

INTRODUCTION

Digital Books, Beach Chairs, and Popular Literary Culture

This book about the changes that have occurred in literary culture in the United States within the past decade began with cup of coffee and a vacant stare in a strip mall store in Mishawaka, Indiana. The coffee was a Starbucks latte and the store was Barnes & Noble, where I sat with my daughters as they downed their Italian sodas and argued about which *Harry Potter* movie was really the best. Already all too familiar with this particular debate, I stared off into space, first at the façade of the Outback Steakhouse across the parking lot, and then upward, where I encountered another café scene in the mural that wrapped around us along the ceiling.

The mural presented a tableau of Great Authors—Henry James, Virginia Woolf, Jane Austen, Edith Wharton, and company—all seated at adjacent



1. Authors Mural, Barnes & Noble store, Mishawaka, Indiana, 2008

tables in an imaginary Literary Café Valhalla. I was initially struck by the absurdity of the tableau, since we were, after all, in a chainstore in a suburban development that had been a cornfield only a few years before, and the people at the tables adjacent to mine weren't talking about the subtleties of literary craft—one woman sat alone reading an issue of *Martha Stewart Living*, two teenagers talked about much they hated having to read *A Separate Peace* and wondered why their English teacher wouldn't let them talk about something interesting like *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* or *Shakespeare in Love*, while another couple talked about Oprah's Book Club. I followed their gaze to the front of the store, where I saw the table that featured the current Oprah Selection. I looked back down at my table, where the course packet for my "Postmodern Narrative" course was sitting next to my latte. I'd brought it along to prep the next class, to give myself something to do while the kids did their Barnes & Noble routines. At that moment, I was overwhelmed by the absurdity not of the store's décor but of my presuming to teach my students anything about contemporary literature without taking superstores, blockbuster film adaptations, and television book clubs into account, not just as symptoms of the current state of the *culture industry* but as the sites, delivery systems, and forms of connoisseurship that formed the fabric of a *popular* literary culture.

The first article in that course packet was John Barth's essay "The Literature of Replenishment" (1980), in which he laid out a provisional definition for what the postmodern writing of the future should be, arguing quite vehemently that it must somehow expand the audience for literary fiction. He identified what he considered to be the most pertinent differences between modernist and postmodernist writing as he set his agenda for replenishment, namely, a reconnection between the literary novelists and the broad-based audience that had been commonplace in the premodern period. According to Barth, this loss of audience was attributable to the "difficulty of access" that was one of the chief distinguishers of modernist writing, and directly responsible for the unpopularity of modernist fiction outside of intellectual circles and university curricula. His ideal postmodernist author should try to recover that lost audience: "He may not hope to reach and move the devotees of James Michener and Irving Wallace, not to mention the great mass of television addicted non-readers. But he should hope to reach and delight, at least part of the time, beyond the circle of what Mann called the Early Christians: professional devotees of high art" (203).

If we fast-forward twenty-some years, the literary world Barth describes

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in that essay now seems antique. The ideal postmodern novel he hoped would appear did indeed materialize, in the form of novels such as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983), Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988), and Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* (1989); and by now those novels have become canonical and are regularly taught in courses on postmodern fiction. But something else happened in the meantime that redefined the entire notion of accessibility. Writers of literary fiction such as Amy Tan, Ian McEwan, Toni Morrison, Jhumpa Lahiri, Margaret Atwood, and Cormac McCarthy have the brand-name recognition once enjoyed by writers of bestsellers like Michener. Their popularity depends upon a great mass of reading-addicted television watchers and a culture industry ready and eager to bring them together through book clubs, superstore bookstores, and glossy high-concept adaptations that have dominated the Academy Awards for the past decade. Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992) was a Booker Prize-winning example of Canadian postmodern fiction, but it also became a hugely successful film by Miramax, winning nine Oscars, including Best Picture of the Year in 1996, at which point it became the subject of an episode of *Seinfeld* and was later voted "Most Romantic Film of the Decade" by the readers of *Romance Times* magazine (the bible of the romance genre industry). Popular literary culture, in a variety of new incarnations, now appears to be everywhere you look — at the multiplex, driving down the strip, floating through the mall, or surfing the Net. And over the course of those twenty years, those early Christians — the professors of literature — ran amuck, allegedly refusing to hold up their end of the conversation as they spoke in High Theory and killed off authors on a regular basis before some returned, eager to connect with addicted readers, who congregated enthusiastically online and on television, to share fiercely held opinions about books. Apparently, the love of literature can now be fully experienced only outside the academy and the New York literary scene, out there somewhere in the wilds of popular culture.

The most profound change in literary America after the rise of postmodern fiction wasn't the next generation of cutting-edge novelists; it was the complete redefinition of what literary reading means within the heart of electronic culture. The really significant next new thing wasn't a matter of radical innovations in literary craft but massive infrastructural changes in literary culture that introduced a new set of players, locations, rituals, and use values for reading literary fiction. Within the past decade media critics

have argued that film viewing has changed so thoroughly that we need to reconsider the power of images since most visual entertainment is no longer enjoyed in the confines of the darkened theater but on screens that come in a seemingly endless variety of formats and locations, from iPods to laptops to theme park sensory extravaganzas. The private dream state that used to be considered the very bedrock of film-viewing pleasure no longer seems quite adequate for describing the multiple-choice gestalts of contemporary visual culture. New technologies of exhibition have reshaped the pleasures and practices that now define what *going to a movie* might mean. Yet I would argue that the experience of literary reading has been transformed to an even greater extent, since who reads it, how it is read, where it is read, and even what is read under the heading of literary fiction have all changed in fundamental ways.

What used to be a thoroughly private experience in which readers engaged in intimate conversation with an author between the pages of a book has become an exuberantly social activity, whether it be in the form of actual book clubs, television book clubs, Internet chat rooms, or the entire set of rituals involved in “going to Barnes & Noble.” What used to be an exclusively print-based activity—and fiercely proud of it—has become an increasingly image-based activity in which literary reading has been transformed into a variety of possible literary experiences. Of course you like Jane Austen—but how do you take your Austen? In novel form? As a television adaptation with Colin Firth, or as a film adaptation with Kiera Knightly? As a fictionalized account of reading Jane, as in *The Jane Austen Book Club*? If so, in novel form complete with reader’s guide, or the movie adaptation with Emily Blunt playing the character who reads *Persuasion* so passionately? Or as any and all of the above, at any given moment, as you surf through the possible Austen experiences?

How and where those audiences appreciate literary fiction has changed profoundly, but so has the literary fiction written for those passionate readers who watch television book clubs, cruise Amazon, or take their literature in cinematic form at the local multiplex or via Netflix. The refunctioning of literary experiences is a matter of how you read them, but it’s also a matter of how you write them. The use value of reading quality fiction—what we read it *for*—has become a central issue in novels that insist on their ability to perform a vitally important function in the lives of those reading-addicted television viewers, whether it be the delivery of essential information about

acquiring significant others and material goods, or the delivery of a “pure” aesthetic experience that is intended to transcend the realm of mere consumerism (and is aggressively marketed as such). In either case, we find literary fiction insisting on its therapeutic value in everything from Melissa Bank’s *The Girls’ Guide to Hunting and Fishing* to Nick Hornby’s *A Long Way Down* to Zadie Smith’s *On Beauty* to Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Line of Beauty*.

Hilma Wolitzer’s novel *Summer Reading* (2008) exemplifies just how explicit this refunctioning project has become. One of the three main characters is Angela, a retired English professor who leads a local reading group in discussions of Anthony Trollope’s *Can You Forgive Her?*, Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, and Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*. The discussion begins ambitiously: “What is the function of literature? Angela had posed the question at the beginning of the meeting, before they’d even mentioned Trollope” (27). That a novel written by a respected literary author who has taught creative writing at places like the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop and Columbia University would pose the question that literary critics have been mulling over for centuries isn’t really that surprising, but the critical blurb on the cover of the paperback suggests a radical relocation for that discussion: “A Hamptons vacation, trophy wives and characters who dig books . . . Bring on the beach chair—*People*.”

Trollope and Flaubert at the beach? Twenty years ago the very idea would have sounded like a Woody Allen parody in *The New Yorker*. Trollope on *Masterpiece Theatre*, of course, but never at the beach, the most notoriously nonintellectual location within American culture, where one is supposed to read only for pleasure. When the most popular lifestyle magazine in North America recommends a novel as ideal summer reading because it brings together the Hamptons (the favorite playground of the celebrity news industry) and people who talk avidly about books by Trollope, Flaubert, and Brontë, and then suggests that the function of literature should be pondered from the vantage point of beach chairs filled with readers of *People* magazine who evidently also really *dig books*, then literary reading is no longer what, or where, it used to be.

