

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:       READING BEYOND THE PAGE: CONTEXTUALIZING  
  READING WITHIN THE LIVES OF AVID READERS

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My dissertation seeks to add to our understanding of reading as a social and cultural practice by examining the roles that reading plays within the everyday lives of four avid readers. The recent proliferation of national reading studies in the English-speaking world indicates a current international preoccupation with reading, but neither these studies nor most previous academic scholarship on reading have taken actual, individual readers into account. Through employing a self-reflexive ethnographic life history approach that includes a series of interviews with each reader and an analysis of how the readers arrange their reading materials in their homes, my work contextualizes how readers use reading and make it meaningful.

I argue that new questions and emphases emerge once we center studies of reading within the lives and words of actual readers. For example, my focus on these readers' daily reading practices reveals problems inherent in privileging book and literary reading and points to the need to include a broader variety of genres and a wider array of formats, such as periodicals and online reading, if we wish to understand how

reading is used in everyday life. Looking at each reader's life history also emphasizes the need for considerations of the influences of space and time on reading, both at home and while traveling, as well as the material aspects of the reading experience.

Furthermore, when we pay attention to the complex negotiations each reader makes between her/his reading interests, social locations, and cultural traditions, it becomes clear that generalizations about groups of readers suppress individual relationships that readers have with their cultural and social influences and therefore how each of these interact with reading. What my dissertation makes most clear is that we must begin to expand our notion of reading beyond the page and into the lives of individual readers if we wish to understand it as a cultural practice.

READING BEYOND THE PAGE:  
CONTEXTUALIZING READING WITHIN THE LIVES OF AVID READERS

by

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2008

**DEDICATION**

TO MADELYN

JIM

ADAM

&

CHRISTINE

WITHOUT WHOM

WE WOULD HAVE NOTHING TO READ

AND

TO MY GRANDMOTHER

PEGGY H. NOLAN

WITHOUT WHOM

I WOULD NOT BE A READER

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Joseph Kruppa and Alan Friedman. As the first professor to challenge me to achieve a higher level of thinking and writing both through class and as my undergraduate thesis advisor, Alan Friedman plays a particularly important role in my academic development, the results of which continue to this day.

I must also thank my mother, father, and stepmother for fostering a love of reading and learning within me that has sustained me throughout graduate school. Particular thanks go to my grandmother, Peggy H. Nolan, to whom this dissertation is dedicated for her tireless interest and support at every stage in the process. My brothers, Andrew, Christopher, and Michael also deserve special note here for their love and encouragement.

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## INTRODUCTION

*The general decline in reading is not merely a cultural issue, though it has enormous consequences for literature and the other arts. It is a serious national problem. If, at the current pace, America continues to lose the habit of regular reading, the nation will suffer substantial economic, social, and civic setbacks.*

~National Endowment for the Arts,  
*To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence*, 2007

*You don't have to burn books to destroy a culture.  
Just get people to stop reading them.*  
~ Ray Bradbury

*Once you learn to read, you will be forever free.*  
~Frederick Douglass

*I find television very educating. Every time somebody turns on the set,  
I go into the other room and read a book.*  
~Groucho Marx

*A book is the most effective weapon against intolerance and ignorance.*  
~Lyndon Baines Johnson

*A home without books is a body without soul.*  
~Marcus Tullius Cicero

The fate of reading in the twenty-first century has become a question of international interest in the English-speaking world, as is indicated by the recent proliferation of national reading studies and campaigns designed to increase reading.<sup>1</sup> In the United States the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has produced two recent reports on

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<sup>1</sup>See the following for examples of this trend: Australia Council for the Arts, *National Survey of Reading, Buying & Borrowing Books* (2001) and related *Books Alive* campaign; Book Marketing Limited, *Reading the Situation: Book Reading, Buying and Borrowing Habits in Britain* (2000); Department of Canadian Heritage, *Reading and Buying Books for Pleasure* (2005) and the Canada Reads program. I should also note here that this international interest is not limited to national studies. In August 2007 I presented at a conference in England entitled "Contemporary Cultures of Reading" hosted by the *Beyond the Book Project* that included scholars from 19 different countries. Despite this, however, the number of scholars working with these issues in each country is relatively small.

national reading trends, *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America* (2004), which cites a decline in literary reading in America, and the recently published *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence* (November 2007), as well as started their Big Read Program in 2006, which is “designed to restore reading to the center of American culture.” While the results of these studies differ dramatically as concerns their outlook on reading in their respective countries, with the NEA’s conclusions being the most dire,<sup>2</sup> what is of greater significance than the individual results of these studies to those of us who study reading and culture are the questions that these types of studies leave unanswered, including how and why people use (or decline to use) reading in their everyday lives. As Catherine Ross points out, to go beyond the numbers and begin to understand the reasons behind them, we must “turn to case studies of real readers reading” (*Reading Matters* 147). Hence, my dissertation explores the life histories of four avid readers to ask what we can learn from the practices, uses, and meanings of reading for those people on one end of the reading spectrum, that is, for those readers who choose to make reading an important part of their daily lives. In this introduction, I will explore the history of academic considerations of readers and reading, including the few, although important, studies to focus on real readers, explain my research project and methodology, and introduce the five readers included. First, however, it is necessary that we define “reading.”

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<sup>2</sup> The most prominent objection to the NEA’s results comes from the authors of *Reading Matters*, who cite a 2005 Canadian reading study (*Reading and Buying Books for Pleasure*) which concludes that “contrary to certain alarmist claims that there is a trend towards a lower reading rate in our society or that the Internet has had harmful effects on reading habits, this national survey has shown that reading for pleasure remains a solidly established and widespread habit with little or no change over the last fifteen years.” However, this study makes clear that its conclusions are only meant to be applicable to Canada, leaving open the question of whether reading is on the decline in America. While it is difficult to make cross-country comparisons, what these studies all show is the current preoccupation with the status and fate of reading.

### *What is Reading?*

In the 1990s it became common for media studies scholars interested in television to point out flaws in audience research that relied upon “literary models of audiencehood, in which the discrete text/reader relationship forms the basic analytical focus” (Ang 67). These critics argue, as Ron Lembo does, that cultural studies of communication media should treat “the self’s relationship to the medium or object in question as a distinctive form of culture [because] there is in television use a ‘formation of the social’ that is not reducible either to the preexisting discursive forms of programming or to textual interpretations made from preexisting social locations (class, race, gender, ethnicity) or other locations relevant for particular viewers” (51). Central to his argument that our understanding of audiences must extend beyond the “text” is the idea that “individuals must turn to a medium, they must become involved in specific ways with particular features of its form and content, and they must eventually leave the object and fit it back (symbolically), in some way, into their daily lives afterward” (50). While I agree that text-based studies of television audiences are outdated and find much of use in audience theorists who have worked to move beyond this, the implication that studies of reading can still effectively be conducted in this manner is striking because audience studies of reading can no more be reduced to “textual interpretations” than audience studies of other communication media. There are clear differences between television viewing and reading, but they both must be understood contextually within the lives of the audiences who participate in them. Just as the television viewers Lembo describes must make a decision to watch television rather than do something else, readers must make a decision to read; just as there are many different ways of engaging with television, there are many

different ways of engaging with reading, from reading an exacting work of literature on the African plains, to reading the City Paper while waiting for a film to start; and just as television viewers must then incorporate their viewing back into their daily lives, so too do readers take what they have read and make meaning from it within their daily lives. As Russell Hunt makes clear in his article for the 2000 edition of the journal *Reader* focused on future directions of reading studies:

It has become more and more difficult to see how to extract “reading” from the dialogical social relationships in which any instance of it occurred, and clearer and clearer that every reading act—literary or otherwise—is shaped fundamentally by the circumstantial minutiae of the rhetorical and social situation. (50).

Thus, it is clear that the lessons learned in more recent directions in audience studies are applicable to our investigations of reading rather than standing in contrast to them.

Elizabeth Long has traced the origins of our conception of reading as limited to the interaction between a single text and its single reader to powerful iconographic and ideological historical roots.<sup>3</sup> As she explains, this conception of reading as a solitary activity elides the reality that reading both requires a social infrastructure and is socially framed. In the first case, “reading must be taught and that socialization into reading always takes place within specific social relationships” (“Textual” 193), which then extends into adulthood in many different manifestations ranging from informal conversations with friends or family to book groups. Reading is “socially framed” by “collective and institutional processes [that] shape reading practices by authoritatively

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<sup>3</sup> Rather than insufficiently reiterate her expertly crafted argument here, I refer the reader to her most recent articulation of this argument from chapter one, “On the Social Nature of Reading,” of *Book Clubs*, p. 1-30.

defining what is worth reading and how to read it,” (194) which in turn determines what is published, reviewed, recommended, and taught, among other things. Her response to the hegemonic image of this solitary reader is to study the ways readers interact in a decidedly social environment, that is, in book clubs, as I will discuss later. My work argues that her conclusions are also applicable to studies centered on individual readers, even those who may not participate in group reading experiences or talk much about their reading with others. Certainly this can be seen in the ways these readers are “socialized into reading,” as Long notes, but also in the societal and cultural structures that surround readers in their daily lives. The reading choices of even a reader who never discusses his or her reading with anyone else (which is a rarity), are still socially inscribed to some extent—from the reviews she or he may encounter both in print and online, to the availability of certain reading materials either in bookstores or libraries, to the ways the reading materials are presented and packaged.

In her 1994 article outlining the increasing number of scholars working on “the practice, variability, and multiple effects of reading as social process” (279) Janice Radway has a useful way of thinking about reading in this vein: “To think of reading in this context-specific way is to stress its hybrid nature as well as its social character and to render it eminently visible as a practice, that is an activity, a set of deliberate and complex strategies engaged in by communities of people” (276). My goal in this project is to understand how individuals, rather than communities, engage in this cultural practice, as Radway calls for at the end of this article: “To do this we will need...what I would like to call micro-ethnographies—that is an attempt to survey and understand human processes we cannot see, which we can only reconstruct by inferential

interpretation, such as, what do individuals do with texts in the context of their daily lives” (294).

Through conducting life history research with avid readers, I study the ways readers use and make meaning from reading in their daily lives. Thus, the object of this study is neither the interactions that occur between a text and the reader, nor interpretations that readers create through their interaction with specific texts; that is, this study takes neither a semiotic nor text-based approach to studying reading.<sup>4</sup> Rather, I explore reading as a cultural practice situated within the context of each individual reader’s life which means paying “attention to the socially situated nature of readers, as well as to what they are looking for in each reading experience and what aspects of a book’s ‘face’ or presence they attend to” (28), as Long suggests in her study of Houston book clubs. In this respect, my work fits in with the goals for the future of the journal *Reader* outlined by Russell Hunt to rethink the meaning of the journal’s title: “not *Reader* as a generalization, but some particular reader as socially constructed and culturally embedded individual” (50). Going back to the opening of this passage, it should be clear that studying readers in this manner means that my considerations of reading extend well beyond the page and into the lives of the readers. Perhaps Jane Greer, in concluding her article about working-class women readers of confessional magazines in the mid-twentieth century, said it best: “My hope is that my work has opened a momentary aperture into how readers can appropriate, dismember, and contextualize the written texts available to them” (157).

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<sup>4</sup> For foundational theories in reader-response criticism concerning the interaction between the text and the reader(s) see Iser and Culler, as well as many feminist critics, such as Fetterley and Mills. As I will argue, many theorists who work with readers end up privileging the text through the emphasis they place upon it in their studies, including Janice Radway in *Reading the Romance*. This is more overt in those theorists who choose the reading material for their participants, such as Margaret Mackey and Sara Mills.

Another important topic for consideration under this heading concerns how broadly reading should be defined in terms of that which is read, a subject of much debate in large-scale national studies and surveys of readership. As Ross explains, “some studies look only at book reading, whereas others also include magazines and newspapers,” (*Reading Matters*, 134) and many are increasingly beginning to include on-screen reading, including the Department of Canadian Heritage’s *Reading and Buying Books for Pleasure* (2005) and the NEA’s *To Read or Not to Read* (2007).<sup>5</sup> Some media scholars even take the term so far as to include engagement with a broad range of texts, including those “that are viewed or interacted with” (Mackey 165).<sup>6</sup> There is also a broad range of materials considered within those studies focused on books. For example *Reading at Risk* looked only at “literary reading,” which the NEA defined as “novels, short stories, plays or poetry,” but not nonfiction (1). Additionally, “some studies are interested only in voluntary reading done by choice, whereas others count all kinds of reading, including work-related reading” (*Reading Matters* 142). That there is much disagreement about what reading means is clear both in these studies and in the work I did with my readers. As I will explain, rather than approaching this project with a set idea of which materials I thought should count as reading, I used the readers’ definitions of reading throughout my work with them.

