

Part I

**THE NEW
INFRASTRUCTURE
OF READING**

*Sites, Delivery Systems,
Authorities*

THE END OF CIVILIZATION (OR AT LEAST CIVILIZED READING) AS YOU KNOW IT

*Barnes & Noble, Amazon.com,
and Self-Cultivation*

How well do you remember that, say, six-hundred-pager the *Times* assured you was destined to become a classic? You know. The “monumental work of fiction” that you were supposed to run, not walk to the nearest bookstore to purchase, the book that was going to change your life, that you must read this year if you read nothing else . . . *Winner of the National Book Award*. . . We sell these babies for fifty cents apiece, or try to, seven years after they come out. We sell them because no one has checked them out for four years.

—Jincy Willett, *Winner of the National Book Award* (2003)

They’re gonna hate us at the beginning, but we’ll get them in the end. . . . In the meantime, we might as well put up a sign, Coming Soon: a Fox Books Superstore, the End of Civilization as You Know it.

—Nora Ephron, *You’ve Got Mail* (1999)

At least, she thinks, she does not read mysteries or romances. At least she continues to improve her mind. Right now she is reading Virginia Woolf. . . . She, Laura, likes to imagine (it’s one of her most closely held secrets) that she has a touch of brilliance herself, just a hint of it, though she knows most people probably walk around with similar hopeful suspicions curled up inside them, never divulged. She wonders, while she pushes a cart through the supermarket or has her hair done, if other

women aren't thinking, to some degree or other, the same thing: Here is the brilliant spirit, the woman of sorrows, the woman of transcendent joys, who would rather be elsewhere.

—Michael Cunningham, *The Hours* (1998)

I begin this chapter with these three quotations, one drawn from a best-selling novel featuring a librarian as its narrator, one from a popular film about a romance between bookstore owners, and another from a bestselling prize-winning novel turned into an extremely successful film, because they reveal so much about conflicting but interdependent aspects of popular literary culture in the United States. In the first, a self-professed, “omnivorous reader” summarily rejects the authority of America’s premier taste-making newspaper, the New York literary culture that it embodies, and the entire taste culture responsible for determining what is, and isn’t, *significant* fiction. Yet this novel is far from a simple “let them read what they like” rant, since this librarian is full of advice about what should be read, and all too aware of the relationship among reading, literary value, and the book market, a point made quite vividly by the title of the novel, which literalizes that interdependency—*Winner of the National Book Award*. If the award signifies achievement *and* marketability, why not make the sticker on the front cover into the title of the novel? At this point, just what constitutes significant fiction appears to be up for grabs—is it in the craft of the fiction, or the way that it has been evaluated and promoted within a particular taste culture? The business of literary taste production and the business of selling books appear to be thoroughly interdependent, because, according to this particular *Winner of the National Book Award*, buying the book is buying into the authority of an evaluative system that can no longer be trusted when it comes to the pleasures of reading.

If avid readers can no longer trust the *New York Times* about what to read, where they go to actually buy books has become just as problematic. The bookstore has been undergoing a highly visible image change in recent years within the public imagination. In *You’ve Got Mail* (1999), characters played by Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan manage to fall in love despite the fact that they own rival bookstores, and in *Notting Hill* (2000) two more “A-list” movie stars, Julia Roberts and Hugh Grant, manage to somehow do the same, despite the fact that she’s a Hollywood megastar and he owns a modest little bookshop. Struggling but devastatingly attractive bookstore owners seem

to have replaced the starving young artist as the epitome of romantic cultural chic, embodying a sweet, but nonetheless, comical earnestness in their disdain of the marketplace for the pursuit of higher cultural ideals. That two such high-profile films should make bookstores one of their primary locations for falling in love suggests that bookstores now fulfill different cultural functions for a mass audience. Yet there is trouble in paradise—the bookstore may have acquired a degree of sexiness that has heretofore escaped the notice of the public at large, but they are also a battleground where the forces of legitimate and illegitimate culture clash by night, and day, or at least from 9:00 A.M. to 11:00 P.M., seven days a week. The proliferation of Barnes & Noble and Borders superstores has been widely reported in the press and roundly denounced as the ruination of smaller “real” bookstores, which have either already gone out of business or live in constant fear of eventual annihilation. So important are these real bookstores to the sanctity of a genuine literary experience that even the character played by Tom Hanks (the owner of the bookstore chain that is clearly modeled on Barnes & Noble) acknowledges the resistance his new superstore will encounter when it opens on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, admitting that such stores signal the end of civilization within this notoriously literary neighborhood in Manhattan. But why should a bookstore, of all things, signal the end of *civilization*?

The quotation from *The Hours* (1998), which describes what the “incessant reader” Laura Brown hopes to achieve in her reading, suggests something else—despite the runaway commercialization of bookselling and the loss of faith in traditional literary authority, there is still a persistent need to experience some kind of aesthetic pleasure that only literary fiction offers, even to nonprofessional readers. Cunningham’s characterization of Laura as *driven* reader (which echoes so neatly the ethnographic accounts of actual reading group members discussed below) is paradigmatic—she is not a genre reader, she is in search of self-cultivation hoping to improve her mind, and her reading allows her to separate herself from mind-numbing quotidian concerns even while immersed in them at the supermarket. She experiences her own brilliance as she reads, because she senses that she and Woolf are kindred spirits, their shared sensibility allowing her to occupy a “twilight zone of sorts: a world composed of London in the twenties, of a turquoise hotel room, and of this car, driving down this familiar street. She is herself and not herself. She is a woman in London, an aristocrat, pale and charming, a little false: she is Virginia Woolf; and she is this other

inchoate, tumbling thing known as herself, a mother, a driver, a swirling streak of pure life like the Milky Way . . ." (187). The three main characters in Cunningham's novel—Laura Brown, Virginia Woolf, and Clarissa Vaughan—all share remarkably similar perceptions and emotions, but what is particularly significant in this regard is that Laura, as the incessantly reading suburban housewife, shares the same rarified sensibility as the great Author and the New York literary editor. Reading is as formative and *transformative* for Laura, the amateur reader, as writing and editing are for the professional literary types—the sensitivity of the reading makes it coequal with the sophisticated production of those words.

As such, Laura Brown may well serve as a kind of patron saint for the millions of nonacademic readers who form the rank and file of the contemporary popular literary culture, but with an essential caveat. She represents the prehistory of the popular literary because she is a solitary reader, adrift in a suburban wasteland, desperate to “only connect,” but able to find kindred spirits only in Woolf and her character Mrs. Dalloway. The Laura Browns of the contemporary literary scene are a well-targeted audience, catered to aggressively by divisions of the publishing, television, and film industries, who are desperate to connect with her, eager to provide her with the means by which she can connect with armies of like-minded readers circulating in those same supermarkets and superstores. Laura could only connect with Mrs. Dalloway via her local library copy of the book; contemporary readers can become one with Laura by buying Cunningham's novel, but they can also become one with an imagined community of like-minded passionate readers if they buy *Bookclub-In-A-Box Discusses the Novel The Hours by Michael Cunningham*. Laura Brown floated through stores in the suburban America of 1947 trying to anesthetize herself to the banality around her; the Laura Browns of the early twenty-first century float through suburban discount stores like Target, where they encounter *The Hours* on Recommended Books end-cap displays. Within this consumer environment, literary books obviously occupy a very different place, but their appearance as featured books in the discount store points to an established audience, which itself suggests a widespread desire for an aesthetic experience, which is dramatically apart from the very space where you buy the book.

Taken together, the three quotations at the start of this chapter are representative of the changing infrastructure of popular literary culture and the fact that those changes have become the subject *of* popular culture. On the

one hand, they suggest that widespread changes are under way in terms of who, or what, counts as an authority on the pleasures of reading and where those pleasures are to be found. While they reflect significant contestation about how this popular literary culture should define itself, outside the confines of the academy, the New York literary scene, and *real* bookstores that used to serve as its outposts across the rest of the country, the need to find a specific type of cultural fix appears undeniable for individuals who describe their reading in terms of an addiction for that which is ultimately civilizing. Laura Brown's reading is driven by a desire to improve her mind through her amateur reading, which would seem an unassailable virtue, but these self-cultivation projects pursued outside the academy have met with as much condemnation as celebration, nowhere more obviously in the wildly differing accounts of the benefits of the Oprah Winfrey Book Club, which I will explore in greater detail in the next chapter. How indeed do these changes mark the end of civilization as we know it, in regard to what civilization might consist of as process of self-cultivation, and in regard to how we come to know it or, more specifically, how we come to know how to acquire it?

The goal of this chapter is to gain a more subtle understanding of those readers who used to be called common readers but are more often called avid or passionate readers, now that they are defined in terms of the intensity of their desire rather than their lack of refinement. These readers may be described, with equal accuracy, as a target audience, a reading community with its own interpretive protocols, and a reading formation. I believe it is only by incorporating all three of these alternative definitions that we can learn just who is doing this reading, for what purposes, talking what sort of literary talk, catered to by what new delivery systems, and guided by which cultural authorities. In her ground-breaking work on reading groups (1992), Elizabeth Long stresses the social infrastructure of reading, arguing that "the ideology of the solitary reader suppresses recognition of the infrastructure of literacy and the social and institutional determinants of what's available to read, what is 'worth reading,' and how to read it" ("Textual Interpretation," 193). In her interviews with members of a variety of different book clubs she found that contemporary literary fiction and the classics were the most frequent choices, because they had the greatest potential for discussability, but their discussions were animated by a different kind of evaluative criteria, their own way of *talking the talk* of books.

