

The Crest of the Wave: Reading the Success Story of Bestsellers

DANIELLE FULLER

Whoop. Whoop. Whoop. Hi. Whoop. Yee-haw! Wee-haw! . . . Our current book selection is *Fall on Your Knees*. Whoop! This book has been flying off the shelves. So far, almost a million of you have come to discover one of the most . . . twisted families . . . in North America.

— Oprah Winfrey, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, 5 Apr. 2002

“**Y**EE-HAW!” (to borrow Oprah’s argot), Atlantic-Canadian literature is hot! Apparently in ascendance since the mid-1990s, it has become, gradually at first, then more rapidly as the century turned, more visible in the media, in bookstores, and in the academy. A significant number of writers from or based in the region have been nominated for — and have won — prestigious literary prizes in the past decade, including the IMPAC (Alistair MacLeod for *No Great Mischief*) and the Governor General’s Literary Award for Poetry (George Elliott Clarke for *Execution Poems*). American and European publishers have caught on to the talent issuing from the four Atlantic provinces and have published editions of new and earlier books by established writers such as Wayne Johnston, David Adams Richards, Kenneth J. Harvey, and Alistair MacLeod, as well as newer writers such as Lynn Coady, Donna Morrissey, and Leo McKay Jr. So why did fiction about Atlantic Canada become a “sexy” transatlantic publishing trend? What anxieties and desires do the “bestsellers” fulfill, and why are some writers riding the crest of the wave while others are swept under it?

I’ve chosen to focus on three successful novels — Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Fall on Your Knees*, Wayne Johnston’s *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, and Alistair MacLeod’s *No Great Mischief* — that were first published in Canada in 1996, 1998, and 1999 respectively. These three works of fiction are important to a consideration of the status of contemporary writing about Atlantic Canada because they were “breakthrough” books, not only for their authors but also, I would sug-

gest, for the media profile and critical success of writing about Atlantic Canada on both sides of the Atlantic. Their success stories can tell us a great deal about the cultural politics and political economy of publishing, notions of literary value, and the ideological function of representations of the region within and beyond contemporary Canadian society.

This essay examines the success stories of these three novels through a critical investigation of their production and reception, in part because, as an out-and-out *Come from Away*, a cultural outsider to Canada, I have a fascination with questions of consumption. What, if anything, engages the non-local reader about a certain text or cultural artifact? How and why do Atlantic-Canadian texts travel — if indeed they do? And what cultural work — ideological and discursive — do travelling texts perform — and for whom? My critique of the cultural meanings that these bestsellers accrued on their journeys is informed by an examination of their publication. By situating these three bestsellers within the mode and moment of their production, I make explicit some of the economic structures and ideological factors that inflect their positioning within “the literary field” as well as mediate the cultural value ascribed to them by critics and general readers. My discussion of literary celebrity and the marketing of authors and their books employs Pierre Bourdieu’s notions of cultural and symbolic capital as a way of rendering visible the labour that cultural workers perform and the financial and symbolic benefits that they (sometimes) win as a result of their efforts (75).

In the second part of the essay, I draw upon the interpretations of two different communities of readers, namely literary reviewers and readers appearing on Oprah’s Book Club and posting on websites, to ask this question: what anxieties, desires, and identifications are being played out in published reviews and reader responses? My research here does not include the type of empirical work with readers that captures “book talk” in process (see, e.g., studies by Hartley; Howie; Long; and Rehberg Sedo). Nevertheless, my brief consideration of popular reading practices of bestselling literary fiction acknowledges the complexities of contemporary consumption. Many avid readers employ the Internet, radio, and TV as research tools within their reading lives (Rehberg Sedo 177-98), for example, and cultural consumption offers a relatively penalty-free site for “discovering, imagining and discarding identities” (Turner 102). My success story is thus a tale of two interrelated parts

that together suggest how *No Great Mischief*, *Fall on Your Knees*, and *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* rode the crest of the wave.

