Abstract

Résumé

Measuring Out Life in Coffee Spoons: Canadian Literary Breakfasts

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Two bodies of secondary literature — literary criticism about the appeal of imagined food and food studies analyses of breakfast — identify the potential of this morning meal to establish an aspirational standard. For literary critics, this aspirational standard involves the norms and conventions of the narrative world being staged, which will inevitably come under pressure as the narrative develops. For food writers, this aspirational standard involves nutritional value.

Drawing from specific examples in Canadian literature, we argue that it is precisely this aspect of breakfast — as benchmark or standard of measurement — that makes it such a fruitful meal in the writer's narrative toolbox. Literary breakfasts either embody tension and conflict, or set up and therefore contain the germs of tension and conflict that will drive the plot.

Deux corpus documentaires – l'un constitué d'analyses littéraires sur l'intérêt d'imaginaires alimentaires et l'autre d'analyses en études alimentaires ayant pour objet le petit déjeuner – suggèrent que ce rituel matinal pourrait signifier un objectif souhaitable. Pour les critiques littéraires, cet objectif recense les normes et les conventions de l'univers narratif mis en scène qui évoluera au cours du récit. Pour les écrivains intéressés par l'objet alimentaire, l'objectif serait la valeur nutritionnelle.

Les auteurs se servent d'exemples issus de la littérature canadienne afin d’argumenter que le petit déjeuner – comme norme de référence ou comme mesure – est un outil narratif riche et porteur de sens. Les déjeuners « littéraires » symbolisent la tension ou le conflit ou amorcent l’intrigue du récit.
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Introduction

In “Spotty-Handed Villainesses: Problems of Female Bad Behaviour,” Margaret Atwood describes a play put on by daughter Jess and friend Heather during which they eat breakfast. Bread is buttered, tea is offered at regular intervals, but nothing in the way of events or conversation accompany or drive the meal. Atwood, in the guise of writing instructor, tells young Jess that this production is not, in fact, a play. Something else has to happen. “Any story you tell” she says “must have a conflict of some sort, and it must have suspense. In other words, something other than breakfast.” But breakfast in literature is actually itself something other than 'breakfast,' at least as Atwood seems to describe it here. We say 'seems' because by raising the problem of a theatrical production in which eating is the central activity and point of the scene, Atwood already proposes that the symbolic and narrative potential of breakfast is significant.

In this study, drawing from specific examples, we argue that breakfast scenes in Canadian literature — including some in Margaret Atwood's own work — are inherently rife with suspense and conflict. [insert figure one here: Offred’s Breakfast in Handmaid’s Tale]
There are a few exceptions admittedly. But when a rare idyllic breakfast scene does make an appearance, it is narrated in the past tense or as a dream sequence, and serves to highlight the discrepancy between dreams of breakfast and the diminished reality of the lived present tense. Shelley Boyd provides two excellent examples in her study of breakfast in Atwood's dystopian Maddaddam trilogy: Jimmy's dream of a leisurely seduction imagined over breakfast, and Toby's dream of an idealized childhood breakfast.5

More generally, we propose that literary breakfasts either embody tension and conflict, or set up and therefore contain the germs of tension and conflict that will drive the plot. Far from being a pause before the day begins, or a moment when nothing happens besides eating, literary breakfasts are foundational to the narrative unfolding of plot, the development of the work's symbolic structure. Literary breakfasts are part of the action, in other words, rather than a pause before the narrative action begins.

In making this argument we focus on a meal that is frequently overlooked in analyses of food scenes in literature, which tend to privilege the main meal of the day6 or large meal events, which offer wonderful opportunities for writers to render their characters and the socio-historical context in precise detail (Kessler, Shields), 7 particularly dramatic instances of food indulgence or restraint (Shapiro),8 or highly symbolic foods (Gilbert). 9 With the exception of Shelley Boyd's article on breakfast scenes in Atwood's Maddaddam Trilogy, that is, to date commentary on the literary fascination with food has focused on something other than breakfast.
Why breakfast? Quite simply: writers often feed breakfast to their characters, and critics have largely turned a blind eye to this, overlooking the literary depiction of the meal rather in the way that Ken Albala argues the meal has itself so often been neglected.10

Food in Literature

Before turning to close analysis of breakfast scenes, it is valuable for us to survey the growing body of commentary describing why writers feed their characters at all, identifying the major lines of argument. What prompts playwrights and authors to gather their subjects to the kitchen and dining table? Commentary on food in literature provides two primary answers: that food contributes to realism, and food events serve as useful literary framing devices.

