

Notes for a panel discussion on “Celebrating the Canadian Reader”
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Peter Calamai

I wish that I could greet you with the salutation that Cervantes choose for the opening of the first book of Don Quixote.

He wrote: “Leisured Reader”

But that would be perverse because like many of you, I’m finding it harder and harder to carve out any leisure time for reading for pleasure and even more difficult to make time for serious reading.

From this beachhead I intend to assail the real scourge in Canadian society today which is alliteracy, not illiteracy and eventually wind up – after several feats of prestidigitation and outrageous over-simplifications – with a proposal for a GRP, a Gross Reading Product.

But first, what we mean when we talk about the Canadian Reader?

Let me pass along something Carole Shields told me when I interviewed her last summer for a 10-year progress report on literacy. That report appeared as a supplement in the September issue of *Saturday Night*. It was my first appearance in Canada’s oldest magazine and, in retrospect, it looks as if the shock may have been too much for the magazine...

Carol Shields talked about the businessmen who repeatedly tell her that their wives love her books, but that they don’t read fiction themselves because they have to wade through reports all day at the office. Her voice as she spoke conveyed both pity and scorn. She went on to say:

It's part of the frontier that's left in our society. We think that something that's made up isn't going to be useful to us. But fiction is a way of expanding our world – we're given such a small slice.

We also spoke about her treatment for breast cancer and how she was using reading as part of the therapy, to stop her from being fixated on her own illness. I asked what sort of books she was reading for this purpose and Carole said that she received regular parcels from Eleanor Wachtel, the CBC radio arts host. What set these books apart as a class, Carole said, was that they had more narrative than the novels she customarily read. But narrative provided structure and reduced the tendency for introspection and this was good under the circumstances.

I believe this anecdote drives home the point that the Canadian Reader isn't someone whose primary reading is restricted to memos, studies, progress reports and all the other literacy make-work of today's commerce and trade. But neither is the Canadian Reader composed of people who read only fiction, or read for personal betterment, or – like Carole Shields – read to escape a real world horror.

In my universe to be granted the honorific of A Canadian Reader, you must abide by the three Golden Rules

1. read because you want to, not because you have to
2. read material that challenges you – in vocabulary, concepts, facts or some other way.
3. read in preference to other leisure activities

If you do this then you are a serious reader, even if what you are reading is Danielle Steel or Sherlock Holmes pastiches. I'm going to all this trouble to distinguish “serious” readers because I believe that, without them, there will be no reading worthy of the word. And that means there will be no one who understands that a tailor may take meticulous measurements but a scientist does not. That's because a serious reader has learned that meticulous has a meaning more nuanced than simply careful. There has to be some aspect of fear and the tailor is meticulous because he fears I have put on weight since my last fitting.

New media thinker Don DeLillo similarly considered the seminal role of serious readers when he wrote:

“If serious reading dwindles down to near nothingness, it will probably mean that the thing we are talking about when we use the word ‘identity’ has reached an end.”

In other terms, we are what we read, and there is no identity worth having from reading only computer software guides or the latest cat book. On the other hand, the Harry Potter books are rapidly becoming as much a part of identity for people as the Maggie Muggins tales, the Nancy Drew stories, the Narnia Chronicles or – dare I reveal this – the adventures of Freddy the Pig.

There can be debate about the first two golden rules but I will brook none about the third. That’s because I know from years of mass media research that when people say they don’t have time to read the newspaper, what they are really saying is that they find other pastimes more rewarding for the use of their discretionary time.

There is no doubt that discretionary time has been scrunched for most adults. The General Social Survey in 1998 found that the time spent on paid work and on work-related activities had gone up by two hours a week from 1992 for both men and women who were married parents and employed full-time. Leisure time had declined by about the same amount. Other categories showed less dramatic changes but no group saw an increase in leisure time.

So the leisure pie is shrinking and the number of competitors for that time expanding. How well is reading doing in this battle?

Two reports issued recently in Ottawa throw some light on this question.

The first is the report by the Commons Heritage committee on the alleged threat to Canada’s book trade from the emergence of Chapters/Pegasus specifically and big box bookstores generally. You might say that the report considers books almost like the petroleum industry. It traces the product from the well of discovery – the author’s creation – through pumping out the crude (agents), then refining (editors), mass production (publishers), the pipeline (book

distribution), wholesaling (a shadowy area for books), retailing (independents, big box stores and even libraries). And there it stops. What the heritage committee can't tell us much about is the final step, the use by customer. It's as if all that gas ran out of the pump at the station right onto the ground.

And it's not the fault of the hard-working committee members or their staff. As I shall demonstrate, this yawning gap is our collective fault.

How big a gap? Or, what don't we know? We don't know who reads books in any detail – cross-tabulated by age, income and education. We don't know what kind of books people are reading, and why? We don't know how much leisure time Canadians spend in all forms of reading, and what proportion of that is serious reading. We don't know where people acquire their reading material – how much is bought and from where, how much from friends, from libraries, from the Internet. We don't know if people are actually reading the books they buy at the new big box stores, where the bosses say 60 per cent of sales are spur-of-the-moment. We don't know how many Canadians would like to read more. We don't know if people are doing any serious reading on their computer screens or via e-book tablets. And above all else, we don't know what people think about reading.

We don't know this because it is not considered a priority by the federal government. If it were, then Statistics Canada would be surveying leisure reading more often than once every six years. And StatsCan would also stop lumping the reading of newspapers and magazines in with books when it reports how Canadians use their time.

To provide some scale of what's at stake here, remember that cultural activities altogether generate more revenue in Canada than does agriculture. As well Canadian taxpayers have paid out something close to a billion dollars in nurturing writers and propping up publishers in this country. We collect the statistics on whether those subsidized books are sold, but we can't tell you anything about whether they are read. We collect data about grain crops on a monthly basis but only bother with books every few years.

