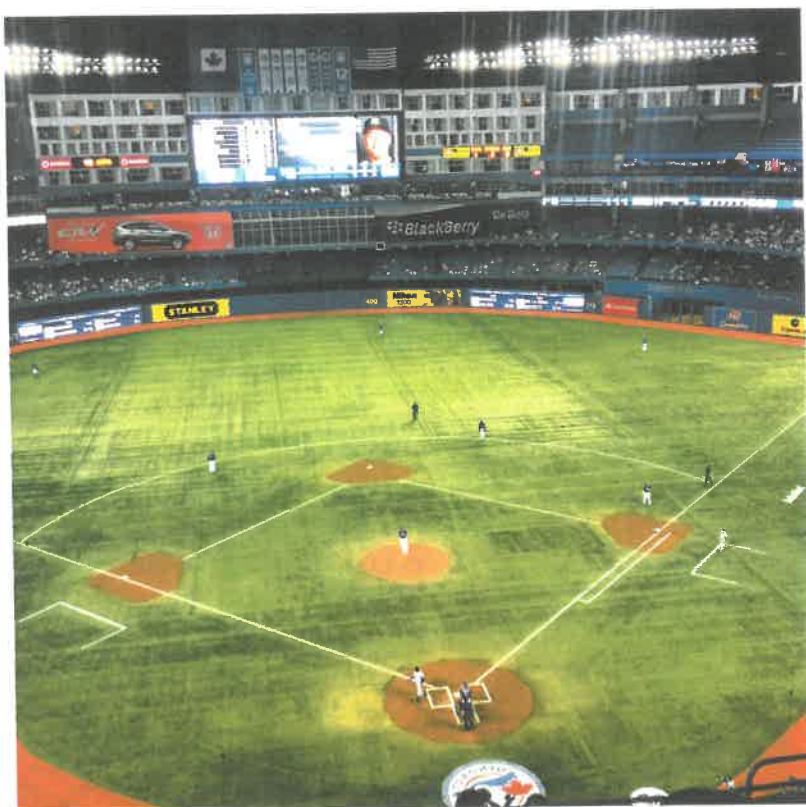


Will Ferguson

**AMERICA IS SEXY**

*Will Ferguson is a Canadian writer and humorist who has published several books on Canadian history and society such as *Beauty Tips from Moose Jaw* (2004) and *Why I Hate Canadians* (1997).*



*New York Yankees vs. Toronto Blue Jays*

**PRE-READING**

Below you will find a table of cities and towns in Canada and the USA.

- ✦ Find these places on Google Maps at [www.maps.google.com](http://www.maps.google.com), and explore the places with Google Street View where you can.
- ✦ Based on what you see from your bird's-eye perspective and from street level, describe each of the cities and towns with two adjectives.
- ✦ Compare your adjectives to your neighbour's, and sum up briefly in class.

| CANADA                     | THE USA           |
|----------------------------|-------------------|
| Fort Vermilion, Alberta    | Chicago, Illinois |
| Toronto, Ontario           | Calais, Maine     |
| St. Andrews, New Brunswick | Bangor, Maine     |
| St. Stephen, New Brunswick | Detroit, Michigan |
| Windsor, Ontario           |                   |

**WHILE READING**

- ✦ Take notes on the following questions while you read.
  - How is the Canadian North characterised? Find key words in the text to support your answer.
  - How is the USA characterised? Find key words in the text to support your answer.
  - What are some of the major differences between Canada and the USA according to the text?
  - Does the author's description of these places match the adjectives you came up with in class? Why/why not?

steep (vb) – gennembløde  
 forlorn (adj) – ene og forladt, øde  
 warped (adj) – forvrænget  
 curve (subst) – bue  
 net-toss (subst) – (her) rækkvidde  
 'skyrocket (vb) – ryge i vejret  
 'heavenward (adv) – mod himmelen  
 dim (adj) – svag  
 'glimmering (subst) – lyaglimt  
 awe (subst) – ærefrygt  
 unresponsive (adj) – passiv  
 'fallout (subst) – nedfald  
 fringe (subst) – udkant  
 lag (subst) – forsinkelser  
 'current (adj) – aktuel  
 de'ceptive (adj) – bedragerisk  
 spine (subst) – ryggrad  
 'boundary (subst) – grænse  
 'tawdry (adj) – tarvelig  
 'huddle (vb) – krybe sammen  
 'trinket (subst) – nipsgenstand  
 ex'change rate (subst) – vekselkurs  
 rut (subst) – hjulspor  
 'outpost (subst) – yderpost

## America Is Sexy

I can see America from my bedroom window.