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<sup>5</sup> The first large-scale study to include internet reading was the 2000 *Reading the Situation* survey conducted in the UK, which “examined the reading habits and attitudes of adults and children in Britain at the end of the century, [and] took a broad view of what it meant by reading, asking adults and children if they read comics, graphic novels, magazines, the Internet as well as/instead of books” (*Reading Matters* 141). There are also many more narrowly focused studies that explore how “young people” use/read alternative texts/media. For a summary and bibliography of these, see Ross, et al. p. 118-123.

<sup>6</sup> See Mackey, *Literacies Across Media* (2007) and Bradby (1994). While Mackey begins her study using reading in this broader sense, she ultimately concludes that this usage is too problematic and replaces it with “play” (165-6), whereas Bradby applies it without qualification to her own and other media studies. In *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (1995) Jacqueline Bobo also uses the term “reading” to refer to how the black women she interviews make meaning from films.



In national studies, definitions of “heavy” or “serious” or “avid” readers also vary extensively, though all seem to be focused on book reading:

Heavy readers in the 1978 BISG study are those who have read ten or more books in the past six months, whereas in the 2004 NEA study, they have read eight or more books in the past year. In the U.K. study *Reading the Situation*, a heavy reader was someone who spent more than 11 hours a week reading books. (*Reading Matters* 142)

In my study, I chose readers on the basis of their determination of themselves as an avid reader, but when asked, I define an avid reader as someone who prioritizes reading as an important part of her/his life. However, all of the avid readers included in this study are heavy book readers and see book reading as an important factor in their determination of themselves as avid readers.

*Academic Considerations of Readers and Reading:  
Part 1: Reader-Response Criticism*

With its focus on the relationship between texts and readers and its commitment against New Critical ways of interpreting texts, reader-response criticism has played an essential role in bringing considerations of readers into literary criticism.<sup>7</sup> In *Reading Sites*, Patrocínio Schweickart and Elizabeth Flynn argue that its effects now permeate the literary academy’s most basic assumptions about texts and readers:

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<sup>7</sup> For overviews of reader-response criticism and anthologies of key texts see Jane Tompkins, ed. *Reader-Response Criticism from Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (1980) and Andrew Bennett, ed. *Readers and Reading* (1995). Schweickart and Flynn’s Introduction to *Reading Sites* (2004) also provides a more recent brief overview. For a detailed survey of foundational texts see Elizabeth Freund, *The Return of the Reader* (1987).

First, the text is not a container of stable objective meaning, so interpretive disputes cannot be decided simply by reference to the objective properties of the text. Second, the reader is a producer of meaning; what one reads out of a text is always a function of the prior experiences; ideological commitments; interpretive strategies; and cognitive, moral, psychological and political interests that one brings to the reading. And third, readings are necessarily various; there is no single noncontroversial set of standards for adjudicating interpretive disputes. (1-2).

Once we dispense with the idea that we can construct the way a culture, group, or individual audience member interprets a text purely from textual elements, we are left with three options: we can focus on the reader or readers *implied* by the text, as first suggested by Wolfgang Iser, and the cultural significance of these readers<sup>8</sup> and/or widespread misreadings as Peter Rabinowitz argues; we can study the modes of production of a work and how they attempt to direct readerly desire, as R. Gordon Kelly advocates in “Literature and the Historian;” or we can work directly with readers’ responses, either through historical records of these responses, which, as Kelly points out, are difficult to find because “the act of reading in our society does not typically generate systematic written records that are likely to persist and that may be available for the use of future historians” (101), or through ethnographic work with actual readers as my dissertation does. While the logistical demands and messiness of ethnographic work are certainly factors in why fewer reading scholars have taken up this type of work, the

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<sup>8</sup> See Brian Richardson “Single Text, Multiple Implied Readers” (2007) for a discussion of multiple implied readers, including those that are “doubly-coded” for readers of different races or sexual orientations.

text-based origins of reader-response criticism and its foundations within English departments must also be considered, and it is telling that most of the recent work done with real readers has taken place outside of English department settings.<sup>9</sup>

Though ostensibly about readers, early reader-response criticism was primarily centered in the text, as Karen Littau usefully summarizes:<sup>10</sup>

Reader-response critics similarly conceive of the ‘I’ of the reader in textual terms: either the reader is inscribed in the text or readers are ‘overwritten’ by expectations, competences or strategies prior to reading. What is clear from such descriptions is that the reader is a construct, that is, a reader is entirely ‘without history, biography, psychology’ as Barthes famously said (1977: 148) and also without race, class and gender, as theorists in the 1980s would have said (122).

Thus, one of the most important trends in reader-response criticism has been the progression from a focus on a universalized (read: academic, male) reader to increasingly differentiated and plural readers, brought about largely at first through the influence of postmodernism and feminist critics. Early feminist theorists, including Judith Fetterley and Patrocínio Schweickart, asserted a woman reader who read

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<sup>9</sup> Though trained in an English department, Janice Radway has a joint appointment in History and the interdisciplinary Literature department at Duke University (which employs historical and interdisciplinary approaches to study “cultural phenomena” such as literature), which she came to after working in the now defunct American Civilization department at the University of Pennsylvania. Of the other important scholars working with actual readers, Elizabeth Long is a sociologist, Adam Reed a social anthropologist, and Catherine Ross is a professor of Information and Media studies. Furthermore, very few of the people I met presenting on reading at the Beyond the Book Conference were from English departments, and most literary scholars who do study reading seem to focus either on implied readers or the history of the book.

<sup>10</sup> See also Bleich, “Intersubjective Reading” (1986) who noted that “there has been considerable *speculation* about how people read, but the actual work done by Fish, Iser, Culler and others has been textual analysis” (402, his emphasis).

differently than the universalized readers in early reader-response criticism.<sup>11</sup> By the 1990s, postmodern feminist critics like Sara Mills questioned “the notion that there is a unified woman’s reading position or even that there is a unified feminist reading position” (31), and paved the way for more intersectional studies of reading as advocated in Schweickart’s most recent work *Reading Sites*, which “participates in this latter development by looking at reading from the point of view of actual readers in concrete situations and by emphasizing theoretical and practical explorations of reading across categories of social difference—in particular, those of gender, race, ethnicity, and class” (10). This plurality of readers and their responses is also reflected among the few critics who use interviews or ethnographic techniques to work with actual readers, as I will discuss below.

### *Part 2: Identifying the Academic Reader*

One of the most frequent criticisms leveled against the literary critical community is that the “readers” discussed are often little more than theoretical representations of the ways that “the largely Euro-American male academic elite” read (Schweickart and Flynn 21). This privileging of academic modes of reading represses the distinction between academic and lay readers, and in doing so places false emphasis on “cognitive, ideational, and analytic” ways of reading (Long “Textual” 194).<sup>12</sup> Perhaps this trend is best described by Eric Livingston in *An Anthropology of Reading*, in which he takes the “culture of academic, critical reading” (xviii) as his subject. As he explains, “the work of reading done by the academic literary critic and that done by the morning commuter are

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<sup>11</sup> See Fetterley *The Resisting Reader* (1978) and Schweickart “Reading Ourselves” (1986)

<sup>12</sup> See Radway, *A Feeling for Books* (1997), for an extended discussion of the differences between academic readers and the “general readers” the Book-of-the-Month Club serves.

different. When the literary critic discusses a reading of a poem, ‘reading’ refers to a subtle distortion of the laic skills of reading, a kind of alchemy of the practices of ordinary reading” (xvii). Through an analysis of the critical work produced by the academic community, Livingston concludes that “for the critical community, discoveries of reading are, inextricably, discoveries concerning how the community reads, and theories of reading are, inextricably, theories about those practices of reading” (145). As Janice Radway has discussed, acknowledging that “professional, academic reading is only one kind of reading and a relatively specialized one at that” (“Beyond”) provides impetus for the work of scholars who contextualize our studies in particular non-academic social and/or historical contexts, such as history of the book scholars concerned with readers and those relatively few of us conducting ethnographies of reading. Exploring the important and numerous contributions of history of the book scholars is beyond the scope of my project, so we turn now to those theorists who have worked with actual readers.<sup>13</sup>

### *Part 3: Studying the Actual Reader*

Though reader-response criticism concerns itself with readers, there are relatively few studies in literary criticism, or other fields, that seek to work with actual, living readers. Of these, on the one hand are the critics who privilege psychological influences on the reader, the most prominent being Norman Holland, who theorized in *5 Readers Reading* that “*a reader responds to a literary work by assimilating it to his own psychological*

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<sup>13</sup> For a good introduction to history of the book scholarship see *The Book History Reader*, eds. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (2002). As the editors explain, though “the study of reading and reading practices was once upon a time the Cinderella of book history,” book historians are now “exploring the ‘whys’ and ‘hows’ of the history of reading as much as the ‘who,’ ‘what,’ ‘where,’ and ‘when’” (289).

*processes, that is, to his search for successful solutions within his identity theme to the multiple demands, both inner and outer, on his ego*" (128, 209, his emphasis). On the other hand are a group of feminists and/or cultural studies-influenced critics who privilege cultural influences on readers, either in groups or individually. The two most influential critics to consider the effects of cultural influences on readers are Janice Radway (who sometimes utilizes a combination of cultural and psychological techniques) and Elizabeth Long.

As the first critic to identify that "American studies needed ethnographies of reading" (*Romance* 4), Janice Radway's groundbreaking work with romance readers in the Midwestern community of Smithton challenged the prevailing primacy of the text and academic ways of reading and asserted the legitimacy of studying the reading practices of actual readers. Particularly significant is that she realized *through her work with the readers* that she would need to privilege their reading experiences over the text: "I soon realized I would have to give up my obsession with textual features and narrative details if I wanted to understand their view of romance reading" (86). She concludes that romance reading fulfills the women's social and psychological needs for "emotional sustenance and solicitude" (93) and "women who seek out ideal novels in order to construct such a vision again and again are reading not out of contentment but out of dissatisfaction, longing, and protest" (215). She therefore calls for feminists to develop "strategies for making that dissatisfaction and its causes consciously available to romance readers and by learning how to encourage that protest in such a way that it will be delivered in the arena of actual social relations rather than acted out in the imagination" (220).

However, while *Reading the Romance* is seminal for many reasons, it also contains key methodological problems, as Radway is among the first to point out.<sup>14</sup> Although she does take steps towards allowing the Smithton women to speak for themselves by including quotations from interviews with them and basing her categories for romance fiction on their descriptions, ultimately their voices are subsumed beneath the “tacit, unintended effects and implications” (210) she sees hidden in the readers’ motivations, namely the oppression they face as wives and mothers in a patriarchal household. Her call for feminists to help readers become conscious of their “dissatisfaction and its causes” (220) and dismissal of the readers’ explanation that they often read for instruction as “a secondary justification for repetitive romance consumption that has been articulated by the women to convince skeptical husbands, friends, and interviewers that the novels are not merely frothy, purposeless entertainment but possess a certain intrinsic value that can be transferred to the reader” (107) both emphasize the critic’s interpretation over that of the readers. One reason for this may be that she did not seem to acknowledge how her social positioning influenced the research situation throughout the research process, something she points out in the revised introduction:

I now think that my initial preoccupation with the empiricist claims of social science prevented me from recognizing fully that even what I took to be simple descriptions of my interviewees’ self-understandings were mediated if not produced by my own conceptual constructs and ways of seeing the world.

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<sup>14</sup> Indeed she seems to write about the problems with the book as much (if not more) than anyone, beginning in the introduction to the revised edition in 1991 and as recently as her 2008 article “What’s the Matter with Reception Study?” See also “Romance and the Work of Fantasy” (1994).

Were I writing *Reading the Romance* today, I would differentiate much more clearly between the remarks actually made by my respondents and my own observations about them. Perhaps even more significantly, I would attend more closely to the nature of the relationship that evolved between the Smithton women and me. (5)

While she is much more reflexive in *A Feeling for Books* published in 1997, some of this tendency lingers, as we will see below.

