

## BOOK CLUBS, BOOK LUST, AND NATIONAL LIBRARIANS

*Literary Connoisseurship  
as Popular Entertainment*

New York may publish the books but Seattle significantly defines America's reading list.

—Nancy Pearl, interview in *New York Times*, 2008

It's not too much of an exaggeration—if it's one at all—to say that reading saved my life.

—Nancy Pearl, *Book Lust*

“I wasn't scared!”

—Message printed on Oprah Book Club T-shirts during the *Anna Karenina* 2004 Challenge

Given the seemingly endless number of titles, all made increasingly accessible through superstores and Web site booksellers, title selection has become one of the most pressing concerns within the popular literary culture. The exhilaration of infinite access generates a concomitant anxiety regarding individually meaningful selection. The listmania at Amazon is response to this excess of access, but it also suggests that the selection process is complicated by more than sheer volume. The search of the right title is not just a matter of finding good books in the abstract sense of the term, as one might make key acquisitions for a permanent home library. As the pleasures of reading have become increasingly social, title selections must be a visible demonstration of personal taste, at that moment. The desire

for the right title, driven by a persistent need to self-cultivate, but without a reliable authority that could be trusted to make the essential fine distinctions, has resulted in a taste vacuum that has been filled by the literary taste maven as media celebrity. That taste vacuum was produced by an increase in the number of available choices and also in the number of readers for whom selection had become a dilemma, without any existing mechanism for delivering the necessary expertise on a scale that could effectively satisfy that audience. New reading authorities had to emerge from within the mass media in order to reach a mass audience of readers in hot pursuit of the right book, just as a wine connoisseur like Robert Parker or a home-keeping diva like Martha Stewart exploded on the scene as national experts when they developed delivery systems for dispensing information that was suddenly considered vital on a very grand scale.

Those literary taste mavens are responsible for creating what Nancy Pearl refers to as “America’s reading list.” Despite the ever-expanding number of titles and target audiences, there is still a fair amount of common reading going on, directly inspired by authorities that function as national librarians. New York may still publish the books, but more of the power brokers who actually shape America’s reading list are concentrated in Seattle in the form of editors at Amazon, Starbucks, and Costco (as well as by Pearl herself, who is based in Seattle and reaches the nation via her role as book critic for National Public Radio), since it is their recommendations that identify the most prominent titles on that national list. And once we factor in Chicago-based Oprah Winfrey, the decentralization of literary culture becomes even more dramatic. But charting the new locations of literary authority in the United States involves more than just moving the pins on the map from one coast to the other. The most striking change in this new cartography of literary taste making is where that expertise is now located and readily accessed—deep in the heart of electronic culture.

In her study of British reading groups Jenny Hartley argues that title selection is the most complicated problem: “How do groups choose what to read? The answer in most cases is ‘with difficulty.’ On some of our visits to groups we have been struck by the way they can take almost as long choosing what to read next as they do discussing this month’s book.” The crux of the matter is knowing which authority to trust—Hartley quotes one book group member to this effect: “We often used to choose from the Booker list, but we have so often been disappointed in recent years that we don’t bother as much now, but go more on reviews and for personal recommendations”

(45). For the British readers Hartley interviewed, the choice of authorities was limited to a neat dichotomy—either by official literary culture (awards and reviews) or word of mouth. The emergence of a third alternative between these two options has become one of the defining features of popular literary culture in North America—literary authority in the form of thriving, mass-mediated connoisseurship.

This need for advice about choosing the right title by first choosing the right reading expert who shares your sensibility has given rise to a mini-industry in guidebooks about the pleasures of reading. They have come to dominate the Literary Criticism sections at both Barnes & Noble and Borders, and one also encounters them regularly within superstores on end-cap displays—Michael Dorris, *The Most Wonderful Books: Writers on Discovering the Pleasures of Reading* (1997); Anne Fadiman, *Ex Libris: Confessions of Common Reader* (1998); Steven Gilbar, *Reading in Bed: Personal Essays on the Glories of Reading* (1999); Kevin Graffagnino, *Only in Books: Writers, Readers and Bibliophiles on Their Passion* (1996); Rob Kaplan, *Speaking of Books: The Best Things Ever Said about Books and Book Collecting* (2001); Sara Nelson, *So Many Books, So Little Time* (2003); Anna Quindlen, *How Reading Changed My Life* (1998); Lynne Sharon Schwartz, *Ruined by Reading: A Life in Books* (1997); Ronald B. Schwartz, *For the Love of Books: 115 Celebrated Writers on the Books They Love Most* (2000); and the list continues. My main focus in this chapter will be the reading experts who have taken this “Passion-for-the-Glories-Available-Only-While-Reading-These-Wonderful-Books-that-Have-Changed-My-Life-and-Will-Certainly-Change-Yours-Too” message to the widest possible audience. In other words, I want to concentrate on the reading authorities that have their own calendars, Web sites, and radio and television programs—the authorities that have taken “book talk” far beyond the realm of books. As cross-media phenomena they exemplify perfectly the way authority functions in what has come to be called convergence culture. At the same time, paradoxically, they represent a countervailing trend within the heart of that convergence—the celebration of the absolute singularity of reading as a transformative cultural activity that can occur only in books and nowhere else in the hypermediated cultures where that reading takes place.

Anyone hoping to gain recognition as a preeminent authority about which books to read for divergent reading communities would have to convince a mass audience that she or he could be trusted as the curator who

*knows what you'll like* even better than the list-making customers at Amazon. They would have to possess some kind of specialized knowledge about books beyond that of most amateur readers, an ability to convey a *passion* for books without profit motive or vested interest of any kind, a delivery system at their disposal to get their advice to a national audience, and most important, a talent for making thousands of amateur readers believe that their recommendations can be expressions of *their own* personal taste. I want to look closely at two media celebrities who, in very different venues, have managed to combine those characteristics so successfully that they have come to function as national librarians—Nancy Pearl, reading adviser for National Public Radio, and Oprah Winfrey and her famous Book Club that appears regularly on her Web site and syndicated television program.

Pearl's overwhelming passion for reading is the heart and soul of her extremely successful guide, *Book Lust: Recommended Reading for Every Mood, Moment, and Reason* (2003), and her follow-ups *More Book Lust: Recommended Reading for Every Mood, Moment, and Reason* (2005), *Book Lust: The Journal* (2005), *Book Lust 2005: A Reader's Calendar*, and *Book Lust 2006: A Reader's Calendar*. That's an awful lot of lust, but hers is a credentialed lust. Her standing as disinterested book maven rests solidly on her status as a professional librarian and her role as a book critic for National Public Radio and director of the Washington Center for the Book. The only retail operation she mentions is a "wonderful independent bookstore, Yorktown Alley, Tulsa, Oklahoma," which, along with her experience at public libraries, has allowed her "to grow as a reader and to share [her] knowledge and love with other readers" (*Book Lust*, x). Knowledge and love are completely interdependent, and the appeal to a community of book lovers gives her reading a transcendent purpose. She establishes her *bona fides*, though, with a simple declaration in the first sentence of *Book Lust*—"I love to read." She then elaborates on its rewards:

Reading has always brought me pure joy. I read to encounter new worlds and new ways of looking at our own world. I read to enlarge my horizons, to gain wisdom, to experience beauty, to understand myself better and for the pure wonderment of it all. I read and marvel over how writers use language in ways I never thought of. I read for company and escape. Because I am incurably interested in the lives of other people, both friends and strangers, I read to meet myriad folks and enter into their lives—for me a way of vanquishing the "otherness" we all experience. (ix)

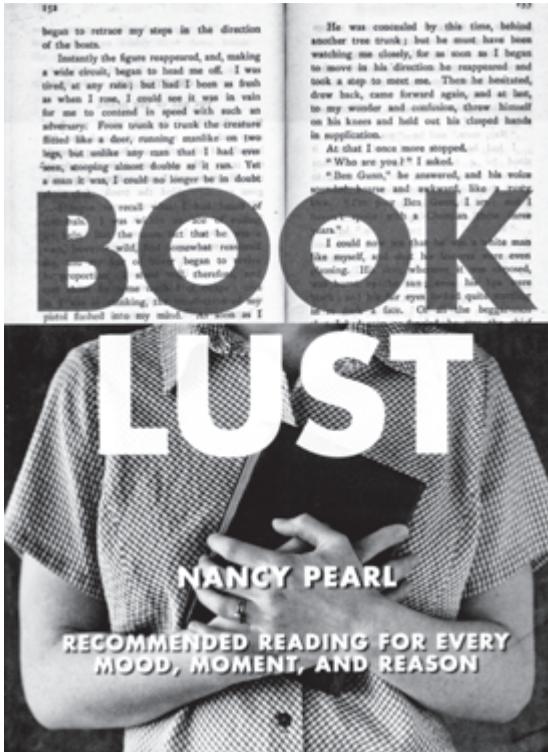
The sort of reading she advocates is anything but the professionalized close reading of the academic variety—no apprenticeship is required, and, judging by the conversational tenor of her prose, anyone can talk the talk of loving books the way she does. This is the kind of authority that the woman who wrote to the *Ladies Home Journal* in 1906 was looking for—an expert advice giver who believes the cultivation of self is there for the taking; it's just a matter of wanting to improve yourself and asking the right person. The therapeutic benefits of reading could hardly be more explicitly articulated. After detailing the pains of her dysfunctional family life as a child, Pearl states: "I spent most of my childhood and early adolescence at the public library. . . . It's not too much of an exaggeration—if it's one at all—to say that reading saved my life" (x).

