

Light Onwords / Light Onwards

LIVING LITERACIES TEXT OF THE
NOVEMBER 14-16, 2002 CONFERENCE AT YORK UNIVERSITY



An Emanation of Vacuity: (boobs on the book tube?)

by Daniel Richler

Taken from:

Light Onwords / Light Onwards

**Living Literacies Text of the
November 14-16, 2002 Conference**

PART THREE: E-LITERACY

An Emanation of Vacuity: (boobs on the book tube?)

by **Daniel Richler**

[On the screen behind Mr. Richler appears an infomercial for Nair Hair Removal Gel]

Well, people, that was what greeted me as I turned on our brand-new channel last fall. Mortified, I fired off an e-mail to my bosses:

I turned on BookTelevision this morning, expecting to see Writers' Profiles with – as is promised in the TV guides – George Orwell. What I saw was a woman removing swathes of hair from the back of a freakishly hirsute man with some miracle solvent. She did this repeatedly, turning a facecloth over in her hand to display the resulting dark and glutinous wad to the camera. Now that that disgusting monster midway exhibition is over, I'm watching a sequence of smiling fitness gargoyles demonstrate the wonders of the latest phony plastic exercise gizmo to end up featured on suburban lawn sales across the land next spring. Now, I know that writers are not always pretty or fit – John Irving is an interesting exception, being a hairy wrestler and a sexy beast – but this material was an offense to my eyes. Elsewhere on the schedule we put up a Viewer Discretion Advised warning at the drop of a hat, but nothing to prepare us for this. How do we reconcile the seriousness of our mission with the tasteless cheez of these infomercials? How much cash do these things earn us? Have you any idea what the press would do to us if they saw them? I can tolerate these embarrassments after midnight – under duress. But at 10:00am on Monday morning? The only saving grace as far as I see it is that we're lucky no one's watching.

It was put to me with much forbearance that if I knew of another source of revenue for the channel I should reveal it right away. As things stood, our new venture was haemorrhaging cash by the hour, so would I please pipe down and return to my oar. BookTelevision: The Channel – the world's first and only twenty-four-hour literary channel. One month in, and reality had already bitten hard. I had a flashback of my father's dubious expression over his reading glasses earlier that year, shortly before he died; I had proudly shown him our full-colour brochure, boasting not just a channel, but a bookstore, a library, and website, no less, with a library of forbidden literature called Archive 451, a spoken word and acid jazz venue we'd call The Lingo Lounge, book clubs nationwide and a creative factory that would for the first time make television ads for books affordable to publishers, create the literary equivalent of the Hollywood EPK (electronic press kit) to spare authors peddling their books on the road, and develop the literary equivalent of the rock video (reprising the work we'd done twenty years earlier with our rockumentary show, *The New Music*). Dad had emerged triumphant from the wilderness years of Canlit, lending this country international status, raising the bar for all future generations. He knew better than anyone how tough a row to hoe it is – he'd always said he didn't want five little Mordecais running around – and now here was I, his eldest son, setting up a rickety literary lemonade stand.

Television is generally thought of as monolithic, but the most accurate way to picture BookTelevision, I have had to accept, is as a corner store, a small business, an independent press, virtuous in its ambitions but something of a snake oil operation when it comes to achieving them. Here at the Living Literacies conference, as we discuss what it means to read and write in this day and age, I anticipate the cat will be skinned in many ways. There will, I imagine, be deconstruction galore – political critiques, racial analyses, class dialectic,

the clash of high versus low culture, feminist perspectives, dire polemics about the death of the word, the insidious tyranny of the paragraph, the imperialism of the noun, and so on. I would simply like to offer a nuts and bolts account of how we erected a book channel. I'll show you a glimpse or two of what it looks like, but too much would be a lazy way for me to occupy this stage. Moreover, it would likely fuel the academic's suspicion that TV people can't live without eye candy, and in any case, it would be against my greater interest, since I'd rather you subscribed to it if you want to see it.

Now I like to think the channel really began in 1989, when TVOntario commissioned me to investigate how a book show might fly in Canada.

I phoned around. I asked several authors how they felt about being on the box. The early results of this poll told me that TV appearances are more taxing for writers than for ordinary people. Martin Amis said he'd always hated it: "It's the fear of disgracing yourself. I used to want to smoke to calm my nerves, but I'd end up pinching my cigarette between my knees because I didn't dare hold up my shaking hands in front of the camera. Then one day my interviewer said, 'Excuse me, Mr. Amis, for interrupting, but your trousers are on fire.'" Ian McEwan revealed, with characteristic spleen, "I always feel a pot of tea is halfway down my cock."