A related problem is that Radway does not consider the readers' positions in multiple, overlapping cultures and instead has an "exclusive preoccupation with gender" (*Romance* 9), to use her reading of what occurred. This is an issue she has written extensively about since the publication of *Reading the Romance*, including in her 2008 article "What's the Matter with Reception Study?":

Although *Reading the Romance* tries to move beyond textual interpretation alone by using ethnographic methods to determine how romance reading figures in the context of ongoing daily lives, even when it manages to conceive the act of romance reading as one practice among many, the initial decision to begin with genre—and with a genre that is specifically about gender relations—tends to produce the readers at the center of the study not only as "romance readers" but also for the most part as individuals who are saturated by their gender. What this effect means is that, to a certain extent, the book answers the question it poses at the outset precisely because it cannot take seriously reader's identities as classed, raced, or ethnically diverse subjects, nor can it very effectively



study how the individuals who are its focus negotiate the contradictions among the many social and cultural activities that engage them” (337).

As we will see, my study provides an example of how this problem can be effectively addressed by using a methodology that contextualizes readers within the matrix of cultural traditions that influence their reading habits and patterns.

In *A Feeling for Books*, Radway provides an ethnographic and historical account of how Book-of-the-Month Club editors attempted both to appeal to and influence their readers’ middle-brow tastes. Unlike in *Reading the Romance*, Radway is careful to situate herself as a researcher, both as a former Book-of-the-Month Club reader and a literary academic. Her description of her struggle to enjoy academically sanctioned texts while denying herself the pleasures of “popular literature” enables her to explore her ambivalent relationship with the editors and their project, while also allowing her readers, who may or may not be academics, to understand the tensions between these opinions.<sup>15</sup> There are many good examples of this type of reflection, but in the following, she very clearly discusses her internal conflicts:

I wondered again about my responses to this year at the club. What had happened? Why did I feel so connected to them [the editors]? Or perhaps more properly, why did I want to feel connected to them? ... Was the connection and identification I felt only an illusion produced by my own particular desires? And if it was...what did this portend for the scholarly ethnography I was trying to write? (123)

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, her discussions about how close she feels to the editors and how this might affect her project (chapter 1) and whether they should be considered friends (chapter 3).

Furthermore, she contextualizes her account both in space, with vivid descriptions of the working space, books on the wall, and editorial meetings, and eventually time. Her reflection upon how she came to realize the importance of “the historical moment” in which she was working illustrates how she uses reflexivity to show the progression of her thoughts as she worked:

Preoccupied with the Book-of-the-Month Club editors’ understanding of reading and with what they said about my own academic ways of reading, I ignored completely the specificity of the historical moment that structured, limited, and controlled our interactions. (47)

As with *Reading the Romance*, Radway’s ethnographic work in *A Feeling for Books* is seminal for adding a new dimension to studies of reading. The benefits of her continual reflection upon the influences of her cultural and social positioning on her research enable Radway to produce an ethnography of the Book-of-the-Month club editors that is much more attune to the ethnographer’s role in the act of interpretation.

However, despite this reflexivity Radway still exhibits a tendency to speak for her informants rather than allowing them to speak for themselves. Although she does try to understand how and why the editors categorize certain books in certain ways and she does quote them, she does little to distinguish the editors or individualize their motives. Essentially, she remains in complete control of the information, even to the extent of relabeling the editors’ experiences with her own terminology. The language she uses most often is hers, not theirs, and she does not seem to see any problem with this. For example:

Of course the language I have used here to convey the way that the equation between literature and lucre, or culture and commerce, was figured at the club is not the language used by the editors themselves. (64).

The editors all understood this, although they perhaps would have explained it in a somewhat different language. (87).

It does seem appropriate on some level to assume some commonality of motives among the editors since they are all working for the same ostensible purpose, but to interpret their actions and words collectively and for them, rather than allowing them to explain their positions and how they feel about the mediation they are making for themselves, exacerbates the power imbalance between the researcher and the informants. On the whole, Radway's work has been and continues to be influential in shaping our understandings of how audiences use texts and, as Radway herself argues, it is the job of the current researcher both to build from her successes and learn from her mistakes.

Elizabeth Long's study of white women's book clubs in the Houston area is invaluable for questioning the hegemony of academic readings and reframing our understanding of reading as a social practice.<sup>16</sup> The "reader-centered model" she promotes "focuses our attention on reading as one kind of cultural practice, a form of behavior that performs complex personal and social functions for those who engage in it" (*Book Clubs* 22). Long's work began with the premise articulated in a 1986 article

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<sup>16</sup> Long explains her decisions to concentrate her research on white women's reading groups in the Preface to *Book Clubs*. Concerning gender she argues that "concentrating on women's reading groups focused the research on the cultural constituency most clearly attached to book discussion groups" (xv). Through initial research with black women's groups she "decided that it was beyond the scope of this research to deal with the political, epistemological, and methodological complexities introduced by the issue of racial difference" (xvi).

published early in her study of Houston's book groups "that in order to understand the cultural meanings of texts, even those written for and read by people from the same social stratum as most academics, scholars must take into account the textual reception by readers" ("Women" 609). By the end of her research, reported in *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (2003), she concludes that the women are "attached to reading as 'equipment for living' and find many practices of academic literary criticism irrelevant for their project" (220). As discussed earlier, one of the most important contributions Long makes is to question the "ideology of the solitary reader," which she argues has been used to suppress "recognition of the infrastructure of literacy and the social or institutional determinants of what is available to read, what is 'worth reading,' and how to read it" (*Book Clubs* 11). Rather than focusing on "a singular and formalist portrait of *the* encounter between book and reader," she is "more curious about the reading practice of ordinary readers" (*Book Clubs* 28, her emphasis).

As a sociological study, Long's work focuses on broad scale social questions about white women's participation in book groups and creates a comprehensive look at these Houston area book clubs and their historical antecedents. By choosing to focus on larger issues, of necessity her approach limits her ability to explore individual differences. For example, while her research took her "several hundred miles through neighborhoods of the sprawling city and its far-flung suburban subdivisions to visit and observe meetings of women's reading groups" (77), she "sat in on most [groups] just one to three times because they wanted to maintain their group's privacy" (80-1), and met with just four for a period of "several months" (82), excluding her own. Though she is careful to acknowledge that "despite broad similarities in race and class, reading group

member are differently situated in the world, bring different histories and beliefs to the discussions, and are dealing with different life issues” (157), the short period of time she spent with most groups inevitably led to generalizations about all of the women or participants in a particular book group based upon information from one reader. She does include some quotations from interviews and extensive demographic information about the groups, but on the whole she does not individuate the group members, nor explore their individual cultural traditions and how these influence the group dynamic. Furthermore, because she often generalizes for all of the women or uses an example from one group to stand for the groups as a whole, the differences in class, occupation, age, and background that she outlines in the beginning are subsumed under a singular “book club participant” umbrella. In many places, she also seems to assume that because all of the women involved in these groups are white, at least middle class, Houstonians (and mostly college-educated), they use the groups to deal with similar issues concerning gender.<sup>17</sup> Part of the reason she does not differentiate between members could be that she intentionally kept “a certain distance so I could control the nature of the interactions and the use of the information gleaned from them” (85-6). She does reflect somewhat on her role as a member in the social world prescribed by the book group, which helped her to acknowledge their exclusivity and that some book clubs are “interpersonally nasty groups” (87), but her role in constructing her interpretation of these groups is left unexplored. Though more reflexivity about her research process could certainly have been included, many of these issues simply fall beyond the goals of her project and point to the need for studies that examine the role of individual readers, both in group and solitary settings.

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<sup>17</sup> See in particular, chapter 3 p.62-8 and chapter 6, p. 163-9.

Two other critics who study readers, Adam Reed and Catherine Ross, deserve mention here as well. Adam Reed's recent ethnographic work with British fiction readers "who belong to a literary society that supports and promotes the writings of a single author—the 20<sup>th</sup>-century English writer Henry Williamson" ("Expanding" 111), provides a more detailed look at the ways individual and group reading experiences are intertwined. His anthropological approach stresses that "scholars need to take the claims made by readers more seriously" (112) and his work involves participation in society events, reading the Henry Williamson canon and society publications, and visiting members in their homes to conduct personal interviews and to see how they organize their Williamson collections. He argues that society members view Williamson's books as a "substitute for the consciousness of the author" (114) and through reading them "*they do not lose a sense of self, rather they experience a self that is not their own*" ("Henry and I" 188, his emphasis). In an important move to consider the spatial locations of reading, he notes that this connection to "'Henry' does not disappear when they stop reading" (190), which is exhibited both in their book collections that "embody their experience of the second self that possessed them during reading" (191) and in their pilgrimages to North Devon where the novels are set.<sup>18</sup> He concludes that "members are impressed by the agency exercised by the "author," a mythic character (or supermind) whose spatiotemporal dimensions expand by inhabiting books and land" ("Expanding" 119). While his work provides a fascinating study of how the imaginary relationships these readers have created with "Henry" influences their reading,<sup>19</sup> it is conducted through the lens of their interactions with Henry Williamson's books and does not aim to

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<sup>18</sup> See "Expanding 'Henry'" for further discussion of their connection to the land.

<sup>19</sup> For further reading on imaginary social relationships see John Caughey, *Imaginary Social Worlds* (1984) and "Gina as Stephen."

understand the participants as readers or as individuals beyond these interactions with this single author and group.

Catherine Ross's work with Canadians "who said that reading for pleasure is a very important part of their lives" ("Finding" 786), which at last count contained interviews from over 220 avid readers, provides a useful body of evidence from actual readers about the ways reading is "interwoven into the texture of their lives" ("Finding" 787).<sup>20</sup> Her research consists of a single open-ended interview with each reader, usually conducted by a graduate student rather than Ross herself,<sup>21</sup> using a chronological approach to "capture the individual reader's unique history and experience of pleasure reading" (*Reading Matters* 57). Many of these findings have been published in articles and throughout *Reading Matters*, an indispensable book she co-authored that synthesizes most surveys of reading and much of the relevant academic work; like Reed, however, she has yet to articulate fully her conclusions in a book-length project. Though she frequently claims that the particular context of each reader's life is important, the summaries of her research published thus far suggest that her emphasis is on discovering larger trends common to avid readers rather than painting cultural portraits of any particular reader. This is further emphasized by the fact that there is no mention of the influence of the researcher on the interview nor of any follow-up work done with any particular readers. Relying on single interviews can lead to interpretative problems, as David Barton and Mary Hamilton note in their study of literacy in Lancaster, England:

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<sup>20</sup> The possibility that Canadian avid readers vary somewhat from American avid readers should be noted here, though I think it unlikely that the difference is significant enough to invalidate the results of Ross's study for American readers. However, as mentioned earlier, the results of the 2005 Canadian national study of reading are much more positive than those of the studies produced by the NEA.

<sup>21</sup> In "Finding without Seeking" she explains that graduate students had interviewed all but 25 of the 169 readers who had been interviewed for the study at that time (see p. 786).

One thing our methodology has taught us is that initial interviews...are not enough. However thorough they appear at the time, they can prove to be superficial to the point of being misleading. If we had not involved people in [the process of repeated interviews], we would, in some cases, have had a very limited overview of their literacy practices; and might well have held inaccurate beliefs about their values. (65, brackets in original)

Thus, while Ross's research is useful for determining trends common to avid readers, including some of the ways readers experience reading and the roles it can play in their lives, it does not lend itself to examining how reading plays a role within the social and cultural lives of any individual readers.

A brief synthesis of these studies reveals the following:

1. Almost all studies of reading to work with actual readers choose readers on the basis of their involvement in a particular group of readers. Only Ross works with readers purely on the basis of their identification as readers, regardless of participation in groups or social locations.<sup>22</sup>
2. Though Reed has begun to look at how reading extends spatially beyond the page, no one has provided a detailed analysis of the ways space and time can affect reading.

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<sup>22</sup> It could be argued that choosing readers based upon a particular aspect of their social location, as Anne Berggren did with the women readers she worked with in "Reading Like a Woman," is distinct from choosing readers based upon their participation in a group of readers, informal or otherwise, but the fact still remains that any criteria used to narrow the potential readers one works with necessarily influences the outcome of the study in the direction of that choice. See Janice Radway "What's the Matter with Reception Study?" for an example of how her choice to work with women romance readers influenced her conclusions.



