] for 60% of Groundwood's revenues" (Spendlove 16). Aldana says that Groundwood has had no choice but to look to the United States: "Cuts over the years to education, particularly school libraries, and lapsed requirements for school textbooks to be published in Canada have deprived Canadian children of the opportunity to learn about their own country" (Spendlove 16). In 2001, Groundwood experienced "a 'huge' pressure to 'de-Canadianize' books," according to Aldana, who commented, "Americans have no interest in Canadian content" (Strauss M1).

Certainly many more children's books are being published, but even the publishers are expressing a certain discomfort at the kinds of books they feel forced to produce.

So the larger numbers of books being published may not reflect the dynamic national publishing phenomenon that a first glance at the figures would suggest. Certainly many more children's books are being published, but even the publishers are expressing a certain discomfort at the kinds of books they feel forced to produce.

The bookstores

Similarly, the situation with regard to where children can buy these books is more complex than first meets the eye. The Canadian Children's Book Centre site lists a total of 225, mainly independent bookshops with an English-language children's section located across the country. A few entries on this list are large grocery stores rather than specialist bookstores, and it is certain that many more stores in this category are not tallied here, nor is there an entry for a single Wal-Mart or Costco. In other words, in terms of absolute numbers the list is conservative. Furthermore, there is almost no mention of the large chains in this list, so it can be supplemented by the listing on the Chapters/Indigo site, which totals 261 shops (Chapters, Indigo, Coles, Smithbooks, and The Book Company) across the country. I am making the assumption that most of the chain stores listed on the Chapters/Indigo site have a children's section, though it is possible that one or two branches of The Book Company located in downtown sites may not.

It is likely that some of these figures are out of date. It is not clear, for example, when the CCBC site was last updated; the information about Alberta bookstores listed on this site, which I checked more closely, was recent but not current. Nevertheless, the provincial breakdown makes interesting reading for a cautious reader who takes none of these figures as

completely reliable. The two lists together total 486 bookstores—many more than existed a generation ago. In my list below, I have marked the numbers of bookstores describing themselves as religious in orientation, on the presumption that they will offer a more specialist selection, and in many other cases the name of the store suggests such a link even if it is not mentioned explicitly.

An estimate of stores selling children's books in Canada

	independent bookstores selling children's books (CCBC website)	major chain bookstores (indigo.chapters website)
Newfoundland & Labrador	1	4
Nova Scotia	12	17
Prince Edward Island	3	2
New Brunswick	10	6
Québec (English only)	8	13
Ontario	92*	126
Manitoba	15	6
Saskatchewan	0	9
Alberta	23**	39
British Columbia	60***	37
North West Territories	1	0

* 4 Ontario bookstores are described on this list as having a religious affiliation—2 Christian, 2 Jewish
** 3 Alberta bookstores are described as having a religious affiliation—all Christian
*** 1 BC bookstore is described as having a Christian affiliation

The big chain bookstores have had a major impact on the national picture and it is possible that some of the independent bookstores cited here have, in fact, since this list was compiled, been driven out of existence by the competition from the superstores. Patsy Aldana of Groundwood Books is inclined to lay some of the blame for stagnation in the Canadian trade market for children's materials at the door of the chain bookstores: "'To sell children's books you need an ample amount of space and trained staff,' she says. 'The chain, as per its definition, is unable to provide either of those'" (Spendlove 16). The big chains do provide a reasonable amount of square footage for children's books, but a great deal of that space is devoted to the massed ranks of series books and variations on the highly commodified titles. Some of the staff are interested and knowledgeable about books for young people, but the turnover of staff is high and many branches hire generalists rather than specialists. "Handselling"—the informed recommendation of individual titles to individual customers—is an important part of book marketing, especially in the children's section where the purchaser is less likely to be the ultimate reader of the book, as adults buy for children. Generalists are less well-equipped to handsell.

On the other hand, Vivian Howard's recent survey of Nova Scotia teenagers suggests that many of them find the chain stores particularly congenial places to

go for books. It may be that, in rural Nova Scotia particularly, the options are not extensive. In any case, there are interesting possibilities for follow-up research about what makes a bookshop attractive to children, adolescents and adults.

