



Book Review

Canadian literary fare

By Nathalie Cooke, Shelley Boyd, with Alexia Moyer

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Reviewed by Amanda Shankland

Canadian Literary Fare offers an unconventional portrayal of “food voices” in Canadian literature. The book represents a unique and refreshing approach to understanding food culture in the Canadian context. You do not need to have a strong knowledge of Canadian literature to enjoy this book. From the food voices of many well-known Canadian authors, such as Alice Munro, Eden Robinson, Fred Wah, M. NourbeSe Philip, Tomson Highway, Rabindranath Maharaj, and others, it explores food in a way that is persuasive and captivating. The book investigates how literary characters interact with food, challenging assumptions about what constitutes Canadian cuisine and its significance. Voices of Indigenous writers highlight the role of food in efforts towards decolonization, and immigrant writers reveal how food reflects a reshaping of their identities. The “food voices” of Canadian authors offer a compelling way of investigating gender, class, and culture within Canadian society.

This book is co-authored by Nathalie Cooke and Shelley Boyd, with Alexia Moyer. The authors explain that the book is the result of a yearslong collaborative research project. This is evident from the depth of research in the book. The authors begin with a section of shorter vignettes depicting how writers represent iconic Canadian foods in literature and how these interact with place and culture. Chapters one through three examine how iconic Canadian foods like maple syrup, butter tarts, and fry bread offer metaphors for well-known Canadian literary characters’ struggles to assert their identities and find their places within the Canadian landscape. These characters often struggle to cope with hunger, isolation, cultural crisis, racism, or oppression, and they try to renegotiate their belief systems through their relationships with food.

The second part of the book is a series of longer chapters exploring Kraft Dinner, food markets, and buffalo, among other topics. Chapter four, on Kraft Dinner (KD), shows how food is used symbolically in

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Canadian literature to depict struggles with poverty and attempts to assert independence among young people. In the case of Indigenous people, KD can represent attempts to erase their traditions. KD has also been symbolic of struggles with neglect and abuse. One particularly compelling passage from the book looks at Linda Svendsen's novel, *White Shoulders*. One of the characters, Adele, discovers that her niece, another character named Jill, is being sexually abused by her father. Adele finds Jill locked in the bathroom writing on a pad of yellow paper, with a pot of KD from the night before sitting on the sink. The author writes, "Jill's isolation, unkempt appearance, and stale pot of KD consumed in the bathroom signal a meal of the unpure--the abject--all suggestive of an abusive family life that have breached standards of morality and parental care" (p.85). The relatively mundane act of eating KD becomes powerful symbolism in many of the passages in the book, like this one. KD is tied to social and economic inequality, abuse and isolation, the trials of young adulthood, and colonization.

Chapter five, on food markets, explores how characters develop a sense of community and belonging through their interactions in those markets. Places like Kensington Market in Toronto and Granville Island in Vancouver offer settings for the reader to get a glimpse of the nuanced interactions between individuals, their languages, and their cultural traditions. Through the food voices of Canadian writers, readers can reflect on how food markets represent the complexity of human interactions in a diverse cultural landscape. For a large number of white Canadians, the food market also represents their first interaction with other cultures.

Chapter six explores the significance of buffalo in Canadian literature. The annihilation of the buffalo is

emblematic of the attempts to contain and erase Indigenous ways of life. The reintroduction of foods like pemmican is an attempt to reassert Indigenous traditions central to their identity and to reconnect with the land. As the authors explain:

Re/turning-point narratives of the bison traverse cross-cultural perspectives that coalesce in a composite space marked by both devastation and renewal. While settler narratives have often worked to naturalize ecological warfare, First Nations and Métis writers recognize the present and future possibilities of the bison's return (p.153).

This book speaks to the paradoxical experiences of Canadian literary voices as they struggle with questions around inclusion and disconnection. The food voices reflect the obstacles of many people in Canada, whether Indigenous, new immigrants, women, or racialized groups, to belong and maintain their unique sense of identity. The book will be of particular interest to students of Canadian literature and food culture. It would also likely appeal to an audience interested in the history of food in Canada and to anyone curious about Canadian culture in general. The food voices in this book reflect the lived experiences of Canadians who have grappled with food insecurity. It highlights how experiences of poverty and hunger are common in Canadian households, and how this is reflected in Canadian literature. Overall, the book is a refreshing departure from more conventional approaches to unpacking food culture in Canada.

Dr. Amanda Shankland earned her Ph.D. from the Department of Political Science at Carleton University. Her dissertation looks at water governance in agricultural communities in rural New South Wales, Australia. She is an adjunct professor at Carleton University and the University of Ottawa. She writes extensively on social ecology, agroecology, food culture, climate change, water management, and rural development.