

Contents

<i>List of Figures and Tables</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	xi
An Introduction to Reading Communities: Processes and Formations <i>DeNel Rehberg Sedo</i>	1
1 Reading in an Epistolary Community in Eighteenth-Century England <i>Betty A. Schellenberg</i>	25
2 Nineteenth-Century Reading Groups in Britain and the Community of the Text: an Experiment with <i>Little Dorrit</i> <i>Jenny Hartley</i>	44
3 Reading Across the Empire: the National Home Reading Union Abroad <i>Robert Snape</i>	60
4 Utopian Civic-Mindedness: Robert Maynard Hutchins, Mortimer Adler, and the Great Books Enterprise <i>Daniel Born</i>	81
5 'I Used to Read Anything that Caught My Eye, But...': Cultural Authority and Intermediaries in a Virtual Young Adult Book Club <i>DeNel Rehberg Sedo</i>	101
6 The Growth of Reading Groups as a Feminine Leisure Pursuit: Cultural Democracy or Dumbing Down? <i>Anna Kiernan</i>	123
7 Speaking Subjects: Developing Identities in Women's Reading Communities <i>Linsey Howie</i>	140
8 Leading Questions: Interpretative Guidelines in Contemporary Popular Reading Culture <i>Anna S. Ivy</i>	159

9	Marionettes and Puppeteers? The Relationship between Book Club Readers and Publishers <i>Danielle Fuller, DeNel Rehberg Sedo and Claire Squires</i>	181
	<i>Bibliography</i>	200
	<i>Index</i>	213

An Introduction to Reading Communities: Processes and Formations

DeNel Rehberg Sedo

In reconstructing sociable forms of reading, book historians make one reader knowable to another.

Leah Price¹

Books cannot be understood apart from the society that creates them, and conversely, no literate society can be understood without some study of the book it produces.

Cathy N. Davidson²

Bringing together scholarship on reading communities that traverses three centuries and numerous cultural contexts, the chapters collected in *Reading Communities from Salons to Cyberspace* illustrate the cross-disciplinary nature of scholarship in the history of reading. In its own way, each of the pieces in this book addresses Davidson's call to reflect upon the private and social interactions that occur between texts and their readers. But while the collection as a whole incorporates the perspectives of authors working in a range of disciplines – and who, because of this, engage in a variety of research methods – a common thread runs through all these chapters: the assumption that shared reading is both a *social process* and a *social formation*. Each author conceives differently the social dimensions of reading. However, by locating reading communities in literary salons, author-reader relationships, face-to-face book clubs, television programmes, online chat rooms, and formal reading programmes designed by cultural authorities, the collection also acknowledges Price's proposition by reconstructing sociable forms of reading.

2 *Reading Communities from Salons to Cyberspace*

The study of book clubs, reading groups or literary societies can be described as a study of interdependencies. Building upon the influential work of book historians who question the assumption of the isolated individual reader, the authors in this collection draw attention to the relationships readers forge with one another and demonstrate how these social interactions influence the very personal relationship one enjoys with a book.³ The collection is not meant to be an exhaustive survey of reading communities from the eighteenth to the twenty-first centuries nor does it encompass the developing world. Rather, it is designed to focus on more recent reading groups while recognizing the importance of the reading-group phenomenon within a broader historical framework. Several exemplary essays establish the context of early reading groups, allowing readers to see the phenomenon as a long-standing practice that has served different functions in various places and times. One of these chapters examines the era of literary salons; another looks at readers of the works of Charles Dickens; the remaining seven bring us from the turn of the last century to the contemporary reader who is influenced by various forms of media convergence. Collectively, then, the authors whose work is printed in this volume offer a range of insights into the social structures that influence both collective and private reading practices. And in turn, each piece illustrates how 'the private' and 'the collective' cannot be considered as isolated phenomena. That is, we cannot arrive at a full understanding of private reading practices without at the same time considering the role of social relationships and institutions.

Along with the assumption that shared reading is both a social process and a social formation, there are three distinct links evident in the reading communities presented in this collection. The first is the notion of community. This is introduced in the first section below with an overview of shared reading that is meant to illustrate neither a simplistic move from oral (pre-literate) to textual (literate) societies, nor a historical process that only took place in the west during the Middle Ages, but aims rather to give the reader a brief glimpse at the early processes and formations of shared reading practices. The chapter continues with a discussion of current reading community scholarship because evident in this scholarship is the role of education, which is the second link between most of the pieces in *Reading Communities from Salons to Cyberspace*. The final section offers a discussion of the third link: the rich repertoire of research methods available to book historians. Each contribution's method of enquiry is highlighted in an effort to illustrate the wealth of tools that can be used to interrogate collective reading practices.

A brief historical introduction to shared reading

During the Middle Ages, the practice of gathering together to read or to listen to someone read from a text grew in popularity and eventually became commonplace. Though illiteracy was the norm and few people owned books, travelling entertainers and troubadours roamed the countryside reading out loud to those who wanted to listen. In the homes of the privileged minority, educated servants read to their masters. The gatherings were frequently utilitarian in nature; labour of some sort would accompany the reading from the book. One example of this can be found in the fifteenth-century story of a learned old man who is asked by a group of women to act as a reader while the women spin and talk with one another.⁴

By the late eighteenth century, the members of small 'book societies', 'reading societies', 'book clubs' and 'literary societies' were discussing books and socializing while the group also acted as a lending and circulating library.⁵ Some of the groups had women members, but it was not until the early 1800s that women started forming literary societies in any great numbers for the purpose of discussing books, and it was only after the Civil War that the movement took hold in the United States. At this point in history, in both Canada and the United States, literacy was expanding at a great rate, and access to books and other literature was growing to answer an increasing demand. Women were slowly gaining access to public spaces.⁶ As more middle-class women gained leisure time as a result of the changes brought on by the Industrial Revolution, they gathered to practise religion, gradually gaining access to public spaces that were traditionally open only to men. As Thomas Augst has illustrated, for example, gender, class and race were often barriers to education, but through libraries, books and knowledge were useful in institutionalizing a more democratic print culture.⁷

Nineteenth-century literary societies were the descendants of the seventeenth-century European salons that were the gathering spots for those – mainly men – who wanted to discuss literature, politics or culture. But the membership of these North American 'literary societies' was comprised mainly of white females and in practice they were modelled after the familial reading sessions that took place in some homes, in which books or magazines were read and discussed, for both educational and entertainment purposes.⁸ There is also evidence of mixed-gender African-American literary societies, whose members read to and for one another.⁹ These readers sought not leisure, but to gain cultural capital in an increasingly literate society. As education improved and literacy spread, the



Figure 1.1 Dickens and group read *Dombey*. Illustrated by Fred Barnard in the Household Edition of John Forster's *Life of Charles Dickens*, reprinted in *Scenes and Characters from the Works of Charles Dickens, Being 865 Drawings by Fred Barnard, Phiz and others*, Chapman and Hall, London 1908: available online at <http://www.archive.org/details/scenescharacters00londonuoft>, p. 571

members of literary societies came more often than not from the burgeoning middle class.¹⁰ Anne Ruggles Gere estimates that by the end of the nineteenth century, there were more than two million American women in literary societies,¹¹ and Barbara Sicherman estimates that 75 per cent of US public libraries were founded by these types of women's groups.¹² Most of these reading women turned their attention to charity work because at the time, it was assumed their sensitivity as ladies lent itself to the study of societal concerns, and they could do this without abandoning domestic duties.¹³ Although literary societies may not have directly encouraged their members to join suffragist and temperance movements, they also often acted as training grounds for women who later became involved in those movements.¹⁴ Interestingly, many women who became involved in social movements reported becoming more active readers and writers.¹⁵