The readers

We need to know more than we do about who is reading what among young Canadians. Current reading figures for Canadian children are especially hard to find, but a chart from Statistics Canada ("Canadians' Reading Habits") suggests that the stereotypes of non-reading teenagers are woefully wrong. A 1998 survey shows that 61.3% of Canadians say they read books. Broken down by age, the figures reveal that the strongest group of book readers is not seniors, as is so often assumed, but people between the ages of fifteen and nineteen, of whom 71.4% read books. Of this age group 40.3% read at least a book a month, again the highest number for that category, and above the national average of 36.2%. Lest it be thought that reading compulsory material for school or college might be skewing these numbers, it is noticeable that magazine reading figures are comparable. According to Statscan, 71.2% of all Canadians read a magazine. Among readers aged fifteen to nineteen years, 80.7% are magazine readers, and again this age bracket dominates the rest. In large surveys of other comparable countries, reading often drops in the teenage years when compared to childhood (Children's Literature Research Centre 119-21; Hall and Coles 2), so it may be reasonable to assume that children (who are not included in the Statscan survey) are reading for pleasure even more than their older teenage siblings.

The collective impact of these numbers

Altogether, these figures suggest many books, many publishers, many bookstores and many readers. More does not automatically mean better, of course, but improved conditions of production and distribution at least lay the groundwork for the possibility of better. But the pressures are numerous and invidious. Sometimes more is just more; the proliferation of mediocre and "de-Canadianized" titles contributes little to the national fabric and a child who has read, say, five mediocre titles in a row is entitled to ask why adults make such a fuss about reading anyway. We badly need current and reliable information about the national picture of childhood and adolescent reading patterns. But in the absence of better data, the indicators I have uncovered do show an expanded field of materials for young people compared to the situation of even thirty years ago, and a positive response to reading among many young people.

Looking at domestic issues

We may gain further insight into children and their

reading through more oblique routes. One of those is to explore the institutions in which young people find their place in society. The first of these institutions is the family, a social unit of profound importance to children, and the first provider of access to many media, including books.

Domestic computer access

By and large, Canadian children live in families. Almost universally, these families are concerned about how their children will become equipped to cope as adults. One consequence of this concern is that families with children are more likely than any other segment of the Canadian population to own a computer and to have access to the Internet. According to the large survey of Canadian young people sponsored by the Media Awareness Network, "Canada is one of the world leaders in terms of Internet penetration in households" (Environics, 2001, n.p.). A large-scale 2002 survey of young people between Grade 6 and Grade 10, which reported in 2004, shows that only 6% of students lived in a house with no computer, 53% owned one computer, 27% owned two computers, and 14% owned more than two computers (Boyce 13). About 85% of these Canadian young people have access to the Internet at home, an impressive figure. "The average Canadian family [with an Internet connection] spends more than 32 hours per week online," according to an Ipsos-Reid survey of 2002 (Pastore). Parents clearly recognize that children will be more comfortable with computers if they make their acquaintance early. We need to recognize that some of these statistics are fairly fluid—a domestic computer may be old or broken. Nevertheless, it is striking that Boyce found that more than four-fifths of the Grade 10 students in his study

> indicated that they had first used the Internet between the ages of 9 and 13…Half of younger students (Grades 6 and 7) surveyed and two-thirds of older students reported spending one or more hours a day playing on the computer during the school week. Boys were more likely than girls to be involved in this leisure activity. (81)

Unfortunately Boyce did not explore the question of reading *per se* in his large survey. However, computer usage itself involves larger quantities of reading than is often recognized. And the computer is often undervalued as a vehicle for finding and talking about books. Website figures are always startling and never completely meaningful, but a Google search for the name "Harry Potter" turned up approximately 13 million sites. More locally, and perhaps more reasonably, Canadian children's titles are also well represented online, as the following figures indicate: *Anne of Green Gables*, 400,000 Google listings; Gordon Korman, over 30,000 listings; Kenneth Oppel's

Silverwing, listed specifically by title and author, 7,920 hits. The relationship between the Internet and other forms of reading is more complex than many people assume.[1]

In any case, domestic access to computers is clearly a significant component of the literate lives of young Canadians and should be taken into account when we consider the social arrangements surrounding their reading.

