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Pedagogy for a few: Book club discussion guides and the modern book industry as literature teacher

Publishers' book club discussion guides may steer readers toward analytic, text-based practices and away from other types of responses.

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(pp. 204–214)

"Practical Pig, dad!" My 5-year-old son Nate calls me (McGinley) to play, his soiled hands still smelling fresh from the day's catch of dirt and miscellaneous garden life. He pulls on the pages as I read *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* by Gerald Graff (1987). With a laugh, he bends and smudges the decades of "academic literary studies," "the Yale Report of 1828," and "controversies over literary theory" before making another urgent plea to play "Practical Pig." It's clear I have little choice in the matter as pleas quickly become demands for this literary game. Upstairs, a short walk to his room, and I become "Brer Bear," a benevolent story creature of the woods, who is unwittingly tricked into assisting the "Big Bad Wolf" (Nate) in his attempt to capture the ever elusive "Practical Pig," played by his mother. For the next hour under Nate's direction, we live under the spell of his story—dramatizing and re-creating his favorite events from the book *Li'l Wolf and the Three Little Pigs* (Walt Disney Productions, 1984).

Without question, Nate's dramatization of this tale is a form of entertainment—a playful way to become different selves, as well as a way to spend time with his mother and father before going to sleep. However, his enactments also reflect the multiple levels and aspects of his daily experience—his imaginative attempts to understand that experience, as well as to construct himself and his understanding of the behaviors and intentions of others through the characters he "meets" or becomes (e.g., Bruner, 1986; Engel, 1994;

Wolf & Heath, 1992). As Coles (1989) reminded us, the act of listening, reading, or responding to the stories of others can have important consequences for the ways in which we think about our own lives because the indirections and vicissitudes that inhabit the lives of story characters often become our own. Although stories certainly have the potential to function in the personally and socially productive ways that Coles described, several scholars also have drawn attention to the political and ideological dimensions of stories, highlighting the ways they also may limit and constrain the worlds and selves one might imagine (e.g., Christian-Smith, 1990; Ebert, 1988; Radway, 1984).

Whatever the complex and multifaceted influence stories exert on our lives, literacy educators and researchers have underscored the importance of fostering approaches to literary reading that engage students not only in an intellectual analysis of the structure and plot of stories, but also in a process designed to help readers critique the world that such stories describe or represent (e.g., Enciso, 1997; McGinley & Kamberelis, 1997; McGinley et al., 1997; Rogers, 1997). Although Nate's way of reading stories may seem a long way from the academic reading practices debated in *Professing Literature*, or the scholarly literary identity many of us worked so hard to assume as professional English students, it may be closer than we think to the sort of relationship with books that might lead a young student to make reading a part of his or her life in the world beyond school: personal, imaginative, and life informing (e.g., Wells, 1986; Wolf & Heath, 1992).

Athough English and language arts teachers will play a significant role in determining the kind of reader that Nate or other young readers of literature will ultimately become, there is no denying the cultural, institutional, and commercial influences outside the classroom that continue to determine the preferences and practices of the general reading public of all ages. These "popular" teachers provide instruction through a variety of media in the United States ranging from *The New York Times Book Review* to the latest televised discussion of an Oprah-endorsed novel. Together, cultural authorities such as these possess the instructional power to sanction particular ways of reading and discussing books for former language arts students everywhere. In light of these potential influences, we find it surprising that for all of the time and interest teachers once devoted to the reading lives of their students, we give so little attention to the "reading lessons" that the literate culture of modern society makes available to them as adult readers. We might wonder, for example, how the many literate-based venues of popular culture will instruct adults to read literature (or other books) in the world outside of school. As young readers like Nate leave the classroom and face the prospect of "reading in the world," what will become of the daily literature lessons we so earnestly offered them?