3. No work produced thus far has attended to how a particular reader's cultural and social influences or history affect her/his reading as a whole.

As this overview of the methods currently used to understand reading should make clear, the complete range of possible meanings of reading has been glossed over because our focus on the text, academic modes of reading, and even on particular groups of readers cannot explain the ways that individual readers use reading and make it meaningful within the context of their everyday lives. Thus, if we wish to understand reading as a cultural and social practice, it is time that we moved towards a life history of avid readers.

#### *Towards a Life History of Avid Readers*

In his introduction to *The Ethnography of Reading*, Jonathan Boyarin notes that despite the contributions of the authors included in his anthology “we still need an ethnography of that ‘solitary reader’ whose stereotype we decry, but who we spend much of our waking time being” (7), and he goes on to note that most of the essays included deal with reading canonical texts. Despite the important contributions of the authors mentioned above, I argue that Boyarin’s pronouncement still holds true fifteen years later—we *still* need an ethnography of individual readers. What should such an ethnography look like? What is needed is a method that considers social, cultural, spatial, and temporal influences on reading, readers, and the researcher—that is, one that socially, culturally, spatially, and temporally contextualizes both the reader and the researcher. By using a life history method, which Geyla Frank defines as “an ethnographic method used to study cultural phenomena by focusing on the personal experiences over time of one or more individuals” who are “usually ordinary people”

(*Life History* 705), I have begun to create the type of ethnography called for by Boyarin, Radway, and others.

Following the examples of ethnographers such as John Caughey, Renato Rosaldo, and Greg Sarris, I start from the premise that all individuals' interactions with the world are influenced by a matrix of social locations and cultural traditions. Perhaps the most vivid explanation of this is provided by Rosaldo in *Culture and Truth*: "More a busy intersection though which multiple identities crisscross than a unified coherent self, the knowing person not only blends a range of cognitive, emotional, and ethnical capabilities but [also] her social identities" (194). As Caughey explains, "to recognize individual Americans as multicultural requires us to consider the ways in which they operate with multiple and often contradictory senses of identity" (*Negotiating* 46). Thus, we cannot understand a person's relationship to a cultural practice or tradition without exploring how she/he negotiates between it and his/her other cultural and social influences. This also means that different people experience shared cultural traditions and social locations differently, as shown by Greg Sarris in the following example from *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*: "A Kashaya individual's ethnicity or sense of identity as a Kashaya Pomo Indian is dependent on how the individual in personal and social situations, consciously and unconsciously, negotiates and mediates a range of cultural and intercultural phenomena to establish and maintain a sense of self" (179). If we wish to understand the ways readers use reading, we must attend to cultural and social differences on an individual level, as Caughey has argued concerning media relationships: "The interplay of these systems at the level of individual consciousness is crucial to an understanding of the actual complexities of media use" ("Gina" 129). My

study applies the same conclusions to reading drawn by S. Elizabeth Bird about media consumption in *The Audience in Everyday Life*: “only ethnography can begin to answer questions about what people *really* do with media, rather than what we imagine they *might* do, or what close readings of texts *assume* they might do” (Bird 191, her emphasis).

Acknowledging the multiplicity of the researcher’s subject position and the influences this has on his/her interpretations is equally important. Since the reflexive turn, ethnographers have recognized the necessarily partial nature of their accounts and the ethical obligations this recognition brings.<sup>23</sup> As Rosaldo explains, “the social analyst’s multiple identities at once underscore the potential for uniting an analytical with an ethical project and render obsolete the view of the utterly detached observer who looks down from on high” (194). Thus, not only is it important for the ethnographer to be constantly aware of and reflect upon her/his influence throughout the research process, but the researcher has an ethical obligation to be present in the text to enable the reader to better understand the position from which the account is constructed. However, as Ruth Behar has usefully pointed out in *The Vulnerable Observer*, to avoid the trap of the ethnographic account becoming about the ethnographer, it should include only information that is relevant to the project at hand:

To assert that one is a ‘white middle-class woman’ or a ‘black gay man’ or a ‘working-class Latina’ within one’s study of Shakespeare or Santeria is only interesting if one is able to draw deeper connections between one’s personal experience and the subject under study. That doesn’t require a full-length autobiography, but it does require a keen

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<sup>23</sup> See James Clifford “Partial Truths” (1986) for further explanation.

understanding of what aspects of the self are the most important filters through which one perceives the world, and, more particularly, the topic being studied. (13)

In addition to ensuring that the ethnographer's influence is reflected upon and made visible in the written account, there are two other important implications on research methods that arise from recognizing its constructedness. The first is the importance of language, and particularly of making sure that the language used to represent the participants is their own. As Pertti Alasuutari has explained, "instead of forcing one's own categories on the data" (67), qualitative studies that attend to cultural distinctions should instead analyze "how people—or texts—themselves classify and construct things" (68). To accomplish this, both the terminology used by the participants to describe their experiences and their words should be used when possible. For this reason, in my study the readers are quoted extensively in each of their chapters. The second related implication is that the researcher should use a grounded theoretical approach in which "you build your theoretical analysis on what you discover is relevant in the actual worlds that you study" (Charmaz 335) rather than coming to the research with preconceived notions. It was through this type of approach that I decided to add an analysis of the ways the participants arranged the books and reading materials in their homes, which made essential contributions to the spatial and material cultural dimensions of my work, as I will explain below.

*Researching 4 Readers Reading: A Brief Introduction*

Using life history methods, I intend to address three sets of interrelated questions that remain unanswered concerning reading as a cultural practice. The first concern the daily practices of avid readers. When do avid readers read? Where do they read? What do they read? Do they read different materials at different times of the day? In different physical spaces? When traveling? At different times in their lives? If so, why? How does context influence what they read? What do they do with their reading materials after they have read them? Do useful areas of comparison emerge when looking at these practices with different readers? What can/do we learn about reading when we map the roles it plays in the lives of avid readers? Can these insights be applied to understanding non-readers as well?

The second set of questions looks at what avid readers have to say about their reading practices. How do they understand themselves and others as readers? How do they describe their motivations for reading, particularly in different times and spaces throughout their lives? What cultural frameworks do they use for understanding their reading practices?

The third set of questions explores the ways reading interacts with their other cultural traditions and social locations. Which cultural traditions and social locations seem particularly relevant to their reading practices? How do these influence one another? What do we gain through understanding the particulars of how one reader negotiates these influences as compared to previous studies that have tended to assume commonalities among groups of readers (whether it be simply from their identification as avid readers or because of their belonging to a group of readers)? What does this kind of

investigation of individual readers reveal about the complex cultural negotiations involved in the act of reading? What is revealed when we take reading beyond the page?

The primary factors in choosing the readers I worked with were their self-identification as avid readers and their willingness to work with me. Two secondary considerations also played a role—gender and education. While the experiences of these readers should not be taken as representative of others with shared social locations or cultural traditions, their experiences can raise questions about the conclusions of previous work, so I chose to work with two men and two women because of how often gender is cited as an important factor in how people read.<sup>24</sup> Careful not to commit the mistake Radway mentions above of privileging gender above other factors that can and do influence reading, I did not prioritize gender considerations above any others and unsurprisingly found that other social and cultural influences were often more directly relevant to the ways the readers included here read and use texts. As discussed above, the other frequently cited influence on reading is the literary academy, so for this reason I picked one reader who was also a member of this group. Again it should be stressed that this reader is not meant to represent those in the literary academy, but rather provide us with one example of how participation in the literary academy influences pleasure reading.

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<sup>24</sup> See for example the works of feminist critics such as Judith Fetterley, Judith Kegan Gardner, Nelly Furman, Jean Kennard, Patrocínio Schweickart, Patricia Lundberg, and Sara Mills. While much recent criticism takes a more intersectional approach as advocated for in the introduction to Schweickart and Flynn's *Reading Sites* (2004), some critics still assert a gendered difference in reading, e.g. Anne Berggren's "Reading Like a Woman," included in that volume. Some surveys have shown a gender gap in reading interests (see Tepper for further explanation), but my work suggests that gender is only one factor in a matrix of potential influences that can influence what, how, and why a person reads.

Except where noted, I conducted three interviews, lasting one to two hours, with each reader over an approximately six-month period.<sup>25</sup> While I had a basic set of questions for the first interview (see Appendix A), the interviews were open-ended and the questions in each subsequent interview were determined by the information gathered during the research process. Each interview was recorded (with the participant's permission) and fully transcribed. I also participated in at least one participant observation session with each reader, generally connected to viewing the ways they organize their books and reading materials in their homes. Additionally, I asked each participant to keep a reading list, the results of which are listed in full in Appendix B. Each chapter presents the life history of one reader and begins with an introduction to that reader situated from my perspective, followed by three sections and a short conclusion. The contents of these sections vary by reader, but in each chapter the first section provides a portrait of the participant as a reader, the second an analysis of what they read and why, and the third focuses on a particularly salient aspect of each reader's personal reading experiences (as noted below). The chapters are organized in the order in which I conducted my research, and I briefly introduce each reader in this order now.

Madelyn is a white, female chiropractor in her late 50s with whom I was connected through a local bookstore. We initially met for three interviews in the spring and summer of 2006 and had a follow-up interview near the completion of my research. All of our interviews were conducted at an Applebee's near her work. I also accompanied her on one of her (at least) weekly trips to the local bookstore through which we met.

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<sup>25</sup> Like Barton and Hamilton in their study of literacy in Lancaster, England, I found that while initial interviews are useful for pointing to future areas of inquiry, one interview alone is insufficient, and sometimes misleading, if we wish to understand the complex ways people use reading and make it meaningful within their everyday lives.

Madelyn's home was under renovation the entire time we worked together, meaning that her home is the only one I was unable to visit. The third section of her chapter focuses on her physical and metaphorical travels as a reader.

Jim is a white man in his late 50s who spent several years in the Peace Corps and now works in international development. We were introduced through his wife, whom I met at a university library holiday party. Unlike the other readers, all of our interviews were conducted at his home in the room where he does most of his reading. This began because he was at home recovering from foot surgery when I first met him, and continued out of convenience, but provided an interesting backdrop for our discussions as he would frequently refer to books on the shelves while talking. The third section of his chapter focuses on his reading experiences in the Peace Corps and the continuing relationship between his ties to Africa and his reading practices.

Adam is a white 40-year-old gay man who primarily reads science fiction and is active in the science fiction community. We met through a mutual friend when I accompanied her to their book discussion group, which was held in his home. With the exception of the interview about the arrangement of the books in his home, all of our interviews were conducted at local restaurants. He is the only reader not to keep a reading journal. The third section of his chapter explores the role the science fiction literary community plays in his reading.

Christine is a white professor of medieval English literature in her late 50s whom I was put into contact with through a local English department. She is the only reader whom I actively sought out for her participation in a particular cultural tradition, that is being a



member of the literary academy, and this plays a large role in her chapter. One of our meetings took place at a restaurant, one at her home, and the final one at the university where she works. The third section of her chapter focuses on the intersections between her academic and leisure reading.