Accessing *Madame Bovary* at the beach involves two interdependent developments that are equally profound in terms of how literary reading has been transformed in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century. I can have a copy delivered to my beach chair “in under a minute” via Amazon on a Kindle digital reader, and if I have any qualms about buy-

ing a Kindle that will hook me up with Flaubert almost instantaneously, I can watch video testimonials at Amazon featuring not only CEO Jeff Bezos but also the Nobel Prize–winning novelist Toni Morrison telling me what a wonderful device it is for really avid readers—and she too will tell me that it’s great if you want to read “in the yard, at the beach, on a plane.” Yet taking Flaubert to the beach involves another kind of empowerment in addition to new forms of digital downloadability; it depends every bit as much on amateur readers feeling perfectly comfortable taking on books that were formerly thought to be fully accessible only to professionalized readers. The beach in this case signifies a geographic space, but also a figurative space where there used to be no confusion about the differences between pleasure reading and literary reading. In other words, of course, you can get an order of Flaubert more easily from your beach chair than an order of fried clams, but why would readers of *People* magazine think of *Madame Bovary* as a good read, intended for people just like them? Because their English teacher recommended it once upon a time? Or because it was the novel that the book club read in Tom Perrotta’s novel *Little Children* (also available in under a minute)? Or because it was the novel Kate Winslet’s character identified with so fiercely in the film version of *Little Children*? Or because books about readers reading passionately have themselves become bestsellers and are supposed to be taken to the beach, at least according to an advertisement from the Random House Publishing Group that appeared in the *New York Times*.

The first of the books featured in this advertisement, Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tebran*, details the book club she formed with a handful of students and how their discussions become vital transformative experiences when they make the novels that they read into narratives about their *own* lives (*Lolita* also available in under a minute, if I feel more like Nabokov than Flaubert that particular afternoon). The promotion of this book alongside Lorna Landvik’s *Angry Housewives Eating Bon Bons* (2004) and Matthew Pearl’s novel *The Dante Club* (2004) reveals a great deal about the imagined readership, especially since Pearl’s novel features America’s first Dante scholars (Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Russell Lowell, J. T. Fields, and Oliver Wendell Holmes) solving heinous murders in post–Civil War Boston. Why have the adventures in interpretive reading undertaken by erudite, scholarly readers like Nafisi, Lowell, and company suddenly become bestselling entertainment for those readers in beach chairs?

**Hit the beach
with this summer's
hottest books**

#1 NATIONAL BESTSELLER
 "Remarkable... An eloquent brief on
the transformative power of fiction."
 —*The New York Times*

NATIONAL BESTSELLER
 "Impossible
not to get
caught up in ...
Landvik's gift lies
in bringing these
familiar women
to life with insight
and humor."
 —*The Denver Post*

NATIONAL BESTSELLER
 "Matthew Pearl is the new
shining star of literary fiction...
With intricate plots, classical themes,
and erudite characters ... what's not to love!"
 —*Dan Brown, author of The Da Vinci Code*

www.randomhouse.com | The Random House Publishing Group

2. "Hit the Beach," advertisement in *New York Times Book Review*, June 2004

How do we begin to get a handle on this robust popular literary culture fueled by such a complicated mix of technology and taste, of culture and commerce? Some of its infrastructural features are directly attributable to the conglomeration of the publishing industry—the ever-expanding number of titles, the ubiquity and velocity of delivery systems in the form of superstores and online book sales; the increasing synergy among publishing, film, television, and Internet industries; and the exponential increase in targeting quality consumers. But a number of other factors are the result of changes in taste hierarchies—the radical devaluation of the academy and New York literary scene as taste brokers who maintained the gold standard

of literary currency, the collapse of the traditional dichotomies that made book reading somehow naturally antagonistic to film going or television watching, and the transformation of taste acquisition into an industry with taste arbiters becoming media celebrities. And perhaps the most fundamental change of all: the notion that refined taste, or the information needed to enjoy sophisticated cultural pleasures, is now easily accessible outside a formal education. It's just a matter of knowing where to access it, and whom to trust.

I have no interest in judging the ultimate effects of that interplay in a unilateral way. This is not a bumper sticker book, e.g., *Honk If You Think Culture Is Going to Hell in a Handbasket* or *My Literary Values Aren't Dead, Sorry about Yours*. My goal in this book is to trace the contours of a particular "media ecology" shaped by the increasing convergence of literary, visual, and material cultures. The phenomena that I examine in detail—Barnes & Noble superstores, Amazon, book clubs (actual, virtual, and fictionalized), adaptation films, and literary bestsellers—all merit book-length studies individually, but I think they are best understood as interdependent components of a popular literary culture that has its own ways of identifying a literary experience as such, with its own way of "talking the talk" of passionate reading, its own modes of circulation and access, and its own authorities to sanction what sort of pleasures are to be enjoyed there. This is not to suggest that I intend to merely describe that interplay as a detached observer, complete with digital pith helmet and clipboard. This is a highly opinionated account, but not a blanket condemnation or celebration. I teach courses in postmodern literature but also contemporary Hollywood, as a member of both an English department and a film department. This experience has given me a keen understanding of the intricacies of style as well as the complexities of the entertainment industry. I think it has also given me a healthy ambivalence about both, repulsed equally by rapacious greed and insufferable sanctimony. So, if you hope this will be an exposé of the Evils of the Culture Industry, or a snappy remix of "I Sing the Culture Electric," go no further, because this book just isn't for you. Think of these first few pages as the thirty-second sample of a song you get to hear at iTunes—if you don't like it so far, you're going to hate the rest of it. If, on the other hand, you want something that does more than simply reaffirm all of the old prejudices as it tries to identify the moving parts and interconnections of the popular literary culture you're surrounded by, you might want to continue.

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The Literacy of Infinite Personalization

The increasing accessibility of literary fiction obviously involves a host of issues concerning the status of “the book” and the nature of literacy at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In a cover story in the *New York Times Magazine* (May 14, 2006) entitled “Scan This Book!” Kevin Kelly argues that because of exponential increases in accessibility “everything we thought we knew about books is going to change.” He focuses on the decision by Google in 2006 to digitize the contents of five major research libraries into one vast universal library, thereby creating an unprecedented degree of access to books:

Might the long-heralded great library of all knowledge really be within our grasp? Brewster Kahle, the archivist overseeing another scanning project says that the universal library is now within reach. “This is our chance to one-up the Greeks!” he shouts. “It really is possible with the technology of today, not tomorrow. We can provide all the works of humankind to all people of the world. It will be an achievement remembered for all time, like putting a man on the moon.” And unlike the libraries of old, which were restricted to an elite, this library would be truly democratic, offering every book to every person. (44)

This desire to take books to the people of the world on a grand scale is not restricted to Google, since it is also the principal goal of Barnes & Noble, Borders, Amazon.com, and Oprah Winfrey’s Book Club—a project epitomized by the charge she gave her “book elves” as they hand out hundreds of copies of *The Good Earth* to her studio audience at the end of her *Anna Karenina* show: “Bring on the books for everybody!” Kelly’s analysis of the ramifications of the scanning of books is a key text for understanding the revolution in accessibility, but so is the *O: The Oprah Magazine*—“Our First Ever Summer Reading Issue” (July 2006), which offered to its millions of readers advice from Toni Morrison and Harper Lee about the pleasures of books, along with featured articles with titles such as “How It Begins” and “How to Read a Hard Book.” Kelly argues compellingly that the basic contours of what constitutes a book have been changed by a digital revolution. The “Summer Reading Issue” in many ways confirms this, since it features on “The O List” (“A few things I think are great”—Oprah) a portable digital library, the Sony Librie (“Download up to 80 of your favorites—hundreds more with a memory card”), as well as a “special deal just for you” on twenty

of the recommended titles: “This issue is so full of books you’re going to want that we asked the nice people at Amazon to do us a favor and give you a break. Just go to www.amazon.com/oprahmagazine.” Kelly focuses on the technological dimensions of this universal accessibility, emphasizing the shifting relationships between copy and copyright and how “digital bits” will change notions of authorship. Taking books to the people on the grandest of scales involves a number of other questions: What happens to literary reading when it becomes a sophisticated form of self-help therapy? What prompts this need to get some kind of aesthetic *fix*, in all senses of that word? Who functions as an expert? And what sort of literary fiction is being written for this passionate readership?