Domestic book supplies

Getting at the reality of what children do actually read at home, of their own volition and in their own time, is always going to be difficult. We do know, however, that the domestic reality of children's book acquisition habits is complicated—it is not simply a case of buying the newest fad in a new copy. Lynne McKechnie gives us a fascinating glimpse of children's domestic purchasing habits in her survey of fifty-two children, mostly based in Ontario. These young people, aged from four to twelve, reported that their books and non-book materials came from a wide variety of sources, which included the following:

- Gifts—49 children (94.2% of all children)
- School and mail order book clubs—24 (46.2%)
- School book fairs—5 (9.6%)
- New book purchases from book and other stores—43 (82.7%)
- Used book purchases—24 (46.2%)
- Hand-me-downs—26 (50.0%)
- Borrowing from others—7 (13.5%)
- School libraries—15 (28.8%)
- Public libraries—14 (26.9%)
- Cereal box enclosures and prizes—10 (19.2%)
- Homemade books—3 (5.8%) (in press)

This motley assortment of sources is a reminder that children's reading undoubtedly still retains some of the higgledy-piggledy qualities that many of us remember (fondly or otherwise) from our own childhoods: new books mix with family favourites, with what happens to have survived someone else's childhood, with obscure selections from the miscellaneous arrays in second-hand bookstores. The very permanence of books may often lead to strangely random reading on the part of the heirs of print collections. It seems likely that such a hodge-podge form of cultural survival may actually be a distinctive quality of something as low-tech as books. Beloved videos are already falling victim to technological obsolescence, and families are less likely to replace obscure titles in new formats. It seems unlikely that videos will be handed down through the generations as books may be. DVDs may last longer but it seems more likely that digitization will lead to ongoing access to a wider range of titles rather than to the ar-

bitrary narrowing of supply through simple survival that so often marks a family's collection of old books. McKechnie's study does us a great favour in reminding us of the potential for stunning miscellaneousness in book reading, most especially but not exclusively in its domestic incarnation (though school stock cupboards can sometimes seem nearly as random and miscellaneous). It may be that, for at least some children, their hodge-podge access to titles from other times and other social and cultural climates may at least mitigate the homogeneousness of much of what is made available for them.

Looking at institutional issues

Books in the home are key to the development of comfort with reading, but books, of course, can be borrowed as well as permanently acquired. How are their other institutions serving children in terms of access to reading materials?

Schools and their libraries

As well as having varied domestic access to reading material, children also attend schools and use libraries. Recent campaigns to stop the savage decline in properly funded and staffed school libraries offer us some significant insights into some aspects of children's reading worlds. For example, Ken Haycock's report on *The Crisis in Canadian School Libraries* contains some startling statistics. Over a short six-year period in Ontario, the number of elementary schools with a teacher-librarian decreased from 80% to 59%. In 1976, 42% of Ontario schools had a *full-time* teacher-librarian; by the time the "People for Education" report was published in 2003, that number had dropped to 10%. In British Columbia, provincial funding used to allow one teacher-librarian for 400 students with additional paid clerical help; the ratio dropped to one teacher-librarian for 700 students with no clerical assistance, and with no specified teacher-librarian time. Collection budgets in B.C. have dropped by more than 50% in ten years. In Alberta, in 1978 there were 550 teacher librarians working half-time or more in the school library; by 2000, the number was down to 106. Experts in Alberta calculate that the provincial ratio is now one teacher-librarian to every three thousand students (14).

The impact of this drop concerns more than the current generation of schoolchildren, their parents, and the public librarians who are left to take up the homework and recreational slack (Jobb). The impact on the publishing industry is two-fold. First, the number of reliable buyers for any particular title is diminished. With no time and no budget, teacher-librarians are purchasing fewer materials. The publishing industry is doubly affected: it is a question of losing money and also a question of losing a secure market, maybe not enormous but certainly *there*, year after year. It

is no longer possible to rely on this market. Second, the teacher-librarian's role as gatekeeper has been diminished. Publishing used to occur with one eye on the adult who vetted school purchases; now the publishing industry is much more likely to do one of two things: to sell curriculum-oriented materials to teachers or to offer mass-market series and media-related fiction directly to the child and its parent. Either route makes it more difficult to publish or even to find maverick and singular works of literature.