Under the guise of helping people in need, American, Canadian,¹⁶ European and colonial¹⁷ women overcame the resistance of spouses,

society and perhaps even their own sense of familial duty. As is the case in contemporary women's book clubs, literary society meetings of the previous century provided the framework for a woman's sense of order and understanding; they were spaces in which women's wisdom and knowledge could be articulated, validated and appreciated.¹⁸ The discussions 'provided a common language and a medium of intellectual and social exchange that helped the women define themselves and formulate responses to the larger world'.¹⁹ Group membership and reading practices provided a community that often connected readers in similar groups across North America and in Great Britain in a real or imagined way.²⁰ The communication networks between the different readers and the groups to which they belonged complicates Benedict Anderson's oft-cited notion of imagined literary community membership in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*.²¹ According to Anderson, an imagined community is created, in part, through the ritual of reading the daily newspaper. He argues that readers know that the act of reading the newspaper is being replicated by hundreds or thousands of other readers, leading to shared but imagined identities, lifestyles and interests. In this collection, we show that not only does the *act* of reading function as a community-building exercise, but also that exchanges of letters, books and interpretations serve as both real and imagined community building blocks, taking their place as markers of membership of a community but also acting as barriers.

Reading communities of the past often exposed their members to learning opportunities that were not available within the institutionalized education system.²² In the early part of the century, formal study groups established by universities, government agencies and religious institutions reflected the growing momentum of the adult education movement, which had begun in the late 1870s and which continued well into the middle of the twentieth century.²³ These groups, whose size varied according to the geographical communities in which they met, were often inspired by progressive ideologies that saw education as an agent of social change, or else by a more conservative philosophy that valued education for the social stability it fostered and education for education's sake.²⁴ The reading materials of each group reflected these ideologies.²⁵

While these groups were often established by churches, universities and other institutions, they frequently evolved into semi-formal and self-directed bodies. Modelling themselves after the existing groups, members of a new group might appropriate and adapt features of established

systems, norms, policies or practices to suit their own purposes. This process is typified by the semi-formal reading and study groups that grew out of two influential US and British cultural programmes. Like other groups that began under formal organizations, there is evidence that members of the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circles and the National Home Reading Union (NHRU) sometimes created their own reading lists and interpretative practices to fit their specific needs, while still maintaining the ideology of education and socialization through prescribed reading and dialogue.²⁶

By the 1960s, formal study clubs had largely disappeared. The semi-formal groups that had branched off from institutions gave way to less formal groups that began with readers already loosely affiliated to one another, perhaps by geographic proximity or through a social network such as a self-help group or activist circle. The political and cultural complexities of these groups are especially evident in the oral histories of the private women's reading clubs that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. These clubs followed the model of the Chautauqua and the NHRU reading circles in that the members often met in each other's homes, but differed from those groups in that their membership consisted mainly of women whose socio-economic backgrounds and educational experiences closely resembled one another, and who lived in the same neighbourhood and had reached a similar stage of life. Because they owed no allegiance to the philosophy of a parent institution, and because the gender composition of the group was often exclusively female, readers in these groups sometimes achieved an intellectual and social respite from domestic routines and responsibilities. This allowed them to discover and nurture and maybe even pursue new interests and activities, and to break the bonds of domestic drudgery.²⁷

Book clubs moved into mainstream culture in the early 1990s through their popularization by American talk-show host Oprah Winfrey. Not only have they appeared in the story lines of prime-time television series in the US, such as *Bob and Margaret*, *The Chris Isaak Show* and *Ed*, but book clubs also appear as part of episodic plots and jokes in the UK series *The Savages*, and as the backdrop to an entire series in the British situation comedy *The Reading Group*. Nintendo even makes a video game targeted at young girls: *Smart Girls: Magical Book Clubs*. Novels such as *The Jane Austen Book Club*, *Reading Group* and *Angry Housewives Eating Bon Bons* feature book club members as central characters.²⁸ American comedian Kathy Griffen illustrates the popularity of Oprah's Book Club by cheekily titling her memoir *Official Book Club Selection: A Memoir by Kathy Griffen*.²⁹

The private book club model has been appropriated by different media production companies and networks. Most obvious is Harpo's 'Oprah's Book Club', but others, such as MSNBC's Today Show and ABC's Good Morning America in the US, have also attempted to promote reading through television.³⁰ Save for 'Oprah's Book Club', the websites for these network programmes offer readers information on recently published books but provide little opportunity for readers to engage directly with one another. However, like 'Oprah's Book Club', 'Richard and Judy's Book Club' in the UK is a good illustration of book and television convergence and the potential for building reader relationships.³¹ In 2004, Richard Madeley and Judy Finnigan began a book club segment on their daytime television programme. 'Richard and Judy's Book Club' was aired each winter and summer on the popular UK magazine format afternoon television show. Joined by two celebrity guest reviewers, the hosts introduced selected books chosen from more than 600 submitted by UK publishers to the show's producer. At the end of the season, and in conjunction with the British Book Awards, the book club concluded with viewers choosing Richard and Judy's Best Read of the Year. Borrowing and adapting key elements from Oprah's Book Club, such as the in-studio book discussion and the opinions of 'real' face-to-face book clubs, the husband and wife team became hugely important actors in the contemporary literary print culture field.

While in many respects the present-day book club resembles the 'grassroots' literary community of the past, it is inevitably influenced by rapidly evolving mediated forms of popular culture. Contemporary readers engage in social practices that are unique to the digitized spaces of twenty-first century life. Online book groups, interactive fan-fiction³² sites where fans re-write favourite fiction and share it with one another, online retailers and their customer-generated book reviews (such as Amazon.com), and book swapping (such as Bookcrossings.com) and review websites (such as LibraryThing.com and GoodReads.com) provide readers with many opportunities not only to connect with one another but also to exchange book recommendations. Readers who Tweet, to use contemporary parlance, can exchange book talk on several sites, such as [Twitter.com/thebookclub](https://twitter.com/thebookclub) and www.thebookstudio.com/twitterbookclub. These social networking sites, along with literary blogs or LitBlogs, as they are often termed by their writers and readers, have reconfigured traditional notions of cultural authority, making it possible for anyone to become a writer, and for anyone with an Internet connection and a desire to express his or her opinion to become a reviewer.³³ So while the world wide web provides a new and radical

medium for the production and distribution of texts and thus acts as a disruptive force upon traditional processes of literary creation, production, distribution and reception, it also provides opportunities for many (though certainly not all) readers to connect with one another regardless of factors such as cultural or socio-economic background, gender, reading level or geography.