John Irving recalled for me his time on the *Dick Cavett Show*. Cavett's reliance on research cards for questions and factoids so enraged him he demanded whether the host had actually read his book. Well, no, said Cavett, actually, not yet. (Irving digressed at this point to describe the other guest on that episode, Blondie's Debbie Harry, who'd fallen asleep on his shoulder, her face, he said, the ectoplasmic green of a bottle of Chardonnay when you look at it through the heel. I relate this to make the point that rock stars get nervous on TV too, but have fewer compunctions than most authors about resorting to drugs for relief.) Irving walked off the set. "If the ignorant, pretentious prick had admitted to it before the show began," he told me, "I would have understood – you can't be expected to read everything – but putting on that blithe, sophisticate act of his really made me want to puke."

John Updike, meanwhile, called appearing on TV "a truly raffish experience – to be in the same hospitality suite on *Good Morning America* as Mel Tormé and the woman who has given birth to sextuplets! I like it and I do it once a year."

Nonetheless, getting books on the air – not to mention their authors – was evidently going to be rough.

I happened to be taking a European holiday that summer and looked up Bernard Pivot in Paris. His world-famous programme, *Apostrophes*, was in its second decade and so successful it commanded a special "Books of the Week" table in almost every bookstore in France; it was accessible in quiz and encyclopaedia form on the country's *Minitel* database network; and it fuelled a European literary magazine called *Lire*. Its enduring success in French Canada, meanwhile, was a tweak on the noses of Anglophones here who professed to have a literary culture of their own. Yes, I presented myself as an innocent holidaymaker, but was in fact on a poaching mission.

Apostrophes' format was not complicated. Before a live audience, six authors gathered to chat. The themes they were asked to explore were not infrequently saucy: "Sexy, les Seins," "Pudeur, Impudeur," "Ça va saigner." I might have overlooked this fact were it not for the cover of *Lire* that week, which displayed a nude woman reading in bed, its main feature erotic lit. Laurence Kaufmann, *Antenne 2's* PR person, assured me rather sternly

that, whatever I was suggesting, it was mere coincidence, but I had stopped listening by then, my mind on fire: I was picturing Robertson Davies in a pose that recalled Burt Reynolds, a typewriter, hot from recent use, strategically placed.

Anyway, it might have been the jet lag, but having taken our seats in the studio for Pivot and company's round table on the secrets of the Romanovs' cuisine or some such arcana, my wife fell asleep on my shoulder – and this was her first appearance on French national television. Unimpeachably intelligent as the show may have been, *Apostrophes* did not always deliver the jolt-a-minute quotient that I felt would be crucial to success on Canadian TV. I started to suspect that some of *Apostrophes*' reputation around the world rested *un peu trop* on one notorious episode from some eight years earlier in the middle of which Charles Bukowski, drunk and bellicose, had been hauled off the set.

At the post-taping cocktail party I asked M. Pivot if in his estimation an *Apostrophes*-like show could be reproduced elsewhere. Modestly he replied, "Oh *mais oui*. Anyone could do it." Then he thought about his own remark and added, "You know, Sweden tried and failed – they're such a cold people, I suppose that's why. And Belgium tried, but went nowhere. They're so ... plain, it was inevitable. And the Italians, *alors*, on every show within fifteen minutes they're at each others' throats, so they took it off the air. So, no – no, I would say it is not so possible."

I thought about North America, a continent with more guns than books in her subways and school libraries; where teachers prioritize conflict resolution over spelling; where mail goes undelivered while disgruntled postal workers roam the inner cities. Given the viciousness of literary criticism in our neck of the woods, I'd want a weapons search before each interview.

In the US at that time even the Book of the Month Club, with its 1.7 million members and over thirty participating PBS stations, had failed to make a book show fly. When I asked the BOMC's President, Al Silverman, what he'd do differently were he given another go, he despondently proposed, "Keep a better stocked bar?"

Against all the odds, then, we launched a book show on TVOntario. Arguably more than other shows, *Imprint* faced a challenge to please every type of viewer, every type of reader. We felt, for example, that we bore some responsibility to nurture young readers, and so we featured the occasional punk descant and the occasional punk. I remember *Maggotzine #3*, which featured "Mondo Sex-O-Rama zinetime: shrunken heads, robot orchestras, grasshopper wrestling, pussy pussy, self-mortification and more!" Some fans of Alice Munro were not enchanted with the editor, a mohawked subterranean with an icetong in her nose. Conversely, we were not able to avoid "Modernity and its Discontents: The Death of the Prairie Epic?" forever. And when we did, I just know we got zapped.