The first response, that food serves to render narrative more realistic, can be described as “gastrorealism.” Food in fiction, Brad Kessler tells us “engages all the senses,” and “lends a concreteness, a specificity, a round tactile feel, like an apple in hand.”11 In other words, food serves as a vehicle for precision in both characterization and in socio-historical setting. Gastrorealism of course is not limited to whether or not a character eats, but also includes what a character eats and where.

But there is a distinction between the gastrorealism described by literary critic Diane McGee in which food serves the interests of literature (feeding the narrative, setting and characterization), and the gastrorealism of Brad Kessler and Simon Schama (where literary food scenes script the lore about and serve the interests of food). For example,
on the matter of Mrs. Ramsay’s “triumphant” *boeuf en daube* in Virginia Woolf’s *To The Lighthouse*, Linda Wolfe, Diane McGee, and Catherine Burgass are of the same mind: that the dish is the locus around which Woolf “demonstrate(s) the innermost workings of [her] characters' personalities” and gives shape to the pre-war Hebredian summer home in which they congregate. Food, that is, serves literary ends. Instead, in “Simmer of Love,” Simon Schama makes a plea for greater precision in Woolf — as does Kessler who consults his *Larousse Gastronomique* for culinary instruction — suggesting that the “bony” Virginia Woolf has described exactly what a *daube* is not. Yellow meats in a traditionally beef-only dish? A stew (read inordinately forgiving) that must be served at exactly the right moment? Olives, asks Kessler? Schama’s objection on culinary grounds reveals his assumption that literature can serve culinary ends.

If meals in literature serve the purpose of defining and drawing attention to character, as well as socio-historical and cultural context, food in literature can also describe and model culinary creativity. Representations of food and metaphors involving food can also serve to support or challenge the text’s formal and thematic frameworks, as in, for example, the way that the *boeuf en daube* scene in *To the Lighthouse* serves to anchor the novel’s symbolic structure, positioned as central both sequentially and symbolically.

To these two primary functions of food in literature identified by commentary to date, we propose one more. Meals serve as "units of measurement" within narrative. In the ways suggested above, they serve as benchmarks to establish particular character norms, socio-historical context, and the text's figurative and symbolic structure. They also, crucially, serve to punctuate the passing of time. But less attention has been paid to
this third function of meals in literature — as units of measurement — than to the first
two. Might this be because commentary has overlooked breakfast? After all, this is the
meal is most obviously associated with the passing of time, situated so squarely at the
beginning of the new day.

