

“True Stories,” Real Lives: *Canada Reads* 2012 and the Effects of Reading Memoir in Public

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FOR THE 2012 INSTALMENT of the competitive reading radio show *Canada Reads*,¹ the producers decided to feature what they called “true stories,” with the winner declared as the non-fictional work that all Canadians should read. This was the first year of *Canada Reads* to feature a theme and the first to focus on non-fiction. However, the producers’ decision to switch from fiction to non-fiction had several unforeseen effects in both the show and the public realm. When celebrity advocate Anne-France Goldwater said on the show’s first day that Marina Nemat’s *Prisoner of Tehran* was untrue and then accused Carmen Aguirre of being a terrorist, *Canada Reads* abruptly stopped being a game show about nationalist forms of reading and became the focus of a serious discussion about memoir, nationalism, and ethics.

Goldwater’s connection of the work of memoir with the lives and ideas of the authors, a common effect of memoir as a genre, echoed throughout the rest of *Canada Reads* 2012. In this essay, we propose that the prominence of the memoir on *Canada Reads* 2012 created a series of effects on the show and among the public that disrupted the usual “show business” of the program as public entertainment and economic catalyst, helping to create a controversy during the series itself. Carmen Aguirre, whose memoir won the contest in 2012, notes in the afterword to the 2014 edition of *Something Fierce* that, in addition to benefiting in terms of media exposure, book sales, and new opportunities to promote her book in person across Canada, the effects of the controversy included heightened public exposure and threats to her own safety. From a critical perspective, these effects unsettle the ideological slant of the show, which to that point had depended on the propagation of a liberal form of cultural nationalism, the CBC’s role as the promoter of national literacy, and the implicit belief, central to *Canada Reads*, that reading *in itself* is morally beneficial for Canadians.

Canada Reads 2012: Business as Usual?

At first, *Canada Reads* 2012 looked like business as usual for both the CBC and the book market and a reminder to listeners and literary critics alike that Canadian literature can be both popular and profitable. Since 2002, the *Canada Reads* formula of game-show-style entertainment, combined with the promise of national cultural uplift through reading books in common, and the *frisson* of finding out which short-listed book — in the words of host Jian Ghomeshi — “Canadians should read” that year, has appealed to listeners and won the CBC good ratings. For over a decade, the show’s producers have also successfully combined the radio program format with advances in new media technologies (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, *Reading* 91-93), a strategy that has contributed to the show’s longevity. In 2012, as in other years, the featured books and their authors were to benefit from what Ghomeshi frequently called “the *Canada Reads* effect,” a way to name a spike in sales that turns the books on the show into bestsellers. Like “the Oprah effect” of Oprah’s Book Club on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *Canada Reads* was a major support for the Canadian publishing industry because it was so popular.² *Canada Reads* had achieved this success by focusing almost exclusively on one literary genre: the novel. The decision to focus on non-fiction, particularly on memoirs and biographies, meant that the *Canada Reads* effect could be extended to a different part of the publishing industry and that fans of the show across the country could be introduced to a different kind of literature within the *Canada Reads* formula. The *Canada Reads* effect could be connected to “the memoir boom,” a way to describe the increased visibility and popularity of memoir and biography with North American readers since 1992 (see Rak 3-4).

Along with the promised spike in sales from the *Canada Reads* effect, the ideological work that *Canada Reads* generally performs for its audiences is to show that reading and sharing books by Canadians are inherently transformative and nationally reparative acts.³ But on the 2012 *Canada Reads* show, reading was *not* shown to be inherently capable of uniting Canadians and creating better citizens. “True stories” have the power to connect public and private worlds, and to shed light on social problems, as Aguirre herself wrote later. But the act of reading such stories might be more divisive than the playful theme of *Canada Reads* presupposed. Beyond the penalty-free arena of the radio debate in which different opinions are encouraged, indeed demanded, but also

readily reconciled in order to declare a single winner, there are divisive ideas about who gets to be a Canadian. These differences are not so easily reconciled off-air, and conflicting views can lead to physical and psychological forms of violence against the people whose life stories circulate and become public through genres such as memoir. If the show's producers thought that the inclusion of memoir on *Canada Reads* 2012 would bring a fresh perspective to the discussion of Canadian writing by promoting "true stories," what they got on and after the show, in all of its messiness, was real life.