Buzz or Bust: Publishing in a “Blockbuster Culture”

How did the current iteration of the “blockbuster culture” that produced, promoted, and disseminated the three novels under discussion come about? Book publishing in the English-speaking world underwent major changes in the last two decades of the twentieth century as rapid takeovers and mergers absorbed large parts of it into the global media and entertainment industries (Moran 36). Changes in ownership have had both material and symbolic impacts on writing and publishing; the economic has become harder to disavow. For example, in this age of “the mass multi-media publisher, . . . bestselling authors [change] hands as if they were sports celebrities” (Bloom 83), and thus many more authors must enter into “a fiduciary relationship with the quasi-professional classes of publishers and agents in order to find an audience and a living” (West, qtd. in McCaig 78). Structural changes such as corporate mergers have not only effected “a sea change” in the conception of the industry from “an ink-stained gentleman’s business to a technologically competitive, market-driven, even ruthless industry, interested in sound business practice and fiscal growth” (Van Herk 123), but also fundamentally altered what gets published by the large houses. Celebrity memoirs and fiction by well-known writers or “new discoveries” are bought (often at auction) at high cost by the large publishing houses in the hope that they will sell at least fifty thousand copies in the US market or ten thousand in the UK market (Schiffirin 106). Add marketing dollars and the synergy between different aspects of a multimedia corporation that can result in writers appearing on TV talk shows broadcast on networks owned by their publisher, and you have the main ingredients of the “blockbuster culture” in which a handful of titles hog the spotlight.

For Canadian presses, it is a tale of mergers and acquisitions unchecked by Canadian federal policy on foreign investment (MacSkimming 368); the instability of the grants sector and subsequent demise of many small independents (Godard; Scherf); the de facto vertical integration of publishing, distribution, and bookselling in North America; and changes in retailing and the demise of many independent bookstores thanks to “bookselling superstores” and online bookselling

(Bloom 83). Yet it is in this era of a vertically integrated industry and a highly competitive, globalized market that the popularity of writing about Atlantic Canada has increased.

Making Waves, Making Bestsellers

How did *Fall on Your Knees*, *No Great Mischief*, and *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* become bestsellers? All three writers had already garnered critical praise for their published work: MacLeod for short-story collections, Johnston for four previous novels, and MacDonald for her Governor General's Literary Award-winning play *Goodnight Desdemona, Good Morning Juliet*. All three had accumulated social capital. MacLeod's generosity toward younger writers through his teaching at Banff, the University of Windsor, and writing workshops enhanced his reputation and extended his contacts within the Canadian literary community. MacDonald's stage and screen appearances had fashioned her into a minor Canadian celebrity. By "making a name" for themselves, Johnston, MacLeod, and MacDonald had therefore accrued symbolic capital (Bourdieu 75), which plays a significant role in determining whose books get published, reviewed, and garlanded with prizes.

Other factors converted these particular novels into bestsellers. Canada's "national" mass-media headquarters are in Toronto; in the mid-late 1990s, all three writers were living in or near that city. Their proximity to print journalists and TV and radio studios facilitated the promotion of these three titles. Most crucially, all three novels were published by "national" publishing houses with head offices in Toronto, as opposed to "regional presses" located in Atlantic Canada. Knopf Canada published the hardback editions of *Fall on Your Knees* and *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, and McClelland & Stewart published *No Great Mischief*.¹ By 2000, both companies would be owned or partly owned by the same multinational media conglomerate — the German company Bertelsmann AG. Even prior to this merger, all three presses had recourse to more substantial funds than any Atlantic-based press.

The high-profile marketing and international brokering of MacDonald's novels exemplifies one mode of producing and managing a bestseller. MacDonald's advance was rumoured to be in six figures for *Fall on Your Knees*, while the New York literary agent Andrew "the Jackal" Wylie brokered a deal for more than a million dollars with HarperCollins worldwide for *The Way the Crow Flies*, excluding Canada,

where Knopf remained her publisher (Clee). The ability to create a buzz about a book or, to adopt Doug Kellner's term, to construct a "media spectacle" depends on "cross-media and cross-platform content and promotion" (Turner 9). Houses such as Knopf have the staff to launch major multimedia marketing campaigns that include elaborate websites, author tours, press interviews, and the mailing out of numerous review copies.

The "buzz" generated around these three novels in Canada was bolstered by further marketing across the Atlantic by their UK publishers, including short reading tours for MacLeod and Johnston in the United Kingdom and Germany. By contrast, MacDonald's theatrical writing and performances were not widely disseminated there. Her British publisher, however, encouraged perhaps by her novel's early success in North America, invested significant energy and funds in its promotion. Rosemary Goring, who reviewed *Fall on Your Knees* for *Scotland on Sunday*, related how, in "the space of several weeks," she had been sent five hardback copies by MacDonald's UK publisher, Jonathan Cape ("Wilderness Years"). This tactic of sending book reviewers multiple copies of lead titles apparently paid off: Cape sold twelve thousand copies of the novel within the first five months of publication in the United Kingdom (Oct. 1996-Mar. 1997), which, as Dan Franklin, publishing director at Cape, attested, "is amazing for a first novel" (qtd. in Wagner).