In order to gain a better understanding of “the book” in the age of digitized accessibility, we need to pursue the questions Kelly frames so incisively but situate them in reference to a specific culture of reading. This culture may indeed rely on twenty-first-century technologies of scanning, storage, and downloadability, but it also draws on early-nineteenth-century notions of reading as self-transformation, filtered through late twentieth-century discourses of self-actualization, all jet-propelled by state-of-the-art forms of marketing “aesthetic experience.” In other words, literary reading in the age of universal access to the universal library is an uneven development, shaped equally by contemporary information technologies, Romantic-era notions of the self, and late Victorian conceptions of aesthetic value. The reality of a universal library is indeed upon us, thanks to Google, and Amazon.com can make individual titles appear in less than a minute. But those books come to us through a thriving popular literary culture, which invests the literary text — whether experienced on the page, or on the screen, or on a laptop — with a variety of *use values*, some of which are just as unprecedented as those scanning technologies. We can begin to make sense of “the book” and what constitutes “literacy” within this reading culture only when we seize on those contradictions and resist the urge to generalize unilaterally about the effects of increased access.

I want to offer just one cautionary example. John Updike expressed profound doubts about Kelly’s article in a *New York Times Book Review* editorial entitled “The End of Authorship” (June 25, 2006). He was troubled by Kelly’s celebration of this “huge, virtually infinite wordstream accessed by search engines and populated by word snippets,” because it will mean the end of reading as “an encounter between two minds.” He concludes:

“The book revolution [that] from the Renaissance taught men and women how to cherish and cultivate their individuality, threatens to end in a flurry of word snippets. For some of us, books are intrinsic to sense of personal identity” (27). Updike obviously hadn’t gotten his copy of *O*’s “Summer Reading Issue” when he penned his countermanifesto, because if he had, he would have seen that this ideology of reading as intrinsic to a sense of personal identity is the central organizing principle for the entire issue. In her final word to her readers, “What I Know for Sure,” Oprah says: “What I know for sure is that reading opens you up. It exposes you and gives you access to anything your mind can hold. What I love most about reading: It gives you the ability to reach higher ground. A world of possibilities awaits you. Keep turning the page” (224). When Oprah brings books to everyone, everyone is encouraged to make their reading intensely personal—what’s the point of reading otherwise? Consider the quotations about reading scattered throughout the magazine. A page of perforated punch-out bookmarks features a series of quotations about the joys of reading from the likes of Jorge Luis Borges (“I always imagined Paradise to be a sort of library”) and Margaret Walker (“When I was about 8, I decided that the most wonderful thing, next to a human being was a book”). The monthly “Calendar” feature is also studded with the same type of quotations that confirm Updike’s sentiments: “Writing and reading is to me synonymous with existing” (Gertrude Stein) and “My home is where my books are” (Ellen Thompson). Interestingly, the most explicit invocation of Updike’s notion of reading as intrinsic to a sense of personal identity comes in the introduction to an article entitled “Comfort Zone: Book Keeping”: “Your books are your autobiography. They map your history, reflect your tastes, hold your emotional moments between covers. On these pages, intelligent designs for sharing space with the literature you love.” This text is superimposed on the proper set for all this reading, with the following suggestions:

Curling up with an absorbing story is as crucial to your well-being as leafy greens or sunshine. And it’s especially restorative if you have a corner dedicated to the printed word, with all the comforts: say a cool linen-covered chaise longue (Interieur); plump embroidered pillows (\$184 each, Historically Inaccurate Decorative Arts); a cashmere throw (\$325, Calypso Christiane Celle); and “good lamp” (\$1,050, Regeneration Furniture) as well as lots of natural light. Of course you’ll have well stocked shelves within reach (teak bookcase, \$2,200, Regeneration Furniture).

This clean, well-lighted, *Elle Decor*-style space for intensely personal, transformative reading suggests that this reading culture depends on the downloadability of books but also on easy access to expertise about how to read even “hard books” from an informed position, and about the right sort of reading space. The text for this feature introduces the “*t* word” avoided by most academic critics, as well as these famous authors — *taste*. The idea that literary reading is an expression not just of some nebulous inner wisdom but of one’s personal taste, and that it can be fully articulated only by a series of interconnected purchases, suggests that this reading culture is a hybrid of information technology and self-help discourse, fueled by high-octane Romantic humanism, all made possible through the generous sponsorship of quality consumerism.

We can’t begin to appreciate how this interplay works without looking closely at the way new delivery systems make a reading culture possible in the first place, but we can’t really discern the impact that this increasing accessibility has on “the book” unless we have a fine-grain understanding of the sort of “literacy” that is required to appreciate them. Delivery systems provide not just the books but also the sites, the talk, and the sense of belonging to a community of readers. Amazon delivers the goods, but it is also a breeder reactor of reading communities, just as Barnes & Noble provides the books and the locations for thousands of local book clubs. The technologies of accessibility do not function in a unilateral way — some may lead in the direction of wordstreams and digital bits, but others only sanctify the most traditional forms of authorship. Consider the ways in which technologies of storage and access enable passionate listeners to enjoy experiences of music that are anything but uniform. iTunes makes over a million songs available, and by ripping and burning them on my iBook, or downloading them on my iPod I can make play lists or compilation mixes to my heart’s content, organized according to the most personal listening agendas, any of which would diminish the singular intentions of the original authors of that music. On the other hand, “digital technology” can valorize, even fetishize, that singularity like never before. Consider the CD Collectors Editions boxed sets such as *The Complete Columbia Recordings: Miles Davis with John Coltrane, 1955–1961*, in which listeners get, in addition to all of the original albums, dozens of alternate takes from record label archives; or the *London Calling: Legacy Edition* boxed set, which includes the original Clash album, another disk of alternate takes, and a DVD of footage shot during the recording of the material. In much the same way, Google’s universal library will

enable burning and ripping of favorite bits from books, but another kind of effect is achieved by the DVD edition of *The Hours*, which includes extensive commentary tracks by its director Stephen Daldry and the novel's author, Michael Cunningham, along with hours of special features about Virginia Woolf, in which noted scholars offer insights about the Author, her novels, and Cunningham's appropriation of *Mrs. Dalloway* within his novel. The inclusion of those special features blurs the line between what is intended for amateur and professionalized readers since it converts the DVD edition of *The Hours* into something resembling a Norton Critical Edition of literary masterpieces used for decades in college English classes, in which the reader gets the integral text of the novel, copiously footnoted, followed by a collection of essays that contextualize the novel from a variety of different perspectives. In each case, the singularity of the masterpiece as product of the Great Author is the organizing principle of the entire enterprise, whether that Great Author is Virginia Woolf or The Clash.

This complicated interplay of early-twenty-first-century forms of digital storage and early-nineteenth-century conceptions of individual genius played out across a variety of media formats exemplifies what Henry Jenkins has referred to as *convergence culture*. According to Jenkins, the initial theorizing about the digital revolution, which was supposed to produce sweeping transformations that would render all previous forms of media instantaneously antiquated (books as “dead-tree” technology), has recently given way to far more subtle investigations of the ways in which old and new media now coexist synergistically: “Cinema did not kill theater. Television did not kill radio. Each old medium was forced to co-exist with emerging media. That's why convergence seems more plausible as a way of understanding the past several decades of media change than the old digital revolution paradigm had. Old media are not being displaced. Rather their functions and status are shifted by the introduction of new technologies” (14). I think this essential point can be taken further in regard to the popularization of literary reading, since it involves more than the convergence of old and new media—it depends, just as fundamentally, on the convergence of antique and emergent notions of access, artistic genius, reading pleasure, and personal taste.

The digital technologies that make downloadable universal libraries possible have one hugely important thing in common with the sort of traditional book talk spoken by Updike and all the various voices in the “Summer Reading Issue” of *O*—both are devoted to the immediate personalization of

literary reading. In the next chapter I will focus on the way in which Amazon *rebangs* the site for each customer based on previous purchases, so that upon each subsequent visit all is cut to the measure of what appears to be an intensely individualized taste profile. Updike may have been concerned about the loss of the personal dimension of reading, but one of the chief distinguishing characteristics of the popular literary culture is the hyper-personalization that empowers the reader, marketer, and reader/novelist to take any liberties needed to ensure that pleasure. While the “Summer Reading Issue” was on the newsstand and Updike’s editorial appeared in the *New York Times Book Review*, Jennifer Kaufman and Karen Black’s novel *Literacy and Longing in L.A.* (2006) was a bestseller advertised in that same *New York Times*. This novel about a passionate reader concludes with a lengthy list of the main character’s favorites books, which she refers to throughout the course of the action, at which point the novel becomes a kind of hybridized combination of fictional narrative and personal guide to literary reading. While I will be talking about this novel at greater length in chapter 6, I want to reflect here on the title of this novel, because it has everything to do with the reading culture of the popular literary: Why this *longing* for the literary experience within an audience of amateur readers? What sort of personalized literacy circulates within this novel and across its readership? And why does that personalization make literary reading such a vital form of popular culture?