As mentioned, an important part of my methodology is that my questions and methods evolve in response to information I discover through the research process. While this occurred on many levels as I worked with each reader, one particular methodological addition deserves note here. Though I worked with quite different people, as the subsequent chapters will illustrate, throughout my interviews one point kept recurring—the personal connection each reader had to his or her books as physical objects. From Christine’s direct statement that “I love them as physical objects,” to Adam’s description of many instances where a “book is so tattered from being read it really needs to be replaced, but I don’t want to,” to Madelyn’s assertion that “whatever the question, the answer is more books,” and Jim’s emphatic statement about why he returned from the Peace Corps with his books (“Well those were my books!”), each reader emphasized the corporeal importance of her/his books. This emphasis, combined with the way Jim physically referred to his books throughout our interviews, made me wonder what could be gained through exploring the organization of readers’ books, reading materials, and reading spaces in their homes. Though this decision arose organically from the research process, the work of Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton in *The Meaning of Things* and David Halle in *Inside Culture* provide

useful ways of understanding why such considerations are valuable.<sup>26</sup> Both books are examples of ethnographic research conducted inside homes to “examine the role of objects in people’s definition of who they are, of who they have been, and who they wish to become” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton x). In each case the authors emphasize the home as a site of identity construction: “one can argue that the home contains the most special objects: those that were selected by the person to attend to regularly or to have close at hand, that create permanence in the intimate life of a person, and therefore that are most involved in making up his or her identity” (17). Halle’s explanation of why the home is more revealing than public spaces, such as museums, is equally applicable to the arrangement of books in a home rather than in a bookstore:

The full range of symbolic meaning associated with modern art and culture has not been noticed in part because we have focused on such domains as the museum or public spaces, where those who arrange the art and those who view it diverge...By contrast, in the house the main audience—the residents—are also the ones responsible for the presence and arrangement of the art and cultural items. This is why the mode of dwelling provides a locus for understanding new, and unexpected, ways in which art signifies in the modern world. (200)

Looking at how readers both choose which books to buy and how they organize them in their homes is very revealing about the identity negotiations each reader makes, as we will see. Adam Reed is the only other theorist to use such considerations in his work,

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<sup>26</sup> I am indebted to Elizabeth Long for suggesting these works to me following my presentation on the ways readers organize books and reading materials in their homes (“Locating Reading: What the Placement of Books in a Reader’s Home Reveals,” Beyond the Book: Contemporary Cultures of Reading Conference, Birmingham, UK, August 31, 2007)

and he examines the ways that members of the Henry Williamson Society arrange their Williamson collections in their homes. His conclusion that “members like to be surrounded by the particular texts they have read [and]...enjoy having ‘Henry’ to hand” (“Henry” 191) is relevant for the readers included here as concerns their larger collections of books. However, my work is the first to include extended analysis of the ways that the organization of books, reading materials, and reading spaces in a home intersect with a reader’s identity as a reader.

### *The Fifth Reader*

And so we come to the fifth reader. My position both as an avid reader and as an academic come into play throughout this project and thus both deserve a bit of explication here. Like the readers I work with, reading has always been an important part of my life. I have vivid memories of my grandmother and father reading to me as a child, the excitement of our weekly trips to the library during the summers where I would trade in one stack of books for the next, staying up late to see what happened in the next chapter, banning all fiction from my dorm room my freshman year in college in a desperate attempt to do my biology reading and instead finding *The Godfather* among my roommate’s otherwise class-oriented books, and so on. I sought out this project, in part, because I was interested in the experiences of those like me, and I feel a strong connection to each reader I worked with.

However, I must admit that until I started to study reading, I had not thought much about the fact that someone might find the type of reading and literature taught by the literary academy alienating. While I am certain that if pressed I could have

articulated differences in the ways people read for school and for pleasure, and certainly in the types of things read, the fact is that these distinction were not something I gave much thought to. Further, while I certainly read things as an adolescent that would be considered popular fiction rather than literature (V.C. Andrews is coming to mind here), I seemed to tacitly accept that these books were not taught in class, and did not think to question why. I never experienced any difficulty explicating a text for class nor any feeling that I was going against how I would prefer to be reading it, as Janice Radway and Anne Berggren have described,<sup>27</sup> but rather this was a world I felt comfortable in from the start.

Though I did not recognize it at the time, I now realize that throughout college and until I began working with a suburban reading group in 2002, I read “Literature” (with all its attendant cultural meanings) almost exclusively. However, the reasons for this had much more to do with exposure than with any kind of feeling that this was what I was *supposed to be reading*; that is, I stuck with what I and those around me knew and I had no apparatus or influences who might help guide me through the myriad options at the bookstore.<sup>28</sup> I should note that I was selective in my choices; that is, I did not accept that anything labeled “literature” was therefore good, but rather that most of my reading fell into this category. Indeed, once I did have a way of sorting through books through the book group, I voraciously began to read all of their favorites from their past reading list, paying particular attention to the books recommended by the women I felt closest to.

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<sup>27</sup> See Radway, *A Feeling for Books* and Berggren, “Reading Like a Woman.”

<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth Long has noted there is a distinction between how academics and non-academics view “the literary,” and thus negotiate their reading choices: “For reading group members, literary quality, to begin with, necessitates a minimum level of craftsmanship; *literary* presupposes *literate*. Most academics do not have to cope with questions of literacy...so discussions of merit rarely touch on this issue” (128-9, her emphasis).

I justified the time I spent on this reading to myself as “important background preparation” for working with the group, thereby *allowing* myself to read it when I had other things I should have been reading for my academic work, but the excitement I felt discovering these new books belied my justifications. However, while I did feel the need to justify the time expenditure I was putting into these books, unlike Radway and Berggren, I did not experience a similar need to justify my enjoyment reading them. I noticed a similar trend with this group of readers—whenever one of them would mention a book that moved them, I played the same mind game with myself and read it “in the name of research.” Some of these seemed reasonable. After all, how could I understand Adam’s interest in science fiction without having read science fiction? How could I understand why Madelyn, Christine, and Jim all liked mystery novels without ever having read one? But others were less compelling; Madelyn mentioned having read *Sophie’s Choice* in chiropractic school, so I read it. Great book, sure, but necessary for this project? You be the judge.

All of which brings up the question, if I did not experience the alienation described by some of my fellow academics, how did it come about that I am studying something on the fringes of literary criticism, if that? Why have I chosen to study the reader when I had no trouble studying the text? The roots of this predilection became apparent as a senior in college writing my honors thesis in English on *Hamlet*. I was interested in the performative aspects of the play, but in particular how it was staged and received by various audiences. Through the kind guidance of my advisor, I came to realize that indeed I was not equipped to judge film versions of *Hamlet* on the basis of their appeal to late-twentieth-century American audiences, as compared to how

Shakespeare's audiences would have responded at the Globe, but my interest in the audience continued to grow throughout my masters degree in English and finally led me away from the text and to the reader. This trajectory is particularly important in my interactions with Christine because I simultaneously share her literary academic training while having distanced myself somewhat from it, and that came into play in several instances during our work.

I would like to say a word here about genre fiction as well. Though I was more than willing to accept the literary fiction read by the book group, I must admit that I shared the common academic bias towards genre fiction, including both science fiction and mystery novels. As mentioned, because science fiction is so important to Adam and mysteries were read by all of the other readers, I decided that I should read some of their favorite authors and discovered that I enjoy them. I soon developed my own classifications of and criteria for judging works of genre fiction, as the readers I work with have, rather than relying upon the hegemonic "categories of classification and evaluation generated by cultural arbiters such as reviewers or professors" (118), which restricted my choices before, just as they do for most of the members of the book clubs Elizabeth Long worked with.<sup>29</sup> My interest in mystery fiction in particular continued beyond my initial desire to understand its attraction to the readers I work with, and not only have I recommended some of the authors I discovered to friends and family members, but these books have had a central role in my leisure reading during my dissertation because I found that they are a good diversion from my work at night. And yet—despite my public declaration here and discussions among friends to the contrary,

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<sup>29</sup> For further discussion of the (largely invisible) influences of this "hierarchy of taste" on what book clubs deem to be worthwhile reading, see Long, *Book Clubs*, p. 117-121.

my mystery reading is still tinged with the influences of the “evaluative hierarchy” I claim to dismiss. My mystery reading only takes place in the private spaces in my home or in places where I know no one, like on a plane; primarily, I read them in bed and upon finishing, like Christine I send them to the basement, not to the more public bookshelves in the living room. Additionally, though I was in the habit of keeping a semi-publicly accessible electronic list of everything I read through not just one, but two, book features on Facebook,<sup>30</sup> I noticed with a bit of chagrin that I became less inclined to add to these lists as I made my way through the Elizabeth George canon. To further understand my encounters with mystery fiction, we should look briefly at how I organize the books in the public spaces of my home.

Upon determining that I would add an analysis of how the participants in this study arranged the books and reading materials in their homes, I set upon my own bookshelves to see what they would reveal, something I had not considered until deciding to add this to my project. An analysis of the books in my living room is particularly revealing of how I negotiate between my background in the literary academy and my position as an avid reader. The first thing I realized is that the books in this room are there for visitors as much as for me. Though the shelves contain a mixture of literature, popular fiction, and a little nonfiction, they are all there because I believe that they are well written and I think that others will benefit from reading them. This is further complicated by the fact that I will and have argued that the popular fiction I

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<sup>30</sup> While there is not space here to adequately discuss the influence of social networking sites on reading, this is an interesting phenomenon that has just begun to garner academic attention (as evidenced by a panel I attended at the Beyond the Book Conference that featured papers on online book groups, LibraryThing, and the ways online technologies are changing reading practices) and will be an important site for future studies of reading to explore. The two applications I use on Facebook are the Visual Bookshelf, which I added because most of my friends use it, and Books, which I prefer because it allows the user to add favorite books as well.

include, which also includes some children's literature, *should* be considered literature and tend to use literary descriptions of the books to do so. While I concede that good genre fiction authors are often overlooked because of the prevailing notion that genre fiction is not "literature," my reluctance to place my mysteries in the living room at the very least reveals both that I do not hold it in as high a regard, or anticipate that others will, as the popular and literary fiction I have placed there. In addition to these books, on the bottom shelf reside the OED, a world atlas, and Bevington's Shakespeare. My OED is ostensibly there because it won't fit upstairs with the rest of my dictionaries, but as Janice Radway has discussed in *A Feeling for Books*, this is also a marker of my position in the literary academy and I like for it to be on display.<sup>31</sup> My atlas relates to my other media usage and my dependence on books as a source for information; the television is located in the living room as well and when I watch a film or program that mentions an unfamiliar place, I like to be able to look it up. Even the Shakespeare edition is significant because it signifies not only that I read Shakespeare, but also that I have an edition preference not as commonly used by the academy; that is, it is yet another signifier of my position as an insider in the academic community. Conducting this self-analysis helped me understand cultural and mental processes involved in the arrangement of a reader's books and was an important starting point for my journey into the homes of the readers included here, just as on a larger scale considering my own reading history was an essential tool for studying the reading histories you are about to read. As Geyla Frank has pointed out, "a biographer brings predilections and preunderstandings to the research situation that are not only cultural but also rooted in her own life history and life story and in the relationship developed over time with her

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<sup>31</sup> See p.2



informant” (Frank 161). Without this type of constant reflection, I would be unprepared to account for the effects of my standpoint on the research I produce.

As I was considering how the readers included here defined reading, an example of such a predilection became apparent that I should address here. As explained earlier, rather than approaching this project with a set idea of which materials I thought should count as reading, I used the readers’ definitions of reading throughout my work with them; that is, what counted as reading to each of them counted as reading in this study. So, though each reader privileged book reading and Adam almost exclusively referred to book reading as “reading,”<sup>32</sup> both Jim and Christine included magazines and newspapers in their reading habits, and Madelyn also included internet reading. However, while I was careful not to limit my understanding of reading to books in my research, my own partiality towards book reading became apparent to me upon reflection on the research process, and perhaps guided my choices more heavily towards book readers. Each of the places I used to find readers can also be thought of as a site which is focused on book reading: a bookstore, a book group, an English department, and a university library. Part of the reason for these choices is attributable to my resources—in each case I had a contact who helped me find eligible readers, an indispensable resource for this type of work. But I should not discount the fact that I primarily think of reading as book reading as well. I consider myself an avid reader because I read a lot of books—fiction in particular—and when I think about other avid readers, I picture book readers, not

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<sup>32</sup> Other than the free daily newspaper given out at the metro, the only periodicals Adam reads are science fiction magazines and one of his primary reasons for reading them is to read the book reviews: “I read the reviews section as soon as I get the magazine. The story content I read quickly if it’s a known author or if I’ve heard something about the story. Other stories I read when/if I get a recommendation from a trusted source - or they get identified as award finalists for one of a number of genre awards (Hugo, Nebula, Tiptree and Gaylactic Spectrum being the key ones). There are stories in these that I’ve never read - not that I don’t want to read them, but I just haven’t found the time.”

someone reading on a computer screen or even reading a magazine. For example, when I go to a doctor's appointment and see someone reading a book I am more likely to think of them as an avid reader than someone reading a magazine, who may be doing so simply because there is no other entertainment.<sup>33</sup> My bias is not entirely without warrant, though this may be changing as online reading becomes more prevalent. For example, the 1978 study of adult reading in the United States conducted by the Book Industry Study Group (BISG) concluded that while some readers "read only newspapers and/or magazines and not books," "there is almost no one (2 percent of the population) who reads books exclusively and does not also read newspapers and magazines" (*Reading Matters* 139), indicating that book reading is a clearer marker of broader reading practices than magazine and/or newspaper reading is. This seems likely to change as a new generation comes of age who "are less likely, and perhaps less willing, to privilege book reading as the highest form of literacy" (*Reading Matters* 120), but still seems applicable to the adult readers I worked with.