Meanwhile, McClelland & Stewart, "the Canadian publisher" of *No Great Mischief*, was still wholly a Canadian-owned company in 1999 and did not have the economic firepower of Knopf Canada. What MacLeod's editor-publisher Douglas Gibson did have as a marketing tool was the legend of MacLeod's long-time-in-the-writing novel, a narrative that, as David Creelman and Tony Tremblay have both noted (Creelman 127; Tremblay 271-72), had already assumed the status of a Canadian literary myth long before the novel was printed. Reiterated in virtually every Canadian, American, and British review of the novel, the myth was structured around nostalgic and romantic ideas of authorship and book production: literary genius writing in his summer cabin on remote island, dramatic wresting of manuscript by dedicated editor from hands of reluctant writer, et cetera. Whatever the realities of the situation, the myth manufactured about the origins and production of *No Great Mischief* underlined a purist ideal of the isolated artistic creator. This

notion disavows the economic by downplaying financial pressures on writers to earn a living and by representing the editorial role as helpmate or muse to a genius rather than as broker of literary production. In sum, the romantic — no doubt exotic to some — story of *No Great Mischief's* production neatly obscured the commodity culture that underpins the production of bestselling fiction while simultaneously contributing to the “spectacle” that late-modern commodity-based capitalism both produces and requires (Debord 13).

One aspect of the “spectacle” increasingly exploited by Canadian publishers since the late 1990s is the promotion of the writer as celebrity (York). Performance texts such as author interviews promote individuated personalities in a process that “is a symptom of the integration of literary production into the entertainment industry” (Moran 41). Another symptom is the transformation of major literary prizes into “meticulously staged media event[s]” (Huggan 108). In the case of the three novels under consideration here, literary prizes added a glamour and critical cachet that assisted them in their international travels. As Lorraine York has suggested, “major” prize frequently translates in the Canadian context as “foreign” award (101). Thus, the economic significance of winning the IMPAC (MacLeod) or the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize for Best first Book (MacDonald) lies not only in prize money but also in the chance for international travel that enhances publicity and sales. Additionally, there is symbolic capital to be gained for writers through the consecration and canonization of Canadian fiction in the old-style metropolitan centres of culture such as London or emerging “global cities” such as Dublin. In evidence, too, is the entanglement of colonial histories and their value systems with the transnational structures of the contemporary multimedia conglomerates that have the capacity to “stream” and “beam” international literary prize ceremonies (sometimes celebrating books produced by their own book-publishing arms) back into Canadian consumers’ homes.

Another time-honoured tactic in the production of literary celebrity is the author publicity photograph. *Fall on Your Knees* was packaged by Knopf Canada under the banner “The New Face of Fiction” (“Knopf Four”). Photographs of MacDonald’s face have been central to both publicity material and feature articles on her work to a much greater extent than images of MacLeod and Johnston. By marketing writers as celebrity “faces” and TV-friendly personalities, Canadian publishers are

not only contributing to a literary economy inflected in style and process by the (American) entertainment industry (York 100) but also creating a sense of intimacy for the consumer with the writer. While this can clearly work to the publisher's economic advantage by driving up book sales, it is within the parasocial relationship between writer and reader that this mediated sense of intimacy produces that some of the identity work of cultural consumption occurs.

Travelling Tales: Reception of Atlantic Stories outside Atlantic Canada

Given the structures of late-twentieth-century transnational English-language publishing outlined in the first part of this essay, my focus here is on readers in Canada (excluding Atlantic Canada), the United States, and the United Kingdom. My analysis is trained upon the images of Atlantic Canada constructed by reviewers and the various anxieties, desires, and identifications that inflect interpretations of MacLeod's, MacDonald's, and Johnston's novels.