Their independence flows from their “uses” of literature. Because these readers incorporate books into their lives primarily as special life-experiences, they often judge them according to their non-literary lives. While literary critics have, at least until recently, aspired to pure or disinterested aesthetic judgment, reading group members are “interested” readers: they are looking for not only a “good reading” but meaningful and pleasurable experiences from books and literary discussions. Thus “discussability,” the very term that gears most reading groups into a traditional evaluative framework, also distances them from it. (“The Book,” 312)

That “interested” readers would consider “discussability” the preeminent criterion for selecting books reveals just how tightly imbricated personal and social pleasures are within popular literary culture. To return to the distinctions made by A. S. Byatt in her novel *Possession*, which were discussed in the introduction, these are relentlessly personal readings, in the sense that books take on value only when they are introjected into the lives of readers, not the impersonal readings she prefers, where readers surrender themselves to the voice of the Author and check their personal lives at the door before entering. But “personal” does not mean solitary, or isolated. Because of their relative independence from the academic modes of literary analysis, these textual communities, then, are also distinct interpretive communities that give reading literary fiction a particular use value. Janice Radway has argued convincingly that this term (first developed by Stanley Fish to describe the ways that different literary critics could produce radically divergent interpretations of the same poems depending on the critical approach or community they were affiliated with) can be used to describe the *variable literacies* that give different values to reading inside and outside the academy (“Interpretive Communities”). But where the readers of romance fiction that Radway interviewed developed their own sort of literacy to enjoy *nonliterary* genre fiction on its own terms, the pleasures that nonacademic readers derive from reading literary fiction involves another kind of variant literacy, one that is shaped by elements drawn from reading protocols of both academic and popular interpretive communities.

These reading communities do not magically coalesce out of thin air—finding the titles worth reading, knowing how to talk about them, even knowing if you are a reader intended to read this sort of book all depend on an infrastructure. Tony Bennett’s notion of a *reading formation* is particularly

useful for understanding how all these factors coalesce to form something more than just a community of like-minded readers who have somehow managed to find one another and the sort of books they like to talk about together: “By reading formation I mean a set of discursive and intertextual determinations which organize and animate the practice of reading, connecting texts and readers in specific relations to one another by constituting readers as reading subjects of particular types and texts as objects-to-be-read in particular ways” (“Texts in History,” 7). The community, then, is not just an audience or a community but a set of interconnections in which the desire for a certain kind of reading pleasure becomes hardwired into a literary culture. The Laura Browns of 2004 could “talk directly” to author Michael Cunningham if they signed up for his online course “A Home at the End of the World,” at the University of Barnes & Noble. This connection between reader and author is made possible by the conflation of retail store and institution of “higher learning.” At this point, the role of the superstore bookstore, publishers’ reading guides, and television book clubs all become vital constitutive elements of an extended reading community that is simultaneously a target audience, consolidated as much by the type of questions posed in book club courses at the University of Barnes & Noble as by the “Customers Who Bought *The Hours* Also Bought” appeals at Amazon.com.

Any investigation of the sites that are provided to reading communities so they may proliferate online and via superstores necessarily involves a parallel investigation of their “architecture” and of the new forms of connoisseurship that circulate there. Steven Johnson has used the term “curatorial culture” to describe the importance of the chooser/repackager within the world of online music file accessing, the refined sensibility that sorts through the excess and is able to deliver what “they know you’ll like”: “Historically, the world of commercial music has been divided between musicians and listeners, but there’s a group in the middle: people with great taste in music—the ones who made great that brilliant mix for you in college that are still listening to you. They’re curators, not creators, brilliant at assembling new combinations of songs rather than generating them from scratch.” To pursue this analogy within traditional literary culture, once there were authors and readers and official critics who were sanctioned to make the right choices for you, only now that sensibility is regarded with disdain because so many avid readers no longer trust the *New York Times Book Review*, any more than they would an allegedly theory-besotted academy to

find them a good read. Other sorts of master curators have entered the picture, not surprisingly since knowing what you like—to drink, eat, wear, sit on, watch, decorate—has become a thriving form of popular culture in virtually every arena of what used to be thought of as elite taste. Accessing books depends every bit as much on accessing the expertise needed to read books from an informed position outside the realm of the classroom. Is this search for the necessary expertise just a traditional form of connoisseurship, being made available by emergent information technologies, or is this a twenty-first-century form of connoisseurship that depends on new technologies of access and new technologies of taste acquisition that empower amateur readers, listeners, and viewers to assume the role of curators of their own archives?

Since the taste arbiters who can be trusted by passionate amateur readers are found outside the academy, popular literary culture depends upon the convergence of literary and consumer experiences, an encounter that has generated widespread debate about the possible outcome of such a dalliance between partners who formerly kept a reproachful distance from each other. The pleasures of reading have traditionally been set in direct opposition to consumerism and the various forms of “mass culture” that emanate from it. The posters that used to hang in my local public library crystallize this dichotomy perfectly: one read “Fight Prime Time—Read a Book.” To read was to educate oneself; to watch advertiser-driven television was the antithesis of that pure experience unsullied by the concerns of the marketplace. The vestiges of such purity, the very apartness of reading as private communion of mind and fine literature, have become a distinguishing feature of the popular literary, since the pleasures it offers must be distinguished somehow from the emptiness of *mere* consumerism, even while the accessibility of those pleasures is due to the increasing commodification of high-end cultural experiences. On the face of it, the superstore, the Web site, and television book club would appear to have replaced, or at least significantly diminished, the power of the public library and librarian as sources of pure knowledge about books. Yet the successful hybridization of aesthetic and consumer pleasures has been realized by introducing a *library factor* within the marketplace—the impression that popular curators, and even the bookstore chains, are determined to deliver the *goods* of genuine culture (goods in terms of the items themselves, as well as the benefits they contain) as a kind of public service, either without vested interests or with

the most admirable vested interests, which serve that public good. In order to appreciate the complexity of this interplay between financial and cultural profit motives, we need to reexamine the taken-for-granted in this age-old dichotomy, because the acquisition of culture—where and how we get it, and why we should want “it” in the first place—has an extremely complicated history, which reveals many of the central tensions that have shaped American culture over the past two centuries.

Acquiring Culture in the Marketplace: The Back Story

In her landmark study *The Making of Middle-Brow Culture* (1992), Joan Shelley Rubin seizes on the value of self-cultivation and details how it became such a widespread cultural disposition. She begins by citing a letter written to the *Ladies Home Journal* in 1906, in which the reader asked how she might “start to obtain culture.” The woman wrote, “I have plenty of time and a good library at my disposal, but no money to employ teachers.” Their resident critic, Hamilton Wright Mabie, responds: “Read only the best books.” Rubin identifies the crucial assumptions at play in this exchange: “[That] culture could be dissociated from wealth, that it could be acquired; that the process of doing so entailed reading certain books and avoiding others; that becoming cultured required time; that cultured individuals commanded deference from those who timidly ‘ventured’ to join their company” (1). She argues compellingly that until the early nineteenth century, “not only was genteel culture compatible with wealth, it depended on it—because the pursuit of refinement was expensive.” This interdependency of cultivation and wealth made culture into something inherited, like property. Extending the old adage “A gentleman never buys furniture, he simply brings something down from the attic,” “culture” worked in much the same way—it came with the patrimony, and who could afford to buy quality furniture anyway, except the genteel class? The acquisition of cultivation that became possible for a rapidly expanding middle-class audience in the nineteenth century depended on making culture into commodity forms that could be purchased by the people who, in effect, had no attics—to become cultured inevitably meant becoming a consumer of cultural goods one didn’t already possess. In his masterful study of this period, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets and Class at the Turn of the Century* (1996), Richard Ohman details the complex transactions that occurred, arguing that “a central need of people who be-

came readers of *Cosmopolitan*, the *Ladies Home Journal* and the rest was to fix their bearings in the new fluid social space of that moment, and to do so to their social advantage” (220).

This balance between cultural and consumer experience was complicated by the increasing tendency to associate genuine cultivation with *inner virtue* and to set this new pairing in direct opposition to materialism. This uncoupling of wealth and cultivation led to profound suspicions about the rampant materialism generated by the Industrial Revolution. Once uncoupled from inherited wealth, the acquisition of culture had to be monitored according to a moral economy that could allow for consumerism but only by recasting it within the terms of a self-cultivation project grounded in the pursuit of “character” untainted by the demands of the marketplace. The chief advocates of this ideology of cultivation were the Harvard moral philosophers (Andrew Norton, William Channing) and the New Haven scholars circulating around Yale College (most especially the college presidents Theodore Dwight Woolsey and Noah Porter). Channing used the term “self-culture” to describe this cultivation in pursuit of virtue, which would counter the base desires and appetites that came from unbridled materialism—an ideal that quickly became hardwired into the liberal arts education within the American academy. Widespread cultivation became increasingly possible by the 1840s, because publishing was becoming an industry with national scope during this decade, due to the introduction of new printing and paper-making technologies that coincided with dramatic improvements in the transportation of goods. Self-cultivation had become a popular phenomenon by the middle of the century because of two interdependent booms—one in publishing and the another in the dissemination of knowledge needed to realize their potential use value, whether it took the form of books about the value of reading the right books, or an elaborate public lecture system that put public oratory in support of this search for character. The concept of self-culture could admit consumerism if it was a carefully guided consumerism that attempted, as Rubin phrases it so succinctly, “to harmonize one’s possessions with one’s nature.”

While this notion of cultivation as pursuit of character held sway until the beginning of the twentieth century, it begins to undergo significant reformulation with the rise of modern consumer culture in America, particularly during the 1920s when, as Rubin argues, *personality* replaces character, and cultivation is uncoupled from moral development. At that point, the academy continues to advocate the value of an education committed to

the development of moral character, counterposed to materialism, and becomes the guardian of what Bourdieu calls “legitimate culture,” ready and eager to play sacred to consumerism’s profane. But the demonization of the marketplace becomes even more pronounced with the rise of modernism, when financial concerns are seen as directly antithetical to the creation of a sophisticated literary culture. Self-cultivation, by the turn of the century, was becoming a mass audience phenomenon fueled by a literary marketplace just as eager to furnish a broad readership with the requisite cultural goods. Yet this audience in search of cultivation was perceived to be even more a threat to all that was good about genuine culture than the mob in search of pulp fiction. Lawrence Rainey, in *The Institutions of Modernism* (27), makes the crucial point that the first reported usage of the term “middle-brow” was in 1906, a clear indication not just of the stratification of reading publics but the perceived need to construct new hierarchies of taste that could delineate quality cultivation from mere book buying. Quality self-cultivation was increasingly conceptualized in modernist terms, primarily because its advocacy of aesthetic autonomy made taste something that could not simply be purchased. A new set of distinctions regarding the acquisition of culture emerged, which recoupled cultivation and inherited wealth in order to avoid what were alleged to be the disastrous effects of the marketplace on the quality of both the books and the readers who consumed them.

