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Early twentieth century women reading through disability and illness: Letters to Canadian novelist Ralph Connor

Les femmes du début du XXe siècle qui lisaient pour traverser le handicap et la maladie : lettres au romancier canadien Ralph Connor

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Abstract

Ralph Connor was a well-known novelist in the first decade of the twentieth century. Many people read his popular fiction novels around the world. Perhaps owing to his popularity and penchant for keeping correspondence, his collected papers, held the Archives and Special Collections at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, Canada, include over six hundred fan letters. I examined these letters with the intention of exploring women's responses to popular fiction of the era and the reasons they were reading. As I read the letters, a recurring theme emerged in letters penned by women: they described the role of reading in their lives in relation to their personal experiences with disabilities and chronic illness. Others wrote about the experience of reading to their mothers, sisters, or friends with disabilities. These fan letters are the voices of women with disabilities who were relegated to the margins of society. Ultimately, the letters reveal the role of reading as a leisure activity, a vocation, and a social outlet in the lives of early twentieth century women who identified themselves as invalids, shut-ins, and bedbound.

Résumé

Ralph Connor était un romancier bien connu de la première décennie du XX^e siècle. Ses romans de fiction populaires ont été lus par de nombreuses personnes dans le monde entier. Peut-être en raison de sa popularité et de son penchant pour la correspondance, ses papiers recueillis et conservés aux archives et collections spéciales de l'Université du Manitoba, à Winnipeg, au Canada, comprennent plus de six cents lettres d'admiratrices. J'ai étudié ces lettres dans le but d'en savoir plus sur les réponses des femmes à la fiction populaire de l'époque et les raisons pour lesquelles elles lisaient. Un thème récurrent est ressorti de la lecture des lettres écrites par des femmes : elles décrivaient le rôle que la lecture occupait dans leur vie par rapport à leurs expériences personnelles en lien avec un handicap et une maladie chronique. D'autres ont écrit sur l'expérience de faire la lecture à leurs mères, sœurs ou amies handicapées. Ces lettres d'admiratrices sont les voix de femmes handicapées qui ont été reléguées aux marges de la société. Finalement, les lettres révèlent le rôle de la lecture en tant qu'activité de loisir, vocation et évasion social dans la vie des femmes du début du XX^e siècle qui se sont identifiées comme invalides, enfermées et alitées.

Keywords

Disability; Invalidism; Reading; Ralph Connor

Introduction

How a researcher arrives at the topics they explore is often a long and winding story. How I arrived at investigating the fan letters of women with disabilities sent to the early twentieth century Canadian novelist Ralph Connor is indeed a bit of a long story. My path into the topic was precipitated by an inquiry prompt in my PhD coursework. In a course, "Reading and response to literature", with Dr. Jennifer Watt at the University of Manitoba, students were asked to investigate any topic of interest somehow related to reading and response to literature for the course's final project. That prompt, coupled with other factors, led to my discovery of Ralph Connor, his fan letters, and the women with disabilities who had written some of those letters.

I am an academic librarian and reading for pleasure has always been a big part of my life. I have been immersed in 'library land' and 'the book world' both professionally and personally. According to Pew in 2021, women in the USA, Canada, and the UK read more than men, and Ian McEwan was quoted in *The Guardian*, saying, "when women stop reading, the novel will be dead" (Thomas-Corr). But when I read *The library: A fragile history*, that charted a history of libraries going back to the ancient Egyptians, women were largely absent as readers, librarians, and even writers until recent history (Pettegree and der Weduwen). Reading that book sparked the question: "how and when did women make the transition from irrelevant in the history of libraries to being of paramount importance to the survival of the novel as a literary form?".

Around the time I was reading *The library: A fragile history*, and taking the course in reading and response to literature, my grandmother died. She was a fellow avid reader. We attended book signing events and literary festivals together. From a small rural farming community, my grandmother was a feminist, who was characteristic of the crusading women of second wave feminism, she had a family and pursued an advanced degree when her children were still young teenagers living at home. In her middle age, she was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis which would shape the way she lived the rest of her life: to its fullest but with ever increasing physical limitations as the disease took its toll. Before I did this research, I had always thought of my grandmother as a pioneering intellectual, who, for my family, demonstrated in one lifetime how women made the transition from irrelevant in the history of libraries to essential to the modern book trade, but I never connected her physical disability and illness to her love of reading.