Some American and British reviews are remarkably self-reflexive about the temptation to exoticize a region unfamiliar to many non-Canadians. Luc Sante, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, comments that Newfoundland, "like few places these days, . . . seems remote, even exotic in a chilly way, and it's likely you haven't been there. It therefore can assert itself as a setting to the point of claiming a character role: a vast, desolate mystery hovering just over our northeast flank." Sante's was only the fifth front-page review of a Canadian text to appear in the *New York Times Book Review* in one hundred years, while *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* was the first novel by Johnston published in the United States. The review thus marks a significant shift in his position in the cultural field as Johnston moves into a larger market. Sante cannot refer to his symbolic capital within an American context and instead evokes readers' previous textual encounters with Newfoundland first, through other books (*The Shipping News* and *The Bird Artist*) and then through his notion of the island as a mysterious character waiting to be discovered. Narratives of discovery are implicit in the majority of American and British reviews of *Colony*, and this is ironic given that it is an anticolonial novel that charts Newfoundland's relationship with imperial power. Many American and British reviewers tap into a twenty-first-century formation of colonial desire for otherworldly knowledge and exotic goods that can be rapidly satisfied on Amazon and eBay.

As a historical fiction that reimagines the early life of Newfoundland's first premier, Joey Smallwood, and the journey that he and the island take from British dominion to Confederation with Canada, *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* invites critical reflection on colonial histories and their ideological and material legacies (Fuller 45; Wyile 128). However, outside Canada, most reviews commented instead on Johnston's characterization of people and place. British reviewers are particularly enthralled by "the unforgiving, desolate landscape of the island" (Bradbury) and Johnston's evocation of "the mundane but profound experiences of life . . . the smells of tar and dust, the reek of bilge-water" (Thackeray). The romantic allure of an apparently remote, relatively underdeveloped island where people wrestle with the natural elements emerges in these reviews. The historical connections between Britain and Newfoundland are rarely referenced, the more recent "cod wars" noticeably absent. Rather than situating the novel within a North Atlantic economy, British reviewers adopt the unspoiled wilderness trope that reinstalls Newfoundland as the desired colony of late-twentieth-century Anglo-Saxon dreams of a rural and maritime lifestyle that only a minority of contemporary Britons pursue.

Other reviewers of *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* are engaged by the narrative's epic scope and themes, such as its "universal" appeal through, for example, "its portrayal of the secrets of love and regret" (Hughes). Even reviews that praise the satire of Shelagh Fielding's "Condensed History of Newfoundland" interpret that text in terms of a personal "battle of wits" between Fielding and Smallwood (Bernstein; Walker) and as part of a (generalized) "contest for power . . . in both the psychic and political spheres" (Bernstein). The reading practices exercised by non-Canadian reviewers suggest that the book appeals to non-Atlantic-Canadian audiences because it is successful on multigeneric terms (epic, romance, historical fiction, and fictional biography are all categorizations made in the reviews) and because its thematic concerns transcend their local resonance. Ironically, such interpretations reaffirm the imperial power dynamic that Johnston satirizes in his novel, while the generic codes that help the book to travel across the English-speaking world are themselves a legacy of British colonial rule.

If the appeal of unfamiliar landscape and a narrative of epic proportions assisted the transnational journey of *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, they also played a role in the Canadian media's presentation

of the novel and its author (Fuller 21). The representation of Wayne Johnston depended in part on a series of non-metropolitan, conservative images of “down home” (see, e.g., Marchand). His shifting position in the cultural field is also highlighted in features and reviews that hail him as the writer who has hit the big time, having won a \$400,000 advance for *Colony* from a US publisher (Rothman J1). The elegiac aspects of *Colony* — as a lament for Confederation and the nation that might have been as well as the one that was — reinforce nostalgic and sentimental readings of Johnston and his text within the Canadian context. Such formulations re-establish the otherness of Atlantic Canada, in particular Newfoundland, while simultaneously appealing to an urbanite longing for a simpler, rural life that is commonly associated with the region (Overton).

The association within the popular Canadian imaginary of Atlantic Canada with old-fashioned cultural practices risks reinforcing romantic, and frequently racially homogeneous, notions of place and people (Fuller). This tendency emerges quite powerfully in several Canadian reviews of *No Great Mischief* that closely identify MacLeod with his text, depicting him as an exiled craftsman whose “fictional focus has always been on the hardy islanders of Cape Breton, their work and loves and tragic losses” (Morley). In *Maclean's*, John DeMont wrote, “Exile looms large over the novel. The central narrator . . . seems unable to forget what he left behind. MacLeod, whose forebears arrived in Nova Scotia in 1791, knows a thing or two about yearning.” The deliberate slippage between author biography and fictional protagonist here also speaks to the persistent desire within contemporary popular culture to establish a parasocial relationship of intimacy between producer, text, and reader.² As British writer Malcolm Bradbury has suggested, only academics want to maintain that the author is dead (qtd. in Moran 59), while avid general readers often gain great pleasure from deciding to what extent an author’s biography can be read into his or her fictional text (Hartley 132; Rehberg Sedo 171-72).