The complicated relationships that developed among authors, presses, and readerships as modernist literary culture began to take shape has been explored in compelling ways in Kevin Dettemar’s and Stephen Watt’s collection, *Marketing Modernisms* (1996); Ian Willison’s, Warwick Gould’s, and Warren Chernaik’s *Modernist Writers and the Marketplace* (1996); Lawrence Rainey’s *The Institutions of Modernism* (1998); and Sean Latham’s *Am I a Snob?* (2003). All these studies shed an enormous amount of light on one hitherto ignored question in the history of modernism. There was indeed a very high premium placed on stylistic innovation, which demonstrated, with varying degrees of defiance, a desire to make serious literary work independent of the tastes of a general readership—*but who paid for it?* Dettemar and Watt describe this situation quite succinctly: “According to the models by which most of us were taught modern literature, the title of this volume, *Marketing Modernisms*, seems almost oxymoronic. That is to say, critical accounts of modernism and modernist writing frequently excavate, or are theorized across a chasm or ‘great divide’ between modernism, however multifoliate

its ambitions and productions, and the larger marketplace” (1). How did Joyce, Eliot, Woolf, and company actually survive as writers before they were assumed into academic heaven? What sort of infrastructure served as the financial foundation for literary production that so gleefully rejected bourgeois reading pleasure and everything that catered to it?

Paul Delaney (“Who Paid for Modernism?”) argues that two interdependent developments in the last two decades of the nineteenth century laid the foundation for a modernist mode of literary production that could be disdainful of commercial interests—the major restructuring of the literary marketplace, and the establishment of what he calls “*rentier* culture,” in which the relationship between inherited wealth and cultivation reemerges within a new patronage system. The near universal literacy achieved in Britain by the end of the 1890s produced a mass market, but other factors made for significant differentiation within that “reading public.”

By the 1890s, a huge expansion of the reading public had swept aside the dominant literary formation of the previous fifty years. . . . Other changes in the literary marketplace included: the recognition of British copyright by the US in 1891; the rise of literary agents in 1890s; the shift from outright sale of literary property to payment by royalty; the fragmentation of novelistic form after the end of the three-decker; and the relaxation of censorship in consequence of the decline of the circulating libraries. These shifts worked together synergistically to create a new literary system, one that conditioned the creative impulses of all literary people and produced complex secondary effects. It is against the background of this new system that we can best understand Pound’s project; not just to “make it new” at the level of the individual work, but also to construct a fully articulated *counter*-system for modernist literary production. (336)

This new system depended on the patronage of the rentier class—a population of individuals of “private means” who lived off the accumulations of previous generations and numbered nearly half a million adults by 1911—certainly large enough, and moneyed enough, to sustain a literary culture unto itself. According to Delaney,

Rentier culture distinguished itself from market-sensitive art by elaborating an ethic of refinement. . . . The art novel assumed a certain leisured sensitivity both in its readers and the characters it represented. Rentier

artists were more likely to have roots in mercantile or financial sectors of the economy; their inherited incomes absolved them from active struggle in the marketplace, but neither were they responsible for a landed estate or local community. Their separation from the market was expressed in the common Victorian term for them, the “independent classes.” (337)

This modernist patronage system is also detailed extensively by Rainey, who, like Delaney, concentrates on the need to create a countersystem outside commodity relations but still somehow involved within it. He argues that “modernism, poised at the cusp of that transformation of the public sphere, responded with a tactical retreat into a divided world of patronage, collecting, speculation, and investment, a retreat that entailed the construction of an institutional counter-space securing a momentary respite from the public realm increasingly degraded, even as it entailed a fatal compromise with precisely that degradation” (*The Institutions of Modernism*, 5). That compromise necessitated a complicated set of commodity relations for literary works. Rainey insists that, rather than conceiving of modernism as a simple rejection of commodification in pursuit of aesthetic autonomy, “it may be that just the opposite would be the more accurate account: that modernism, among other things is a strategy whereby the work of art invites and solicits commodification but it does so in such a way that it becomes a commodity of a special sort, one that is temporarily exempted from the exigencies of immediate consumption prevalent within the larger cultural economy, and instead is integrated into a different economic circuit of exchange” (3).

This notion of literary work as a *commodity of a special sort*, whose self-professed dismissal of commodity relations functions, as it were, as its major selling point, will have a great deal of relevance for my analysis of the literary bestseller in chapter 6, but I want to pursue here this modernist ambivalence toward the book market at the beginning of the century in order to better understand the vestigial force of that countersystem within the popularization of literary culture a century later. In *Am I a Snob?* Sean Latham concentrates on exactly that ambivalence in his analysis of the different sorts of literary snobbery that developed at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. His examination of the various ways Virginia Woolf positioned herself in regard to both the literary marketplace and modernist literary culture reveals a complicated, conflicted relationship toward both. He provides abundant evidence of Woolf’s deter-

mination to link artistic autonomy and aristocratic sensibility, arguing that “Woolf manages to blur the boundaries between the aristocrats of birth and the aristocrats of art, thereby cleverly effecting her own entry into the world of the beau monde. Imagining herself as a member of a small literary nobility constantly under assault by the forces of modernity, she confesses to Lady Ottoline Morrell that ‘I am an aristocrat in writing’” (93). That only the enlightened aristocrat can be free from the taint of the marketplace is consistently elaborated throughout her novel *Orlando*, most obviously in her condemnation of the writer Nick Greene as a middle-brow writer devoted only to acquiring money and fame through his writing, and then even more vehemently in her characterization of Sir Nicholas Greene, now a twentieth-century middle-brow publisher concerned only with what will sell. The character of Orlando incarnates the interdependency of aesthetic sensibility and aristocratic freedom from the marketplace.

Latham finds this same class-specific conception of a genuine literary sensibility in Woolf’s essay “A Room of One’s Own,” since Woolf’s famous call for three hundred pounds a year and a room of her own for aspiring writers “imagines that this money and this room will only be granted to women of Woolf’s own social class. The female children of the upper middle class, who had seen their brothers sent off to public schools and the hallowed halls of Cambridge and Oxford, possess in Woolf’s mind a native sense of autonomy and taste. . . . [T]hey alone possess the ability to record the moment of true freedom when the artist’s mind is suddenly severed from the world about her” (111). That this intelligence is *native* to a specific class, rather than acquired, results in deep reservations about the upwardly mobile middle-class intellectual who is unable to distinguish between genuine and counterfeit forms of cultural capital. She was deeply disappointed in Sackville West, her model for Orlando, when she devotes too much time to dreary women who were “earnest middle-class intellectuals.” This Virginia Woolf would have been horrified by the presumptuousness of a Laura Brown, who imagines as she is reading that she somehow *becomes* Virginia Woolf, since she exemplifies exactly the sort of middle-class intellectual bent on self-improvement that Woolf considered a threat to all things truly literary. (I’m Virginia Woolf, and *you’re not*.) According to Latham, “Woolf employs the aristocratic language of inheritance to describe her own obsession with the fine details of social distinction: ‘The social side is very genuine in me. Nor do I think it reprehensible. It is a piece of jewelry I inherited from my mother’” (65).

Woolf in effect could bring the jewels down from the attic—she didn't need to acquire cultivation any more than she needed to buy jewelry and could live in a world of ideas unsullied by commodity relations.

Despite, or because, of this celebration of an inherited cultured sensibility, *Orlando* became a bestseller, outselling any other title published by Hogarth Press, a concern she ran with her husband, the author Leonard Woolf. While Woolf may have condemned the vulgarity of the marketplace as she advocated aesthetic autonomy in her writings, her ownership of the press made that autonomy possible in material terms. In her essay on Virginia Woolf and the press, Laura Marcus argues: “Hogarth Press represented work that cut out the middle-man and escaped literary commodification, it gave Woolf a way of negotiating the terms of literary publicity and a space somewhere between the private, the coterie, and the public sphere” (145). The elimination of the middleman as publisher seeking only profit, in the style of Sir Nicholas in *Orlando*, allows for a more rarefied exchange, in which quality fiction is written with the goal of publication and cold hard cash is laid down for books, but the taint of commodified culture is removed, since authors produce literature for book *collectors* who want to add them to their private libraries. The semantic distinctions that served as the foundation for such exchanges only barely conceal the taste ideology that legitimates the exchange as an authentic cultural experience rather than brute consumerism. This imperative to remove the taint of the marketplace in the early-twentieth-century literary culture was shaped by the convergence of century-old distinctions concerning the need to keep art somehow apart from the market, and modernist notions of avant-garde purity that were fueled by a complicated, internally contradictory amalgamation of neoaristocratic and socialist values that demonized the marketplace as the root of all evil. To return to Rubin's letter-writer who asks the *Ladies Home Journal* in 1906 how she might obtain culture, acquiring culture was becoming an increasingly risky activity by the twenties, despite the growth of popular presses ready and eager to provide her with the literary goods, because buying books (even the best books) from the wrong sources, with the wrong intentions, invalidated the entire cultivation process.

