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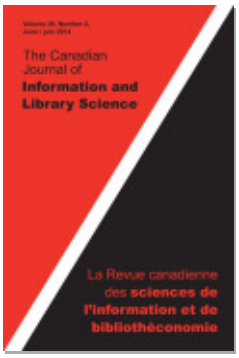

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"Pure Delight and Professional Development": The Reading Practices and Library Use of an Active Poetry Community

« Pures délices » et développement professionnel : Les pratiques de lecture d'une communauté active de poésie et la fréquentation de la bibliothèque

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Abstract: This paper reports the findings of an online survey designed to explore the reading practices, library habits, and book acquisition of adult members of an active poetry community (n = 32) in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Findings show the close relationship between poetry reading and poetry writing and the tight interweaving of poetry throughout the working and personal lives of respondents. Reading and finding out about poetry are also highly social in nature with a clear reliance on the poetry community rather than the public library. Our findings have implications for the roles of reading institutions such as bookstores, libraries, and publishers, as well as for collection development and readers' advisory services to specialized reading communities.

Keywords: poetry readers, poetry collections, collection management, public libraries, readers' advisory services, bookstores, book-buying habits, reading habits, poetry promotion

Résumé : Cet article présente les résultats d'un sondage en ligne visant à explorer les pratiques de lecture, les habitudes en bibliothèque et les acquisitions de livres des membres adultes d'une communauté de poésie très active (n = 32), au Toronto, Ontario, au Canada. Les résultats montrent l'étroitesse des liens entre la lecture et l'écriture de poésie et l'étroite imbrication de la poésie dans tous les aspects de la vie professionnelle et de la vie personnelle des répondants. La lecture et les découvertes poétiques sont également des activités de nature très sociale, marquées par une dépendance claire à l'égard de la communauté de poésie plutôt que de la bibliothèque publique. Nos résultats ont des implications concernant le rôle des institutions vouées à la lecture comme les librairies, les bibliothèques et les éditeurs, ainsi que

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pour le développement des collections et les services consultatifs de lecteurs aux communautés de lecture spécialisés.

Mots-clés : lecteurs de poésie; collections de poésie; gestion de collections; bibliothèques publiques; services consultatifs de lecteurs; librairies; habitudes de lecture; habitudes d'achat de livres; promotion de la poésie

Introduction

There is scant research into the reading practices, library usage patterns, and text acquisition habits of poetry readers, writers, and specialists in Canada. The study reported here seeks to address that gap by shedding light on how members of one urban poetry community perceive their poetry reading habits and how such habits are situated into the contexts of reading institutions such as libraries and bookstores and reading events such as book fairs and organized public readings. The goals of this project were threefold: first, it aimed to contribute toward evidence-based library practices by providing research-derived insights for suggestions for collection development, reading promotion, and readers' advisory services. Second, we wanted to add to the research record the voices of poetry readers, writers, and those who work in the publishing sector editing, promoting, and selling poetry (often one respondent speaks from all three positions). Third, this study privileged poetry for its own sake, as an enduringly popular reading material and writing practice but an understudied way of rendering, contemplating, and sharing ideas about human experience, and, thus, we wanted to make a contribution to studies of contemporary reading in Canada. We surveyed a targeted, non-generalizable sample of adults who self-identified as members of the poetry community in Toronto, Canada, asking them to respond to a series of open and closed online survey questions designed to investigate both their perceptions and practices related to poetry reading, buying, borrowing, and event attendance. Below, we review an extensive selection of the professional and scholarly literature on poetry reading and readers.

Poetry in America (Bradburn, Parks, and Reynolds 2006; Schwartz et al. 2006), conducted for the Poetry Foundation in the United States,[1] is a national survey of over 1,000 adults who were questioned about their poetry reading habits of the previous five years. Respondents were categorized as members of either a "poetry audience" (those who were active and engaged readers of poetry at the time of the survey) or a "potential audience" (those who read for pleasure and may read poetry in the future). Among the key findings was that active poetry readers were more likely to be young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 years and were more likely to participate in sports, play music, volunteer, and attend other cultural events. Nearly all respondents (94%) had read poetry at some time in their lives, with current readers citing positive experiences of reading poetry with family members or teachers during childhood (Bradburn, Parks, and Reynolds 2006, 2–3). Of particular relevance to our study was the finding that

> both current and potential poetry audiences report relatively high rates of library membership at 73 and 62 percent respectively. About one-third of the current poetry audience reports reading books of poetry at or borrowing books of poetry from the library. In spite of these very high numbers of library membership, few current or potential audience members report attending events related to poetry at a library or at bookstores. (Bradburn, Parks, and Reynolds 2006, 6)

The authors later conclude that "libraries are untapped resources for promoting participation with poetry" (15).

There is no study comparable to *Poetry in America*, nor is there a collection of statistics for poetry reading practices in Canada.[2] Yet there is a noted renaissance in the contemporary Canadian poetry milieu marked by new contests and awards, new publishing venues, and new anthologies of Canadian work (see Smith 2012). It is worth noting the Canadian provenance of the Griffin Trust for Excellence in Poetry, which funds the Griffin Poetry Prizes—the world's largest cash prizes for first-edition single collections of poetry written in English.[3] Like the Poetry Foundation in the United States, the Griffin Trust expressly aims to "spark the public's imagination and raise awareness of the crucial role poetry plays in our cultural life" (Griffin Trust for Excellence in Poetry, "About the Griffin Trust"). In Canada such aims can be contextualized by recent evidence that Canadians remain committed to the arts, including reading works of the imagination, and that such commitment carries its own rewards for individuals and for society at large. Indeed, a recent report funded by the Department of Canadian Heritage, the Canada Council for the Arts, and the Ontario Arts Council finds that "there is a strong connection between cultural activities and eight indicators of health and well-being (such as health, mental health, volunteering, feeling stressed, and overall satisfaction with life)" (Hill 2013, 1). Another Department of Canadian Heritage study on access and availability of arts and culture found that a strong majority of adult respondents thought that

> arts and culture make a community a better place to live (92%), arts experiences are a valuable way of bringing together people from different languages and cultural traditions (92%), arts are an important way of helping people think and work creatively (92%), Canadian actors, musicians, writers and other artists are among the best in the world (90%), and exposure to arts and culture is important to individual well-being (90%). (Phoenix Strategic Perspectives 2012, 2)

Heeding Middleton's claim that poetry readerships "do not spring into life as a new poem rains down upon them. They need training, they need to be brought into being as economies of affect, memory, and interpretation" (2005, xv), we sought to establish a picture of the reading modes and access methods of adult readers of poetry in one Canadian community. Our study makes a small contribution by beginning to shed light on a pervasive yet marginalized, valued but still invisible cultural activity of many Canadian readers.

Library and information science research into readers and reading

The vibrant reading research in library and information science contexts informs this project in important ways: as a basic starting point, it provides ample evidence that leisure reading in this country holds profound personal meaning for those who do it and that voluntary reading has deep social implications for members of reading communities. Rothbauer's previous reading research has shown us that knowing about the motivations and habits of various readerships has general significance for information services in public, academic, and school libraries and quite specific implications for readers' advisory services (e.g., Rothbauer 2004a, 2004b, 2009). Pawley (2006, 2009) argues that the role of organizations such as bookstores and libraries should be central to readership studies, giving a clear rationale for an emphasis on social and institutional structures that support reading, including publishers. Dali's (2012a, 2012b) empirical study of the reading behaviour of Russian immigrants to Toronto informed our research methods (see below) and also suggests a new model for how readers choose books to read for pleasure, one based on reading practices rather than characteristics of the texts. Pecoskie (2012) developed the concept of the "grafted space" in which readers push against the limits of personal and communal identities—a concept that has value for our study as we sought to understand the interplay between professional and personal reading stances of poetry readers. Together with earlier findings by McKechnie, Ross, and Rothbauer (2007), Pecoskie's (2005) analysis of the book-as-object to support identity informed some of our thinking about the possibilities for personal collections of poetry for our respondents. Research by Cedeira Serantes (2012) and Howard and Ziolkowska (2010) supports a fine-grained approach to the readership of comics and graphic novels—although these are very different fields of production than poetry, like poetry they are specialized literary forms. Finally, influenced by Catherine Sheldrick Ross (1999, 2009), our work shares a firm dedication to understanding reading practices and ideas about reading from the perspective of readers themselves. Through qualitative interviews with hundreds of readers, Ross has shown how the concept of active reading enlivens and destabilizes the meanings of any text and, further, that such understanding of reading practices can begin only with what readers have to say about their experiences rather than with any implied stance for them suggested by authorial and critical positions.

