

Understanding Immigrants Through Their Reading



By Keren Dali

In libraries, they are known as landed immigrants seeking citizenship classes or career-related guides; as newcomers looking for community information; as ESL (English-as-a-Second-Language) learners; as users with special language needs; as borrowers of books in languages other than English. It seems that we know a great deal about them: their needs, their goals, their difficulties ... but do we know enough? What do we know about them as readers? For instance, do we know how they manage to keep reading for leisure, despite the transitional state of their lives, the unimaginable demand of resettlement, and the culture shock induced by the encounter with the new country?

Over the last decade, I have been researching reading in immigration, mostly focusing on Russian-speaking avid readers residing in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). I have investigated the effects of immigration on reading practices: types of reading materials and criteria for reading selection; the ways of finding out about and gaining access to new titles. I have also examined the role of leisure reading in the process of acculturation of immigrant readers in Canada: coping with culture shock and learning about a new country; improving English and re-establishing personal identity in immigration; re-evaluating national heritage and sharing the immigration experience of others.

Some of my findings suggest that immigrant readers treat books read for pleasure as friends: they expect books to speak the language they understand and to evoke a desired emotional response. This may explain why immigrant readers prefer reading for pleasure in their mother tongue. That is not to say that they necessarily choose books written by their ex-compatriots. As my research discovers, readers' choices are very international, with a substantial number of titles originally written in English. From a practical standpoint, this



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highlights how important it is for librarians to be aware of good translations of originally English-language titles into the languages of immigrant communities. From a more general standpoint, this indicates that immigrant and English-speaking readerships stand closer to one another than it may seem. The similarity of reading interests, not always obvious and frequently underestimated, should be capitalized upon and turned into a powerful instrument of cultural integration of immigrant readers into the Canadian readership.

To date, I have focused on one immigrant readership, but in the future, I hope to expand my work on reading and immigration by studying a few other immigrant groups in the GTA. The future study will examine pre-immigration library usage and reading practices, post-immigration changes in leisure reading, and the perceptions of the library held by immigrant readers. In other words, it will first investigate the origin and history of readers and then look at their current library experiences, with the ultimate goal to inform readers' advisory services in public libraries. I hope that my work will foster a better understanding of immigrant readers in the complex context of their lives.

To Read More

Keren Dali, "The Psychosocial Portrait of Immigration through the Medium of Reading': Leisure Reading and Its Role in the Lives of Russian-Speaking Immigrants in Toronto" (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 2010).

Keren Dali, "Readers' Advisory Interactions with Immigrant Readers," *New Library World* 111, no. 5/6 (2010): 213–22.

Keren Dali, "Readers' Advisory in Public Libraries and Translated Fiction," *The Reference Librarian* 51, no. 3 (2010): 175–88.

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