'The Big Read', a programme organized by the National Endowment for the Arts in the US, which, since 2006, has made over 800 grants to support community-wide reading projects, is another indication of the popularization of book clubs. On 20 December 2005, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) released a press statement announcing its new nationwide reading programme. The Big Read was the NEA's response to a national study that found that reading in the US was in drastic decline. Chairman Gioia says in the release:

If cities nationally unite to adopt The Big Read, our community-wide reading program, together we can restore reading to its essential place in American culture. Call me naïve, but I can actually envision an America in which average people talk about *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Great Gatsby* with the same enthusiasm as they bring to *Lost* or *Desperate Housewives*.³⁴

According to that same release, literary reading in the US is not only on the decline but reading for 'pleasure and enlightenment' is *in crisis*.³⁵ Modelled on successful One Book, One City programmes in which all residents of a city or region are encouraged to read the same book, the Big Read's aim is 'To restore reading to the center of American culture', and, by implication, to educate and civilize American citizens through shared reading of 'classic' books.

At the turn of the previous century, cultural authorities lamented the *rise* of novel reading. The NEA has turned this around 180 degrees, though it ignores non-fiction reading in its description of the dire situation of reading among the American public.³⁶ The *Reading at Risk* study does not report participation by non-fiction readers or those who might read online. Instead, the main message of the Big Read is that reading a certain type of literary fiction will encourage civic engagement.

Now in its fifth year, the Big Read programme and its partners fund more than 800 programmes across the US. Participants in these programmes are often provided with one of twenty-two books, many of which could be considered part of the traditional American canon, and some of which have also been the source of controversy.³⁷ For example,

titles such as *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) and *The Great Gatsby* (1925) have – as late as the 1980s – been included on lists of banned books. Big Read participants also have access to a centrally produced reading guide and to reading events, such as panel discussions after a film-showing or traditional book group discussions, that sometimes, but not always, provide opportunities for alternative readings of the text.

The NEA website lists the geographical communities that sponsor Big Read programming (www.neabigread.org/communities.php) and hosts a blog where readers can learn about books and programming (www.arts.gov/bigreadblog). The website provides little evidence about the relationships that readers build with one another, but scholarly work has started on reading communities that are formed and facilitated through the Big Read.³⁸ How best might we critically analyse the relationships that develop between readers, and the factors that play into that process? In the chapters below, the contributors to *Reading Communities from Salons to Cyberspace* explore various manifestations of book clubs and while doing so illustrate an array of research techniques available to scholars interested in the experience of collective reading. The differing lenses reveal the rich history that informs contemporary reading practices.

Theorizing (reading) communities

Recent scholarship on contemporary book clubs critically analyses perhaps the most famous reading group in recent history: Oprah's Book Club.³⁹ This burgeoning area of study illustrates the diversity of contemporary manifestations of reading communities, and the findings of researchers sometimes question the benefits of shared reading as a practice and as a form of social interaction. Jenny Hartley and Sarah Turvey were two of the first scholars to pose general questions directly to book club members.⁴⁰ Hailing the rise in popularity and significance of the clubs as, in their phrase, 'the reading-group movement',⁴¹ Hartley's *Reading Groups*, written for a non-scholarly audience and published in a trade paperback format, provides general information that forms a useful background for an understanding of the cultural, social and educational roles book clubs have played in the last thirty to forty years.

First, Hartley finds that book clubs are comprised primarily of middle-class, well-educated women predominantly over the age of 40. Not surprisingly, considering that social theorists have argued that education and work play a significant role in valuing books and reading,⁴² most club members are highly educated. Second, readers report that the

search for new knowledge is often a key reason for joining and belonging to a club.⁴³ They are looking for points of view that differ from their own, and these are made available to them through the varying interpretations and opinions members express when books are being discussed. Third, book clubs read primarily fiction.

Of course, by describing book clubs in this general manner we ignore complexities that are intrinsic to any human relationship, as well as to any relationship between a reader and his or her books. This collection joins a growing body of work that pays critical attention to the social aspects of reading and concentrates on the discussions that take place within groups, their reading lists, and the contexts in which the reading takes place. Several historical studies were discussed above. Other works include Patricia Gregory's comparative analysis of historical and contemporary book clubs in St Louis, Missouri.⁴⁴ She explores the social bonds that are formed over time when readers read together for many years, and argues that communal reading is a cultural process that can become a ritual for group members. Contemporary scholarship includes Michelle Winter Sisson's discussion of the educational potential of book clubs.⁴⁵ Sisson studies an African-American book club in the American South and concludes that the women read differently as individuals and as a community. Meanwhile, Kimberly Chabot Davis explores the reception strategies of white book club members who read African-American literature.⁴⁶ Jane Missner Barstow's 'Reading in Groups: Women's Clubs and College Literature Classes',⁴⁷ and Temma Berg's "'What do you Know?"; or, the Question of Reading in Groups and Academic Authority'⁴⁸ are comparative studies of reading groups within and outside the academy. While Missner Barstow privileges the level of literary interpretation outside the university classroom, Berg argues that variations in readers' reception are influenced by social position. Linda Griffin's critical ethnography of a romance reading group identified the self-awareness and self-improvement potential in that group,⁴⁹ and Norma González's study of a group that read Nancy Drew novels identified female family members and librarians as influential 'literary agents'.⁵⁰ Joan Bessman Taylor's work concentrates on the 'discussibility' of book club books.⁵¹ Identifying the process and place between private and social reading as 'the grafted space', Jen Pecoskie presents an original contribution to the understanding of how social factors influence private processes, and vice versa, when readers read.⁵² Similarly, Elizabeth Long's analysis is especially important to this collection because it questions the distinction between public and private reading practices while providing opportunities to critically assess the

'moral and ideological dimensions of social identity'.⁵³ Long persuasively argues that an individual's participation in a book club is based on a *shared* need that informs the individual's sense of identity and contributes to the group's solidarity.

Bringing together scholars who all study shared reading, but who come from varied academic backgrounds and disciplines – communication studies, history, literary studies, leisure studies and occupational therapy – this collection illustrates how a reading community can be conceptualized as emotional, psychological and/or social. As Anna S. Ivy argues in the introduction to Chapter 8, it is naive to generalize about book clubs because they take many forms and serve many purposes. A similar argument can be made about reading communities across centuries and cultures. Members of such communities might attain the emotional gratification that a sense of belonging can provide, or the security of being part of something larger than oneself, or the community might fulfil the individual's need for emotional connections with other people.⁵⁴ Community is constructed and maintained socially. The 'commune' is the key social construct that emerges when people build and share connections through a book, or a serial, or a readers' guide, or even a review. Using the term 'community' gets to the heart of the notion that social formations can shape themselves around a text. It helps us recognize the factors at play as community members search for meaning within a text, sort out power structures, and, ultimately, gain the knowledge that comes from exposure to, and discussion of, new and unfamiliar concepts. The reading communities discussed in this collection are diverse, and, coming from different backgrounds, the authors don't necessarily agree on what they mean by the word 'community'. However, while there is no consensus on a definition of 'community' in the collection, we each illustrate that a community is comprised of relationships and that the people involved in these relationships *feel* they have an affiliation with one another.⁵⁵ The chapters also cover a wide assortment of readers' relationships with texts in their various forms, and with those involved in the creation, marketing, distribution, collection and analysis of texts. These include readers' relationships with authors; readers' relationships with cultural and social institutions such as publishers, booksellers, mass media, universities, schools and libraries; and readers' relationships with each other, as mediated by texts.