In this article, we examine the practices of a unique type of "teacher" and the nature of the instruction this teacher is capable of providing for readers of literature. Specifically, as reading in book clubs has become increasingly popular in many U.S. communities, we set out to examine the kinds of literature lessons the modern book industry has to offer this growing population of readers who once read and wrote in school classrooms. We did so by examining the recommended ways of reading found in a wide range of commercially produced "book club discussion guides" —the literature reading manuals that major book publishers have recently made available to book club readers everywhere. In this regard, our work provides insight to the book industry as a source of cultural authority among the reading public, and sheds light on the potential processes through which particular ways of reading enter the stock of authoritative or "official" knowledges "at hand" for an ever expanding reading public.

Teachers incorporated and the rise of the book club industry

Despite our best efforts to make reading interesting to all of our students, we face the reality that some simply will not find literature reading worth their time or attention after they leave school. Nevertheless, many students will become readers-at-large purchasing literature or other books, as well as taking up a variety of reading practices in various settings from living rooms to libraries. In relation to this point, our work focuses on the popular pedagogical models for reading literature that contemporary culture makes most available for readers to purchase or consume as readers in the world.

Book club discussion guides

All guides are undated.
Atticus. New York: Harper/Perennial.
Babel tower. New York: Vintage.
Birdsong. New York: Vintage.
A brother's blood. New York: Cliff Street Books.
Bucking the sun. New York: Simon & Schuster.
Cry, the beloved country. New York: Scribner.
The cunning man. New York: Penguin.
The fatigue artist. New York: Scribner.
Flesh and blood. New York: Penguin.
Girlfriends. Boulder, CO: Paz & Associates.
Into the forest. New York: Bantam.
A lesson before dying. New York: Vintage.
Littlejohn. New York: Vintage.
A long fatal love chase. New York: Random House.
Look homeward, angel. New York: Scribner.
Love warps the mind a little. New York: W.W. Norton.
A map of the world. New York: Doubleday.
Martin Dressler. New York: Vintage.
Maus: A survivor's tale Vol. 1. New York: Vintage.
Open secrets. New York: Random House.
Paddy Clark ha ha ha. New York: Vintage.
Possession. New York: Vintage.
Range of motion. New York: Random House.
Reservation blues. New York: Warner.
The robber bride. New York: Doubleday.
Snow falling on cedars. New York: Vintage.
St. Burl's obituary. Chestnut Hill, MA: Harvest.
Things fall apart. New York: Anchor.
Tracks. New York: Vintage.
Wolf whistle. Boulder, CO: Paz & Associates.
The woman who lives in the earth. New York: HarperCollins.

Recently, one such pedagogical model or "teacher" has emerged in the form of local or community-based books clubs, each complete with its own informal "curriculum" and pedagogical models for how to read and discuss literature. Sometimes referred to as reading groups, book clubs have long played a role in the literate practices of American readers dating back more than 100 years to the development of women's literary societies of the progressive era. Such groups, scholars suggest, often allowed women to discover the eloquence of their voices and the strength of their convictions. These literature study circles often became a forum for addressing more public issues of progressive reform and democratic public life (e.g., Blair, 1980; Long, 1992; Martin, 1987).

Once associated with self-improvement and a variety of social and political causes, today's book clubs are increasingly under the commercial influence and instructional direction of the modern book industry and other commercial interests; simply put, readers are no longer under the guidance of the not-for-profit instructional world of the language arts classroom. In what has fast become a "classroom," the size of which only a marketing executive could imagine, the modern book industry has virtually set up shop in living rooms of potential readers. One large bookseller in metropolitan Denver, Colorado, for example, estimates sponsoring approximately 200 to 300 book clubs in neighboring suburban communities. Although the nature and extent of its "sponsorship" in these community-based clubs varies widely, it currently supports a staff of seven part-time employees who perform a variety of organizational tasks for the club readers in addition to providing more specific reading-related instructional activities for these members. Interestingly, one primary mechanism through which sponsorship and instructional support occurs is the commercially produced reading group discussion guide.