If culture was to be acquired by more than a coterie audience, a genuine cultivation process would have to be sanctioned that could incorporate the modernist agenda yet somehow give its neoaristocratic dimensions a more populist cast. The academy, and more specifically English departments,

managed to fashion a cultivation project that was both elitist and populist at the same time, celebrating the values of modernist literary culture but proclaiming it as somehow available to all. According to Latham, the Leavisites in Great Britain and the New Critics in the United States “fashioned artifacts drawn from an imaginary aesthetic autonomy, purged of what they believed to be the market’s poisonous taint” (216). John Guillory sums up the situation quite neatly: as students came to understand that literature was intrinsically difficult, “they also discovered at the same moment why it needed to be studied *in the university*” (*Cultural Capital*, 172). One didn’t have to inherit culture like family jewelry—it could be acquired, but only within the university, where it could be properly taught outside the realm of commodity relations. In his account of the transformation of the study of English as academic discipline during this period, Terry Eagleton stresses that “English” as an academic subject was first institutionalized not in the great universities but in the Mechanics Institutes and extension lecturing circuits and was therefore considered “the poor man’s classics—a way of providing a cheapish, ‘liberal’ education for those beyond the charmed circles of public school and Oxbridge.” As women began to enter the realm of higher education, it was a “convenient sort of non-subject to palm off on the ladies, who were in any case excluded from science and the professions” (*Literary Theory*, 28). The professionalization of English, as a field suitable for the best and the brightest male scholars was spearheaded by Leavis and his journal *Scrutiny*, in which the rigorous study of English necessitated a new way of talking the talk of literary analysis and a new hierarchy of taste that would allow it to clear a space for itself next to classics, but far above popular British fiction. Only a certain type of writing would be judged English. Eagleton argues:

Scrutiny was not just a journal but a moral and cultural crusade: its adherents would go out to the schools and universities to do battle there, nurturing through the study of literature the kind of rich, complex, mature, discriminating, morally serious responses (all key *Scrutiny* terms) which would equip individuals to survive in a mechanized society of trashy romances, alienated labour, banal advertisements and vulgarizing mass media. . . . The *Scrutiny* case was inescapably elitist; it betrayed a profound ignorance and distrust of the capacities of those not fortunate enough to have read English at Downing College. “Ordinary” people seemed acceptable only if they were seventeenth-century cowherds or “vital” Australian bushmen. (33)

This regendering of the *study* of English as a properly masculine pursuit exemplifies one of the central tenets of the modernist culture (articulated in detail by scholars such as Andreas Huyssens (*After the Great Divide*, 1986), Tania Modleski (*Loving with a Vengeance*, 1989) and Patrice Petro (*Joyless Streets*, 1989)). Avant-gardist writing was a difficult, rigorous affair and therefore framed in masculine terms, while mass culture was rejected as easy, promiscuous, and altogether feminine. Pulp fiction in its various forms was all that the study of English had to define itself over and against, but there was no more disreputable “other” than popular fiction addressed to women. To return to Rubin’s example of the woman who could not afford to pay teachers but who wanted to buy good books, all the good books in the world weren’t going to make any difference, because genuine cultivation could be secured only through proper instruction in how to really read, which could be acquired only within the academy. The woman was looking for cultivation in all the wrong places—the *Ladies Home Journal* was the last sort of place she should be going to for advice, because it represented all that was the enemy of the academy, a popular publication addressed to ladies who remained home instead of attending college.

Once the study of English was stabilized within the academy, the tensions between cultivation on a mass scale and the still persistent coupling of literary taste and inherited class privilege became successfully hybridized in a form of intellectual class snobbery. Just as the literary novel was a commodity of a special sort whose appeal depended on its avowedly anticommodity status, this intellectual taste formation was snobbery of a special sort, snobbery that defined itself as antisnobbery, at least of the financial kind. Like thousands of other students descended from immigrant stock with no inherited cultivation whatsoever to our names, I acquired certified cultivation, in my case, in the English and film departments at the University of Iowa, the “Athens of the Prairie,” where I learned to talk the talk of modernist aesthetics and became a blue-blood intellectual snob. During this initiation process I learned to sneer, with equal fervor, at class distinctions based on inherited wealth, and at all of the forms of popular culture that my family had enjoyed as I was growing up. The most important lesson that I learned during my apprenticeship was that what really separated ordinary from extraordinary readers was not a matter of who loved literature passionately and who didn’t. The crucial distinction, which an entire institutionalized practice of reading endlessly reiterated, was between those who knew how to read *closely* and those who merely read, passionately or

otherwise. Untutored reading might lead to pleasure but certainly not to insight, which could be found only with the right operating instructions.

The professionalization of English (like the professionalization of film studies in the seventies, which I will discuss in the next chapter) was predicated on intensive differentiation. Reading, and reading professionally, seemed on the surface, at least, to be so similar that radical differentiation was required, and academic reading wasn't the sort of thing that anyone should try to do at home. Just as medicine labored in the eighteenth century to differentiate itself from alchemy when the two appeared, to the uninformed eye, to be more or less the same thing, reading within the academy had to turn reading outside the academy into the equivalent of alchemy—an unsystematic hodge-podge of opinion guided by irrational goals with no way of evaluating the results. Yet the very closeness of the tutored and untutored that necessitated differentiation also greased the wheels for the rapid return of the repressed, especially when the authority of the academy was thrown into question and a new set of sites and tour guides appeared to offer lessons in the *pleasures* of a new kind of authorized reading.

McBooks, or Carnegie Superstores?

Given this conviction that literary culture and genuine self-cultivation both had to function as countersystems apart from consumerism, the popularization of both throughout the past decade within the very heart of the marketplace required a new-taste cartography to provide legitimacy where none could have possibly existed before. The vestigial force of both the modernist ideal of aesthetic autonomy and the concomitant sanctioning of only certain forms of cultivation is nowhere more obvious than in the demonization of the superstore bookstore—they do indeed signal “the end of civilization as we know it,” or at least as we were taught to know it within traditional literary culture. The debates about the effects of the superstore have been accompanied by a steady stream of articles that have focused on the impact of the superstore phenomenon, most of which echo Nora Ephron's account of the bookstore wars by emphasizing only the destructive effects of Barnes & Noble and Borders. The controversy boils down to a collision between two opposing notions of how one acquires cultivation—“genuine culture requires specialized sites and the proper initiation process” (because it cannot simply be purchased if it is to have any beneficial value) versus “culture should be accessible to all” (and if commerce makes that

possible, the benefits certainly justify the means). The former is exemplified by André Schiffrin's book *The Business of Books* (2000), which presents a thoroughgoing indictment of corporate publishing: the superstore is only a cog in the conglomerate machine, which, in its all-consuming obsession with profit "leaves little room for books with new controversial ideas or challenging literary voices." The latter position, in which accessibility of culture can be seen as only a positive value in a democratic society is set forth in no uncertain terms by Brooke Allen in her article "Two—Make That Three—Cheers for the Chain Bookstores" (2001):

What if fifteen years ago someone had suggested a nationwide network of gigantic bookshops, carrying about 150,000 titles each, staying open until 11:00 P.M. or midnight, and offering cafes, comfortable chairs, and public restrooms? And what if these sumptuous emporia were to be found not only in the great urban centers but also in small cities and suburbs all across the country in places like Plano, Texas; Knoxville, Tennessee; and Mesa, Arizona? Wouldn't we have thought that sounded like pure, if unattainable, heaven? Well that is what the superstore chains—Barnes & Noble; Borders; and Books-A-Million, based in Birmingham, Alabama—have brought us. Why, then, this chorus of disapproval from the cultural elite? Why the characterization, spread by a vocal group of critics, of the chain bookstores as a sort of intellectual McDonald's, a symbol of the dumbing-down and standardization of American life? (148)

Allen's celebration of this increased access to books makes a key point regarding the appearance of bookstores in towns where none had been before. Good bookstores are now in towns and suburbs, not just the big cities and university towns where culture normally resided. To adapt the old Hollywood adage that a movie would be successful only if it could "play in Peoria," bookstores are now playing in Peoria and hundreds of other fly-over cities that have never been on anyone's cultural map, let alone *The New Yorker's*.

While critics of the superstores deplore the standardization that comes with the chains, this threat of decentralization is in fact the more disruptive one to traditional literary culture. Janice Radway, in *A Feeling for Books* (1997), traces a comparable attack on standardization by established literary authorities in response to the success of the Book-of-the-Month Club in the 1950s, but since the delivery system was still direct mail, it didn't threaten the sanctity of the *real* bookstore as outpost of literary culture. The appear-

ance of massive bookstores, located not just in mid-sized towns and suburbs but in strip malls surrounded by nothing but the worst excesses of consumer culture is a complicated development, because it confounds virtually all of the traditional distinctions between cultural and commercial space.

At this point I want to make my own prejudices regarding real and unreal bookstores abundantly clear, because I think it will shed a great deal of light on the argument to come. As a graduate student at the University of Iowa, I learned more about what it meant to live a vibrantly intellectual life from hanging out at Prairie Lights bookstore than I did in any of my courses. What I read for pleasure (and what I read for much of my dissertation) was shaped as much by conversations with its owner, Jim Harris, as it was by any of my professors. Had Barnes & Noble attempted to open a store down the block I would have helped form a human chain to try to stop construction or built barricades in the middle of the street and set them afire. When I left Iowa City for South Bend, Indiana, in the mid-eighties, I lived in a city without anything worthy of the name bookstore, long before Amazon appeared on the scene. When a Barnes & Noble, and then a Borders superstore eventually opened on the strip in nearby Mishawaka, they were greeted by the local community as momentous cultural events that suddenly changed everything. In the decade or so that I've been a regular customer at both superstores, I have never talked with a member of their staffs about a book, except to inquire about what's in stock. That being said, if they closed their doors tomorrow I would probably consider taking my own life, even though I buy as many books at Amazon and go there practically every night, sometimes several times a day. For me, Prairie Lights, Barnes & Noble, and Amazon are all real bookstores, because each performs a real function in my life as a reader, teacher, and father.

What has gone largely unexamined in the debates about the superstores is how these stores function as complex cultural sites within the popular landscape, commercial enterprises that become the location for a variety of literary scenes. Mixed-use sites, they evoke an ambience that's part *Café Deux Magots*, part Reading Room of the British Museum, where habitués can converse, with equal sense of appropriateness, about Gertrude Stein or Martha Stewart, right next door to, or across the parking lot from, literary hangouts like Outback Steakhouse, Old Navy, or Bed Bath & Beyond. What does indeed happen to literary culture when it goes to the mall, or shows up on the strip, especially in locations where no literary scene of any

sort has ever existed before? Why do these stores generate such friction in terms of how we evaluate them?