Finally, the last part of this puzzle of how I discovered the histories and stories I describe in this article is how I found the works of Ralph Connor. As an academic librarian, I had been doing some co-teaching with an archivist about our university's archival collections. Each time I participated in those sessions, I was left with a feeling that there are so many interesting materials lying untouched for decades in archives. In an interview, Ry Moran, former Director of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation said, "I think archives, in so many ways, are a huge collection of voices that are waiting to be heard... They need to be brought out, and they can't just sit and collect dust" (Abram). I wondered if there were any collections in my local institutional archive that could address my questions about the emergence of women as a dominant demographic of readers. Were there voices in the archives, women who were reading in history, waiting to be heard?

What I found was a Winnipeg-based Presbyterian minister, moonlighting as novelist under the pseudonym Ralph Connor, who wrote a series of novels that were widely read and well-received around the world to the point that many of those readers wrote to him about reading his works (University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections). I knew, based on the questions I had formulated, I was interested in reading the Connor fan letters penned by women to hear the voices of women who read in times before women had emerged as the dominant market share of readers they are today. My exploration into the fan letters written to Ralph Connor between 1897 and 1937 resulted in the unforeseen discovery that numerous women described their experiences of reading in relation to their identities of being invalid, shut-in, or bedbound. In this paper, I highlight some of the letters from those women who wrote to Ralph Connor. They wrote about the impacts of reading on their lives and, in turn, their perceptions of his novels from their perspective as people living with disabilities. Like my grandmother, their lives were influenced by their disabilities which in turn compelled their thoughtful, emotional, and intellectual responses to literature.

Historical background

It might seem obvious, but Canadian literature often is distinctly Canadian owing to its setting (Moss, *Patterns of Isolation in English Canadian Fiction*). Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* is a story anchored in and brought vividly to life by the pastoral beauty of Prince Edward Island (Moss, *A Reader's Guide to the Canadian Novel*). Frederick Grove addressed both wild landscapes and countryside domesticity in *Over Prairie Trails* and *Settlers of the Marsh* respectively (Moss, *A Reader's Guide to the Canadian Novel*). In 1974, John Moss offered his study *Patterns of Isolation* as an introduction to the connection between place and

isolation in Canadian literature (*Patterns of Isolation in English Canadian Fiction* 122). He observes that the idea of isolation in the landscape often gives rise to an exploration of moralism (Moss, *Patterns of Isolation in English Canadian Fiction* 122). Nature (often a harsh winter landscape) presents itself as a moral test that can break one of two ways: protagonists can either succeed or fail, giving rise to two distinct types of stories. Canadian literature can feature protagonists who fail moral tests or fail despite their efforts because of the brutality of Canadian winters. These stories often end with death and snow (or death *in* snow) like Morley Callaghan's *They Shall Inherit the Earth* or Earnest Buckler's *The Mountain and The Valley* (Moss, *Patterns of Isolation in English Canadian Fiction* 113–18). In contrast, regional idylls go the opposite direction because, after a moral test of fortitude and faith, protagonists emerge victoriously after overcoming the challenges of the natural world around them and (or) by drawing strength from it. *Anne of Green Gables* is the most famous of early twentieth century Canadian regional idyll, but it was certainly not the only one (Moss, *Patterns of Isolation in English Canadian Fiction* 124). Ralph Connor had already written six such novels by the time *Anne of Green Gables* was published in 1908 (University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections; Moss, *A Reader's Guide to the Canadian Novel*). Furthermore, Connor's novels depict many of the themes that John Moss argue are typical of Canadian authors of this period: *The Sky Pilot* describes events in a remote isolated community in the Alberta "Foothills country" a many miles ride by horseback from the last stop along the railway line (11), *Black Rock* begins in a lumber camp in winter, and all his novels involve characters' moral fortitude being tested by their setting or circumstances.