As Pearl describes the therapeutic benefits of this reading experience, she names the people and institutions who helped her realize these pleasures, citing public radio stations, public libraries systems, and even favorite childhood librarians (Miss Long and Miss Whitehead), but not one professor or even so much as an inspiring junior high English teacher. Her formation as a reader apparently had nothing to do with reading in school of any sort. No special apprenticeship was required, just a community of like-minded book lovers all anxious to turn each other on to books. Interestingly, the only mention made of book learning of the traditional sort comes in the second entry in *Book Lust*: after "A . . . My Name is Alice" (books written by women named Alice) comes "Academia: the Joke" (books that satirize the academy). The single acknowledgment of some kind of authority on all this passionate reading comes in the chapter entitled "Books about Books." There she begins by saying, "Bibliophiles love nothing better than making the acquaintance of other book lovers—especially between the pages of a book. Here are some people whose books about books I've especially enjoyed." She lists Clifton Fadiman, Anne Fadiman, Francis Spufford, and a host of other popular journalists and novelists. Literary criticism and bibliophilia are apparently on separate planets, because for Pearl, reading is all about pleasure, a point made abundantly clear when she introduces her "rule of fifty"—one should read at least fifty pages of a book before setting it aside, but no more than that, should it prove tedious, because, "no one is going to get in heaven by slogging their way through a book they aren't enjoying but think they *ought* to read" (xiii, emphasis mine). The world of "ought to read" is clearly the domain of English professors, but bibliophiles, to use

Pearl's own phrase, read "to be transported" and boring books won't get you anywhere.

This characterization of book lovers as a congregation united by their transcendent faith in reading pleasurable books culminates at the end of Pearl's introduction, where she quotes Virginia Woolf (shorn of any class snobbery or modernist prejudices) in order to convey the spirituality of the experience: "I have sometimes dreamt that when the Day of Judgment dawns and the great conquerors and lawyers and statesmen come to receive their rewards . . . the Almighty will turn to Peter and will say, not without a certain envy when he sees us coming with our books under our arms, 'Look, these need no reward, we have nothing to give them here. They have loved reading.'" Now this is the Woolf that Laura Brown wants to become one with, the patron saint of common readers who is a *reader* first, and great novelist only as a result of that experience. The popular, middle-class fiction abhorred by Woolf is recommended just as enthusiastically by Pearl as more recent versions of the modernist alternative. She includes a number of "Too Good to Miss" entries devoted to her favorite authors, including both Ross Thomas and Richard Powers. Within this spiritualization of reading, populist readers and modernist readers can apparently lie down together in the bosom of bibliophilia. As a librarian extraordinaire who brings knowledge to a world outside the walls of the academy, Pearl is an early-twenty-first-century incarnation of the late-nineteenth-century public lecturer; and as a someone who celebrates the spiritual dimensions of reading pleasure, she is the bibliophile incarnation of Sister Wendy, a celebrity member of the secularized priesthood that ministers to the common art lovers in search of uplifting aesthetic experience. By performing the all-important selection process, and then relaying that information in conversational speech, she offers common readers a form of popular connoisseurship, a taste for books that is decidedly informed, and just as decidedly accessible to all.

Unlike the connoisseurship of the popular found in fanzines or chat rooms devoted to the glories of a particular television program or graphic novel, this popular connoisseurship dismantles the traditional links among discernment, specialized discourse, and rarefied audience. The foundation for this countersystem is an informed reading in pursuit of pleasure, devoid of guilt pangs or ought-to-have-reads—a *cultural* activity given license to be enjoyed as popular culture. And that reading produces such transformative, out-of-the-body experiences that it can only be described in sexual or spiri-



6. Front cover of *Book Lust: Recommended Reading for Every Mood, Moment, and Reason* (2003), by Nancy Pearl

tual terms. It's either lust, or meeting Sister Virginia at the Pearly Gates—this sort of reading is never merely an intellectual transformation. The cover of *Book Lust* captures this perfectly—“LUST” in bold, block letters laid over a photo of the headless author, holding what appears to be a hymnal against her chest.

As popular as Pearl has become through her books and calendars in her role as NPR's house librarian, her national impact pales next to that of Oprah Winfrey, who has managed to achieve the role of national librarian without any such professional credentials, within the heart of commercial television. Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and Borders provide the sites, and to a certain extent, the infrastructures for like-minded readers to connect and then become a mutually reinforcing taste community in which they serve as each other's guides about what to read next; but the remarkable commonality of

the lists suggests a larger force, a higher authority with the ability to reach very broad audiences nationwide. For the precollegiate avid readers (the AP English students discussed in the previous chapter) the answer is relatively simple—standardized curricula and pedagogy, the persistent downloading of the same masterpieces, and the same ways of talking about literary texts inevitably produce a high degree of consistency on the lists—only the level of student irony varies. But in the lists and guides made by the postcollegiate readers at Amazon, especially those assembled by the female readers who conceive of reading as a sanctified form of escape from their daily lives (*Books for a Peaceful Time Alone*, *Books for Solitude and Quiet*, etc.), one finds an even greater commonality in terms of titles and the way one talks the talk of book loving. Amazon may provide the infrastructure, but this consistency of titles, chosen by an extremely cohesive taste community, is due directly to the Book Club.

Oprah Winfrey, more than any other figure or factor, represents the complicated interplay among commerce, culture, and self-cultivation within the popular literary. Her power to turn novels into bestsellers of a magnitude comparable only to blockbuster franchise films has been extensively reported in virtually every form of American mass media. The announcement of a new title has automatically led to bestseller status at Amazon within twenty-four hours and immediate placement on the tables inside the front door at superstores. My chief concern in this chapter will not be the sales figures but the way Oprah functions as the preeminent national librarian, seemingly outside the realm of commerce. Two book-length studies of her Book Club, Kathleen Rooney's *Reading with Oprah: The Book Club That Changed America* (2005) and Cecilia Konchar Farr's *Reading Oprah: How Oprah's Book Club Changed the Way America Reads* (2005) have covered a broad range of issues, but I want to look closely at the way Oprah functions as an authority on reading for an imagined community of self-cultivators that numbers in the hundreds of thousands and who come to her expertise within the heart of consumer culture. Like the local librarian, she recommends books as choices, not products, as expressions of taste, not mere commerce, and therefore she can be trusted implicitly. She chooses these books because she loves them and knows you will too. As Laura Miller has said in her assessment of the Book Club: "Winfrey may be a performer, but her job is to perform herself, and in selecting titles for her book club, she has always seemed to be choosing on the basis of personal taste" (2001). Talk

about bookselling rarely enters the conversation, even though the program is aired on advertiser-driven television as a product of her Harpo Productions, Inc., an entertainment conglomerate unto itself. Winfrey chooses only books sold by *other* publishers and thereby remains somehow apart from the commercialism of bookselling, even as her “picks” generate more book sales than any other figure or force in publishing.

