



TAYLOR BROWN¹

“How Do You Criticize a Life Story?”: Form, Trauma, and Memoir in *Canada Reads 2020*

Abstract

“How do you Criticize a Life Story?": Form, Trauma, and Memoir in *Canada Reads 2020*” investigates the practice of reading for empathy, as it pertains to memoir and trauma operating in the hypervisibility of the public sphere. The emotional connection between reader and author that memoir inspires is also encouraged on *Canada Reads*, the popular intersection of a literary contest and reality show. The panelists’ 2020 discussion of Jesse Thistle’s *From the Ashes* and Samra Habib’s *We Have Always Been Here* encouraged reading as a means of empathizing with the author’s experiences. As Danielle Fuller details, this is also how many viewers appraise the titles featured on *Canada Reads*, adopting a method of literary evaluation that is inherently personal. Memoir, given its connection to the real world and real people, becomes an excellent candidate for connecting with the reader. While Philippe Lejeune argues that memoir must be entirely non-fictional, G. Thomas Couser and Leigh Gilmore demonstrate that for a genre grappling with selective memory and trauma, this is impossible. As a result, memoir proves to be a genre that is both popular amongst readers and necessarily literary and inventive in its construction. The popularity of *Canada Reads* and memoir indicate that empathetic reading deserves a place in literary discourse, which in turn reimagines the Canadian literary canon and traditional methods of evaluation.

Keywords: Memoir, Canada Reads, Trauma, Canlit, Public

Résumé

« Comment critiquer une histoire de vie ? » Form, Trauma, and Memoir in *Canada Reads 2020* » étudie la pratique de la lecture pour l'empathie, en ce qui concerne les mémoires et les traumatismes opérant dans l'hyper visibilité de la sphère publique. Le lien émotionnel entre le lecteur et l'auteur qui inspire les mémoires est également encouragé par le Combat national des livres, l'intersection populaire d'un concours littéraire et d'une émission de télé-réalité. La discussion des panélistes sur *From the Ashes* de Jesse Thistle et *We Have Always Been Here* de Samra Habib a encouragé la lecture comme moyen d'empathie avec les expériences de l'auteur. Selon Danielle Fuller, c'est également de cette manière que de nombreux spectateurs évaluent les titres présentés dans le cadre du Combat national des livres; on adopte une méthode d'évaluation littéraire intrinsèquement personnelle. Les mémoires, étant donné leur lien avec le monde réel et les personnes réelles, deviennent un excellent candidat pour établir un lien avec le lecteur. Alors que Philippe Lejeune soutient que les mémoires doivent être entièrement non fictionnelles, G. Thomas Couser et Leigh Gilmore démontrent que c'est impossible pour un genre qui s'attaque à la mémoire sélective et aux traumatismes. Par conséquent, les mémoires s'avèrent être un genre à la fois populaire auprès des lecteurs et nécessairement littéraire et inventif dans sa construction. La popularité du Combat des livres et des mémoires indique que la lecture empathique mérite une place dans le discours littéraire, qui à son tour, reconçoit le canon littéraire canadien et les méthodes traditionnelles d'évaluation.

Mots clés: mémoires, Canada Reads, traumatisme, Canlit, public

¹ University of Guelph, Ontario.

As a genre, memoir is largely regarded as lowbrow art. In Julie Rak's *Boom!: Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market*, Rak (2013) outlines the memoir boom, a "period roughly spanning the first decade of the twenty-first century, when the production and public visibility of American and British memoirs" increased (p. 3). Rak's analysis focuses on memoir as a commodity, linking the genre's popularity to its performance in the marketplace. Rak argues that "the long association of memoir with the marketplace and its 'demands' for timely, truthful and sometimes sensationalized non-fiction continues today, as does the backlash against this kind of writing as trashy, lowbrow, and not worth reading" (p. 51). Evidently, memoir sells well but is largely overlooked by academics, and perhaps not taken seriously as a legitimate, distinctly "literary" medium.