Ralph Connor was the literary alias of Charles William Gordon (University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections). Gordon's literary career came about because of his vocation and mission's work. His aim was to increase awareness of the work and impact of the

Presbyterian Home Mission Committee in Eastern Canadian regions to garner financial support. To gain this support, he wrote a series of stories about Western Canada for *The Westminster* magazine; the series would later be published as a single volume and one of his more popular novels, *Black Rock* (Karr, *Authors and Audiences: Popular Canadian Fiction in the Early Twentieth Century*). Ralph Connor was credited with writing 26 novels between 1899 and 1937 (University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections). An “evangelical liberal”, Gordon believed in love, care, and tolerance for people in ways that did not seek to avoid the march of time and modernization, but with the aim of building faith into modern activities, such as leisure reading. (Karr, *Authors and Audiences: Popular Canadian Fiction in the Early Twentieth Century* 12) Like fellow Canadian novelist of the same era, for Nellie McClung, who wrote to espouse social activism, novels were a medium for a message. Gordon took advantage of modern capacity for mass distribution of popular fiction to spread his message of love, faith, and tolerance broadly. His early novels were largely characterized by his crusade against drinking and alcoholism and were lauded by Women’s Christian Temperance Union members across North America (Karr, *Authors and Audiences: Popular Canadian Fiction in the Early Twentieth Century*). Connor’s idylls have a simple structure: 1) setting the scene with characters in a distinct place (like a mining town or backwoods ranch), 2) introducing a test of faith in trying circumstances, and 3) celebrating the rewards the characters reap by keeping the faith. The only slight deviation from this structure for Connor, which is coincidentally his most lastingly known work, is *The Man From Glengarry: A tale of the Ottawa* which is a fictionalized autobiographical account of coming of age in the Ottawa Valley (Moss, *A Reader’s Guide to the Canadian Novel*).

In his biting essay, “In praise of talking dogs: The study and teaching of early Canada's canonless canon”, Nick Mount agrees with John Metcalfe that early Canadian literature (pre-World War I) is “largely crappy” (Metcalf 149) and lacking literary merit. Therefore, Connor is not the sole target of ire by literary critics, but they certainly do not pull any punches in their assessment his work. Moss admits *The Man From Glengarry* was Connor’s best novel but goes on to say it is “a melodramatic and intensely sentimental transmutation of man’s struggle amidst nature into the struggle within man between virtue and depravity” (*Patterns of Isolation in English Canadian Fiction* 123) and “Aesthetically and morally, Connor’s novel is a travesty” (*A Reader’s Guide to the Canadian Novel* 52). Believing that early Canadian literature is devoid of literary merit, many scholars have taken the approach of a cultural historian (Frye 213). And, in fact, this is my approach to Connor’s works. While the literary merit of previously overlooked and even maligned authors of early Canadian literature should and has been redressed by others, I am neither specifically interested in their literary merit nor the substance of Connor’s stories. I am only interested in the literary merit, content, or themes of Connor’s works insofar as they elicited, and are the basis of, a reader response in a specific demographic: women with disabilities who read his novels in years directly following their publication.

Clarence Karr, a cultural historian, makes a study of several early Canadian authors, including Ralph Connor, to examine their literary contributions given their popularity and appeal at the time they were written in *Authors and Audiences: Popular Canadian Fiction in the Early Twentieth Century*. Karr explores Connor’s popularity in part by drawing on the same collection of fan letters referenced in this article, and mentions readers who responded cathartically to the character of Gwen in *The Sky Pilot* but also notes letters from men struggling with alcoholism and others in crises of faith (*Authors and Audiences: Popular Canadian Fiction in the Early*

Twentieth Century 89). What Connor's novels lack literary merit, they made up for in popularity; by 1906, his first five novels had sold over two million copies worldwide (Karr, *Authors and Audiences: Popular Canadian Fiction in the Early Twentieth Century* 53). In comparison, Nellie McClung's *Sowing Seeds in Danny* sold 21,000 copies by 1911 (Karr, *Authors and Audiences: Popular Canadian Fiction in the Early Twentieth Century* 54). The issue of popularity, and resulting accessibility, is a central reason for examining the works of Connor and the fan letters he received. Because although there may have been other authors of the time whose works could have been more relevant to women with disabilities, it was not what was widely read; by the sheer reason that there were many more copies published than works by other authors, women with disabilities would have had a higher likelihood of reading Connor's works than many others. Building on Karr's work, my aim is to focus exclusively on the letters from women who refer to reading Connor's novels in relation to their experience with physical disability and illness.

