

BOOKS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Northern exposure

Eric Walters's initiative to promote homegrown authors and illustrators starts with a day dedicated to kids reading Canadian **BY HEATHER CAMLOT**

CAN YOU NAME the last Canadian book you handed to your child, teen, or student?

While the volume of English-Canadian titles for adults and children has been on the rise over recent decades, Canadian readership and purchases have decreased. The figures are staggering: in 2005, approximately 27 per cent of books purchased in Canada were written by Canadians. Today, that number is a mere 13 per cent, according to a 2018 report, "More Canada: Increasing Canadians' Awareness and Reading of Canadian Books," compiled by a volunteer think-tank of 27 industry veterans.

The Canadian children's book community is hoping to reverse that trend with I Read Canadian Day on Feb. 19, 2020, along with additional activities throughout the week of Feb. 14 to 21. "We're asking schools, libraries, and daycare centres across the country to take time that day to have students read a Canadian book of their choice, or have it read to them," says Toronto author Eric Walters, who initiated the event. "When kids are exposed to Canadian books, they will love Canadian books. We have to give them that exposure."

But grabbing the attention of kids, parents, and educators can be difficult for Canadian publishers. "It is impossible to compete against the marketing budgets of U.S. blockbusters," says Andrew Wooldridge, head of Orca Book Publishers in Victoria, B.C. Yet, he is seeing rising demand and acclaim for Canadian children's books *outside* of Canada. "We are missing

the boat in this country in terms of sharing our content with young readers. Canadian children should have wide access to Canadian stories that reflect their lives and experiences."

I Read Canadian Day was born out of a lunchtime meeting last February in which the participants discussed ways to promote, recognize, and celebrate Canadian books with children. The organizations represented at the meeting, and now jointly leading the project with Walters, include the Canadian Society of Children's Authors, Illustrators, and Performers (Sharon Jennings, president); the Canadian Children's Book Centre (Rose Vespa, executive director); and the Ontario Library Association (Shelagh Paterson, executive director, and Meredith Tutching, director of Forest of Reading).

In June, the group invited people from across the publishing spectrum to a gathering in Toronto during the annual Book Summit. I Read Canadian Day was unanimously endorsed by those in attendance. The hope is for at least

3,000 schools across the country to partake in the patriotic literacy day. "I just want us to celebrate who we are as a people, as a culture, as a country," says Walters.

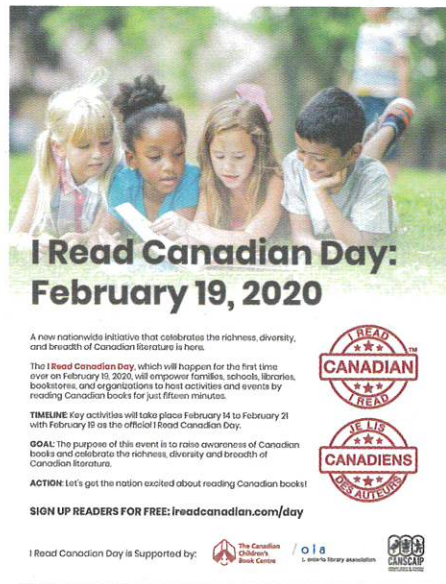
Another goal is to get more Canadian books in school libraries and in bookstores. "Many factors affect our awareness," says Vespa, of the CCBC, "including the scale of the market within Canada, the competition from other media sources for our attention, the amount of publishing we do in relation to the U.K. and the United States." She says the government needs a federal cultural policy and targeted

funding at all levels to increase awareness of our literature and get children to read more Canadian books.

Wooldridge and Walters agree. Requiring schools to teach a certain proportion of Canadian content and strengthening copyright law so teachers compensate creators for their work are important first steps, says Wooldridge. Walters believes 25 per cent of bookstore display space should be Canadian, and that public

and school libraries should be mandated to have the same percentage on their shelves.

"We are an incredible country of great diversity and we need to look at the stories that make this country wonderful," says Walters. "I'm not prepared to put our writers and culture in second place to anybody."



Kidlit P.I. goes Hollywood

"Everybody has their wild daydreams," says Strathroy, Ontario, author Casey Lyall, when asked if she ever expected her three-book middle-grade detective series Howard Wallace, P.I. to make it to the screen. "When the first book was published, I was given a 'manage your expectations' talk by my agent. She said they were shopping around the rights but, with middle grade, people are more interested in fantasy or the big bestsellers, like *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*."

So news that the rights to Lyall's books had sold to a group consisting of



Entertainment One, the Mother Company, and Drew Barrymore's Flower Films really took her by surprise. The plan is to make a half-hour, live-action show based on Lyall's characters and their adventures, which in the books include blackmail, dognapping, and school-play sabotage. "I wanted to have a fun mystery series where the kids aren't running around investigating murders," says Lyall. "A kid could read the books and think, 'I could solve that mystery.' Plus, there's always a friendship storyline and lots of jokes – because that's what I like best." –Shanda Deziel