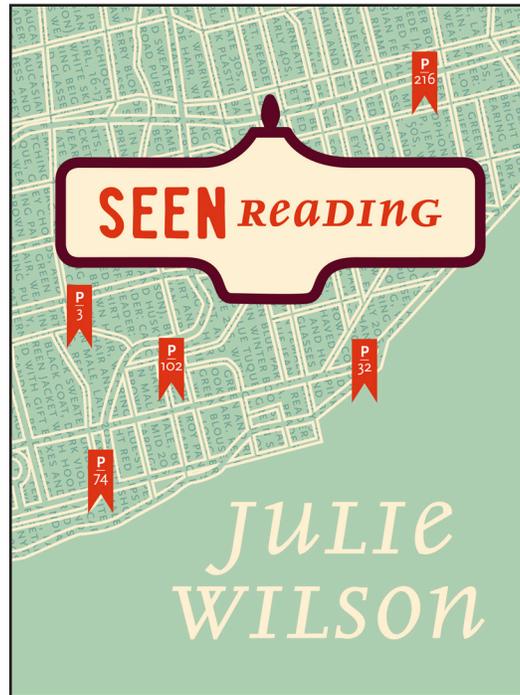




READING GUIDE



Seen Reading Julie Wilson

About the book:

Seen Reading is the exciting debut collection of microfictions from Canada's pre-eminent literary voyeur, Julie Wilson. Based on the beloved online movement of the same name, *Seen Reading* collects more than a hundred stories inspired by sightings of people reading on Toronto transit, each reader re-invented in a poetic piece of short fiction. Tender, poignant, and fun, *Seen Reading* offers readers an inspired fictional map while charting an urban centre's cultural commitment to books and literature.

"I spy with my little eye, something that is utterly delightful. Take a peek at Julie Wilson's Seen Reading. There are treasures to be found within."—Ami McKay

"Beneath the surface of Julie Wilson's energy, biting wit, and quirkiness lays intelligence and insight—a fresh observer to the dynamic ways in which we communicate."

—Anthony de Sa

About the author:

Julie Wilson is The Book Madam, a self-professed “professional publishing fan” living and working in Toronto. She’s the past Online Marketing Manager for House of Anansi Press and recent host of the CBC Book Club. She thinks reading looks good on you. Follow Julie on Twitter: [@BookMadam](#) and [@SeenReading](#). Post your own reader sightings using the hashtag [#seenreading](#).

Julie’s website: www.seenreading.com



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Seeing People Reading and *Seen Reading*: A Conversation with Julie Wilson

Robyn Read (editor of *Seen Reading*): Julie, what is the difference between seeing people reading and *Seen Reading*?

Julie Wilson: At its simplest, I would suggest that one is an activity—seeing people read—that a person might pursue if naturally inclined toward curiosity or voyeurism. The other, *Seen Reading*, is a collected, curated, and distilled archive of my own sightings of readers, largely on public transit, gathered over 4-5 years, accompanied by close to 1000 original microfictions. Just as I could (or, at least, should) never conclude anything absolute about a reader simply based on appearance, each fiction is merely a speculation of their past, present, or future. Sparked by the visual cues of their physical appearance, the book they are reading, and some crucial, yet rather unplaceable element, I pursue the impulse to consider who they might be. I write a flash fiction that can be read in the same amount of time it would presumably take the reader to scan the paragraph they were on when I happened to first see them. In this sense, each story is almost in progress rather than having a definitive sense of a beginning, middle, or end. I’m drawn to passages and sentences that resonate for

reasons I may not even be able to articulate, but which hold me suspended for just a moment longer. That experience is akin to a surprise encounter and is not unlike meeting a reader “in the wild” and realizing that they’re going to be my next sighting. For me, it’s a cyclical process, a constant call and response.

RR: For those of us just curious (and awake) enough on public transit, we might spy a person’s shoes, or hairdo, and imagine the association: a person is wearing those boots because they go work here; someone whose hair looks like that had this happen to them this morning. Of course, such speculations are most often fictions. Can you please walk us through the process of writing a *Seen Reading* suite, from conjecture to composition?