While writing the first draft of this paper, I worked at a major book retailer. Right in time for the frenzy of holiday shopping, Barack Obama published his second memoir, *The Promised Land*. My job became inundated with unloading boxes upon boxes of that book and pointing customers to its various locations around the store. Many customers were drawn to Obama's memoir because they liked his personality and his politics, and because they were intrigued by the fact that everything within those pages *actually happened*. They were drawn to the real person and the real story he promised. The appeal of Obama's memoir and perhaps by extension, every memoir, appears contingent upon the reader's connection to the author and the real world they represent.

If one considers the emphasis of personal connection to a text, it is important to consider literary contests that also emphasize personalities and real-world connections. CBC's *Canada Reads* is a reality show that features a panel of five celebrated Canadians who discuss the merit of five Canadian books. The show is formatted like *Survivor*, as panelists eliminate one book every episode until the winner remains, crowning the "one book all of Canada should read" (CBC, 2021). The show is televised, broadcast over the radio, Spotify, Apple Podcasts and available through CBC Gem and YouTube. The show's popularity is best demonstrated through its influence on the Canadian publishing industry. Fuller and Rak (2015) define the "*Canada Reads* effect" as the exposure that each book receives throughout the discussions, placing almost every contender on the bestseller list (p. 38). While reality television is usually framed as frivolous or superficial, the proceedings of the program have material consequences for authors, readers, and booksellers.

What exactly makes *Canada Reads* so popular and sets it apart from other Canadian literary contests? According to the CBC, the show's success is attributed to "inviting celebrities who were avid readers but not the 'usual suspects' when it came to talking about books" (CBC, 2020). Here, the CBC highlights the most important aspect of the show: the panelists are not literary critics or experts in any capacity, they simply enjoy reading. As a result, the show becomes framed as accessible and relatable for viewers who are not always interested in intensive literary analysis. The panelists' appraisal of each book is usually linked to their personal connections to the book they are defending. *Canada Reads* differs from traditional, academic modes of evaluation in that it encourages relatability, accessibility and considers the personal likes and dislikes of the reader. As a result, the structure of *Canada Reads* almost guarantees memoir will perform exceedingly well on the show, as both outlets inspire a method of reading that differs from strictly academic interpretations of books, inspiring empathetic and inherently personal readings of the texts.

Canada Reads 2020 featured two memoirs: Jesse Thistle's *From the Ashes*, a memoir of Thistle's life as he overcomes addiction and homelessness to find recovery through cultural connection, was defended by George Canyon. The other memoir is Samra Habib's *We Have Always Been Here*, an account of Habib's life as a queer, Muslim, immigrant woman in Canada, defended by Amanda Brugal. These two memoirs form the basis of this analysis due to their popularity amongst readers, how each memoir and author contended with trauma as a public facing entity and the similarities in how the panelists appraised them. Habib's memoir ultimately won the competition and although *From the Ashes* was eliminated in the second round, according to Genner (2020), it became a top-selling Canadian title (par. 6). Evidently, Canadians are moved by, or at least inclined to read and buy, memoir.

Memoir's popularity in *Canada Reads* can be attributed to *how* the panelists spoke about each memoir. The panelists foregrounded the authors' personalities, as Canyon argued that reading *From the Ashes* "felt like I was sitting with a close friend you know, a brother if you will, listening to his life story over a casual cup of coffee" (CBC, 2020). Panelist Kaniehtiio Horn validated Canyon's experience of understanding an author through their memoir, because she felt "like I knew [Habib] by the end" of *We Have Always Been Here* (CBC, 2020). As a result of the panelists' focus on the author's knowability in memoir, they emphasize its status as non-fiction, as authors are framed not as

characters within a book but as knowable, accessible personas.

