

When writers place food in front of their characters – who after all do not need sustenance – they are asking readers to be alert to the meaning and implication of food choices. As readers begin to listen closely to these cues, they become attuned to increasingly layered stories about why it matters what foods are selected, prepared, served, or shared, and with whom, where, and when.

In *Canadian Literary Fare* Nathalie Cooke and Shelley Boyd explore food voices in a wide range of Canadian fiction, drama, and poetry, drawing from their formational blog series with Alexia Moyer. Thirteen short vignettes delve into metaphorical taste sensations, telling of how single ingredients such as garlic or ginger, or food items such as butter tarts or bannock, can pack a hefty symbolic punch in literary contexts. A chapter on Canada's public markets finds literary food voices sounding a largely positive note, just as Canadian journalists trumpet Canada's bountiful and diverse foodways. But in chapters on literary representations of bison and Kraft Dinner, Cooke and Boyd bear witness to narratives of hunger, food scarcity, and social inequality with poignancy and insistence.

*Canadian Literary Fare* pays heed to food voices in the works of Tomson Highway, Rabindranath Maharaj, Alice Munro, M. NourbeSe Philip, Eden Robinson, Fred Wah, and more, inviting readers to listen for stories of foodways in the literatures of Canada and beyond.

"A charming collection about Canadian foodstuffs. The authors invite the reader in with entertaining information and stories, while presenting research that is riveting in detail." LYNETTE HUNTER, University of California, Davis

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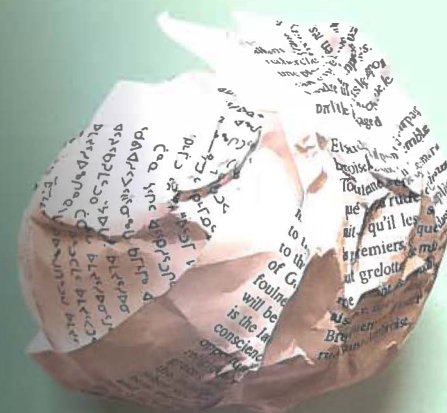
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CANADIAN LITERARY FARE



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NATHALIE COOKE AND SHELLEY BOYD  
WITH ALEXIA MOYER

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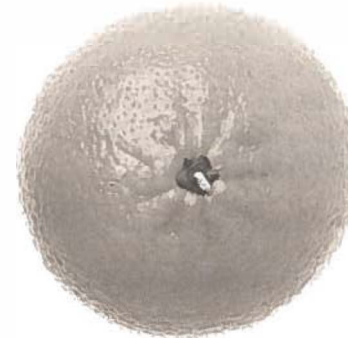
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# CANADIAN LITERARY FARE

NATHALIE COOKE AND SHELLEY BOYD

WITH ALEXIA MOYER



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## INTRODUCTION

This book explores stories told by “food voices” in Canadian literature. It scrutinizes what readers can “hear” when they listen and read closely for the implications of characters’ choices of what foods to eat, prepare, serve, and share, and, just as important, what foods they or their bodies reject. As Lucy Long writes in her article evoking the food voice: “Food speaks. It tells of memories, relationships, cultural histories, and personal life stories. It reflects not only who we are, but also who we were in the past and who we want to be.” When we listen to “food voices” in Canadian literature – those voices born of personal memories, experiences of cultural pasts and presents, and profound desires for social connection – their stories differ dramatically from the iconic narratives of bounty, celebration, and inclusion articulated so frequently in popular media, Canadian cookbooks, food texts, or visitor information pamphlets. More often than not, food voices speak of food scarcity, resource depletion, social inequities, and exclusion. Indeed, when following the lead of Canadian writers and the topics their food voices address, we discover ways in which Canadian *literary* fare challenges easy assumptions of what constitutes Canadian cuisine and its significance.