The success of Oprah as the consummate reliable authority, however, depends on more than her ability to pick appropriate titles. She also provides a way of talking about literary titles that is nonacademic but thoroughly self-confident, thereby empowering readers to read and talk about her selections without performance anxiety. Her choice of titles can be trusted so implicitly because they are appropriate to that manner of reading. But what distinguishes that manner of reading? She is the featured oral performer for a textual community. In their ethnographic studies of how the activity of reading began to take particular shape in medieval societies, Brian Stock (*Implications of Literacy*, 1987) and Nicholas Howe (“Cultural Construction,” 1999) detail the ways in which reading is decidedly not the free-floating, solitary pleasure that it is too often imagined to be, but instead a historically specific activity requiring certain rituals and protocols that bestow it with particular values in different contexts. Howe’s account of how such textual communities form the basis of the “cultural construction of reading” provides a useful corollary for understanding the ways in which reading *literary* fiction is made accessible to contemporary television audiences:

In a culture unaccustomed to the written text, the act of reading would have seemed remarkably like solving a riddle, for it meant translating meaningless but somehow magical squiggles on a leaf of vellum into significant discourse, even and most remarkably into sacred scripture. What was alien, opaque, seemingly without meaning becomes familiar, transparent, and meaningful when read aloud by those initiated in the solution of such enigmas. Without the dimension of oral performance, reading of this sort could not be made into the solving of a mystery. The squiggles must be made to speak. . . . Both readers and listeners belong in a community at once textual and spiritual, written and oral, in which intellectual and spiritual life is created through the communal interchange of reading. (“Cultural Construction,” 6, 7)

In much the same way, the avid, nonprofessional readers of the early twenty-first century come to literary fiction in an arena of popular culture

formerly unaccustomed to literary language—a culture that is both written and exuberantly oral, in the form of television chat show book clubs and reading group discussions that make the reading activity into an explicitly communal interchange, dependent upon someone properly initiated to solve the mysteries hidden in the literary text. The fact that the most reliable authorities for this audience now come from the realm of popular culture rather than the academy makes this a very particular kind of interpretive community animated by its own “spirituality,” if we conceive of the spiritual here as that factor which makes reading an uplifting and transformative experience. Oprah performs a very similar function for her viewers within a televisual context as a skilled public explicator who translates the opaque into something familiar, transparent, and meaningful for people unaccustomed to the intricacies of reading in oral cultures. She makes her selections but, just as important, provides a way of experiencing those selections that invests reading with entertainment value for television watchers, who are encouraged to become, or continue to be, avid readers. The now legendary exchange between Winfrey and Toni Morrison is particularly indicative of this power. According to Oprah, she was fascinated, but also baffled as she first read *Beloved*. When she called Morrison and asked, “What is *that*?” The author replied, “That, dear, is called *reading*” (quoted in Lisa Schwarzbaum’s 1997 article in *Entertainment Weekly*). Having been initiated into the mysteries of the Word, Winfrey takes the message to her viewers and provides a way of talking the talk of reading that renders the formerly opaque into the transparently meaningful, and the mysterious becomes transparent. Winfrey “makes the squiggles speak” in ways that make them suddenly seem directly addressed to her viewers/readers, at which point her personal taste and the taste of her viewers/readers can become so tightly interwoven that the boundaries between them fade away into a common way of talking about the same type of fiction.

### *Oprah and “An-na, An-na Karenininina”*

In order to discuss the way this particular textual community operates, I want to look closely at a specific Book Club segment on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*—the one devoted to Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, which aired September 15, 2004. I have chosen this particular program because I think it is the most revealing in terms of how Oprah’s authority as oral performer works for her “Book Clubbers,” and also because it is extremely self-conscious

about the Book Club's cultural impact. This analysis goes into considerable detail in order to capture the combination of different evaluative criteria that are used by this community as they talk the talk of reading.

When Oprah announced that Tolstoy's novel was going to be the Summer Selection for the club, she admitted in her introduction to the novel at her Web site: "I've never, ever chosen a novel that I had not personally read. It's been on my list for years but I didn't do it because I was scared. Now I'm going to team up with all of you and read it together." Here, authority rests on this admission, because her fascination, coupled with a lack of expertise in Russian literature, makes her eminently trustable as the explicator of the squiggles — they're squiggles for her too at this point, but by reading and talking about it together, the squiggles will become transparent. This segment, then, was welcoming back the Clubbers after their summer with Tolstoy, at 817 pages the longest book ever chosen for the Book Club and the only one that Oprah was reading for the first time right along with them.

That the Oprah Book Club is intended to be a genuinely popular experience designed to appeal to amateur, nonprofessional readers was never more vividly clear than on this particular program. The *Anna Karenina* segment was the second half of the program; the first half was devoted to Oprah's guest Barry Manilow, who performed a mini-concert of songs requested by audience members. In addition to the performances and the repeated plugs for his new album, *Barry Manilow Scores*, the viewers were introduced to a number of audience members who told their personal "Barry" stories. They were invited by Oprah in response to their letters urging her to invite Manilow, and she even says during this segment, "You all can stop writing me letters about this now," because she has made their wishes come true. Manilow finishes this half of the show with a stirring rendition of one of his biggest hits, "Copacabana," and then, after being thanked by Oprah, he adds a new verse of "Copacabana" as a kind of encore and segue into the Book Club segment: "Her name was An-na, An-na Karenininina." The crowd roars appreciatively (fade to commercial).

### *Book Club Segment*

Coming back from the commercial break, Oprah now talks directly to us (viewers at home and studio audience, as one expanded club):

*Oprah*: Last June I could not wait to reveal my Summer Book Club choice. *An-na, An-na Karen-nee-na* [sung to the tune of “Copacabana”] was our Book Club’s first Russian masterpiece, and I was thrilled—but would you be as thrilled as I was? I couldn’t be sure, so while I was on vacation reading *Anna*, our Book Club producers followed the story.

[Cut to: *Harpotone News*: Parody newsreel, made in the style of Welles’s “News on the March” in *Citizen Kane*, complete with archival black-and-white footage and booming voice-over narration.]

*Voice-over*: Headline, June 1st, 2000 and 4. While thousands wait in eager anticipation, Oprah announces her Summer Book Club Selection.

[Archival images of crowds in streets, followed by another archival interior shot of a 1950s American family, watching their television, where Oprah has been digitally inserted on the screen.]

*Oprah*: Don’t be scared. It’s *Anna Karenina*.

*Voice-over*: Millions cheer and celebrate; the classic novel makes headlines around the nation and around the world, making it *the* summer read.

[More archival crowd scenes, then traditional newspaper montage featuring actual news stories responding to the announcement with titles such as “Tolstoy Top Seller Thanks to Oprah,” “Yo, Tolstoy, We’re Reading Oprah’s Choice,” “Thumbs Up to Count Tolstoy,” and so on.]

*Voice-over*: People travel from near and far to be the first in line to get their copies, pushing *Anna Karenina* to the top of the charts! The 126-year-old Russian romance finds new life as it becomes number 1 on the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Publisher’s Weekly* bestseller lists, winning the coveted triple crown of book publishing.

[Shots of each of these newspaper’s bestseller lists, and then shot of a newspaper article detailing this “triple crown” achievement.]

*Voice-over*: As June becomes July, and July, August, seventy thousand brand-new readers join Oprah’s Book Club. At Oprah.com they

sign up for the summer training program, “Read Along with Oprah Each Week,” and engage in fascinating book discussions with members as far away as Sydney, Australia.

[Montage of several Web site pages, old-fashioned globe with Sydney highlighted.]

*Voice-over:* And with half a million total members and growing, Oprah’s Book Club is truly the biggest in the world.

What I find especially fascinating here, first in Oprah’s introduction, and then again in the *Harpotone* newsreel, is the rapid alternation between earnest appreciation and ironic undercutting of the featured book and the Book Club itself. Oprah sings the title as if it were a Barry Manilow song, then immediately gets reverential. The “newsreel” at first appears to be a complete send-up, but then goes about detailing the impact of the Oprah choices, complete with correct figures and actual newspaper articles that, in effect prove how enormous that impact really is. The book talk here is alternately deeply sincere and blithely ironic, with the tone changing practically every other sentence, and often within the same sentence, as if the assertion of seriousness about reading must come with near instantaneous disclaimer, only to be reasserted again almost immediately. After the newsreel, we come back to Oprah in the studio, and she reiterates that this was the first book she had not previously read:

*Oprah:* I tried to keep the same schedule that was offered online. Anyway, I began to wonder, was everybody going to finish this gigantic novel. After all, we had moms who hadn’t read a book since high school. So if you hadn’t read a book since high school, this was a tough one to pick up. Book Clubbers who’d never read Tolstoy, I was one of them. So let’s go to the videotape.

[Cut to: Another mock documentary, this one in color, but with the same booming voice-over. Group of Book Clubbers all in matching T-shirts (“I’m Not Scared” emblazoned on chest) warming up for a race, followed by marathon race footage with each runner carrying same copy of *Anna Karenina* as they push baby strollers, stumble over in street, and so on.]

*Voice-over:* They came from across the globe, Book Clubbers ready to take the 2004 Anna Karenina Challenge—eight long sections, 817

pages, twenty-three complicated Russian names. The only thing they had to fear was fear itself. They would battle elements. Summer heat. Busy family schedules. . . . Could they do it? Could they conquer Tolstoy?

[Cut to: Studio, where the “marathon” Book Clubbers rush onto the stage surrounding Oprah, chanting, “Anna! Anna! Anna!” as they hold their copies over their heads. Oprah urges them on.]