Before we discuss the 2012 controversy in more detail, we should provide some background on the structure of the 2012 *Canada Reads* and its tagline, "true stories." The format of *Canada Reads* 2012 followed that of previous years: the public suggested books, five finalists were chosen, and five Canadian celebrity advocates, one for each book, appeared on four radio broadcasts with live studio audiences. The celebrities voted, and a book was eliminated at the end of each debate. The winner, as always, was to be the book that all Canadians "should" read.⁴ For the 2012 contest, Ghomeshi was still the host, a role that he occupied from 2008 to 2014, but it ended abruptly when he was dismissed from the CBC in October 2014 because of allegations of violent sexual assault. In 2012, Ghomeshi was also known as the host and co-creator of the CBC's most widely listened to radio show, *Q*, and as a member of the 1990s group Moxy Früvous. He was to become a published non-fiction writer himself when his own memoir, *1982*, appeared in September 2012, some months after *Canada Reads* aired in February of that year. The five books on the 2012 list were Marina Nemat's *Prisoner of Tehran* (2008), about her incarceration in a notorious Iranian prison in 1982 when Nemat was a teenager; Ken Dryden's *The Game* (1983), a memoir about his last year as a goalie for the Montreal Canadiens; Dave Bidini's *On a Cold Road* (1998), about a cross-Canada tour that his band, the Rheostatics, undertook with The Tragically Hip in 1996; playwright Carmen Aguirre's *Something Fierce* (2011), a memoir about her years in the Chilean resistance to Augusto Pinochet's regime; and John Vaillant's *The Tiger* (2010), a history of the battle between a Russian village and a killer Siberian tiger bent on revenge against poachers. The celebrity advocates were Arlene Dickinson, an investor on CBC Television's program *Dragon's Den*, who defended *Prisoner of Tehran*; Alan Thicke, a popular Hollywood television actor, screen writer, and composer, who

defended *The Game*; Stacey McKenzie, a supermodel, who defended *On a Cold Road*; hip hop artist Shadrach Kabango (known publicly as Shad), who defended *Something Fierce*; and Anne-France Goldwater, a Québécoise television personality and francophone lawyer who helped to legalize same-sex marriage in Quebec, who defended *The Tiger*.

After four days of debate, in addition to live question-and-answer sessions with the studio audience made available on the CBC's website, the final vote was taken by the panel, and *Something Fierce* beat *The Game* as the non-fiction book that all Canadians should read. Some aspects of the 2012 contest were in keeping with the established *Canada Reads* format: a winner was declared, which resulted in increased book sales for that title as well as others on the shortlist, and the audience for the show outstripped the audiences for most CBC Television programs. As we shall see, other aspects of the 2012 *Canada Reads* show created unexpected outcomes, notably when the choice to feature non-fictional texts (particularly memoirs) created controversy and sparked debate about the transnational character of Canadian citizenship.

The Effect of Truth Claims

Even the decision to feature non-fiction as a theme on *Canada Reads* in itself is significant, because it indicates that the producers of *Canada Reads* in its earlier years reflected a reading bias normally found in the world of literary scholarship: literature, particularly Canadian literature, is commonly understood to be composed mostly of novels and then, to a lesser extent, short stories, poetry, and drama. "Life writing" — a term for autobiography, biography, and other kinds of personal non-fictional writing, such as travel writing, diaries, and letters (Kadar 3-5) — has traditionally been overlooked. The tagline for the CBC *Canada Reads* contest is "The Battle of the Books," but given the fact that until 2012 a novel won the debates every time, and the fact that the 2014 contest was dubbed "One Novel to Change Our Nation" (*Canada Reads*), it is clear that the novel is the most significant genre in the context of the show. This might be one reason why non-fiction became the show's first "theme," since memoir and biography, among other non-fiction genres, had never been included before. As we have said, the rising popularity of the memoir in North America might have helped to convince producers that *Canada Reads* should feature this kind of writing.

But the dominance of memoirs in the final five books had an unforeseen consequence. As most of the panelists said during the debates, memoir in particular has discursive properties that direct reading away from considerations of literary merit and reader affect and toward ethical considerations about content and the author. Try as Ghomeshi might to steer discussion toward the books and away from the authors, debates about the finalist selections of *Canada Reads* steadily moved from a consideration of style and impact toward a discussion of what the books were saying to Canadians about human rights, animal rights, nationalism, and the ethical responsibilities of citizenship. As Ghomeshi noted during the day three Q&A show, “these are real people, and it is personal, and it leads to discussions about real things happening in the world. . . . The stakes are high.” Goldwater’s comments touched off a debate on the *Canada Reads* show, and in the Canadian public sphere more generally, about what kind of people Canadians *should be* in a transnational world and not just what kind of books they should read. That relationship between the author’s persona, the content of “true stories,” and the reactions of readers as citizens and not just as consumers connected truth claims, as part of memoir discourse, to public discourse. Was Nemat in fact a liar? Was Aguirre a terrorist? What *are* Canadian values about if these writers are to be believed? How are readers to respond as citizens to these life stories? How are the authors themselves to respond?