Through *Canada Reads 2020*, the panelists debated the merits and shortcomings of each genre represented in the contest, with certain panelists fixated on the comparison between fiction and non-fiction. Canyon dismissed fiction because “you won’t develop the same empathy” for fictional characters because “you can separate yourself from that fictional world” (CBC, 2020). Truth is paramount to the appeal of memoir and defines the genre in contrast to fiction. For a work to be considered autobiographical and therefore non-fiction, Philippe Lejeune (1989) argues the work must comply with the “autobiographical pact,” achieved when a book is the “retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (p. 4). Lejeune’s definition, while not flawless as it leaves much to be considered², provides a sufficient understanding of what memoir is and most importantly, what memoir is not. Even if fiction is inspired by true events, the reader invests in the reading experience differently, as argued by Canyon. G. Thomas Couser (2011) argues that fiction requires the “willing suspension of disbelief,” while memoir is contingent upon its promise to portray true events (p. 17).

While memoir is often defined in contrast to fiction, that distinction cannot adequately establish the two as binaries of truth and falsehood. Couser (2011) argues that an author’s memory can prove to be “notoriously unreliable and highly selective” (p. 19). Therefore, memoirs cannot be evaluated as a carbon copy of reality. Life writing is “undeniably ‘fictive’ (inventive) even when it is not [considered] ‘novelistic’” (p. 53). Lejeune (1989) demonstrates that as a genre, memoir hinges upon the “autobiographical pact” (p. 3)³, while conversely, Couser points out the inherent inventiveness of the genre. Memoirs represent true events but in the process of writing non-fiction, the invention akin to fiction is required. The two models of memoir offered by Lejeune and Couser highlight the most pronounced problem of the genre. While both *From the Ashes* and *We Have Always Been Here* serve as

accounts of past events, the limitations of memory and trauma are imposed upon them.

From the Ashes and *We Have Always Been Here* both include references to traumatic episodes that cannot be explicitly represented. Leigh Gilmore (2003), in writing about memoir and trauma, argues that trauma is “unspeakable” and therefore difficult for the survivor to come to terms with themselves, let alone disclose to the reader, rendering it nearly “unrepresentable” (p. 702). This does not reflect a memoirist’s literary abilities; rather, the failure to represent trauma subsequently emphasizes the presence of craft; the narrative *must* be constructed to work around restrictions imposed by trauma. As a result, memoir should not be considered wholly non-fiction and therefore automatically unliterary, as its very existence indicates stylistic choices made by the author.

In an author’s note that succeeds *From the Ashes*, Thistle (2019) explains that “trauma distorts perspectives. I think my mind blocks out a lot, bends time, folds that trauma in on itself so that I can function today” (p. 355). Thistle acknowledges the presence of his trauma and yet, the traumatic events in question cannot be explicitly detailed because the existence of his present, writing self is contingent upon the bracketing of his trauma. To write his memoir and subsequently appear on *Canada Reads* as a figure made available to the public, he cannot fully represent some of the circumstances that inform his position as a memoirist.

From the Ashes chronicles Thistle’s life as he struggles against systemic barriers resulting in homelessness, addiction, and physical and sexual violence. In Thistle’s retelling of the night that he was sexually assaulted, he loses then regains consciousness. After a break in the narration indicates time has passed, he awakes to inspect the damage to his body by describing the graphic details. Although Thistle unflinchingly represents the aftermath, he is unable to disclose “what happened, who was around me before I fell unconscious, why I woke up near the washroom” (p. 173). The moments leading up to the narrative break, combined with the aftermath, make it evident to both

² Lejeune’s definition of autobiography elicits the following questions: must the work be prose? How does an author only focus on their individual life, given the external factors inherent to any person’s experience? Does the “story of his personality” imply a narrative arc and a definitive conclusion, leaving anything short of that incomplete? Is a perfect narrative arc possible, because the author is alive to write their memoir and therefore still has life left to live?