Simultaneously serving as an instructional medium as well as a marketing mechanism for the book industry, reading group discussion guides range in format from a simple trifold pamphlet to a more elaborate glossy brochure with design features resembling a small book. Book companions, as they are sometimes called, are available free to interested readers and are often prominently displayed at checkout counters or in specially designated book club centers at many bookstores. In addition to their obvious marketing impact, such commercially produced guides are intended as a kind of literary primer—a book club "teacher's manual" if you will, with the goal of providing relevant literary information to "enhance your group's reading" of a particular book. Guides frequently contain questions for discussion by group members, as well as a range of other book- or author-related information. At any given time, it is customary for some larger retail stores to have discussion guides on hand for approximately 400

different fiction and nonfiction texts representing a wide range of topics and themes.

Although we acknowledge classroom teachers' influence on readers' lives both in and out of school, we also readily acknowledge that teachers are only one of a growing number of potential influences on the reading lives of children and adults everywhere. Indeed, as Fairclough (1993) reminded us, the culture of U.S. educational and social life is increasingly colonized by the corporate discourse of "marketization" and "commodification." It should come as no surprise if we learn one day that perhaps an equal, if not a more pervasive, influence on the reading practices of the adult public can be traced to the magazines, TV studios, boardrooms, bookstores, and the Internet sites where new ideas about reading and how we ought to do it are produced and disseminated. Our examination of book club discussion guides provides information about the potential influence of the contemporary book-publishing establishment by examining the version of reading and images of readers it disseminates and endorses.

Official reading

According to Morgan (1990) what counts as "legitimate" reading "always shifts in concert with the changing nature of institutional arrangements and the dominate social discourses of a period" (p. 328). In conceptualizing reading as a social or discursive practice, we distance ourselves from many of the pedagogical models that rank ways of reading literature as more or less "sophisticated," "tasteful," or "refined." As a discursive practice, reading is understood for its contingent and socially constructed nature— "as a constantly changing form of cultural production" (p. 323). From this perspective, "to speak of 'reading' is always to tell a particular historical, institutional, and social story about what counts as reading" (p. 327).

Recent work in the social construction of knowledge in public life and politics provides a useful framework for exploring the processes through which particular ways of reading and discussing literature are authorized for the reading public. In her book *Knowledge as Culture: The New Sociology of Knowledge*, McCarthy (1996) drew upon work from classical and contemporary sociology, Marxist theory, anthropology, American pragmatism, and feminist theory in an attempt to reintroduce at the forefront of the sociology of knowledge the issue of the function of knowledge in public life. In brief, McCarthy explained that recent interest in the function of knowledge within society has developed along with the idea that "social reality is not a phenomenon that exists in its own right but one that is produced and communicated through 'knowledges' that render it real for us" (p. 17). In relation to these points, many social realities of modern life are made known to us through the diverse venues of the popular press (e.g., books, newspapers, television), as well as the authorized reports of social scientists, government commissions, political groups, professional organizations, and other agencies. The collective popularity of these texts provides insight into the nature of knowledge in society, as well as the sources of knowledge that we have come to identify as authoritative. Not surprisingly, today's knowledge is expressed and experienced virtually everywhere and in a wide range of settings where cultural production takes place (e.g., TV programs, movie theaters, bookstores, law offices, shopping malls, classrooms, health clubs, hospitals, police stations, and Internet sites).

It follows from this perspective that ways of reading books (or more specifically, literature) are also socially produced and communicated through knowledges that reproduce the viewpoints of particular individuals or institutions. In a given social and cultural setting, it is often customary for some ways of reading and engaging with texts to be accepted as more appropriate or valuable than others. Likewise, as readers we are socialized to accept some meanings as valuable and important while others are less highly regarded or simply not considered at all. In short, no reading is ever entirely one's own. Rather, the meaning of any story read is always subject to one or more discursive framings or interpretations as a function of the variety of related texts (i.e., book reviews, related films, public readings, advertisements, curriculum materials) and other readers that help to determine its meaning (e.g., Fish, 1980; Hunter, 1982; Morgan, 1990). Relations between readers and texts are never pristine encounters. Rather, they are always subject to various forms of social mediation through other texts and readers that frame a book

in a particular way and define the experience of reading it within a particular time and place.