While I'll be examining the superstore as a nation-wide phenomenon, I'm using my local Barnes & Noble and Borders bookstores as my base of operations. Laura J. Miller provides a detailed study of the evolution of the bookstore controversy in *Reluctant Capitalists: Bookselling and the Culture of Consumption* (2006), which goes far beyond the scope of this study, but I want to look closely at my local superstores to gain a better picture of what sort of stage set is required for self-cultivation. I was first struck by the singularity of these environments while sitting in the Starbucks café located in that Barnes & Noble, gazing up at the mural that wraps around the seating area. I began this book with an account of that scene because it reveals so much about the way the popular literary envisions itself as a kind of cultural experience which requires mise-en-scène of its own. There, in an imaginary literary café, a host of great authors sit at their tables: George Eliot cozied up to Henry James, who appears to be avoiding eye contact with Oscar Wilde, who stares languidly at the *litterateurs* below, while Raymond Chandler and Virginia Woolf sit at another table looking fiercely creative. This is not the sort of Great Authors murals where the literary gods loom above the public—here the great writers form a “scene” and the literary experience is envisioned as profoundly social. But what does the mural suggest about the sort of literary scenes that might be enacted below?

In his book *You Have to Pay for the Public Life*, the architect Charles Moore argued that public spaces that become significant sites in the cultural life of a community take on a monumental quality. Their monumentality depends on a process of *marking* a place:

The act of marking is . . . a public act, and the act of recognition an expectable public act among members of the society which possesses the place. Monumentality, considered in this way, is not a product of compositional techniques (such as symmetry about several axes) or flamboyance of form, or even of conspicuous consumption of space, time, or money. It is rather, a function of society's taking possession of, or agreeing upon, extraordinarily important places on the earth's surface, and of the society's celebration of their pre-eminence. (25)

What I find so intriguing about the superstore phenomenon is that it depends on both kinds of monumentality—the public's taking possession



3. Borders store, viewed from parking lot, Mishawaka, Indiana, 2008



4. Barnes & Noble store, viewed from parking lot, Mishawaka, Indiana, 2008

of the site *and* compositional techniques that are decidedly flamboyant, at least by the standards of contemporary commercial architecture. How these stores are marked within the morphology of form vocabularies that constitute contemporary consumer design reveals even more about how “culture,” specifically literary culture, is given a recognizable shape within landscapes dominated by malls and multiplexes by both the designers and users of these stores.

The relationship between independent and superstore bookstores is not the simple dichotomy between genuine culture and mere commerce that it is often alleged to be, nor is it simply a matter of chainstore bookshops differentiating themselves from the rest of mall/strip culture by appropriating so many of the functions and rituals associated with real bookstores (public readings, coffee bars, etc.). The monumentality of the superstore involves a library effect, which leads shopper-patrons to use them as substitutes for lending libraries, one of the original bastions of not-for-profit culture intended for the general public. The emergence of this library effect within the superstore environment represents an unprecedented hybrid of culture and commerce as a site designed for commerce at its most corporate but used as though it were a gift from a philanthropist. Just how consumer-dominated the superstore environment actually has itself become is a matter of debate. When the legendary independent bookstore Shakespeare & Co. closed its doors on the Upper West Side of Manhattan in 1999 due to competition from the Barnes & Noble store that had opened just a block down Broadway (a closing that was the inspiration for the film *You’ve Got Mail*), it issued a statement that defined the struggle between community and corporate might in no uncertain terms: “Our store has been a home for great literature and a sense of community that is getting harder and harder to find in New York City”; it lamented “the change in the retail environment on this particular stretch of Broadway, where generic corporately-owned stores dominate what was once an urban wonderland” (quoted by Karen Angel in *Publisher’s Weekly* [1999]).

Yet this same Barnes & Noble superstore that is alleged to be a hothouse of corporate consumerism is invoked by Doreen Carvajal in the *New York Times* as an example of exactly the opposite: “The Barnes & Noble superstore is to this generation’s avid readers what an Andrew Carnegie library was to those of an earlier era: community center, reading room and of course repository of thousands of books. The carefully calculated lounge-and-browse ambiance is so relaxing — so free from petty distractions of commerce that a

Manhattan customer died at the Broadway and 82nd street branch, nestled in an overstuffed chair and left to slumber undisturbed until closing.” This ambiance, which produces what Carvajal refers to as “literary lounge lizards,” bespeaks a redefinition of the bookstore as public space, privately owned but treated as quasi-public, a site where reading and consumption are somehow complementary but decidedly not coterminous. Ironically, the ambiance cultivated by the superstore has made reading something that one goes to *do* in a bookstore. Terry McCoy, coowner of another legendary independent bookstore, St. Marks Bookshop in Greenwich Village, has said of this new way of treating bookstores as reading rooms: “People think they can just sit down and read. They didn’t used to do that a couple of years ago. We had to put out stools” (quoted by Carvajal).

His point is amplified by Renee Feinberg, a professor and reference librarian at Brooklyn College, who sees the superstore as a model for what libraries once were and might become again—places where people come to actually read books, to engage in reading as a social activity, rather than information depots where one does focused research and from which one departs as soon as possible. Feinberg interviewed students at Barnes & Noble stores throughout Manhattan in order to ascertain how they were using these stores compared with their college libraries. She discovered that most of the students did much of their studying, as well as much of their research, at the store, treating the “merchandise” as an open-stack library. At the Astor Place Barnes & Noble in Greenwich Village as she reports in a 1998 article in *Library Journal*, she found a store that “looked like an undergraduate library during final exam week, as students crammed and finished papers. (On weekends, however, Astor Place reminds me of a Left Bank café, as everyone reads newspapers and drinks coffee.)” While philanthropists like Carnegie and Henry Higginson were cultural gatekeepers eager to encourage social uplift, who, or what, is minding the cultural store at Barnes & Noble, a bookstore that seems to conceive of customer service in terms of leaving customers as alone as possible to follow their own agendas? As Feinberg argues, “Borders has been noted for testing its job applicants, while B & N has claimed it seeks a staff that won’t intimidate customers.” One of the staffers she interviewed summed up the differences quite succinctly: “The library is still involved with good reading to make good people, while B & N is willing to suspend ‘good’ and to stretch the limits” (50).

While the superstore appears to be far more egalitarian than the library Brahmins, who were nothing if not prescriptive, the relationship between

Brahmin and superstore culture is further complicated by the fact that the architecture and design one encounters at the superstore are far closer to the nineteenth-century Boston Brahmin vision of culture than anything in the surrounding vicinity. Charles Moore, in an essay on public architecture, declares the architecture found on the Stanford University campus to be outmoded: “The Boston architects of the nineteenth-century railroad tycoon Leland Stanford had their own clear notions, social and architectural, of the nature of hierarchy, and they manifested them with great success in the old Stanford campus. As its population grows phenomenally, the people who comprise it, rich and poor, come from all sorts of places and owe no allegiance to any establishment of the sort that exercises at least some control of money and taste in areas less burgeoning” (*You Have to Pay for the Public Life*, 122). Moore’s argument may be compelling in reference to the different imperatives that have shaped architectural style in California, but I think it may be very productively reconceived in reference to contemporary commercial architecture on a far broader scale. The suburban strip mall is itself a product of postwar California style, yet marking what is a “cultural” location within that landscape has necessitated the incorporation of styles that are immediately recognizable as belonging to other, far earlier visions of culture as built environment. While the prescriptive cultural agenda that originally accompanied the styles favored by Stanford, Higginson, and their like may have been jettisoned, vestiges of those designs are now a vital component in the struggle to give visual form to the new hypercommercialized cultural landscape that has emerged at the start of the twenty-first century. The class distinctions of the late nineteenth century are then simultaneously leveled in terms of the very accessibility of this culture within the marketplace and also reiterated as a way of marking these stores as sites of cultural commerce.

The flourishing popular literary culture, in the form of both literary adaptations and superstore bookshops, has been a matter of developing a proper *mise-en-scène*. Lush Miramax adaptations such as *The English Patient*, *The Wings of a Dove*, and *Shakespeare in Love* have substantially redefined the look of the literary, and in a broader sense, they have been instrumental in changing the public’s expectations concerning just what a literary experience should look like. In much the same way, the superstore fashions its own *mise-en-scène* for a literary experience—art direction is as important to the superstore as it is to Merchant and Ivory adaptation film. The exterior façades of both the Borders and Barnes & Noble superstores in my

community stand out in drastic contrast to the rest of the strip mall that surrounds them in their historical other-worldliness. The Borders store sits in the middle of a vast parking lot it shares with Kohls, Old Navy, Dick's Sporting Goods, and Bed Bath & Beyond, all located at some distance away within the same mini-mall enclosure. The front of the store (see figure 3) suggests a civic building done in a neoclassical mode, its monumentality foregrounded by the red brick cladding, the massive columns and cornices that frame the entrance, and the grand peaked roof attached to the flat roof so common on the rest of the strip buildings, a kind of architectural top hat to import the proper degree of cost-effective *luxé*. The building seems to have learned from both Robert Venturi and Leland Stanford an extremely effective design that can be read, from passing cars, as Culture, but according to nineteenth-century design codes that clearly retain a significant residual force within the popular imagination.

The Barnes & Noble store located a few hundred yards further down the same strip sits alone within a similar mini-mall compound with a shared parking lot, its most prominent neighbor being the Outback Steakhouse. Here again the historical otherness of the façade stands out at a distance. Instead of the neoclassicism of the Borders store, this historicity is of more recent vintage: the brick, ornamentation, awnings, and rooftop lamps all suggesting an Arts and Crafts effect, an evocation of not just another, more literary period but also an earlier form of urbanity that now seems so *other* within this particular commercial landscape. The historicist nature of this façade may be as ersatz as the evocation of the wilds of Australia next door, or the quaintness of Old Mexico in Chili's Grill across the road, but the book-shopping experience depends on historical rather than geographic exoticism to mark it as a "destination" experience along the strip. In the summer of 2009 my local Barnes & Noble superstore moved to a new location within a shopping mall but the emphasis on a nineteenth-century façade became, if anything, even more pronounced (see figure 5). "Literariness," within high-tech information culture, is signified by an amalgamation of neo-aestheticist styles prominent when print was still the only medium of cultured exchange, a time when distinctions between high-brow and middle-brow were first being hardwired into the system of American culture.