My determination to explore this popularization may seem like a puzzling move to some readers, since the National Endowment for the Arts published a report in the fall of 2004 entitled *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*, which insisted that the reading of books has been declining in the United States within the past decade and that it’s all attributable to the evil influences of electronic media. While many of the assumptions made in that report involve highly debatable interpretations of its statistical data, none is more troubling, or more limiting, than its central theme — that reading books and viewing electronic media are mutually antagonistic experiences that take place in incommensurate, hermetically sealed cultures. That television and computer technologies are to blame was not an earth-shaking conclusion, since it was such predictable reiteration of the traditional attack on mass culture as the ruin of genuine culture by providing all those easy, promiscuous pleasures: “Reading a book requires a degree of active attention and engagement. Indeed, reading itself is a progressive skill that depends on years of education and practice. By contrast,

most electronic media such as television, recordings, and radio make fewer demands on their audiences and indeed often require no more than passive participation. Even interactive electronic media, such as video games and the Internet, foster shorter attention spans and accelerated gratification” (vii).

The report details, in an elaborate associated-tastes argument, how literary readers are much more likely to attend museums, concerts, and so on but assumes that electronic media are consumed by some great Other composed of unwashed nonreaders. Yet upon closer inspection of the data, certain points emerge that undermine that sweeping central argument. In table 13, “Average Number of Hours per Day Watching TV, U.S. Adults,” we learn that while nonreaders may watch television 3.1 hours per day, those who read literature watch 2.7 hours per day. The authors of the report begin by insisting that what they consider “frequent readers” (twelve to forty-nine books a year) watch less TV (2.4 hours) than nonreaders; but they also found that really “avid readers” (fifty or more books a year) watched more (2.6 hours), leading them to the grudging conclusion that “overall, . . . frequent readers watch only slightly less TV per day than infrequent readers. The SPPA (Survey of Public Participation in the Arts) results cannot show whether people who never read literary works would do so if they watch less TV, or whether they would use this extra time in other ways” (15). The authors of the report then make a rather surprising admission, given their central argument: “In some cases, TV watching may have a positive effect on literary reading. Authors regularly appear on TV to promote their books, and some TV book clubs have been extremely popular. In fact, in the spring of 2002 most book publishers were very disappointed when Oprah Winfrey cancelled the book club related to her talk show. The effects of mass media, particularly television, movies and the Internet, merit further scrutiny” (16).

Indeed they do. Interestingly, when the NEA issued another report on reading in January 2009, *Reading on the Rise*, it found a significant increase in literary reading, but it was unwilling to reconsider the relationship between literary reading and electronic media. In his preface to the report, Dan Gioia argues:

A significant turning point in recent American cultural history. For the first time in over a quarter-century, our survey shows that literary reading has risen among adult Americans. After decades of declining trends,

there has been a decisive and unambiguous increase in virtually every group measured in this comprehensive national survey. . . . Combined with general population growth, these higher reading rates have expanded literary readership by 16.6 million, creating the largest audience in the history of the survey.

This increase is due to the forces he congratulates: “Legions of teachers, librarians, writers, parents, public officials, and philanthropists who helped achieve the renaissance.” He also cites the Big Read projects and a widespread awareness that something had to be done about the decline in literary reading.

While all of those parties did indeed contribute mightily to the cause, the report attributes nothing to the massive transformation in the culture of reading that has occurred over the past decade in terms of where and how readers now access their literary experiences (in a variety of different interdependent media), why they feel empowered to make literary reading *their own*, or why they would be drawn to literary reading as a favorite leisure-time activity. Teachers and librarians merit the heartiest of congratulations for their steadfast efforts, but anyone who has waited with a few hundred other parents and supercharged thirteen-year-old readers in the middle of the night in a strip mall store for the release of a vampire novel knows that other forces have been at work. We weren’t there because the local librarian thought it was a good book we should make every effort to read. I’m not referring here just to the power of conglomerate publishing, even though bestselling books are now regularly talked about in the media in terms of opening-weekend grosses and how they compare to other blockbuster book releases. The more important point is that those readers knew that this vampire novel was written for *them*, and they knew exactly where to go to get their copy, because they had already become habituated readers and habituated customers at that bookstore. The largest audience for literary reading in the history of the NEA survey is attributable to the work of teachers and librarians, but also to superstore chains, and adaptations films at the multiplex down the strip, and Amazon communities, and television book clubs, and digital books, and all of those beach chairs.

One of the main goals of this book is to challenge the argument regarding the relationship between literary reading and electronic culture that is central to both of those NEA reports. I have no interest in measuring the effects of the mass media on reading as some kind of instrumental tool that

might increase the number of readers in the United States a few percentage points. That sort of approach, in which mass media becomes a good thing if they lead viewers to genuine cultural pleasures, would only perpetuate all the old dichotomies between mass culture and high culture that grow ever more antiquated. In their conclusion to the *Reading at Risk* report, the authors set forth “questions for a research agenda and national conversation on literature participation,” but they begin with a question that would only push further research in exactly the wrong direction, because they continue to position literary reading and electronic media in an antagonistic relationship: “How does literature, particularly serious literary work, compete with the Internet, popular entertainment, and other increased demands on leisure time?” (30). Why *compete*? A far more productive question might be, How has the experience of literary work become a form of popular visual entertainment? And how can we hope that the habit of literary reading will survive if it doesn’t?

What I hope to do in this book, then, is provide a fine-grain analysis of popular literary culture where mass media and literary reading are not mutually opposed but interdependent experiences, crucial associated tastes that tell us more about how people who consider themselves readers actually come to their literary experiences, which are no longer restricted to the solitary act of reading a book. The NEA report uses the term “literary reading” liberally but attempts no such fine distinctions, preferring to use it as an all-encompassing category, “including popular genres such as mysteries, as well as contemporary and classic literary fiction. No distinctions were drawn in the quality of literary work” (2). Yet within popular literary culture, qualitative distinctions are relentlessly drawn in regard to both marketing and connoisseurship. The adaptation films that have dominated the Academy Awards have been winners of Man Booker, PEN Faulkner, and Pulitzer Prizes and advertised as such—anything but the mere genre fiction that serves as the basis for action pictures based on novels by the likes of John Grisham or Robert Ludlum. Those qualitative distinctions depend on a very particular sort of “literacy.” The uses of this word are obviously wide-ranging and polyvalent, from relatively “neutral” conceptions of literacy defined as the ability to read, to highly charged conceptions of the term that make literacy into a kind of shorthand for a particular theory of education. Debates have swirled around E. D. Hirsch’s notion of cultural literacy since the eighties, but the battles that raged over literary canons have in recent years given way to an even wider struggle over the question

of a “national curriculum.” The conflicts between opposing definitions of what constitutes cultural or critical literacy continue to invest the word “literacy” with a host of preconceptions about what should or shouldn’t be learned, by practically everyone, at virtually any age level. I want to come at the question of literacy from another angle—what does the transformation of certain forms of literary reading into popular culture suggest about popular literacy, specifically in terms of what readers are now lead to believe they need to know in order to be culturally literate, not by E. D. Hirsch and company, but by television book clubs, superstore bookshops, mall movie adaptations, and literary bestsellers? In her seminal work on early childhood literacy, Lillian Katz argues compellingly that we need to focus on what shapes the *disposition to be a reader* if we hope to get a clearer picture of what animates lifetime reading. In much the same way, I believe we need to develop a far more sophisticated understanding of what shapes the disposition for literary reading among readers who don’t have to, the postcollegiate or noncollegiate readers who read passionately, without a syllabus. What does popular literary culture offer as a payoff for such reading? “The joys of reading” doesn’t really answer the question. If literacy ultimately depends on a set of assumptions about what is worth knowing, what does popular literary culture promise to deliver, since it provides not just the books for everybody, but the reasons for having a literary experience for everybody, in whatever format it may be encountered?