Commercially produced book club discussion guides represent yet another, more contemporary type of "mediating text" that functions similarly to define the nature of a given reading experience for a growing portion of the reading public. With this in mind, we set out to understand the nature of the discursive training and instructional protocols that book guides provide. We assessed their payoffs and their limitations, examined the kinds of readers and specific ways of reading literature that they legitimize, and explored what counts as "reading" from their point of view.

Inventing readers, writers, and the act of reading

Our inquiry into the content of book club guides was informed by recent work in critical discourse analysis (e.g., Fairclough, 1993). Fundamental to this perspective is the idea that language is socially shaped and socially shaping, or constitutive. Language (as it is deployed in book club guides) always produces particular reader identities, social relations among readers and texts, and knowledge frameworks related to literature reading—each in varying degrees. Moreover, this language can be constitutive in socially reproductive ways and in socially transformative ways, with more salience given to one or the other depending on the circumstances.

We selected reading group discussion guides from several commercial booksellers over a year to represent a broad range of texts, genres, and narrative styles including mysteries; romance; horror; and historical, feminist, and contemporary fiction. Specifically, we conducted critical text-based analyses of the organizational structure, style, vocabulary, and specific content of approximately 120 guides representing roughly 26 different publishers. Our focus, in this regard, was on the particular reader identities constituted by such texts, as well as the construction of "popular" reading they sought to produce and market.

Preparing to read literature the book guide way. We began by examining the overall organizing structure and component parts of the guides in order to understand the possible ways they seemed to position their readers in preparation for reading. Examining guides in this way provided initial insight to the nature of the possible relationships between readers and text that the publishing industry endorsed, as well as the particular kind of discursive framing of reading it sought to produce. A special kind of popular literature manual, book guides generally provide readers with very specific kinds of literary information related to given books. Although some guides are far more elaborate than others, they often comprise some combination of plot summaries, specific literary information, historical backgrounds, author biographies and autobiographies, critical essays, author interviews, supplementary literature such as poetry, suggestions for further reading, and questions for discussion.

Producing and perhaps doing their part to police the boundaries of popular reading, such literary prefaces and commentaries act preëmptively, legitimizing a sort of highly formal English-class version of reading in everyday social life. The attention to narrative styles and techniques, historical background, literary criticism, biography, authorial intent, and so forth suggests an approach to literature wherein "appropriate" reading begins with, and is necessarily built upon, attention to formalist ways of reading and understanding the text in itself. It is unclear, for example, how such an approach might lead readers to experience many of the life-informing or critical functions of reading that many literacy educators and researchers have described as essential for lifelong reading (e.g., Enciso, 1997; Rosenblatt, 1938; Wolf & Heath,1992). To the contrary, book guides endorse a pedagogy reminiscent of the early days of English studies wherein authorized histories, criticisms, biographies, and specialized questions were taken to be more important than the literary text itself—as prerequisites essential for reading, enjoying, and ultimately understanding particular works (Morgan, 1990).

Constructing books, readers, and authors. In order to understand further the particular kinds of readers and ways of reading that book guides seem to produce, we also sought information about how the guides tended to talk about or describe specific books, their respective authors, and potential readers. Specifically, we were interested in learn-

ing more about the aesthetic dispositions and literary tastes that the book industry seemed to authorize through such reading guides. With this in mind, we examined the specific content of the plot summaries, critical essays, and author profiles in order to develop a detailed account of the literary proclivities that book guides assumed.