³ Consider the outrage sparked by James Frey’s fabricated account of addiction in *A Million Little Pieces*. Rak (2013) highlights that the public’s reaction indicates that Frey betrayed his readers and his publishers by marketing a novel as memoir (p. 25), which demonstrates the ramifications of betraying Lejeune’s autobiographical pact.

Thistle and the reader that he survived a sexual assault. When he begins to realize what happened to him, he cannot bring himself to explicitly name it, articulating a “deep feeling of shame” instead (p. 173). While the presence of a traumatic event is identified to the reader, just as Thistle acknowledges its presence in his author’s note, the actual incident can only be implied; traumatic episodes fail to be represented in Thistle’s memoir.

We Have Always Been Here operates under the same restrictions of representation. Habib (2019) recalls an incident in which she is sexually assaulted as a child. In the aftermath, it “became important to me to act as though I hadn’t been scarred by the incident” (p. 15). Like Thistle, whose trauma is bracketed to allow him to continue with his life and his writing, Habib collapses the traumatic event in her narration. She chose to “forget his name and his face” (p. 14), reflecting not only trauma’s impact on her memory, but on how she’s chosen to represent it. The vagueness in her narration is furthered by the setting she recalls: a “dark room, heavy curtains obscuring any hope of clarity” (p. 14). This is another instance, like Thistle’s unconscious state, that illustrates the narrative restrictions of representing trauma. The man is faceless, and the room prevents clarity, illustrating both Habib’s failure to be explicit in her retelling and how her mind has blocked out certain details.

This analysis of trauma within *From the Ashes* and *We Have Always Been Here* does not serve to position unconsciousness or dark rooms as apt metaphors for how trauma functions in the text. Nor does this exploration cast doubt upon the circumstances of each incident. Instead, this analysis demonstrates the necessary construction of memoir. Both Thistle and Habib *must* be inventive in their writing, not only for the sake of a cohesive narrative, but for the preservation of their current, writing selves. Their writing is a result of self-preservation as they bend the narrative to move around and beyond traumatic events. Memoir is inventive and intentional because the authors are aware of the gaps in their memory and subsequently, their narration. A consideration of trauma and its impacts on narrative undermines memoir’s status as “lowbrow” writing.

While Gilmore’s articulation of trauma is observed in both memoirs featured on *Canada Reads* 2020, the format and execution of the show runs

contrary to how trauma functions in the texts. Lorraine York (2007) demonstrates the tension of balancing the author’s private, written world with the wider, public realm they promote their work to (p. 13). Writing is “most frequently performed in privacy” despite a notable author’s visibility and availability to the public (p. 12)⁴. This is exceptionally true when authors appear on *Canada Reads*. Throughout the show, Habib and Thistle are virtually present to embody the traumas that their memoirs attempt to articulate. Their public personas appear to contradict the private worlds that their memoirs present.

Fuller and Rehberg Sedo (2006) demonstrate how the structure of *Canada Reads* brings the private act of reading and writing into the hypervisibility of the public sphere (via radio, television, and the Internet), creating a sensationalized “media spectacle” (p. 19). As a result of the show’s format, intimate moments involving both authors and panelists are broadcast across the country. This contradiction between the private and the public, the intimate and the spectacle, pervades every installment, as the panelists encourage viewers to engage with or be compelled by the most intimate and traumatizing moments of an author’s life. In *Canada Reads* 2020, every panelist referred to the relationship they fostered with the authors, both through reading their work and interacting with them. Canyon established a sense of intimacy with Thistle by referring to him as a “brother” (CBC, 2020). *We Have Always Been Here* received the same treatment from the panelists, as Brugal praised the memoir as a “window into a world” she had not previously understood (CBC, 2020). The panelists emotionally connected with Thistle and Habib through their memoirs and advocated for viewers to observe the same practice in their own readings of each text.