Poetry promotion and libraries

The intertwined subjects of poetry, readers, and libraries are encompassed by two dominant themes in the library and information science literature from Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom: poetry promotion among children and youth,[4] and poetry awareness and collection development practices (e.g., Cassell 1991; Basinski 2002; Lazar 1992; Richey and Kratzert 2005; Wells 1993). Many authors advocate for the role of libraries as sites of poetry promotion and as sources of poetry for readers of all ages to access poetry as representative and important works of the imagination.

Walters (1995) and Meade (1997) argue eloquently for the benefits of investing in poetry collections and events. Walters rallied for support of "works of the imagination" alongside the library profession's emphasis on "information and the world of fact" (21). Meade (1997, 260), then director of the Poetry Society and current director of if:book,[5] challenged libraries across the United Kingdom to adopt a national policy of poetry promotion.

Closer to home, Koh (2008) argues for the importance of representing alternative literatures in Canadian library collections, referring to Anderson's concept of the "other 90 percent" of publishers that librarians rarely support: "small, underground and independent presses and individuals . . . [who publish on issues of] current literary and social trends, [that] are not written or distributed with profit in mind" (Anderson 1999, quoted in Koh 2008, 48). Koh goes on to argue that if public librarians are to be "ardent advocates of intellectual freedom" as they claim to be, they have a responsibility to represent a diversity of perspectives and voices (48). While Koh is making the case for the importance of collecting zines, the same argument can be made for small literary presses, often struggling with minimal editorial and sales staff to sell more than a few hundred copies of a given title, unless the author is well established or wins a high-profile award (Rogers 2009).

In a recent study that examines selection methods for poetry among academic librarians in the United States, Golomb (2011) questions the time-honoured practice of using award winners as anchors for core collections. With regard to the 65 contests examined, Golomb contends that existing bias may disqualify award winners as representative of the "best" poetry available, especially as many of the books are published by small presses that rely on the contest fees to fund their poetry lists. She concludes that "for building and maintaining a good collection of contemporary American poetry, there is no substitute for subject specialist knowledge, especially when coupled with departmental input" (212).

Despite consistent calls for improving poetry collection practices, poetry in Canadian libraries may be harder to find these days, in part because many titles in Canada come from small literary presses not well represented in Canadian public libraries. The 2008 Turner-Riggs study of the Canadian book distribution market unequivocally states that "smaller firms have a relatively limited field of potential distributors to choose from, and that their ability to access effective distribution has a significant bearing on the ease with which the books they publish can be discovered by Canadian consumers" (Turner-Riggs 2008, 54). When it comes to traditional book distribution, one Toronto-based small publisher expressed the not-uncommon opinion that it "would almost be cheaper to give them away" (D. De Klerck, pers. comm., June 30, 2011).

Poetry reading habits of adults have not been widely researched in English language scholarship. One recent study features a case study of a partnership with the poetry community in Washington, DC, documenting efforts to preserve the papers of lesser-known writers in the area (King 2011). While this article provides insights into the tensions involved in community history projects, it

provides little knowledge about the readership practices external to the well-defined boundaries of this particular poetry community. Studies by sociologist Ailsa Craig provide important contextual knowledge about the field of production and performance of poetry communities in Toronto, New York, and Paris (Craig 2007, 2011; Craig and Dubois 2010) but take little account of the reading audiences and practices beyond those associated with established poetry communities.

Methodology

The subjects of this study were adult members of the poetry community in Toronto, Ontario. Fundamentally grass-roots in nature, this community is composed of myriad sub-factions connected through a dozen small presses and a steady stream of events including reading series, book launches, festivals, and awards. Poetry in this study includes books; chapbooks, broadsides, draft manuscripts, and ephemera; electronic/online publications; and oral poetry, including sound poetry and spoken word. A poetry-focused event is one where any of the above is performed, taught, or formally discussed via readings, signings, workshops, panels, and reading clubs. The poetry community is the group of people who participate in the production and/or consumption of poetry as authors, translators, publishers, editors, instructors, promoters, distributors, sellers, event organizers, hosts, critics, academics, and/or students of the art but, most important, as readers and, in the case of readings, listeners.

One of the authors, Carey Toane, has been involved in this community since 2008 as a reading series host, micropress publisher, literary festival organizer, and published poet. Not only did this proximate position inspire this research, but it was a crucial factor in setting the geographical scope and recruitment process.

The methodology for this enquiry is informed by Dali's studies of the Russian-speaking community in Toronto (2002, 2004, 2005), which forms a parallel to the niche community of poetry readers in our sample. The Russian-speaking immigrant community as described by Dali (2004) is made up of avid readers who are familiar with the public library and its offerings, have limited disposable income, and highly value their home book collections. Aside from the differences in the collective language and immigration history, this description is applicable to the poetry community surveyed here.

A sample of participants was recruited using targeted non-probability methods from September to November 2011. A mass e-mail was sent out to approximately 100 of Toane's contacts within the community, who were encouraged to pass it on. The authors are aware of the limitations that this sampling method imposes on these findings and do not make claims beyond these limits; rather, this study is intended as an attempt to begin to address a gap in the literature that will require further exploration and study. To attempt to broaden the circle of potential participants outside of these social and technological limits, audience members were also approached at relevant events in Toronto, such as Word on the Street.[6] In addition, posters were distributed in bookstores and other

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locations, and listings appeared in e-newsletters and on social networks. All materials asked for potential participants who were of legal age, residents of Toronto, and a poetry reader. Interested individuals were given a brief written explanation and were asked to give their name and e-mail address for survey delivery.

Dali (2004) produced a qualitative-quantitative body of data on readers by surveying 50 participants via a self-administered questionnaire on their demographic data, reading of books for leisure and educational/professional development, reading of newspapers and magazines, and usage patterns for and perspectives on public libraries, bookstores, and home collections. Our survey instrument addressed reading of poetry for leisure (Q1–9) and professional development and study (Q10–17), public library use (Q18–31), bookstore use (Q32–41), book collections at home (Q42–45), reading series (Q46–54), and personal/demographic data (Q55–59).[7] To encompass both the behavioural and attitudinal aspects of the research question, the questionnaire included a combination of closed-ended, open-ended, and contingency questions, with a total of 59 questions. Participants were asked questions on these topics to assess their feelings, actions, and motivations in regards to why and how they read poetry, how they obtained (or failed to obtain) the poetry they (wished to) read, and what role, if any, the library played in this readership. Given that this study was not an evaluation of any of the libraries in the metropolitan area, none of the local institutions' collections were measured or assessed; nor was the link between readership and author publication/output a focus of this study. Given the anecdotal reference to both of these areas within these findings, these are clear opportunities for further exploration.

The survey was pre-tested in a pilot study; pilot participants were asked to respond to the same set of questions to be used in the study, after which they were asked about usability, content, and design. Five individual, in-person sessions were conducted with three male and two female poetry readers living outside the target community. All participants were given the option of completing the survey alone or with a researcher present; all chose the latter. This informal observation allowed the participants to talk through the process and ask questions, which further informed survey content and design. Based on the pilot test, the survey was revised for clarity and relevance before it was distributed to the metropolitan-area sample.

Those individuals who provided names and e-mail addresses during recruitment were sent an e-mail message containing a link to a website to complete the self-administered questionnaire.[8] The e-mail also included a letter of information about the study and some instructions for the respondent, as well as a guarantee of anonymity and confidentiality. The total number of people who ultimately received this invitation is unknown, as known potential participants contacted by e-mail or social media were encouraged to pass the link on to eligible friends and colleagues.

Upon clicking the link, potential participants were asked for their informed consent via Web form, before continuing to the survey. They were also made

aware that, by continuing, they were confirming that they met the criteria required for participation. Responses to the survey were received from 32 people, from November 2 to December 27, 2011. Due to the design of the survey, the number of respondents varies from section to section, and this has been noted throughout. The actual size of the poetry community is impossible to quantify; because of the small, non-representative sample, these results are not statistically significant. All responses were anonymous. Participants were not asked to provide a name or other identifying information while completing the questionnaire, and there was no attempt to connect those who expressed interest during recruitment with those who completed the survey. The researchers took advantage of the options provided by SurveyMonkey to enable anonymous response collection via public links and disabling of e-mail address and IP address storage. The software also provided SSL protection, which meant that survey data were sent over a secure, encrypted, https connection.