However, before turning to Canadian literary fare, we should consider what topics preoccupy the food voice more generally. As Diana Pittet illustrates through her annotated bibliography of sociological studies of individuals’ food choices and the volumes those choices speak, the food voice speaks to gender, culture, and class. “Food is an excellent tool for investigating these issues,” she writes. “In fact, food is key to their study and understanding.”<sup>2</sup> The same is true for food choices made by literary characters, and even more so because literary characters, unlike we humans, do not *need* to eat. Some writers choose not to feed their characters, and yet, for many, food serves multiple functions. For Diane McGee, for instance, food describes and defines characters, “their world and their relationship to that world.”<sup>3</sup> More than this, however, food in literature is *always* symbolic, and choices relating to it are carefully and consciously staged by the writer.

Lucy Long provides a useful starting point for where to begin when conceptualizing the food voice, whether it be in real life or literary text. She describes a sample class assignment in which students are asked to interview an individual about a dish of special significance to them and to find out what they are attempting to say in the food voice not only through the choice of the dish but also through the circumstances of its preparation and consumption. In guiding students about what questions they might pose to their interviewee, Long organizes them around four concepts commonly used in folkloristic studies of food: meaningfulness (“the emotional and affective associations and memories evoked by food”),<sup>4</sup> foodways (where meaning can be attached to any aspect of the range of activities surrounding eating and food: product, performance, procurement, conceptualization, preservation, preparation, presentation, consumption, and clean-up),<sup>5</sup> performance theory (“which emphasizes the role of the context in which a food is consumed [performed]”),<sup>6</sup> and concepts of identity (which “involves addressing identity as multi-faceted”).<sup>7</sup> These same four general concepts guide our own examination of food choices in Canadian literature, but we pose questions relating to literary characters and food scenes rather than conduct in-person interviews with real individuals.

Where this book of literary analysis also differs from a folkloristic or sociological study is in the close attention we pay to the *form* in which the food voice speaks in literary texts. We underline ways in which the author’s choice of mode, genre, and rhetorical device both animates the food voice and shapes the stories it can tell. We are conscious of the implications of writers choosing to place a food item in a poem rather than in a novel, for example, or in a work of fantasy or romance rather than in a work of realism. As literary scholars, we know that it *matters* that we see Cora making fish stew with her capable hands in her modest home kitchen fictionally anchored in the now destroyed suburb of Halifax, Africville, depicted in the eloquent poetic lines of George Elliot Clarke’s *Whylah Falls*, itself constructed in the ambitious – and now very seldom-used – epic form. The kitchen work of Cora’s hands is elevated through this very particular poetic medium. At a more granular level, we scrutinize what literary devices are mustered to grab a reader’s attention: how food items often function as metaphors to suggest a comparison and bridge between ideas; or as metonym, where the food item actually comes to stand in for, and represent, a whole host of complex ideas.

Because our focus is on literature and what the food voice enables us to understand through the written form, our inclusion of images is selective and in distinct contrast to today’s highly illustrated food texts. Our archival selections foreground historical foodways from which writers have drawn their inspiration or that resonate with some of many food voices analyzed in this volume. In many cases, these archival images capture places that are no longer visible to contemporary visitors. Our present-day images of food preparation point to the embodied experience of the food voice that some writers offer their readers by inviting inclusion or sharing a recipe. Trying to cook from literature can result in challenges or disappointments, helping reveal and define how food functions in literature with respect to figurative language. These brief culinary experimentations appear as part of the opening section of short vignettes, which introduces readers to the way the food voice speaks in a range of Canadian literary works, familiarizing them with its symbolic potential through reference to specific examples. The subsequent three chapters turn to a close interrogation of food metaphors that gather such resonance that they extend across individual works and even across different forms of writing. Together, these analytical sections all explore personal food choices – what drives or limits characters’ food choices – and how food voices speak out on the spectrum between amplifying and undermining the overt assertions of the works in which they figure. Our selection of writers includes those who have been pivotal in foregrounding the food voice, including some lesser-known writers for whom food circulates in their texts with expressive and critical acumen. We follow the lead of literary food voices, while also recognizing that colonial histories and social inequities have shaped which food voices have had the privilege of “speaking” and/or being heard at this juncture in time. While our selection is by no means exhaustive (and no volume could ever hope to be), our aim is to listen to a range of food voices that lead us to larger conclusions about Canadian foodways and the many counter-narratives that challenge popular notions of shared bounty and pleasure.