*Who Really Loves Reading?—The Discrediting of the Academy
and Empowering Amateur Readers*

Bringing good books to a mass audience outside the academy is hardly a new development in and of itself. Ambitious public lecture systems and various bookselling gambits thrived during the 1890s, and then became even more elaborate with the introduction of the Book-of-the-Month Club in the late 1920s. The popularization of literary culture that begins in the 1990s, however, involves a far more extensive redefinition of what constitutes a quality reading experience. In *A Feeling for Books* (1997) Janice Radway meticulously details the ways in which the Book-of-the-Month Club brought a new delivery system, direct-mail marketing, to the selling of books and, in the process, challenged existing notions of literary authority as this aggressively “middle-brow” phenomenon scandalized official literary culture. Yet to conceive of Barnes & Noble, Amazon.com, Miramax,

and Oprah Winfrey's Book Club as merely further expansions of middle-brow culture is to fail to recognize just how fundamentally cultural life in the United States has changed during the past decade. The Book-of-the-Month Club had to engage in elaborate rhetorical maneuvers to legitimize its authority in reference to an academy that still reigned supreme as broker of literary value. Radway makes the key point that as she was growing up she read featured selections from the Book-of-the-Month Club that were decidedly noncanonical: "good reads" exemplified by *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Marjorie Morningstar*, and *Gone with the Wind* that formed a category unto itself, not to be confused with high-brow literary fiction. While she defends these club selections that made such an impression on her at the time, she adds that they had no place in her college English classes, where "the only female authors I read were the Brontës, Jane Austen, Emily Dickinson, and Edith Wharton" (349). Radway argues convincingly that "the book club wars were, in sum, a specifically American version of what we now call the mass culture debate" (4). But the "Other" that is mass culture has shifted profoundly within the past decade in terms of its location and, just as important, in terms of who now has the venue and the power to make those brow designations.

Where the Book-of-the-Month Club depended on the identification and promotion of a new class of fiction that could be offered as *good reads* distinctively apart from literary fiction, popular literary culture refunctions the literary novel as a *good read*, insisting that the appreciation of top-shelf fiction, whether it be canonical or contemporary, is possible for the general reader—it's all in how you read them, or, more precisely, what you read them *for*. By the late nineties, literary taste brokers outside the academy could present themselves as superior to an academy that could now simply be ignored, because the priesthood of literature allegedly minted only counterfeit forms of cultural capital that were valueless to real readers in search of a good book unless they could learn to express their expertise in the discourse of passionate reading. Within a thoroughly destigmatized popular literary culture no longer haunted by the original sin of consumerism, those readers could access both the books and the information needed to really appreciate them as aesthetic experiences with a degree of ease that made direct-mail marketing seem antique, and with a degree of confidence that made the academy seem irrelevant.

The popularization of literary reading depends as much on shifts in cultural authority as it does on changes within culture industries. In other

words, popular literary culture came into being not just because Barnes & Noble, Amazon, and the Oprah Book Club appeared on the scene. They did indeed provide new contexts for passionate readers to talk about literary books and form reading communities that didn't feel intimidated by the traditional discourses of literary appreciation. But the robust self-confidence enjoyed by amateur readers could only have occurred during a time when there was a profound loss of faith in professional readers, a loss of confidence in traditional literary authority to say much of anything useful about the joys of reading. According to John Barth, the difficulty of access that distinguished modernist fiction was responsible for "the engenderment of a necessary priestly industry of explicators, annotators, allusion chasers, to mediate between the text and the reader" ("The Literature of Replenishment," 210). Whatever was wrong with modernist fiction, it was taken for granted that professors of English (what he called the Early Christians) and writers of literary fiction were bonded together, engaged in a kind of sacred dialogue in which each confirmed the value of the other.

The use of religious tropes to characterize the exchange between writers and critics exemplifies a longstanding tradition of marking off culture as a transcendent experience within a profane society, an experience that could be enjoyed only by restricting access. Carol Duncan's account of the sacralization of art in nineteenth-century America details the genesis of the rituals that were deemed necessary for a genuine cultural experience to transpire (*Civilizing Rituals*). The museum had to be separated somehow from the marketplace, ideally in a park, in a classical building that signified a temple of the arts, complete with long staircases and lions guarding the grand entrance. Once inside, the appreciation of art was a matter of learning the proper cues and rituals; culture was framed not just by this grandiose structure but by a way of speaking about art that allowed one to converse with it. Duncan cites Benjamin Ives Gilman's *Museum Ideals of Purpose and Method* (1918) as the most influential statement of this doctrine, which insisted that works of art, once they were put in museums, existed for one purpose only—to be looked at as things of beauty.

As he expounded it (sounding much like William Hazlitt almost a century earlier) aesthetic contemplation is a profoundly transforming experience, an imaginative act of identification between viewer and artist. To achieve it, the viewer "must make himself over in the image of the artist, penetrate his intention, think his thoughts, feel with his feelings."

The end result of this is an intense and joyous emotion, an overwhelming and absolutely “serious pleasure” that contains a profound spiritual dimension. Gilman compares it to the “sacred conversations” depicted in Italian Renaissance altarpieces—images in which saints who lived in different centuries miraculously gather together in a single imaginary space to contemplate the Madonna. With this metaphor, Gilman casts the modern aesthete as a devotee of who achieves a kind of secular grace through communion with artistic geniuses of the past—spirits which offer a life-sustaining sustenance. (16–17)

The proper appreciation of literature depended, not surprisingly, on a similar separation from the marketplace, a comparable set of rituals and cues, and a specialized language in order to talk the talk of appreciation of books. The priesthood of English professors Barth refers to performed their duties within the academy, a world just as marked off in spatial terms—the campus as cultural park, featuring its own requisite architecture (various forms of Gothic and neoclassical architecture) for bona fide temples of learning. This priesthood instructed the uninitiated in ritual practices and sophisticated languages needed to express genuine appreciation. This combination of sanctioned sites and appropriate manners of speaking, which had to be learned before one could enter into the sacred conversation, was, in Foucauldian terms, a discursive formation, because it set both the limits and the modalities needed to distinguish between informed and uninformed ways of talking about an aesthetic experience. What distinguished literary works from mere genre fiction was not just a refinement of style, but also the refinement of a certain class of readers who observed the protocols of appreciation, protocols unnecessary for the enjoyment of popular fiction. In other words, the appreciation of literature necessitated a literary culture that stabilized just who could participate, which rituals would serve as the preconditions for the exchange, and which values would serve as the foundation for this community of readers.

The sacred literary conversation, then, was founded on a restriction of access, even as it was seemingly offered to all comers like the masterpieces in the public museum. But the popularization of the literary conversation has depended on the expansion and redefinition of literary culture far beyond its former confines, just as the museums of the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first have labored to significantly reduce the restrictive nature of the aesthetic conversation by making museums ever more user-friendly,

in their search of a broader audience that needed to be reassured that it too could take part in genuine aesthetic experience. The prologue to Harold Bloom's bestselling *How to Read and Why* (2002) exemplifies how literary conversation is now supposed to be conducted. In order to be what Bloom calls an "authentic reader," an academic initiation process is no longer necessary, because "the way we read now partly depends upon our distance, inner or outer, from universities, where reading is scarcely taught as a pleasure, in any of the deeper senses of the aesthetics of pleasure" (22). The villains in this piece are professors, characterized here as a priesthood run amuck, "campus Puritans" who have only deprecated aesthetic values in pursuit of social moralism. Their greatest fault, however, appears to be the insularity of their critical discourse: "Since the universities have empowered such covens as 'gender studies' and 'multiculturalism,' [Samuel] Johnson's admonition becomes 'Clear your mind of academic cant'" (23).

In opposition to these covens, Bloom offers a genuine, rather than pagan, spirituality, founded on the opening of oneself to great literature: "Reading well is best pursued as an implicit discipline; finally there is no method but yourself, when your self has been fully molded. Literary criticism, as I have learned to understand it, ought to be experiential and pragmatic, rather than theoretical" (19). The conversation, though still conceived of as sacred, has become all-embracing: "We read Shakespeare, Dante, Chaucer, Cervantes, Dickens, Proust, and all their peers because they enlarge life. Pragmatically, they have become the Blessing, in its true Yahwistic sense of, 'more life into a time without boundaries.' . . . There is a reader's Sublime, and it seems the only secular transcendence we can ever attain, except for the even more precarious transcendence we call 'falling in love.' . . . Read deeply, not to believe, not to accept, not to contradict, but to learn to share in that *one nature* that writes and reads" (29, emphasis mine). This notion of a oneness that is accessible to all (or at least all who read Bloom) rejects the need for a priesthood and replaces it with the critic who serves as channeler of the Author's voice, who speaks directly, or almost directly, to readers who have opened themselves sufficiently. Reading the classics in this way becomes a veritable museum without walls, because Bloom, as celebrity medium, turns reading into an aesthetic form of self-help therapy: "Reading well is one of the great pleasures that solitude can afford you, because it is, at least in my experience, one of the most healing of pleasures" (14).