The collections in schools are also affected, of course, and children's inclination to use their library for recreational purposes is reduced. As Evans and Company point out, when the teacher-librarian disappears, purchasing for the school library becomes haphazard, collections become out of date and unbalanced, and schools lack a "Champion" pressing to buy books (8). While other social and commercial factors are also at work at the same time, the effective demise of the teacher-librarian in Canada has certainly reduced an element of a certain kind of quality control in the children's book market and has seriously contributed to a reduction in one arena of access and exposure to a broad range of good books.

Public libraries

Public libraries serve the same child population as school libraries, but represent a smaller piece of the purchasing pie, even with the radical decline in properly staffed school libraries. In 1999, school libraries spent $46 million on English-language Canadian children's books, 28% of publishers' total sales. Public libraries spent $30 million, for 18% of the total. The remaining 54% ($88 million) were sold through retail outlets (Evans and Company sec. III, 29). It is possible that some of this total represents purchases for school or classroom libraries, but there is no way of checking this possibility. Unlike school libraries, however, at least some public libraries increased their materials buying budgets between 1995 and 2000. A sample of public libraries in Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario rose by about 4% per annum (Evans and Company sec. III, 30).

Not all library systems are protecting the specialism of children's librarianship; some are turning to more generalist job descriptions. Nevertheless, many systems are increasing their focus on the needs of children and young adults, with special and often very imaginative attention being paid to adolescents in some districts (Evans and Company sec. III, 34-35).

The decline in school libraries has a ripple effect in public libraries; in many locations, more resources in terms both of collections and of librarian time are now devoted to curriculum support to meet perceived user needs. Inevitably, the effect on collections and services is not always positive, but many Canadian

young people are still very well served, indeed, by their public libraries.

Publishing and distribution

Children's reading encompasses more than home purchases and library books. A substantial component of most children's reading life involves textbooks, workbooks, and photocopies. All may have a pedagogical role, but none was designed with the primary purpose of causing children to enjoy reading for pleasure. Nevertheless, educational publishing buttresses many firms that might otherwise struggle for existence. Indeed, Canadian children's publishing could be said to have grown out of the seedbed of educational publishing with its somewhat more reliable, or at least predictable, purchasing cycles.

The institutions of publishing and retail also affect the literary landscape.

The marketing of books is distinctive in that retailers may return unsold copies to the publisher, so that the publisher cannot consider goods as "sold" for a very long time (leading to the wry saying in the publishing industry, "Gone today, here tomorrow"). In the first ten months of 2003, the Douglas & McIntyre Group (which includes Groundwood) had returns of 56% (Spendlove 17). It is not an easy way to run a business; publishers must print more copies for distribution to stores where they cannot be considered as sold for a long time.

Before its 2001 takeover by Indigo, the national bookstore chain Chapters was particularly infamous, both for its returns policy (which was bad for publishers) and its actual returns behaviour (which was worse). Chapters was notorious for its late returns, often keeping books 150 days before returning as many as 80% of the titles it had ordered ("Publishers Fear" G4). Rowland Lorimer explains why this practice causes problems:

> Nothing stood in the way of Chapters keeping books for 90 days, returning them to the publisher, and requesting a fresh shipment, thus forever putting off paying for stock until it was sold. The publishers had no choice but to supply the retailer. To do otherwise would lose them sales. To supply the market, publishers needed more copies of books. Thus they increased their print runs. But when the dust settled, the size of the market had not increased significantly, yet the publishers had been printing greater numbers of copies of each title. In short, printing costs were rising, display costs were being implemented, and discounts to Chapters were increasing, while sales were remaining fairly constant. (19)

When Indigo bought out Chapters and merged the two chains in 2001, things improved, but the situation is still very difficult. One casualty of the Chap-

ters years was General Publishing, a major Canadian distributor that filed for bankruptcy in 2002, seriously damaging the prospects of many publishers, as many copies of books were caught up in the post-bankruptcy freeze. Independent booksellers also suffered from the financial fallout of Chapters, and some folded over the years before and after the turn of the century.

There is not space here to do justice to the complications of the Canadian publishing and bookselling industries, but there are numerous implications to being a small country sharing a long border and a common language with a large country that has its own successful and aggressive book-publishing industry. Some of these implications actually benefit readers; for example, books are certainly cheaper in Canada than they would be without American competition (Harnum 12). But little is straightforward in the national picture, and it would require a much more in-depth study to do it justice.