Meanwhile, the repeated claims made for the authenticity of *No Great Mischief* as a tale of a Gaelic clan, underwritten by the authority of MacLeod’s knowledge of language, history, and place, are made in reviews from Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom alike, suggesting that the desire for intimacy is coupled with readers’ longing for “infotainment” and remote locations where “traditional”

lifestyles prevail. In the Scottish reviews, such reading practices are entwined with a chauvinism that positions both MacLeod and his novel not only within the Celtic diaspora but also within Scottish culture, often employing the same affiliative discourse that inflects the novel's tale of clan and kinship. Hence, in the Glasgow *Herald*, MacLeod is the man "whose family comes from Eigg" (Collins). Nearly two years later, headlines promoting his post-IMPAC award participation in the Edinburgh Book Festival exclaim, "Homecoming for a writer who has been away for 200 years. He fears being labelled a fake Scots writer, but Alistair MacLeod is the real thing" (Goring). The *Scotsman* similarly claimed, "once a Scot, always a Scot" (Gilchrist). Here *No Great Mischief's* representation of Gaelic culture performs the cultural work of a counterhegemonic narrative, implicitly opposing the latter-day imperialist snobbery of the English. Significantly for this purpose, and unlike the Canadian representations of him, the Scottish and Northern Irish images of MacLeod are coded in class as well as ethnic terms: he is "the former Canadian logger and fisherman" ("Logger") or "a bunnetwearing man who looked like an Argyll farmer come to market to sell a few ewes" (Robinson). Thus, as MacLeod and his novel reverse Calum MacDonald's transatlantic journey, the garlanded writer literalizes the "spiritual triumph of the dispossessed" that *No Great Mischief* narrates (Gifford), and MacLeod becomes sutured into a genealogy of Scottish literary culture.

Unlike *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* with its metafictional tactics, satire, and parody, *No Great Mischief* is a defiantly unpostmodern work of literary realism, and this may well account for its greater popularity. MacLeod's representation of place-based identities and tribal identifications, family loyalty, and the tracing of genealogy has made the novel a popular selection by book groups in North America and the United Kingdom. The novel was also chosen for the inaugural year of the One Book, One Community, program in Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge (2002) and for Western Reads in 2003-04 (at the University of Western Ontario), and it has been recommended by teachers for high school readers in the United Kingdom (Fraser). In a nice reversal of the usual pathway of cultural consumption across the US-Canadian border, Martin Arnold's *New York Times* review suggests that the powerful evocation of place and regional sensibility in MacLeod's work intersects with historic American constructions of the United States in terms of

regions: “in reading him you remember that there is such a thing as Southern literary sensibility and a Western sensibility in this country.” Here a Canadian cultural artifact inspires the reimagining of America in terms of a dominant Canadian paradigm. As Creelman has noted, *No Great Mischief* promotes such nostalgic readings even as the text struggles to reconcile “the divergent nostalgic and despairing strands of Maritime culture” (25). However, to detect that tension requires a situated analysis of the regionalist realist text that the general reader outside the region is unlikely to undertake.

Fall on Your Knees highlights a different kind of cultural formation with a transatlantic reach: genre hierarchy. Unlike both *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* and *No Great Mischief*, which reviewers consecrated through comparison with examples of literary realism drawn from Scottish, American, and British canons, the value of *Fall on Your Knees* is registered in more populist and, sometimes, blatantly economic terms. In contrast to the emphasis on the “desolate beauty” of the reimagined landscape in MacLeod’s Cape Breton or Johnston’s Newfoundland, reviews of *Fall on Your Knees* from Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States focused on “its capacious plot” (Motyka), its dramatic and temporal structures, MacDonald’s characterization of the Pipers, and the multigeneric aspects of the narrative: “an extraordinary family saga of gothic proportions” (“Knopf Four”), an “epic in the true sense” (Gregory). These elements, along with the powerful voice of the novel’s central narrator, helped *Fall on Your Knees* to travel widely and to cross over between the audience for serious literary fiction and the market for “beach-bag blockbusters,” a categorization selected for the novel by the paperback reviewer in the *Independent*, a broadsheet British newspaper (Hagestadt). Here the potential profitability of the novel as a genre that can attract a broad readership is rendered visible, but, simultaneously, its economic worth and its association with women’s leisure time clearly position it further down the literary hierarchy than a novel such as *Colony*, aligned by reviewers to Dickens (see, e.g., Ravvin).

