

Episode 3.7 Refuse: CanLit in Ruins

November 16, 2018

Hannah (Host): [00:07](#) [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Hi, I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda*. And this is going to be a minisode the errs on the side of mini, not because I don't have a lot to say this week, but actually just because this week has been wildly hectic. As I mentioned in the last episode, and I guess in a bunch of episodes previously, I was part of the organizing committee for the Vancouver Podcast Festival. That happened our inaugural festival happened last week. It was a huge success. Seriously, it was just so much fun, really wonderful audiences, wonderful performances. I got to meet some really incredible people. I got to meet Helen Zaltsman and Martin of *The Allusionist* and *Answer Me This* fame. Huge, huge fan. Huge Fan. That was really thrilling. I also got to meet a lot of other local podcasters, which was an absolute delight. And at the events that I was running, I got to meet a bunch of listeners, which was also wonderful. It was just a really incredible event. We're gonna be doing a second one next year. So if you are sad that you missed the first Vancouver podcast festival, just plan on coming to the second one. It will also be great. The other big event is the launch of the book that I've been working on for the past year and a bit. Yeah, let's say year and a bet. And that's what I'm actually going to talk to you about this week. So happy launch week to me. And uh, let me tell you a little bit more about this book. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

Hannah (Host): [01:54](#) So yesterday, November 15th was the official pub date, publication date, for *Refuse: CanLit in Ruins*, which is a collection of essays, and poems, and dialogues, and short fiction that I co-edited with my friends and colleagues, Julie Rak and Erin Wunker. It's published with Book Hug Press, which is an amazing literary press out of Toronto. And this book was a response to a whole series of events that have happened in CanLit over the past couple of years. There are events that I have talked about in the past on the podcast, and that I don't, because I'm feeling celebratory about this book. Don't particularly want to spend a bunch of time describing. But what I'll say, sort of, at a glance, is that it was a series of events having to do with abuses of power in institutions with appropriation of voice with structural racism, with ableism, with colonialism. And that for a of us, scholars of Canadian literature, activists working within the literary production realm, writers, these events weren't some weird break with a history of CanLit but in fact, indicative of the structure of the literary industry

and the way that, for all kinds of reasons, the literary industry in Canada [sic] mirrors Canada itself, in the sense that it is very fond of a narrative of tolerance and progressiveness, but is, in fact, built on a foundation of colonialism, and thus of genocide, of ableism, and eugenics, and white supremacy, and misogyny and, and all of these things that we know are foundational to the nation formation moment in the 19th century, and that we really need to be working to critique and to dismantle rather than letting, sort of, pleasant narratives about the nation gloss over them. So in the book, Julie, and Erin, and I are trying to, sort of, do the work we do as scholars, which is historicize and contextualize the many, many voices that we've gathered in this volume. So we, you know, we have introductory material in there that's like, "okay, what is CanLit? What does it mean? What are the events that have been happening? How are we understanding them?" It's just kind of doing that context work, which is I think actually one of the best things scholars can do a lot of the time. I think we're, I think we're pretty good at context. And then in terms of the actual writers who are gathered in the collection, it's just this beautiful range of people. It includes writers and academics. So that we're bringing together, you know, scholars who work on CanLit, and then authors who, who either understand themselves as part of CanLit, or who are writing in Canada, but actually resisting the idea of CanLit quite powerfully. And that's one of the things I think is really exciting about the book, is that it, it takes these often quite divided conversations, about Canadian literature and what it is that happened between writers and between academics, and it brings them together. So it's trying to bridge those and really build a dialogue across the different communities that are concerned with this topic. So we've divided the book into three parts, and the three parts are really thinking in different ways about the word "refuse" and the concept of refusal. So part one is called "Refusal," and it's thinking about, about what Jacques Rancière calls "rupture events," these moments that sort of reveal something that has been going on the whole time. These moments that, sort of, rupture our ability to pretend we don't know what's going on. So you know, you had to think of, Idle No More as rupture event, or Black Lives Matter, or Me Too. These are all rupture events. And so the, the first section is thinking about, sort of, possible responses to rupture events and, and how that might be refusal in the sense of saying "no," refusal in the sense of, of really looking around at the status quo of, of a culture or a community and saying there's a problem with this and we really need to stop accepting the status quo. We really need to push back against it. Part two, we're sort of playing with the sense of "refuse" in the sense of "refuse" as in garbage, which