The interiors of both the Borders and Barnes & Noble superstores feature the same combination of styles, invoking both the neoclassicism associated with the not-for-profit cultural establishments of the Gilded Age and the more streamlined, but nonetheless, vividly antique look of a transatlantic



5. New Barnes & Noble store, Mishawaka, Indiana, 2009

Arts and Crafts style. Once shoppers pass through the imposing columns of the front entrance, they encounter, immediately to their right, the café area. Here, the leather club chairs and couches are matched with Mission-style lamps. At Barnes & Noble, the Great Writers mural looms above a café area enclosed by metal railings featuring small colored squares, echoing the predominant ornamentation used throughout the store—Frank Lloyd Wright crossed with Charles Rennie Mackintosh, a sort of all-purpose Glasgow Prairie style.

The basic floor plan employed here is the stuff of nineteenth-century philanthropic culture. All aisles lead to a central rotunda with modified tunnel vaults leading off to the various corners of the store. The “public library” associations that come with such a design are immediately apparent. According to Nicholas Pevsner, the first library to feature a wall system arrangement of stacks (the Escorial) had exactly such a tunnel-vaulted structure, and this design quickly became the standard model for the modern library, first at the Vatican Library, then throughout Europe, and eventually across America as an ideal model of cultural architecture for the important civic establishments constructed during the golden age of philanthropic building (*A History of Building Types*, 134). The Gilded Age aspect of this design in all its civic-seeming monumentality is further emphasized within

the rotunda at Barnes & Noble by a massive, ornate, gilded chandelier that looks like it would be more at home in the film version of *The Age of Innocence* than in a strip mall in Mishawaka, Indiana. The recent addition of an officially designated study area apart from the stacks (and café) only further amplifies the library atmosphere—this is where people come to *read*.

The monumentality of the superstore represents an attempt to mass-produce the aura of a “real” bookstore combined with a grand old public library. As such, the historical exoticism of the design reflects a residual desire to enjoy a cultural experience that is distinct from the surrounding strip mall, even as the superstore embodies the increasingly merchandized nature of literary pleasures. This aura may be considered ersatz by many critics, but these sites are marked two times over—by corporate architects in search of the proper stage set, and by patrons who mark these places as somehow their own, regardless of who actually owns them. The library effect is further amplified by the in-house publications produced by both Barnes & Noble and Borders. While the staff at the former may not be counted upon for its extensive knowledge of quality literature, its monthly *Discover Young Writers* booklet evidences how determined the superstores are to take on a curatorial function. The booklet is offered free as a critical selection of the best new literary fiction, apparently without profit motive as a public service—the sort of informed “advice” we would expect to get from a friendly librarian or an eager salesperson at an independent bookstore and that springs from the sheer love of books. As a publication that promotes the sale of these books, *Discover Young Writers* could be considered a print-based, high-toned version of an infomercial, since it provides information about books that will lead to their increased sales. But the nonprofit aspect of this selection process (this is all about the *quality* of this fiction) and the validity of that process (this is literary criticism, not mere bookselling) are given legitimacy by the award system that accompanies it, the annual Discover Young Writers Award (Borders has its own version of this, their annual Original Voices Award). The winners are featured within their respective store publications, and advertisements announcing the winners appear prominently soon after in the *New York Times Book Review* and *Entertainment Weekly*. This promotion benefits both the book in question and the award itself by making it appear to be a significant achievement, a pedigree like the Whitbread Prize or the PEN Faulkner. The Discover Young Writers and Original Voices Awards bestow cultural status on the books but also on the superstores themselves by insisting that they are serving a curatorial func-

tion—they are not just selling books, they are identifying the really great books for us the way a book reviewer or a librarian would, without vested interests. As such, they address not potential buyers as much as a community of book lovers.

Collecting Affinities in Amazonia, or Two Clicks of Separation

There is no better example of how tightly interconnected bookselling and book loving have become than the screen full of information that is presented to customer/avid reader at Amazon.com. Consumer information is supplied in profusion, but comes thoroughly interlaced with a discourse of passionate reading apparently unsullied by all those commercial appeals. Potential customers are not just addressed; they are interpellated into reading formations in which they are constituted as readers of a very particular sort, intended for books that are simultaneously defined in very particular ways as commodities to be purchased and objects to be read. The architecture of the Web site that is Amazon, like the architecture of the Barnes & Noble superstore, is built on the interdependency of culture and commerce. Both labor to create the impression that the “store” is really just a community of book lovers in retail disguise—they provides books, advice about which books to buy, and, just as important, the ideal site for the common conversation about the joys of reading. In his memoir of his experience as fiction editor at Amazon, *Amazonia: Five Years at the Epicenter of the Dot.com Juggernaut* (2004), James Marcus details how this intermingling of art and commerce was, in effect, built right into the system from the virtual ground up. When he started at Amazon in 1996, he was struck by the fact that

even as Jeff (Bezos) hired an editorial staff larger than that of most magazines, and gambled his SWAT team of egg heads would be good for something—it was clear that art and commerce weren’t necessarily the comfiest of bedfellows. You could, like me, ignore the potential friction. You could aim your work at some ideal, book-besotted reader and let retail take care of itself. But when you were writing something for Amazon—where, incidentally, nobody ever told me to make nice to a single title—you couldn’t help but have the suspicion that your opinions were succumbing to the gravitational tug of the marketplace. This didn’t mean you were corrupt: indeed, it sometimes led to a strange, neurotic vigilance about the purity of your enthusiasms. (23)

At this stage in its development, according to Marcus, the editors at Amazon imagined themselves as a kind of upstart independent bookstore, referring to Barnes & Noble as the “Evil Empire” because they embodied pure unadulterated commerce, pushing books as mere commodities in chain stores. Bezos encouraged the promotion of a certain number of noncommercial titles, because, according to Marcus, “they telegraphed certain qualities that Jeff wanted to see associated with the site. They made us seem eclectic, funny, smart and discriminating, minus any hint of snobbish superiority. And, in the early days, when the company was first locking horns with the deep-pocketed proprietors of B&N, this cachet was a real (if unquantifiable) asset” (115). Notice here that the positioning of Amazon vis-à-vis Barnes & Noble involves an implicit third element in this triangulation — “We’re not mere hucksters for books like those guys, but, on the other hand, we’re anything but snobs” — and on that middle ground, cachet can become a marketing strategy unto itself. Marcus’s characterization of the editorial team as eggheads and bohemians raises an important point often lost in the demonization of mass market bookselling — just *who* worked there? Rather than confirming the widespread impression that chains and Web sites are run by corporate monsters with robotic minions trained to do their bidding, he presents a much more complicated picture, one that exposes the profound tensions within not just Amazon but the very infrastructure of popular literary culture.

Marcus details the increasingly conflicted relationship between Editorial and Marketing departments that developed as Bezos brought in his army of MBAs and their “culture of metrics” designed to measure customer enjoyment and cater to it more efficiently. The tensions between literary criticism and the selling of books were initially handled by a neat subdivision between editorial and marketing departments, the former providing the all-important *content*. According to Marcus,

We were betting big on content. By setting up the equivalent of twenty on-line magazines and a budget close to a million dollars for reviews, articles, and interviews, Amazon was creating a true hybrid. It was neither a traditional store nor a traditional publication, but a back-scratching fusion of the two. Ideally, readers would flock to see what Toni Morrison thought about racial separatism, then exit with a copy of *The Bluest Eye* in their shopping carts. Editorial would thrive on its own and render unto Caesar (or Jeff) what was his. The reality, of course, was

more complicated. But in the early, iconoclastic heyday of the Web, it felt like a marvelous experiment. (106)

Marcus admits to being overwhelmed when he learns that *The New Yorker*, bastion of the traditional New York literary world, had expressed interest in interviewing the Amazon editorial staff. “The proposal was enormously flattering. Since when did a retailer’s editorial staff end up in the *New Yorker*? (Since when did a retailer *have* an editorial staff?)” (150).

What complicated this equilibrium was the loss of confidence in *content* in 1997, which resulted in the merging of editorial and marketing departments at Amazon. The “Golden Age of Content” is brought to a close by these marketing types, who now encourage editorial to “*monetize those eyeballs*” (130). That monetizing required a new master strategy: personalization, in which the site would be rehung for each customer according to previous buying history. This move to personalization was the end of the equilibrium between the editors and the MBAs, because it introduced a new set of voices, namely customers, who were encouraged to provide their own reviews. Marcus’s intense resentment of what he calls these amateur reviews exposes some of the most interesting tensions within his account of Amazon’s history. On the one hand, the incorporation of customer reviews “seemed to validate all the rhetoric of Internet democracy. Here was an intelligent conversation about books conducted by a group of disinterested, disembodied spirits. . . . These were amateurs, in the most honorable sense of the word” (224). As such, they represented the natural extension of the site’s ability to develop community and/or a target audience simultaneously. Marcus describes Bezos’s dream of the Internet as a world in which “affinity would call out to affinity: your likes and dislikes — from Beethoven to barbeque sauce to shampoo to shoe polish to Laverne and Shirley — were as distinctive as your DNA, and would make it a snap to match you up with your 9,999 cousins. His was either utopian daydream or targeted marketing nightmare” (89). Marcus details his own reading of Emerson and other Transcendentalists during this period, fascinated by the possible connections: “Emerson had earlier kicked around the idea of a university without walls — a free-wheeling establishment where he could teach literature to a class of kindred souls. That never took off” (158).

The parallel never takes off within Marcus’s book either, because it would seem to involve a kind of populist dimension that, by his own admission, he is “a bit tetchy about.” He dismisses the use of customer reviews, which were

themselves rated for their usefulness by other customers and then quantified accordingly as merely “the Culture of Metrics at its worst, with a dose of managerial quackery. . . . A reminder: art is not a popularity contest. Taste, talent and discrimination have nothing to do with numbers, case closed” (226). Discrimination and taste may have nothing to do with numbers, but they have a lot to do with who presumes to be able to have an opinion about books, a sticking point for Marcus, which becomes especially clear when he dismisses Amazon’s decision to “throw in its lot with the vox pop” and begins submitting his own “customer reviews” under a pseudonym, “Jim Kibble”—and which eventually win him the Amazon.com Book Review Writing Contest.