Once it has been wrested away from the covens of academe, reading literature is accessible to all, a point made abundantly clear by the celebrity

style magazine *Vanity Fair*. In a regular feature entitled “Night Table Reading,” in which celebrities divulge what they have been reading recently, movie star Sally Field had this to say about Harold Bloom’s *How to Read and Why*: “Bloom is a brilliant writer. Reading this book is like taking a class in comparative literature” (340). The fact that Field doesn’t just like Bloom, she really, really likes him, suggests that the wider audience has indeed been found. Talking the talk of a literary experience requires only a self willing to be opened and the expert channeler who can show you how to improve that self. It’s like a class in comparative literature, but it’s taught by Bloom, a priest who has leapt over the wall and now offers bestselling lessons in reading down at Barnes & Noble. Does this mean that genuine literary culture has begun to develop within the heart of the popular, since even Harold Bloom, or a piece of him, has gotten into bed with movie stars?

What is crucially important here is that Bloom does not begin his advice book with a homily about the joys of reading and then follow up with a list of suggested readings; he begins with this diatribe against professors of literature in order to present personalized reading as the only legitimate authority. For Bloom, loving literature means you must first reject the idea that the theory-besotted academy might retain any kind of authority whatsoever when it comes to knowing why we should read literary works. Within this scenario, amateur and professional readers cannot simply coexist, each in pursuit of their reading pleasures. Literary authority is a zero-sum game—apparently amateur, personal reading cannot lead to transcendent experience as long as the academy retains any shred of validity. It cannot be judged merely misguided; it must be completely invalidated, a covenant that must be avoided at all costs.

I want to examine the recurring versions of this zero-sum game scenario in some detail, because the discrediting of the academy as ultimate arbiter of literary value was a key factor in the legitimizing of the popular literary. I have no desire to present an extensive point-by-point account of the polemical debates between the practitioners of High Theory and the avenging Bloomites. As James Shapiro says so eloquently in his review of Frank Kermode’s book *Pieces of My Mind* (2003): “With the passage of time revisiting battles over narrative theory or whether French thinkers should be treated as allies or enemies offers all the thrill of a World War I regimental history. Granted, if you fought back then, there’s some nostalgia value. If not, however grateful you are for the bravery of others, the trench warfare of English professors seems remarkably pointless” (10). Yet those

battles were not just conducted within the academy. They were also fought throughout the nineties in the trenches of novels by very prominent British and American writers who specialize in the novel of ideas—A. S. Byatt in *Possession* (1990), Richard Powers in *Galatea 2.2* (1995), and Philip Roth in *The Human Stain* (2001). I think it's useful to look at the fictionalizations of this great struggle, since readers of literary fiction were encouraged to believe that nothing less than the future of literary reading depended on who won this Great War. Together they provide a kind of time capsule sampling of the literary culture of the early nineties, before the advent of popular literary culture.

This rage against professors of literature who failed to hold up their end of the sacred conversation was nowhere more obvious, or more strident, than in Byatt's *Possession*. As winner of the Booker Prize and a literary best-seller, it would appear to be the perfect incarnation of what Barth called for a decade before: quality fiction that appeals beyond the realm of the priesthood. As Byatt herself described it: "It's like the books people used to enjoy reading when they enjoyed reading." Yet this restoration of pleasure to the act of reading depends on a thoroughgoing indictment of the professors of English who must learn the errors of their ways before the novel can come to rest. By pairing two sets of lovers, one featuring Victorian poets (Randall Ash and Christabel LaMotte), the other involving late-twentieth-century academics (Maud Bailey and Roland Mitchell), Byatt could hardly have made the opposition between creative and theoretical writing more explicit. In the opening chapters the reader is presented with a panorama of what is alleged to be academic life, complete with scheming professors and sexual cads who specialize in literary theory, exemplified by Fergus Woolf, and grotesque American feminist scholars, such as Leonora Stern, who write articles with such titles as "White Gloves: Blanche Glover: Occluded Lesbian Sexuality in LaMotte." But Byatt was not merely content to lampoon—this operation rescue demanded a conversion process. As Maud and Roland learn about the hidden love story between the Victorian poets through their literary detective work, they become increasingly uncomfortable with themselves as devotees of high theory, especially when they discover that their reading of their work, which is so animated by the politics of gender and sexual preference, appears to be so wrong—an old-fashioned heterosexual romance was the great mystery behind it all.

The reason they get it so wrong, according to Byatt, is that their training has blinded them to the truth: "They were children of a time and culture

that mistrusted love, ‘in love,’ romantic love, romance in toto, and which nevertheless in revenge proliferated sexual language, linguistic sexuality, analysis, dissection, deconstruction, exposure” (458). When Roland eventually comes to realize what his training has blinded him to, he resolves to write differently: “He was writing lists of words. He was writing lists of words that resisted arrangement into sentences of literary criticism or theory. He had hopes—more intimations of imminence—of writing poems but so far had got no further than lists. These were, however, compulsive and desperately important” (467).

To love, and to love literature for the *right* reasons, become completely interdependent in *Possession*. The narrator offers the following intervention late in the novel:

There are readings—of the same text—that are dutiful, readings that map and dissect, readings that hear a rustling of unheard sounds, that count grey little pronouns for pleasure or instructions and for a time do not hear golden or apples. There are personal readings, which snatch for personal meanings, I am full of love, or disgust, or fear, I scan for love or disgust or fear. There are—believe it—impersonal readings—where the mind’s eye sees the line move onwards and the mind’s ear hears them sing and sing. Now and then there are readings that make the hairs on the neck, the non-existent pelt, stand on end and tremble, when every word burns and shines hard and clear and infinite and exact, like stones of fire, like points of stars in the dark—readings when the knowledge of that we *shall know* the writing differently or better or satisfactorily, runs ahead of any capacity to say what we know, or how. (511–12)

Readings animated by theory then are merely dutiful, whether they be structuralist (the counting of grey little pronouns) or poststructuralist (the rustling of unheard sounds). The distinction between personal and impersonal demands greater scrutiny, because it reveals what sort of power relations need to be in effect for Byatt’s sacred conversation between author and reader to be restored. Personal readings are rejected as too dependent on the mood swings of the reader. Impersonal readings, on the other hand, are fundamentally a matter of surrendering to the author and letting the writing overwhelm the reader, who is swept away, enraptured by knowledge that runs “ahead of any capacity to say what we know, or how.” Whether Maud and Roland’s readings are dutiful (as academics it’s all part of their job) or personal (“I read as a committed feminist”) they are both *misread*-

ings. Yet this mini-essay on reading is itself profoundly academic, and raises no hairs on any pelts, existent or nonexistent. While she may avoid, or use only dismissively, the words she associates with feminist and poststructuralist theory, Byatt's Romance is in many ways a fictionalized academic essay about the need for romance and an "impersonal" reader of the novel who will care deeply about such debates. The model reader (in Umberto Eco's sense of the term: the reader who gets all the jokes, recognizes the intertextual references, and can perform the interpretive work called for in a text) remains, despite all of the passionate activity to the contrary, an *academic* impersonal reader, who approves of this idea of hairs rising on the backs of heads and appreciates why the author is laboring so furiously to restore the once and future sacred conversation.

In *Possession* Byatt does not desacralize the literary experience but re-sacralizes it in profoundly nineteenth-century terms. The authentic literary experience is a sacred conversation between romantic author and the reader, here defined as pious listener, helped along by the novelist/critic as ventriloquist/channeler. To read is to surrender to the author, at which point the religious tropes begin to take on overtly erotic aspect. This belief that the author must be surrendered to absolutely for genuine literary experience to be consummated is also the foundation of Richard Powers's novel *Galatea 2.2*. Powers sets his novel on a university campus overrun by theory-poisoned academics who no longer love literature. Its main character is a novelist (named Richard Powers) serving as a humanist-in-residence in a Center for the Study of Advanced Sciences at an American university. When one of the other resident scholars, a cognitive neurologist, suggests that people must envy him, because, as a novelist he must be "king of the cats," he replies: "You're joking. Were maybe. A hundred years ago. It's all movies and lit crit now" (24). For Powers, the primary adversary in this cultural struggle is not Hollywood, however, but what he calls the "lit-critter," a point that becomes most obvious when he visits the English Department: "I watched them up close, the curators of the written word. I moved about them, a 'double agent.' I listened around the mail-boxes, in the coffee room. Criticism had gotten more involuted since I was away. The author was dead, the text-function a plot to preserve illicit privilege, and meaning an ambiguous social construction of no more than sardonic interest" (191). While at the center, Powers becomes intrigued by computer-generated neural networks and a young master's student named A., who is preparing to take the English Department's comprehensive exam. These

twin obsessions begin to interlace when he constructs a sophisticated neural net (a kind of artificial intelligence) that could take the same comprehensive exam that A. will be attempting to pass. His programming of this neural network (which he names Helen) becomes a project in intellectual autobiography as he recounts stories of his father and a favorite professor who taught him how to love literature. Helen as programmable neural net becomes a stand-in for the wished-for A., as well as a projection of his own sensibility, since he has absolute control over what he reads into her. Because A. is besotted with theory, she remains well beyond Powers's control, unlike Helen, who can only be entranced by what Powers chooses to read to her. Literary theory keeps A. from being able to really love literature, and by extension, this novelist. When he fantasizes about a life with A., Powers muses: "We could buy a house. She'd never have to worry about making a living again. I could call New York, tell them I had another book in me after all. She could spend her day living, recovering the pleasure of the text" (255). Here then, as in Byatt's *Possession*, a successful love affair depends on the ability to read for pleasure, which can be accomplished only if youth forsakes the false promises of French poststructuralism.