For Canadian writer and critic Stephen Henighan, *Fall on Your Knees*, “a self-consciously trashy novel,” fits squarely into his descension narrative about Canadian literature produced, in his view, for a “globalized market” at the expense of quality and the expression of Canadianness (188). Henighan suggests that MacDonald’s novel “enfolds within its pages both halves of the ‘literary bestseller’ para-

digm. . . . Bursts of compelling writing jar the formulaic rituals of the blockbuster-family-saga genre. . . . Sections set in New York entice the American reader" (188). To Henighan, a "literary best-seller" is a literary failure, and he denies MacDonald symbolic capital by aligning her writing with popular fiction and implying that she is motivated by profit (a serious writer would disavow the economic). Her employment of popular genres, analyzed by other academic critics as creative and subversive in effect (Andrews; Creelman), potentially opens up her work to a wider audience than the readership for *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* or for the "bestselling" *No Great Mischief*, but, within Bourdieu's account of generic hierarchy, a mass readership also places her novel on a lower rung (48).

Oprah's Book Club readers offer a glimpse into the popular appeal of *Fall on Your Knees*.³ MacDonald's novel was the penultimate selection for the "first chapter" of the Book Club before Oprah turned to "classics" and only the second novel by a Canadian to feature on her show. Introduced by Winfrey as "a riveting book drenched in secrecy and deceit," featuring possibly "the most twisted family in North America," *Fall on Your Knees* is mediated for the audience through the edited format of entertainment television as well as through Winfrey's persona as trusted friend/celebrity and her promotion of a literacy centred on healing and self-improvement (Hall 651). The novel is therefore offered to viewers not only as "an emotional roller-coaster" read but also as a medium through which the reader can explore her own family's "secrets and betrayals." Two of Oprah's on-screen book group participants are survivors of sexual abuse, and describing how *Fall on Your Knees* "was a healing book" for one reader's family is an important part of their book talk.

In addition to reading the novel for therapy and pleasure, cultural readings of the text are sanctioned. At Oprah's instigation, miscegenation becomes a point that prompts Oprah to question MacDonald about black history in Nova Scotia. *Fall on Your Knees* is clearly mediated through Oprah's framing of what may be articulated on her show, and the potentially "taboo-breaking" power of MacDonald's text is sidestepped. Similarly, the "shock" of the "lesbian love twist" (Oprah's terms) is mitigated by a book group member who aestheticizes the interracial lesbian relationship between Rose and Kathleen by describing it as "the most beautiful part [of the novel] . . . so lyrical." The

unspoken script of this Book Club show is the story of the queer-from-the-hinterland (“exotic” Cape Breton, Canada — no mention is made of MacDonald’s residence in Toronto) whose novel describes the violent physical and emotional punishment suffered by Rose and Kathleen for transgressing social boundaries of race, sexuality, gender, and class. However, this silence is typical of the popular readings and published reviews of the novel.

Many reviewers in newspapers north and south of the forty-ninth parallel and on both sides of the Atlantic comment on MacDonald’s “mordant wit” (Robertson; Thomas), and humour is a preoccupation for readers of *Fall on Your Knees* on Amazon.com, who frequently construct their evaluations of the novel against the grain of the book blurb, which includes quotations from published reviews. The American paperback describes the novel as “darkly humorous.” Some readers analyse how this operates for them, with one reader concluding that “Parts of the novel are very funny and parts are extremely dark. very dark” (reader “Thought”). In contrast, another post-er who admired the “brilliant writing” commented that “I certainly didn’t find any hilarity in this book” (reader “I”). A Long Island reader wrote that “perhaps I’m not sophisticated enough, but I just don’t see any humor at all in this distressing tale” (reader “Disturbing”). The Amazon readers are self-conscious — even anxious — about their reading practices in relation to readers whom they perceive as possessing greater cultural authority. Yet many post-ers resist the cultural rules by privileging the emotional experience of reading over appreciation of aesthetics. There may also be a cultural specificity to MacDonald’s humour that does not “survive” every journey. Given the limited information about Amazon post-ers, it is difficult to analyze this in terms of religious, ethnic, gender, or national difference, but readings that depend on institutional aesthetics seem to recognize the humour, while readers adopting a vernacular practice do not.