It lies across the St. Croix River, steeped in shadows, a wooded bank with a few forlorn points of light. It is a dark land, America. Our Doppelganger; Canada reflected through the fun-house mirror, warped and wild, colossal.

Nothing from my window suggests this.

I was born in the northern Alberta town of Fort Vermilion (or, as my brothers and I insisted on calling it, "Fort Vermin"). We were closer to the Arctic Circle than the American border. The rest of Canada lay south, past the curve of the horizon. Fort Vermilion, far beyond the net-toss of television signals, existed in a vacuum. Toronto and Chicago were equally unreal and foreign. It was not until the Anik satellites of the 1970s were skyrocketed heavenward that we were finally able to pick up the dim glimmerings of even the CBC. I remember watching *Hymn Sing* with unblinking awe.

Living in the north was like living in a colony, a northern colony of a distant, unresponsive land called Canada. Only later did I learn that mine was not a typical Canadian childhood. In the south, living within the media fallout of American pop culture, other Canadians – real Canadians – were growing up under a radioactive cloud of Americana. Real Canadians lived on the fringes of the American Empire; we in the north lived on the fringe of Nothingness.

I haven't been home for many years, but I understand that things have changed. Satellite dishes are now pointed low along the horizon, almost vertical as they strain to catch signals from the south. There is no longer the ten-year time lag between current pop culture and northern tastes, and a few tourists have even begun to stumble in, looking around with outsiders' eyes.

I didn't leave the North, I escaped. And eventually, I ended up here in St. Andrews, New Brunswick, with just a river separating me from that Great Carnival, America.

The St. Croix is a deceptively narrow river, yet down its spine runs both an international boundary and a time zone. On one side, the province of New Brunswick. On the other side, the state of Maine. The provincial vs. the stately. This is where the American Dream ends and the Canadian Dream begins.

Further upriver on the Canadian side is the town of St. Stephen, home of the world's first chocolate bar and sister city to Calais, Maine. Calais and St. Stephen are mirror reflections, with only a short bridge between the two.

Like St. Stephen, Calais is a goodhearted but tawdry little place. It lies huddled along the border, selling trinkets and cheap gas, living and dying on the Canadian exchange rate. After Calais there is two hours of forest along the Airline Road, two hours of ruts and claustrophobic woods, before you get to the next outpost of civilization – if Bangor can be considered civilization.

You can use Canadian money anywhere in Calais and in most places in Bangor. Canadian flags fly over Wal-Mart and McDonald's, the International Hotel offers special discounts to Canadians, and Bangor holds an annual Canadian Appreciation Days, with a flurry of maple leaves and signs declaring *Welcome Canadians! To Your Home Away from Home!* Loonies and twonies and Queen Elizabeth's formaldehyde hair are everywhere in evidence, and – unfettered by our own fetish with language – the American Border Patrol has even put up a bilingual welcome sign: *Bienvenue aux États-Unis. Toutes les voitures doivent arrêter pour l'inspection.*

The Americans, to their credit, are not dismayed by any of this. There is no talk of cultural encroachment or Canadian colonialism, no intellectual nationalists debating the issue, no outraged letters to the editor. Why? Because Americans have the ability to separate commerce from culture. Canadians do not.

On the Canadian side of the Great Divide, meanwhile, the town of St. Stephen has no fewer than four flags over its wharf-side park: the Canadian flag, the American flag, the New Brunswick provincial flag and – for good measure – the Union Jack. Calais and St. Stephen are so close you could throw a stone from one to the other. Marriages and friendships straddle the line and fire-trucks answer calls on either side. During the war of 1812, nervous British officials sent a shipment of gunpowder to St. Stephen for defence against American marauders. It wasn't necessary. The two towns simply agreed not to fight, and the good people of St. Stephen later *gave* their gunpowder to the Americans in Calais to help them celebrate their July 4 holiday. All this while a war was raging. (Even today, a horn of gunpowder is sometimes ceremoniously exchanged between the two communities.)