SurveyMonkey's statistical analysis tools aided with quantitative data analysis, and thematic codes were derived inductively from the data. As this project was conducted as a two-credit course of independent study during Toane's tenure as a master of library and information science program student, time and resource constraints dictated certain economies of research, both well-documented features of qualitative study decision making. We opted to use thematic coding as our chief strategy of data reduction for the qualitative data. We did not use an a priori coding frame but were sensitized to themes suggested by the structure of the questionnaire, while at the same time working to allow new concepts (and codes) to emerge from the data (Ayres 2008). We were guided by the integrative logic of thematic coding and synthesis rather than the reductionist logic of analytic coding (Piantanida, Tananis, and Grubs 2004). We relied on the notion of validity described by Janice Morse and her colleagues (2002) as measure of rigour for qualitative research, using verification strategies when possible and appropriate to establish reliability and validity. Of the 12 figures included here, figures 4, 6, 8, 10, and 12 depict occurrences of coded themes in responses to open-ended questions; the rest depict closed questions. Occurrences of particular codes were counted using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and the find-search function. These have been illustrated in this report using bar graphs to illustrate the frequency of the coded terms. While those themes have formed the basis of many of the observations in the following sections, individual comments are also included to allow for the expression of individual readers' voices and perspectives.

Participants: Committed poetry readers

The respondents were generally highly educated and non-traditionally employed. Reflecting blurred work and leisure roles, many identified as poetry writers as well as poetry readers. The 29 respondents to the demographics questions (Q55–59) ranged in age from 26 to 65 years; of these, 18 (56.3%) identified as female, 10 (31.3%) as male, and 1 (3.2%) abstained. All 32 respondents (100%) had

completed high school; 1 (3.2%) had a college diploma, 10 (31.3%) had an undergraduate degree, and 18 (56.3%) had a graduate or postgraduate degree.

When asked for their current occupation(s) (Q58), 16 of 29 respondents (55.2%) gave more than one. Eleven (37.9%) people self-identified as writers/authors, and six (20.7%) as poets; two (6.9%) respondents listed both, suggesting the two writing occupations are seen by some to be distinct. Another seven people listed a pedagogical role such as instructor, teacher, or professor (24.1%); three were administrators or program assistants (10.3%), two publishers (6.9%), one (3.4%) academic, and one librarian (3.9%), as well as 10 miscellaneous occupations (34.5%). These findings align with the responses by the 19 respondents who read poetry for work or study, in response to the request "describe the work that you do" (Q13); collectively, they identified a total of 72 roles. Of these, the most popular were "poet" (15 occurrences), "writer (not poetry)" (13 occurrences), editor (12 occurrences), and "professor" or "writing instructor" (10 occurrences).

Findings: Tensions and competing positions

The findings illustrate competing tensions in the reading practices of a group of readers with twin commitments to reading for pleasure and reading for professional development as a writer and poet. Furthermore, affective dimensions of reading poetry are central to these readers: many expressed a pure love of poetry, seeing works of poetry as emotional touchstones while at the same time using such works as creative and intellectual resources, again blending personal and professional motivations for reading. Lack of access to desired titles was a recurring theme, whether caused by costs of materials, gaps in library holdings or circulating collections, or bookstore inventories or publisher's lists. The desire to own significant works of poetry also undermined the borrowing function of the public library, where libraries are used as sources of trial readings. Generally, respondents expressed positive perceptions of libraries despite the persistent observation that their reading interests were not being adequately served by existing collections and programming. The social influence of the poetry community strongly affected buying habits, reading interests, and motivation.

1. "Pure delight and professional development": The intertwining of readership and writerly identity

Despite their diversity all members of the sample were connected by their reading habits. All but one of the 32 respondents read poetry in their spare time (Q1); 15 (50%) had read more than 10 poetry books in the previous six months, while 27 (90%) had read 3 or more. Overwhelmingly, this community read contemporary Canadian poetry, in a variety of styles, more than canonical or classic works (see figure 1).[9] They read printed monographs more than chapbooks or articles and rarely read blogs or zines (see figure 2). Most of the 31 respondents to Q7 (26; 86.7%) read poetry only in English.

The participants in this study were very well read in general, and, not surprisingly, all read deeply in the literary form of poetry. As elaborated above, many were also writing poetry, often for publication. Aside from poetry, this

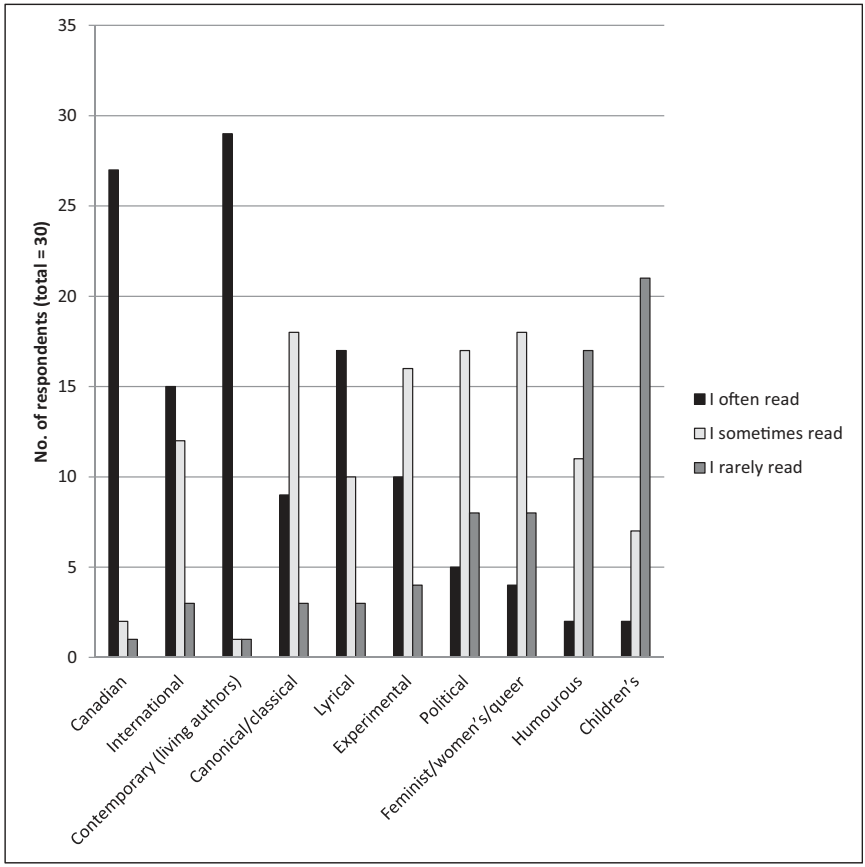

Figure 1: Q4: "How would you describe the poetry you read in your spare time?"

group also consumed high volumes of other written materials: they read more novels than poetry books and read non-fiction as much as poetry. Of the 19 respondents (59.3%) who read poetry for work or school, 100% also read poetry in their spare time.

When asked why they chose to read poetry in their spare time, several common themes emerged from the open-ended responses, which point to the holistic way in which poetry is integrated into the working and personal lives of members of this community. Professional, intellectual, emotional, social, and linguistic motivations were often difficult to parse, as in the following statement: "Allows me to read and interact with language in a way that most of my communication and information intake in my daily routine does not allow; most of my time is spent consuming facts while poetry allows me to participate in language as a playful, emotionally engaging activity." Many people expressed a pure love of poetry, citing the simple enjoyment it brings and/or a preference for poetry over other genres: (e.g., "Because I love it. Because it deepens my perceptions

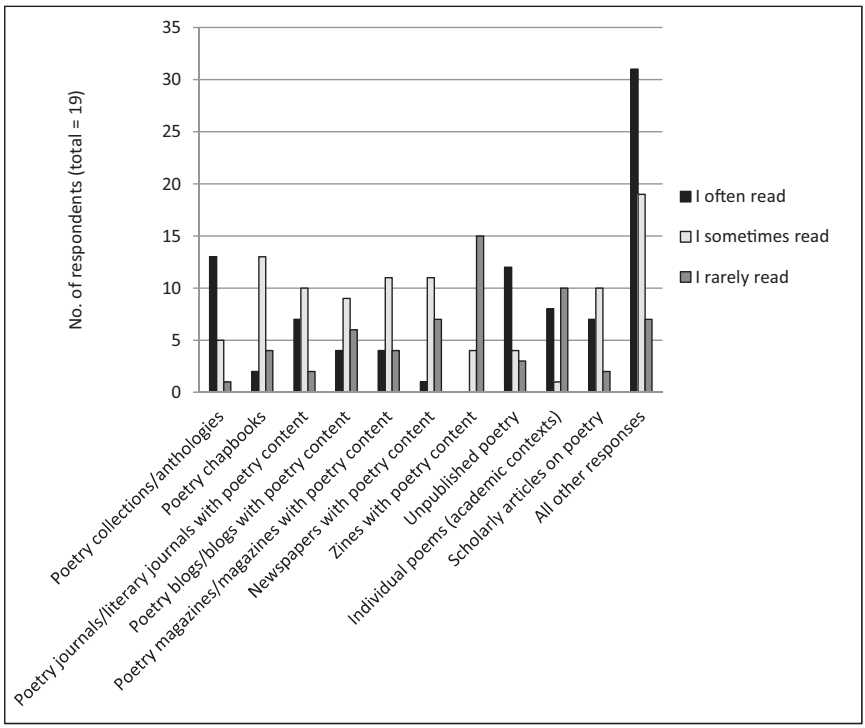

Figure 2: Q11: "Which of the following do you read for work or school?"