On day one, after Ghomeshi’s smooth introduction and the advocates’ first pleas for their books, the nationalist mission of *Canada Reads* came into conflict with the idea of genre and what genre “asks” readers to do. In particular, as Goldwater argued, the genre of memoir activates questions about truth claims. Ghomeshi began with a question often asked of fiction: “Which of the characters in the five books did you find the least engaging?” All advocates except Goldwater said that they either found the Tiger, the lead “character” of that account, to be unknowable or were cheering for the Russian poachers to be killed because they did not like them. Taking the pugilistic theme of the show to heart, Goldwater decided to strike back quickly, and hard, when it was her turn to speak: “Well, the characters I found the least compelling were Dave Bidini, Ken Dryden, Marina Nemat, and Carmen Aguirre, and in no particular order. I’ll say this: Carmen Aguirre is a bloody terrorist, how they let her into Canada I don’t understand. Marina Nemat

. . . tells a story that's not true, and you can tell it's not true when you read it." Goldwater went on to say that Bidini was a "failed rocker with aspirations of grandeur as a journalist" and added that Dryden's book was boring. She did end with "it's not true, y'all, we lawyers learn to say anything," but no one in the studio audience was fooled by this. The Twitter feed erupted with outrage about her comments. Once the nervous studio laughter and some booing subsided, Ghomeshi tried to moderate her comments by saying that it was merely her opinion that Nemat lied and that Aguirre could be seen as a freedom fighter. Goldwater refused to moderate her comments about either of them. Dickinson tried to defend Nemat's memoir as a subjective story based on what Nemat remembered, but Goldwater would have none of it: she insisted that there are errors of fact in the book. Shad asked Goldwater if she considered Nelson Mandela to be a terrorist, and she affirmed that she did with a nod of her head, to general laughter. With that, the *Globe and Mail* reported, "the CBC has inadvertently transformed a friendly, domestic literary debate into a geopolitical furor focused on volatile questions of truth and justice in distant totalitarian regimes" (Barber).

Goldwater was introduced on *Canada Reads* as a "celebrity lawyer," but in Quebec she is best known as a television star who presides over cases on the program *L'Arbitre* — and there she is known as the Québécoise Judge Judy (Dumas). This was perhaps why she came out fighting — one of her nicknames in Quebec is GoldFighter for her outspokenness (Petrowski). Goldwater was more conciliatory during the rest of the series, even voting for the eventual winner, *Something Fierce*.

Her decision to contest two of the *Canada Reads* books based on what she saw as the responsibilities of each author is not just evidence of bombast. It shows how Philippe Lejeune's "autobiographical pact," when it is activated, can change the stakes for non-fiction in the way that it cannot for fiction. The pact, as Lejeune first conceptualized it, is one of the foundational tests for determining if a work is autobiographical and not fiction. The test is activated whenever a reader encounters an autobiography. If the reader determines that the first-person pronoun in the text matches the proper name on the frontispiece and the identity of someone in the world beyond the book, then the book is an autobiography. If one of these correspondences fails, then the work is fictional (Lejeune 121). Many critics have contested the pact because its terms are narrow, but in fact Lejeune is describing exactly the way that Goldwater

interpreted Nemat's truth claims. Just as Winfrey accused James Frey of lying on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* after aspects of his memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*, were found to be false or exaggerated, thereby touching off an international scandal about memoir fraud, so too Goldwater said on day two of *Canada Reads* that, "as soon as people, that's our five authors, present their story as true, that lends itself to a particular type of critique, which is determining whether the books are telling the truth or not." She was saying, much as Winfrey had said about Frey in 2005, that Nemat could not have lived through the horrific torture scenes that she describes in *Prisoner of Tehran* and that she must be a liar. She called the text into question because she believed that the pact had been broken.

Partly because of a stalemate on the first day, *Prisoner of Tehran* was voted off, to the open disgust of Dickinson, who said that the wrong book lost for the wrong — that is, "political" — reasons. Nemat publicly called for Goldwater to apologize. When she did not, Nemat published a letter in the *Globe and Mail*, stating that "Canada took me when I had nowhere to go. It allowed me to gradually find my way back to myself and to the reality of the person I have become." She ended with an appeal to Goldwater: "The witness is the cornerstone of the justice system. If we throw stones at her, we have taken a step toward burying freedom and democracy. Canada and Canadians deserve better than this" (Nemat). Goldwater replied that "I'm really sorry she's hurt, but that's part of what life is in Canada. . . . [i]f you put your book out there, if it's chosen to be in a debate. . . . In this country there is a tolerance for a difference of opinion, and if somebody just doesn't buy your story, they don't buy their story" (qtd. in Lederman). There are several interesting aspects to this exchange. Goldwater's use of the word *buy* moves *Prisoner of Tehran* away from the idea of witnessing and social justice and toward the market. This balance is what the *Canada Reads* program often attempts: books are commodities on the show because they are openly marketed, and the shortlisted books experience a spike in sales, yet books are understood to be more than commodities because of their ability to educate and delight. Reading is understood to have both pedagogical and entertainment functions for the nation of Canada itself. These discourses exist uneasily alongside each other.