In order to explore the vestiges of these battles between culture and commerce within the architecture of the Amazon site, and at the same time take a very close look at those customer reviews, I decided in the summer of 2004 to engage in an ethnographic exercise. In honor of Michael Cunningham’s character Laura Brown, I went first to his book *The Hours: A Novel*. Once there, I saw the cover of the book, featuring the poster for the film, with prices for all nine editions of the novel: hardback, paperback, audio cassette (unabridged), audio CD (unabridged), audio CD (abridged), e-book (Adobe Reader), e-book (Microsoft Reader), and audio download. Two more overt consumer appeals came next: “Visit the DVD Store,” where I could buy the novel in the form of adaptation film (*The Hours*, directed by Stephen Daldry), and “Better Together,” *The Hours* and *Mrs. Dalloway* “Buy Both Now! for a special price.” In addition to the price information, I was also being interpellated into a specific reading community, first by “Customers who bought this book also bought . . .” (featuring other titles by Woolf and Cunningham) and then by “Popular in . . .,” where, upon going to see where *The Hours* was especially popular, I learned that I could join a Purchase Circle: “Amazon.com is calculating thousands of bestseller lists. No matter where you *work, live, or go to school*, we’ll probably have a Purchase Circle for you.” Here the consumerism could hardly be more overt, since the connections that link readers sharing similar tastes are defined entirely in terms of buying patterns—not a reading circle, or even a fan circle, but a purchase circle.

Yet that screen also includes links to an even greater profusion of avid readers, whose discourse is made up of languages of aesthetic evaluation that make no mention whatsoever that these books are consumer items. “Customer Reviews” follow the price and edition information, which is

bordered by lists of two sorts: “Listmania” and “So You’d Like to . . .” guides.” I wanted to see what Laura Brown (who was reading all the Woolf novels, one at a time) would have encountered had she gone to Amazon.com, rather than her local library, so I clicked on “Buy Together” and went to the *Mrs. Dalloway* page, to get a sense of what she could have learned from the customers instead of asking her local librarian. The first entry in the “So You’d Like to” guide was “So You’d Like to . . . read the best books without having to endure the bad ones? A guide written by bel-78.” This guide expressed the same sentiments as the letter writer to *Ladies Home Journal* in 1906—here was someone in search of good books who had come to Amazon, rather than *Ladies Home Journal* or her local librarian, and now offered to return the favor, as it were, for other avid readers like herself,

I love to read, and I have read quite a lot of books. Many are great, but others are really not worth it. So, given that some Amazon lists have helped me a lot when deciding which book to buy, I concluded that trying to do the same for others was only fair. The order in which I put the books doesn’t mean anything: I liked them all. If a phrase is between inverted commas, it means that I’ve copied it from an editorial review I consider specially good but I must warn you, however, that you might hate the books I loved, or think books I deem boring are interesting. The reason for that is that tastes vary. Anyway, even taking that into account, you might find some of these tips helpful. And that is my purpose. After all, so many good books, so little time. (Read 23,217 times, May 3, 2004)

I’ve quoted this statement in its entirety, because it articulates so many of the taken-for-granted assumptions that form this imagined community of readers. Unlike the woman who asked the resident authority at the *Ladies Home Journal* for advice, bel-78 has obtained culture and feels empowered to offer a list of her own, her authority resting on her love of books and her range of reading experiences rather than a formal education in the professional reading practice. She clearly feels she owes something to her community of fellow avid readers, whom she considers to be anything but a Purchase Circle. There is no mention of the marketplace, but neither is there any suggestion of an elitist alternative to it. She takes great delight in offering her opinions about quality reading, but her list comes with a disclaimer—tastes vary. She incorporates editorial reviews, but only if they confirm her perspectives.

Literary authority here resides within the imagined community, rather

than coming down from above, even while it celebrates the transcendent nature of a literary text as something far beyond the realm of mere best-sellers. The notion that this community of readers has a special status, that they are somehow all kindred spirits serving in effect as each other's experts because they are so passionately committed to books is crystallized by the title she puts at the top of her list—*Fahrenheit 451*. Even though Ray Bradbury's novel, as a science-fiction novel, would normally fall into the category of genre fiction rather than literary classic, it is a favorite for this community because it imagines readers as imperiled counterculture, possessing a secret knowledge of the wonders of reading unavailable to the rest of the population. Within the past decade there has been an increasing amount of research into the diversity of Internet communities, from David Porter's *Internet Culture* (1997) to Sherry Turkle's *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (1997) to Julian Dibbel's *Play Money: Or How I Quit My Day Job and Made Millions Trading Virtual Loot* (2006) to Henry Jenkins's *Convergence Culture: How Old and New Media Collide* (2006). Jenkins explores the participatory nature of Internet fan communities that revolve around *The Matrix*, *Star Wars*, and *Harry Potter* franchises, detailing the frenetic creative activity of fans as they invent elaborate extended universes for their favorite characters. What I find particularly fascinating about the participatory culture formed by the listmaniacs and guide writers at Amazon is that it revolves around another sort of project not addressed by these other studies, yet it's one that is pursued with equal fervor. These fans exist to make taste distinctions, to demonstrate their expertise not about what is perceived to be a cult phenomenon such as playing a particular video game but to take possession of canonical literary masterpieces in the most public domain. They articulate their own identities not through role playing but by insisting on their singularity as reader-connoisseurs. They don't imagine the further adventures of Kirk and Spock or Harry and Ron—their lists and guides become adventures unto themselves.

Taken together, the "So You'd Like to Be" guides and "Listmania" entries on the *Mrs. Dalloway* page that the contemporary Laura Brown may choose to explore at Amazon provide a neat composite picture of the differing reading formations that intersect here. The "My Virginia Woolf Reading List" and "Who's the Fairest of Them All" are dutiful homages to Woolf, thoroughly respectful of literary excellence. Each of these lists is bordered by still more lists, some of which continue along the same lines, obviously driven by a kind of missionary zeal to be informative about great literature,

as evidenced by their very titles: “So You’d Like to . . . immerse yourself in British Classics: a guide by irmita, English Graduate Student and Teacher,” “So You’d Like to . . . know Who’s Who of British literature: A guide by writetothebone, a creative writing teacher,” and “So You’d Like to . . . have a firm base of Western literature: a guide by redsox989, employee of Borders, reader.” This last guide is particularly interesting because redsox989, an employee of the superstore, appears to be as driven by a pedagogical mission as the actual teachers of literature and ironically enough, it is this guide that is most elitist in its trumpeting of the Great Books against “the modern stuff and pop lit.”

Another of the guides at the *Mrs. Dalloway* page, “Books I’ve Read This School Year: a list by rachelharin, wants to read more,” leads to a host of interrelated lists, composed primarily by high school students. These lists reflect another reading formation situated neatly at the intersection of an Amazon Purchase Circle and high school Advanced Placement English classes. The repetition of a number of the same titles throughout these lists (*The Great Gatsby*, *Brave New World*, 1984, *Great Expectations*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, etc.) bears witness to the force of a standardized curriculum for so many American high school students; but their attitudes, and the languages of evaluation that they use to express those intensely held opinions, reveal a complicated, often ambivalent set of values, an ambivalence so ubiquitous that it appears to be a distinguishing feature of this community. Some of these lists and guides take an explicitly pedagogical position, offering information in semiprofessional tones to budding connoisseurs: “So You’d Like to . . . take an English AP Class with me as your instructor: a list by Kauskih, high school student and writer,” or “Read the Top 50 Books Which Changed My Life: a guide by j2d2, a voracious reader,” and “Outstanding Literature (no particular order): a list by faulkner600, connoisseur.” But other guides offer a more conflicted account of the quality reading experience, suggesting a less than perfect conversion to professionalized reading among these avid readers. A few guide writers add favorite titles to their list of the canonical novels, but they obviously feel the need to justify their choices, and thereby give themselves a certain authority by using the languages of appreciation they are in the process of acquiring in their high school English classes. “The Twenty Best Books I’ve Read: a list by Connor Dirks, literary analyst,” for example, includes the usual classics found on so many other lists, but starts with *The Gunslinger* by Stephen King at the number 1 spot: “Not recognized as a classic, but a masterpiece of allegory told by one of

the best storytellers ever.” Dirks’s list also anticipates his peers’ suspicions about this choice, so he sometimes acts as middleman between teacher and classmate: number 2, “*The Sound and the Fury*—Cryptic, but Faulkner has something to say. Wow”; and number 8 “*The Stranger*—It’s not just for the French. The story is amazing.” Other list makers take a more defiant relationship to that imaginary English teacher, so one encounters lists made by perfectly interpellated reading subjects, “Books I’ve Recently Read (and all students should)” alongside lists that try to locate valuable reading experiences despite that instruction: “Books That I Didn’t Mind Reading (and You Won’t either).” A few of the lists take an overtly ironic tone that allows the list maker to be both inside and outside at the same time, clearly bent on demonstrating that they have, *of course*, read all the canonical text that they are supposed to read, but just as determined to promote their *own* singularity. In the introduction to “So You’d Like to . . . inadvertently become known as a wry intellectual: a guide by Bobnothingelse,” for example, the author says: “So far I sound like a snob. My name is Bob and the general consensus seems to be that I am indeed an allusive and wry teenage intellectual, though my previous conception of myself remains. I think I am a simple and nitwitted girl. In any event, somebody suggested that I make a guide of how to become an unappreciated geek freak who listens to classical music.” This leads to an even more ironical list, “See What Bob Has Read in High School Part I.”