If critics have overlooked breakfast, however, writers have not. Gulliver, as Johnathan
Swift would have it, is forever losing out on breakfast, his bit of cake perpetually stolen
by predators: partridge-sized bees, aggressive birds, etc. Although he does exact revenge
on one such bird, eating him for dinner.17 Blackmailer, Mrs. Cheveley, of Oscar Wilde’s
An Ideal Husband, whose social and political machinations threaten to destroy Sir
Robert Chiltern’s career, is curiously stringent about breakfast behaviour: “In England
people actually try to be brilliant at breakfast. Only dull people are brilliant at breakfast.
And then the family skeleton is always reading family prayers.”18 Presumably, breakfast-
goers are meant to eat with quiet dignity, each to his own plate of kedgeree. P.G.
Wodehouse’s Bertie Wooster is regularly beset with “beastly thing[s]” over the breakfast
table or on a breakfast tray: hangover cures, scaly silver egg cups and Honoria Glossop.19
Not all at once thankfully. In these disparate iterations of the morning meal there is a
sense that actual and desired breakfasts are not one in the same. There is a measurable
distance between Gulliver’s cake-less, bee-fraught breakfasts and the ideal breakfast . . .
at Tiffany’s (at least as far as Holly Golightly is concerned), “with those kind men in
their nice suits, and that lovely smell of silver and alligator wallets.”20 But even Holly
struggles to find “a real life”21 equivalent of Tiffany’s and breakfasting there remains a
hoped-for but as-yet-unfulfilled dream.
But what about Canadian writers depicting Canadian breakfasts? Can one make specifically national literary claims on this matter of the morning meal? Is there a marked adherence to typically national ingredients, like Canadian bacon and maple syrup, for example? Is there consistency in practice or ideology across generations and genres of Canadian literature? There is not so much one thread that neatly stitches all these breakfasts together as there is one Canadian poet who has left us with many threads to unravel. That is to say, no one goes further than Gwendolyn MacEwen in theorizing the narrative function of breakfast in multiple, thought-provoking ways. While much is made of dinner in literary criticism, notably by Diane McGee in Writing the Meal, as “the weightiest meal of the day — not only in terms of its menu but also in the social expectations and importance that surround it,” MacEwen takes a different tack in her introduction to A Breakfast for Barbarians: “Here for you is a book of poems — or call it a menu. A breakfast menu, a breakfast being a more profound and sacramental meal than supper, because after all it’s the first meal, it’s the pact you make with yourself to see the day through. Analysts take note: if you want to reveal the inner man, root out his breakfast complexes.” Writing out breakfast complexes and complex breakfasts is what MacEwen does. It is the opening poem of her first major poetry collection, The Rising Fire and the leitmotif of A Breakfast for Barbarians. Such a preoccupation has not gone unnoticed by other Canadian poets, like George Elliott Clarke, for instance, who writes “Breakfast in Kingston” after — as in dedicated to and in the style of — Gwendolyn MacEwen. Breakfast for MacEwen is a unit of measurement: “place one hand before the sun and make it smaller, / Hold the spoon in your hand up to the sky / And marvel at its relative size; comfort yourself / With the measures of a momentary breakfast table.” There is a certain degree of comfort to be found in such
limits in the face of our immeasurable, insatiable appetites. But breakfast is as much about danger as it is about comfort. “We are dangerous at breakfast,” writes McEwen in “The Peanut Butter Sandwich,” “At breakfast we investigate the reasons for our myths.”

Sometimes these are found wanting, as when in the myth of a “kanadian” breakfast in “The Last Breakfast,” the speaker “realiz[es] / [his/her] appetite is jaded and the plate is blue and food has become an anathema.” The bacon it seems “has nothing to say for itself.”

MacEwen has described poetry as “an introduction to something else,” as are her poetic breakfasts: a device through which author and reader alike consider big questions through smallish spoons and fried eggs.

Other, more literal forms of measurement occur in Fred Wah’s Diamond Grill. Old Man Hansen’s daily breakfast order at the Diamond Grill’s 6:00am opening — “Stack a hot! Side a Sausage” — signals the start of cook Shu’s workday: “That’s the switch, the buzz. Now the day has measure.”

For many writers breakfast also functions as an efficient means of evoking and/or contesting social norms — for instance, where one is expected to eat breakfast, when, what’s on the “official” menu and who is doing the eating. Consequently, in this study, we focus on breakfast as establishing a standard against which to measure the narrative in which it contains — either embodying the conflicts that will be developed, or establishing norms that will be challenged through the narrative’s central conflict.