Conceptions of *books* were framed through a discursive mix of educational and promotional language. The guides we examined consistently highlighted the overall plot and general content of their respective books. Additionally, these descriptions often drew prospective readers' attention to specific aesthetic or stylistic features of presumed interest. The following descriptive excerpts pertaining to the content and style of several different books illustrate this point.

> "a profound and redemptive symphony of good and indifference" (guide to *Reservation Blues*)
>
> "a novel whose compactness, narrative simplicity, and unadorned voices mask a complex structure and a tragic moral vision" (guide to *Littlejohn*)
>
> "poetically nuanced portraits of character and place" (guide to *Snow Falling on Cedars*)
>
> "a novel whose eloquence, thematic richness, and moral resonance have called forth comparisons to the work of Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and William Faulkner" (guide to *A Lesson Before Dying*)
>
> "written with a remarkable economy and subtle irony" (guide to *Things Fall Apart*)
>
> "spellbinding tale of genius and obsession, winner of the 1997 Pulitzer prize for fiction" (guide to *Martin Dressler*)

As an approach to reading, or to books more generally, the guides we examined did not presume a simple or vernacular "gaze" on the part of their readers. Rather, they asked that books be looked at through a particular aesthetic lens defined by attention to form, style, and formal literary features that would seem to discourage or even deny more colloquial enjoyment or facile involvement with books, and perhaps with other readers.

The conceptions of *authors* promoted through book guides reflect a similar perspective in their appeal to a formal literary aesthetic, focused primarily on the "things of art" far more than "the things of life." In reference to authors, the guides seemed to be composed according to the supposition that readers would or should focus their attention on an author's writing style and ability, as well as his or her professional literary reputation.

> "a master strategist, moving her characters around the gameboard" (guide to *The Robber Bride*)
>
> "Roddy Doyle pulls off a radical shift in narrative and mood that establishes him as one of the most technically accomplished writers at work today" (guide to *Paddy Clark Ha Ha Ha*)
>
> "a perfect ear for the interchanges of domestic life" (guide to *A Map of the World*)
>
> "He entered the Iowa Writer's Workshop on the GI Bill, where writers Alan Gurganus and T. Coraghessan Boyle were among his classmates." (guide to *Atticus*)
>
> "Were you drawn to high Anglicanism at the time [of writing this book]?" (guide to *The Cunning Man*)
>
> "Do you see *A Map of the World* as a great thematic and stylistic departure from your first novel...?" (guide to *A Map of the World*)

As these excerpts pertaining to authors suggest, the reader is increasingly directed to appreciate the importance of fictional styles, stylistic dilemmas, literary reputation, authorial background, and authorial intention. As a whole, book guides at once assume a "readerly" identity that embodies a very specific kind of cultural competence—one that consequently distinguishes the guide reader from more colloquial or "everyday" readers.

Finally, *readers* themselves were similarly defined. With few exceptions, the guides contained both implicit and explicit information about valued reader identities, as well as ways of reading. The following statements provided insight to the kinds of readers and reading-related practices book guides presume.

> "Some books are meant to be read, others are meant to be savored. *Range of Motion* is both—a book to treasure and to share with old friends and new, and a book tailor made for discussion...." (guide to *Range of Motion*)
>
> "Remember the days when you could spend hours talking with friends over coffee about an idea?... when the excitement of discovering a new writer was something you just couldn't wait to share?... fans lined up, begging for an early look.... The dis-

cussions went on over lunch, between meetings, and in the elevators." (guide to *The Robber Bride*)

"One comes to the end of *The Cunning Man* reflecting on the sheer pleasure of reading a novel by a writer who has lived a full life.... What a delight to be again in the hands of a master storyteller." (guide to *The Cunning Man*)

"Charmed readers in the hereafter will turn these pages with wise little smiles." (guide to *The Woman Who Lives in the Earth*)