After perusing these AP lists, I returned to the *Mrs. Dalloway* homepage, where I clicked on the last guide listed there, “So You’d Like to . . . wow your Sweet Baboo,” only to discover another interconnected constellation of lists and guides uniting another parallel community of avid readers who were far more emancipated from academic reading protocols in their pursuit of reading pleasure. Within this group of guide and list makers, reading literary fiction was given a different use value, exemplifying perfectly Tony Bennett’s notion of a reading formation: “Different reading formations produce their own texts, their own readers, their own contexts” (“Texts in History,” 10). Instead of reading *Mrs. Dalloway* in order to gain a greater understanding of Woolf’s genius or in order to become a “know-it-all” about modern classics, these readers situated the same novel in a different context: in women’s fiction—but of a very particular variety. The fact that these lists were far more heavily gender-based, and also far more ironical about how one was supposed to talk about literary fiction, is exemplified neatly by Sweet Baboo’s guide, which was broken down into two lists. The first

is “for the Lady in Your Life” and included these suggestions: “*The Hours*, Get her this and she won’t drag you to the movie (I love the movie, but then I’m a chick . . .),” and “*Mrs. Dalloway*, *The Hours* is based on this novel by Virginia Woolf. You will look WAY intellectual with this one.” In addition to Cunningham and Woolf’s novels, Sweet Baboo included a second list, with Cathi Hanauer’s *The Bitch in the House: 26 Women Tell the Truth about Sex, Solitude, Work, Motherhood and Marriage*; Janis Jaquith’s *Birdseed Cookies: A Fractured Memoir*; Allison Pearson’s *I Don’t Know How She Does It: The Life of Kate Reddy, Working Mother*; and Jill Connor Browne’s *The Sweet Potato Queen’s Big Ass Cookbook (and Event Planner)*. The common denominator here, unlike in the high school students’ lists, is situational, the main distinguisher being not the stylistic achievement of Great British Literature or Great Novels of the twentieth century, but rather Stories of “Alienated Women,” or more precisely, “Stories about Smart-Mouth, Discontented Women—English, American Southern, and otherwise.” Here there is no evidence of any need to justify or defend the inclusion of noncanonical alongside the canonical choices; Woolf becomes an honorary member of the Ya-Ya sisterhood and apparently, she’s the better for it. If only Clarissa had had that *Big Ass* event planner, how differently things might have gone for both character and author. Or if Woolf and Sylvia Plath, also ubiquitous on these lists, had read *Prozac Nation*—required reading on virtually all of the related lists on this page (*Phenomenal Women*, *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, etc.)—what a different course literary history may have taken.

Another sort of evaluative criterion is used by these list makers, which allows them to situate the canonical novel alongside the memoir and cookbook, and privilege all three according to another rubric of value. Elizabeth Long’s work on reading groups in and around Houston (published 1987, in the journal *Cultural Studies*) is relevant in this regard, because she discovered that the readers she encountered read classics but define that category in *experiential* terms: “A classic is great because it *does* something for someone: it provides a reading experience that can transcend the ephemerality and flux of daily living and so enrich or move the reader that it finds a permanent niche in her memory. This stands in direct opposition to the intellectualist tendency to produce formal aesthetic analyses” (315). I think this important distinction can be made even more precise in these lists. The tension is not between experiential and aesthetic reading as such, or between intellectual and ordinary readers as such, because the list makers at Amazon are intellectual (no matter how ironic they may be about it, they’re college-

educated, informed, avid readers) and they are clearly in search of aesthetic experience. But what makes a book so transcendent that it removes the reader from the flux of day-to-day life into some other realm of experience depends on its experiential use value. Another one of these Smart-Mouth Women lists is provided by Janis Jaquith herself, an author (*Birdseed Cookies: A Fractured Memoir*) featured on Sweet Baboo's list. Her list, "In the Footsteps of Oprah," includes *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, assorted contemporary popular literary novels such as *Bel Canto* and *The Secret Life of Bees*, and self-help books such as *Psychic Secrets: Your Guide to Dreams, Hunches, and Spirit Contact* ("This is a funny smart book about growing up in a psychic family. Read it and you'll learn to foster your own psychic abilities"), along with her own book, *Birdseed Cookies* ("Okay, I wrote this one. But trust me, you'll love it. It's a collection of my public radio essays. You'll laugh, you'll cry, yadda, yadda, yadda").

The fact that Jaquith's authority rests on her status as a National Public Radio celebrity like Nancy Pearl, suggests a great deal about this group of readers (it's taken for granted that they are NPR-listening women, and two of the books on her list are by other NPR figures) and the librarian function she claims for that group. AP high school students reading Woolf as a literary classic or NPR-listening women reading her as a self-help book are only two clicks of separation away from each other at Amazon.com. When I used to explain to my students how an interpretive community can make an enormous difference in determining how a given novel is to be read and evaluated (how the same novel can be a radically different text depending on how it comes to us as already mediated, already humming with particular types of meanings), I would cite Anne Rice's *Vampire Lestat* (1987), arguing that they would read the novel one way if they were directed to it by a friend as a great beach read, and very differently if they were asked to read it for a college course in feminist Gothic fiction. They would see the point immediately, and build on it themselves with only the slightest encouragement from me, locating the very significant differences in the respective reading formations that made that book the perfectly appropriate reading material in each case, recognizing that word of mouth and the academy depended on different delivery systems, intertextual frameworks, and interpretive protocols, all of which would constitute them as reading subjects of a particular type in each formation, since the novel would be a fundamentally different book-to-be-read in each case. But the distance between those two ways of reading is virtually eliminated by Amazon, where one and the same delivery

system directs readers to *Mrs. Dalloway* as canonical novel or as arch-literary self-help book. Whether we prefer to label that experience as a purchase circle, reading community, interpretive community, reading formation, or taste community, the difference between them is a matter of clicks, which can either maintain distinct borders or overcome them almost instantly, since the links to each set of lists and guides appear on the same page as co-equal options. Click in the direction of precollegiate, AP English students, and you find “So You Want to . . . be a Left Bank intellectual”; click toward the postcollegiate, NPR-listening Women, and you find “So You Want to . . . sprawl on the beach with a great book.”

I have introduced pre- and postcollegiate here in order to further delineate the differences between these two groups, but also to suggest a temporal dimension to our understanding of the reading communities—that these are the same readers, not just at different stages in their lives, but at two different moments in regard to the professionalized reading lessons that they receive within the academy. In other words, the differences here are not a matter of rigid either/or dichotomies founded on inherent differences between high- and middle-brow cultures; they are, rather, shifting, overlapping distinctions that make the traditional hierarchy of taste cultures seem far too monolithic.

The NPR-listening Women may be interested in beach reading (and those lists may include *The South Beach Diet*), but they also include quality literary fiction. In the summer of 2004, the May 14 issue of the *Wall Street Journal* published its annual guide to “Summer Reading,” formulated by a resident critic, Robert J. Hughes, who interviewed “everyone from editors to agents to independent book-store owners and big retailers.” According to Hughes, the most significant development was what he called “the beach-blanket brainy trend,” and he quoted Elaine Petrocelli, owner of the bookstore Book Passage, to confirm this development: “Traditionally we thought people wanted to do light reading in summer. We were probably wrong” (W14). He goes on to stress the way in which publishers are trying to sell these beach-blanket brainy books to the forty-and-older audience. While the reading habits of this audience may not be animated by the same factors that lead AP English students to read just as avidly, both are still driven by a need for self-cultivation, even at the beach, perhaps the most notoriously nonintellectual location within American culture.

The lists and guides made by members of both reading communities reveal how thoroughly ingrained the need to self-cultivate is, because it can’t

be eluded, even in locations where it's not supposed to be pursued. The act of evaluating books outside the academy, according to what they take to be their own criteria, is done with enormous gusto and confidence. Just reading is not enough. One could argue that reading and evaluating have obviously always been interdependent pleasures, but the desire to make those evaluations public in actual reading groups or via Amazon's virtual reading communities makes it abundantly clear that the need to demonstrate one's personal taste in terms of the books one chooses forms an essential part of the pleasures of reading. That books can now function just as effectively as "mere" consumer items such as clothing or furniture as a public manifestation of one's taste—and that this is a conviction held by "mass" audiences and not just intellectuals of the traditional variety—is a major factor in transforming literary culture into popular culture.

These tensions between commerce and culture, between bookselling and self-cultivation at Amazon, where both are undertaken so feverishly, cannot be adequately accounted for by a traditional taste hierarchy. While the terms "high-brow" and "middle-brow" still circulate throughout American popular discourse, they seem at best vestigial expressions of an earlier time, used most often from above and in a negative, disdainful way to reject a particular book or film. While the taste cultures that intersect at Amazon may indeed delight in rating books according to their own evaluative criteria, they appear to have no interest whatsoever in positioning themselves in regard to any commonly agreed-upon hierarchy. Comparing the lists of AP high school students and the NPR-listening women suggests that the traditional relationship between taste and education doesn't develop in the way we have been led to believe, that is, that the more educated people become, the more they adopt the protocols of artistic appreciation that they acquire through a university education. But it is not a matter of sliding back down a hierarchy either, seeking only light entertainment from further down the brow scale once they enter the "real world."

To account for both the simultaneity and diversity of these communities, each evaluating books so exuberantly with such a high degree of self-satisfied confidence, and each investing the very act of reading itself with such different goals, we need to turn the hierarchy of taste cultures envisioned by Herbert Gans (1974) not upside down, but on its side, as it were, because the best way to envision the parallel nature of these reading communities is along a vertical rather than horizontal axis. Amazon institutionalizes that verticality by offering different reading communities as coequal

options. The message that the architecture of Amazon drives home is not populist in the traditional sense of disavowing taste distinctions (i.e., since there's no accounting for taste, don't worry about yours, dear customer, just go ahead and buy something). The homepage for literary novels is an intersection of conflicting taste cultures, each endlessly reinforcing its own notions of pleasure (so go ahead and account for tastes to your heart's content, dear passionately committed reader, you'll find validation here).

If any figure is going to emerge as a taste maker on an international scale within this world of frenetic popular connoisseurship, that person would have to have massive reach in terms of media exposure, and would also have to be able to talk the talk of reading pleasure in a way that would establish him or her as an authority, and at the same time, still be completely of that community of amateur readers. And that person could have no vested interest in the selling of books whatsoever in order to function like a national librarian. They are the subjects of chapter 2.