JW: *Seen Reading* departs from an anthropological study of the reader-at-large into the realm of fiction; but, as all writers will confirm or deny (or neither confirm nor deny), there’s a lot of the writer in the telling—in *Seen Reading*, there’s a lot of my own person. In other words, while *Seen Reading* is far from autobiographical, the fiction is nevertheless the result of my own synapses firing in reaction to a detail that’s familiar to me. That detail is not always physical or tangible, and is sometimes just a sensation that incites the What if? It’s not a matter of knowing the book the person is reading exhaustively or thinking I might conclude something about the reader; anything I even begin to suspect is either far from the truth or, conversely, a truth less intriguing than fiction. The fictional suites gathered in the book were born in the rush hours of an urban city centre on streetcars, subways, and buses often packed shoulder-to-shoulder with commuters. There’s a loneliness in those spaces—we commuters barely acknowledge one another—but for me that loneliness is countered by seeing someone reading. I delight in knowing that a reader doesn’t know what awaits them on the next page; meanwhile, while most often I can’t read the text the person is reading, the reader is in full view. Most likely, a whole story will never be shared between two people who come to find themselves side-by-side en route. Transient would be a way of describing the relationship between reader and literary voyeur: or impermanent, ephemeral, fugitive. The chapter entitled “For Rent: White Wedding” responds to the brevity of the exchange, each story only one sentence long. I should also note that each chapter’s title is a one-sentence story; so the Table of Contents is its own collection of microfictions!

RR: Do you think everyone reading in public wants to be seen reading? One might choose to wear certain clothing, bare a brand, or carry a gadget based on its cultural clout. Is this relevant to publicizing what we read? Do people read to be seen?

JW: I have a lot of fun ideas about how we might create safe, formalized spaces in which readers can encounter one another: flash mobs—large, seemingly random and unorchestrated gatherings of like-kindred people in public venues—or bars and restaurants that set aside quiet reading times, so readers can identify as readers “on purpose” as opposed to convenience: the reader who carries a book so that they’re not bothered while commuting, or bored while waiting. I’d love for readers to be able to yell out to their family, “I’m going to read!” as if going to the gym, heading to a place that formally accommodates readers, even if the activity of reading isn’t its primary business or service. As to whether or not a person wants to be seen reading, I would expect that most readers are on some level very conscious of the books they choose to read in public; there’s something exhibitionist in the performance of reading in public, although few of us would confess to an awareness of that

performance. I'll be quick to add that my skills as a voyeur are finely tuned and have shaped my overall ethic and approach to writing itself, something I pass along in my workshops. For instance, I taught a high school creative writing workshop at Marc Garneau Collegiate Institute about how liberating it can be when you let inspiration find you: chance reader sightings, chance book sightings, these are all entry points for a writer. It's how each writer chooses to respond to such stimuli that distinguishes their voice, so we also talk about pride in craft. I compare "How To be A Literary Voyeur" to a live video game, spotting readers and gathering the "gems" (book title, etc.) in order to reach the next level (writing a response). I always stress a number of points before they head out into the wild, tips to make sure that they remain under the radar.

RR: What would those be? I've been caught reading over someone's shoulder before; there's nothing worse than a backseat reader. How did you negotiate the invasion of a stranger's privacy as necessary territory to tread for your venture?

JW: Rules of engagement for the literary voyeur:

1. Never intrude upon someone's space in an obvious or offensive manner.
2. Prioritize sightings that cross your path; never, ever chase a sighting, you'll look desperate and attract attention for good reason. Keep calm and carry on.
3. Don't start the exercise with a forced meeting between reader and voyeur. Part of the thrill of the exercise lives in the random encounter, the surprise of someone sitting down beside you, and, *c'est voila*, you barely need to lift a finger. And not unlike writing, a large part of the joy stems from not knowing what comes next. The good news is reading is alive and well. There will never be a shortage of sightings!

RR: One might call these texts microfiction. Or postcard fiction. Or prose poetry. Is there one generic classification that seems most suitable to you, or with which you are most comfortable?

JW: Teeny-weeny stories? Of them all, microfiction sits best with me. I adore postcard fiction, but have a hard time envisioning the fiction on anything other than a postcard. I also like the term flash fiction. I alluded to it earlier in this interview: there's a pop flash just before I realize the sighting is going to develop a fictional snapshot.