The debate between Goldwater and Nemat was also a rare instance in Canada of an open discussion about witnessing, truth claims, and

what can be said in public. Nemat claimed that Canada had sheltered her and allowed her to be a witness. The difficulties of witnessing, which Dickinson mentioned during the debate as difficulties with trauma and memory, are dismissed by those who do not want that subject to be public. Goldwater, who never provided evidence that Nemat had lied or exaggerated, expressed a particular position about what it means to be a public person. She saw Canada as a place that allows debate, so to her potentially anything can be discussed in the public sphere. This sense of latitude is much like what occurs in the relationship between celebrity status and ideas of privacy. If someone *becomes* a public persona through memoir, then he or she becomes a celebrity of sorts. Public visibility is heightened, and public scrutiny can become more pronounced, because a memoir places private experiences in the public domain for all to see. Goldwater used this assumption that celebrities (and memoirists) forgo privacy when they or their stories become public to justify her attack on Aguirre and Nemat. Although Lejeune did not intend this, celebrity discourse does underwrite the autobiographical pact, since celebrity publicity operates to forge a relationship between the celebrity's body, public representation, and the promise of revelation of a private life. In this environment, truth claims are subjected to "jurisdiction." Memoirs are held to the same standards as legal testimony, particularly when their authors are vulnerable subjects themselves (Gilmore 695-96). The fallout when a "lie" is discovered can be intense, as Frey discovered when Winfrey vented her rage at him on television, calling him a liar because he misrepresented some events in his memoir. When the autobiographical pact breaks down, as it did for Frey, the interpretation of "truth" becomes rigid, to a degree that Winfrey herself later regretted (Rak 196-200).

Dickinson at first contested Goldwater's legalistic understanding of truth claims on day one. But on day two she voiced much the same sentiment about memoir's ethical dimension, saying that "because it's non-fiction" the panelists had an obligation not to use strategy to win the contest but to debate the issues in the books. This approach was echoed in a slightly different way by Thicke, who argued that *The Game* and *On a Cold Road* deserve consideration because they have Canadian settings, unlike the books by the other three finalists. In other words, memoir and biography not only need to be true but also need to correspond to the geography and experiences that Canadians presumably

know. Shad defended Aguirre's memoir by appealing to the ethics of memoir writing as a form of testimonial witnessing, an argument that Goldwater supported despite her early denunciation of Aguirre. This quality of memoir as testimony in particular led the panelists to discuss the issues in the books, even when Ghomeshi, on day two, pleaded with them to discuss style, and not to leave out *On a Cold Road* because the issues in that work were seen to be lighter. The introduction of a different genre into the *Canada Reads* contest activated a kind of reading different from the vernacular reading often practised on the show (Fuller 19-20) as panelists discussed what the books meant ethically and pedagogically and not just the affective dimension of reading.

The Effect of Citizenship

Learning about Canada and Canadians has been an overt nationalist goal for the panelists on every annual iteration of *Canada Reads*, a goal (and a reading practice) partly constituted by the CBC's mandate, set out in the Broadcasting Act of 1991, to "enlighten Canadians" about each other.⁵ But one effect of focusing on non-fiction was that it engendered one of the most sustained discussions about human rights and Canadian "values" in the show's history. Rather than making liberal appeals to the notion of Canada as a tolerant, multicultural society with a diverse set of histories and regional identities that Canadians need to read about, the panelists used their reading experiences of the 2012 books to examine what it means to *be* a Canadian citizen. In the process, an active notion of Canadian citizenship emerged. This type of citizenship requires the subject not only to engage with and defend the rights of a democratic society but also to recognize the responsibilities that come with being what Shad called, in the day one Q&A show, "global citizens." In a similar vein, women's rights were eloquently discussed by Dickinson during the same segment, and the rights to free speech and dissent were advocated by both Goldwater and Shad at different points during the contest.

Although Goldwater's accusation on day one that Aguirre was "a bomb-carrying, murdering terrorist" who should not have been "let into Canada" can be understood as a moment of hostile inhospitality, it also prompted her fellow panelists to confront their own understandings of Canadian values and, in turn, clarify what belonging to the Canadian nation-state involves. In the wake of Goldwater's accusations