This tendency towards book reading is also reflected in the growing number of books that feature accounts of individual readers, either through interviews with them about the books that most changed their lives or through autobiographies about reading. For example, Maureen Corrigan's 2005 *Leave Me Alone, I'm Reading: Finding and Losing Myself in Books* looks at how particular books have shaped her life experiences: "I want to talk about how life and art interrelate—specifically how what was happening to me at certain times in my life affected how I've read literature, as well as how books have affected how I've 'read,' and to a certain extent, shaped my life" (xxv-xxvi).

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<sup>33</sup> I came to this realization during a recent visit to the dentist when I noticed myself making assumptions about the other patients waiting based upon their reading choices.

Indeed, what is striking is how many of these focus on writers and books and there appears to be an implicit suggestion that reading *is* book reading in their choice of topic and title, as a sampling of some of the most recent titles shows: *The Most Wonderful Books: Writers on Discovering the Pleasures of Reading* (1997), *The Book that Changed My Life: Interviews with National Book Award Winners and Finalists* (2002), *So Many Books, So Little Time: A Year of Passionate Reading* (2003), *Reading Life: Books for the Ages* (2007), and so on. I note this here not to defend my predilection towards book reading—after all one of the most avid readers in my life is my grandmother who reads three newspapers a day, but fewer books, so I *knew* better—but rather to point out that the prevalence of this trend suggests that many, if not most, avid readers do read a lot of books.

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In her conclusion to *Venus on Wheels*, a cultural biography of Diane DeVries, Geyla Frank directly addresses her readers and their role in creating the ethnography or life history that they read: “Reader, this may be your last change to catch yourself in the act! The Diane portrayed in this cultural biography depends on what you take away. She is very truly *your* Diane” (163, her emphasis). While I very much admire this sentiment, I question why she leaves it for the end of the book *after* Diane’s life has been shared. Thus, as we begin I leave you now, the sixth reader, with this caveat: As you get to know each reader in the following chapters, remember that you too play a part in the act of creation.

## CHAPTER ONE: MADELYN

*I cannot imagine how people live and not read, for pleasure or curiosity or interest or improvement. I cannot imagine not being a lover of books*

Appropriately, my work with Madelyn began and ended with a bookstore. When I initially set out to find readers for my dissertation, I had approached a local bookstore with whom our department had connections and asked if they could spread the word about my project to any readers they thought might be interested. To my surprise, I received the following response that evening from Madelyn:

Hello Jennifer, I got your email from the folks at [the bookstore]. They asked if I was interested in participating in a research project for a grad student's dissertation. I certainly would love to participate. I work in ---- and I'm there 4 days a week. My name is Dr. Madelyn -----, and I can be reached at [her phone number]. Take care. Madelyn<sup>34</sup>

Throughout our interviews, her strong connection to bookstores came up so often that we decided I should accompany her on one of her frequent trips to this bookstore, into which she “stops in and looks around” at least once a week as it is conveniently within walking distance of her office. Under the watchful eye of the bemused owner, I followed Madelyn as she weaved her way through the store in her normal pattern—stopping first at the sale rack outside to look for “books for her lending library at work,” then to the sale-tables, new fiction, and new arrivals where she looks “just in case” at the fiction, though she generally reads less of this, and tries to avoid things about the President because they make her “angry,” defeating the purpose of being here, and

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<sup>34</sup> Identifying information has been deleted or changed to help maintain anonymity.

finally to her primary interests in travel, cookbooks, and spirituality “depending on [her] mood.” As she went she explained that “just looking at books makes me very happy” and periodically used a book to strike up conversation. When we left the store, Madelyn admitted that she was uncertain what our trip would reveal, but for me the very existence of this ritualized, frequent route through this bookstore is symbolic of the role reading and books play in her life, and accompanying her reinforced and brought to life several of the things we discussed throughout our interviews—the way her curiosity urges her to spend time looking at books she typically does not read “just in case,” the way books have the ability to strongly affect how she feels and conversely how her mood influences her reading interests, the way she uses books to discuss other aspects of her life.

This was not our last meeting, however. Since I had completed my primary research with Madelyn first, I had some follow-up questions I wanted to go through before beginning work on this chapter and we met for the last time over lunch more than a year after this trip had taken place. Conversation was easy as it had been from the very beginning, and continued after I packed my recorder away as we waited for the check. Talk turned, as it often had, to bookstores, in this case the “sensual” experience of going to a used bookstore, something “important to those of use who feel things.” She was lamenting the closing of used bookstores and the inevitable turn to online selling and animatedly explained that the feel of the book, the look of the place, the smell of the store, and the interaction with knowledgeable owners were what made the “thrill of the search” so fulfilling and kept her going back. “If you have a free afternoon, there’s nothing like spending it in a used bookstore because you never know what you’re going to find.” And the same can be said for reading itself—for Madelyn, reading ultimately

plays a central role in her life because it helps to satisfy her insatiable curiosity—for self-knowledge, for knowledge of other people, for knowledge of other places, for knowledge of other experiences.

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*An avid reader to me is someone who, given free time, the first thing they want to do is pick up a book. That's the drug of choice. That given free time, you know, I don't want to go out and garden, I don't particularly want to go out and swim or kayak. That if I have free time, what I gravitate towards is reading.*

Madelyn is a white avid reader in her late 50s who, as a perfect example of this description that she espouses, can usefully be described as a “voracious reader.” In her book of narratives from both avid and infrequent readers, Nadine Rosenthal identifies a “voracious reader” as someone for whom “reading is their form of play; it’s their favorite leisure-time activity” (77). As such, these readers “read anytime, anywhere” (77). As Madelyn explains, she reads more places than not:

I read in bed. I read on the living room sofa. I read on the john.<sup>35</sup> I read at traffic lights. I read on the subway. I read on airplanes. I read at the beach. I read outside in the backyard. I read when I’m waiting for appointments. I don’t read when I’m in the movies and I don’t read when I go to concerts. Although, no that’s not true. Before the movie, I usually have the *City Paper* and I’m reading the *City Paper*. I generally read at breakfast. I don’t usually have lunch and dinner and read. But I read at breakfast a lot. I mean sometimes in the evening, that’s not true,

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<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, she is the only reader to mention bathroom reading and focused on this in her description of her reading materials in her home as well, whereas this room was skipped during my visits to the other readers’ homes. I did not ask to see the bathrooms because my methodological standpoint is that I should follow the lead of the participant, but this was a question that arose during my presentation on reading spaces in the home at the Beyond the Book: Contemporary Cultures of Reading conference in England.

sometimes I'll read the paper at dinner, cause I'll read the *Post* with breakfast and then my husband will bring home *The New York Times* or *USA Today* and I'll read those while I'm eating dinner sometimes. I read a lot of places, times, I almost always read before I go to bed. Almost always. Unless I'm really tired. I read, well like if I'm traveling. We traveled this weekend on the plane—took two books. Now, we're going to take a road trip this weekend. I won't read on the road, I'll listen to music. Once we get to the hotel, I'll probably read. I don't know. When don't I read is less (laughs). I read in the bathtub. I've even taken to sometimes, it's rude, but if I'm on the phone with somebody, I might be reading my e-mail!

Clearly, reading plays an important role in what she does with her personal time, and like other avid readers, her days begin and end with reading and she fits it in wherever she can in her daily life.<sup>36</sup> Like most voracious readers, her reading interests are broad, as will be apparent throughout this chapter: “Voracious readers read magazines and newspapers (sometimes two or three a day), literature, novels, mysteries, science fiction, history, politics, sociology, science, technology, popular psychology, repair manuals, how-to books, and cereal box tops” (77). However, where she differs a bit from the other readers I worked with is in the wide range of reading materials and circumstances she includes—like Jim, she mentions newspaper reading, but she is the only reader I worked with to include online resources. This tendency to exclude online resources is

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<sup>36</sup> This tendency fits in with data from larger studies. Catherine Ross's research suggests that avid readers “make time for reading” (143, her emphasis) and Zill and Winglee's summaries of survey data collected in the 1980s shows that “literature reading is a fairly robust habit that can persist in the face of time pressures and competition from other activities” (60).

still reflected in most large-scale national reading studies, though this is slowly changing; the 2007 NEA study, *To Read or Not To Read: A Question of National Consequence* “looks at all varieties of reading, including fiction and nonfiction genres in various formats such as books, magazines, newspapers, and online reading”<sup>37</sup> and there have been several important smaller studies of the way “young people” read alternative media.<sup>38</sup> Her discussion of her online reading reflects some uncertainty about how to classify it as well. Note in the following passage how she begins by saying she does not read sometimes and then clarifies that she actually is reading online:

I actually will go periods of time where I don't read now. I'll come home, I'll listen to music, I'll get on the computer—well I read a lot on the computer, though. I'll go to the science daily website and I'll just read science articles. So I guess I still read, but an awful lot of it now is online. I don't read books online. It's mostly articles and information. You know, some quilting article or science. Mostly science is what I read online.

While she identifies learning about new things as an important reason she reads (as we will see in section two) the distinction she seems to be drawing here is between reading articles and reading books, making her online reading more akin to her magazine or newspaper reading than her book reading. Throughout our interviews, reading of this kind was not mentioned frequently, but when she did identify magazines she read, they

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<sup>37</sup> However, though the NEA report considers online reading, it is generally cast as oppositional to “literary reading,” (particularly among adolescents) rather than as a type of reading legitimate unto itself and acknowledges that “there is a shortage of scientific research on the effects of screen reading” (53).

<sup>38</sup> Another exception to this can be found in *Reading the Situation*, a survey conducted in the UK in 2000 (141). See Ross, et al, p. 134 for a summary of what type of reading was included in national studies through 2006 and p. 118-123 for a summary and bibliography of studies that look at the way “young people” read alternative texts/media. As Rothbauer points out, young people “are less likely (than their elders), and perhaps less willing, to privilege book reading as the highest form of literacy” (120).



were all of the informative type—during her description of the reading materials in her home she mentioned cooking, sewing, and travel magazines, as well as *This Old House*. Her use of magazines and newspapers primarily for information can be clearly seen when she describes her reading habits while traveling: “I usually read whatever material is in the hotel room, you know, the brochures, the magazines, we always buy local newspapers, we try to find the local arts paper.” Unlike the younger readers included in the surveys mentioned above, though Madelyn does value this type of reading, she makes a distinction between it and her book reading that clearly privileges the latter.

A brief look at the prevalence of books in her home helps to make this preference clear. While magazines do have a place as noted above, books play a primary role. Madelyn’s home was undergoing renovations during the duration of our work together, so I was not able to visit it as I did with the other readers, but her description of where her books are kept throughout the house is impressive in magnitude. Every room contains books, including the bathroom and kitchen, and because of the remodeling there are books stacked around in various places and in boxes as well. Some sense of their sheer number is conveyed through her description of the lower level of her house: “Downstairs in the big family room there are three floor-to-ceiling bookcases. In that hallway here are two or three bookcases, one of which is floor-to-ceiling. In the family room, there’s also two other bookcases, but they’re low.” Her bedroom also overflows with books and these best illustrate her current reading interests because, as she explains, “the books that I want a lot are the ones that are stacked on the floor in the bedroom”:

We have a platform bed, so under the platform I can just stack books,

which I do. And in those books are, those are all my books, there's everything from fiction, to philosophy, to health, to memoir, lots and lots of memoir, to travel, to art, to writing, to Buddhism, (pause) there might be some fiction.