and/or is engaging and/or takes my breath away"). Several respondents expressed this distinction in their comments about language: they described the role of "inventive language" or "the play of language"; one wrote that "poetry attends to language more fully and experimentally than does most prose." Respondents referred to the "skill and craft" of poetry and its focus on imagery and form (e.g., "capturing an elusive thought, experience or perception in such a compressed and powerful form") as well as a broader philosophical aspect (e.g., "Poetry assists my comprehension of the civilized world, of natural history and of humanity's spiritual concerns") and a general contribution to personal development and lifelong learning (e.g., "it makes me a better general reader"). Professionally, it served as a writing aid (e.g., "it feeds my writer's brain"; "stimulates me to write my own poetry") as well as a means to keep up with current literary trends. This aspect was also social (e.g., "I am a poet myself and like to read other contemporaries") and added to the sense of community (e.g., "the Toronto [poetry] community is diverse, dynamic").

"Recommendations of friends/peers"

Given the number of respondents who included "poet" in their job descriptions, it is not surprising that proximity to others who are writing, publishing, and

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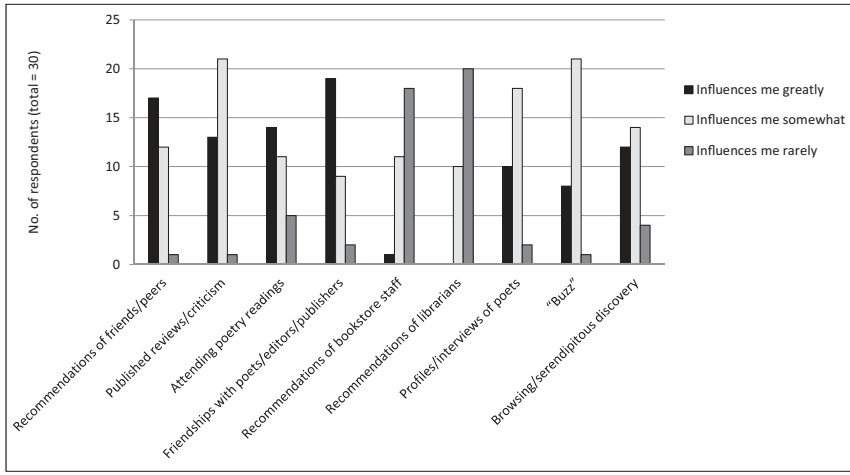

Figure 3: Q6: "What influences your choices of poetry to read in your spare time?"

reading poetry in public had a strong influence on their reading choices (see figure 3). Friendships with poets and publishers (63.3%), recommendations of friends and peers (56.7%), and attendance at poetry readings (46.7%) were all social motivators which respondents to Q6 (n = 30) said "influence[d] me greatly." In contrast, "somewhat influential" factors included media and "buzz," which could include things such as award nominations or wins (70%), book reviews/criticism (70%), and profiles/interviews of poets (60%). In response to Q36, which asked what motivated recent poetry purchases (see figure 4), 3 of 30 respondents (10%) mentioned award shortlists in their open-ended responses, and 1 of these said they bought every book on the nomination list for the Griffin Prize. Librarians did not rank as high as they might; in Q6 they "rarely influenced" 20 of 30 respondents (66.7%). In the words of one respondent, "librarians WOULD influence me, though I never actually receive recommendations from them." Another took the onus on himself/herself, saying, "Librarians don't influence me greatly because I've never asked!"

Not surprisingly, social factors also influenced the book-purchasing decisions of this group (see figure 4), whose members can be considered frequent purchasers of books: 53% of the 31 respondents to Q34 said they had purchased more than 15 books of any genre in the past six months, and 23% of the 31 respondents to Q35 said they had purchased more than 15 poetry books in the past six months. The social influence of the community was evident in coding the open-ended responses to Q36, such as knowing the poet personally and hearing a reading or attending a launch; recommendations of poets, friends, and co-workers; purchasing a book to take or teach a course; supporting a particular publisher; following award shortlists; desiring to support local poetry; purchasing gifts; and "keeping up." However, the most common motivation for purchase

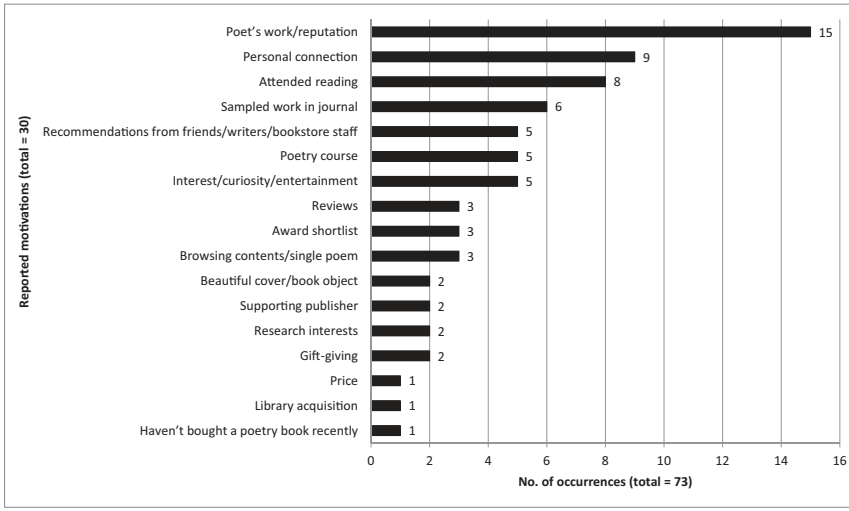

Figure 4: Q36: "Think about some of the poetry books you purchased recently. What motivated you to buy them?"

was an interest in a particular poet (15 occurrences) based on his or her previous work or reputation (e.g., "Wanting to know what a certain poet has done recently"; "Like the poet"; "A poet whose work I follow"), which speaks to the deep and broad nature of this community's reading habits: following a poet through his or her career requires sustained interest and attention.

Bookstores play an important role in this community and were found to be the most common source for frequent purchases for 25 (80.6%) of the 31 respondents to Q33. Significantly, of those places from which poetry books are "sometimes" bought or obtained, the most popular choices were book fairs and festivals (65.5%), publishers (review/sample copies; 55.2%), and reading series (55.2%). Reading series beat out online retailers as a place to purchase books "often" and "sometimes," indicating both the low adoption of digital formats such as e-books for poetry (see Teicher 2011) as well as the importance of non-traditional channels for poetry book distribution (see O'Neal Parker 2013). Reading series are also a crucial space for the blending of social and professional roles, as will be addressed below. The purchasing behaviour of the survey respondents results in impressive home collections (of any genre), as evidenced by responses to Q43: the survey instrument underestimated the potential number of books in the average respondent's collection, as 38.7% of the 31 respondents chose the maximum option of "more than 750" books, while 74.2% of respondents indicated that they had collections of more than 500 books. Of these collections, poetry books made up 50% or less (see figure 5).