Theoretical background

Because my way into this research was a result of questions about women's experiences of reading as a leisure activity in history, and a desire to explore the evidence for those experiences, much of the theoretical framework for this research comes from feminist theorists. Rita Felski's work, *Uses of Literature*, is a key influence on my understanding of the less tangible connections that readers make to the literature they read and why they make them. Building on Felski's reader response theories on the uses of literature, but zeroing in more specifically on what that response can be, and what meaning it carries for marginalized people, Eve Sedgwick's theory of "reparative reading" adds layers of agency, purpose, and insight into

why women with disabilities responded they way they did to Connor's works (35). The last foundational influencer on this work is Gloria Anzaldúa, who makes clear how individuals can be between worlds and how, people she called, "nepantleras", can live within multiple worlds (151). Anzaldúa applied this frame to lived experiences; I apply this idea to real and imagined worlds alike.

At the heart of my inquiry into fan letters written to Connor by women with disabilities are questions about why they were reading his novels and what they got out of it that was so moving that they wrote to Connor about their reading experience. In literary criticism, and reading for academic pursuits generally, there is an underlying motive on the part of the reader to decode the messages within the text and account for the cultural context of those messages, in what Eve Sedgwick might call a paranoid reading exercise. Why Rita Felski's understanding of uses of literature (as described in her book of the same name) is so central to revealing some answers to the key questions of my inquiry is that the uses she describes are not bound to ivory towers and could conceivably be the uses and reasons invoked by laypeople who choose to read in their spare time as a leisure activity. She explores how people read to be recognized, to be enchanted, to gain knowledge and to be shocked (Felski). All these uses are reflected in the fan letters to Connor.

While we participate in or bear witness to repeated calls for diverse representation not only in media but in the people who produce media today, it might seem unlikely that women with disabilities in the early twentieth century could read novels written by someone whose life was so different from their lives that would resonate with them and move them to such an extent. Eve Sedgwick's concept of reparative reading gave me insight into how these women's voices

rose above the sea of over six hundred letters written to Connor by fans of his work. On the surface, as described earlier, Connor's purpose in his novels was to gently, and maybe even overtly, proselytize and provide wholesome literary entertainment for the converted. It is doubtful he ever considered women with disabilities as a specific audience for his writing. In *The Sky Pilot*, a novel that features a woman (Gwen) who loses the ability to walk after an accident, the focus of that episode in the novel revolves around her spiritual health as opposed to her physical or lived experience. Sedgwick, however, explains that marginalized groups (she speaks specifically about queer experiences) can read meaning into a text through reparative reading, even if the text was not intended to illicit that response saying: "What we can best learn from such practices are, perhaps the many ways in which selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture – even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them" (35).

Gloria Anzaldúa made many contributions to literary and cultural criticism that found a home in the feminist and queer spaces of academia and culture. The ideas she shared regarding "nepantlera" was often contextualized within her own experience as a queer person of colour navigating and making space for herself and people like her but certainly can also apply to others (Keating 1–2). I argue Anzaldúa's conceptualization of these mediating threshold people, sitting at the edges of worlds and acting as bridge because of their unique positioning along the cracks between worlds, perfectly encapsulates a key feature of the experiences of women with disabilities who were reading Connor's novels in the early twentieth century. Later in this article, I will explore examples in the letters written to Connor of how Anzaldúa's framing of being neither within one or another world accurately reflects how women with disabilities used

literature as both a door into and a window between worlds to navigate their nepantlera existence.