As her equivocation over whether or not fiction is included by her bedside emphasizes, her preference for book reading over other types of reading does not translate into a preference for fiction over nonfiction. Aside from being an avid mystery reader and the monthly book she reads for her book group, most of what Madelyn reads is nonfiction, which she prefers.<sup>39</sup> To further complicate the matter, she so frequently seemed to distinguish between mysteries and "fiction" in our first two interviews that I asked her to clarify the distinction for me:

I prefer dark mysteries usually, and there's a lot of intense sort of human, intense and tense human drama, and so it feels like it engages my brain as much as nonfiction. Whereas most fiction, not all, but most of the fiction I read doesn't have always that component for me. Now *Bastard Out of Carolina* did because it was a dark story. I hadn't even thought about it until this very second when I'm talking about it, but most regular just fiction story books don't engage my brain in the same way. It's just there's a lightness to the story usually, but it's not like a lot of intense human struggle. Now, I haven't read Dostoevsky and a lot of those writers, which I think would be a different sense, but I think that the

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<sup>39</sup> This preference for nonfiction and mysteries is clearly illustrated in the reading journals she provided (see Appendix B).

mysteries that I read probably pull on my brain in the same way that in some ways nonfiction does.<sup>40</sup>

I will address some of the ways mystery fiction accomplishes this in the next section, but for now what is key are the similarities she draws between the type of fiction she prefers, including mystery fiction, and nonfiction. On several occasions she emphasized that everything she reads should engage her in a similar way:

I think the way I feel when I read—whatever that is, I don't even know how to say what that is—if I'm reading something that's interesting to me, whether it's a story or it's nonfiction, there's a way in which I'm focused and following a train of thought. It feels really good to me. It's a kind of being immersed in something that's really very interesting that has an intellectual and a mental component that then sort of stimulates a feeling of curiosity or engagement or wonder or um—it's being involved with something with a real mental quality to it. And I don't think I ever thought of myself as an intellectual person because I'm, I mean if you look at the Myers Briggs I'm way off the chart with emotion. But, I think I like thinking about things. I don't like thinking about everything, but I think the things I really like thinking about I *really* like thinking about. I mean if we lived in, if I lived in a culture where there were salons or people engaged in a lot of intellectual discourse, I think I would do it, I

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<sup>40</sup> This reference to the humanness of the mystery fiction Madelyn reads above other sorts of fiction is reminiscent of Adam's assertions about the nature of the science fiction he reads as well, which raises many interesting questions—do other genre readers feel this way? If so, is it something inherent to the writing or does it have more to do with how it is read? Does the academy, which historically concerns itself less with genre fiction, play any role in this perception? Both of these readers only make these claims for the specific type of reading they do within their respective genres—what is the significance of this?

think I would enjoy it. But the next best thing for me is to have an intellectual discourse in my head. And, there's something about that that feels very familiar and very grounding to me. (her emphasis)

Most reader-response critics focus on how fiction is read, but as Wendy Simonds points out in her book on self-help reading, "these categories (fiction/nonfiction) are not particularly relevant to a reader-oriented analysis of reading" because the reader's assessment of a story's truthfulness is independent "from the realness or pretense of the story" (10). That this is true for Madelyn can be seen in her response to her favorite book, Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*:

Her story is not my story. She came from a much poorer family with a lot of violence and disruption, which I didn't have. But she so captured, she SO captured Appalachia at that time, that I literally recognized every word in that book. I recognized every smell. I recognized the clothes. I recognized the attitude. I recognized everything about every word that she wrote. And for two weeks after reading that book I was sort of like "Oh My God" and I was obsessed with writing her a letter. I mean I went through like seven drafts. And I finally wrote her a letter. And when I met her, I told her.

I said "I just needed to tell you what an incredibly, incredibly perfect book I thought you had written and how you had captured that time and place. Even though I didn't know you and my life wasn't your life, I knew you. I knew people that were in your life. I went to school with them. I had cousins." And I said "you nailed it. You nailed it

beyond words.” I mean it was really one of the most powerful books I ever read.<sup>41</sup>

The intensity of her engagement with this book that comes through in her description is due to how well Madelyn felt the book captured real life—that is, for Madelyn it is the truth of the depiction that allows her to connect with the story and made her feel that she “really needed to meet her.” According to Janice Radway, this type of engaged reading, both on an intellectual and emotional level, aligns with what the Book-of-the-Month Club editors were trying to enable:

The modality of reading privileged at the Book-of-the-Month Club emphasized both sense and sensibility, both affect and cognition. It mobilized the body and the brain, the heart and the soul. It was a mode of reading that stressed immersion and connection, communication and response. The editors saw their job, accordingly, of finding writers who could speak to more than a few like-minded peers. (117)

Madelyn’s description of her absorption in the book and her seeking out the author first through a letter and then in person shows in concrete form her “immersion and connection” with the world of the book and the “communication” (from author to reader) and “response” (from reader to author) that the editors were seeking. The topic of being immersed in a book came up frequently in our conversations, as it did in the Book-of-the-Month Club editors’ reports. As Janice Radway explains “the particular pleasure referred to again and again in reader’s reports was always bound to a certain extent

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<sup>41</sup> This type of uncharacteristic “compulsion” to reach an author is also described by some of the members of the Henry Williamson society who generally have equally strong reactions to their first encounter with Williamson’s novels (though for somewhat different reasons) as Madelyn did with *Bastard Out of Carolina* (Reed, *Henry and I* 193).

within a feeling of immersion, a sense of boundaries dissolved” (114). Madelyn’s descriptions of what happens when she’s reading a story fit perfectly within this description:<sup>42</sup>

And I think that there’s something that happens when I’m reading a book, when I’m actually reading it. There’s a way in which I’m there in a different way. I’m in the book. It’s like I’m one of the characters or I’m much more in the book, in the story, than if I’m listening to it.<sup>43</sup>

I think that when I read, because I have read so much for so long, that the way I feel when I read is that I’m reading a book that I’m really immersed in and I’m really involved with the characters and the story and the language. There’s a way that it makes me feel that is tremendously familiar and comforting. Now it’s less so than it was 15 years ago because I think there’s other ways in which I feel pretty connected to myself that I didn’t used to. I think reading helps me feel connected to myself because from such an early age my self was a reader. And a reader who explored stories. That’s what I think I meant.<sup>44</sup>

This deep connection with reading manifested itself early in her childhood. As she explains, “I’d probably have to say that my earliest memories are probably that of books and music. I cannot imagine a life without either one. I mean, I truly can’t

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<sup>42</sup> There is a disconnect the types of books Madelyn prefers and those that the editors privilege most. As Radway explains, while the editors diligently fulfilled their task of finding reading materials from many categories and “seemed to have a profound respect for the diversity of functions books could fulfill...they also seemed to reserve a special place for one kind of book above all other, that is, literary fiction” (62), which Madelyn does not share.

<sup>43</sup> For a discussion of how people create social relationships with fictional characters see John Caughey “Gina as Stephen.” I will discuss the ways Madelyn creates relationships to the characters she encounters in depth in the next section.

<sup>44</sup> That Madelyn uses the words “story” and “character” to refer to both fiction and nonfiction is another indication that this distinction is not useful for understanding her reading.

imagine a life without either one. The world would be so bleak.” As is the case with most avid readers, she grew up surrounded by books and her parents “encouraged reading”:<sup>45</sup>

There were lots of books around our house. I mean both of my parents were avid readers. As soon as I was old enough to sign my name, I had a library card. And my parents would go grocery shopping every two weeks and they would drop me off at the library. And I would bring home lots of books. My father read to us when we were children, and he didn't read story books, he would read Thurber, you know, and stuff like that. And so we grew up exposed to a lot. I mean we read little kids books too, of course, but there was no such thing as a book that was off limits. You know, “oh that's too old for you.” None of that, none of that, none of that.

Thinking and reading and education and teachers were really revered in my household. Education was very much valued. And along with it, my Dad went to college on the GI bill and he loved it. He loved college. He loved learning, you know, reading Plato and Aristotle and all that. And so, it's inconceivable to me that people grow up without books. I cannot imagine a childhood without books. So, I think that because they were around me so much when I was a kid, and because education and the life of the mind was valued a lot, thinking.

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<sup>45</sup> Of the over 220 avid readers in Ross's study “an overwhelming majority...came from families that strongly supported reading in childhood” (72).

In addition to reading being valued in her family, she also used it as a way to cope with growing up in a difficult situation: “I mean I grew up in an environment that encouraged reading. I grew up in a house that was pretty broken and so I needed to escape. I needed to make sense of a world that in some ways didn’t make a lot of sense to me. I had a natural affinity for it.” As she explains above, these ways of using reading to “make sense of [the] world” continued well into her adult life, though it became more about explication and less about escape as we will see. The familiarity and comfort that reading provided for her encouraged her reading to such an extent that even teachers became concerned about how much time she spent reading as a child:

Maybe it was 4<sup>th</sup> grade or 5<sup>th</sup> grade, I don’t know what grade I was in, but our teacher wanted us to keep a list of books and it was the name and the author and what the book was about and what you thought about it, and then at the end of three weeks or whatever, you’d turn your list in and the teacher would go over it. And the other kids were turning in one or two pages and I would turn in like six and seven pages. And in fact the teacher said to me one time, she called me up to her desk, and she was very concerned. She said “Madelyn do you ever go out and play?” And I said “yeah, I mean, but I just read a lot.” And my sister says that what she remembers about me the most when we were little is that I always had a book in my hand.

However, unlike some of the readers interviewed for Ross’s study and many of the romance readers in Radway’s *Reading the Romance*, Madelyn never characterizes her



heavy reading as problematic—either as a child or as an adult.<sup>46</sup> If we turn now to an analysis of what she reads, has read, and why, it becomes clearer why she does not share this concern.

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*Well I have never not read. I have never not read a lot.*

Reading for Madelyn is both therapeutic and enlightening. Throughout her life she has used it as a way to find out information about the world, herself, and others, and it has been a therapeutic comfort and way of relaxing for her, in good times and in stressful ones. In the following description of why she reads, it is clear how it serves both as a source of knowledge and as a means of comfort to her:

I think even if I had had a different family, if my childhood had been better, I think because I'm curious, I think I would have [read]. And I love, I have always loved immersing myself in the world that a book creates. I love, I had a therapist ask me one time "You know, there's a lot of alcoholism in your family. Why didn't you become an alcoholic?" And I busted out laughing and said "Cause I didn't need the bottle. I could just do it." And part of the way I could do it, I think, was just to dive into a book. And I'm not one of these people—I mean, it's like, okay don't bother me. I mean, if I'm in a book, I'm in a book. Now it's not so much, I'm almost 56-years old, so it's not quite that way now, but for a vast majority of my life, you know, I'm not somebody that keeps a very clean house. I mean, I'm not dirty, but housework is way down

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<sup>46</sup> According to Radway, "the Smithton readers are most troubled about the quantity of time they devote to their books" and show this through their defensiveness about their "right to escape just as others do" (103). Madelyn shares none of this defensiveness and instead depicts reading as a natural part of her life.

there on the list. If it's a choice between vacuuming and a book (heartily laughs) the book's gonna win!

Like the romance readers in *Reading the Romance*, Madelyn is aware that her reading is taking time away from her other activities, but unlike them, she is unapologetic about this fact. Also, rather than being made uncomfortable by comparisons of reading to addictions like alcoholism as many of the Smithton romance readers are, she views her ability to use reading this way positively.<sup>47</sup> Some of this distinction may be attributable to the much maligned nature of romance reading, but many of the categories Madelyn reads, like mysteries, self-help novels, and books on dreams and spirituality, do not fare much better in the cultural hierarchy of reading. A more salient factor is that Madelyn and her husband are both avid readers and support each other's reading habits, while the romance readers' husbands and families object to the time the women spend reading. However, the most important difference seems to be in their understanding of why they read—while the Smithton women “agreed that one of their principal goals in reading was their desire to do something different from their daily routine” (88), Madelyn claims that she primarily reads to satiate her curiosity.<sup>48</sup> There may be times when she uses reading to help alleviate a stressful situation, but rather than viewing reading as a break from her “daily routine” she considers it an important part of her identity:

Reading has always been for me a form of relaxation, it's a form of, I don't know what the word is—a way of getting centered. I really self-identify as a reader, I think. And I think that if I've had a stressful time,

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<sup>47</sup> See *Reading the Romance* p. 88.

<sup>48</sup> As has been discussed in my introduction, the methodological approach used in *Reading the Romance* does not prioritize the voices of individual women and thus the evidence I include from this book is limited to that which is directly corroborated by the women's statements.

reading and having a book in front of me, and following the story, really brings me home to myself. For some people it's nature maybe, or gardening, or athletics, for me it's reading. I mean I really think that, and once again I never thought about it until we started doing this and I started thinking about it, but I think a core part of my identity is that of a reader.