St. Stephen and Calais have enjoyed more than two hundred years of civility. You would be hard pressed to find any two towns – let alone two on different sides of an international border – that get along as well as do Calais and St. Stephen. Yet, when you cross that bridge from St. Stephen to Calais, everything changes. The accents change, the spellings change, even the units of measurement change. Handguns for sale at the local department store, mace for sale at supermarket checkouts, smutty magazines displayed without those paternalistic and highly annoying little black tags required on the Canadian side of the river: everything reminds you that you have entered another country. You cross time zones as well when you cross that bridge; the two sides exist in different hours of the day and different frames of reference.

That odd American blend of puritanism and anarchy, the Yankee pride, the abrasive patriotism – it lingers like vapour halfway across the bridge. From St. Stephen, you can walk to America. And the closer you get, the more things change, and the more aware of nationality you become. It is like examining a pointillist

'annual (adj) – årlig  
 'flurry (subst) – byge  
 'Loonie (subst, slang) – canadisk en-dollar  
 ment nævngives efter den canadiske nationalfugl, the loon.  
 'Twonies (subst, slang) – canadisk to-dollarment  
 for'maldehyde (subst) – formaldehyd, kemisk væske til at opbevare fx døde dyr og legemsdele.  
 un'fettered (adj) – uhindret  
 Bienvenue aux États-Unis. Toutes les voitures doivent arrêter pour l'inspection (fransk) – Velkommen til USA. Alle biler skal standse til kontrol.  
 dis'mayed (adj) – rystet  
 en'crouachment (subst) – indtrængen  
 'outraged (adj) – rasende  
 'commerce (subst) – handel  
 Great Divide (prop) – den kontinentale deling af Nordamerika (normalt: Rocky Mountains), grænsen mellem USA og Canada  
 'wharf-side (subst) – havneside  
 straddle (vb) – spænde over  
 ma'rauder (subst) – (deserteret) soldat der følger efter en hær og plyndrer  
 rage (vb) – rase  
 cere'moniously (adj) – ceremonielt  
 ci'vility (subst) – høflighed  
 mace (subst) – tåregas  
 'smutty (adj) – smudset  
 dis'play (vb) – udstille  
 paternal'istic (adj) – formyndersk  
 'puritanism (subst) – puritanisme, streng moralsk og afholdende livsforrelse  
 'Yankee (subst, slang) – amerikaner  
 a'b'rasive (adj) – grov  
 'patriotism – fædrelandskærlighed  
 'tinger (vb) – blive hængende  
 'vapour (subst) – dunst  
 'pointillist (subst) – maler, der maler med en teknik hvor man sætter prikker i stedet for at bruge penselstrøg

mi'nut (adj) - ubetydelig  
 'myriad (adj) - utallige  
 sur'real (adj) - surrealistisk  
 ex'tended (adj) - udvidet  
 'interface (subst) -  
 grænseflade  
 Marshall McLuhan (prop)  
 - Canadisk filosof og  
 kommunikationsteoretiker  
 'lucid (adj) - tydelig  
 'aphorism (subst) -  
 aforisme, kort, præcis og  
 fyndig formulering med  
 tanker om et emne.  
 etched (adj) - etsset  
 e'phemeral (adj) - flygtig  
 pre'ject (vb) - forudsætte  
 urge (subst) - trang  
 huddle (vb) - klybe  
 sammen  
 'Manifest 'Destiny  
 (subst) - ideen om  
 at (amerikanerne)  
 er forudbestemt og  
 skæbnebestemt til  
 at bosætte hele det  
 nordamerikanske  
 kontinent  
 cuddle (subst) - krus  
 jog (vb) - skubbe  
 'arbitrary (adj) - tilfældig  
 'agriculture (subst) -  
 landbrug  
 'irrigation (subst) - kunstig  
 vanding  
 'attic (subst) - loft  
 'frou'tier (subst) -  
 grænseområde  
 'hinterland (subst) -  
 bagland  
 'sparsely (adv) - tyndt  
 'glaring (adj) -  
 iøjnefaldende  
 'hick (subst) - bondekniold  
 'urbanite (subst) -  
 bymenneske  
 'spacious (adj) - rummelig  
 com'pulsively (adv) -  
 tvungende  
 'deference (subst) -  
 ærbødighed  
 'smugness (subst) -  
 selvtilfredshed

painting under a magnifying glass; when you are right up against the edge that divides Us from Them, the differences are minute – and myriad.

