

Interview with

## Lynn Coady

Canadian Women Reading and Writing  
February 5, 2009



Lynn Coady is currently Writer-in-Residence at the University of Alberta. She was born and raised in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia and holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and Philosophy from Carleton University and Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing from the University of British Columbia. She is the author of several novels including Governor General's Award nominee *Strange Heaven* (1998), *Play the Monster Blind* (2000), *Saints of Big Harbour* (2002), and *Mean Boy* (2006). She also writes non-fiction and plays. Lynn Coady has taught creative writing at Douglas College, Simon Fraser University's Writer's Studio, The Sage Hill Writing Experience, The Maritime Writer's Workshop, and the Banff Center's Wired Writing Studio. Her awards and distinctions include the Canadian Authors Association's Under-Thirty and Jubilee Award (for short fiction), the Dartmouth Book Award, the Atlantic Bookseller's Choice Award and the Sandy and Kay Pearson Distinguished Writer Award.

We interviewed Lynn Coady (L.C.) for CanWWR on March 13, 2009 at the University of Alberta.

**CanWWR (Clare):** Let's start with your childhood reading habits. Were there books that you were drawn to as a child, were you encouraged to read certain books, or, alternately, discouraged?

L.C.: My family weren't readers in particular. There wasn't a culture of reading in my home. So when it was discovered that I kind of had an ability with reading and words, it was like I had been discovered to be good at math or acrobatics or something like that. So it was encouraged—"It's this strength, we should encourage it." So my mom used to read to me every night, which is probably a good thing for moms to do, and she would always be really tired by the end of the day, as mothers often are, and I would tell her if she was skipping lines, because I would just read along with her. Finally she just handed me the book and said, "Why don't you read to me?" (laughs). And then she would promptly go to sleep as I read. So I think that was part of what got me reading. I was encouraged to join those dorky little "Book of the Month" clubs at school. And I was always given books because everybody knew I liked to read. So it was something I was always doing, and when I started read-

ing books that I probably shouldn't have been reading, nobody really cared. (Laughter) Because, again, my family weren't big readers, so they didn't really have a sense of what books I should or should not be reading. The first book for grown-ups I ever read was called *Alligator*, and it was a really trashy paperback about these two guys in the Florida everglades doing battle to the death with a giant alligator. And there was drinking, sex, infidelity.

**CanWWR (Clare):** How old were you?

L.C.: I think I was around eight.

**CanWWR (Clare):** All right, that's early!

L.C.: I was very confused about a lot of what was going on.

**CanWWR (Clare):** Did you get caught out on any of it, or were you able to pretty much pursue whatever you wanted?

L.C.: Yes, I could pretty much read whatever I wanted. So it was an advantage in that I could read whatever I wanted, but it was a disadvantage in that I had no real direction. There was no one there to tell me what I should be reading and what I shouldn't.

**CanWWR (Clare):** Did you find direction yourself? Were you drawn to certain types of books or certain authors or was it just anything you could get your hands on?

L.C.: For a long time it was just anything I could get my hands on, but then I started realizing that there were books that I liked better than others. And again, there was no kind of critical discernment, it was just, "Oh, I like this one, I like that one." And I guess it wasn't until I was a teenager that I started to become a bit of a snob, and I realized that there was snobbery around reading. And I was kind of desperate to figure out what were the proper books to read. What should a young intellectual be reading, that kind of thing.

**CanWWR (Clare):** So what should a young intellectual be reading?

L.C.: Oh, for some reason I fixated on Joyce pretty quickly, because he seemed like he was the hardest. And around this time I had some pretty good English teachers who were pointing me in better directions. It was kind of perfectly balanced, actually, because I had a woman English teacher in grade nine, and a man English teacher in grade ten and eleven and twelve. The woman English teacher kind of got me up on Canadian female writers like Alice Munroe and Mavis Gallant and all those guys. The male English teacher, and this is just so typical, was the person who started talking about Joyce and the heavy-lifters.

CanWWR (Clare): Did you like them? Did you go towards them because you felt like you should, or because you might actually enjoy them?

L.C.: I was taking them up because I thought I should. But the ones that I didn't actually enjoy have not stuck with me. Joyce did because I immediately related to the Irish Catholic stuff.