Reading communities across time share certain signifiers: friendship, enlightenment, education. They have in common political and cultural conflicts, both internal and external. Robert Snape's analysis of late nineteenth-century National Home Reading Union (NHRU) groups in

Chapter 3 concludes that ‘for many readers the social aspects of the circle meeting were its principal appeal, although for some the circle was valued primarily as a form of self-education or as a means of continuing education for young women who had left school’. In remote areas of Australia, Canada and South Africa, NHRU reading circles enabled ‘socially and culturally isolated people to retain intellectual contact through reading’.

The letters that passed between the Bluestocking salon members, which are the focus of Betty Schellenberg’s findings in Chapter 1, reveal a different approach to reading from those we see in other accounts of well-educated and socially privileged women. The circle acted as a means by which members were able to continue their education under their own auspices, in defiance of the norms of their time. Acting within a supportive and nurturing atmosphere, members were encouraged by one another not only to become more vocal critics of what they read, but also to seek publication of their own work. The intimate connection between writing and reading that evolved within the Bluestocking community suggests a reconsideration of the circle as simply a community of readers. Upon closer examination, as Schellenberg observes, the Bluestockings illustrate how ‘hegemonic gender ideology might be experienced, negotiated, modified, even produced, by a particular group of women’ in the eighteenth century. Not only did their reading responses influence how they thought about themselves, their responses to what they read and the critical conversations of that reading become in this case ‘cumulative and constructive’, leading to new knowledge for each of the participants. Ultimately, the influence of their responses extended well beyond the immediate circle of readers, a remarkable achievement considering the size of the print community during the mid-eighteenth century.

While Schellenberg’s readers articulated a pattern of friendship that influenced their reading practices, those readers discussed by Linsey Howie in Chapter 7 described their reading groups – more effusively – as ‘nurturing, supportive, accommodating, sharing, safe, accepting, comfortable, tolerant, respectful and non-threatening’. Meanwhile, my own contribution (Chapter 5) questions this utopian idealism of community. The differences that emerge between Howie’s book club women and the reader community I studied suggest that the face-to-face environment, nurtured over time, allows for a normalizing process that does not always exist in groups who meet online. With cultural literacy comes agency in a book club, but it is an evolutionary process. The texts change as the readers’ life situations change, and the book club setting

provides them with an opportunity to introduce a personal element into the dialogue. Tangential discussion within the community need not be limited to personal issues, but can extend to topics of a political, historical or social nature. This is, of course, dependent on the *type* of reading community one belongs to. Whereas Howie's readers meet in each other's homes, the formal structure of 'Great Books' that Daniel Born discusses in Chapter 4 – where the text remains at the centre of analysis – may not allow for this kind of talk. In my study of a virtual YA (young adult) book club, only a few of the members mention personal issues and even fewer discuss politics.

'Space' assumes special significance in the study of reading communities. Where people meet to read or discuss a book influences our understanding of how knowledge is acquired and perhaps even determines the questions we can ask about the process. Quoting Jürgen Habermas, in Chapter 2 Jenny Hartley identifies the importance of the novel and of communal reading in our histories. The process of enlightenment, and the movement of reading from the personal into the public sphere, demanded a critical and public reflection, which was collectively shaped. Familial interactions, such as reading aloud to one another, moved easily into the semi-public sphere of circle members' homes. The movement of familial interactions and specifically that of reading aloud translates easily into the semi-public sphere of circle member's homes, but this intimacy results in a subordination by critics of the cultural importance of the reading circles, largely because the readers were women.

In Chapter 6, 'The Growth of Reading Groups as a Feminine Leisure Pursuit: Cultural Democracy or Dumbing Down?', Anna Kiernan directly confronts the critics of women's reading habits and tastes. She argues that it is specifically the domestic spaces wherein much of women's reading and participation in face-to-face, online or televised book club meetings takes place that critics find problematic. Inevitably it seems, cultural values related to assumptions about the locations of meetings are assigned to reading and the discussions that result from the experience of reading: low cultural status is assigned to book clubs that meet in a home or a pub, higher cultural status is endowed upon book discussions in the academy. Also, like Ivy, Kiernan is especially interested in the cultural tensions that ensue when books and television encounter one another.

In this collection, 'space' does not only signify the home or other meeting venue, but refers as well to the wider geography that the book, the text, can occupy. In Chapter 3, Robert Snape follows the movement

not only of texts, but of an institutionalized reading programme that we can broadly interpret as a cultural text. From its origin in Great Britain to its various iterations in the colonies of Australia, Canada and South Africa, the NHRU promoted fixed ideologies and encouraged normative cultural practices. Snape demonstrates that the communities that formed around NHRU-distributed reading material and texts and the material left behind by members' friends and family, served to homogenize the actual and imagined communities that developed in the colonies.

The transnational character of reading communities is also addressed by co-authors Fuller, Squires and Rehberg Sedo in Chapter 9, 'Marionettes and Puppeteers? The Relationship between Book Club Readers and Publishers', where we follow the marketing efforts of publishing houses and the international communication networks of book club readers.

The relationship between social institutions and formal and informal reading communities becomes especially evident when studying the social and economic pressures that people faced in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 'Marionettes and Puppeteers', we are reminded that the educational reforms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries played a central role in creating new readers and thus a new market for reading materials. In his chapter, Snape argues that 'while repressive legislation was deployed to regulate what ordinary people read in the early years of the nineteenth century, coercive measures were inappropriate in later decades as economic progress depended upon a literate population with ready access to printed materials'. Like the 'Great Books Program' that was the brainchild of Mortimer Adler and Robert Maynard Hutchins a century later, prescribed reading programmes were meant to provide lists of acceptable literature and instructions on how to read the books – and talk about them – correctly. Collaborations remained strong between state agencies such as the London authority and, until its demise, the NHRU. Interestingly, while the ideals of British nationhood were successfully conveyed across oceans with the Union, the priority of maintaining formal educational ties was not.

Crossing disciplinary boundaries in communal reading scholarship

In *Old Books & New Histories: an Orientation to Studies in Book & Print Culture*, Leslie Howsam provides a thorough and succinct synopsis of

the contested historical and theoretical foundations of scholarly inquiry into book and print traditions.⁵⁶ She shows how the convergence of the core disciplines of history, bibliography and literary scholarship led to a new area of study known as 'Book History'. More recently, the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of fields such as cultural studies, communication studies, political science and sociology – to mention just a few – has influenced how scholars approach and regard terms such as 'history' and 'books'. *Reading Communities from Salons to Cyberspace* provides unique insights into the evolution of the study of book and print culture by guiding the reader through the span of time and across the varied geographies with which students of book history engage. The collection brings together scholarship that investigates and interrogates reading communities, and suggests divergent methods of enquiry that we can use to explore collective reading practices and formations. In assembling this collection, we are aware that crossing disciplinary boundaries is not always elegant and can be messy – even controversial – but we are cognizant too of the richness that different theoretical assumptions and methodological practices bring to our attempt to become better acquainted with one another as readers.