We fired away regardless, on the one hand punctuating the show with videos and film clips, sales charts and reading lists, news hits and comedy skits; on the other, simply cramming the hour with every kind of writer we could find. Wags say if Shakespeare were alive today he'd be writing sitcoms. Well, we weren't snobs; we'd still have had him on the show. Chinese dissident poets, gangsta rappers, Tolkien nerds, gay pornographers, the toeheads who write the so-called instructions you get with your DVD player, even political speechwriters – all were welcome.

Serendipitously, *Imprint* also stumbled into the cleansing fire of political correctness, making for some white-hot arguments and lending the show an urgent, newsy flavour. Debates over racism in publishing, sexism in novels, and ageism in lullabies may have

struck some viewers as overwrought, but the fact is they struck a lot of viewers, one way or another, and reinforced what lovers of literature have always known: literature (to paraphrase Ezra Pound) is news that *stays* news.

Fast forward, now, to 1999: the recombination of my experience at TVO and the considerable juice of Moses Znaimer and his team at CityTV, plus the academic bona fides of Dr. Ron Keast and Canadian Learning Television in Edmonton, won us the bid for a TV license from Canada's regulatory body, the CRTC. Astonishingly, there was fierce competition for this. You would not imagine a book channel to be the most lucrative proposition – not when you could have gone for the sex channel or the speed channel or – and this one surely has greater potential – Jewish Television, with its Sabra Price is Right show and its twentyfour-hour UJA fundraiser, and its Klezmer music nights, and its Yiddish kitchen sink dramas, and more WWII retrospectives than even The History Channel, and – a real cost saver – nothing at all on between Friday sundown and Saturday evening. But books? Not likely. Why bother, especially when it's also an exercise in inevitable punishment, since television is usually blamed for the demise of the book itself ?

I announced my suspicion earlier that few of you subscribe to BookTelevision. Well, if you haven't yet, you're not alone. A senior bureaucrat at the Canada Council we'd invited to discuss the Governor General's Award the other day asked what format the show might take – since, he confessed, he didn't subscribe to digital TV. "Well," I said. "Since this is the only book channel on the planet, a real first, don't you think it behooves a Canadian – particularly of your high cultural office – to support it?" I can be a little touchy, I admit, feeling that this venture, while worthy in the extreme, could not suffer more from obscurity and neglect. (Oh, by the way, if I do pique your interest and you decide to subscribe, I will throw in a discount on any Nair hair-removal product with every subscription.)

It's quite amazing to think of the barrage of disdain that's been aimed at television from the start. Lee Loevinger himself, the Commissioner of the FCC between 1963 and 1968 in the US, once commented, "Television is really the golden goose that lays scrambled eggs. It is futile and probably fatal to beat it for not laying caviar." Television is something absolutely everyone feels qualified to criticize, regardless of their profession. Remember Frank Lloyd Wright, he of the immortal, "Television is bubble gum for the mind." And then Groucho Marx (though he can be forgiven for obvious reasons): "I find television very educational. Every time someone turns it on I go into the other room to read a good book."

Is TV a cornucopia of crap? Surely no more than all Lloyd Wright-influenced architecture looks like a Soviet apartment block. What is it about television as a whole, then, that arouses so much ire? I imagine it's partly to do with resentful perceptions of power – a hangover from the days when only a few networks commanded huge audiences, when watching the box felt like forced collectivity. There's also that unwelcome feeling that TV is watching you, not the other way around. For many people, watching TV is not so much a cozy cultural experience as a combative one, an embarrassing one; like a bright kid in a class of dim bulbs, you resent being dumbed down to. BookTelevision, in particular, has been greeted by the academic and literary communities with some suspicion; some snobs love to snort that we are an inherently oxymoronic proposition, and simply leave it at that.

But you know, there's really no one like a TV critic to lay on the lash. There they are, the champions of the people, all of them too smart for the boob tube. Have you ever read a film critic who dislikes film as much as, say, TV critics loathe TV? Or a restaurant critic who so hates food? What I find most aggravating is how, after howling column on column about the vulgarities of reality television, quiz shows, and the like, they will turn their noses up at us

altogether because we're digital; all the major newspapers in Canada, each one a part of a multimedia conglomerate, have policies (more or less unspoken) of not reviewing digital TV because it reaches a marginal number of households. But the dislike of television among print people is even more visceral than that. Let me illustrate.