"[You'll read this book] for the clarity and eloquence of its prose, for its bold and perceptive ideas, and for the sheer delight in discovering a long lost treasure by a beloved author." (guide to *A Long Fatal Love Chase*)

Readers, as the corporate book industry formulates them, do more than simply read books; they savor them, as well as analyze what they read for its aesthetic qualities. Readers discuss books "between meetings and in elevators" with friends, as well as with other readers like themselves in a world that almost presupposes a kind of elective distance from some of the necessities of social life. Such guides appear to offer their readers a textual world that promises to leave them "mesmerized" or "spellbound." Although the particular readerly identity and way of engaging with books being offered in book guides is often appropriate, readers in the "course" being taught by the popular book industry are potentially denied the opportunity to learn about some of the possibilities that other more life-centered approaches to literature might offer. These approaches, as Coles (1989) reminded us, allow readers to explore life's contingencies and dilemmas through the "moral imagination" of an author; in so doing perhaps, they enable readers to "take matters of choice and commitment more seriously than they might otherwise have done" had they not read at all (p. 90).

Reading and discussing literature the book guide way. To more fully understand the particular approaches to reading and discussing stories that book guides seemed to authorize, we examined the "Questions for Discussion," a collection of questions that often accounted for a significant portion of each guide. We were interested in learning more about the kinds of knowledge these questions presupposed, as well as the corresponding ways of interacting with texts they seemed to suggest. Although the focus of book guide questions varied somewhat across guides for specific books, the majority of questions encouraged readers to interpret and analyze characters; identify and analyze a range of narrative or textual strategies; and draw upon relevant historical events, literary history, and related works to interpret text. Relative to these, far fewer questions encouraged readers to approach text in ways that might encourage them to look up from the pages of their stories, poems, or plays to uncover some part of the literature they read in their own lives and in the world.

More than other kinds of questions, the book guides provided questions designed to engage readers in some form of character analysis. Additionally, readers were asked to describe the beliefs, values, or moral disposition of characters; to summarize the nature of relationships among characters; or to interpret the meaning of specific character experiences or decisions. The following representative excerpts from different guides illustrate the specific nature of these questions.

"How does Spiegelman establish his characters?" (guide to *Maus: A Survivor's Tale Vol. 1*)

"Laura's on-again off-again relationship with her lover, Q., is a central theme [in the book]. In the beginning, Laura says, 'Q. threads through my life like an unusual color in a tapestry or a swatch in a cape of many colors.' How would you describe the character of Q?" (guide to *The Fatigue Artist*)

"What do you think of Burl as the hero of the story? Is he an everyman? What is the significance of Burl's weight to his life and to the story?" (guide to *St. Burl's Obituary*)

"Throughout the novel, Laf is writing a story about Dale and Theresa.... Discuss Dale's change of character in terms of Laf's change of character." (guide to *Love Warps the Mind a Little*)

"Cunningham takes us through 40 years of different characters' lives. Are his characters dynamic or do they remain the same? How do Mary, Susan, and Billy grow? Do you feel the characters find what they are seeking? What does each see, and more importantly, what does each find?" (guide to *Flesh and Blood*)

Nearly as common as character-specific questions were those that encouraged readers to interpret text by identifying and examining a range of narrative techniques. In general, such questions instructed

readers to interpret or evaluate the meaning of specific narrative techniques within a text (e.g., symbolism, metaphor, irony, allusion, flashback, theme, lyricism, literary voice, point of view, setting, plot structure); to discuss or evaluate a previously identified theme as a function of particular events; or to discuss the extent to which various themes were present in a novel. Some of these ways of reading are reflected in the following questions.