RR: Before there was *Seen Reading* (Calgary: Freehand Books, Spring 2012, print; Toronto: HarperCollins Canada, Spring 2012, eBook) there was your Seen Reading online project. It seems that in this day and age there is a distinguished relevance, and potential for congruous co-existence, between print and digital publications. Your book provides a prologue and context for the project. Can you speak about the other distinct features of the book as anthology of the Seen Reading movement?

JW: I sometimes catch myself referring to *Seen Reading* (the book) as a pamphlet for Seen Reading (the online movement). For loyal fans of the website, this book is a collector's item, a commemorative keepsake. Then, there will be those who read the book who are new to the notion

of a literary voyeurism movement and the potential for a blog to be a fully realized artistic venture. I've always believed Seen Reading's online entity to be a creative force unto itself and don't subscribe to the notion that a book isn't a book unless it's bound paper. At the same time, I believe that the paper on which we print our stories is as precious as the stories themselves; I cherish events where authors can peddle their own wares out of a backpack; and I don't leave the house without both my iPhone and a book-on-paper. I love paper; so, as much as I'm willing to consume my text in any format, print or digital, I have to pinch myself that this germ of an idea has been deemed worthy of physical space on literal bookshelves. Not only that, but I look forward to the potential, serendipitous encounter I might have on the subway: seeing someone reading a copy of *Seen Reading*. The book has been shaped by the guiding hand—of you, my editor—and there's not one story in the collection that hasn't evolved in some way, be it a word, punctuation, clarification, while some cases required a full rewrite. You'll recall, when my agent, Samantha Haywood, took on the manuscript, she described the collection as "embryonic." She knew there was life, but the sonogram didn't offer much clarity. Shall I extend the metaphor? It was the kind of book that required a village to rear it; and now, it's like one of those babies with old souls just behind their big eyes, and you're all, "Oh, you've seen things." Then there's the design of a writer's work; there are no words to express my appreciation when I think about the level of care, joy, and understanding Natalie Olsen brought to making the book an art object. I joke that everyone thinks their baby is beautiful, but seriously, this a good-looking book. As a book that identifies the books that inspired the microfictions, it glosses the cycle of reading and writing and reading and writing and so on. It's an ambassador for a miraculous industry.

RR: Within the book, the fictions face (on the opposing page) a description of the reader and bibliographic information. Can you walk us through your thoughts concerning the significance of this layout?

JW: As you know, when we went into the substantive edit, there was the question of what would remain from the original sightings and what we could part with. And I felt strongly that including a literal intersection—the geographical points at which a sighting took place—would alienate anyone living outside of Toronto. Also, my project is about happenstance. There is no rhyme or reason. What of the reader? I can confirm that I thought about submitting, or pitching the idea for, an illustrated edition. But ultimately, while it seemed important to make note of the physical characteristics that provide the statistics of each sighting, it became apparent that a visual depiction would interrupt the reader's ability to imagine the characters and their potential be fluid and fictional. Instead, data about each reader exists on its own page, surrounded by a lot of white space, provoking the reader to speculate any number of other details.

RR: You have quite the entourage now. Who's in your murder of literary voyeurs? How (and where) do they report on who's been seen reading and (respectively) what books have been seen being read?

JW: The Literary Voyeurs are a loose (and growing) collective of individuals who report their Seen Reading sightings via Twitter using the hashtag #seenreading. Anyone can play. The formula is simple: [where] + [what the book is] + [who the book is by, along with @writer or @publisher mention if you know them] + [#seenreading hashtag]. You've only got the 140 characters, so you'll

have to be strict in edits; but the payoff is huge. You can't know how much joy a writer gets upon learning that some nameless person is out there reading his or her book. I mean, really think about how mind-blowing this is for the writer: what are the chances that you're going to encounter your book in the wild? Then, one day, you're cruising #seenreading, and—WAHOO!—a stranger has taken the time to tap out a tweet, and there it is: proof your work has been seen. High fives all around. Plus, everyone needs a cookie now and then. It's hard work living your dreams.

Calgary, Alberta. March 8, 2012.

Robyn Read was the editor of Seen Reading (Calgary: Freehand Books, Spring 2012, print), and Acquiring Editor for Freehand Books from 2009-2011.