on the day one Q&A show, Shad proposed that “the immigrant experience is quintessentially Canadian,” a comment that might easily have been integrated into a bland liberal-nationalist conception of Canada. However, he went on to argue that memoirs such as those by Aguirre and Nemat offer “a rich opportunity to learn about the world through each other. . . . Our stories move us outside the borders of Canada.” Shad then situated his claim that Canadians are “global citizens” politically and economically by referring to the involvement of Canadian businesses in the transnational economy, citing in particular the presence of Canadian mining companies in other regions of the world. His invocation of Canada and Canadians as being “in the world” thus linked the idea that books not set in Canada can be Canadian with the materialities and inequities of a global economy. Within that economy, the labour and resources of the (often poorer) South increase the wealth of the (usually richer) North. Reading and discussing “true stories” that “move us outside the border of Canada” — stories that might require difficult conversations about topics such as terrorism — were for Shad an important “civil discussion” (Q&A day two). Throughout the four days of live broadcasts, he returned to this idea that the shared reading of non-fiction enabled the panelists “to learn from each other” (Q&A day one) precisely because they had different views and politics. It is possible to recognize this difference, Shad said, because there are points of similarity: “I myself connected to her experience. People in this room share a story with Carmen, people on the street.” Memoir, therefore, can be a path to understanding during a time of globalization because “the world is here, and we are in the rest of the world. As Canadian citizens, we are global citizens, and that’s why we should learn about the world and each other” (Q&A day one).

Shad’s eloquent defence of *Something Fierce* as a book that reminds Canadians that many of their fellow citizens have suffered at the hands of “brutal regimes,” and his appeal to a notion of Canada that does not stop at its political or territorial borders, were the most politically progressive positions of the 2012 contest. Nevertheless, the negotiation and exploration of what constituted “Canadian values” were engaged in by all of the panelists. On day four, Goldwater recalled the events of the early 1970s in Quebec, noting that, in contrast to the situation described in Aguirre’s memoir, “we made a choice as a people to reject bloodshed. . . . I’m proud of this as part of my Québécoise identity.”

Her reminder to the panelists that there have been moments of violent confrontation between Canadians in recent Canadian history did not extend to a recognition of other internal conflicts and oppressions, and notably no one spoke about Indigenous rights in Canada when discussing human rights. Nevertheless, Goldwater's declared position on Canadian values as a liberal progressive on some matters, such as same-sex marriage, and a conservative on foreign policy issues, particularly in relation to South America, complicated the idea that arriving at a shared idea of Canadian values might be easily achieved. Her ruminations on Canadian identity, history, and the right to dissent on the final day of discussions thus problematized Dickinson's eloquent defence of the Nemat and Aguirre memoirs on day three. Dickinson spoke passionately, declaring that "nothing is more important than human rights" and that a book "doesn't have to take place in Canada to have Canadian values and experiences." The in-studio audience applauded the idea that human rights are a core value for Canadians, but the panelists' views about how those rights should be enacted and defended differed.

The negotiations on shared values and the centrality of human rights were, if anything, made more complicated by Thicke and McKenzie. Thicke adhered to a cultural nationalist model of Canada throughout the broadcasts, citing his own involvement in the establishment of and commitment to Canadian content (called CanCon) legislation. McKenzie envisaged Canada in more utopian and personally transformative terms as a place where people could pursue their dreams. Neither construction entirely ruled out a consideration of human rights as a shared value for Canadians, but each suggested a different idea of the citizen subject. Thicke repeatedly argued that a Canadian book should be set in Canada and be about experiences within national borders, and this argument was partly a strategic position that enabled him to make a coherent case for Dryden's hockey memoir. But it also invoked a territorially bound idea of citizenship in which the test for Canadianness becomes knowledge of iconic sports and the sharing of cultural products authored by Canadian nationals. McKenzie's Canadian identity narrative was actually more complex than it first appeared to be. McKenzie shared her own immigrant story with the panelists while acknowledging how difficult it can be to establish a career in Canada in some cultural industries, specifically the music business (the focus of her book,

Bidini's *On a Cold Road*) and the fashion industry, her own sphere of work experience. Her life story indicated that, for some Canadians, becoming an economically productive (and artistically fulfilled) citizen actually required working elsewhere, a professional experience shared by Thicke, who has worked extensively in the media industries in the United States. Here, then, we have another model of the "global citizen," caught up in transnational flows of labour. When the panelists finally chose *Something Fierce* over *The Game*, they rejected a nationalist "true story" about a popular Canadian sport set within Canada's territorial borders for a memoir about labour activism and resistance fighters in Chile, Bolivia, and Argentina.

Nevertheless, notions of reading for nationalist purposes, or at least for transformative and potentially reparative ends, re-emerged on day four. Shad's earlier assertion that reading and discussing the books should involve "learning *from* each other," and not simply "learning *about*" each other, was echoed by Dickinson: "We are about listening to and understanding people. . . . That is what Canada is about. Read books!" On the one hand, her final declaration returns us to an ideal of moral improvement, a "civilizing" notion that reading is "about becoming better as a multicultural nation." On the other, in the context of the panelists' discussion on the right to dissent and the importance of discussing "difficult issues" in public, her words can also be interpreted as a more politically progressive expression of the Canadian citizen as a thoughtful reader of "true stories" who reads in order to understand how to be Canadian in a transnational world.