By interrogating reading communities from 1740 to 2009 we illustrate how methods of inquiry that have proven useful in creating a better understanding of the power, agency and experience of reading at the individual and collective levels have advanced in step with the technology, and yet remained consistent over time.⁵⁷ Readership studies have traditionally referred to readers' notes and marginalia, along with letters and diaries. But such studies have evolved in their approach and researchers in this area now also examine the (sometimes archived) content of listservs, blogs and websites, not to mention radio and television transcripts, in order to construct their analyses. These new technologies converge to create novel ways of experiencing reading and interpreting readers' responses to and interactions with literature.⁵⁸

A collection that focuses on communities of readers that have existed over time and across geographies thus provides a unique opportunity to examine the diversity of forms that book culture can assume. We hope the reader comes away from this book with a better understanding of what has happened and what can happen when people engage with a single book or study the same genre of literature. The individual contributions included in these pages pay special attention to elements of Robert Darnton's oft-cited, and sometimes criticized, communication circuit model of book history.⁵⁹ Like Darnton's original model, the collection as a whole poses questions about how economic, social,

ontological and political issues can influence readers. It illustrates Thomas R. Adams and Nicolas Barker's 'new model' of book history, which allows us to consider readers who may read individually, but who in the end are members of a wider social network that takes part in a form of shared reading.⁶⁰ Like Adams and Barker, we position the book as the unifying, central object of our investigations but our methods of analysis of what happens with the book are in constant dialogical collaboration across disciplines, eras and continents.

The chronologically arranged chapters in this volume illustrate the many ways in which books have been put to use, over time and within a variety of cultural contexts. The discussions take into account a great many factors – among them gender, economic and political climates, and the means by which knowledge is produced and spread – as they build an argument in support of the notion that all reading is rooted in the social. The work thus addresses through investigation of groups, gender, generation, religious beliefs and community membership Roger Chartier's call to understand the diversity in apprehension, handling and comprehension of books.⁶¹ The chapters below examine not only the meanings that readers take from what they read, but also what it means to a society to have members who are literate. Analysis of reading communities bound together under one cover allows us to better consider the nexus of power across time and space, and helps us to identify the material and ideological struggles and structural inequalities in a given book or print culture. These cultures, of course, mirror the wider culture in which we live or have lived.

Schellenberg's 'Reading in an Epistolary Community in Eighteenth-Century England' suggests that it is not unwarranted to regard the correspondence between members of the Bluestocking salon as testimony of their responses to their reading, especially if we consider these writings in tandem with the perceptions recorded by readers outside the circle. Schellenberg analyses the content of letters and compares them to edited collections of correspondence, but the focus of her inquiry is not necessarily on individual reading selections and responses. Rather, she examines epistolary exchanges that seek to alter or re-shape responses by correspondents and the group to their reading. By widening the analysis to include not only the edited exchanges between the women, but also the letters themselves and outsider commentary, Schellenberg extends our current assumptions regarding Bluestocking reading and shows us how these women writers and readers simultaneously negotiated with and resisted the cultural community of which they were members.

Working with Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural fields, Jenny Hartley temporally recreates reading reception of Charles Dickens's serial *Little Dorrit*. Her experiment uncovers reading techniques with which we might not be familiar: 'double-reading', 'back-reading' and 'art of memory'. Taking into account the time that has elapsed since the book's original publication in serial form, 'Nineteenth Century Reading Groups in Britain and the Community of the Text: an Experiment with *Little Dorrit*' demonstrates how readers will respond to literary works in different ways depending on the format of publication. Hartley also looks at a modern parallel in the case of Stephen King's *The Green Mile*, and discusses the variety of assumptions that Dickens and King make about the literacy levels and reading practices of their readers.

Robert Snape's account of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century British-based prescribed reading programme, the NHRU, employs an analysis of association newsletters, magazines and reports, references to the NHRU that appear in memoirs, along with interviews with living members, to argue that when the programme travelled to the colonies, readers themselves determined the purpose and function of communal reading. While there are no organized NHRU archives and the organization's history is therefore somewhat obscure, Snape's contribution demonstrates how such available mixed methods enhance our understanding of the impact that communal reading has had. In 'Reading Across the Empire: the National Home Reading Union Abroad' we find a rich account of institutionalized reading programmes that tells us much about the transnational migration of social and cultural norms and the ideologies inherent in them.

Daniel Born's 'Utopian Civic-Mindedness: Robert Maynard Hutchins, Mortimer Adler, and the Great Books Enterprise' is a case study of the social and cultural assumptions and ideals underlying the foundation in 1948 of a substantial American bibliographic project called Syntopicon. Born asks us to consider how the idea of Great Books functions within the pedagogical traditions of higher education. Is 'commitment to the Great Books the enemy of progressive education ... or in fact a foundation for it?' he asks. As Born points out, while today the discussion of books among teacher and students is 'standard operating procedure in the best classes', when Mortimer Adler brought John Erskine's methods to the University of Chicago, where Robert Maynard Hutchins was president, it was, as a theory and practice, 'nothing short of revolutionary'. By presenting documentary evidence of Hutchins's ideological, professional and cultural accomplishments in the shape of letters, biographies and institutional documents, Born offers a history of twentieth-century education.

Mortimer Adler's 102 Ideas (Syntopicon) constituted an ideological platform promoted and perpetuated through formal and informal reading programmes that were supported by people with cultural and/or economic influence, both of which Adler possessed. It was also the starting point for the 'Great Books Program', whose ideological genesis, as Born observes, can be traced to the Syntopicon, an educational toolkit 'powerful enough to save the world from self-destruction'. Born situates the project within the larger social movements following the Second World War, demonstrating the liberal philosophy of the programme's co-founders, who saw a direct link between literature and democracy, and democracy and freedom.

Following upon Daniel Born's broad social enquiry, two chapters bring the collection into the twenty-first century. Anna Kiernan (Chapter 6) in 'The Growth of Reading Groups as a Feminine Leisure Pursuit: Cultural Democracy or Dumbing Down?' and I (in Chapter 5) both make use of social theory to help explain the way in which cultural authority works in popular media to determine what is viewed as worthy literary work. While both chapters analyse online book discussion, Kiernan bases her study on the UK talk show sensation 'Richard and Judy's Book Club' and to a degree, 'Oprah's Book Club', while I use as my starting point an ethnographic study that gathers evidence through participant observation, interviews and a poll of an online book club of Young Adult Literature enthusiasts. This cyber study demonstrates that discussions about books that take place in a virtual YA book club setting can shape cultural production when certain members, who possess real and symbolic power, express a preference for specific books.

In Chapter 7, Linsey Howie undertakes an investigation of individual reader behaviour and the familiar notion of contemporary book clubs in Australia. Using quantitative survey data coupled with personal interviews, Howie interrogates the relationship between the isolated individual reading experience and the social factors of group reading. Her contribution, 'Speaking Subjects: Developing Identities in Women's Reading Communities', draws on philosophy, sociology, psychoanalysis and feminist theory to help us understand the 'relational ways of being' and 'subjects in process' that members of women's book clubs in Australia experience.

In 'Leading Questions: Interpretative Guidelines in Contemporary Popular Reading Culture' (Chapter 8), Anna S. Ivy applies her skills as a literary critic to the language of reading guides produced by book publishers and television programme producers to determine how these documents influence reading practices and direct readers' responses. Do

readers use the guides that are found online, in the books themselves, or on shelves in bookstores? Obviously, readers can use them however they want, but like the text itself, the guides are a stimulus for discussion. Ivy explores the ways in which texts – including televised book club discussions – and reader guides interact to generate new meanings, and suggests, as well, that television has created a new category of readers. This emerging faction of readers gives a new twist on a familiar conundrum – how to account for ‘high-’ and ‘low-brow’ reading tastes and practices.