*Oprah:* You’re beautiful. Thank you. OK. Oh, great, guys. Nice enthusiasm. OK. These are cute T-shirts, and the front says, “I wasn’t scared!” That’s because when I first announced the book, I said to everybody, “Like, don’t be scared [pronounced *skerred*]. You did it! And on the back it says, “Anna Karenina Summer 2004.” Fantastic. I know. Were there times, though when you thought you couldn’t finish it? All the time? [Laughter] I have to say that this summer I was with my trainer Bob Green, and every time he’d say, “What are you doing for the rest of the afternoon?” I’d go, “Finish *Anna Karenina*.” It’s like a running joke in my house. Next our star-studded Book Club signs up a famous funny member. And later, where in the world are we going to go next? Our brand new book. We’ll be right back.

Notice here the assertion that she’s *just like* her Clubbers, slugging through the novel just like they did, the coach who does calisthenics with the team. Her affirmation of solidarity with the other Clubbers new to Tolstoy, especially the moms who hadn’t read a novel since high school and pushed their babies in strollers as they trudged on through the novel, could hardly be more emphasized, at least until she tells us about her conversation with her personal trainer, which puts her on a somewhat different plane—the megacelebrity who is doing this because she just loves reading so much. The fear of the squiggles is acknowledged (especially since there are so many of them, 817 [!] pages’ worth), but what is more strongly affirmed is that the fear was overcome together, with Oprah (a recovered fearful reader).

[Commercial Break]

[Plot synopsis feature: Montage of images from the *Exxon Masterpiece Theatre* production of *Anna Karenina*, accompanied by disembodied voice of Oprah telling the story of the novel, and speaking

lines of significant dialogue related to the images onscreen. (Quoted lines are italicized.)]

*Oprah's voice-over:* From the famous first line, “*All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way,*” Tolstoy captures us instantly in his web of lust, deceit, infidelity, and unbridled passions.

Our tragic heroine, Anna Karenina betrays her husband and begins a fated romance with Count Vronsky, a handsome young soldier.

“*Your husband is an important man. There will be a scandal!*”

Their torrid love affair erupts when Anna’s husband confronts her.

“*I’m his mistress. I hate you!*”

She then reveals her scandalous secret.

“*I’m pregnant.*”

“*We’ll say the child is mine. Dear God!*”

Anna is faced with a decision no mother wants to make. It will haunt her for the rest of her days.

“*Things will go on as before, but you will lose your son!*”

[Child’s voice] “*Please don’t go!*”

Unable to live in the world she created . . .

“*I’ve given up everything for you!*”

And incapable of living without Vronsky . . .

“*You’re destroying me!*”

Anna unravels, and Tolstoy leaves us with a searing glimpse of a tortured soul.

The incorporation of footage from the *Masterpiece Theatre* production, combined with this voice-over, sums up the Oprah Book Club like an epigram, because the reading experience is visualized two times over—we watch a television production of the novel within another television show dedicated to the successful reading of the novel. This is the world of Merchant-Ivory reimaged by Margaret Mitchell on daytime television. The decorative tastefulness of *Masterpiece Theatre* is retained, but also transformed. The plot points may come from Tolstoy, but the overheated, lustful language translates him into genre romance, with a difference. Yet this is lust for reading *mothers*, the Clubbers who, we’ve already been told, may not have read a book since high school and have been seen pushing baby carriages while reading their copies of *Anna Karenina*. Now we know why! This is a novel, but rather than reading passages aloud, Oprah narrates the

television images, transforming the novel into a hybrid, teleliterary experience that is as much about watching as it is about reading.

[Cut to: Celebrity guest-reader interview.]

*Oprab* [talking directly to audience]: I'm looking at all the people who weren't scared. Our newest Book Club member is Megan Mullally, hilarious star of *Will and Grace*. Welcome Megaaaaan! Take a look.

[Cut to: Videotape interview with Megan Mullally. Montage of shots featuring her assuming various reading postures around her apartment. She holds up her copy, littered with Post-it notes marking key passages.]

*Disembodied voice of Oprah*: We can see that Megan is a girl who likes to be prepared.

*Megan*: I just want to point out the nerd factor happening here, the notes up the side of the page. I'm ready for my quiz.

*Voice of Oprah*: Hey, Megan, this is not a test, but we do want to know what you thought of our Book Club Pick?

*Megan*: I heartily recommend it to one and all because it's so rich. It's pretty great. There were times when I must admit, because it is 817 pages long, that I wasn't sure if I was going to make it. But you can't wait to get back to the story.

*Voice of Oprah*: And what does Megan think of Anna the tragic heroine?

*Megan*: The whole, like breakdown, Anna Karenina's entire like mental unraveling is really interesting. [Shot of Megan underlining passages in her copy as she reads.] Of course, now she'd just like take some Paxil and it would all be good, but they didn't have those mood stabilizers back then, apparently.

*Voice of Oprah*: And to those book lovers who have not finished?

*Megan*: It is a little intimidating, but it's worth it, and because of that it's rich and it really does give you a full sense of human nature that's universal.

*Voice of Oprah*: And for Book Club members who might want further study?

*Megan*: Well, you can just attend my college course that I'll be teaching at Yale if you have any further questions on the material. [Big laugh from studio audience.]

*Oprah*: That’s Megan Mullally. Thank you, Megan. You can watch Megan on *Will and Grace*, one of our favorite shows, on Thursdays on NBC. Next, we’re just minutes away from revealing our next book. And it’s easy. It’s easy. I thought you needed a break. It’s fascinating. You’ll be happy I picked it.

The celebrity guest-reader is introduced to the audience just as she would be on a talk show, complete with plugs for her television series at the beginning and end of her interview. The Book Club segment at this point familiarizes Tolstoy three times over — as a book that another celebrity reads just like you did, a familiar person from a popular television series you’ve seen before, interviewed as though she were a guest on a talk show like *Rosie O’Donnell* or *David Letterman* that you’ve seen throughout your entire life. Within that all-too-familiar world, the idea of reading in *school* becomes a source of humor; as Megan has exam anxiety, Oprah assures her this not that kind of book discussion (no evaluation of your reading will be done here), and then she jokes about teaching a course on Tolstoy at an elite university. Yet, between the ironic remarks about reading done in a school setting, there is another assertion of an almost reverential seriousness about the book as an experience that gives you a “full sense of human nature that’s universal” and therefore needs annotations in the form of Post-it notes and underlining of key passages, just as one reads a classic novel for a class.

Oprah closes this segment by assuring her Clubbers that they will approve of her next selection, the supremely confident curator who “knows what you’ll like.”

[Cut to: Public service announcement for the Angel Network. Sudden introduction of another video segment featuring montage of Russian orphans, accompanied by Oprah’s voice-over.]

*Oprah*: In honor of our Book Club selection *Anna Karenina*, we are proud to announce that our \$50,000 Angel Network Award goes to a culture project in St. Petersburg, Russia. Thousands and thousands of storybooks written in Russian will be making their way to these children who have so very little. Together with your help, our Book Club and the Angel Network are bringing the joys of reading to boys and girls all over the world — one book at a time, and I thank you for it!

Here Oprah becomes not just the nation's, but the world's librarian, as she spreads the joys of reading in an overtly philanthropic manner, sounding like a contemporary, televisual version of Andrew Carnegie. She brings books to the people, for free. Here we could not be further from the world of commercial-driven television and the commodification of books. But then, suddenly, she thanks someone else.

*Oprah* [back in studio, talking directly to us]: Thanks to all of you who have logged on to Oprah.com and shopped our boutique. I want to show you the newest addition to our line. These are cute. They're cute little pink pajamas, little pajamas that say Oprah's Book Club on the pocket. [Applause.] They're little pink checks [Close-ups of pocket with logo, then Web site catalogue picture] with a little lace trim. I designed these with Karen Neuburger. OK? So if you'd like some to get cozy you can wear these all day and not take your pajamas off and just curl up.

At this point, the philanthropist becomes saleswoman and the program changes from a Save the Children charitable appeal to the Shopping Channel, complete with close-ups of the product and voice-over descriptions of its selling points. The marketplace has invaded the library, but apparently there is no sense of a contradiction lurking anywhere on the premises. While Oprah may not actually have any financial interest in the books being read, she does sell the accoutrements for all that reading, a line of reading clothes at her own boutique. There's more than reading tips at this Web site. Oprah is a full-service oral performer, selecting the books, narrating the story, providing "handy-dandy reading strategies," acting as our good-will ambassador to the world in need of books, even designing the right clothes to wear while reading those selections. By this point, the fact that this reading community is also a target audience, and that both are being cultivated carefully, is explicitly acknowledged by the program.

[Cut to: Announcement of the next Book Club Selection. Oprah on stage, surrounded by boxes of books with "Top Secret" printed on the side.]