Cultural issues: commercialism

Children as private readers are an enticing market for many kinds of merchants. Schools offer mainly "safe" reading material but children's private reading also incorporates less innocent influences. *The Globe and Mail*, pursuing the story of a court case involving a teenage baseball star in Prince Edward Island, two girls of twelve and thirteen, and a conviction for oral sex, drew readers' attention to the "massive sexual sell" to which Canadian children are subjected:

> If teenagers were a creation of the 1950s, "tweens"—the eight-to-14-year-olds weaned on the Spice Girls, Clueless, Missy Elliot and The O.C.—are a product of the new millennium. Never before has a group so young commanded such powerful market attention. An army of mini-me celebrities gaze out from the covers of publications such as *Teen People*, *Teen Vogue*, *Cosmo Girl* and *Elle Girl*, plugging junior-branded merchandise, movies and TV shows. It's fuelled an explosion of retail lines and outlets that cater to the legions that want to emulate them. (Wilson F4)

It is tempting to think that books published for children offer a respite from the constant, and frequently sexualized, marketing that otherwise besieges them—but books for children do not exist in some magical commercial-free zone. For a while, literary books were at the austere end of the cultural/commercial nexus, relative to other media, but many books—those published for children in particular—are now succumbing to the commercial contagion. Merchandising, once perhaps a spin-off of particularly popular books, is becoming more widespread, and even the youngest children are targets. Daniel Hade tackles this topic in the context of American

examples, and certainly a great deal of American material of this nature competes with Canadian titles. Hade says,

> Perhaps the most troubling effect of licensing, synergy, and vertical integration on children's books is that the book and each spin-off piece of merchandise and each retelling across another medium becomes a promotion for every other product based upon that story. Children reading, say, *Clifford, the Big Red Dog* are also reading a promotion for the Clifford television show, Clifford backpacks, and Clifford dolls, and vice versa. This ubiquitous cross-promoting blurs, if not erases the line between advertisement and entertainment. The corporate owners of children's book publishing have successfully turned recreational reading into a commodity. (514–15)

I am not convinced that substituting Franklin or Caillou for Clifford in this paragraph improves the quality of the experience on offer to child readers, even though they represent Canadian content. There is room for disagreement on this issue, but the question of the kind of reading experience provided by any of these mass-marketed titles deserves our attention.

It is probably fair to say that nearly all Canadian children at least read within a framework of awareness of these spin-offs, even if they are not rich enough to afford many commodities of their own. And there are other ways in which reading is inflected by new cultural imperatives. In a study of the cultural impact of *Harry Potter*, Andrew Blake points out,

> In Bloomsburymagazine.com [an online magazine aimed at readers, with news and gossip, interviews, and other material relating to books, particularly those published by Bloomsbury] and similar e-publications we see the reinvention of reading in an era of literary fast-food consumerism serviced by internet chat, celebrity signings, book prizes and journalists' soundbites, rather than the critical opinion of academic or literary journals. (74)

Children are not immune to this "fast-food" syndrome. Schools, libraries and bookstores often organize thoughtful and creative author sessions, but the celebrity culture sometimes overtakes the serious educational impact of author sightings. The excitement of seeing someone famous may outweigh any literary value to be gained from a visit, particularly if autographing is the major feature of the event. Children certainly participate in online discussion of books; again, some is serious and productive and some is gossip. Young people may exchange their reactions to books and recommend titles to each other in positive and useful ways, or they may be simply self-indulgent (Mackey, "Survival"). Prizes for

children's literature provide labels for books that are highly valued by librarians and teachers, but sometimes the price is that other books are neglected. A bumper year for good children's books can be a drawback in this kind of culture, if books that win no prizes are later overlooked in favour of paying attention to a prizewinner that is actually more mediocre and happened to triumph in an indifferent year. (The U.S.-based Children's Literature Association takes this problem seriously enough that each year it offers a special retrospective prize—the Phoenix Award—to a meritorious book that was overlooked in the prize lists twenty years earlier.)

