READING BOOKS: THROUGH THE PRISM OF PUBLIC LENDING RIGHT

ABSTRACT

In this essay, Gwen Hoover first explains the function and role of the Public Lending Right program in Canada and demonstrates how it sheds light on the reading practices and patterns of Canadian readers. Hoover's article underlines the importance of libraries to our book-reading culture.

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The Public Lending Right operates according to basic rules. While PLR payments won't make any one author rich – the average payment last year was $694 – it is highly valued by writers as it represents public recognition of their contribution to Canadian society.

Let me begin by offering general information about the Public Lending Right Commission:

- Founded in 1986, it makes annual payments to Canadian authors for the presence of their books in Canadian libraries.
- Federally-funded, managed by an independent board of writers, librarians and publishers under the administrative aegis of Canada Council for the Arts.
- Had a budget of $10,000,000 in 2002-03.
- Has paid 13,889 authors for their 53,532 eligible titles in February 2003.
- Registers 600 new authors and 3,500 new titles every year.
- The payments are calculated by checking the list of registered titles against the collections of a number of libraries every year; payment is made each time a title is found in one of these libraries.
- The maximum amount any author could receive in 2003 was $3,485.
- Although Canada is the only country in the Americas to have a PLR program, thirty-four countries in total have recognized the principle of PLR.

The pioneers of our program in the early 1980s have determined that public lending right payments would be based on the presence of the book in the library, not on the amount of times that books are lent. The founders did not want to simply replicate the marketplace and reward bestsellers. Moreover, librarians were concerned about the burden that might be placed upon them in counting loans – those were the days before sophisticated computer systems when tracking loans was not an option.

Fortunately, this method of recognition also obviated the need for us to do what the PLR did in Germany in the 1970s when their program started up: volunteers fanned out over the country in the summertime, spending a day or so in each library photographing the books that crossed the check-out desk. These individuals would return to the head office, have the film developed, and then staff members would try to make out the title and author of the books and tabulate the results by hand to determine which authors would be paid and how much. Tedious, to say the least.

In Canada, we sample titles in ten libraries (public and university libraries) on a rotational basis every year, and determine from the results the amounts to be paid. Presence, therefore, is the defining criteria. If the book is in one of the libraries we have selected, and only one copy is necessary for it to count, a payment is made. The premise is that if it is in the library, it is being used, either on site, or lent out.

While it is impossible to provide individual loan data per title, it is still possible to determine which Canadian-authored books are being read. A look at books registered in 1986, the first year of the program, tells us which of the most recent payment distribution in February 2003 are still found in all 10 sampled libraries. This information suggests that these titles are among our classics, and that Canadians are still reading these titles today, otherwise the libraries would have jettisoned them by the summer of 2002 when the data was last collected. It is important to consider, when looking at these titles, that in 1986, writers registered all the books they had published up to that date; therefore, some of the titles go back as far as the 1940s. PLR payments are only made to living authors.

When looking at the PLR data about the titles registered in the spring of 2002 that are found in all ten libraries in the first year of sampling in the libraries, we see which books libraries rushed out to buy and catalogue as quickly as possible due to the importance of and demand for the titles.

Of the 16,584 eligible books registered in the first year of the PLR program in 1986, 12,106 are still being paid. Out of these 12,106 titles still being paid, 1,929 (16%) of them are being paid at the maximum rate. This means that, after seventeen years of rotating throughout the major public and university libraries in the country, these titles are still found the maximum number of times.

The Reading Canada Environics poll, recent Statistics Canada data, as well as articles and bestseller lists in our newspapers and magazines offer a wealth of information about the reading habits of Canadians. We learn from recent articles in the *Globe and Mail* and *Toronto Life* magazine that Torontonians have the second highest lending rate in the world after Hong Kong. So, what are Torontonians reading? According to the Toronto Public Library's summer newsletter, non-fiction predominates. *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy,* by Robert Dallek and *The Crisis of Islam* by Bernard Lewis had the most holds.

The PLR data is also a good indicator of what Canadians are reading. For example, the table below shows which titles registered last year are found in all libraries sampled.

Libraries are always looking for all kinds of way to encourage the reading of books. For example, over 1,500 patrons participated in a Toronto Public Library poll to guess who would win the Giller Prize this year. Five ballots selected are receiving a copy of all five short-listed books. In 2002, Vancouver Public Library encouraged everyone in the city to read Wayson Choy's *The Jade Peony* with its "One Book, One Vancouver" project, inspired by the success of similar initiatives in US cities. The library reported that the book was checked out 7,000 times, and 6,000 copies of it were sold in the bookstores putting *The Jade Peony* on the BC Bestseller list for 13 weeks. This year, Timothy Taylor's *Stanley Park* has been selected for VPL's One Book, One Vancouver title.

The Public Lending Right program helps promote the reading of books in Canada, it provides valuable data as to what Canadians are reading, and it undeniably shows the importance of libraries to our book-reading culture.

Author	Title	1st Publication Date	1st Publisher
FICTION			
Richard Wright	*Clara Callan: A Novel*	2001	Harper Flamingo Canada
Rohinton Mistry	*Family Matters*	2001	McClelland and Stewart
P.K. Page	*A Kind of Fiction*	2001	Porcupine's Quill
Audrey Thomas	*The Path of Totality: New and Selected Stories*	2001	Viking
Monique Proulx	*Le coeur est un muscle volontaire*	2002	Boréal
Monique Larue	*La gloire de Cassiodore*	2002	Boréal
POETRY			
Lorna Crozier	*Apocrypha of Light*	2002	McClelland and Stewart
Robert Kroetsch	*The Hornbooks of Rita K.*	2001	University of Alberta Press
Louise Warren	*La lumiere, l'arbre, le trait*	2001	L'Hexagone
NONFICTION			
William Weintraub	*Getting Started: A Memoir of the 50s*	2001	McClelland and Stewart
Thomas Homer-Dixon	*The Ingenuity Gap*	1998	Knopf
Heather-Jane Robertson	*No More Teachers, No More Books*	1998	McClelland and Stewart
Marcel Trudel	*Mythes et réalités dans l'histoire du Québec*	2001	Hurtubise HMH
DRAMA			
Carole Fréchette	*Jean et Béatrice*	2002	Leméac
SCHOLARLY			
Sherrill Grace Press	*Canada and the Idea of North*	2002	McGill-Queen's University
Gregory Marchildon	*Profits and Politics: Beaverbrook and the Gilded Age of Canadian Finance*	1996	University of Toronto Press
André Brochu	*Rêver la lune: L'imaginaire de Michel Tremblay dans les chroniques du Plateau Mont-Royal*	2002	Hurtubise HMH
CHILDREN'S LITERATURE			
Arthur Slade	*Dust*	2001	Harper Collins
Christiane Duchesne	*Mister Po, chasseur*	2001	Boréal