We see this study as complementary to Boyd’s close analysis of the utopian and dystopian, or “ustopian,” elements of breakfast in Atwood’s trilogy. Boyd intimates this
notion of breakfast as a unit of measurement when she describes breakfast as a "culinary remnant from the human past" — against which readers measure the state of things in Atwood’s utopian world.\textsuperscript{31} For Boyd, as well as for Atwood, breakfast functions as a “serving of daily expectations.”\textsuperscript{32} And for Boyd, breakfasts serve as an indicator of the characters’ gradual adaptation to their new reality, with its menus shifting from poor replication of iconic breakfasts past with “coffee” brewed from twigs and other available materials and “ham” derived from the genetically modified pigoon, to ones taking advantage of available vegetation (kudzu) and avoiding the one available protein source (pigoon) that is the flesh of the humans and the Crakers’s new ally in the war against the dreaded Painballers.

\textbf{The Meaning of Breakfast}

In addition to a body of commentary looking at literary fare, there is a body of commentary devoted to the evolution and symbolic potential of breakfast itself. Three insights emerge from this body of food studies commentary.

First, breakfast has long been a matter of prescription — subject to the opinions and authority of religious figures, medical practitioners, dieticians, politicians and/or the occasional quacks and profit seekers — but the objective of that prescription has shifted over time. When twentieth-century wartime rations came into effect in Canada, for example, limits were placed on consumption of wheat and meat and other breakfast staples in the name of victory. “Canadians,” writes historian Ian Mosby “were
bombardeed with messages linking their personal food consumption with the overall success of the war effort” with “Slogans like ‘Food Is a Weapon of War’ and ‘Food Will Win the War’.” From international relations to domestic politics and government ministries (Health Canada), dietitians (Dietitians of Canada) have attached breakfast to a child’s academic performance, a healthy dose of the former believed to positively affect the latter. Advice and admonition as to what to eat and/or what not to eat and when to eat it have evolved over time and across regions and cultures. But consistently at stake have been the physical, intellectual and moral welfare of parishioners, subjects and citizens. High stakes indeed for a fried egg.

The second insight emerging from food studies literature is that the form and function of breakfast has been shaped by society's work culture. While seventeenth-century physicians made “vague concessions” to labourers need for a morning meal, from the nineteenth century, work schedules affected both the time in which this meal was to be eaten and the kinds of food consumed. As Abigail Carroll writes in her account of the invention of American meals, breakfast — quickly prepared and eaten — was seen by the profit minded “as a vehicle of efficiency and productivity.”

The third insight emerging from food studies commentary is that this meal and its accoutrements are an indicator of one’s access to “the good life.” There has long been a clear class distinction between those who eat meat and eggs at breakfast and those who eat porridge or stale bread and ale. Also, the more time one has to “languish over a newspaper and a sweet roll,” or even to push back the hour at which breakfast is eaten until it collides with the second meal of the day to form brunch, is a sign of leisure, or at
least the pursuit and performance of it. Further, ever-changing symbols of the good life — from an architectural standpoint — have included breakfast rooms, butler’s pantries and breakfast nooks.

**Aspirational Breakfasts**

Taken together, these two bodies of secondary literature — commentary about food in literature and food studies analyses of breakfast — identify the potential of breakfast to establish an aspirational standard. For literary critics, this aspirational standard involves the norms and conventions of the narrative world being staged, norms and standards that will inevitably come under pressure as the narrative develops. For food writers, this aspirational standard involves nutritional value.

It is precisely this aspect of breakfast — as benchmark or standard of measurement — that makes it such a fruitful meal in the writer's narrative toolbox. With its potential for being an indicator of "the good life," containing the "right" nutritional fuel for a healthy life, or potentially signalling a new phase or direction in charting the day's path towards a better life, the connotations of breakfast itself constitute a rich source of drama for the writer.