*Oprah*: OK. You know what these top secret boxes mean. The Pulitzer Prize-winning novel I'm about to reveal was written by a Nobel Peace Prize-winning American author. That's a big clue. You can

do anything now that you've read *Anna Karenina*. So really don't be scared. It's a sweeping saga that's been called a universal tale of the destiny of man. It's also juicy as all get out, so it has a concubine [breaks into comical "black" voice]—that always helps when you got a couple of concubines, got a couple of concubines, and you got me. It's got affairs, vicious family feuds, and this novel's going to keep you up at night and it will not take you a long time to read it. It's really, really good because it's *The Good Earth* by Pearl S. Buck. It's solid. You've read it before? Well, read it again! We'll be right back.

The announcement epitomizes all of the main features of this textual community's way of talking the talk of reading literary books. Here again we find the rocketing back and forth between reverence for the classic and ironic undercutting of any seriousness complete with concubine jokes in comical black voice. This is a book that has *two* pedigrees, so it must be worth reading, especially since it too can be made to sound like a lost Margaret Mitchell novel. And it's another one of those "universal tales about the destiny of man" that must be something like a novel that gives you "a full sense of human nature that's universal." Least anyone make light of this appeal to universality as a transcendent characteristic of literary greatness, remember how important universality and oneness were for Harold Bloom: "Read deeply, not to believe, not to accept, not to contradict, but to learn to share in that *one nature* that writes and reads." Bloom and Oprah know something about the connection between universal tales and appealing to mass audiences.

The program concludes with an announcement from the host that reiterates one last time the complicated, ambivalent relationship between the reading one does in the Book Club and the sort of reading one does in school. The latter may be deserving of ironic disdain, but it nevertheless provides a high degree of legitimacy in terms of title selections.

*Oprah*: So we just announced our new book, *The Good Earth*, by Pearl S. Buck. Head out to your bookstore today and get your copy. There are plenty in the libraries. And log on to Oprah.com—print out this handy-dandy character guide. There it is on your screen. You'll also have a map of China and a reading strategy. So we're going from Russia to China. We're now in China. OK? Now we have some special guests who are going to help me out. Our Book Club elves today are all honor students from Mrs. Fredney's Advanced English

class at Marion High School on the South Side of Chicago. They'll be reading *The Good Earth* this fall in class. Come on out, elves. Bring on the books for everybody, all of you honor elves. 'Bye, everybody. Happy reading! Join us for OxyGen. Barry Manilow will be right back. Thank you.

Here Oprah brings on the books for everybody, the national librarian handing out books to audience members as if they were so many Russian orphans. She directs them to bookstores (go *today*) but also to libraries—her lack of financial gain in all this being reiterated one last time. Here too she brings together her Clubbers and AP English students, the reading community at Amazon that was definitely not reading the titles that Oprah and company read, at least until the return of her Book Club, and she began choosing exactly the sort of novels they read in high school AP English classes.

### *Bibliotherapy and Taste Therapy*

Throughout this segment, Oprah's power as oral performer for this community of readers depends on more than her ability to function as kindly librarian. To return to Hartley's research on British reading groups, she does not comment specifically on the Oprah effect, but she argues that one of the chief differences between British and American reading groups is that the latter places far greater emphasis on the therapeutic dimensions of reading:

Many of the groups contributing to Ellen Slezak's *Book Group Book* would agree—"While the books remain our reason for meeting we have become the story"—whereas I suspect most UK groups would disagree loudly. This is where British and US groups diverge most. The reading lists which Slezak has collected from US groups have books on psychology and personal growth which very rarely appear on British lists. And in America reading together and self-help have taken yet another logical step in a healing art which is relatively unknown in the UK. *Read Two Books and Let's Talk Next Week* is the title of a collection of essays by mental health practitioners devoted to bibliotherapy using reading as a tool to assist the therapeutic process. (114)

Hartley does not pursue this argument, but a comparison between the Oprah Book Club and bibliotherapy can be very productive in terms of

specifying the hybrid nature of that talk and the role Oprah plays as within that reading culture as public explicator. This is not to suggest that Oprah is simply engaging in bibliotherapy on a grand, televisual scale because the points of divergence are as revealing as the points of convergence. In *Read Two Books*, for example, the authors Janice Maidman Joshua and Donna Di-Menna, organize their book in terms of clinical problems—domestic abuse, adult children of alcoholics, and so on—and offer summaries of relevant self-help books under each rubric without mentioning any fictional titles whatsoever. In *Bibliotherapy, the Interactive Process: A Handbook* (1986), Arleen Hynes (founder of the first hospital-based training program in bibliotherapy in 1974 at St. Elizabeths Hospital in Washington) and Mary Hynes-Berry advocate the use of fictional titles but stress the difference between bibliotherapy and book groups, insisting that the former is devoted to therapeutic development of the individual, while the latter is “more a literature class” and therefore is more concerned with aesthetic issues. According to the distinctions they draw between reading for bibliotherapeutic reasons and reading for a class, the Oprah Book Club appears to straddle those categories and complicate any hard-and-fast distinctions between them. They argue:

In a class, the interaction takes place between the student–literature–teacher; the literature is usually considered to be the object of discussion rather than a tool. The teacher’s goal is to help the student achieve some insight into the meaning and value of the work as written. Discussion might focus on historical context, nature of the genre, structure, use of imagery or language, or presentation of dominant values. In bibliotherapy, however, the value of the literature depends strictly on its capacity to encourage a therapeutic response from the participants. The individual’s feeling–response is more important than an intellectual grasp of the work’s meaning. Thus, in bibliotherapy even a misinterpretation of the text will be considered both legitimate and useful if it leads to the release of feelings or insights related to self-understanding. In other words, the use of literature in bibliotherapy reflects the goals of therapy rather than those of education. (43)

Even a quick visit to the Oprah Book Club Web site reveals a hybrid mixture of both ways of reading, a concerted effort to provide information about the meaning of the work as in a class (interviews with authors or experts, short analyses of different aspects of the novel, maps of reading strategies, etc.) and other material that moves in the direction of reading as

self-realization. But the distinctions between bibliotherapy and the Oprah Book Club become even harder to draw in reference to the role of the *facilitator*, the figure who, for Hynes and Hynes-Berry, is both the linchpin for genuinely interactive bibliotherapy and what separates it from pleasure or academic reading. They acknowledge the traditional role of the librarian as provider of readers' advisory services but stress the differences between librarian and the facilitator:

In the early 1920s, some librarians made a point of searching out and offering reading materials specifically for their therapeutic potential. . . . Since then, numerous librarians, counselors, English teachers, and social workers have compiled lists and made suggestions for reading they believe will help an individual's growth or offer insight into a personal crisis. . . . We do not mean to suggest that recommended readings cannot serve therapeutic ends. On the contrary, there are many cases in which a librarian, teacher, or counselor's thoughtful suggestion has provided a reader with just the right book—a work that triggered a significant and growth-producing feeling-response to some need. The point is that the interaction takes place between the reader and the work and does not directly involve the person who made the suggestion. . . . In other words, in this mode—which can be identified as interactive bibliotherapy—the process of growth and healing is centered not as much in the act of reading as in the *guided dialogue* about the material. In effect, the triad of *participant-literature-facilitator* means that there is a dual interaction: The participant's personal response to the story is important, but dialoguing with the facilitator about that response can lead to a whole new dimension of insight. (125, emphasis mine)

Given this account, Oprah is not just the well-intentioned librarian but a master facilitator, since a triadic relationship is the foundation of her Book Club—this is *guided* reading that takes place in a kind of imagined dialogue with the facilitator. She is not like the librarian who merely recommends a good read and then discreetly fades out of the picture. She narrates *Anna Karenina* during one key segment of the Book Club show, but throughout the program she remains the narrator of *their* story as Book Club readers of the novel. This is not to suggest that this kind of guided reading is as attuned to the needs of the individual participant as a formal therapeutic situation would be, but the emphasis is as much on soliciting feeling-responses and shaping them into narrative form as it is on knowledge of the

work as such. Given the frequent discussion of self-help books and therapeutic experiences involving a wide variety of problems on her programs, the cultivation of feeling-responses of a nonliterary sort has been a distinguishing feature of the program since its inception. Oprah's Book Club is so successful because it facilitates reading as a form of self-cultivation that combines the formerly antagonistic, making knowledge of the work and knowledge of one's own feeling-responses equally legitimate and somehow mutually reinforcing.