The *Observer's* former TV critic, John Naughton, is one of the few who's copped to this in writing. Once, in the course of commenting on television coverage of the Chinese pro-democracy movement and its bloody suppression, he'd remarked on the increased harassed appearance of the BBC's Diplomatic Editor, John Simpson: "He began the week ... looking as usual like an expensive rubber beach toy and ended it like a deflated barrage balloon in a club tie." Later, Naughton has confessed, he read in *Granta* Simpson's personal account of how a mob had surrounded an armoured personnel carrier, set fire to it, pulled out two of the three soldiers manning the vehicle and beat them savagely to death. Unable to maintain journalistic detachment any longer, he'd used his physical bulk to prevent the third soldier from being butchered. Which explained why Mr. Simpson had not looked his best toward the end of his tour of Tiananmen Square. Now, I've never stuck my neck out like Mr. Simpson, but as someone who has never worn a plastic wig on camera, I seize on this story to argue that it is *critics* of TV who are obsessed with appearances, not necessarily us.

On BookTelevision, incidentally, we are plotting the sweetest revenge: a show called *Everyone's a Critic*, which will regularly analyze and criticize what the critics have written – not just about TV, but books too, restaurants, cars, goalies, the House of Commons. It will be a show about critical writing, a show that ought at least to soothe the savage soul of the critic by letting him know someone cares about what he has to say.

Quotes on screen

"I don't own a television."

Dr. John Meisel – Chairman, Canadian Radio-Television Commission,
1979–83

"Television is the literature of the illiterate, the culture of the lowbrow, the wealth of the poor, the privilege of the underprivileged, the exclusive club of the excluded masses."

Lee Loevinger – Commissioner, US Federal Communications Commission,
1963–68

"Television is at its most trivial and therefore most dangerous when its aspirations are high; when it presents itself as a carrier of important cultural conversation."

Neil Postman – author of *The End of Education*

"The smallest bookstore still contains more ideas of worth than have been presented in the entire history of television."

Andrew Ross – Journalist

"It is destroying our entire political, educational, social, institutional life. TV will dissolve the entire fabric of society in a short time."

Marshall McLuhan – Media Scholar/Critic

“Don’t you wish there was a knob on the TV to turn up the intelligence? There’s one marked “Brightness,” but it doesn’t work.”

Gallagher – Comedian

“Television was not intended to make human beings vacuous, but it is an emanation of their vacuity.”

Malcolm Muggeridge – Journalist

In our first year on the air we featured, in a mix of documentaries, archival footage, news reports, in-depth interviews, book fair coverage and even vampirological game shows: Allen Ginsberg, Alistair MacLeod, Andrew Pyper, Anthony Bourdain, Armistead Maupin, Christopher Hitchens, Chuck Palahniuk, David Suzuki, Douglas Coupland, J. M. Coetzee, Laurence Ferlinghetti, Gilbert Sorrentino, Irvine Welsh, Margaret Atwood, Mario Puzo, Maxine Hong Kingston, Michael Franti, Michael Ondaatje, Michael Redhill, Evelyn Waugh, Naomi Wolf, Martin Amis, Kingsley Amis, Anaïs Nin, Nick Bantock, Nino Ricci, Paul McCartney, Rohinton Mistry, Salman Rushdie, Stephen King, Yann Martel, Yashar Kemal, Naomi Klein, Austin Clarke, Umberto Eco, Jamaica Kincaid, Margaret Drabble, Brian Fawcett, Michael Ignatiev, Susan Faludi, Timothy Findley, Mark Kingwell, Peter Carey, Jonathan Franzen, Mavis Gallant, Annie Cohen-Solal, Aharon Shabtai, Janette Turner Hospital, Barbara Gowdy, Ian McEwan, James Joyce, Henry Miller, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, William Gibson, George Orwell, Melvyn Bragg, William Baldwin ...

I don’t sound too defensive, do I? Of course, it is possible that we had these people on the channel in a very stupid way, asking them dumb questions, misunderstanding everything they said, wrote, and stood for. But I don’t think so. More likely is that unimaginative people cannot even conceive of our full potential. You should see most people’s faces when they hear there’s a book channel, as they picture the inert tome on the screen with its indecipherable title and leaden promise, the farthest thing imaginable from exciting television, and then the author, seated with a TV host afflicted with myopia and dandruff, answering academic questions in a monotone. I have a certain sympathy with this view, but I was saddened to see that in a recent season opener issue of *The Globe and Mail’s Broadcast Week* surveying the most intelligent new TV channels in Canada, BookTelevision was not even mentioned.