And what of the readers who turn from their sexually charged magazines to the kinds of books on offer in their classrooms? Many of these young people have serious questions about what is moral in our commercial universe; bland and unquestioning fiction, however Canadian, will not answer these questions. Russell Smith takes this issue further. Writing in Robert Wright's book about Canadian nationalism and publishing, he says,

> our culture of literary evaluation, our book reviewers and our awards juries, are years behind our writers. The majority of book people in Canada are not really interested in literature as I am; they are interested in what is socially progressive or responsible, in what is good for you. . . . And the well reviewed books are the ones that end up on reading-club lists, which are the books that your Mom reads and which confirm in any young person's mind the boredom and banality of all literary endeavour. (155–56)

Smith is certainly not pulling his punches here, but there are many examples of books being chosen for their social virtues rather than their literary merit. Children's librarians and teachers may value a book for its contribution to multiculturalism or its useful message about bullying or its positive portrayal of blended families—the list of worthwhile topics is a long one, but children with burning questions may simply feel that they are being "got at" by a constant stream of issues.

Today's children live in a commercially charged world. *The Christian Science Monitor* points out that American corporations "spend $15 billion per year on advertising and marketing to children, twice what they spent 10 years ago" (Wolcott). Canadian children participate—at second hand perhaps, but willy-nilly—in much of this marketing frenzy. It is not surprising if many of them perceive books as another consumer item—children are quick to pick up all the messages that surround them, not just the ones their parents and teachers happen to like. Whether or not we like the idea of books competing in the marketplace in this way (and I can see arguments to

be made on both sides), it is helpful to realize that books are not standing aloof from the commercial fray.

Cultural issues: multimedia

Just as we may be tempted, misguidedly, to consider books as bastions against commercialism, so there is a temptation for adults involved in children's literature to perceive and admire the sophistication of books for children while carelessly assuming that other media are less complex and demanding. Again, this would be an over-simplification. Take the example of the television series, *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, currently a CTV production. Aimed at young adults, it is a resounding success, especially with girls. Grant and Wood tell us,

> In Canada in 2002-2003, viewers aged 12-34 chose *Degrassi* over all other programs on the air in its time slot. Among girls aged 12–17, an astonishing one in four of all viewers were tuned to *Degrassi* on those nights. The show's national reach was greater than that of any other Canadian drama series. (18)

Degrassi is in effect a series of television series, one that has achieved resounding success over the years as its characters move through school and college. Not only has it succeeded in terms of its own medium, telling brave and complex stories about the challenges of adolescence, but it has also spawned fascinating and sophisticated websites (for example, www.degrassi.tv), where users are invited to extend the fictional world in clever and appealing ways. For example, if you become a virtual student by registering at Degrassi Community School, you are assigned to a virtual homeroom, are given access to "exclusive online-only stories taking place at Degrassi Community School" ("Register"), are allocated a "locker page" where you can customize your own personal web space, and are given access to the locker pages not only of other virtual students but also of characters from the show. You can chat with other virtual students, receive "Dmails" from characters in the show, gain access to alerts about "news" at the school, and take part in online games and activities. The merging, not so much of fact and fiction, but rather of different levels of fiction—the crafting of characters on the show, the presentation of web personas by fans—is challenging and sophisticated.

The TV series has also led to a long list of print titles. A check on amazon.ca shows that there are fifty-five *Degrassi* videos available and forty-nine *Degrassi* books. Eliminating duplicates (hardcover/paperback editions, etc.), this boils down to an English-language set of ten novels, eight books of short stories, and six books of non-fiction advice on topics such as depression, alcohol, and sex, and a French-

language set of nine fiction titles. Not all are readily available at present, but McKechnie's list reminds us that most of them are probably still kicking around in somebody's bedroom.

In other words, *Degrassi* invites and enables new forms of multimodal literacy, and there is nothing to be gained and much to be lost by dismissing such developments as mindless popcult. There is bad television just as there are bad books; there is rubbish on the Internet but there is also intriguing and challenging reading material. Children move between and among media, and an acute study of children's literature needs to take account of such phenomena. In fact, in the case of *Degrassi*, it seems arguable that both the television shows and the official Internet site offer more substantial forms of fictional engagement than many of the books; the books that I have read have a certain potboiler quality to them. They feature the same social complexities as the television programs but the writing is undistinguished. One example is Ellis's *Maya*, which conveys an estimably positive view of a disabled young person but does so in fairly flat-footed prose. It would be unfortunate if a rote obeisance to the moral virtues of reading as opposed to viewing or surfing meant that the books were valued more highly simply by virtue of being books.