CanWWR (Clare): Do you come back to any of those books? Are you a re-reader?

L.C.: Yes, I go back to Joyce. That's also when I first read Charlotte Brontë, Jane Austen. I can't quite remember any of the others. I think I remember Joyce because I did a paper on him in grade twelve. I remember staying up all night. (Laughter) That's kind of an experience that never left me.

CanWWR (Clare): Can you see connections between the type of books you were drawn to then and the type of books you're drawn to now?

L.C.: You know, it's funny, because I was reading the snobby books and I was reading a lot of poetry too—so getting very snobby—but I was also ravenously reading Stephen King at the same time. So I think what that ended up doing was instilling in me a need for really literate yet fun books, entertaining books. I remember discovering Kurt Vonnegut at twenty or twenty-one and thinking, "This has everything I want! Highly entertaining and highly literate at the same time, and heart-rending as well." So it kind of had it all.

CanWWR (Clare): So, those are still qualities that you look for?

L.C.: Yes. I remember discovering John Irving in high school too, *The Hotel New Hampshire*, and that was my first experience with a big, weighty novel that was also really comic, and just entertaining.

CanWWR (Clare): It's kind of shocking.

L.C.: Yes! When you've been grimly working your way through Joyce. (Laughter)

CanWWR (Devorah): Was there any particular moment when you decided you were a writer? Some writers talk about how they've always been writers, they've always needed to write. For other people there's a moment or a person that makes them sit down and write. What was your experience?

L.C.: I always knew that I liked to write and I was always writing, I remember a teacher in grade four in particular, saying, "One day we'll have books by Lynn Coady on our shelf." And that always gave me a thrill. And she said that kind of stuff to my parents. Teachers were often letting my parents know that I could write. So that was always kind of in the background—that I could write, I could be a writer. And at the same time, in my community, small-town, Catholic, working-class community, it was nice to say, "Your daughter can write, she could be a writer." But it doesn't really mean anything in terms of a career or what you might actually do with the rest of your life. So I was never encouraged to think of it as a career. Not out of malice or anything, but it wasn't the kind of thing you encouraged your daughter to do. So I never thought about it as a career, it was the same sort of thing as being a clown in the circus or an acrobat or something like that. It was probably only when I was in university—and my generation is the first generation of working-class kids from that particular community who were sent to university—that I started finding out that there were people who make a living as writers and have careers as writers. So that interested me, and I was really interested in finding out how they did it, getting that big mystery solved. And meanwhile I'd been instilled with these values that you go to university to get a job, ultimately. To enter some kind of high-paying career, hopefully. So I went for journalism, and it was apparent to me pretty quickly that I didn't want to train to be a journalist at that point in my life. I was mostly interested in literature and writing. So I didn't do very well in journalism, but I was winning writing contests and getting published. And it felt to me like every time I'd tried to do something other than be a writer, the universe would say, "No. You're going to fail at that." But then if I tried to do anything along the lines of writing I would get a yes back. And that's what was giving me the most pleasure and that's what was giving me the most gratification. So I decided at around twenty-one, "Well, I don't care what it takes or if I'm going to have to live in poverty for my whole life." Because you can say that when you're twenty-one because you have no idea what that means. (Laughter) But, yeah, "I'm going to try to be a writer."

CanWWR (Devorah): So was it a very solitary pursuit?

L.C.: It was pretty solitary. When I was in university I went to Carleton and promptly dropped out of the Journalism program and got into English and Philosophy. There was a student journal called the *Carleton Arts Review* and I was involved with those people and I took creative writing classes with some of those people, so we had a bit of a student community. But then—I still don't know why I did this (laughter)—after I gradu-

ated, I promptly went with my boyfriend back to Nova Scotia and then to New Brunswick. It was the worst place in the world to be too, it was the 90s recession so there was no work, and it's the Maritimes, so there's especially no work. So we had a good three or four years of welfare and five-dollar-an-hour jobs and that kind of stuff. I did a lot of writing in that time. I kind of think of it as an apprenticeship period, because much of the time I was unemployed, so it was a good time to get writing done. I had no community at that point. We were moving around a lot. I was in St. John and Fredericton and Sackville, but I kind of laid the foundation for my first novel and I wrote a play that got produced.