Ivy’s analysis of the questions posed by reading group guides also proposes a link between pedagogical ideals and philosophies and the expectations that can arise within certain disciplines of study. She concludes that ‘there is no clear distinction between reading for pleasure and reading for intellectual engagement; rather, they are linked, the classroom functioning as a place wherein pleasure, as well as insight, can be taught’.

In a critique of the commodified relationship between publishers and book club readers, Fuller, Squires and Rehberg Sedo (Chapter 9) make use of interviews with publishers and a quantitative online survey to create the first study that examines the process of book distribution, marketing, consumption and reception in Canada, the US and the UK at the turn of the last century. Like Ivy’s contribution, ‘Marionettes and Puppeteers? The Relationship between Book Club Readers and Publishers’ demonstrates the influence that book clubs exert in the contemporary publishing milieu. In the past 50 years the book publishing industry has undergone massive changes, and this has had a huge impact on the relationships that publishers enjoy with readers. Regardless of the kind of club or group that readers might belong to, their reading choices will be influenced by a wide variety of factors: from personal recommendations to mass media promotional campaigns that can propel a book to best-seller status. Because they function as a social communications network, primed to spread the word, book clubs represent a tempting new target market for publishers. Yet, to some extent, book clubs and their readers remain immune to the publishing industry’s marketing efforts.

‘Despite its richness, the history of the book is not *l’histoire totale*, and nor is all historical, literary and material-text scholarship reducible to the study of book and print culture’, writes Leslie Howsam in her appeal for mutual respect across the disciplinary boundaries that compose book and print culture studies.⁶² This collection, while maybe not ‘*l’histoire totale*’ of reading communities, nonetheless presents cogent and lively discussions of a wide variety of communal reading practices, and in the

process demonstrates that intellectual rewards accrue when we set aside obstructive disciplinary, theoretical and methodological assumptions. In reconstructing reading communities across time and space, we hope to make other readers knowable to you.

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22 *Reading Communities from Salons to Cyberspace*

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Index

- Aberdeen, Lady and the Earl of
 Aberdeen 71–3
 academic readers *see* reader
 Adler, Mortimer 14, 17, 18, 81, 86
 adult education 5, 95, 141
see also education
 advertisements 48, 52, 54, 198n.
 Africa 65, 66, 145
 Amazon.com 7, 189
 Anderson, Benedict 5, 196n.
 Ang, Ien 126, 132, 137nn., 139n.
 Atwood, Margaret 101, 159, 166,
 187
 audiences 41, 45, 53, 124, 126,
 137n.
 Australia 12, 14, 18, 45, 65–70, 74,
 104, 141
 Australasian 68–9
- Barthes, Roland 131–2
 BBC 64, 125, 127, 130
 Big Read (UK) 125, 127, 130
 Big Read (US) 8–9
 blogs and litblogs 7, 9, 15, 22n.,
 105, 182
 Bluestockings 12, 25, 27, 35, 40–1,
 42n., 43n.
 Boscawen, Frances 25
 Carter, Elizabeth 25–40
 Montagu, Elizabeth 25–40, 42n.,
 43nn.
 Robinson Scott, Sarah 25–9, 31–3,
 35–9, 42n., 43nn.
 Talbot, Catherine 26, 28–30, 32–41
 Vesey, Elizabeth 25, 27, 29
- book awards
 Booker 129, 185
 British Book Awards 7
 Orange Reading Group Prize
 (Penguin Orange Prize) 129,
 130, 139, 189
 Richard and Judy's Best Read of the
 Year 7, 129
- Whitbread 185
 Young Adult literary awards
 105–8, 110, 111, 113, 119
 Michael L. Printz Prize for
 Excellence in Young Adult
 Literature 110–12
 National Book Award for Young
 People's Literature 110–12
 Newbery Medal 110–12
see also Big Read (UK)
- book clubs (book groups, reading
 clubs, reading groups)
 African American book clubs,
 literary societies 3, 10, 191
 cultural practices of 2, 5–7, 9–10,
 12–15, 19, 60, 72, 74, 102–3,
 106, 117–19, 124–5, 126, 134,
 140, 144, 153–5, 160, 193,
 194–5
 hierarchy of taste in 18, 19, 25,
 30, 34, 41, 67, 187, 190,
 193–5
 movement 3, 9, 25, 64, 70, 85–6,
 182, 193, 195
 and readers' ideology of instruction
 and self-improvement 10, 26,
 33, 72–3, 84, 96, 148, 159; *see*
also distinction.
 religious (church) 63, 83, 192
 trust in 107–8, 115, 173, 186,
 191–4
see also literary societies; reading
 circles
- book discussion *see* dialogue
 book history 15–16, 20
 Adams and Barker's New Model of
 Book History 16
 circuit model of 15–16
- book market, marketing,
 marketplace 11, 14, 19, 29,
 53–4, 83, 89, 113, 124, 136,
 139n., 160, 162, 165, 182, 184,
 195, 197n., 198n.

- book reviews, reviewers 1, 7, 11, 48, 49, 53, 54, 55, 102, 104, 105, 107, 109, 110, 118, 120, 124, 126, 127, 128, 133, 135, 185, 187, 188, 192
- book selection 7, 16, 19, 28, 54, 57, 60, 101, 105, 107–9, 119, 124, 130, 138n., 140, 151, 169–70, 176, 178n., 184–8, 192, 194
- booksellers, bookstores 11, 19, 37, 160, 161, 182, 184, 187, 188, 189, 193, 194
- Bourdieu, Pierre 17, 49, 102, 107, 108, 126–8, 137n., 199n.
- British Empire 60, 68, 75, 76, 77
- Canada 3, 12, 14, 19, 65, 66, 67, 70–4, 79n., 104, 114, 181, 182, 183, 184, 187, 188, 189, 190, 191, 193
- Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) 185, 192
- Chartier, Roger 16
- Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circles 6, 60, 68, 71
- class articulations, distinctions and negotiations 35, 40, 42n., 45, 46, 72, 76, 85, 102, 126, 153, 175, 193
- high–low (popular) 64, 67, 174
- middle class 3, 4, 9, 64, 69, 70, 71, 129–30, 175
- upper class 25, 42n., 175
- working class 35, 37, 44, 54, 61, 63, 64, 66, 67, 69, 73, 126, 183
- collective reading *see* reading practices
- community
- epistolary 16, 25–41; *see also* correspondence, reader to reader; letters
- ethnic 173–4
- geographical 5, 9, 65, 68, 69, 73, 75
- imagined 5, 14, 75–7, 145, 182, 196n.
- interpretative 40, 85, 86, 113, 118, 122n., 186
- online 1, 7, 12, 13, 18, 19, 102, 120, 121n., 124, 160, 182, 184, 194, 195
- reading as engaging 57, 68, 75, 140, 173
- virtual 26, 41; *see also* online (*above*)
- Collins, Wilkie 46–7
- correspondence
- author to reader, reader to author 26, 54
- reader to reader 65, 66, 70, 129; *see also* epistolary community *see also* letters
- consumers 37, 124, 162, 174, 182, 184, 193, 194
- convergence (media convergence) 2, 7, 15, 55, 182, 183
- cultural authority 7, 10, 18, 36, 32, 102–9, 116–18, 120, 122n., 125, 163, 169–70, 172–4, 176, 183, 185, 193
- cultural capital 3, 102, 104, 107–8, 126–7, 130, 190, 197n.
- cultural consumption, reading as 102, 108, 123
- cultural tastes *see* reading tastes
- Curran, James 127–8, 130
- Darnton, Robert 15, 24n.
- Dewey, John 83, 89, 94, 96
- dialogue, discourse, discussion, book talk 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 17, 18, 19, 25, 28, 34, 41, 54, 61, 68, 82, 85, 87, 90, 101, 102, 109, 110, 118, 124, 134–5, 140, 142, 143, 148–56, 160–4, 166, 168–70, 177, 185, 189, 192
- as an educational process 9, 11, 17, 34, 41, 61, 84–7, 90, 108, 110, 119, 142, 148, 149–50, 152–3
- gendered 25, 28, 34, 41, 134–5, 142, 148–56, 159
- online 7, 18, 102–10, 113–19, 121n., 124, 137n.
- personal 6–7, 13, 27, 106, 109, 125–6, 131, 135, 141–3, 146, 148, 150–1, 160, 167, 168, 170, 172, 174