Many viewers of *Canada Reads* partake in what Fuller (2007) refers to as the show’s empathetic “response to literature” (p. 12). Fuller argues this method of “personalized criticism,” is how many fans, inspired by the panelists’ discussion, shape their evaluation of the titles (p. 12). The personal connection that *Canada Reads* encourages is further evidenced by Simon and Shuster’s promotion of *From the Ashes* following its elimination:

Thank you to all the readers who embraced FROM THE ASHES. Thank you @georgecanyon for your beautiful words of

⁴ It is worth mentioning that social media renders authors more visible now than ever, further exacerbating the tension between the author’s private realm and the public world where their work circulates.

support, and always and forever, thank you to @michifman for sharing your story with the world.

With this tweet, Simon and Schuster insinuate Thistle's memoir is not to be simply read, it is to be embraced, suggesting a level of intimacy between the book and its reader. Even the term "sharing" taps into the connective quality of memoir. Given that Simon and Schuster, Thistle's publisher, directly benefit from the success of *From the Ashes*, it can be assumed that a memoir's relationality to its readers forms an essential aspect of its value in the marketplace, reflecting its widespread appeal to readers.

With the program's emphasis on content and connection, critics of the show argue that a consideration of form appears to be absent from readings of each text. Russell Smith (2019) argues that *Canada Reads* fails to reward books based on their literary merit (par. 4). He opposes the ways in which *Canada Reads* frames reading as a method of garnering empathy for another Canadian's experience. Smith (2019) further argues that memoir will not be "remembered in encyclopedias and taught to schoolchildren" (par. 9), excluding the entire genre from imaginings of a Canadian literary canon. Smith is not the first critic to argue that form is overlooked for the sake of content in Canadian Literature. In "The Canonization of Canadian Literature: An Inquiry into Value," Robert Lecker (1990) contends not just with the contents of a Canadian literary canon, but the process of constructing and defining a national literary tradition. He argues that many literary scholars failed to produce "sustained discussion of one of the most crucial, problematic, and theoretically important questions that gives the Canadian canon its power – the question of how the literary values it embodies achieved and maintain their currency" (p. 658-659). His use of the term "how" is important here, because Lecker, much like Smith, is advocating for a consideration of style and form, not a consideration of the reader's empathy.

Smith's lamentation about the poor literary quality of memoir overlooks how Thistle and Habib and many other memoirists intentionally write around trauma. Based upon the restrictions that memoirists operate under, the genre proves to be an inherent exercise in form. Memoir's craft is revealed upon considering a synthesis of Lejeune, Couser and Gilmore. The genre represents real stories that have been reconstructed from memory, despite the disturbances imposed by trauma. The writer's craft is felt throughout

the memoir, dispelling Smith's assertion that life writing is not 'literary enough' to be taught or remembered by future generations.

Considerations of *Canada Reads* always stirs up inevitable questions about the purpose of the program, and what it contributes to both public and academic discourse. Does *Canada Reads* serve to create a CBC-endorsed literary canon, or otherwise solidify certain titles as Canadian classics? According to Smith (2019), most memoirs, despite their impact on readers, will not have a long-lasting impact on the Canadian literary canon (par. 9). Julie Rak (2013) agrees that literary critics often overlook both memoir and its readership (p. 7), while simultaneously noting the popularity of the genre (p. 9-10). Perhaps memoir's wide-spread popularity, when complimentary to the model of empathetic reading offered by *Canada Reads*, indicates a form of literary evaluation that, as Fuller (2007) explains, might be "re-shaping the use of Canadian literature" (p. 13).