The letters

Fans wrote to Connor for many varying reasons. On one hand, he received many letters like one from E. S. Blair from Miami, Manitoba, who wrote a half-page note asking for an autograph to give as a gift to her sister (Blair). Meanwhile, on the other end of the spectrum, readers would describe at length the degree to which their experience of reading Connor's works had impacted them (Karr, "Fan Mail from Readers"). For example, Sophia Gilmour wrote seven pages to Connor (Gilmour). These letters could be confessional, because the fans felt at liberty to confide in an author they would most likely never meet, and, at the same time, deeply personal because readers often describe feeling connected to the author through his writing (Karr, "Fan Mail from Readers"). In the Archives and Special Collections at the University of Manitoba, there are 612 letters written to Connor by fans between 1895 and 1937 (date of his first published work until the time of his death). Of those letters, 165 are unambiguously identifiable as coming from women. It is possible that more of the letters were written by women, but many letters were signed only with an initial in place of their first name and gave no indication of their identity in the contents of their letters. Many women used ambiguous language to describe themselves and their situations but could have been referring to disabilities or even chronic mental illnesses in their letters. For example, Nellie Ward from London, England expressed that she was going through a "time of hardship" and Elsie Einarsen of Durban, South Africa, lamented that both of her daughters were dead, but provided no further details (Einarsen; Ward). While many women used euphemistic or coded language to describe their experiences, several wrote explicitly about

experiences which is similar to the confessional literature of the previous century that gave birth to the invalid identity (Frawley 64). I describe letters from the following three women in detail: Emma Bowers, Lucy Horton, and Elizabeth Dickinson. While there are other letters from women with disabilities (or written on their behalf by friends or family) in the collection, and I will make passing mention of a few, these three letters highlight how reading was cathartic, it spurred intellectual labour, and represented an opportunity for a shared leisure activity with family and friends in a world which largely precluded them.

In the nineteenth century, invalidism or to be an invalid became an accepted identity and many men and women described themselves as invalids in their literary work (Frawley 2). Frawley argues that to self-identify as an invalid in the nineteenth century went beyond pathologizing disability, because it was used to describe a wide variety of medical conditions, and represented a “cultural mentality” (3). Identifying yourself as an invalid meant you would not be required to attend social engagements because it was understood that you could not (Driedger 320). As a result of this cultural understanding, wherein people with disabilities did not participate in public life because public spaces were inaccessible, Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell argue that people with disabilities “function almost exclusively as a lesson for the nondisabled, promoting behaviours such as patience, cheerfulness, and “making the best of things” (46). Evidence of this function can be seen in Connor’s character, Gwen from *The Sky Pilot*, who is imbued with saintly virtue, patience, and faith despite her new disability.

Identifying as an invalid continued through the first part of the twentieth century; Virginia Woolf mentions invalidism in her 1926 essay “On Being Ill” in a matter-of-fact way without explanation because it was a well-understood state of being to her audience (319). Snyder and Mitchell argue that charitable organizations that emerge in the late nineteenth

century do so in response to people with disabilities being designated as unproductive within a capitalist society and therefore require a separate cultural location from able-bodied people and means to survive (39). The narrative put forth by Snyder and Mitchell seems somewhat at odds with Virginia Woolf's exemplary existence and writing, and what Diane Driedger asserts: a particular feature of Victorian invalids is that they were productive members of Victorian society (312). I draw a general conclusion from these contrasting ideas Snyder and Mitchell are referring to manual forms of labour while Driedger refers to Victorians who were engaging in lastingly notable intellectual labour, like in the case of two examples she references: Florence Nightingale and Charles Darwin. Virginia Woolf mentions her invalidism, but her essay itself was proof that she was producing writing even as she was ill. In times when people with disabilities were largely confined to their homes, and invisible within society, because of the inaccessibility of public spaces, people with disabilities were well-accustomed to working from home.

Compared to invalids, working-class women of the early twentieth century were also productive, but in different ways. Rural or agrarian women were predominantly characterized by their roles in domestic labour and child-rearing (McPherson; Osterud). They are frequently characterized by their hard work and endurance in the face of difficult and relenting conditions (McPherson). Similarly, working-class women in cities were employed long hours from a young age in factories and other industrialized workplaces (Appleby et al.). Writing letters could be respite from the woman's domestic duties (Bye), but it was also a necessary labour to maintain communication with family, friends, and the world beyond their daily life. Based on these understandings of working-class women of this period, it would have been uncommon for women to have the time to both read a Ralph Connor novel and subsequently write to the author about the experience. Those that managed to find the time allude to their preoccupation with

their responsibilities; Minnie Kohler of Kenton, Ohio wrote of her experience of reading Connor's novel that it had "brightened a busy woman's life" (Kohler).