How do we address this problem? For surely the world opened up in books is infinite in its variety and potential majesty, and therefore on TV too – a place at present almost entirely unexplored, scarcely imagined, like Borges’ Uqbar with its transparent tigers and towers of blood and playing cards and mythological terrors. Now, obviously, some people will never be persuaded, but for the reachable ones our channel must be advertised as funny, aggressive, original, challenging, and respectful of their intelligence. I say, “advertise” because yes, we are marketing literacy here. That is as much my job this week as interviewing writers in Turkish prisons was last month. And so the channel must adopt all the tricks and tropes of traditional TV, with its theme music and animated openings and game shows and news shows and bumpers and stings and entertainment beat reporters and – to utterly convince the dubious viewer that this is a channel worth watching – ads; ads for expensive cars, international airlines, and computers.

But about the programming: At a party last year the writer M. T. Kelly was complaining to me about a friend of his, a professor of ancient Greek literature, who claimed kids today are unreachable. M. T. argued that there are parallel heroic themes between the Homeric narrative – of Achilles on the blood-boltered plains of Troy – and the lyrics of the gangsta rapper Tupac Shakur, gunned down a few years ago in the streets of Las Vegas. So we took

him up on it, videotaping him on a brutal literary tear both in the Royal Ontario Museum and the graffitied alleys of downtown Toronto, and then putting the argument together in the form of a scratch music video.

The problem with this outlaw approach to books is that the serious book-set tend to sniff at such lowbrow material. Readers are just as tribal as pop fans, and though you'd think twenty-four hours a day was enough time for everyone, it always seems that Mrs. Teakettle from Flin Flon is tuning in during the musical Marquis de Sade revival hour, and the punks you promised some serious action always find Bonnie Burnard.

In time, there will be a show for everyone. The natural progression of narrowcast TV with its specialty channels heralds the end of the one-size-fits-all book show. At TVOntario I experimented with this as well, creating a show about SF, comix, and graphic novels called *Prisoners of Gravity* that took the form of an extraterrestrial rogue veejay broadcast. At BookTelevision right now we are developing a show called *The Biz*, about business writing in books, magazines, and newspapers, as well as an erotica show called *Lust*. There's no reason why one day we shan't have a show specifically for mystery lovers too, for philosophers, for émigrés of war-torn countries.

But meanwhile, if there is to be a show for followers of Derrida or Chomsky or Amiri Baraka, I need your help. Over the years I've been, shall we say, *impressed* by the anger and determination worked up on campuses across the continent over the political ideas contained in literature. At Lakehead University in Thunder Bay one year, before a colloquium of Student Council Presidents, I remember attempting a critique of the word "Holocaust" as it had been used by protestors outside the Royal Ontario Museum's "Out of Africa" exhibit. To say "African Holocaust," I argued, was appropriation of voice, for the word derives from the ancient Greek meaning "to be burnt whole," was formerly used to describe a sacrifice by fire on the altar in Jewish religious practise, and was clearly associated with the agonies of Jews cremated at Auschwitz. For descendants of slaves to convey the agonies of their forbears, and not to invite suspicions of anti-Semitism and competitive suffering, I requested an original and possibly more accurate term be used. One student barked out, "Asshole!" Another demanded to know what right I had to be on stage with a microphone, and was not dissuaded when I replied that the Council of Students had invited me. A third lectured me with ferocious condescension about the "witches" who'd been burned in the sixteenth century – a holocaust, in other words, for feminists. Without a doubt I was perceived as a member of the exclusive white male club, evidently of inherited wealth, power, and influence. But I was appalled at how these little ideologues, so attuned to the plights of Western society's underdogs, to "otherness," could be so insensitive to anyone but themselves and their adopted cause. To be fair, they'd all grown up in an era of inaccessible, big corporate TV that never asked them for their opinions. But not one person thought to approach me with ideas for any TV of their own.

Even in the era of affordable, homemade, hand-held TV equipment, the power remains in the hands of the powerful. Still today, one hears complaints that TV does not afford everyone a voice. This is true to a dismaying degree. (I once attended a lecture delivered by Mark Starowicz, Executive Producer of *The Journal*, in which he promised us a people's revolution of TV thanks to handycams. A colleague sitting beside me whispered, "Yeah. And when they invented the typewriter everyone became a novelist.") Think how quickly the technology that exposed the beating of Rodney King and promised the democratization of the news has devolved into slick, banal, so-called reality shows, desert island survival adventures in which no one is ever seen leaning against a palm tree and reading a book – not Sun Tzu, not Machiavelli, not Napoleon – in order to get ahead.