is, in part, referring to the language that writers like Alicia Elliot and Jen Sookfong Lee have been using to talk about CanLit as a dumpster fire. I mean it's popular turn of phrase. We talk about a lot of things as "dumpster fires" these days, but in particular this, this image of CanLit as being both garbage and on fire has been circulating quite a lot for the past two years. And the pieces in this section are thinking about garbage. They're thinking about, about trash in various different ways. Whether it means, you know, recognizing the sort of dumpster re foundations of Canada as a nation-state and a settler colonial project, or if it means, you know, thinking about what gets thrown out and what grows out of the the trash heap. So there's a lot of, there's a lot of playing with a sense of both the necessity of naming something as "trash" as well as the sort of fertility that comes out of trashing things. And it's in that direction of thinking about, about fertility and potential that the third part takes off. So the third part is called "Re-fuse," in the sense of, of remaking something, rebuilding something. And the pieces in here are really emphasizing that the point is not to try to gloss over or repair things as they've always been. It's that there are ways to take something that is falling apart, or that we are, are breaking down, and, and to rebuild it otherwise, to rebuild it into something that is nourishing and sustaining, community oriented, radical, and resistant. And you know, I, in this sense we're talking about the literary community here in this place that we call Canada of, though we, many of these pieces really fundamentally reject the idea that our literature should be named after the nation-state. So maybe we all need to stop talking about CanLit entirely, which is, which is great. If that's what comes out of this book, two thumbs up. But yeah, the, the tone that the book ends on is one, you know, not of saying like, "oh, CanLit can redeem itself," but of saying, "you know, we don't actually need this formation. We can build other better things." The concluding pieces by Joshua Whitehead, who's absolutely incredible two-spirit indigiqueer writer, who's I think I've talked to on the podcast before about his novel *Johnny Appleseed*, which was just absolutely incredible. Buy it and read it now. And his essay at the end of this book, which is called "Writing as Rupture: A Breakup Note to CanLit" is just stunning, as are so many of the pieces in this volume. There's so many moments in here when I go back and reread it, even as somebody who helped edit a lot of the work in here, there's still so many moments that I go through and think just what an absolutely incredible collection of voices are, are coming together in this volume. It's, it's a strange beast of a book because it really does bring together people from so many different genres, and perspectives, and positions, and identities, and voices and it's exactly that. It's exactly that kind of, you

know, polyphonic and messy nature of the book that I think really lets it expose and contribute to a really important conversation that's happening right now about, about the literature here in this place we call Canada and about, you know, recognizing violence, and structural harm, and power, and how they work, and, and trying to figure out how to do things differently. So I want to, I'm just going to read you the end of the introduction as a little sample and then you know, go, go buy the book is probably what you should do. That's probably it. So the final section of the introduction, and this was co-written by me, Julie Rak and Erin Wunker. It's called "Refusing CanLit." "What does it mean to refuse CanLit? To say no to what it stands for? To re-fuse, or fire up, a different kind of writing by different kinds of writers. What is it like to think about and write in ways that do not support what has come to be called and understood as CanLit? It is at least in part to shift the way conversations unfold. Here in this collection are contributors working in and outside the academy, scholars, and creative writers who have contributed essays, creative nonfiction, poetry, and archival practices. It is moving to see so many contributors thinking through the same issues in different ways as we all try to stay with the trouble and think about it together. Staying with the most recent iterations of trouble means, in this collection, staying with what has been unfolding publicly since 2016 and has been referred to by some as a "dumpster fire." The fire imagery is common. In November, 2016 journalist Simon Loosen called the fallout from UBC accountable a "firestorm," and in May, 2017 scholar David Gardner tweeted in response to Hal Niedzviecki's Write editorial quote, "if this is CanLit, let it burn." Jen Sookfong Lee and Alicia Elliot both wrote iconic essays in late 2017 referring to it as a "dumpster fire." How might we understand these relatively recent flames within the larger field and history of CanLit itself? The writers in this collection think through, with around, and beyond these events in CanLit. They write about the roles they have played and resisting entrenched discrimination in CanLit and about the intersectionality of the violences of CanLit itself. They imagine other ways to write and publish beyond the events since 2016 some want CanLit as we know it to come to an end. Some want reform. Some want to point out how this cultural formation never included them to begin with. Some think about how long and deep the fault lines of CanLit are, as long and as deep as the fault lines of Canada itself. Some express love for the writing and writers, they care so deeply about. Some look elsewhere and beyond the ruins of CanLit. Throughout the book, we will continue to do what scholars do most often: offer pieces of context on historical and cultural events or think about concepts like cultural appropriation. We