Just as literary food voices communicate an array of deeply personal experiences through food choices (which we examine in the vignettes), we understand too that food functions to set the table, as it were, by situating plot and characters in precise moments of social and cultural history – the focus for the longer chapters on Kraft Dinner, markets, and bison. With Canadians being the world’s most avid consumers of Kraft Dinner, in a

chapter dedicated to this processed food we piece together its origins, history, and many brief appearances across a range of genres, especially poetry. This food's symbolic potential gives voice to those paradoxical experiences so often implicated in Canadian literary fare: a common food language that speaks of social exclusion and disconnection.

In a chapter on market scenes in Canadian literature, we describe the various ways in which public markets provide opportunities for writers to bring characters together and have them interact on the same stage. However, unlike parties or social gatherings, which are also favourite plot devices of authors who are careful to feed their characters, markets have the added benefit of bringing together individuals who are not connected by similar interests, family relations, class, or even location. Rather, markets' governing structure, based on commercial exchange, provides writers with an opportunity to bring together a very diverse community while also evoking a well-understood relationship of commercial or barter-based food exchange. The chapter on market scenes, like public markets themselves, surveys the diversity of offerings – this time in terms of literary form, genre, and style. It pauses to examine in greater detail some of the most iconic portrayals of markets in Canadian literature, such as Sara Jeanette Duncan's 1904 *The Imperialist*, and to reveal the literary devices activating painful communal memories, for example, of Snauq, once located on the now-called Granville Island, or endearing glances to the earlier years of Kensington Market in Toronto. However, as with all sections of this book, the close focus is on individual food choices and how the metaphorical food voice in which they speak unfolds a story of the relations of the self to place, family, and community. In many ways, Canadian literature's food voices offer counter-narratives that often showcase and amplify the unspoken, the deeply personal, and what has been seemingly lost, forgotten, or silenced.

Our third and last deep analytical dive involves a glance towards Canada's culinary past as well as a glimpse into how that past has re-emerged to influence the present and future. A chapter on bison describes how that particular word, "bison," takes on such complex resonance in multiple tellings and retellings that it no longer functions as a metaphor or even as an extended metaphor but, rather, drives narrative plots to hurtle forward, turn, and return to pursue trajectories that sadden and shock readers in ways that grab their full attention and refuse to be ignored. More than metaphor, the term "bison" serves as a charged metonym, standing in for

the many legacies of loss wrought by colonialism but also the promise of return for Indigenous peoples.

Our book concludes with a consideration of two food items that loom large in our literatures and culinary imaginations but are absent from conversations of Canada's iconic fare: tea and oranges. Since virtually no recipes are needed, they do not feature prominently in our cookbooks. Nevertheless, both items are very closely associated with Canada's foodways and lore, even as they are imported from abroad. Why then are Canadian writers so interested in them? We muse in our conclusion that, while they do indeed each function as evocative metaphors, there is a surprising chemistry – almost a chemical alchemy – that is triggered when the two are brought together in literature. Our literary toolbox cannot adequately describe the resulting reaction, yet we do shed light on its very unusual persistence, hoping our close reading of the works in which tea and oranges appear together can spark further thought and conversation. Our conclusion also enables us to suggest ways in which the food voice speaks optimistically about the potential of food to bring people together to forge a constructive way forward.

## NOTES

### INTRODUCTION

- 1 Long, "Learning to Listen," 119.
- 2 Pittet, "Food Voice Annotated Bibliography," 135.
- 3 McGee, *Writing the Meal*, 1.
- 4 Long, "Learning to Listen," 120.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 121.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Ibid.*

### CHAPTER ONE

- 1 Parts of this vignette were originally presented at the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery in 2015 and subsequently appeared in the published proceedings.
- 2 *Tomson Highway Gets His Trout*.
- 3 Hoffman, "Political Theatre in a Small City," 196.
- 4 Däwes, "I Don't Write Native Stories," 154.
- 5 Highway, *Ernestine Shuswap*, 54.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 35.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 33–4, emphasis in original.
- 8 Gora, "From Meat to Metaphor," 107.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 93, emphasis in original.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 *Ibid.*, 34.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 28, emphasis in original.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 38.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 60.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 *Ibid.*, 35–6.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 55.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 57.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 57–8.