It would be easy to argue that Oprah puts the "self" in the self-culture of reading, but the incorporation of information about the work reveals a need to provide the inside scoop, the information needed to read confidently, knowing that this is a genuine educational experience and therefore, a meaningful form of self-cultivation. The interplay between the two only intensified when Oprah restarted the Book Club in 2004, with literary classics such as *East of Eden*, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and *Anna Karenina*, exactly the sort of canonical books found on the lists of the AP English students at Amazon, the readers who were learning about the works and provided their own feeling-responses unfacilitated by their English teachers. The need to respect the literary work, even when it might mean a loss of authority about feeling-responses, became especially clear with the choice of *Anna Karenina*. Here the work is respected to the point of awe, but it is worthy of reading because "all of us" are reading it together—Oprah's authority as a facilitator is only intensified by her admission that, like you, she hasn't read it but she's heading the expedition into the wilds of nineteenth-century Russian fiction, and readers never doubt that they are in good hands because of that admission. Likewise, she tells her audience that even if they have read *The Good Earth* before, they should read it again, because reading it together with other Clubbers, facilitated by Oprah, will produce a profoundly different experience from any previous, unfacilitated reading.

In order to appreciate the nature of Oprah's authority as literary tastemaker who is both an authority and one of us, I think it's useful to compare her to two other taste mavens who have brought what were formerly thought to be elite tastes to a mass audience—Martha Stewart and Robert Parker Jr. All three have gained unprecedented influence by making refined taste into popular taste, whether it be for literary fiction, "home keeping," or wine appreciation, but the nature of the expertise, and its relationship to the marketplace, is quite different in each case. Like Oprah, Stewart pro-

vides lessons in connoisseurship that allow the uninitiated to gain confidence about formerly intimidating cultural pleasures at warp speed. And Stewart is also a facilitator of sorts, showing viewers how to transform their feeling-responses into room decorating, antique collecting, and gardening skills step by step, in implied dialogue form. But while Stewart is there *with* you, televisually speaking she's not one of *us*, for her superiority is never in doubt; she has deigned to share her secrets with viewers, but those power relations remain firmly in place. And unlike Oprah, Stewart's expertise is commodified two times over—first, as vital information delivered via her television program, magazine, and Web site, and then as consumer goods, which allow for the realization of that taste advice via purchases from her catalogue, her Web site, or K-Mart, where Martha Stewart's Everyday Collection is available nationwide. The Oprah Book Club, on the other hand, does not sell the books it selects via Harpo, Inc. It refers readers to books published by other commercial interests within the marketplace, thereby allowing Oprah's recommendations to be untainted by financial gain. Granted, it offers paraphernalia related to the Book Club at the Web site (T-shirts, those cozy pajamas, etc.), but the guided reading experience is “free.”

In its ability to inspire the sale of millions of books yet retain a purely advisory/facilitator function apart from the filthy lucre of the publishing industry, the Oprah Book Club resembles Robert M. Parker Jr.'s wine newsletter, *The Wine Advocate*, which has had every bit as profound an impact on wine drinking in the United States as Oprah enjoys in the publishing world. Parker's newsletter is entirely subscriber-supported, taking no advertisements because they would jeopardize the consumer advocate nature of the publication, a point insisted upon in the mission statement printed on the cover of every issue: “*The Wine Advocate*, first published in 1978, relentlessly pursues the goal of providing valuable, uncensored, totally independent and reliable information on wine and issues affecting wine quality to those consumers in search of the finest wines and best wine values.” Parker's expertise, like Oprah's, floats above commercial interests and introduces, at the same time, a new language of connoisseurship articulated in terms of hedonistic pleasures that the right wine provides to new mass audiences of quality wine drinkers. This language of connoisseurship combines knowledge of wine as *a work of art* (copious details about varietals, wine makers, vintages, residual sugar levels, etc.) with abundant descriptions about taste expressed in decidedly nonelitist terms (e.g., “mind-blowing,” “a staggering

fruit bomb of a wine,” “gobs of fruit,” and frequent incorporation of lyrics from Neil Young songs in the section titles). While wine connoisseurship was, for centuries, an elite taste restricted to the upper classes, in which the knowledge of wine was handed down just like a wine cellar, Parker’s readers can acquire that cultural expertise, but only if they are driven by *wine lust* rather than snobbery. Yet within that realm there is no question about who has the master palate. He evaluates for us, and as in the case of Stewart, a loyal audience pays for that expertise, even if Parker sells no wine himself. (When he did acquire a one-third interest in an Oregon vineyard in 1992, a disclaimer was added to the mission statement: “Because of an obvious conflict of interest, the wine produced from this vineyard will never be mentioned or reviewed in anything written by Robert M. Parker Jr.”) While Parker may stand apart from the industry as the champion for the readers he initiates into the delights of wine appreciation through his own nationwide, taste delivery system, Parker’s expertise is not offered free to all who might listen; a subscription to *The Wine Advocate* is currently two to three times more expensive than that of any American food magazines such as *Bon Appetit* and *Food and Wine*. Knowledge about taste may be acquired rather than inherited, but it’s still a commodity for sale.

### The Corrections *Controversy: A National Referendum on Literary Authority*

Oprah’s status as America’s librarian/facilitator depends on a form of cultural authority that is both nonelitist (she’s one of us, she hasn’t read *Anna Karenina* either) and noncommercial (she’s not selling any books, just encouraging people to take delight in reading as a way of learning about themselves). Because of that status, her conflict with Jonathan Franzen became a kind of national referendum on the legitimacy of popular literary culture in the United States. Once it was selected by the Oprah Book Club, Franzen’s novel *The Corrections* (2002), became a bestseller within hours and remained the bestselling book in America for weeks thereafter. On the face of it, this would have seemed like the perfect realization of the author’s dream of bringing the “social novel” back to a broad general readership, that audience beyond the priesthood that John Barth argued literary fiction would have to connect with if it were to have a future. But when Franzen expressed misgivings about the impact that the Club Selection would have

on his book he was disinvented from the television program, at which point the story became front-page news in the *New York Times* and the subject of dozens of articles and opinion pieces on television, radio, and print publications. In the surprisingly vociferous controversy that ensued, Oprah and Franzen were very quickly made into exemplars of the two figures that have loomed over self-cultivation for over a century—the librarian, who brings knowledge to the people, and the modernist artist, who creates genuine art and therefore must avoid the taint of anything that smacks of mass culture. What was at stake in the controversy, at the most fundamental level, was just who literary culture belonged to, who could function as its experts, and who got to be a player in the game of serious reading.

That Franzen was insistent upon maintaining his status as latter-day modernist novelist could hardly have been more explicit, given his explanation of why he felt uncomfortable as an author in Oprah's Book Club: "I feel like I'm solidly in the high-art literary tradition. She's picked some good books, but she's picked enough schmaltsy, one-dimensional [ones] that I cringe, myself, even though I think she's really smart and she's really fighting the good fight" (Franzen here sounding uncannily like the Virginia Woolf who said, "If anyone calls me middle-brow, I shall stab them with my pen"). The interview where Franzen offered these remarks, in 2004, was published, not coincidentally, within the realm of official literary culture—the Web site for Powell's Bookstore, one of the best known independent bookstores in America. He was also bothered by the Oprah sticker on the cover of *The Corrections*: "I'm an independent writer and I didn't want that corporate logo on my book" (quoted in *Oregonian* 12 [2002]). Franzen had already articulated his contempt for what he called "technological consumerism" in his manifesto "Why Bother?," an essay that originally appeared in *Harper's* magazine in 1996, well before the publication of *The Corrections*. There he marshaled most of the time-honored charges leveled against mass culture, inveighing against the "cultural totalitarianism" at work in a country that "grows ever more distracted and mesmerized by mass culture," where culture is overrun by the marketplace. Television, of course, is one of his chief targets; in his essay he refers to "the banal ascendancy of television, the electronic fragmentation of public discourse" (58). This fragmentation is inevitable because television is driven solely by consumerism: "In the world of consumer advertising and consumer purchasing, no evil is moral. . . . [T]he only problems worth advertising solutions for are problems treatable

through the spending of money” (69, in *How to Be Alone*). Most horrifying of all, this is a world in which “publishing is now a subsidiary of Hollywood, and the blockbuster novel is a mass-marketable commodity, a portable substitute for TV” (85). This diatribe on the evils of mass culture as nothing more than commodity fetishism (at which point, anything on television is, ipso facto, part of a corporate conspiracy and, therefore, the antithesis of genuine culture) obviously plays well with Powell’s shoppers, since it has functioned as the old-time religion of official literary culture for decades (“It was good for Adorno’s children and it’s good enough for me! Sing it with me now! Gimme that old time . . .”). This mass culture bashing reaches its zenith in Franzen’s particular rendition of the old hymn: “The feeling of oppositionality is compounded in an age when simply picking up a novel after dinner represents a kind of cultural *je refuse!*” (90).

