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 pur-
chases 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, ac-

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 Ca-
adian 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 chil-
dren’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, rec-
ognize, and celebrate Canadian books with
children. The organiz-
ations represented at
that meeting, and now
jointly leading the
project with Walters,
include the Canadian
Society of Children’s
Authors, Illustrators,
and Performers (Sha-
ron Jennings, presi-
dent); the Canadian
Children’s Book Cen-
tre (Rose Vespa, ex-
decutive director); and
the Ontario Library
Association (Sheilagh
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. Requir-
ing schools to teach a
certain proportion
of Canadian content
and strengthening copy-
right law so teachers
compensate creators
for their work are im-
portant first steps, says
Wooldridge. Walters
believes 25 per cent of
bookstore display
space should be Can-
dian, and that public
and school libraries should be mandated to
have the same percentage on their shelves.

“We are an incredible country of great di-
versity 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 pub-

so many of Lyall’s
tales to mystery, 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
mysteries,” 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