CanWWR (Devorah): So once you made the decision to be a writer were people back home willing to take you seriously?

L.C.: Oh god. My mother mentioned the other day how they despaired for my future the year that I was in Sackville. (Laughter) I was unemployed, probably on welfare at that point, and they would ask me what I was doing. I would say, "I'm writing" and they'd be like, "Well are you looking for work?"

CanWWR (Patricia): "What are you really doing?"

L.C.: Yes, and I was shackled up with my boyfriend, which was wrong. It was like, "No, I'm unemployed and shackled up with my boyfriend here in Sackville, and there's no job prospects here at all for me, and I'm writing." And they were really concerned. It's difficult to make this clear to my family and people from that community because they don't know what it means when I say, "I'm writing, and that's the most important thing." That sounds crazy. But I decided, "I'm going to have to start asserting this, I can't be embarrassed about the fact that I'm writing and I want to be a writer." I was dealing with a lot of second-guessing, the feeling that this is a really stupid thing to be doing. This is especially hard when you're from a working-class community. And I realized that was something that I had to push through and sort of be stubborn about. So I started articulating it to my family and enduring the ridicule, and all the rest. Just to get it out there. And if I had any little successes, like I'd won a prize or something, I would tell them, just so they would know that it was something I was taking seriously. Does that answer your question?

CanWWR (Devorah): Yes. So they're on board now?

L.C.: Yes. When I started publishing novels, that made a big difference.

CanWWR (Lindsay): I'd just like to continue discussing the writerly life, and focus on your writing process. Perhaps you could describe how your process has evolved over time and maybe describe a typical writing day?

L.C.: I don't really have a typical writing day. I have an ideal

writing day that I always try to achieve and often fail at achieving. But when things are going well I'm often able to work as soon as I get up, after coffee, for about three hours, and if things are super incredibly good, maybe four hours. Two hours, I'm pretty happy with. Half an hour is something. But if I'm doing three hours more or less every day of the week, then I'm pretty satisfied. That usually doesn't happen. Two things have to be in place for that to happen. I have to have creative momentum going and I have to have that time available every day. And those two things coming together seems rarer and rarer these days, unfortunately. Sorry, what was the other part of your question?

CanWWR (Lindsay): How your writing process has evolved over time. Has it become more disciplined, do you have any rituals?

L.C.: No, I don't really have that. The only thing I do is go over what I wrote. It's almost like adding layers to paint. I'll go over what I wrote the day before in great detail, and just add little things here and there, until next thing I know I've bumped up my page count. Usually that process calibrates my mind and gives me a little boost to keep me writing, keep me doing the pure creativity thing. So I kind of trick myself into thinking that I'm just editing and revising by going over things, everything is very low stakes, just changing a comma here, and then next thing I know I'm moved to keep writing or generating creative content. So that's one little ploy I have against my procrastinating self. (Laughter)

CanWWR (Lindsay): And what about reading while you're writing? Do you tend to stay away from certain authors or do you like to read while you're writing?

L.C.: Yes, I actually really need to read while I'm writing. I've been in a dry spell for a really long time and part of the dry spell was not only that I could not write, I felt I couldn't read either. I just wasn't taking pleasure in the written word the way I used to, for whatever reason. And then right around the time I felt like writing again, I felt like reading again. I feel like one feeds the other. When I'm finding really great books, when I'm devouring them, it's almost like I'm vampiring that creative energy and using it in my own work.

CanWWR (Patricia): Well, what kind of great books are you reading that give you that creative urge?

L.C.: What feeds the machine? Oh God, the best book I've ever written—ever written, if only (laughter)—the best book I've ever read, I was so happy when I found it, *Paris Trout* by Pete Dexter. One of those Southern writers. I really like Southern writers for the kind of grim, Gothic thing they do. But structurally it was just so good, it was such a well-structured, perfectly plotted book, and just so brilliant on so many levels. That was a thrill. The book is really fantastic.

CanWWR (Patricia): Do you like Flannery O'Connor?

L.C.: Yes, she's one of my favourites actually.

CanWWR (Patricia): Well, I'm turning this back to reading, as you can tell. And I wonder if you read, deliberately, a lot of Canadian authors or if your choices are really more catholic.