That these stories might take place outside the nation-state was underlined by Ghomeshi, who noted the international circulation of several of the books, especially *Something Fierce* and *Prisoner of Tehran*. Listeners and online spectators of the show were reminded of the financial and cultural infrastructure required to produce, disseminate, and evaluate "Canadian" books within and outside Canada. Meanwhile, by reminding on- and offline followers of the contest that the books can be purchased, Ghomeshi returned the audience from the public sphere of debate (traditionally upheld by CBC talk radio) to the marketplace and the CBC's role as an agent in the reading industry, adeptly communicating across the media formats of *Canada Reads*. Thus, in the final minutes of the last "live" broadcast show, he articulated the interdependence of the financial, media, and cultural/transnational factors

that produced the *Canada Reads* 2012 contest. In so doing, Ghomeshi temporarily sutured together aspects of the show that in fact do not cohere easily in ideological terms: public debate and the marketplace; a public broadcaster as a profit-making bookseller; reading as a transnational practice on a show that promotes Canadian cultural products. What he could not contain or control through his moderation were the generic effects triggered by the featured books.

As we have argued, the change of genre from fiction to non-fiction, and in particular the inclusion of four memoirs, activated the debate about ethics and citizenship. Goldwater's claims that Nemat was a liar and that Aguirre was a terrorist were not merely part of a professional performance by a celebrity lawyer who understands the conventions of debate and the dynamics of "live" media. Her accusations were effects generated by memoir, a genre that, as we have said, relies extensively on truth claims and ethics. At the end of day four's Q&A show, the celebrity readers seemed to be in agreement with Shad. Even Goldwater saw the debate as positive, saying that "the vigour, intensity, and energy of debate will ignite people." The effects of reading memoir in public on *Canada Reads* would indeed have an afterlife, but not one confined to buying the books and engaging in political discussion, as we explore below.

The *Canada Reads* Effect and Its After Effects

It is a big deal winning *Canada Reads*. . . . People in the Canadian publishing industry have called us the *Canada Reads* effect. Along with the Scotiabank Giller Prize, *Canada Reads* is the biggest event in terms of influencing book sales in this country. Last year's winner, *The Best Laid Plans* by Terry Fallis, who is with us on the online chat right now, saw a 700 percent jump in sales after it won this competition. A couple years back Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* sold a half a million copies after this competition. So it does mean something to get into the top five; it does mean something to win.

— Jian Ghomeshi, day two of *Canada Reads* 2012

During the *Canada Reads* 2012 daily broadcast shows, Ghomeshi made several explicit remarks about the capacity of the series to vastly improve book sales for the selected titles. On day one of the contest, he noted that *Canada Reads* is now as influential as major literary awards

when it comes to promoting Canadian books to Canadian readers, an aspect of the show highlighted by Gillian Roberts in her analysis of Canadian literary prizes (*Prizing Literature*). On day two, as quoted above, Ghomeshi offered more specific information about the *Canada Reads* effect.⁶ At other points across the four days of the competition, he noted that all of the titles had been, or were currently, on bestseller lists. He also commented on the fact that *Something Fierce* was the most recently published of the five featured books.

His remarks about sales and prestige were not simply boosters for the books and the show. Ghomeshi was reminding listeners how the CBC functions not just as a creator of national culture — with a history as a publisher of Canadian writing (Latham 155; McCaig 25-30) and a promoter of Canadian literary culture — but also as a part of the contemporary reading industry. The “reading industry” gives a name to the various social and economic structures that together produce contemporary cultures of reading and refers to the organizations, institutions, and businesses that produce various types of cultural artifacts and events for a target market of non-professional readers. The shared goal of the various for-profit and publicly funded bodies that constitute the reading industry is to make leisure reading entertaining by employing any of the established or newer modes of communication and media technologies available to them (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, *Reading* 15-19). As a publicly funded national broadcaster, the CBC is not supposed to be profit-centred. Nevertheless, the producers of shows such as *Canada Reads* form alliances with other agents in the reading industry, such as book publishers and book retailers, for whom economic profit is vital. The *Canada Reads* effect describes the success of this relationship.

In 2012, the audience reach of *Canada Reads* via CBC Radio One was impressive and thus caught the attention of many potential readers and book buyers, thereby fuelling the *Canada Reads* effect. Between 6 and 11 February 2012, the total audience figure for the radio broadcasts (combining mid-morning live broadcasts with the repeat evening broadcasts) was 1,679,000 (CBC Research). This represented a slight increase of the previous audience reach (1,548,000) for the radio version of *Canada Reads* in 2011. To put this into perspective, contemporaneous record-breaking television broadcasts of *Hockey Night in Canada* — the most popular show on CBC Television at the time — averaged between 1.5 million viewers for a Winnipeg Jets-Ottawa Senators game and 3.3

million viewers for a Toronto Maple Leafs-Montreal Canadiens game (Perry). Even without adding the number of visitors to the *Canada Reads* website, who might have participated with the series only online, or viewers of the CBC Television version of the show (the broadcast of 12 February 2012 achieved an audience reach of 470,000), *Canada Reads* is a success for the CBC, a valuable promoter of Canadian literary cultural products, and thus a significant agent in the reading industry.