It does not take a French theorist, or a militant feminist critic, to see a pattern here—novelists insisting on the need to rescue literature from evil critics by asserting the power of the author, to whom readers must submit absolutely if they ever want to really love literature or another human being. This pattern takes on an even more grotesque cast in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (1999). Here in another campus novel, the main character, Coleman Silk, is a classics professor at Athena, a small New England college. Silk is forced into retirement when he is accused of making a racist comment in class. The misunderstanding snowballs into full-scale character assassination, and Silk leaves Athena, shamed and furious about this miscarriage of justice. The real villain of the novel is, however, a French poststructuralist named Delphine Roux, a feminist critic who embodies all the evils of literary theory. In an extended chapter entitled "What Maniac Conceived It?" Zuckerman delves into Delphine's psyche. She is a well-published academic and the walking-talking embodiment of poststructuralist theory, but she too has a guilty secret—she actually hates the stuff, ashamed by "the discrepancy between how she must deal with literature in order to succeed professionally and why first she came to literature." Roth frames that self-betrayal in terms of how she feels about Milan Kundera, whom she saw lecture in France:

Kundera's intention in his lectures was to free the intelligence from the French sophistication, to talk about the novel as having something to do with human beings and the *comédie humaine*; his intention was to free his students from the tempting traps of structuralism and formalism and the obsession with modernity, to purge them of the French theory that they had been fed, and listening to him had been an enormous relief, for despite her publications and growing scholarly reputation, it was always difficult for her to deal with literature through literary theory. (276)

These indictments of the academy all depend on a profound sense of nostalgia for what literary culture *used to be*—a time when professors and writers were bonded together, sharing the same values, respecting the sanctity of the words of the author. In short, these books attempt to restore the literary culture of the sixties, a time before the fall into theory perhaps, but also the period Barth describes in terms of exhaustion and insularity, the very period when the writing and reading of literary fiction was becoming so dangerously self-enclosed that Barth believed it had no future unless the readership of literary fiction could be opened up to a far broader audience. In the scenarios dramatized with such gusto by Byatt, Powers, and Roth, critics and authors try to kill each off in the center ring, but amateur readers don't even enter the picture, except as an abstract concept one needs to endorse from time to time—those little people out there somewhere, who just love to read. By now, this scenario seems like ancient history.

"Readers Are Artists Too, You Know": The Empowerment of Amateur Readers

The pleasures of the literary experience in the contemporary period are not confined to a one-on-one relationship between author and reader, no matter how eroticized that relationship is imagined to be by these novelists. The most substantial difference between then and now is not that the old mutual admiration society broke down because professors of literature no longer wanted to engage in the same sacred conversation. The turmoil that resulted from that breakdown did indeed result in a loss of confidence in those professional readers to identify the really good books and determine what the goals of reading literary fiction should be. Yet the most profound difference between the current situation and what Byatt and company thought of as the good old days is the rejection of the sacred conversation altogether; a new *secularized* conversation about books has changed the power relations within

the triangular relationship between author, critic, and reader far more expansively than any of the internecine warfare within traditional literary culture, because in this conversation readers are capable of becoming authors of their own reading pleasure (assuming the right sort of instruction).

Within this radically secularized conversation, the new cast of curators and readers talk about books in ways that are meaningful to amateur readers and have the media technologies at their disposal to make their conversations into robust forms of popular entertainment in the form of television book clubs, the Listmania scene at Amazon.com, or a new wave of guidebooks for amateur readers authored by university professors and literary critics: Thomas C. Foster's *How to Read Novels Like a Professor* (2008), Edward Mendelson's *The Things That Matter: What Seven Classic Novels Have to Say about the Stages of Life* (2006), John Mullen's *How Novels Work* (2006), John Sutherland's *How to Read a Novel: A User's Guide* (2006), Arnold Weinstein's *Recovering Your Story: Proust, Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner, Morrison* (2006), and John Wood's *How Fiction Works* (2008). These guidebooks all promote a highly pragmatic approach to literary reading and address an audience of passionate amateur readers by staking out a new cultural space where a different kind of book talk takes place. The author in these new conversations is paradoxically both enormously important and an algebraic function. On the one hand, authors are seemingly restored to their former glory as literary gods, nowhere more vividly than in literary bio-pics like *Shakespeare in Love*, *Finding Neverland*, and *The Hours*, or in literary bestsellers like *Author, Author* and *The Master*. On the other hand, they also function as this month's "x," furnishing the *pretext* to the *really* important conversation conducted by readers, who are encouraged to give them significance in their *own* lives, or as the *pretext* to spectacular film or television adaptations that really visualize the pleasures of the written word, or as a *pretext* to contemporary novels of manners that update Austen or James or Forster.

The popularization of literary reading hinges on forms of personalization that were unimaginable within traditional notions of reading-as-personal-journey, because they impose a new set of power relations that make adaptability and incorporation the highest priorities. Just how different these power relations are within this new triangular relationship between Author, Critic, and Reader is exemplified in paradigmatic form by a comment made by Robert Hamlin, one of the English professors who served as a resident advisor for Oprah's Book Club during "A Summer of Faulkner." In "Faulkner 101," in an entry entitled "Make the Story Your

Own,” Hamlin offers the following advice: “Faulkner prizes active, not passive readers. And what a compliment Faulkner’s novels pay to the energetic reader, intelligent, enthusiastic readers! ‘Join me as a partner in creativity,’ he says. ‘Help me discover and order and understand the story. Think of these characters and actions what you will. Interpret the story for yourself. Write your own ending.’ Readers are artists, too, you know.”

Readers have indeed become artists in the popular literary, and the ascription of these sentiments to the Author who needs, and welcomes, *our* help in creating the story suggests a shift in authority, at every corner of that triangle. This power to function as cocreator has to be authorized by a new sort of cultural authority who can extend the franchise of genuine aesthetic appreciation to amateur readers. Hamlin, as resident academic critic, is not busy killing off authors—he is a spokesman for the author but, just as important, an advocate for amateur readers. They are made to feel essential, because within this critical discourse the experience of great literature cannot be completed without their very personal readings. One can hardly imagine Byatt, Powers, or Roth conceiving of their readers as their “partners”—ventriloquist’s dummies, maybe, but certainly not cocreators free to write their own endings. Had I suggested to the professor who taught the modern fiction course I took as an undergraduate that Faulkner needed me to complete *The Sound and the Fury*, she would have probably called Campus Security, convinced that I was criminally insane. When it comes to making meaning in literary texts, the “politics of the personal” has begun to resonate in very different ways across the lines that used to distinguish professional from amateur readers. The fact that very prominent literary authors now issue public statements that affirm the power of the amateur reader is exemplified quite vividly by the title of the article Toni Morrison contributed to the “Summer Reading Issue” of *O: The Oprah Magazine*—“The Reader as Artist”: “The words on the page are only half the story, says Toni Morrison. The rest is what you bring to the party” (174).

This fluidity in regard to just who is responsible for making texts meaningful is, of course, hardly a revelation. Ironically, one of the central tenets of the demonized French theory was that the pleasure of the text was not there in the “work itself” but was produced by the act of reading—the reader was an equal player in making the text meaningful and pleasurable. Roland Barthes’s articulation of this dynamic process in *The Pleasure of the Text* was enormously influential within the academy, but the reader in question was Barthes himself, professional reader extraordinaire, and the rarefied nature

of that pleasure was never in doubt. Over the next three decades scholars working within the realm of reception studies greatly expanded both range of readers involved and the sorts of meanings they generated, particularly in regard to romance novels or popular television series. But within popular literary culture, the empowerment of the reader is not a critical project undertaken by critics attempting to uncover what has hitherto been ignored by literary criticism. The fully empowered reader is a given—why else would they be passionate readers if they weren't making books meaningful, and pleasurable, on their own terms?