L.C.: I don't really make a point of reading Canadian writers. I have this thing where I'm trying to preserve the leisure element of reading and writing, because so much of it feels like business and work. When I'm teaching I always have these really earnest students who go on and on about how miserable writing is making them. I tell them, "Don't do it. If it makes you miserable, why would you? You're not going to make millions of dollars, probably, you're not going to get sumptuous rewards. If you're not enjoying the process, there's absolutely no reason to be doing it." So that's kind of my attitude with respect to my own indulgences in reading and writing. I really want to maintain that feeling of play. And that's what reading has always been about for me. I have friends, really good friends in the writing community who make a point of reading everything Canadian contemporary authors put out, and they feel bad if they don't.

CanWWR (Patricia): But you're not one of them.

L.C.: I'm not one of them. (Laughter)

CanWWR (Patricia): That's really refreshing to hear. But in addition to Dexter and Flannery O'Connor, who are some of your favourites?

L.C.: Well, I was really influenced by David Adams Richards, because he was the first person writing about my area of the world and the same kind of community that I came from, in a way that felt profoundly true to me. So his early novels have really engrained themselves on me.

CanWWR (Patricia): Have you read Ann-Marie MacDonald?

L.C.: No, I haven't read Ann-Marie MacDonald.

CanWWR (Patricia): Or Alistair McLeod?

L.C.: It's funny because the short fiction of Alistair McLeod is amazing stuff, but I often hold him up as the kind of writer that I'm writing against, actually. And I'm not setting us up as dueling Cape Bretoners. (Laughter) But part of what prompted me to write my first novel was that I was looking for writers like David Adams Richards, I was looking for people who were from where I was from, writing about where I wanted to write about. And I was coming across Hugh McLennan and Alistair McLeod and the work was really male, and it was written about an era that was completely alien to me, and I wanted to write about teenage girls in the 80s in industrial Cape Breton. And they were

also writing about a Cape Breton that was really bucolic and pastoral. I mean there was coal mines and all that, but it was almost a fairytale land. And I wanted to write about a mill town, an industrial town. So it was like we were from two different countries I guess.

CanWWR (Patricia): What is your sense, as an insider, of the Canadian publishing industry today?

L.C.: I think it's got some typically Canadian traits, mainly in its inferiority complex to the rest of the world.

CanWWR (Patricia): You think we still have that?

L.C.: Oh, definitely, yes, and it's a shame. There's kind of an embarrassment of being Canadian and writing Canadian, whatever that means. And there's a real feeling that Canadian writers have to put themselves forward more as global citizens, and deemphasize the regional aspects of their writing. And with respect to the publishing industry in general—I don't know, it's funny because I'm not in Toronto anymore and now the economic recession is happening and from what I'm hearing it just seems like everybody's going crazy, and it's kind of terrifying. (Laughter) But the interesting thing is that the multinational publishers are sort of melting down, whereas the independent publishers seem to be standing pretty firm. And Canadian literature was kind of built on those independent publishers who always operated on a shoe-string. I don't really know much about publishing as a business, but it could be said that it was the multinationals, once they started asserting themselves on the scene as multinationals, that made Canadian publishing more of a business, and got us into the whole thing with Chapters, and then the independent book stores started closing down. Canadian literature became very market-driven, very corporate. And now it seems like the last thing the multinational publishers want to do is publish Canadian literature. So it kind of seems like Canadian publishing is going to be forced to go back to its roots, maybe, and go back to being a network of small, prestigious presses that publish really great literary work, which is not such a bad thing. I wonder sometimes if I'm just being a bit Pollyanna, but ever since I started publishing I've struggled to understand the business of it, so I'm always quizzing people I know who are in the business. And I don't think it's a Pollyanna take, it's a real thing. I think things are going to recalibrate a bit.

CanWWR (Patricia): I think people are anxious for a renewed sense of commitment to the local, the communal, the particular.

L.C.: I think so too, I think that's the kind of stuff that readers lock into, what they recognize. Me, as a reader, talking about looking for writers from Cape Breton, writers from my part of the country, writers who have the same kind of experience as I've had.

CanWWR (Patricia): Well, thank you very much for your time,

Lynn.