These personal poetry collections also reflect the social aspects of the community of readers (see figure 6). For example, one open-ended response to Q45

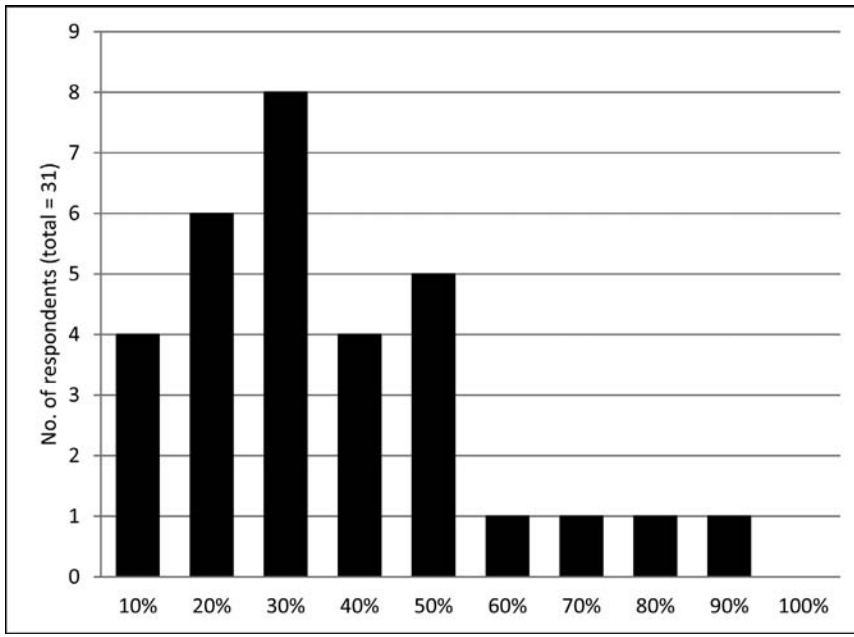

Figure 5: Q44: "What percentage of your home collection is poetry books?"

expressed a connection to authors through acquisition of their books: "owning a poetry collection written (or published) by someone I know makes me feel as if I have access to a small corner of their soul." The historical purpose of these collections also ranked high, as a record of interests or a connection to the past (e.g., "I have a nostalgic attachment to so many of my books as I recall who recommended which book"). Readers in this sample expressed affective connections with authors and poets, and to their home poetry libraries, but they also used their collections of poetry as practical resources to support their own creative and intellectual endeavours.

2. "An important creative, emotional and intellectual resource": Poetry books as emotional artefacts and as a reference collection

The socio-emotional aspects of poetry readership explored in the previous section give some clues to the importance of poetry books as objects as well as physical containers of content. This relationship is both emotional and practical and is evident in respondents' attitudes toward their personal collections, as well as how they use library collections of poetry.

Personal poetry collections are highly valued by most members of this community (as seen in figure 6), described as "essential," "paramount," "my greatest asset," or simply as "very important," although one person said that his or her collection is less important than it once was. The respondents revealed emotional connections, such as love, nostalgia, sentiment, joy, pleasure, or otherwise deep

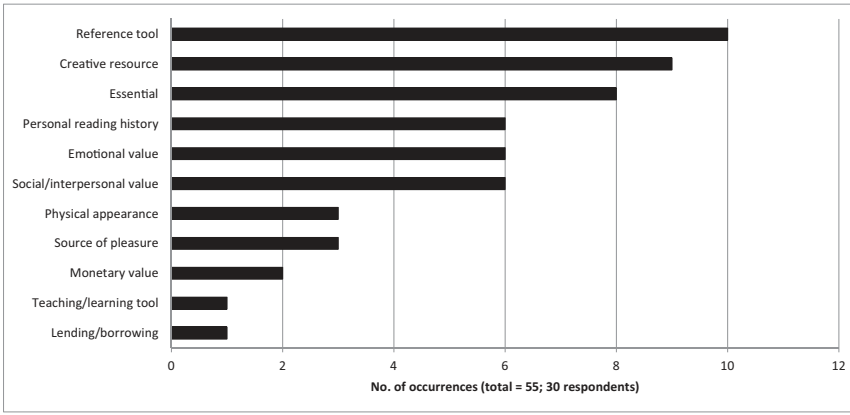

Figure 6: Q45: "Please describe the importance your personal collection of poetry books has for you."

or intimate feelings. The often emotionally affecting content is transferred to the objects themselves; poetry books can be seen to provide, as one respondent said, "emotional and intellectual companionship."

The desire to possess a beautiful physical object, the cover art, or the title were also motivators to own a particular book. Aesthetic considerations influenced respondents' attitudes toward their home collections (e.g., "They're super nice to look at!"; "the books are often appealing—slim, and with each poem nicely presented. The feel and look of the book adds to the experience"). Respondents repeatedly referred to their "love" for their poetry books (e.g., "I like to refer to poems I love at leisure, and pull them off my own shelves"). The desire to build and care for a private library was also evident in the comments of the respondent who wrote, "I take very good care of my books, they feel new each time I enter them and they are never underlined. These are sources of deep pleasure for me." Two people referred to the monetary value of their rare books, and two people mentioned giving books as gifts.

Notably, the issue of e-books was not raised in the survey instrument, nor was it mentioned in any respondents' comments. The Literary Press Group found in a follow-up with participants in their 2012 survey of Canadian poetry readers that "reading poetry online/via e-books remains less preferable to reading print books" (Turner-Riggs 2012, 9). While aesthetic considerations such as the desire to own and touch physical objects may go some way to explain the resistance to adopt digital poetry books, more pressing practical considerations had, at the time this survey was carried out, prevented poetry publishers from successfully producing digital versions of their titles. Teicher (2011) explains that e-book file formats at that time did not preserve pagination and specifically line breaks; while not significant in prose texts, these are precisely "the things that happen to make poems what they are." Comments in the Literary Press Group of Canada 2012 survey corroborated this issue. As such, Teicher continues,

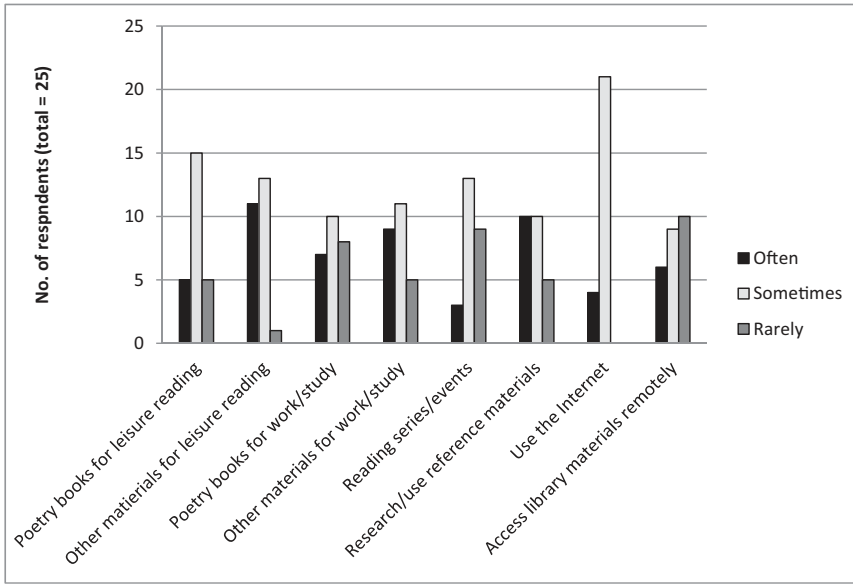

Figure 7: Q20: "What do you use the public library for?"

publishers and readers alike have been unwilling to shift to digital formats, although new technology has been developed that may alleviate the problem.

"Poetry demands rereading"

Given the voracious reading habits of this group, they use the library as a source for poetry books relatively infrequently. Of the 30 respondents to Q3, 15 (50%) had read more than 10 poetry books in the past six months; however, 14 (56%) of the 25 respondents to Q21 had read or borrowed only 5 or fewer books from the library in the same time period, and 23 (92%) had read or borrowed 10 or fewer (see figure 7).

When asked in Q41, "In an ideal situation, if you had a choice between buying a desired poetry title from a bookstore (physical or online) or borrowing it from the public library, what would be your preference?" 50% of the 30 respondents said they would prefer to buy it. Only 4 (13%) definitively declared that they would borrow, while 11 (37%) said "it depends." One reason given for the majority preference is that these personal collections serve an important practical function as reference materials, which are kept close at hand and referred to repeatedly and often: for example, "Given no financial constraints, I would buy a poetry book rather than borrow it, as I would rather be able to return to a book again at my convenience, and often read books slowly, and multiple times"; "I like to have them handy. Not to mention it's permissible to scribble in your own books, or at least append with Post-it notes!"

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The importance of this reference function was reinforced by responses to the request to "describe the importance of your personal collection of poetry books" (see figure 6); coding revealed again that this group buys poetry books as reference materials (10 occurrences). As one commenter said, "It's an important creative, emotional, and intellectual resource." Another related reference purpose is that these books serve as a source of creative inspiration for writing and related work (9 occurrences). The issue of lending personal copies of books to friends came up only once during coding, hinting at the private lending library within this community (e.g., "Having a collection from which to lend books to others, or to exchange for others' books, is also important, as it allows me to more ably borrow books from others").