On Amazon, the Oprah effect’s afterlife, which increased the novel’s sales by between 600,000 and one million copies, is strongly in evidence (Kirkpatrick).⁴ By summer 2004, more than five hundred people had posted reviews of the novel, and many continue to reference the book’s selection for Oprah’s Book Club (e.g., Adamcyk; reader “Thought”). The extent to which the book and entertainment industries have become integrated is also very marked when one compares how few reviews are

posted on Amazon for *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* and *No Great Mischief*.

Reading the Wave

Responses to books posted on the Internet offer an intriguing commentary on the positioning of writers and their work within an English-language literary field that has gone global. As I suggested earlier, the vertical integration of the book-publishing industry and the dominance of media spectacle in contemporary culture produce a “blockbuster” effect that spotlights a handful of celebrity writers. Within the global literary economy, only a few novels become financially lucrative transnational commodities, assisted in their journey by multimedia marketing and a book industry that has increasingly integrated with — and, arguably, has become dependent on — the entertainment industry. Within this economy, writers such as Ann-Marie MacDonald and Alistair MacLeod have gained significant symbolic and financial capital, Wayne Johnston less so. The transatlantic success of their novels heralded the beginning of a publishing trend for fiction about Atlantic Canada that saw literary agents and presses, not only outside the region but also outside Canada, scrambling for the next tale of dysfunctional family life in Cape Breton or Newfoundland. Why — and why now?

Fiction about Atlantic Canada that depicts specific sites through the realistic — if sometimes nostalgic or melodramatic — representation of place, people, and language has clearly struck a chord with publishers and readers since the late 1990s. Perhaps this suggests the attraction of cultural difference, particularly that apparently offered by geopolitically marginalized communities, to those inhabiting urban sites in northern industrialized countries that increasingly look the same? This impulse certainly underwrites many of the reviews by literary journalists, whether located in central Canada, the United States, or the United Kingdom. The value of Atlantic-Canadian representations for publishers indicates some interesting aspects of the value of the local to the global, since this particular configuration of the local boosts the cultural capital of multinational publishers such as HarperCollins and Random House in several ways. First, the publishers gain legitimacy from marketing work handcrafted by someone with “roots” in a specific culture. Second, the production of a distinct (“authentic”) voice hailing from a distinct (“unspoiled”) place legitimates the multinational press-

es as “discoverers of new writing,” despite the fact that small regional presses do most of the developmental work. In both cases, the local is used to assert the position of the transnational presses as global brokers of culture and consecrators of literary value. Third, the local offers a useful means of disavowing the economic: the distinctness of the local Atlantic-Canadian writing “product” helps to kick over the traces of mass production, global marketing, and transnational commodification of “bestselling” novels. Similarly, the notion of the local author-crafts-person obscures the reality of author-as-product and author-as-part-of-the-commodity-text. The local was also used to mediate the popular appeal of *No Great Mischief* and *Fall on Your Knees*. Framing the novels in terms of their intimate knowledge of a particular culture and the carefully crafted representation of marginalized places enabled reviewers and publicity personnel to sidestep the derogatory “middlebrow” label that is frequently affixed by cultural authorities such as librarians, teachers, and media commentators to books that appeal to general readers and book clubs. Once again, the benefit to the megapublishers is a boost to their cultural capital as well as to their profit margins.

At a moment of major structural change in the book industry, then, this particular Atlantic-Canadian iteration of the local was an effective corollary to the globalized marketplace, providing publishing companies with important cultural capital. The local was also valuable to various “national” projects. For McClelland & Stewart, the Canadian publisher of *No Great Mischief*, MacLeod’s novel performed the important task of upholding its status as the creator of Canadian canons. Meanwhile, the 2003 series of CBC Radio One’s *Canada Reads* saw Justin Trudeau promoting Johnston’s *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* as an exemplar of federalism and the book that “all of Canada should read.” As Cynthia Sugars points out, this is a highly ironic appropriation of the novel given its representation of Newfoundland as a “country” rather than a province and the discussions of Newfoundland independence taking place in early 2003 (169n1).