But just how does that *je refuse* business actually work? Does it depend on the type of fiction being read? Or the intellectual class formation of the reader? When Oprah’s viewers pick up *One Hundred Years of Solitude* after dinner, do they refuse the evils of mass culture even if they are reading that novel because it was recommended to them by a mass culture celebrity who has made literary novels into instant blockbusters, reading a copy they’ve bought at superstore bookstores out at the mall or down on the strip, reading a story they may see eventually as a Hollywood adaptation at the multiplex across the parking lot from that superstore? And if it doesn’t constitute the proper *je refuse*, why doesn’t it? Is it due to the quality of the novel, or the quality of the readers? Or is it because they are common readers rather than the uncommon readers who share that certain “oppositionality”?

One of the most insightful opinion pieces offered during the controversy, one that was predicated on a quite different conception of reading, appeared in *Library Journal* in 2002. The journal’s editor, Francine Fialkoff, saw Franzen’s discomfort as a missed opportunity. She begins by introducing the term “book bait,” what librarians once called books they gathered to entice young readers, “built on the wisdom of public librarians who understood that it doesn’t matter what young adults read as long as they do read.” She quotes Frances Perkins’s *Special Report on Public Libraries in the United States*, written in 1876: “The *habit of reading* is indispensable. That habit once established it is a recognized fact that readers go from poor to better sorts of reading.” Those who intend to organize a public library for popular reading, and who intend to exclude trash, may as well stop before they begin. Fialkoff argues:

If only Franzen were familiar with library history and philosophy. . . . In the frenzy of his misgivings Franzen blew the opportunity to bring the gap between popular, or middle-brow fiction, and his own “high-art literary tradition.” . . . Given the concerns he expressed in his *Harper’s* essay about the demise of the social novel, the novel of manners, how wonderful it would have been had Franzen appeared on Oprah’s show to talk about just such a novel. Librarians have shown us that one way to create high-brows out of middle-brows is to give readers avenues they can be comfortable with and that’s what Oprah’s Book Club does. The Oprah appearance would have given Franzen access to an even broader readership than he already has, and it may have helped elevate the reading tastes of some of those viewers. (52)

Within Fialkoff’s conception of this habit of reading, the excesses of consumerism are irrelevant; elevating tasting and the increased access it requires apparently neutralizes the harmful effects of consumerism just as certainly as they contaminated all they touched within the discourse of the high-art literary tradition. For Franzen, as was the case with Woolf, Leavis, and company, the habit of reading is not enough — there’s reading, but then there’s *reading*. In the concluding section of “Why Bother?” Franzen recounts his conversations with Shirley Brice Heath concerning who reads, and why they acquire that habit. In her research on the readers of “substantive works of fiction,” Heath found that two things have to be in place: first, the habit of reading such books had to be heavily modeled when they were very young by parents who read serious books and encouraged them to do the same; and second, young readers had to find a person with whom they could share their interest. As for the former, class was an important determinant in inculcating this habit of reading, but according to Franzen’s account of Heath’s work,

Class matters less in other parts of the country, especially in the Protestant Midwest, where literature is seen as a way to exercise the mind. As Heath put it, “Part of the exercise of being a good person is not using your time frivolously. You have to be able to account for yourself through the work ethic and through the wise use of your leisure time.” For a century after the Civil War, the Midwest was home to thousands of small-town literary societies in which, Heath found, the wife of a janitor was as likely to be active as the wife of a doctor. (78)

While Franzen obviously offers this as evidence of the halcyon days of a once-vital reading culture in America that now no longer exists (or at least, that he didn't seem to think existed in 1996), it does not lead him to appreciate comparable reading societies—namely, book clubs—in the contemporary period. What fascinates Franzen in his conversation with Heath is her characterization of *another* type of reader. He tells Heath that reading was never modeled for him, that he couldn't remember either of his parents ever reading a book, except aloud, and to him. “Without missing a beat Heath replied: ‘Yes, but there's a second kind of reader. There's the social isolate—the child who from an early age felt very different from everyone around him. . . . What happens is you take that sense of being different into an imaginary world. But in that world, then, is a world you can't share with the people around you—because it's imaginary. And so the important dialogue in your life is with the *authors* of the books you read. Though they aren't present, they become your community” (77). Franzen sees himself as this second kind of reader, especially when Heath tells him that readers of the social-isolate variety are much more likely to become writers than those of the modeled habit variety.

Heath's categories are extremely useful in delineating not just different types of readers but the radically different kinds of reading communities that the librarian and modernist writer envision. For Oprah and her viewer-readers, reading is a *social* act in which the talking about a book together is one of the preconditions for pleasurable reading. Even though the discussion may take place on television or at the Web site, the actuality of that community is repeatedly reiterated and celebrated as one of its most appealing features. As a social-isolate reader, Franzen had no need for such a community, because such interaction is at best superfluous, and at worst, destructive of his oppositionality. The title of the collection of essays that includes “Why Bother?” is, after all *How to Be Alone*. Franzen could have functioned in Oprah's reading community only as an author, and not as a fellow reader of good books, a point made quite clear in an interview on National Public Radio by his dismissal of some of her “schmaltzy” selections, which made him “cringe” and, even more tellingly, by his characterization of her program as a “coffee klatch.” The inherent misogyny in such a term echoes the modernist rejection of women's culture as mass culture at its most vapid, a point explored compellingly by Kathleen Fitzpatrick (in *The Anxiety of Obsolescence*, 2006) in her assessment of the controversy: “This battle between the literary and the televisual pits the white male literary humanist against

the black female producer of mass media, each vying for control of the cultural arena. Television's democratizing reach is dangerous to the novelist in part because of the power it wields to level disparities in access to cultural products, exposing the writer to the scrutiny—and, indeed, the judgment of others who may not be like-minded” (205). This interplay between gender difference and a “like-mindedness” dependent upon intellectual class distinctions explains Franzen's reluctance to appear in the wrong sort of reading community and observe its protocols, a context in which he might have served as oral performer but not a codiscussant.

The incommensurability of these two different reading communities becomes apparent in Franzen's admission: “I'll encounter two kinds of readers in signing lines and in interviews. One kind will say to me, essentially, ‘I like your book and I think it's wonderful that Oprah picked it,’ the other kind will say, ‘I like your book and I'm so sorry that Oprah picked it.’ And because I'm a person who instantly acquires a Texas accent in Texas, I'll respond in kind to each reader. When I talk to admirers of Winfrey, I'll experience a glow of gratitude and good will and agree that it's wonderful to see television expanding the audience for books. When I talk to detractors of Winfrey, I'll complain about the Book Club logo” (75). In her assessment of the book lovers' quarrel that erupted over *The Corrections* and Oprah, Laura Miller emphasizes the same opposition:

America's book culture too often seems composed of two resentful camps, hunkered down in their foxholes. Lobbing the occasional grenade at each other and nursing grievances. One side sees itself as scorned by a snotty self-styled elite and the other sees itself as keepers of the literary flame, neglected by a vulgarian mainstream that would rather wallow in mediocrity and dreck. Each side remains exquisitely sensitive to perceived rejection from the other and the fact that one is often characterized as female and the other as male resonates with the edgy relations between the sexes of late. This divide in the reading public is also the place where submerged class anxieties of American life flare up. Conversations about books are often rife with silly agendas, each speaker intent on indicating how high (or, in the case of contrarians, low) his or her brow can go. (“Book Lovers' Quarrel,” 2)

Miller delineates effectively where the battle lines are drawn here, but the ability that each camp has to see itself as superior is due to the fact that each is empowered by its own metanarrative, in Lyotard's conception of

the term—narratives that legitimize their own authority in terms of the pleasures and goals of reading, and at the same time, delegitimize any conflicting metanarratives. In this sense, Oprah and Franzen are each powerful metanarrators of their respective grand traditions of Uplift and Oppositionality. Each promises a very particular sort of self-cultivation, because each produces its own type of knowledge about literature. Lyotard makes this crucial point:

Knowledge is not only a set of denotative statements, far from it. It also includes notions of “know-how,” “knowing how to live,” “how to listen” (*savoir-faire, savoir-vivre, savoir-écouter*). Knowledge, then, is a question of competence that goes beyond the simple determination of and application of the criterion of truth. . . . Understood in this way, knowledge is what makes someone capable of making “good” denotative utterances, but also “good” prescriptive and “good” evaluative utterances. From this derives one of the principal features of knowledge: it coincides with an extensive array of competence building measures. (74)

Elite literary culture has had, since its institutionalization within the academy decades ago, a vast arsenal of such confidence-building measures, but popular literary culture, embodied by Oprah’s Book Club, has been able to mobilize an impressive array of competence-building measures of its own within just the past decade, largely because it has outflanked traditional literary cultures in terms of its ability to deliver knowledge articulated in terms of knowing how to live and knowing how to listen.