Many respondents described this reference function as unique to poetry among other genres, as in the case of one individual who makes a distinction between poetry and novels: "I borrow more novels from the library as I return to them much less often than I do poetry." Others described poetry as a genre with a unique reading experience different from novels or non-fiction prose, often slower and extended or repeated over time (e.g., "I revisit my poetry books more than any of my other books . . . This is because poetry is a different kind of experience—meditative, rather than for escape and entertainment the way novels often are"), or as an aide-memoire to a particular time or place (e.g., "Certain moments, certain feelings, etc. will make me reach for particular poems or for the language and sensibility of a particular book, sort of like remembering what a friend said at a certain time and reaching to hear that again"; "Recalls past associations or presence at a reading or images I wish to re-examine"). The lending limits on poetry books—those that circulate at all—can therefore be seen as a factor that discourages this community from borrowing poetry books from the public library.

"I might borrow a book from the library, fall in love with the words and then buy it from a bookstore"

The group of respondents to Q41 that was divided on the buy-versus-borrow question (37%) suggests that the library can play a "try-before-you-buy" role. Instances in which this library trial would be appropriate included encountering a work or poet for the first time, "without recommendation," and the nationality or social proximity to the author (e.g., "I mostly want to own books by my contemporary Canadian fellow poets"). Several of these responses suggested that libraries do as much to promote sales of books as they "compete" with bookstores: "I have pulled authors off the shelf in the public library that I had not heard of, or had heard of but not read. I don't always want to buy a book unless I really like it—I like the borrowing model." Similarly to reading a poem excerpted in a magazine or journal, this serendipitous or "incidental" discovery can often lead to purchase, as respondents described buying new books or backlist titles after discovering a new or unknown poet whose work they enjoy. Looked at from another angle, it is unlikely that members of this community borrow a given book from the library more than once (e.g., "If it's a collection I

love, I prefer to be able to go back to it again and again whenever I need to, rather than waiting to borrow it from the library").

With other respondents, borrowing is the preference, largely because of financial constraints (e.g., "My preference is therefore to borrow first, absolutely. I suppose my reason is simply limited budget"). Given that 90% of respondents to Q34 (total respondents = 31) reported purchasing one or more books a month in the six months before completing the survey, budgets for book buying are somewhat larger for this group than for the average consumer, but money can nevertheless pose a barrier to purchase. When asked in Q40, "What prevents you from buying poetry books?" 14 of 31 (45.2%) open-ended responses mentioned money. Adding to the budget crunch is the perceived high price of poetry books (7 occurrences), which are often cheaper when purchased directly from authors or publishers at reading series, book launches, and festivals. One commenter pointed out that these alternative sales channels often only accept cash, which suggests that some people may otherwise buy more books than they can afford. That library books can be obtained for free is a major advantage in this circumstance; however, given the small percentage of respondents who would prefer to borrow (13% of 30 respondents to Q41), the majority of this community is likely to continue to buy books regardless of library access. Indeed, access to new or unfamiliar poets or collections often lead to purchase, as has been seen above.

Seven (23.3%) of the 30 respondents to Q40 said that "nothing" prevented them from purchasing poetry books, which corroborates the reported high purchase frequency and the large size of home collections of poetry books. One person (3.0%) referred to the "exhaustion" that can act as a barrier to purchase: "sometimes I find a novel easier to escape into and less intellectually taxing"; while one (3.0%) mentioned the desire to keep his or her home collection under control. Even if money is not a barrier, poetry can be difficult to find; this unavailability was mentioned six times (20.0%), including this comment: "small print runs mean works rapidly go out of print and are often hard to find even online." The challenges of small press distribution in Canada are well documented (see Turner-Riggs 2008, 2012) and suggest an opportunity for libraries to collect and provide access to books that are otherwise scarcely available. This community's perception of the public library and its collections will be discussed in the following section.

3. "I go there to get books I've heard about elsewhere": Perceptions of the library as a source of poetry and poetry events

While all 30 (100%) respondents to Q27 said their perception of the public library as a community institution was positive, when asked about their perceptions of the public library as a source of poetry (Q28), the responses were more mixed (see figure 8). The most common complaint attached to this perception was the small size of poetry collections (11 occurrences), primarily in the neighbourhood branches. Those respondents who were neutral largely attributed this to limited experience or use of library spaces or collections. Several respondents to Q24, which asked, "Are you satisfied with the poetry collections in your public

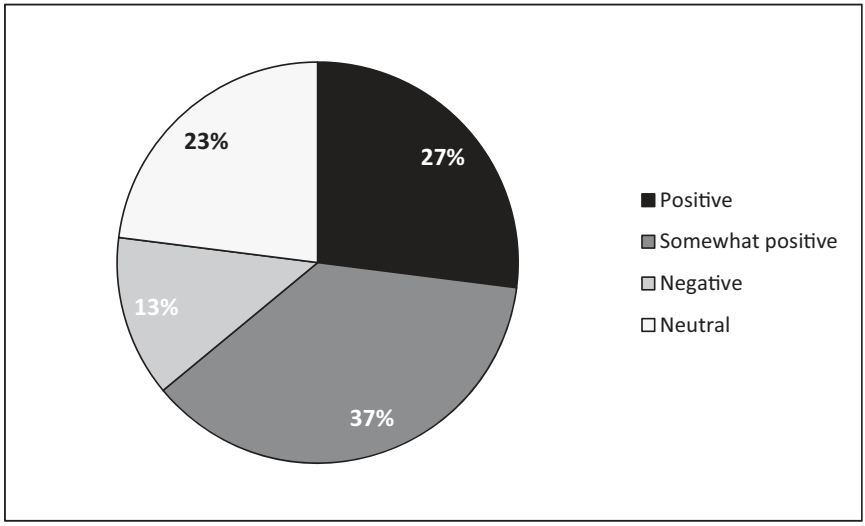

Figure 8: Q28: "Is your perception of the public library as a source of poetry largely positive or negative?" (total respondents = 30)

library?" explained that the selection was somewhat general: for example, "I do think that the public library is a good source of more general work, especially the main reference library. However, it is a bit lacking in the more specific, more obscure works"; and "a lot of the poetry selection tends to be very basic canonical work from the past or else a 'hot' book by a non-poet, ie jewel or tupac shakur [*sic*]." There were comments on the comparative depth between poetry and other collections: for example, "Most public libraries simply do not put the same effort into keeping up with contemporary poetry as they do into fiction and popular nonfiction." However, four people said they were satisfied with the collections, specifically hard-to-find, Canadian, and contemporary books, suggesting differing needs or levels of familiarity with the collections. Another group distinguished between the central and branch libraries, and specifically the noncirculation policy of poetry collections at the former.

While it is important to consider that each of these respondents could be seeking slightly different titles in terms of publisher or genre, this question reveals the respondents to be heavy readers of specialized material, a need that generally is not being met by libraries. It also speaks to the expectation that the library will have "all the things," or, as another respondent to Q22, "What kinds of poetry books do you expect to find in a public library?" put it: "I want a large cross section of genres and time periods—basically the library should be able to supplement me with any books I don't have in my own collection (for whatever reasons)." While this expectation may be unattainable, it nevertheless speaks to the perceptions and expectations of a library collection in a potentially underserved literary community.

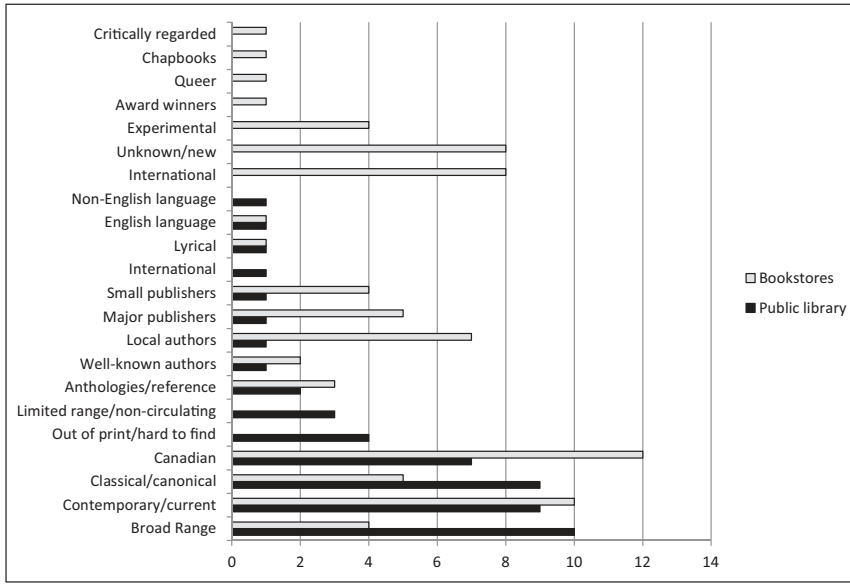

Figure 9: Combination of Q22: "What kinds of books to you expect to find in a public library?" (total respondents = 25) and Q38: "What kind of poetry do you expect to find at [your preferred] bookstores?" (total respondents = 30)

When asked what recommendations they would make to improve services for poetry readers in the public library (Q29), the most common suggestion was, perhaps not surprisingly, to increase the selection (10 occurrences) by way of more titles, more local titles, more books by young or first-time authors, more new releases, and more award nominees. Related to this, two people called for more circulating collections.