1. Breakfast as indicator of the good life

In Phyllis Brett Young’s bestselling novel *The Torontonians*, the standards by which protagonist Karen Whitney and husband Rick measure their “arrival” come in the form
of a thick, soft, sea-green Chinese carpet rather than in their choice of a breakfast food. For them, this carpet represents, “the final touch, the visible proof of success” the Whitneys had longed for when they were barely scraping by. Nevertheless, it is through breakfast or, more specifically, over a cup of coffee in the well-appointed, sunlit breakfast-room with golden nasturtiums decorating the table that writer Phyllis Brett Young establishes Karen’s actual sense of her place in the world. The fabled carpet is set to arrive later that morning but Karen is no longer sure what it means to have “arrived”: “where and why and what in hell does it do for us?,” she asks herself. Karen craves the “simple life and uncomplicated existence” of a milkman, which, as her husband points out, is not as free of complication and dissatisfaction as she imagines. Much of the novel’s narrative arc takes its shape from its pithy and somewhat surprising opening line: “Early morning sunlight warm against the thin, smooth contour of one cheek, Karen sat in the breakfast-room and thought about suicide.” This novel boasts some illuminating ladies’ luncheons, summer barbecues and winter cocktail parties where the proponents of “gracious” living and the sites in which they operate are duly described, but Brett Young chooses breakfast to set the ball rolling.

If Brett Young described the aspirational standard of breakfast in Anglo Toronto, then Michel Tremblay touches on its similar function not only in the Quebec from which he writes, but across the country. Michel Tremblay juxtaposes different notions of “the good life” through contrasting breakfast scenes in his novel, Crossing the Continent. He opens with a poignant portrait of family life in Sainte-Maria-de-Saskatchewan, a rural village in western Canada: grandparents and their three grandchildren, whose mutual affection and attachment are demonstrated through their warm exchanges around the
breakfast table. The girls are late for school, however, and their guardians late for their workday. Like the meal, this idyllic arrangement is destined to be short-lived. The girls’ mother, Maria, the seeming antithesis of the namesake village and all it stands for, has at long last sent for them. Rhéauna is to go first. She is to cross the country by train and join her mother in Montreal. Along the way, she will stay with three aunts, partaking in a range of alimentary offerings: from the pitiable breakfast in Regina to the opulent *petit déjeuner* at the Chateau Laurier in Ottawa. Despite the elegance of a breakfast in bed at the Chateau Laurier — one definition of the good life on offer here — Rhéauna finds nowhere the pleasure of those childhood family meals. Further, because the opulence of that Ottawa breakfast is funded by the morally questionable lifestyle of Rhéauna’s aunt, who seems to work as a paid escort, Tremblay invites his readers to assess what constitutes a ‘good’ life.

A similar comparison between different notions of ‘the good life’ through the lens of breakfast scenes emerges from Alice Munro’s short story "Half a Grapefruit." The story opens with a classroom scene, as the young teacher takes up the responsibilities of prescribing correct nutrition, serving to further the agenda heralded by the Canadian government’s new food guide. If the teacher perceives breakfast as a standard of measurement for the children’s nutritional wellbeing, however, the story’s narrator, herself a student in that classroom, understands instead that it has the potential to be an indicator of her social standing and access to 'the good life.' The narrator serves up two very different breakfast scenes for her readers. The first involves what she, Rose, typically eats. As well as communicating the routine that is so much part of the breakfast
ritual, Rose nevertheless communicates a sense of promise inherent in this meal of new beginnings. Her description of the promise of the first bowl of Puffed Rice speaks to another definition of the good life — not only of wealth and luxury, but one of simple pleasures.

The real breakfasts she eats are similar to the ones eaten by the country children, and some are indeed full of promise. Those of us from a country marked by harsh winters will recognize the wonder of summer mornings: “For breakfast they too had tea and porridge. Puffed Rice in the summertime. The first morning the Puffed Rice, light as pollen, came spilling into the bowl, was as festive, as encouraging a time as the first day walking on the hard road without rubbers or the first day the door could be left open in the lovely, brief time between frost and flies.”

But the breakfast she describes to her teacher and her classmates is full of daring rather than promise. Rose comes from West Hanratty, and although she’s a country girl she sits beside the children from town, "to attach herself to those waffle- eating coffee-drinking aloof and knowledgeable possessors of breakfast nooks." When asked about breakfast she answers "boldly," “half a grapefruit.” "Nobody else had thought of it. ...Rose was pleased with herself for thinking of the grapefruit and with the way she had said it, in so bold, yet natural, a voice." But she would soon come to regret her presumption when walking home across the bridge a few days later as voice is called out to her, taunted her for being too big for her boots: "Half a grapefruit." The story is part of the collection entitled *Who Do You Think You Are?* The title is different for the
American edition called *The Beggar Maid*. Perhaps editors were unsure whether American audiences would understand the connotations of that phrase, which for Canadians, calls someone out for their presumptuousness: just *who* do you think you are?