Miller feels that it is unfortunate that the two book cultures cannot overcome their mutual animosity, but their mutual disrespect is inevitable, given the mutually incommensurable nature of these metanarratives of reading. While Lyotard may have famously defined the postmodern as the incredulity toward such all-encompassing metanarratives, I believe it is equally accurate to say that such incredulity is indeed omnipresent, except in regard to the metanarrative one subscribes to in order to give value to the way one improves oneself. Given the loss of respect for the academy as custodian of the gold standard of literary value by so many millions of readers outside the academy, and given the number of competence-building mechanisms mobilized by both popular and traditional literary cultures, incredulity is indeed endemic, but only toward the *other* literary culture, given how self-sufficient each metanarrative has become in empowering readers to feel fully engaged in the act of genuine self-cultivation. That the conflict between the two lit-

erary cultures should be a zero-sum game, rather than peaceful coexistence, is presented in no uncertain terms by Franzen in his essay “The Reader in Exile” (2002). The opening sentence makes this clear: “A few months ago, I gave away my television set.” He felt this was essential because, as long as it was on the premises, he says, “I wasn’t reading books.” He pursues this either/or dichotomy even more forcefully in the next paragraph:

For every reader who dies today, a viewer is born, and we seem to be witnessing here in the anxious mid-nineties, the final tipping of a balance. For critics inclined to alarmism, the shift from a culture based on the printed word to a culture based on virtual images—a shift that began with television and is now being completed with computers—feels apocalyptic. (165)

But for whom is it apocalyptic? What about the readers who are also viewers? Surely not the readers who think that giving away your television so you’ll be able to read more is just too quaint for words. That we’ve reached another sort of “tipping point” not foreseen by Franzen’s essay became overwhelmingly clear to me when I discussed the Franzen-Oprah controversy with the students in my postmodern narrative course in the spring of 2005. I had them read *The Corrections*, along with “Why Bother?” and “The Reader in Exile,” and I showed them the *Anna Karenina* program. I want to conclude this chapter by discussing their reactions to both Franzen and Oprah, because I think their responses suggest a great deal about tipping points, given who they are and what they’re in the process of becoming. Since I’ve been focusing on the roles played by the Reader, the Librarian, and the Author within popular literary culture throughout these first chapters, I wanted to bring back the Professor, or in this case the Professors-in-Training to get a sense of how they situate themselves in that controversy.

The class was a mix of graduate students in English and advanced undergraduates in film and television. Most of them characterized themselves as solitary readers, at least as far as literary fiction was concerned—few had come from homes where reading literary fiction was a modeled behavior. They all had two things in common: they had all been in AP English classes in high school and, while they had seen Oprah’s television show from time to time, none of them had ever watched a Book Club episode. In the preliminary discussion before we began watching the episode, I asked them about their perceptions of the Book Club “going in.” They were uniformly positive, if a trifle condescending. None of them ever contemplated

becoming a member (“It’s not intended for us, so why would we?”), but just about everyone had a mother, grandmother, aunt, or cousin who was a Clubber and they thought this was generally a positive development (e.g., “Anything that keeps my mother from watching *Fox News* is great, as far as I’m concerned”). The consensus that developed, then, was benevolent approval of Oprah and an affirmation of the “uplift” position. This is a good thing, and if it’s not all that sophisticated, so be it—“She’s getting people to read, and that’s the toughest job we have to do.”

As they began to watch an actual book club segment for the first time, their approval started to fade. Things began to go badly as soon as Barry Manilow sang (mispronouncing), “Anna, Anna Karen-ni-ni-na,” and then Oprah did the same fool thing, apparently affiliating more with Barry than Leo at that point. As the segment progressed the students grew surly. Their comments:

“When are they actually going to get down to it and talk about the novel?”

“This is like watching a Weight Watchers infomercial. It’s all about mutual affirmation and feeling good about yourself. What are they learning about reading literature?”

“It doesn’t seem to make any difference whether they’re jogging together or reading together—it’s all about belonging. Tolstoy is just the McGuffin.”

“I’m glad you showed us the video, because if you had just told us about the pajamas routine I would’ve thought you were making it all up.”

“And now they’re off to China! Bon voyage, girls! This isn’t about reading, it’s all about tourism.”

By the end of the program, widespread skepticism replaced benign approval as the new consensus. As a discussion leader/oral interpreter extraordinaire, Oprah “wasn’t doing it right,” because they weren’t “learning” anything about the book. But something else became just as apparent—this was not the students’ taste culture. Reading here was intertwined so explicitly with tastes in music, clothing, and entertainment that they realized that what was called reading within that world was simply not the same activity as it was for them. My students were passionate readers too, but they wanted nothing to do with these Weight-Watching, Barry-Manilow-listening, Tolstoy-reading Clubbers. For reading to count as meaningful activity in their eyes, it couldn’t become so thoroughly bound up with such

bad taste in other forms of cultural expression. If *Barry Manilow's Scores* was in the CD player, their Tolstoy had already left the building.

The next class was the first day of the Franzen unit, and, given the way they'd reacted to the *Anna Karenina* show, I expected them to affiliate enthusiastically with Franzen, who was a member of their taste culture—or so I thought. But the more we discussed these essays, the more they *disaffiliated* from him. They certainly couldn't see themselves in one of those "I'm Not Scared" T-shirts chanting along with the rest of the Clubbers, but they couldn't see themselves in the team photo of Franzen's imagined community of book lovers either. If anything, they were even more determined to put distance between themselves and Franzen when we discussed "The Reader in Exile." I had expected the film and television majors to go after him, and they did, knives out. They zeroed in on the elitist assumptions about how mass culture allegedly worked and reserved special scorn for his dismissal of the visual ("I'm supposed to think that *The Corrections* is a greater work of art than *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* because it's in print instead of these evil images?!"). What I didn't expect was that the graduate students in English, the most professionalized, sophisticated readers in the class, would be even more critical of what they considered an antiquated notion of literary writing:

"This guy writes a novel that Updike could have written twenty years ago and he's carrying forth the torch of the high-art literary tradition?!"

"This was a perfect choice for the Oprah's Book Club. It's a middle-brow novel about a dysfunctional family. Of course she loved it!"

"He gave away his television set so he could read? Is this guy caught in a time warp or what? He sounds like the deposed Crown Prince of Modernism, waiting to be restored to the throne."

What I found particularly interesting in their reactions was that, on the one hand, they were employing the evaluative criteria that graduate students specializing in contemporary fiction have always used—the only thing really worth talking about is the cutting edge. On the other hand, they had no desire whatsoever to restrict that experience to print-based texts. They wanted to talk about literary novels, but they also wanted to discuss Chris Ware's *Jimmy Reardon: The Smartest Boy in the World*, Frank Miller's *Sin City*, Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* saga, Alfonso Cuarón's *Y Tu Mamá También* and David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*. Many of the factors associated with the reading of literary fiction, as opposed to popular visual media, were now

being detached from literary experience and transferred to texts coming from the heart of that visual culture; that is, texts that demanded close reading possessed the density to justify repeated readings, and also required the specialized knowledge that came with professionalized reading. This is not to suggest that there hasn't been something called film studies solidly in place for the past four decades that hasn't been doing exactly that. This was, however, the first generation of English graduate students I had encountered who were in hot pursuit of exactly those kinds of cutting-edge texts that called out for professionalized reading protocols, but they saw no need whatsoever to restrict their search to the literary fiction as such. The sort of scholarly reading formerly reserved for the high-art literary tradition that Franzen affiliated with was now uncoupled from that tradition and applied with equal success to a wide range of print-based *and* visual texts. In other words, what was formerly thought of as a "literary experience," in terms of the sophistication of both the texts involved and the manner of reading needed to appreciate them no longer depended on print. The "literary experience" could be enjoyed just as easily with visual media. Since the foundation of Franzen's *je refuse* oppositionality was his opposition to the virtual images generated by television and computer screens, he was as foreign to their taste culture as Barry Manilow, and no one wanted Franzen's "Reader-in-Exile Blues" in their iPod either. Why, indeed, bother?

At the end of the class, I asked them where they were now. Were they comfortable picking a side in the controversy? There was widespread reaffirmation of the uplift position ("Bring on the book bait, even if it's *The Corrections*"), but two other positions were advocated with greater fervor. What was really worth pursuing about the relationship between print culture and visual culture was the fluidity between them, not endlessly rebuilding the same old worn-out fencing. And please don't ask us to watch the Oprah Book Club again—endorsing the uplift position doesn't mean we have to like the show. In order to get a better perspective on the nature of popular literary culture then, two questions still need to be explored in greater detail in the remainder of this book: What is the relationship between print and visual culture in terms of what now constitutes a "literary experience"? And how *does* taste culture determine what counts as quality reading and what is recognized as quality writing?