"A curated selection of works of interest"

In comparing the group's expectations of books available in public libraries and those found in "preferred bookstores" (see figure 9), the themes of curation and visibility emerge. In terms of collections, the majority expected these bookstores to carry primarily contemporary titles, while libraries were seen to have primarily canonical and classic titles (e.g., "to judge by the poetry collection of most libraries, the typical user would assume that people stopped reading poetry after, say, 1950"). This difference is even greater if no distinction is made between contemporary and publishers' new or front-list titles. Both libraries and bookstores were perceived as carrying Canadian titles, but bookstores rated higher in terms of carrying local work. Libraries were more commonly perceived as having "all kinds/broad range," and bookstores less so. One comment made the distinction between independent and chain bookstores explicit: "Really, it would be nice if the selection was larger in bookstores too . . . it may be larger than I realize at the big chain bookstores, but I generally don't shop there."

Another comment emphasized the selection that often distinguishes better bookstores: "A curated selection of works of interest to the store owners/managers and regular customers. This Ain't the Rosedale Library, for example, had a wonderful stock of poetry that reflected its owners' and customers interests in queer, local and experimental poetry published by independent publishers and micropresses."

Given that at least one respondent to this survey identified as a librarian, this curation may well be present in some library branches as well, based on the interests of individual collection librarians. In that case it could be promoted in the same way it is in bookstores. As this study did not include an analysis of the city libraries' holdings, it is unclear whether this is a collections or an access issue; in other words, we do not know whether these individuals are looking for books that cannot be found or for those that are not part of the collection. Regardless, it appears that these poetry readers are not finding everything they want to read at the public library. And given the recent demise of several independent bookstores in the metropolitan area, including Toronto Women's Bookstore, This Ain't the Rosedale Library, and Book City, options for accessing the kind of poetry they wish to read are likely becoming fewer.

The issue of visibility was also addressed in responses to Q23, "How do you find out about poetry at the public library? (Select all that apply)." Of the 25 respondents, 16 (64%) used the library website/catalogue, and 16 (64%) said they browsed the shelves. Traditional promotional efforts such as book displays (16%), posters (4%), and staff recommendations/readers' advisory (4%) did not make as great an impact with respondents, and 12% said they don't hear about poetry at the library at all. One commenter provided a summary of where the library currently stands in terms of serving this community: "I typically don't look to the library for poetry info. Rather, I go there to get books I've heard about elsewhere." The opportunities here for libraries include advocacy, collection promotion, and readers' advisory. The need for greater visibility and promotion of poetry collections was a major theme in the recommendations respondents gave for service improvements for poetry readers, including more displays, readers' advisory, and book clubs and discussion groups (see figure 10). Other creative suggestions included the establishment of a special library dedicated to poetry, handing out individual poems, recording poets reading, and improving metadata to enable identification of specific subgenres, styles, or themes.

"One can always find unexpected treasures in a library"

Despite certain complaints, for 19 (76.0%) of the 25 respondents to Q25, the public library has nevertheless played a role in exposing them to or enriching their access to poetry. Twenty people provided comments to explain their answers. The dominant theme (10 occurrences) was that the library provides access to poetry not available elsewhere: "The library allows me to read much, much more than I could afford to otherwise, and to take a chance on reading poetry that I wouldn't otherwise be able to access"; "Great to be able to borrow books

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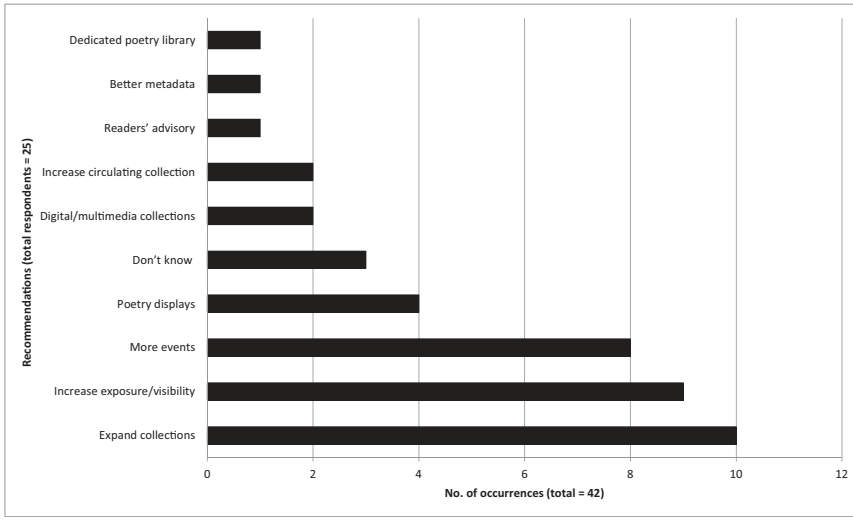

Figure 10: Q29: "What recommendations, if any, would you make to improve services for poetry readers in your area?"

from poets across the country that aren't necessarily available from local bookstores/Chapters."

While, as previously discussed, some perceived the age of the poetry collection as a drawback when seeking new or contemporary titles, others pointed out the advantages of the availability of backlist or out-of-print books, such as one who said he or she was "able to document the history of [Governor General's Award for Poetry] winners back to the 40s through the [Toronto Public Library]." The practice of discovery through browsing the shelves or catalogue (respondents didn't specify which) was also mentioned (4 occurrences), as in this comment: "One can always find unexpected treasures in a library. Often, I find older books that expose [me] to poetry I was previously unaware of, books no longer available in the trade."

"It seems like a homey, equalizing space"

Of those respondents who use the public library (26 [81.3%] of 32 respondents to Q18), more than half take advantage of readings and other poetry events in library spaces; 13 (52%) respondents to Q20 (see figure 7) said they sometimes use the library for this purpose, while only 3 (12%) often attend poetry events in the library. While poetry readings and events haven't played a large role in exposing this group to poetry at the library, several suggested an increase in poetry-related programming as a way to improve library services for poetry readers (see figure 10). Considering the influence that reading series have on readership and on publicity or awareness of poetry as discussed above, this is an opportunity for libraries to boost readership and engagement with this community. Further,

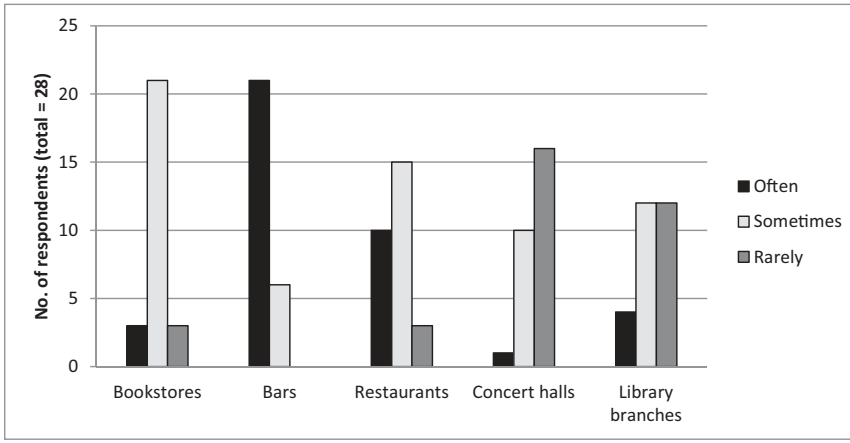

Figure 11: Q49: "Where do the readings and events you attend take place?"

given the potential of the try-before-you-buy model, this is one area in which the library could better serve this community, as a place where new titles or poets could be sampled before committing to purchase.