Memoir, as evidenced by *We Have Always Been Here* and *From the Ashes*, represents a genre that not only holds the potential for literary merit but also proves to be popular amongst readers. While creating a literary canon is always riddled with complications and contradictions, perhaps the best place to start is to understand which stories Canadians are drawn to, and why. Therefore, empathetic methods of reading do not need to be heralded as inferior, nor indicative of an uncritical readership influenced by the author's personality, and their personality alone. An empathetic response to literature should be perceived as what it is: a method of reading that inspires an alternative inquiry into value, to borrow from Lecker. Canyon laments, "how do you criticize a life story? Someone's true life story?" (CBC, 2020). The answer to his question rests in the subjective spirit of *Canada Reads* itself. In his response to Lecker, Tracy Ware (1991) recalls Canadian literature's history of fluidity (p. 487), implying that changes to how scholars respond to literature are inevitable. Disagreements regarding the formation of the Canadian literary canon are emblematic of a tradition of subjectivity. To pay homage to that tradition is to allow *Canada Reads* (panelists, readers, and authors alike) to indulge in the popular, the overlooked, and the necessarily literary, Canadian memoir.

References

- CBC Books. (2020, March). About Canada Reads. CBC. Retrieved from <https://www.cbc.ca/books/canadareads/about-1.4025711>
- CBC. (2020, July 20). *Canada Reads 2020: Day One*. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XKng2D-mKyY&ab_channel=CBC
- CBC. (2020, July 21). *Canada Reads 2020: Day Two*. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XVY4lijjAYE&ab_channel=CBC
- CBC. (2020, July 23). *Canada Reads 2020: Finale*. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3GKdLNq5EaA&ab_channel=CBC
- CBC. (2021, January). Meet the Canada Reads 2021 contenders. CBC. Retrieved from <https://www.cbc.ca/books/canadareads/meet-the-canada-reads-2021-contenders-1.5869833>
- Couser, G.T. (2011). *Memoir: An introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Fuller, D. (2007). Listening to the readers of 'Canada Reads.' *Canadian Literature*, 193, 11–34.
- Fuller, D., Rak, J (2015). "True Stories," real lives: Canada Reads 2012 and the effects of reading memoir in public. *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 40(2), 25–45.
- Fuller, D., Rehberg Sedo, D (2006). A reading spectacle for the nation: The CBC and 'Canada Reads.' *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 40(1), 5–36. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jcs.40.1.5>
- Genner, N. (2020, August). 2020 Canadian book market half-year review. *Booknet Canada*. Retrieved from <https://www.booknetcanada.ca/blog/2020/8/27/2020-canadian-book-market-half-year-review>
- Gilmore, L. (2003). *Jurisdictions: I, Rigoberta Menchú, The Kiss*, and scandalous self-representation in the age of memoir and trauma. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28(2), 695–718. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/342594>
- Habib, S. (2019). *We have always been here: A queer Muslim memoir*. Viking.
- Lecker, R. (1990). The canonization of Canadian literature: An inquiry into value. *Critical Inquiry*, 16(3), 656–71. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343645>
- Lejeune, P. (1989). "The autobiographical pact." In *On autobiography*. <http://www.debbiejlee.com/lejeuneone.pdf>.
- Rak, J. (2013). *Boom!: Manufacturing memoir for the popular market*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Simon & Schuster CA. [simonschusterca]. (2020, July 21). *Thank you to all the readers who embraced FROM THE ASHES. Thank you @georgecanyon for your beautiful words of support, and always and forever, thank you to @michifman for sharing your story with the world. We are so proud. Congratulations to the remaining authors in #CanadaReads!* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/SimonSchusterCA/status/1285621965013819393>
- Smith, R. (2019, March 25). Why CBC's Canada Reads is bad for literature. *The Globe and Mail*. www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books/article-why-canada-reads-is-bad-for-literature/
- Thistle, J. (2019). *From the ashes: My story of being Métis, homeless, and finding my way*. Simon and Schuster.
- Ware, T. (1991). A little self-consciousness is a dangerous thing: A response to Robert Lecker. *English Studies in Canada*, 17(4), 481–493. 10.1353/esc.1991.0007
- York, L. (2007). *Literary celebrity in Canada*. University of Toronto Press.