Reading as catharsis for women with disabilities

The first letter that stood out to me was unlike most of the hundreds of handwritten archived fan letters to Connor. Emma Bowers of Ithaca, New York, neatly typed a letter that was both autobiography and self-reflection on the role of Connor's work in her life. Bowers typed her letter most likely because she used a typewriter while pursuing advanced studies. Born in 1870, she graduated from Cornell University with a Bachelor of Science in 1897, and a master's degree the following year. Noted in her class yearbook, she devoted her university career "to a careful study of the natural sciences" (Fraser et al.). When she was studying science at Cornell, she was among the first women trailblazing a path for women in science in higher education (Jones et al.). Graduating from Cornell was a huge personal success that was eclipsed by a near fatal accident within two months of graduating (Bowers). Admitting her ignorance and incredulity saying, "I had always been well and active and it never occurred to me that life had anything but a continuance of happiness in store for me" (Bowers). She was told she would need an operation and optimistically assumed it would return her to her previously well and active state. Instead, even after her operation she had extreme and chronic pain.

It was during this time that Bowers read Connor's *Sky Pilot*. She felt akin with the character, Gwen, to the point that she had a physical reaction saying, "I can never get past the period of Gwen's grief and rebellion without feeling suffocated or a choking sensation in my throat" (Bowers). Bowers attributes this visceral response to seeing herself in the character of the young woman. In the novel, Gwen is a young active woman who is almost fatally crushed by a

horse falling on her (Connor). As a result of the accident, Gwen cannot walk and experiences chronic pain (Connor). Bowers describes what Felski defines as recognition in literature. This “powerful motive for reading” (Felski 26) is evident in Bowers’ letter when she reveals, “it seemed like a page out of my own life”. Gwen was a unique character in Connor’s novels; most of them centered male protagonists’ stories. She was mentioned repeatedly in the letters from women. As mentioned earlier, Connor’s purpose in the story of Gwen was to highlight her spiritual fortitude and faith, but there are no obvious religious overtones in Bowers’ letter. Instead, she takes from the story a kindred experience. Her way of reading into Connor’s work what she needed to make sense of her own life is an example of Sedgwick’s concept of reparative reading.

Bowers was far from the only woman to extol the transformative and healing powers of Connor’s stories. Similarly to Bowers, Susie Gentry asserts that reading to her mother was “better than medicine” (Gentry). Again, Gentry draws a clear connection between the reading experience and impact on her mother who she explains had been “quite ill” (Gentry). Elizabeth Dickinson, who self-describes as an invalid, lauds Connor’s novels which “served to pass away many an hour of otherwise wearisome pain” (Dickinson). Dickinson does not go so far to say that the pain is gone when she reads, but her words suggest that reading distracts from her pain or serves as a mechanism for coping with her pain. For Dickinson, Connor’s regional idylls serve the role that their genre suggests: an idealized world that she can escape into, using literature for enchantment and escapism as Felski might describe it. In addition, Dickinson also embodies the Anzaldúan state of *nepantlera* by describing how her physical body would be in a world of wearisome pain but, because of reading, she is able to step through a door into Connor’s imagined world.

Felski argues reading for recognition can result in self-scrutiny, self-reflection, and change (25). While Suzanne Keen, in *Empathy and the novel*, suggests that academics give too much credit to the transformative power of reading (xv), those, like Felski and others, such as Timothy Aubry in *Reading as therapy*, who focus on reading outside of academia or at least from that lens, embrace the sometimes naïve and therapeutic impetus for reading (Aubry 1–2; Felski 19). Again, I would argue that this type of reading is an example of Sedgwick's reparative reading: getting out of reading what the reader needs to make sense of or exist in their world. The signs of adaptation and change are evident in the Bowers letter when she describes the depths of her despair at her physical impairments and subsequent transformation. Today, there is extensive literature describing decades of research into coping with and adjusting to disability. Dunn's coping versus succumbing frameworks, where succumbing is dwelling on the negative consequences of disability and coping is regarding disability as one aspect of life (77), contextualizes the change inspired by the book within Bowers' experience of disability. She reveals that she is inspired by the book to make the most of her life by doing small, good deeds within her capacity: "I tried hard to find someone who needed a little kindness, if it was nothing but the cat..." (Bowers). Reading a book enabled a woman, whose life had been dramatically altered by disability, to view even kindness to a cat as a worthy contribution to the world. This change of outlook, according to Bowers, contributed to her physical, as well as mental, recovery from her near-fatal accident. Bowers went on to live nearly another fifty years after writing the letter. She was an active organizing member in women's clubs in Ithaca and the Cornell women alumni club in the years following her accident before dying in 1956 when she was in her eighties ("Obituaries"). Bowers' letter demonstrates the depths to which literature could be a mental health support and therapist to women in an era focused predominantly on the physical

impacts of disability. Meanwhile, other letters, like those penned by Susie Gentry and Elizabeth Dickinson, demonstrate that women also believed reading had a physical impact on their health and wellbeing.