do this knowing that we are not the last word on what has happened to CanLit and why, and we know that not everyone who reads this book will agree with our assessment of CanLit. What is it to refuse? To say no, but also to say yes to something else, to blow up, to fire up, but also refuse garbage, waste, detritus, and at the same time "re-fuse," to reignite to think about the fuse, to fuse together, to think about what could be better as we look at CanLit in ruins, just as Bill Readings in the University in Ruins wrote about what living in the ruins could mean and the possibilities that such living could hold without corrosive national ideas at their heart to live in the ruins with others to stay with the trouble and not leave it. That requires an act of love of what writing in this part of Turtle Island could be about. It is a complicated moment to love writing. It is also an incredible moment from which to care deeply about how writing and culture work together, or not, to make all sorts of things we call communities. What a good thing to recall as Zygmunt Bauman reminds us that though the word "community" is imbued with good feelings, not all communities are healthy, thriving, supported, or strong. Can we think together without reinstating a common national ideal? The writers of *Refuse* ask us to try. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Alright. Like I said, it's going to be a short one this week. That is all you're getting from me. Check out *Refuse* if you are interested in CanLit and writers being brilliant. And speaking of people who are brilliant, let's go hear from Kaarina. [Music: "I Will" by Mitski]

Kaarina:

[15:15](#)

Hello. Welcome to Kaarina's Cozy Self Care Corner. This week I'm thinking about self care for your future self, and I have one very concrete example of ways that you can take care of your future self and make things easier on yourself in the future. I'm here to remind you to back up your computer and your work files regularly. If you're somebody who hasn't really taken the time to figure out that whole backup thing, or just doesn't, isn't super diligent about it, I want to strongly advise you to take some time, sit down with a friend, or a professional, or youtube tutorials and figure it out. Use Dropbox, use a backup drive, an external drive, use Google Drive. Use as many or whatever tools you want. As long as you know, that should something terrible happen, you're not going to lose all of that stuff that you poured your heart and soul into. Today I am feeling particularly grateful to past Kaarina, Kaarina of a mere five days ago who backed up her files. Such care, such love, such a small action with such big consequences, much like knocking a glass of water onto your keyboard. This week self care sounds like practical advice. Back up your files, back them up regularly. You will thank yourself. Trust me. Have a great weekend [Music: "I Will" by Mitski]

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

Hannah (Host): [17:14](#) As always, you can find show notes and the rest of the episodes of *Secret Feminist Agenda* on secretfeministagenda.com you can follow me on Twitter @hkpmcgregor. You can follow Kaarina @Kaarinasauruss, and you can tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda. I just went in, checked in there are no new reviews of the podcast. Picture me here, broken hearted, and then go review it somewhere. The podcast theme song is "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans off their album Chub Rub. You can download the entire album on freemusicarchive.org or follow them on Facebook. Kaarina's theme song is "I Will" by Mitski. *Secret Feminist Agenda* is recorded on the traditional and unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh first nations where I'm grateful to live and work. This has been *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Pass it on. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]