So the Commons heritage committee couldn't actually answer a basic question – what is the impact of Chapters, Indigo and all the rest – on reading (which is, after all what really matters in the end, not sales). The MPs couldn't answer it because collectively as Canadians we don't value reading enough in this country to collect competent, topical statistics about it.

It's not entirely true to say we don't know any of this. We do know a fair whack of it for Quebec where the book publishers, of all people, paid for a phone survey of the reading habits of 4,000 Quebecers which was published in October 1999. To the best of my knowledge that study, *Quebeckers and the Book*, has not been translated into English.

I'm not going to attempt to summarize a report where two-thirds of the pages are statistical tables but there are a couple of items worth mentioning.

When the survey looked at the reasons people gave for reading books, it divided the responses into five categories, which are: pleasure, thirst (*soif*), curiosity, study and work. The distinction between thirst and curiosity eluded my translator.

Secondly, the survey asked those who did read if they wanted to read more and 62 per cent said they wished they could. That subgroup was then asked why they didn't, and 82 per cent said they didn't have the time.

Now we're back on familiar ground. why is it that Canadians don't have the time – won't make the time – to read books?

We can get some insight into this question from the second study that was released recently in Ottawa, the final report from the International Adult Literacy Survey, or IALS for those in the know. The report was notable for two things. First it expanded the number of countries surveyed from the original seven in 1994 to 20 now. Secondly, it showed Canada dropping in the literacy league tables.

The initial 1994 report, released with much hoopla by the federal government, showed Canada ranked third, behind only Sweden and the Netherlands in overall adult literacy .

In the current report Canada is behind not only Sweden and the Netherlands, but also now Finland and Norway. And not significantly better than Germany, New Zealand, Denmark, Australia, the Flemish parts of Belgium and the United States.

Yet there was one aspect where Canada fared even worse – in the percentage of the population aged 16 to 65 who said they read books once a month. Our 65 per cent was significantly behind New Zealand (74), Czech Republic (73), Ireland (71), Germany (71), Australia (70), Sweden (70) and Switzerland (69).

Now the question becomes, why can a higher proportion of Swedes, New Zealanders, Germans and Czechs find the time to read books than Canadians? Of course, it would be helpful to know what books were being read. Maybe the Irish are gobbling up Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro while the New Zealanders just can't put down Carole Shields. Or they could all be reading books about avoiding income tax, although I doubt it.

Part of the explanation is something I call alliteracy, not illiteracy, but alliteracy. I define alliteracy as not reading when you are capable of doing so. You will have noticed that three countries which have a lower adult literacy rate than Canada – Ireland, the Czech Republic and Switzerland – none the less had a higher percentage of adults saying they read at least one book a month. And ditto for three other countries where the literacy rate was not significantly different from Canada – Germany, New Zealand and Australia.

Put simply, Canada has a higher alliteracy rate than these six countries which, by rights, it ought to equal or surpass in book reading.

Now for those feats of prestidigitation and outrageous over-simplifications that I promised at the beginning. I believe there is a connection between our lack of interest in better defining the Canadian Reader and our poor showing in the reading ranks of industrialized countries. Despite all the zillion tons of studies, the glitz of the Geller Prizes, the continuous flow of modest funds from the Canada Council to authors and the more substantial flow to publishers, I contend that as a nation, we really don't value serious reading all that highly.

What else are you supposed to think when the federal heritage committee (and the National Librarian of Canada) have to admit that they don't know how many public libraries there are in this country (the report used a range of 21,000 to 22,000.). This is a country that can tell you precisely how many tubes of toothpaste left factory doors last year. By definition, what isn't measured, isn't valued.

If the Canadian book industry were in real crisis we wouldn't know until it was too late. There is no statistical early warning system, no numerical tripwire, to sound the alarm the way there is if farmers aren't preparing to plant sufficient canola to meet our national commitments.

Reading in Canada is the Unexamined Phenomenon and, like the unexamined life, it has little value. My view is that we shy away from really delving into reading not out of a lack of interest but out of an excess of timidity. We fear the very hard questions of public policy that knowing more about the Canadian Reader would stir up.

We need to understand what it is that makes people want to read certain books at certain times. As Jacques Barzun noted in an essay, even reviewers know that a new masterpiece in each genre is not published every seven days, although they must often pretend so. But why Harry Potter now, why *A Brief History of Time* a decade ago?

We need to understand shifts in reading tastes over time. Why can costume movies cause a revival for Jane Austen's novels but hit musicals not shift Dickens or Victor Hugo from the shelves.

What we need, in short, are the tools to measure what people read and why they do it. We need an annual State of the Book report and a national GRP (Gross Reading Product). Let me note in passing that in addition to the Quebec report on reading, the British have also produced a study entitled *Reading the Situation*, which surveyed 2,400 individuals by questionnaires and supplemented that quantitative data with focus groups. The U.S. Centre for the Book, housed at the Library of Congress, also produces such assessments.

Unless we follow suit, we cannot expect a positive shift in the status of books and reading in this country. My dream, and I know this is foolish, but it is my dream is that someday we might see photographs of our prime minister – and take your pick who that is – with a book in hand that he or she is obviously reading for pleasure. Until that far-off day comes, I'll have to satisfy myself with watching reruns of Star Trek – The Next Generation. There, centuries ahead of us, the captain of the Enterprise, Jean-Luc Picard, eschewed the Starship's talking computers and electronic text slates when he wanted to really connect with something. Instead, he picked up a book.

If a TV star can do it, why not a national leader?