Reading as inspiration for work

Bowers' story, both in her letter and life, ends optimistically, in parallel to endings of Connor's novels typical of regional idylls because she experienced a form of recovery. Other fans' personal stories of lasting struggles characterized by the persistent restriction of their physical abilities did not end like Connor's novels. Lucy Horton was one such fan, who explained, at the point of writing, she had been confined to her bed for eighteen years, lying prone for eleven without ever being able to sit up. Despite this extreme prolonged confinement, Horton overcomes the physical barrier she faces to foster and nurture human connections by reading and writing. A devout Christian, she states, "I long to serve my Lord and fellow beings in some manner" (L. E. Horton). Like Bowers, Horton seeks to be in service to some greater purpose beyond herself. And, being at once in the limited world of her bed and connected to worlds beyond it, she contributes, as she would see it, with her writing which she tells Connor has been published in "The Rural New Yorker, Ladies Home Journal, and several other periodicals" and even having "a department all [her] own in one newspaper" (L. E. Horton). She writes to Connor asking for his advice about her greater ambition of writing a novel. She addresses Connor as an admirer and fellow writer with the hopes of corresponding about writing procedures and craft. Horton briefly mentions the limited scope of her physical existence but quickly moves on to detail her ambitions and dream of writing a novel that will be a positive contribution to the world, similarly to how Virginia Woolf makes matter-of-fact mention of her

own invalidism. Acknowledging her physical limitation, Horton says she feels “so weak in one way” but follows quickly by saying that, in contrast, she feels “so strong in another” (Horton). Horton’s work as a reader and writer was characterized by and a product of her invalidism. As a wife and mother, had she not been confined to her bed, domestic and social responsibilities of women of that time could have detracted from the time she ultimately spent reading and writing. Upon her death, she had been confined to her bed for over forty years, being blind for the last twenty (“Horton”). In her obituary, it was noted, “she was a great reader and writer”, indicating the degree to which literature played an important part in her life (“Horton”).

Lucy Horton was one of several women who wrote to Connor explaining that they were bedbound or invalid. Several of them noted that their confinement was because of frailty in old age, but others wrote of other reasons they experienced the world differently to others. In some cases, the writers were not as direct about the reasons for their physical pain or struggles. For example, Anne Weir wrote on behalf of her friend, and expressed thanks to Connor for having sent her friend a copy of his book. It is unclear exactly why her friend is unable to write on her own behalf, but Weir hints that some recent tragic event had occurred that made her unable to write. Whatever the specific reasons for their inability to interact with worlds beyond their private confined spaces, literature was a tool at their disposal to bridge private and public worlds.

While it was unclear, because of the vague or discreet way some correspondents relayed their medical conditions, what befell some, for others it was quite clear even in their first few lines. Mrs. John H. Hudson of Sandusky, Ohio begins her letter saying, “Your book has brought light to the blind, for I am a blind woman...”. She explains to Connor the accommodations with which she is writing to him, and attribution is given at the end of the letter to the local student who has transcribed the letter. Like other women with disabilities who wrote to Connor, she

explains how his book has launched her into action, writing letters to local clergymen about topics relating to the novel, demonstrating again the work (in this case, advocacy) undertaken by women with disabilities who read Connor's works. Furthermore, she explains how the novel led her to a new level of understanding. Felski reveals how literature can impart knowledge (83), and Hudson notes having greater knowledge of words her father had imparted to her that never fully made sense before having read Connor's novel. Arguably, Horton also read Connor's work for knowledge of the craft of writing (however misguidedly considering critical response to his work). For those women to whom limited accessibility was afforded by their moment in history, as Horton and Hudson's letters demonstrate, literature served as exploratory and educational tools. It was essential for those who otherwise would not have the opportunities to gather knowledge in the world like others.