The *Canada Reads* effect in 2012 held particular significance for Aguirre. What Ghomeshi did not mention on-air was that her memoir had not met with commercial success prior to its selection for *Canada Reads*. As Aguirre herself notes in an afterword to the 2014 edition of *Something Fierce*, when it was first published in hardcover in 2011, “the book didn’t sell. At all. The sales were so dismal, in fact, that my publisher was not going to release it in paperback. . . . The sales flatlined at 1,500 books” (277). If the book had received no press attention, then the low sales would have been understandable, but it was widely reviewed upon publication in major newspapers and magazines across Canada, including the *Globe and Mail* and *Quill and Quire* (see Sampson; Smith; Teodoro; and Zentilli). Aguirre writes in her afterword that publicity was extensive: “There were interviews and previews in Canada’s major papers, visits to TV and radio talk shows and glowing reviews” (277). She also reports that she “received deeply felt messages from readers across the country,” many of whom were “activists” or “immigrants,” who “identified with the story, the voice, the point of view, who felt that the book articulated their own defining stories” (277). It is possible that some of these correspondents had neither read nor bought the book but had heard Aguirre tell her story through the mass media interviews. Regardless of how this first audience for *Something Fierce* had accessed her life story, their affective and identificatory responses were typical of the reader responses that Aguirre received after the *Canada Reads* effect propelled her memoir into the top national bestseller spot.

For Aguirre, her book had suddenly “found the broad audience that seemed unreachable mere months before” (280), an audience that she encountered in person through the numerous readings and meetings that she was invited to give across Canada after the on-air contest was over. Many readers identified with the book and felt moved by it (281), responses that vindicated her artistic decisions to write in the first person even though that risked her seeming to be “unrevolutionary” and

“to frame the story as a coming-of-age tale set against the backdrop of a political thriller,” thus “wrapping the personal and political around each other” (276). Other readers whom she met shared their own experiences of activism, immigration, post-traumatic stress disorder, and loss of family, regardless of their “races, social classes, religions, genders, sexual orientations and nationalities” (281). In her afterword, Aguirre recounts details of several specific events at which this occurred. She also notes that winning *Canada Reads* literally opened the door to an exclusive Vancouver club in order to debate politics with right-wing business men (281), allowed her to raise in-depth issues in a men’s prison in Ontario (282), and led to her giving dating advice to ESL Chinese students in New Westminster, BC. These diverse experiences not only underlined the emotional, political, and social power of Aguirre’s memoir once it was read and shared in public but also mitigated for her the vulnerability and “terror” that she felt while writing it (275-76) and the troubling effects generated by the on-air controversy.

Primary among these unwelcome effects were the threat to her physical safety and the return of the psychological distress associated with “years of paranoia” when Aguirre had feared her “accusation” as a terrorist from either the Chilean or the Canadian government (278). She immediately understood the power of that “insult” being “hurled on the public broadcasting network” and the speed and potential scale of its mass mediation. Her thoughts about the possible consequences of Goldwater’s comment for her family and son, as well as her fear about being arrested, initially numbed her (278-79). Once Aguirre articulated her fear to those around her, her publicist, Shad, her friends, her publisher, her editor, and staff at the CBC rallied to provide encouragement, legal advice, and a security detail (279). In the afterword, Aguirre reminds the reader why her fears were warranted: “I thought of repercussions, of the price to pay for telling this story at this particular time in North America, when the word ‘terrorist’ is not an abstraction but carries the weight of two towers toppling; a label is not that easily erased, that can and does destroy lives” (278). The language that Aguirre employs shifts the connotations and the referent of the accusation, so that from the first line of the afterword “terror” becomes an emotion that she felt, not one that she sought to inspire in others. Although she takes responsibility for her actions and for writing her

memoir, she details how stressful, ethically difficult, and laborious the work of completing it was for her (275-76).