- pleasures of reading with
 others 142, 148
 prescribed 6, 7, 13, 14, 60, 84–7
 on radio 182
 resistant, dissident 154–5, 159,
 162
 Shared Inquiry™ 85–6
 Socratic discussion method 85
 Talmudic discussion method 85
 on television 7, 135, 167–77
 as therapy 167–8, 173
 diaries and journals 15, 32, 45
 Dickens, Charles 2, 4, 17, 46, 48–57,
 61, 62
 discussion boards, forums, websites
see dialogue, discourse,
 discussion, book talk, online
 distinction 37–8, 76, 80, 126, 137n.,
 160, 163, 171, 172, 193
 education 2, 3, 5–6, 8, 9–10, 11,
 12, 14, 17–18, 19, 28, 32, 37,
 39, 41, 45, 47, 60, 63, 64, 67,
 71–4, 76–7, 82–5, 87, 89, 91,
 95, 96, 106, 108–10, 114, 115,
 119, 125, 126, 152, 177, 191,
 199n.
 African American literary societies 3
 educational reform 14, 73, 89,
 90–1, 92, 94, 96, 183
 higher education 10, 17, 89, 90–1,
 92–4, 163, 171, 173, 176
 literacy 3, 12, 17, 47, 102, 119,
 125, 136, 138n.
 pedagogy 19, 85, 90, 110, 159,
 163, 176
 self-education 12, 64, 183
 enlightenment 8, 11, 42n., 44–5
 Enlightenment, the 13, 153
 Erskine, John 7, 86, 87, 91, 98
 feminism, feminist 25, 104, 132
 feminist criticism 18, 47, 103, 132,
 137n., 146, 148, 153–6, 160,
 162, 178n.
 Fish, Stanley 113, 122n., 186
 Flint, Kate 44
 Franzen, Jonathan 130, 138n.,
 178n.
 friendship 11, 12, 32, 34, 41, 45, 57,
 74, 106, 145, 164
 genre 15, 27, 28, 29, 30, 35, 41, 46,
 104, 106, 109, 114, 119, 120,
 126, 128, 131, 132, 133, 135,
 165, 186, 187, 188, 191, 192, 193
 autobiography 89, 92
 biography 17, 29, 46, 52, 66, 89,
 92, 128, 163, 192
 classical fiction, classics 31, 37, 56,
 86, 161, 176, 191, 192
 contemporary fiction 35, 160,
 186, 191, 192
 essays 33, 38, 63, 66, 70, 84
 fan fiction 7, 22, 165
 fiction, literary fiction 7, 8, 10,
 22n., 32–40, 46, 47, 49, 70,
 103, 119, 124, 128, 130, 131,
 134, 136, 139n., 144, 160, 162,
 164, 165, 166, 170, 174, 175,
 176, 185–7, 190, 193; *see also*
 genre, novels (*below*)
 genre fiction 126, 131, 132, 135,
 136, 192
 history 6, 25, 32, 33, 38, 46, 90,
 128, 163
 memoir 6, 17, 31, 36, 39, 40, 77,
 134, 139
 mystery 103, 106, 133
 non-fiction 8, 36, 110
 novels 6, 10, 29, 30, 35, 36, 37,
 42n., 46, 47, 48, 63, 72, 120,
 127, 128, 130, 134, 135, 164,
 165, 174, 176, 181, 187
 plays 22n., 33, 38, 72
 poetry 22, 25, 33, 39, 40, 47, 61,
 62, 63, 70
 romance 27, 37, 106, 113, 126,
 131, 132, 135, 154
 satire 34, 36, 54
 science fiction 106
 young adult fiction 102–20
 Gioia, Dana 8, 22n.
 Giroux, Henry 106, 110
 Great Books 81–8, 90, 92–3, 95, 96, 98
 Great Books Foundation 13, 14,
 17, 18, 85–6, 94–5, 178n.
 Junior Great Books 85

- Great Britain 5, 14, 60, 61, 64, 66,
67, 68, 73, 76, 77, 182
see also United Kingdom (UK)
- Habermas, Jürgen 13, 44
- Howsam, Leslie 14, 19
- humanities 82, 89, 90, 91, 128
- Hutchins, Robert Maynard 14, 17,
81–98
- identity 28–31, 120
collective 140, 148, 155, 168
imagined 77
imperial 77
individual 11, 71, 75, 77, 101,
140, 148, 168
national 68, 72, 75, 76
social 11, 168
- India 65, 70
- Internet 7, 106, 121n., 165, 182,
188, 192
chat rooms, forums 1, 106, 124,
125, 137n.
see also community, online
- Kellner, Douglas 110, 114, 120
- King, Stephen 17, 52–3
- Kristeva, Julia 132, 152, 154–5
- legislation 14
- letters 1, 5, 12, 16, 17, 26, 27, 28–30,
33, 38, 39, 41, 42n., 53–4, 66,
184, 194
see also community, epistolary;
correspondence
- librarians 10, 46, 63, 101, 102, 104,
107, 108, 110, 119, 120, 125,
136, 181
- libraries
Association for Library Service 110
circulating 3, 29
LibraryThing.com 7
public 45, 63, 77, 78n., 101, 102,
109, 110, 119, 125, 181
New American Library *see*
publishers
subscription 29, 72
- litblogs *see* blogs and litblogs
- literacy *see* education
- literary salons 1, 2
see also salons
- literary societies (book societies and
reading societies) 2, 3–4, 21n.,
58n., 182
- Long, Elizabeth 10, 102, 103, 106,
138n., 167, 177n., 183
- Manguel, Alberto 75, 123, 132
- marginalia 15
- marketing 11, 14, 19, 83, 89, 139n.,
162, 165, 182–4, 187, 188, 190,
191–2, 194–5
- McCarthyism 97
- McCrum, Robert 123, 129, 130
- McHenry, Elizabeth 20n., 102
- McLuhan, Marshall 83, 84, 85
- media 2, 7, 11, 18, 19, 97, 105, 124,
127, 128, 130, 132, 181, 182,
184, 186, 189
- middlebrow 174, 187
see also reading tastes, cultural
hierarchy, cultural tastes
- Morrison, Toni 170–5
- multidisciplinarity
(interdisciplinarity) 1, 11,
15–16, 19, 90–3, 141
- Murray, Heather 70, 71, 102
- National Endowment for the Arts 8,
9, 22n.
- National Home Reading Union 6,
11, 17, 21n., 45, 60–77
Australasian Home Reading
Union 68
Canadian Home Reading Union 73
South African Home Reading
Union 70
- newspapers 5, 34, 54, 92, 105, 127,
128, 188, 189
- One Book, One City programs 8
- Oprah Winfrey 6, 53, 86
Oprah's Book Club 6, 7, 9, 18, 86,
121n., 127–30, 138n., 159–62,
166, 168–77, 179n., 180n.
- peace 52, 83, 94, 95, 97, 98, 103,
115