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Television plays a large role in the lives of Canadian young people. Over 40% of the Canadian young people surveyed by Boyce watch television for three or more hours a day during the school week A quarter of the same age group watch for more than four hours a day (81). The implications of this information are complicated. Randall Stevenson makes an interesting comment on television and reading in his new study of the literary history of our own times:

> In less direct ways, too—contrary to early fears of its influence—television may have added to the appeal of reading. The central position of a television set in every living room ensured that fictional worlds were more easily and immediately available than at any time in history, and that late twentieth-century life was daily drenched in narrative. One result—as commentators such as Jean Baudrillard warned—was an attenuation or fictionalizing of reality swathed in ever-thickening fabrics of images. But another may have been an increasing appetite for the imaginary in all its forms, print included.

(128)

The *Degrassi* example offers one clear example of this fictional appetite. The world of Degrassi Street has many portals, and the complexity of moving between media may indeed add to its fictional robustness in the minds of many young fans. Acknowledging and respecting the potential for richness in this kind of fictional encounter seems both reasonable and essential.

Young people are gaining expertise in the production of multimedia materials as well. Online, they create websites—both stand-alone and fan-related. In addition to creating their own sites, they participate in other people's online diaries, they join chat rooms, and they read and write a multitude of other electronic texts. They make home videos and more polished film productions. They produce zines, ezines and blogs. *Broken Pencil*, the Canadian review of independent publications, defines a zine as

> an independently published, not-for-profit publication. Although it usually represents the personal vision of a single creator, it can have many contributors. Although most zines are photocopied and hand stapled, some zines are professionally printed. What makes a zine a zine is its dedication to the independent transference of thought on a non-commercial basis. (2)

An ezine is simply a zine published only on the Internet; www.brokenpencil.com provides links to examples. A blog is a weblog, an online diary complete with links to other sites; there are many directories of blogs, such as the Canadian site listed at http://www.blogscanada.ca/directory/ (accessed January 21, 2005).

Just as young people have always learned to become more sophisticated readers if they make the effort to be writers, so these young people experimenting with multimodal forms of expression are becoming literate in new and broad ways.

Cultural issues: multiculturalism and internationalism

Canada is a country of immigrants, and much of our literature, for children and adults alike, reflects this condition. Much contemporary material for young people tells stories of incomers, or reflects conflicts between settled and new cultures. For many children, nevertheless, the most significant story may well come from elsewhere. For many years I have argued that the prime job of adults working with Canadian young people is to focus not necessarily on *Canadian books* but rather on *books for Canadian readers* (Mackey, "Slight Change"). It is perhaps a subtle distinction, but a significant one. For example, one of the best books for young people on the subject of immigration that I know is *The Frozen Waterfall* by Gaye Hicyilmaz, which tells the story of a Turk-

ish girl who emigrates to the German-speaking part of Switzerland. This book offers many vivid insights into what it is like to live in a place where you do not understand the language spoken around you and do not grasp the basis of even simple cultural decisions. I have seen this book speak in compelling ways to young, often immigrant Canadians, partly because it addresses the questions of loss, fear, and the impenetrable barrier of language so directly, partly because it is subtly observed and beautifully written. To praise such a book and say it should be available to young Canadians is not to denigrate other made-in-Canada books on the same theme—but nor should *The Frozen Waterfall* be overlooked simply because it is *not* Canadian.

Many of our Canadian institutions are set up to promote "Canadian" reading, and this is probably necessary in a country so overwhelmed by a giant and culturally domineering neighbour. On the other hand, our politics and our public discourses pay at least lip service to pluralism. I think it is vital that those adults who work with young people make room for a pluralism that is genuinely international, not merely multicultural within the limits of a hyphenated Canadianism. Promoting Canadian materials is part of the necessary framework but only part; reading about the rest of the world, described from the perspective of writers who do not make concessions to Canadian preconceptions, is an important aspect of literary growth.

Even for those youngsters born and raised in Canada, even for those whose ancestors came to Canada centuries ago, it may well be that they respond to a feeling of contemporary internationalism, that they see themselves as readers of the world rather than simply of Canadian materials, however hyphenated or otherwise. Robert Wright argues that national considerations are less significant for young Canadian readers than they were for previous generations: "In contrast with some older critics' anxiety about the disjunction of literature and citizenship, youth do not feel the least bit compromised for selecting books and authors from among the *world* of choices available to them" (218).