Aguirre's unromantic portrait of authorship not only has the effect of demystifying the writing process but also sets up the second part of her narrative, in which the costs and benefits of becoming a public person are related. But, importantly, her account of the after-effects of *Canada Reads* 2012 ends with her stories of meeting and talking with a broad range of readers "who let me know that telling this secret story — now part of broader Canadian mythology — was worth it" (284). Readers — and their own life stories — are what make the political and artistic "struggle" worthwhile to Aguirre. The act of readers sharing with her their own life stories also foregrounds another important effect that published memoir can engender even as it enacts it: personal testimony. Within the genre of memoir, personal testimony is a form of life writing that is "an important discursive practice for bearing witness to traumatic historical events" (Kennedy 48). Personal testimony is written not just to retell a life but also to bear witness to an event through the writer's personal experience of it. Personal testimony therefore has great potential. It has the power to bring about the kind of awareness that can lead to social change. But it also has the power to expose its author to charges of lying (because testimony has to be true) or, as Aguirre experienced, damaging allegations and threats.

Conclusion

The 2012 focus on "true stories" and the effects of reading the genre of memoir resulted in a rupturing of the nationalist ideology and the liberal notion of multiculturalism that drives the purpose of *Canada Reads*. The catch phrase of *Canada Reads* and the goal of the elimination format are to select a book "that all Canadians should read." The implication that the shared reading of a Canadian book will create an imagined community across the nation-state has remained a constant theme in terms of both the content and the production style of the series. We argue that, rather than unifying Canadians and "enlightening" them about each other through the medium of a shared reading experience of Canadian stories, the effects of reading memoir in public on the 2012 show exposed the dangerous naivety of that ideal and the requirement for more ethically responsible ways of reading. As we have seen, for two of the featured authors, Carmen Aguirre and Marina Nemat, the

“real life” effects of *Canada Reads* were not confined to the economic benefits of increased sales of and interest in their books. Their experiences, especially those of Aguirre, demonstrate the difficulty of being a public person whose life story threatens some people’s ideas of what it means to be a Canadian citizen.

The 2012 iteration of *Canada Reads* marked the beginning of a new chapter for the multi-platform series. The explicit aims of the contest changed because of the way that ideas about “Canada,” citizenship, and truth telling could be engaged through non-fiction genres and ethically motivated reading practices. Although the 2013 theme of “turf wars” appealed to a regionalist model of nationalism and saw the series revert to fiction-only selections, more recent iterations of *Canada Reads* have taken up different aspects of the ethical agenda raised in the 2012 contest, both thematically and in on-air discussions. The 2014 contest was framed by the question “What is the one novel that could change Canada?” and included a heated debate between panelists Wab Kinew and Stephen Lewis about the representation of violence in *The Orenda*. In 2015, the ethos of reading as a means of social transformation was rearticulated as “What is the one book to break barriers?” Non-fiction appeared alongside fiction for the first time on the shortlist. As the *Canada Reads* 2012 theme “true stories” suggests, non-fictional narratives are as capable of inspiring readers to engage with “Canadian” narratives as their so-called fictional counterparts. The debate that developed during the 2012 series, partly because of the close connection between truth claims and memoir reading, appears to have sparked a shift in the *Canada Reads* format toward issue-based reading and the inclusion of non-fiction. The decision in 2012 to focus on “true stories” shows us how important the work of memoir and its connection to contemporary issues have become to Canadian readers and how the effects of memoir, with its potential to connect readers to public issues and its potential for public harm, highlighted the power, the possibility, and the messiness of stories about real life: stories with real effects both on and off the air.

NOTES

¹ All references to the content of the *Canada Reads* 2012 contest are to audio and video files found in the CBC *Canada Reads* archive at <http://www.cbc.ca/books/canadarads/2012/watchlisten.html>.

² It is unclear exactly when the term “the *Canada Reads* effect” was first used to describe the pattern of rapid and high-volume book sales created by the CBC series, but it is an adaptation of “the Oprah effect,” which describes a similar relationship in the reading industry. Employed by business journalists and scholars investigating Oprah’s Book Club (Kinsella 276; Max), the term invokes the economic and symbolic forms of capital accrued by Winfrey as a superstar celebrity, book club leader, and taste maker — capital that drove up book sales significantly with each book club selection (Zeitchik).

³ The public impact of *Canada Reads* and reparative reading have been discussed generally by Fuller; Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, “Reading Spectacle”; and Moss. Also see Lang, who discusses historical reparation and *Canada Reads*; and Roberts, “*Book of Negroes*,” who discusses African-Canadian history and *Canada Reads*.

⁴ Detailed studies of the format and history of *Canada Reads* have already been well documented by scholars of Canadian literature and communications. See Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, *Reading*; Grafton; Kamboureli; Moss; and Roberts, *Prizing*.

⁵ The Broadcasting Act of 1991 is the latest piece of legislation to define the CBC as a public broadcaster. For a history of broadcasting legislation from the Aird Commission in 1924, to the Radio Broadcasting Act in 1932, to the founding of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in 1936, see Miller (271-75); and Vipond (259).

⁶ The effect that Ghomeshi described in 2012 began with the first series, when sales of the 2002 winning title, Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*, sky-rocketed to 90,000 by the end of that year even though the book was first published in 1987 (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, “Reading Spectacle” 23).

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