2. Breakfast as fuelling journey to a healthy life.

Canadian schoolteachers, such as the one in Munro’s short story, encourage their students to eat a good breakfast. But writers tell us that they have a very rigid and limited sense of what a good breakfast means. In Alice Munro’s story, set in mid-20th-century, this is based on Canada’s food rules. Little has changed later in the century when a young Kim Thuy, newly emigrated from Vietnam, finds herself questioned by her young schoolteacher in Grandby Québec.

When Marie-France, my teacher in Granby, asked me to describe my breakfast, I told her: soup, vermicelli, pork. She asked me again, more than once, miming waking up, rubbing her eyes and stretching. But my reply was the same, with a slight variation: rice instead of vermicelli. The other Vietnamese children gave similar descriptions. She called home then to check the accuracy of our answers with our parents. As time went on, we no longer started our day with soup and rice. To this day, I haven’t found a substitute. So it’s very rare that I have breakfast.49
For her teacher, soup and noodles are not part of the story of renewal, of promise, of energy. For Thuy, herself starting afresh in a new country, the breakfast she really savours at home as a child, just like the breakfasts she cannot bring herself to eat comfortably as an adult, become part of her own story of cultural integration. [insert figure three here: Kim Thuy’s Breakfast] [insert figure four here: Kim Thuy’s Breakfast]

The classroom is clearly a popular space with writers. This is a space in which normalizing lessons on what is good or good for you are dispensed, against which writers test the lived realities of their fictional or non-fictional pupils. Children in Dosolina Cotroneo’s “The Birth and Rebirth of Biscotti,” for example, know a good breakfast when they eat one: a thermos of hot milk, sweetened with sugar, strengthened with a shot or two of espresso and served with biscotti for dipping. Exchanging food on school grounds is out of the question. Cotroneo explains, “we were wise beyond our years not to forego our delicacy for a store-bought cookie and a can of no-name pop.”

Cotroneo’s is a slightly different tale of acculturation than Thuy’s.

Rather than describing the narrator’s adaptation to Canadian foodways, Cotroneo describes the ways in which Canadians and their foodways have adapted. She writes of a gradual widening of public tastes. Sneering juveniles transform into hipster-cosmopolites, lining up in countless coffee shops, ordering her childhood breakfast in carefully pronounced Italian.

3. Breakfast as signalling the beginning of a new and possibly better life
Commentary on the history of breakfast repeatedly points to its being subject to prescription. Tracking these prescriptions, tells a story of our evolving notions of health and productivity. They also reveal our persistent sense of breakfast as the occasion around which change can take place. Morning as the agent of possibility. Joe Milk’s poem, “Transcendence in the Breakfast Nook” tucked away in the “cracked dawns” chapter of Margaret Atwood’s *The CanLit Foodbook*, speaks to this sense of promise that accompanies the rising sun of a new day. “As Winter into Spring so I / From white grub into butterfly / This transformation comes my way / At the beginning of the day.”

Milk uses the ingredients, the materials of the morning meal to then measure the fortunes of her/his speaker.

But the sliced orange on the plate

May foretell another fate.

Does the paltry blob of jam

Contradict the great I AM?