The title of Arnold Weinstein's *Recovering Your Story: Proust, Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner, Morrison* (2006) epitomizes the degree to which this empowerment depends on redefining the relationship between author and reader in a new sort of special—but not sacred—conversation. The authors could hardly be more prominent in the title, but the “your” in *Your Story* belongs to the reader. Weinstein says in his preface that these novels are essential to him: “I need great books, have always needed them, for it is in these novels (that I read and teach and write about) that I find my own voice. . . . I realize ever more clearly that these novels tell my story as much as tell theirs. . . . In them you will encounter, in ways that you could not have anticipated, versions of yourself, enactments of your own story.” This book about how these masterpieces of modernist literature should be read is “a guidebook of sorts, a personal tour of these rich and varied fictional worlds and it is meant to open them up, to make you realize how intimate and hospitable and mirror-like they are—rather than how daunting or inaccessible they may appear” (x). For it to succeed as a guidebook to the pleasures of reading novels that we have been led to believe are opaque to the uninitiated, the triangular conversation must do more than make them more hospitable: “How, then, can I be surprised that these writers speak me every bit as much as I speak them? In writing this book, in reflecting consciously on the personal hold these novels have on me, I have wanted to make that special conversation—between them and me, between the book and the reader—audible” (xii).

Appreciating why this new special conversation must be made “audible,” resonating far beyond solitary reading or classroom discussion is the key to understanding popular literary culture, because it is only when it becomes robustly audible that reading literary fiction can thrive as a form of mass entertainment. For Weinstein, making it audible is a matter of articulating the unsaid in order for the amateur reader to appreciate the insights these

novels offer, but making those lessons audible is also a matter of giving value to another way of reading literary fiction that acquires validity only when it is audible on a grand enough scale to overcome any doubts about its superiority in accomplishing the real purpose of reading.

The various outreach strategies that museums throughout the world have utilized so vigorously may take art to the people, but taking literary fiction to the people involves a different set of cultural transactions. Where the art museum may reach out, the art stays on the premises. It may go home in the form of refrigerator magnets, mouse pads, or umbrellas, but there's no doubt about where the original has to remain. The gift shops may grow ever larger, but the consumer space remains more or less distinct from the gallery space. Taking literary books to the people is a more complicated process, because once they begin to circulate outside the temples of learning, outside the "gallery" space of the classroom and the *New York Times Book Review*, literary novels circulate through places like Barnes & Noble superstores, Amazon Web sites, television book clubs, and the local multiplex, where there are no hard-and-fast boundaries between cultural space and consumer space. The "art" and the "paraphernalia" sit side by side, and since the outreach comes from outside, its strategies and ultimate impact are harder to assess. This is not to suggest that taste distinctions are no longer made within those locations. On the contrary, the absence of physical boundaries has led to the creation of elaborate taste distinctions sanctioned by authorities who, to use Pierre Bourdieu's term, *consecrate* certain forms of consumer activity as cultural pleasures. His account of the ways in which traditional literary culture distinguished itself from what he calls the public at large provides an extremely useful template that can be modified to account for the hybridization of those categories within popular literary culture. Just how dichotomous those categories were formerly imagined to be is exemplified by his distinction between *restricted* and *large-scale* cultural production:

In contrast to the field of large-scale cultural production, which submits to the laws of competition for the conquest of the largest possible market, the field of restricted production tends to develop its own criteria for the evaluation of its products, thus achieving the truly cultural recognition accorded by the peer group whose members are both privileged clients and competitors. . . . From 1830 literary society isolated itself in an aura of indifference and rejection towards the buying public, i.e., towards the

“bourgeois.” By an effect of circular causality, separation and isolation engender further separation and isolation, and cultural production develops a dynamic autonomy. (115)

It is significant that the progress of the field of restricted cultural production towards autonomy is marked by an increasing distinct tendency of criticism to devote itself to the task, not of producing the instruments of appropriation . . . but of providing a “creative” interpretation for the benefit of the creators. And so “mutual admiration societies” grew up, closed in upon their own esotericism, as, simultaneously signs of a new solidarity between artist and critic emerged. (116)

Thus it also includes the objective relations between producers and different agents of legitimation, specific institutions such as academies, museums, learned societies[;] . . . these authorities consecrate a certain type of work and a certain type of cultivated person. These agents of consecration may, moreover, be organizations which are not fully institutionalized: literary circles, critical circles, salons, and small groups surrounding a famous author or associating with a publisher, a review, or literary or artistic magazine. (121)

To recast Bourdieu’s distinctions in reference to the current situation, popular literary culture depends on the development of another field *between* restricted and large-scale production, in which the delivery systems for literary experiences become increasingly large-scale, but the mechanisms of taste distinction appear to grow ever more intimate as reading taste becomes ever more personalized. The increases in scale secured by conglomeration allow for an unprecedented interdependency of the publishing, film, and television industries, which can reach that “public at large” wherever it may be with ever greater proficiency, but that culture also has its own “agents of legitimation,” its own authorities, which consecrate the buying of books and the viewing of film and television adaptations as a genuinely literary experience distinct from mere consumer experience. All of this depends on new mutual admiration societies that revolve around cultivated, *ordinary* readers, whose love of the literary experience, in whichever media they encounter it, now serves as the basis for a new form of cultural production, positioned squarely between the academy and the conglomerate entertainment industry, and is shaped massively by both.

The promotion for Mary Ann Shaffer’s and Annie Barrow’s *The Guernsey*

Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society (2008) exemplifies this phenomenon neatly. The novel details what happens when a well-known author begins corresponding with members of a rural literary society following the Second World War, and a quotation from one of their letters is featured in bold print on the dust jacket: “Perhaps there is some secret homing instinct in books that brings them to their perfect readers.” There were evidently more than enough of these perfect readers to make this novel a surprise literary best-seller, but how did potential readers know if they were the perfect readers for this novel? If they went to Amazon to find out more about this unusual title and checked out the customer reviews to see if the readers talking about the book in ways that made them feel as if they too were one of those perfect readers, they would have encountered a review entitled “For Lovers of Literature and Life” by Susan Schooniver, a customer review from the Amazon Vine™ program. By clicking on “What’s This?” I learned a great deal about how consecration worked for this reading community at Amazon, particularly in terms of how a mutual admiration society of ordinary readers thrives, and how culture and commerce are configured accordingly:

Amazon Vine™ is a program that enables a select group of Amazon customers to post opinions about new and pre-release items to help their fellow customers make educated purchase decisions. Customers are invited to become Amazon Vine™ Voices based on the trust they have earned in the Amazon community for writing accurate and insightful reviews. Amazon provides Amazon Vine™ members with free copies of products that have been submitted to the program by vendors. Amazon does not influence the opinions of Amazon Vine™ members, nor do we modify or edit their reviews.

The goal here is the “educated purchase decision,” a distinction made possible only through the agency of select readers who have earned the trust of a community of like-minded readers and are thereby empowered to consecrate accordingly, with some help from Amazon, which makes it possible for these reader/customers to find one another. These crucial distinctions are apparently untainted by commodity relations, yet that expertise is used to promote a literary bestseller about the joys of deeply personalized reading, for a global market.

Sanctioning particular forms of book buying, blockbuster film viewing, and television chat show watching as aesthetic experiences depends upon intermediaries who can talk the talk of loving literature within that

arena and enforce those distinctions while promoting their own rhetoric of quality. That conversation, however, doesn't just spontaneously occur somewhere out there beyond the sacred groves of academe where literary reading, self-discovery, information technologies, and consumerism all just spontaneously intersect. Those "secret homing instincts" get a lot of help. Tracing the permutations of this popular curatorship will be one of the central concerns of the next two chapters, but that discussion rests on another messy, unruly question that must be posed, because it goes straight to the heart of popular literary culture. This passionate reading, this longing for literacy, is obviously animated by some sort of self-cultivation project, because it isn't compulsory homework—but where does this urge come from, and how can we begin to describe it in ways that go beyond banal generalizations? And if all this occurs outside the realm traditionally sanctioned for the proper appreciation of things aesthetic, just where does it take place? And how have the publishing, television, film, and computer industries transformed that desire for self-cultivation into an extremely lucrative market?