Reading series are a vital space for the interplay of social and professional reading stances of poetry readers, but the community was somewhat divided on their function and ideal context (see figure 11). For the majority of respondents, reading series and events fulfilled as much of a social function as a literary/intellectual one—and again these are closely intertwined. As one respondent to Q50, "How important is the venue to the reading series you attend?" commented, "For writers, the social aspect of these series is probably paramount." It is clear from the responses to Q54 that this community does not unanimously see the public library as this kind of social space; the group was ambivalent in their perceptions of the public library as a space, host, and organizer of poetry events in general (see figure 12). While most stated that their perceptions were positive, many qualified this: "Largely positive but it can be a little stiff or artificial"; "I think that the public library does everything it can to be a good host and provide interesting readers consistently—I'm just not that interested in going to the library to hear poetry"; "mostly positive, but if it's during normal hours, the ambient noise is high. And it's awkward to have a 'reading' while others are clearly silently reading."

By contrast, reviews of specific poetry events in libraries were largely positive. In response to Q51, only 2 (7.1%) of 28 respondents had attended a reading series at a library branch in the past month, while 6 (21.4%) had attended in the past three months and 11 (39.3%) in the past year. When asked in Q52 how they felt about the venue, 18 (81.8%) of 22 respondents were positive, saying it was "wonderful," "impressive," "perfect," "nice," or "good," although 8 (44.4%) of these qualified their response with some drawback such as the lack of

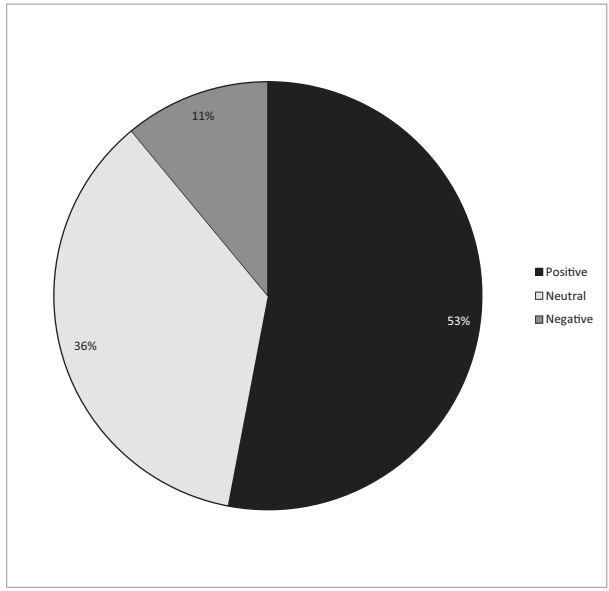

Figure 12: Q54: "Is your perception of the public library as a space, host, and organizer of poetry events largely positive or negative? Explain your answer." (total respondents = 29)

drinks or social atmosphere. Several respondents noted the opportunity to interact with and expose different audiences to poetry in a public setting (6 occurrences): "Libraries are an excellent place for poets to reach out to new readers"; "I also liked that it brought in a crowd of people I don't normally interact with, especially in a poetry setting"; "[Libraries] attract a more mature and varied audience than bars tend to." The results also referred to the difference between library spaces in terms of layout and traffic; while some noted the quiet, attentive, or intimate atmosphere (7 occurrences), others reported that the venues were large, loud, or transient or impersonal (3 occurrences). Some appreciated that there was no obligation to buy food or drink (3 occurrences). The pro-bar contingent noticed the lack of drinks (2 occurrences) and felt that the space was cold, formal, or "less social" (5 occurrences), although one found his or her preconceptions were challenged: "Was a little dubious in case the atmosphere was too formal. But it turned out to be good."

Summary of findings

We were privileged to gain insight into the reading and library usage habits of such an active group of readers of contemporary Canadian English poetry. Work and leisure reading are closely intertwined for this group, many of whom make their living within the literary community as either writers, authors, or educators, or in related vocations. These social connections influence their choice and consumption of reading material greatly. These people are frequent users of

library collections for research and leisure reading but not as often for accessing poetry books and events. One primary reason for this gap is that they consider poetry books as reference materials which are referred to often and as such must be kept close at hand; book collections are maintained as a kind of physical trace of their reading history and development. As such, they have a deep socio-emotional connection to both the content and the physical books themselves, in which they have invested considerably: of their large personal libraries up to 50% is poetry, and their adoption of digital book formats remains low. They would appreciate greater visibility, promotion, and acquisition of contemporary Canadian and international poetry in libraries; a try-before-you-buy model could position libraries as an access point to more poetry, as books are seen as expensive and money is often in short supply. Given the high purchase rate among this group, library use does not compete with book sales. Currently, they do not consider the public library to be an expert source of poetry and do not seek readers' advisory services from librarians. Nevertheless, they see a potential new audience for poetry among library patrons and generally enjoy the readings and other poetry events that they attend in libraries; readings in general play an important social function in this community. As such, libraries wishing to reach this group could develop programming which included drinks and/or a more social, relaxed atmosphere, which could go some way to alleviating the reputation of libraries as institutional or formal among some members of this group.

The findings of this study tell us more about how to best serve poetry readers through library collections and programming. While it is perhaps unreasonable in today's budgetary contexts to make calls for poetry subject specialists in public libraries, harnessing expertise in the library around poetry collections and programs is clearly warranted on at least two grounds: first, there is a vibrant community of readers and writers (and specialists) who are being underserved by existing levels of services; and, second, poetry promotion can support community development. Poetry readers cross other group categories used in libraries to design services (e.g., teens, seniors, newcomers), and so poetry programming could be further integrated into ongoing outreach efforts to support social inclusion. As social work researchers Sjollema and Hanley (2013) have found, active community engagement and community building through poetry reading and poetry writing can be outcomes of structured, non-therapeutic support for personal expression.

Asking readers questions about the role of reading yields unique insights into reading practices, modes and methods of access to reading materials, and perceptions about the place of reading and literature in their everyday personal and professional lived experiences. Asking poetry readers about their poetry reading habits gives us a rich slice of the reading experiences of a specialized and somewhat invisible reading group, adding their voices to the research record. In many ways, these readers traverse the comfortable silos in reading research by bridging reading and writing practices as well as personal and professional reading motivations. This bridging creates a renewed space for reading researchers to think about texts in ways that allow them to function always at the same time as

emotional artefacts and professional resources, and that enable collections of poetry to be symbols of inadequacy and gaps in service at the same time as they are celebrated public sites of communities constructed around aesthetic tastes and textual engagement. This study gives trenchant support to the idea that arts and culture are seen to be important for individual well-being and for healthy, vibrant communities.

Notes

1 The Poetry Foundation, established in 2003, is an independent literary association whose mission is to "be a leader in shaping a receptive climate for poetry." It dates back to 1941 and the establishment of the Modern Poetry Association (Poetry Foundation).

2 In 2010, with the support of the Ontario Arts Council, the Literary Press Group and Turner-Riggs Workspace launched a market-research survey of poetry readers. Results of this ongoing study have not been made public (see Literary Press Group of Canada for details).

3 C$130,000 is awarded to living poets in two categories: Canadian and international (which may include Canada). In addition, poets who are shortlisted for either award each receive C$10,000 (Griffin Trust for Excellence in Poetry, "Griffin Poetry Prize").

4 Given space constraints and our emphasis on adult readers, we do not review the voluminous literature on children's poetry promotion in schools, school libraries, and public libraries. Readers are directed to Maynard, Davies, and Robinson's (2005) article for a recent review of this literature.

5 if:book, founded by Meade in 2007, is a multi-site "think tank dedicated to inventing new forms of discourse for the network age" (Institute for the Future of the Book).

6 Inaugurated in 1990, The Word on the Street (WOTS) is a national book and magazine festival that promotes Canadian literary arts and advocates for literacy (see Word on the Street details).

7 Anyone who wishes to obtain a copy of the survey instrument in full may contact Carey Toane at careytoane@gmail.com.

8 An online survey was determined to be a cost-effective means for gathering information from a group comfortable with digital technology. Much of the planning and interaction that takes place within this community is based in digital technology and platforms such as social networks. Submissions to poetry journals are regularly done via e-mail or Web portals. Furthermore, providing paper surveys and postage was outside the budgetary scope and timeline of this project. After receiving ethics approval for our research protocols from the Research Committee, Faculty of Information and Media Studies, at the University of Western Ontario, we used the fee-based data services provided by SurveyMonkey to collect answers to our survey.

9 As the non-exclusive genres of poetry listed in Q4: "How would you describe the poetry you read in your spare time?" and Q14: "How would you describe the poetry you read for work or school?" were left undefined in the survey instrument, the authors hesitate to provide definitions here. Those unfamiliar with these descriptive categories can refer to reference sources such as *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Baldick 2008) or *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Greene 2012) for further explanation.

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