Like the coffee in the cup

Soon I will be all used up.⁵²

Like many Canadian literary breakfasts, then, this one tells of promise thwarted. The speaker measures out life with coffee cups and, unlike T.S. Eliot's Alfred Prufrock who prefers spoons and for whom “there will be time,” finds s/he has come up short. As an
aside, the scant biographical details concerning Milk provided at the end of *The CanLit Foodbook* — that Joe Milk died young — are cause for some speculation. Was Milk prophetic? Milk, like the coffee, too soon used up? Or is this a darkly playful little joke for us to chew on, played by Jay MacPherson or by Margaret Atwood in the guise of Jay MacPherson.53

Occasionally, however, a literary breakfast launches a character in an entirely new direction, as in Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*. The meal that actually signals the launch of Naoe's new life is one shared with her new friend Tengu, over a meal in a Chinese restaurant, in the middle of the night, itself a memorable literary meal scene. But the story that begins their unusual and close relationship, is one told by Tengu about a watershed childhood breakfast. They are not eating breakfast together, but rather remembering one as they sit together in a bathtub. As Tengu remembers it, when describing it to his new friend Naoe in *Chorus of Mushrooms*, there was “coffee perking on the gas stove all hot and brown smelling and the blue eggs cracked and the yolks so yellow bolstered up and scrambled...I ate two pieces of toast and eggs with ketchup and a cup of coffee because dad was never one for making a fuss about age and what I could and couldn't do so long as it was legal.”54 But somehow this wonderful preparation for the new school day turn sour once he gets to school. When asked his name he says, "Sun"; but his teacher explains to him that “son” is not a name tool but his relationship to his father. "The whole class room burst out laughing...Even the teacher was laughing."55 Then "everything swung around and the words and names all swirling and bang, they smacked into place so that something I have known and trusted was really a
solid wall that I could run into and I puked the two cups of coffee and breakfast all over the teacher’s shoes.”

While Tengu’s breakfast is the start of a disastrous day at kindergarten, the intimacy of the telling that story successfully initiates an unlikely friendship between a middle-aged Canadian truck driver and a Japanese grandmother, and one in which the communication seems to take place in Japanese. For Naoe, who has spent most of her time in Canada anchored to a rocking chair in her daughter’s house, isolated because of her refusal to speak in the language spoken by the household, this friendship is the beginning of her journey towards exuberant independence. It may only be a breakfast of memory, but its narrative thrust is powerful indeed.

Conclusion

Writes Atwood, “if we are going to sit still for two or three hours in a theatre, or wade through two or three hundred pages of a book, we certainly expect something more than breakfast.” But as our selection of Canadian literary breakfast scenes illustrate, breakfast is far from a meal in which nothing happens. Breakfast does something for writers that lunch and dinner do not. “It may be the eggs,” proposes Atwood in The CanLit Foodbook. The egg certainly embodies the possibility of a new birth, its deep yellow yolk reflecting the rising sun of a new day. This meal is full of promise, set as it is at the beginning of the day. It is a useful device, not only as a means of narrating the
passing of time but also in setting up the distance between characters’ expectations and the realities of their social situations, their spiritual well-being — all this with the aid of a certain table setting, the presence or not of a grapefruit spoon, and the amount of coffee left in the cup. Much depends on breakfast, it seems.

[insert figure five here: morning egg]

Biography

Alexia Moyer was an FQRSC Postdoctoral Fellow with McGill’s Institute for the Study of Canada and McGill’s Department of English from June 2013 – October 2016. She holds a Ph.D. in études anglaises from Université de Montréal. In November of 2016, she formed editing collective redline-lignerouge with a team of literary scholars and continues to work as an editor and translator in the Montreal area. She is a member of the Editors’ Association of Canada.


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Linda Wolfe, The Literary Gourmet, xxii.


Ibid, 40.

McGee, Writing the Meal, 3.


Ibid. 35.

Ibid. 35.

Ibid. 35.


Ibid, 162.

38 Ibid, 46.
41 Ibid, 10.
42 Ibid, 10.
43 Ibid, 7.
46 Ibid, 40-1.
48 Ibid, 41.
52 Ibid, 23.
53 We thank Mark Abley for his insight into the origins of the poem, pointing out the similarities between the names Joe Milk and Jay MacPherson: the first name is J + a long vowel; the second name is M + a short vowel + C/K (personal communication 4 August 2016).
55 Ibid, 195.
56 Ibid, 195-6
58 Margaret Atwood, The CanLit Foodbook, 3.