Reading as shared experience

Readers repeatedly mentioned the shared experience of reading with loved ones. Susie Gentry explained, in her letter, that her mother had been ill, and Susie read to her during that time. Not only did she communicate her perceptions of the active healing power of the written word for her mother, but also the shared entertainment that comes from reading a novel (Gentry). She expresses how sad both she and her mother were when they had finished reading the book (Gentry). For those that are incapable of participating in a world either not made accessible to them or closed off because of physical limitations, the ability to participate in experiences with family members, such as reading a novel together provided a way for some of Connor's readers to commune with their family and friends such that they would be otherwise unable to do.

Elizabeth Dickinson explains the scope of experience of an invalid when she was writing in 1902. She says, "I am afflicted with a spinal trouble which debar[s] me from many pleasures others enjoy" (Dickinson). Whereas those with physical disabilities could not participate fully in most leisure activities of the day, many could participate fully and equally in the pleasure of leisure reading the latest popular novels. For that reason, many women wrote of spending many hours in the company of loved ones and a Ralph Connor novel for the shared and mutual enjoyment of stories therein.

Lucy Horton enjoyed shared experiences similarly to Susie Gentry's mother, as evidenced by the fact that it was her physician that gave her the Ralph Connor novel, thinking that she would enjoy it. Emma Bowers also enjoyed the shared joy of reading by asserting that she read *The Sky Pilot*, "...aloud to every member of our family, and procured a copy to lend" (Bowers). The ability to share in the delight of a book and rue the moment it comes to an end is the experience of being enchanted by literature. All-consuming enchantment is a compelling use of literature according to Felski (55). Escapism is a phenomenon of reading already mentioned in this article, but the added benefits of being able to escape with a loved one into a novel written by Connor, for his fans who had limited shared experiences with family and friends, was a gift lauded in his fan letters. Like Anzaldúa's *nepantlera*, it allowed these women the opportunity to participate in and be at the edge of the worlds of their family and friends while still within their own worlds shaped by the societal constraints placed on their bodies.

Conclusion

I began this research to learn about early twentieth century women who were reading. I understood that women have not always enjoyed the levels of literacy and access to reading as a

leisure activity. One of my overarching research questions was, “who were the women that were reading in the early twentieth century?”. My archival research led me somewhere unexpected. Despite being from all over the world, several women who wrote to Connor were joined by a unifying characteristic: they described a relationship between disability or illness and reading. Women writing to Connor described how they related to the characters in his novels and hoped to be able to have the same mental fortitude of their favourite characters to overcome the toll of their physical limitations. They recognized themselves in the characters of Connor’s books and took comfort and strength from the actions and attitudes of those characters. The novels served as examples and roadmaps for how to exist and thrive through adversity. What the adversity or physical impairment was for each reader varied, and often was unclear from their writing; however, in each case, they attested to its profound impact on their lives.

Using the theoretical frameworks of Felski’s uses of literature, Sedgwick’s reparative reading, and Anzaldúa’s *nepantlera*, I examined ways women with disabilities writing to Connor read: for recognition, for identity building, for work, for escape, for community, among others. Reading was a transformative therapeutic experience for Emma Bowers. Books allowed a reader like Lucy Horton, who was bedbound for almost forty years, to explore and learn about new places, people, and methods of storytelling. Elizabeth Dickinson read through her pain to arrive in other worlds. In answer to my foundational purpose for this inquiry, I discovered that women with disabilities were reading and responding to literature in the early twentieth century at a time when others were seldom afforded the time to do so.

At the beginning of this article, I mentioned that my grandmother who passed away shortly before undertaking this work was a strong influence in my own life as a reader. While I had previously never seen a connection between her identity as an avid reader and her experience

as woman with chronic illness, my exploration of the experiences of Connor's fan letters made that connection clear. I now believe that reading was an integral way that she explored ideas and reflected on her own identity and positionality because it was a persistent method of doing so even when other ways of interacting with the world became increasingly prohibitive due to her chronic illness. The most important lasting impact of this work for me is that it deepened my understanding of a woman who I loved, admired, and will always miss.

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