

Roberts, Gillian. *Prizing Literature: The Celebration and Circulation of National Culture*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2011. 272 pp. \$45.00.

Analyzing the reception of Canadian literature and writers, Gillian Roberts' *Prizing Literature* "interrogates the relationships between national culture and hospitality, between celebration and accommodation, between writing, reading, and citizenship" (4). Roberts' study functions as an important supplement to James English's *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (2005). English's book offers a compelling look at the cultural prize industry through both historical analysis and a probing of the particulars and peculiarities of an industry marked by orchestrated drama and discord, building on Pierre Bourdieu's work in *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993) by making the theoretical insights concrete in his studies of the institutionalizing of the cultural game. Roberts' text adds to English's work by situating her study in the Canadian context. Furthermore, she examines issues of cultural capital in Canada by considering them in relation to questions of national identity and citizenship. She focuses on celebrated writers who pose intriguing challenges: the immigrants Michael Ondaatje (Sri Lanka), Carol Shields (U.S.), and Rohinton Mistry (India) as well as the Canadian but very cosmopolitan Yann Martel, a French *Québécois* who writes in English. Roberts' exploration of "Canadianness" in the context of the culture industry makes her study distinctive and important. She deftly uses Derridean theoretical analyses of hospitality alongside valuable reading and reception studies of scholars such as Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo; she also couples extranational literary prizes (e.g., the Booker and Pulitzer) with Canadian prizes such as the Governor General's Award and the Canada Reads competition to reveal the interanimating effects of the national and the international prizes in the global marketplace.

Roberts begins by carefully delineating the differences among the Canadian literary awards. The Governor General's Award for English Language Fiction is tied closely to the state and has been roundly criticized for being elitist, overly concerned with aesthetic experimentation, too focused on multiculturalism, and too supportive of small regional presses. The (Scotiabank) Giller Prize claims to focus exclusively on excellence and, thus, conservatively cordons itself off from socio-cultural concerns, but it is anything but politically pure in light of its yoking quality so closely with book sales. Although the short lists of these two prizes often overlap, the Giller's heavy investment in publicity makes it the coveted Canadian prize in terms of retailers' interest. The Canada Reads selection, which includes any Canadian literary text (old or new), is a competition modeled on the *Survivor* television series format, whereby the winner emerges through a process of elimination, with the spirited discussions of elimination featured on both CBC radio and television. Because the Canada Reads process involves celebrated and often canonized books with which Canadians should already be familiar, it creates a conservative cultural feedback loop. Yet despite the selection of well-worn favorites, Canada Reads does manage to cultivate new readers and "to interpellate Canadian readers *as* Canadians who presumably want to consume their own nation's culture" (39).

Roberts analyzes the disproportionate cultural authority wielded by the extranational Booker and Pulitzer prizes in establishing literary value and generating interest in Canadian culture. Ironically, despite the Pulitzer's less-than-stellar status in

the U.S., it was this prize that secured bestseller status for *The Stone Diaries*. Shields' Pulitzer proved to be more influential than the Governor General's Award and the Booker nomination--a fact that Roberts interprets as indicative of "a neocolonial mentality in Canada with regards to the United States" (50). Although her exploration of extranational influence demonstrates that Canadians have long looked beyond their border--especially to Britain--for cultural validation, Roberts claims that the anxiety about American influence on Canadian culture has perpetuated the perception that Canada lacks a distinctive national culture.

Roberts devotes most of her discussion to the four writers, with a chapter on each. She considers the complexities of each author's cultural reception and transformation into a Canadian subject, while making astute points about the ways that each takes up themes of "belonging . . . through exploring disjunctions between nation and habitation, between citizenship and nationality, the negotiation of host and guest positions, and the possibilities and limitations of cosmopolitanism" (228). Roberts points to the gap between Canada's official policy of support for multiculturalism and the cultural and political reality; in fact, Canada is a country still driven mostly by Anglo-Protestant values. The state encourages celebration of difference without disturbing the status quo of the dominant society. Thus, the critique of power structures that Ondaatje's *In the Skin of the Lion* aims at all levels of the Canadian government was effectively absorbed and neutralized in the novel's selection as a Canada Reads book. Likewise, the Hollywood film adaptation of *The English Patient* transformed Ondaatje's critical exploration of issues of cosmopolitanism into a simpler love story, with the huge success of the film coloring subsequent readings and reception of the novel. Although Ondaatje became a Canadian citizen in 1965, the international acclaim he has brought to Canadian literature has had the greatest effect in transforming his identity as Canadian from guest to host and in dispelling anxieties that he is not truly and finally Canadian.

Mistry is an especially fascinating case in Roberts' analysis. The Bombay-born Mistry possesses a less secure status as a Canadian than Ondaatje and Shields, in part because his fiction is set in India. Although critics have praised the authenticity of his portrayals of India while also citing his universalism, Canadian critics have questioned why he has chosen not to write about Canada. Hospitality is a central concept in Roberts' study, and she uses this concept to interrogate the critical assessment of Mistry as an ungrateful guest who has refused to pay his cultural dues, criticism that provides evidence of the limits of Canada's multicultural hospitality. Although Mistry's books have enjoyed success nationally and internationally, Oprah Winfrey's choice of *A Fine Balance* as one of her Book Club selections brought the most attention to his work. Roberts conveys the bitter irony of the fact that, while Oprah chose Mistry's novel after the September 11th tragedy to stress to Americans that they needed to look beyond themselves to understand other cultures, Mistry had to cut short the American leg of a book tour because he was repeatedly subjected to racial profiling at U.S. airports--despite his being a Canadian citizen and a native of a country not on the list of suspected terrorist states.

Thorough, impeccably researched, and accessible, *Prizing Literature* adds crucial specificity and breadth to the study of the global book market and what Joanie Mitchell famously referred to as the "star-making machinery" of the culture industry. In addition to making a valuable contribution to Canadian reception scholarship, Roberts' book

constructs a rich context to enable those of us who are not Canadian to better understand a literature that we prize but too often know little about.

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