If an investment in the image of the Atlantic region as cohesive, rural, and different results in some curious misreadings, are there any instances of resistance to the national and global employment of the local that I have mapped? The Scottish newspapers’ appropriation of MacLeod as a Scotsman could be read as a redeployment of a globally marketed image for locally important ideological purposes. More com-

elling, however, are the assertions of agency detectable in the work of Atlantic-Canadian reviewers — significantly in pieces by successful fiction writers. Kenneth J. Harvey's declaration that *No Great Mischief* "is *the* book of the year — and of this decade" — is made in a national newspaper, and Harvey invokes the discourse of authenticity in order to establish a grand claim to national and international fame for MacLeod as "the greatest living Canadian writer and one of the most distinguished writers in the world." Bernice Morgan's review of *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* in the Newfoundland journal *TickleAce* operates rather differently: local knowledge of St. John's enables Morgan to identify topographical errors committed by Johnston, and she suggests that the trickery is a deliberate and "canny" commentary on non-local appropriations of Newfoundland culture (Fuller 44-45). Finally, Sheldon Currie's reviews of *Fall on Your Knees* and *No Great Mischief* in the *Antigonish Review* carefully delineate the history of Cape Breton that each writer articulates (rev. of *Fall* 111), praising MacLeod for his "talent as a social historian" (rev. of *Mischief* 99). Currie's readings of the novels as both literary fictions and important documents of, in the case of *Fall on Your Knees*, "Industrial Cape Breton's past in all its complexity" (113) reclaim the popular and transnational success of each novel for local readers. Referencing that success explicitly (rev. of *Fall* 113; rev. of *Mischief* 102), Currie states that "MacDonald's novel should help dissolve [the] ethnic-cleansed image" of Cape Breton presented by "the popular press [and] the tourist bureau" (rev. of *Fall* 113). What all these reviews have in common is their implication, first, that the articulation of local knowledge within the novels is of great value and significance to Atlantic-Canadians and, second, that international success might lead to a questioning of widely circulating regional stereotypes. In this way, global marketing and success are reappropriated for an immediate political purpose and audience.

Reading the success story of these three Atlantic-Canadian novels helps to foreground the operation of cultural capital in a blockbuster culture. It also suggests how intertwined institutional and industrial structures are with perceptions of regional culture as a necessary "other" to centralized Canadian constructions of the national as metropolitan and "world class." Yet the novels' narratives, and their critical and commercial success, also challenged that dichotomy by suggesting that the expression of local cultures can win both cultural and economic cap-

ital. Three “Atlantic bestsellers” were packaged and sold from central Canada for an urban audience and were frequently mediated through long-established stereotypes of the region. Consecrated by national and international awards as “world-class” fiction, these Atlantic-Canadian tales sallied forth, accruing financial rewards and media coverage achieved by few other writers affiliated with the region. As they travelled outside Canada, the novels inevitably became vehicles for a range of desires and anxieties, performing a series of cultural functions, many of which were ideologically conservative in effect, despite the critique of imperialism articulated in Johnston’s text or the interracial lesbian love story at the heart of MacDonald’s novel. Nevertheless, their collective success story is worth celebrating: for the overdue attention from the publishing industry that it brought to contemporary prose writing about Atlantic Canada; for the wider readership that it created for novels from and about the region; and, above all, for the novels themselves, which demand and reward our careful attention as critical readers.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

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NOTES

¹ The American and British hardback and paperback editions were, for *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* — Doubleday, Anchor (in both the US and the UK); for *Fall on Your Knees* — Prentice Hall, Simon and Schuster; Jonathan Cape, Vintage; and for *No Great Mischief* — W.W. Norton, Vintage; Jonathan Cape, Vintage.

² “Parasocial” used to be a pejorative term with reference to fandom as obsessive adulation, as a stand-in for “real” relationships. More positively, Elliott; Giles; Hall; and Rojek suggest how audiences “read” and employ celebrities as part of their own identity construction.

³ DeNel Rehberg Sedo highlighted to me the potentially different literacies in operation among Oprah’s readers, regular readers, and Amazon post-ers. Oprah’s readers have the confidence to appear on TV in order to articulate their interpretations of books, while post-ers on Amazon possess a range of cultural competencies with regard to computer and print technologies. Again, they may feel more confident in their critical abilities than many other so-called everyday readers.

⁴ I have been unable to obtain accurate sales figures for *Fall on Your Knees* and *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, despite repeated efforts. The only accurate sales figures that I have been able to obtain from publishers were offered by McClelland & Stewart for Canadian sales of *No Great Mischief*: at 22 September 2004, 57,000 hardback copies and 47,000 paperback copies.

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