Reflections on a literature

I have discussed many elements that impinge on Canadian child readers, but so far I have not looked very hard at the actual titles being produced. There are claims that Canadian children's literature is mired in mediocrity (Nodelman). Here is Nodelman on a year's worth of contemporary Canadian picture books:

> The books were assured and competent, textbook examples of what the picture book as a genre has become on our continent, perhaps on our planet, in our time. But that's about all. There was little

here that was fresh or innovative or even all that imaginative. Viewed as a group, these books were depressingly similar to each other" (25).

This lament is a substantial indictment, and Nodelman makes a persuasive case, but I am not sure it is a uniquely national problem. Compare Nodelman's complaint with Christina Hardyment writing about books for 8–12-year-olds in the United Kingdom for *The Independent* of London: "Publishers are producing far too many unoriginal books: I have two metre-long shelves filled over the past three months with rip-offs of Rowlings, chickette-lit in candy-coloured covers, disguised family therapy manuals, Tolkien-esque trilogies and armed furry-beast sagas" (24). Both Nodelman and Hardyment paint a cheerless picture, but the issue of national origin does not seem to be a prime ingredient of the situation that gives rise to their irritation, although of course there are national details that differ in each case. Overpublishing of fluff, mediocrity, and a minimal kind of "competence" seemingly knows no national boundaries.

As the social and commercial history of the publishing industry shifts into a new mode, with more and more companies owned by fewer and fewer large international corporations, many observers lament that a focus on the bottom line has replaced the adventure of speculating on literary quality. But the idea that it is an international rather than a Canadian problem is not exactly heartening.

As a children's book reviewer of twenty-five years' experience, both in Canada and the United Kingdom, I do not have problems in believing warning cries about mediocrity. On the other hand, I am not sure that the problem of lame and unsatisfactory books is a new one. For eight years during the 1980s, as the secondary editor of *The Essex Review of Children's Literature* in Britain, I dealt with seventy-five books a year aimed at British young people from eleven to eighteen. For most of that time, I would argue that the trusty time-management tool of 20/80 probably applied, at least roughly: 20% of the books were worth 80% of the attention. Since returning to Canada in 1989 and taking up book reviewing here not long afterwards, I see little difference in the proportions, though of course the raw numbers are different in light of Canada's smaller market. I would certainly agree that the marketing priorities of current publishing are problematic; on the other hand, it seems plausible to argue that, in order to get the cream, we must always put up with a certain amount of skim milk. I do not wish to be complacent, but neither do I want to empty the entire milk churn because it is not all cream. On the other hand (to stretch my metaphor perhaps to breaking point), it is well to be wary of ways in which junk-food sugary drinks replace all forms of milk altogether.

Where are we going?

Robert Wright is optimistic about the future for reading in Canada. He says today's young people have been brought up with wide exposure to good materials and in a society with many forms of institutional support for reading to and with children. In this country, he suggests,

> young people enjoy not only the greatest basic literacy skills but, indeed, the highest degree of comfort with the world of books and literature—something that should come as no surprise given their extraordinary exposure to high quality literature as children. With the extremely important exception of those youth who, for whatever reason, have found themselves forced to the margins of Canadian society—most notably those who have dropped out of school—it may be argued that young people in Canada have been disproportionately advantaged by the nation's "culture of literacy" as it has taken shape since the 1970s. (141)

It is possible that Wright is overly sanguine, but it is certainly true that many Canadian young people move smoothly through a world of various complex fictions, with ease and grace. Their reading often occurs in a context of multimodal and multicultural sophistication. Understanding the complexity of that context is a major challenge for those adults who work with them.

My exploration of the context in which Canadian young people meet their literature has led to some conflicting discoveries—it would be no exaggeration to describe my picture as messy. In terms of raw plenitude, we have come a long way. In terms of multimodal awareness and multicultural understanding, we are in a different universe from that of a generation ago, which is not to say that everything is perfect. In terms of the commercial nexus, there are many disturbing ingredients. But a look at the broader picture reveals dynamic forces at play; I hope my snapshot reveals some of the complexity of the contemporary scene.

Notes

[1] See Mackey, 2001, for a more extended discussion of this issue.

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