Border towns are always slightly surreal, and in a sense Canada is one extended border town.

"Canada is a land of multiple borderlines, psychic, social and geographic. Canadians live at the interface where opposites clash." So wrote Marshall McLuhan (quoted in *Mondo Canuck*) in one of his more lucid moments, incomprehensible aphorisms being something of a Marshall McLuhan speciality.

If Canada is a land of borderlines, none is as deeply etched or as ephemeral, as carved in granite or as light as air, as that which runs between Canada and the United States. Pessimists like to point out that 80 per cent of Canadians live within 160 kilometres of the United States, the suggestion being that we long to live as near to America as humanly possible. But this assumes intent where none existed: it projects modern insecurities on powerful past forces. We live as far south as possible because it makes sense. It is as primal an urge as the need to huddle near a campfire. The border between Canada and the U.S. was forged in geography, trade routes, blood, war, threats and ultimatums. It was not a psychological yearning that kept us clinging to the border, it was the combined threat of frostbite and Manifest Destiny.

In the east, the St. Lawrence River and the protective cuddle of the Great Lakes dictated where we would settle. Further west, however, it becomes less logical: the 49th parallel cuts as cleanly as a scalpel blade across the prairies and over the mountains, jogging south only to include the tip of Vancouver Island in Canadian territory.

Borders – even arbitrary borders – matter. They may be simple lines drawn in the dust, but once drawn, they begin to shape us. They limit us. They define us. They give us an outline to grow into. In western Canada, differences in agriculture, irrigation and settlement have made the 49th parallel – once an arbitrary line on a map – a geographic reality that is visible from outer space.

All along the Canada/U.S. border, the relationship between the two countries is reversed. For us, the border is our southern sunbelt, the most populated stretch of land in Canada. But for the Americans, the border is the northern attic, a frontier hinterland, sparsely populated and generally quiet. There are exceptions, of course, Detroit/Windsor being the most glaring, but generally along the border, the Americans are the hicks and the Canadians are the urbanites with the big cities and spacious shopping malls.

Living so close to the States makes us compulsively aware of both small differences (the body language, surnames, pronunciation and even hairstyles) and large (our deference to authority, our fascination with language laws, our secret smugness, our insecurities, and – most striking of all – our lack of ideology). Though we generally speak a common language, our words have different

meanings. In Canada, *freedom* refers largely to negative freedoms: freedom from crime, freedom from fear, freedom from risk. In America, *freedom* is understood in its baldest, simplest form: the freedom to do anything you damn well please. The American version of freedom includes the freedom to soar with the eagles – and to shit on those below you. In Canada, freedom – as – security has a kind of self-censoring, leveling effect. It enshrines mediocrity. Mediocrity vs. anarchy. Tough choice.

bald (adj) - utilsløret  
 'level (vb) - udjævne  
 en'shrine (vb) - gøre helligt  
 medi'ocrity (subst) -  
 middelmådighed

## WORKING WITH THE TEXT IN CLASS

### INDIVIDUAL WORK

- ✦ You now have five minutes to write down answers for as many of the following questions about the text as you can. You don't need to answer the questions in chronological order.
- Based on your notes from reading the text, sum up some major differences and similarities between Canada, the Canadian North, and the USA.
- How is the text structured, and what is the effect of this?
- Characterise the tone of the text. Is it serious, ironic, humorous, provocative or something else? Give examples.
- Why is America sexy, according to the author?
- What does freedom mean to Canadians and Americans respectively, according to the author (p. 53).
- Explain the symbolic value of borders and border towns, according to the author (p. 52).

### CLASS WORK

- ✦ Walk around the classroom and ask your classmates about their answers. Add their answers to your own notes, and also add answers they have for questions you didn't work with.
- ✦ Sum up your answers in class. Feel free to present answers you heard from classmates.