- pedagogy *see* education
- place
 as context for reading,
 discussion 2, 3, 8, 10, 13, 18,
 19, 41, 106, 124–5, 132, 134,
 136, 151, 171–2
 cultural expressions of 32, 52
 ideal 133–4
 literary expressions of 45, 53, 56,
 135
 sense of 55, 60, 63–74, 117, 119
see also space
- Price, Leah 1, 22n.
- public sphere 13, 26, 44, 124
- publishers 7, 11, 18, 19, 104, 107,
 128, 130, 160, 161, 181–95
 Ballantine 161, 166, 177n., 189
 Bantam 189
 Bertelsmann 184, 189
 Bloomsbury 130, 190
 Continuum 160, 178n.
 Doubleday 187
 HarperCollins 130, 184, 187, 188,
 189, 190, 191
 New American Library 164
 Penguin Group 56, 86, 129, 130,
 178n., 179n., 181, 188, 189,
 190, 192
 Random House 130, 187, 188,
 189, 190
 Simon & Shuster 124, 188, 189
 Vintage/Anchor 187, 189
- radio 100n.
 and books 15, 49, 105, 178n., 182,
 192
- Radner, Hilary 131, 132, 138n.
- Radway, Janice 103–4, 113, 121n.,
 126, 131–2, 135, 154, 183, 186
- reader
 expert, professional 17, 25, 28, 29,
 41–1, 63–4, 104–7, 118, 119,
 162, 170, 172, 177
 ideal 35, 130, 134, 135, 136
 lay 60, 64, 160, 162, 163, 166,
 172, 177
 redemptive 126
- reader-response criticism, reception
 studies 24n., 36, 122n., 125
- reading circles 6, 12, 13, 45, 57, 60,
 64, 68–72, 76, 77
see also book clubs
- reading guides 18, 160, 161, 162–6,
 178n., 179n., 187, 188, 194
- reading practices
 collective, shared 2, 9, 13, 15, 26,
 28–9, 40, 45, 47, 50, 52, 86,
 117–18, 122n., 134–5, 142–8,
 168–72, 184, 186, 194
 critical 35, 39, 51, 85, 114, 125–6,
 134, 166
 with family, shared reading 10,
 14, 26, 30, 45, 47, 55, 57, 64,
 76, 186, 190, 193; *see also*
 community, epistolary
 gendered 13, 18, 26, 32, 34, 37,
 41, 42nn., 64, 69–70, 103–4,
 117, 123, 129–30, 133–5, 136,
 142, 162, 173
 guided 18–19, 25, 60, 113,
 160–77, 179n.; *see also*
 prescribed reading (*below*)
 as intellectual engagement 5, 19,
 33, 64, 74, 84–6, 171
 pleasure reading 19, 26, 40, 57,
 69, 86, 131–2, 134, 144, 167,
 169, 171
 prescribed reading 6, 14, 17, 37,
 45, 60–5, 71–2, 85–6
 reading aloud 13, 48, 52, 64, 72
 reading resistance 31, 34, 35,
 118–19, 126, 128, 131, 135,
 163, 179n., 192
 re-reading 49–50, 51
 reading for self-improvement *see*
 education, self-education
 solitary reading 2, 16, 18, 30, 41,
 75, 134, 138n., 140, 164, 194
- Reading at Risk* 8–9
- reading tastes, cultural hierarchy,
 cultural tastes 13, 19, 22,
 25, 28, 30, 34, 35–9, 41, 45–7,
 67, 126, 127, 131, 183, 186,
 187, 190, 193, 194, 195, 197n.
 high-, middle-, low-brow 19,
 46, 67, 123–5, 127–8, 130,
 136, 163, 174, 186–7; *see also*
 middlebrow

research methods

- archival 15, 17, 26–8, 42n., 65–7, 78n., 160
 - case studies 17, 101–2, 103
 - ethnographic 18, 105, 131;
see also participant observation
(*below*)
 - experimental 17, 44, 48–57
 - grounded theory 141
 - interviews 17, 18, 19, 124, 127, 137, 141, 142, 182
 - literary criticism 29, 55, 159–60, 163, 172; *New Critics* 85
 - memoir study 17, 26–8, 35, 77, 134–5
 - participant observation 18, 105
 - questionnaires 104, 108, 141
 - quantified history 44
 - reading reception 15, 17, 24n., 49; *see also* reader-response criticism, reception studies
 - survey 18, 19, 105, 141, 177n., 192, 193, 197n.
 - textual analysis 15, 17, 124, 166
- Richard and Judy's Book Club 7, 18, 126, 127, 128, 129
- Richard Madeley and Judy Finnigan 7
- ritual 5, 10, 140
- Rose, Jonathan 44, 54
- Ruggles Gere, Anne 4, 21n.
- salons 3, 26, 29, 41, 159
see also literary salons
- self-improvement 10
see also education, self-education
- serial, serialization 11, 17, 44, 49, 52–7, 166
- series 6, 55, 160–1, 164, 166, 176, 178n.
- Sicherman, Barbara 4
- social capital *see* cultural authority; cultural capital
- South Africa 12, 14, 65, 66, 67, 69–70, 73, 74, 76, 176
- space 3, 5, 7, 10, 13, 16, 20, 26, 76, 80, 89, 90, 102, 103, 105–7, 114–15, 118, 128, 132, 140, 148, 169, 175
- St Clair, William 44, 45, 58n.
- Stein, Gertrude 87–8
- Syntopicon 17–18, 81–4, 96, 98
- television 49, 124, 125, 167–8
and books 1, 6, 7, 13, 15, 18–19, 101, 105, 123–4, 125–6, 136, 168–77, 182, 185
- Travis, Trysh 103–4, 166–7, 175–6
- Twitter 7, 188
- United Kingdom (UK) 6, 7, 18, 19, 104, 114, 123, 127, 129, 181, 182, 183, 184, 185, 187, 188, 189, 190, 191, 192, 195n.
see also Great Britain
- United States of America (US) 4, 6, 7, 8, 19, 86, 97, 101, 104, 105, 106, 111, 114, 127, 181, 182, 183, 184, 187, 189, 191, 197n.