> "Where and to what purpose does Faulks use images of birds?" (guide to *Birdsong*)
>
> "What techniques does Munro use in this story to evoke the sense of time passing?" (guide to *Open Secrets*)
>
> "What is symbolically suggested by the motif of doubling, with reference to the ideas about identity? Fate?" (guide to *Atticus*)
>
> "The setting of the novel can almost be looked upon as another character. How does the bleak Maine landscape contribute to the tension of the novel?" (guide to *A Brother's Blood*)
>
> "Describe the structure of *Bucking the Sun*. Discuss Doig's literary voice, as well as his use of flashback." (guide to *Bucking the Sun*)

To a lesser extent, book guides also provided readers with many questions designed to involve them in analyzing text both through and in relation to other literary works or in relation to "official" meanings that the publisher often provided in the context of specific questions. This way of reading, wherein particular questions suggest that the meaning of a text can be best understood as a function of knowledge of related literary works, is illustrated in the following book guide questions.

> "All of the characters' names are carefully chosen and layered with meaning. What is the significance behind the following names: [list of character names] (Clues to the last three [names] may be found in the poetry of Tennyson, Yeats, and Coleridge cited below)." (guide to *Possession*)
>
> "Like Faulkner and Joyce, Wolfe has been acclaimed for his evocation of place. What details in *Look Homeward, Angel* evoke its setting, and what is the relation between its setting and its themes?" (guide to *Look Homeward, Angel*)
>
> "What significance do you ascribe to Ishmael's name? What does Guterson's protagonist have in common with *Moby Dick*, another story of the sea?" (guide to *Snow Falling on Cedars*)
>
> "Do you see Nigel as a comment on the 'type' of the Romantic hero—Heathcliff or Byron?" (guide to *Babel Tower*)
>
> "How does the story resemble the biblical parable of the prodigal son? How does it mirror another biblical parable, Absalom?" (guide to *Cry, the Beloved Country*)

Although questions that might encourage readers to explore the connection between text and the world were rare, the guides for a few books did provide an opportunity for this sort of exploration. In general, these guides contained questions designed to encourage readers to discuss the experiences of story characters in relation to their own experiences or relevant social issues; to analyze characters and story events in order to examine one's own moral codes and beliefs; or to engage in discussion aimed at developing an understanding of the power of stories to represent, as well as to produce, social and cultural meanings.

> "In the back of the book there is a section on women's rituals that goes beyond gossip and shopping. What rituals are important in women's relationships? Why?" (guide to *Girlfriends*)
>
> "In the novel, as in real life, the murderers are acquitted. Do you think the verdict would be different today? What recent events support your conclusions?" (guide to *Wolf Whistle*)
>
> "How would you yourself define freedom? How might one achieve real freedom in one's own life without taking steps as drastic as Davidson's?" (guide to *Tracks*)
>
> "Certain aspects of the clan's religious practice... might impress us as being barbaric. Casting an honest eye on our own religious practices, which ones might appear barbaric or bizarre to an outsider?" (guide to *Things Fall Apart*)
>
> "*Into the Forest* seems to convey that the stripped-down life of a hunter-gatherer would be better for us as a species. What Nell and Eva do is clearly right for them. Would it be right for people in general? For women? Is it a tenable ideal for anyone but the very young, very fit, and very adaptable?" (guide to *Into the Forest*)

Preferred books, preferred readers

In this article, we examine the practices of a unique type of "teacher" and the nature of the instruction this teacher was capable of providing for "students of literature" in communities across the United States. Specifically, as book clubs have become increasingly popular in many communities, we set out to examine the kinds of literature lessons the modern book industry had to offer this growing population of readers who once read and wrote in school classrooms.

With a few important exceptions, the recommended pedagogical routines of the modern book industry, as embodied in book club guides, reflect a rather analytic and text-based literary ancestry. In general, the reader such guides target is perhaps best described as a sort of scholar-recluse or academic analyst. Such an academic framing of book club reading, while certainly securing the scholar's position of authority within the world of reading, raises important questions about the potential consequences of authorizing this sort of reading for the popular reading public. In fashioning an "official" status for a rather narrow collection of academic reading practices, book club guides suppress not only other modes of thinking and reading, but other types of less "refined" or less "schooled" readers.