But the intellectuals are to blame as well. Like so many other critics, for example, Pierre Bourdieu complains in *On Television* about the inherent constraints of the TV format – seven-second soundbites, trumped-up polarizations of opinion, and all that. My first thought on reading *him* was, "My God, I've seen French television, and no longwinded philosopher is wanting for airtime there," but I also wondered, given his impenetrable prose, who exactly he imagined was going to invite him on.

Similarly, one of our esteemed colleagues here at *Living Literacies* once gave me a very hard time when I was at TVO. Taking offence at comments made about her on *Imprint*, she *demand*ed equal time – demanded it, I felt, in a rude, intractable, imperious and opportunistic fashion that quickly led to an escalation of rhetoric (public, on her part) and a hardening of both our positions. *Equal* time? I finally said. okay, let's calculate it. You, Madam, were commented upon for precisely one minute and fourteen seconds. I'll be generous: You may have two minutes. This resulted in her excoriating article about the white media establishment and me, "2 Minutes in the New Jerusalem," which caused me considerable pain, since I'd always imagined myself to be sympathetic to the grievances of visible minorities. Why, I wondered, weren't there pickets outside the egregiously insensitive, starched, and exploitative mainstream TV studios? It struck me as cowardly on her part to be stabbing at the soft underbelly of white liberalism, and above all counterproductive not to plead her case more imaginatively.

On the other hand, I've never been happy with the way our quarrel went. Why *couldn't* we have been more accommodating? What would it have cost us to give this or any other person an *entire* show if they asked for it? I know that we felt besieged. We felt that the public could not be allowed to dictate our content. We spoke of principles and precedents. And yet, and yet, were we not a publicly funded station?

So there is a certain irony in me standing here today, representing a privately owned, commercially minded TV station asking: Literacy, what is it? Access, power, privilege. Belonging. Enabling. Yet I insist, I remain impressed by how few academics, how few intellectual interest groups, how few aggrieved minorities have approached me with a plan. Where are they? Where's the democratic media revolution? Where are the homemade documentaries? What's coming out of university multimedia facilities? We have a national network here, folks. Let's use it like the televangelists do. Save some illiterate souls! Think commercially, charismatically. In case you haven't noticed, the public trough is drying up. Together we ought to be finding sponsors, underwriters, advertisers. *This revolution is brought to you by Nair Hair Removal Gel!*

It seems to me the sky is always falling for academics. We receive dire warnings that reading is on the wane. The esteemed George Steiner has remarked that while the classical act of reading broke down around 1914, the real trouble began with modern media: "Guttenberg was not a fundamental revolution," he has written, "as the current technological revolution is." But before television, how many people were literate? What romantic idea do we harbour of a well-read populace of yore? Besides, television actually requires a great deal of reading – there's text on the screen all the time. And, as communications technologies converge, try getting around the Internet without reading skills. I might propose that, in fact, the classical act of reading broke down around 1923, at the Frankfurt School, for in my experience, critical theory on campus has done far more damage to basic literacy skills than TV ever did. The tortured prose! A simulacrum of language! The de(con)struction of English. The murder of the author in his own write!

Perhaps I should get back to my point: that those who worry we live in an illiterate age should seize the tools available to them, one of those being television. There is no tenure to be had here, no grants or guarantees, but there is a new future in specialized, narrowcast, digital, and ultimately interactive TV. I cannot do it all myself because, quite frankly, running a book channel totally gets in the way of my reading, so I appeal to you to get down out of your ivory towers and contribute to the cause in a language the masses – on whose behalf you express so much concern – can understand. As a matter of fact you already have, just by being here, for the TV cameras you see in this hall belong to Canadian Learning Television, our sister station, and in a few months thirteen Living Literacies programs will air there and on Book Television. Which is, at least, a start.

Daniel Richler

Daniel Richler is an author and broadcaster. He is currently the Editor-in-Chief and Supervising Producer of BookTelevision: The Channel, the world's first and only twenty-four-hour TV station devoted to literary matters, the publishing industry, and the evolution of the word. His novel, *Kicking Tomorrow*, was one of the *New York Times Book Review's* top books of 1991.