In contrast to the street-based literature curriculums of the working class men and women of 19th-century England (Willinsky, 1991), the vernacular expressions of hope and struggle implicit in the "literature" of the blues in early 20th-century North America (e.g., Baker, 1984; Murray, 1974), or the transformative reading practices of women's literary societies of the progressive era (e.g., Blair, 1980; Long, 1992; Martin, 1987), the curriculum of the book guide promises a much different sort of reading for a very specialized reader—text intensive, ideational, and analytical. At the core of the pedagogical practices of book guides is an entire literature curriculum refracted through the reading discourses of a rather elite, academic literary infrastructure. Ironically, in offering such an identity, this formulation of the book club reader stands in direct contrast to the kinds of readers and modes of reading that book groups have historically made possible. As Long (1992) explained in reference to her analysis of the history of such groups and their use of stories as "equipment for living":

> The process of "living" other stories than one's own may be crucial for confronting times of individual or social change, in part because it is then that such "equipment for living" is especially needed. A socially negotiated process of cultural reflection makes these groups [book clubs]—when functioning well—sites for insight and innovation in the arena of identity, values, and meanings. (pp. 200–202)

As both products and producers of literate culture, the conceptual frames put forth by book club guides provide only a partial account of the nature of reading and offer a rather limited view of the possibilities that might be associated with reading in the world. Equally important, however, is that book guides represent a sort of new kid on the literature-reading block—a new mechanism for competing with a range of other social and commercial organizations for positions of cultural authority among the reading public. Doubtless, the prize accompanying such a competition is the power to persuade book club readers to see the approaches endorsed by the book industry as the natural, if not the most prestigious, way of proceeding with books. One specific side effect of these circumstances is the descendent or lesser cultural status bestowed to more "popular" readers and ways of reading. Indeed, in the reading world imagined by the producers of commercial book guides, readers inclined to take up more personal or colloquial forms of engagement with stories are simply not invited to the discussion.

Not only are these chosen readers encouraged to adopt a more academic perspective on authors and their books, but they are "sold" the ability to *see* in specialized ways. Through book discussion guides, readers are promised a kind of intellectual-turned-commodity gift of being able to apprehend and appreciate the importance of fictional styles, stylistic dilemmas, literary reputation, authorial background, and authorial intention. The commodity, in this case, is an academic account of what counts as good reading or writing. The prestige, although implied, lies in the assumption and promise that Joe and Jane Reader will view books and their authors in ways similar to those endorsed in the guides. Taken together, reading guides seamlessly assume and promise a readerly

identity that embodies a very specific kind of cultural competence—one that will ultimately distinguish them from more colloquial or everyday readers. Such a practice is undoubtedly good for business because it bestows on certain readers a special status by virtue of their newly acquired ability to appreciate some of the so-called intellectual components of literary reading.

In sum, book discussion guides accomplish their promotional sleight-of-hand by first envisioning an academic readerly identity on the part of their readers. They then assign this identity, and the requisite ways of reading that accompany it, cultural prestige through various forms of promotional discourse related to books, authors, and readers. Finally, these guides offer a select group of readers the promise of "purchasing" a piece of that literary world through the questions and literary information they provide. In such a commodity-driven climate, the nature and consequences of such a curriculum and the processes through which it is implemented are only seldom considered.

Despite this rather obvious dismissal of everyday readers as well as other ways of approaching literature, it is not our intention to suggest that the pedagogical routines of book guides are without merit. Nevertheless, we contend that book discussion guides represent a relatively new social mechanism through which the modern book industry is capable of authorizing not only "preferred" books for the reading public, but also "preferred" ways of reading and responding to such books in the company of other readers. Although our understanding of this relationship and its consequences for the reading public is a partial one, it raises important questions about the influence of the modern book industry on the practices and consciousness of the popular reading public.

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