For this reason, even when she is in situations that consume a lot of her time, she has made sure to prioritize reading: “when I was in chiropractic school one of the things I realized was that you could become consumed with studying” and so “I just made the decision that I was going to continue pleasure reading.” While she explained that much of her reading during school were mysteries that were “pure escapist fiction, cause I was so fried” she also clarified that “pleasure reading for me can be anything from mysteries to the history of the Dead Sea scrolls to psychology” and that these interests continued as well.

Madelyn's reading interests can be roughly divided into two sometimes overlapping categories—informational reading, including her quilting books and cookbooks and the online reading discussed earlier, and fictional and nonfiction “stories,” including mystery fiction and her more recent interest in memoir. Though her “story” reading is not bound by the fiction/nonfiction divide as we saw earlier, she does have clear specifications for the type of writing she prefers:

I don't play cards for relaxation. I don't play [sports] for relaxation, other than dance, but it doesn't feel like work. I don't want to have to work.

When I read for enjoyment, I don't mind intense engagement, but I don't

want to have to work. And postmodern books make me work. And it's like, I don't need this. It's not, I'm not lazy. It's just that having to wade through all that whatever it is in those books, it irritates me. There's something about that kind of writing that is part of what irritates me about the culture, which is that it's very narcissistic. "Look at me. Aren't I doing something really special?" You know, and it adds a layer of crap that's unnecessary. Just give me the story. Just give me the story and get the hell out of the way, is the way I feel. It's like singers who feel like they have to do a lot of affect. Just shut that up. Just give me the song. Just give me the feeling of the song. You don't have to lay a bunch of hysteria and "Look at me" on top of it. That's too distracting. You know, I'm a cut to the chase kind of gal. I like to just get to the meat of the story—if you're wordy, that's okay. I mean I do love some of those Southern writers. But that layer that goes on top of postmodern writing, I don't know what it is, but it makes me crazy.

As we have seen, reading fulfills a very personal role for Madelyn and an author's role is to provide "you the vehicle to project onto." Her irritation with these writers who draw attention to themselves is understandable because their presence places the focus on what the writer is doing, thereby detracting from her ability to use writing to center herself. As she explains, it is not being asked for "intense engagement" that is the problem, but being asked to play the game that the author dictates, rather than use the story for her own purposes:

My perception of postmodern literature is that the storyteller is too present. The storytelling is too present. “Look at me, look at what I can do.” Rather than just give me the story and get the hell out of the picture. To me a good writer is not so present—they channel the story—that you get so caught up in the story that you’re not even aware of the writer.

Interestingly, as noted earlier, this does not mean that she does not respect individual authors, nor that she thinks that they are interchangeable. Though she has to “really, really, really like an author before [she]’ll go to a book signing,” in addition to meeting Dorothy Allison, she has also met Andrew Vachss, Cathy Reichs, and Elizabeth George, all mystery writers of various sorts. Her description of her expectations for meeting Elizabeth George mirrors her sentiments above: “I didn’t really know what to expect because she’s an author that’s kind of invisible. When she writes it’s the characters’ voices that you’re so much more aware of. It’s the story’s voice, and so I didn’t have an idea of what to expect.” While it seemed counterintuitive to me that she would want to meet an author when she so strongly wants them to “get the hell out of the picture,” she explains her desire to meet Elizabeth George in the following way: “The first few books I read I remember saying to my husband, ‘I love her characters. I love her character development. I want to have these people over for dinner.’ I was just so pulled into the story, the humanness of the characters, that I was curious to meet her.”<sup>49</sup>

Given Madelyn’s emphasis on the story and characters, it makes sense that the only fiction she reads with regularity is mystery fiction, which academics negatively

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<sup>49</sup> This is in direct contrast to how the members of the Henry Williamson society describe their reading experiences: “Society members believe that the central point of view they experience belongs to the author. They principally identify not with the characters of the novels but with ‘Henry’” (Reed *Expanding Henry* 114)

contrast with “modernist fiction for the former’s continued reliance on traditional modes of plot and character and the conventions of Realism” (Kelly, *Mystery* 174). Madelyn’s assessment of what type of fiction attracts her is reminiscent of descriptions used by the mystery readers who participate in the online discussion group DorothyL. By analyzing their postings, Kelly determined that “engagement with character is central to the reading experience” for these readers and further that these characters must not only be realistic, but likable (172), just as Madelyn explains that “I have to like somebody in the story, for fiction...if I don’t like any of the characters, the story ceases to interest me.”<sup>50</sup> Her earlier comments about what drew her to Elizabeth George and the following description of what appeals to her about her characters supports this contention:

I think her characters are trying to understand themselves and trying to understand the world they live in, in a way that’s very appealing to me. Her characters seem like people who think, and who question, and who want to do the right thing. They don’t just go through and just automatically react. They’re people that are thoughtful and they’re trying to understand their selves. They’re not just reactive people. And that’s interesting to me. That’s appealing to me.

As John Caughey has described in “Gina as Steven,” one of the ways that people interact with fictional characters is to use their actions as a “model for the self” (128). Madelyn’s description of these characters mirrors her own attempts to understand herself and the world, and much of Madelyn’s past and current reading interests are focused on these

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<sup>50</sup> It should be noted here that Elizabeth Long found that book club members also emphasized the importance of character and treated them “*as if* they were real people” (“Women” 606). However, the need for these characters to be likable is not a requirement for these readers: “closeness [with characters] can occur even when someone disapproves of a character” (606) and can lead to “fascinated discussion” (607).

goals, as we will see shortly. However, while this statement refers to the characters solving the crimes, she also has relationships with the criminal characters and therefore it is equally important that the criminals and their motivations also be realistic:

J: And what do you get from a mystery that's different?

M: Well I thought about that. For the most part, it makes an untidy world tidy because a puzzle is solved, usually the bad guy is caught, and I think it's a way of—how do I want to say this? I think it's a way of experiencing a part of the world, you know that of breaking the law or murderers or the dark stuff, the unsavory stuff, without really getting your hands dirty.

J: Do you mean solving those crimes or you like knowing what the criminals did themselves?

M: Both. I mean, I think that understanding how quote unquote bad people think is interesting. I don't particularly want to live in that world. I don't particularly want to run around with criminals and hoodlums and thieves, but I'm curious. I'm not curious enough to go live that life, but curious enough to pick up a book.

In this instance, we see a different media relationship, one in which Madelyn has “*partially* become the fictional character[s]” (Caughey 128, my emphasis) she describes. While she uses the books to experience an “unsavory” part of the world, in her explanation she simultaneously makes her distinction from it clear by emphasizing her distance as well; i.e. without really getting her hands dirty. Kelly notes that accurate portrayals are important to mystery readers because “without the confident expectation

that their fiction will be accurate, readers of mystery fiction could not reasonably or coherently hold the belief that they can learn about the world through mystery fiction” (180), as Madelyn so clearly does, albeit in a “tidy” way.” For Madelyn to get the vicarious experience of both solving a crime and understanding how “criminals and hoodlums and thieves” live, she must rely upon the mysteries she reads to be accurate in depicting these situations. As we saw earlier, she makes this connection explicit by likening the type of mysteries she prefers to nonfiction: “I prefer dark mysteries usually and there’s a lot of intense and tense human drama, and so it feels like it engages my brain as much as nonfiction.”

According to Catherine Ross, avid readers place “authority in the printed word” (164). We see this reflected in Madelyn’s belief that the mystery fiction she reads provides accurate depictions of the situations described and also in her reliance on books for more directly informative purposes. A large focus of Madelyn’s informational reading has centered around trying to figure herself out. The most overtly therapeutic use Madelyn has made of reading is evident in her formerly heavy reading of psychology and self-help books. When she first identified this category of reading as “psychology,” I was not sure what she meant by the term, so I asked if she could explain her interest in it:

Oh, because I was really screwed up. And I was really trying to figure out why, where I was stuck, you know. I mean I used to devour self-help books and psychology books. I came from a really, the family was pretty dysfunctional. And I’ve spent a fair amount of time on the ole analyst’s couch. And so, part of what I would do is just, okay, how can I make



sense of where I came from? I don't read too much psychology anymore. I mean I noticed about six or seven years ago that that was not the first place I would go to in the bookstore anymore.

As Wendy Simonds explains, the "primary focus" for a reader of a self-help book "is on 'understanding' herself: her motivations, her actions, her childhood, how she fits in" (78). As with the mystery fiction, accurate information is an essential component of their usefulness to Madelyn. However, as Madelyn has gotten older, she has felt less of a need for this type of help from books:

I think when I was reading psychology, part of that I think, was about trying to unravel the places that I was stuck and understanding. It was a way of trying to understand myself. Well, I don't think I'm trying to do that so much anymore. I mean, I'll be 56 this year and I have a pretty good sense of who I am and why I am. More so than I did in my 20s and 30s. So, I don't feel quite so driven to do that. I think I was looking a lot in my 20s and 30s. I was really trying to figure out who I was, where I'd come from, what my place in the world was, and reading was the way that I approached it. I think probably now I'm less driven in my reading. It's more just about plain old enjoyment. I don't think I'm on this quest to sort of figure it all out so much.

This shift in reading interests is also reflected in a shift in her reliance on having books around in general, as we will see in the final section of this chapter.

However, though she no longer reads these types of books, she frequently uses a psychological framework to explain the motivations behind her actions, particularly as

concerns her reading interests. For example, in the following explanation of why she likes to read mysteries, she uses Myers-Briggs both to explain her reading habits and to explain her choice of profession:

I mean they have all these psychological ideas about why people like to read mystery. I'm curious about things and I'm not somebody that likes crossword puzzles or jigsaw puzzles. I can't stand that. So I don't like those kind of puzzles, but I'm infinitely curious about how people's heads work. Well in mysteries, you get a lot of that and in the Myers-Briggs, I'm a J, so I like to have closure. And, you know, you get closure in mystery. Life isn't messy in the same way that life is. I mean in a mystery life is messy, but by the end of the book it's usually been solved. Some problem has been solved fairly successfully. I mean, in my work I'm a problem solver. You know, people come in, their back's hurt, their neck's hurt, they have headaches, whatever, and my job is to find out what's wrong and fix it. So I do a lot of problem solving, even though I don't think of myself as a particularly analytical person. I'm curious and I do like to see that things work and I like closure, so I guess that's part of why I like mysteries.

Her personality profile came up again when she explained why she preferred memoir to biography and in describing her interactions with her book group:

I like the personal feel of a memoir and you don't get that in a biography. I like to know what is the person feeling. Cause on the

Myers-Briggs thing I am off the scale with F. You know, I'm a really feeling person.

I come from a family of extroverts who all talk. So learning to shut up and let the introverts talk, learning to ask the introverts what they think because they're not going to volunteer, learning group dynamics. I mean part of what book club has taught me has been a little about group dynamics.

Not only does her continued use of psychological vocabulary provide evidence that reading goes beyond the text, but its prevalence despite her no longer reading psychological texts suggests how long reading's potential effects may last. Clearly, any study seeking to understand the role reading plays in the everyday lives of avid readers must consider both past and present reading experiences.

She also seems to have replaced some of her some of her psychological reading with dream work. Madelyn has "been actively involved in dream work for probably the last ten or twelve years." The language she uses to describe her dream work is similar to the language she used to describe her psychology reading:

I read a book by this guy that, well let's just say he connected a lot of dots for me. I've been waiting a long time to hear this man, I think, because as soon as I heard him speak—well, his book blew me away and then I took a workshop and, I mean, I joke with him and say you connected all these dots for me and so the approach that we take to dream work in our dream group is very much based on his writing and his approach. And it's an amazingly wonderful experience.

However, unlike her psychological reading, a large component of dream work involves working in a group. Each group member shares their dreams and the other participants offer their interpretations, which helps the dreamer decipher the meaning. Like she does with the psychological concepts she has read about, Madelyn also applies the ideas that she learns about interpreting dreams to understand reading:

His thinking about it is dreams are full of symbols that are not yet speech-ripe. But when we hear [other people's interpretations]—he says ultimately the only person who knows the best what the meaning of the dream is, is the dreamer. But we're all uniquely blind to our own dreams. And it isn't until we hear what's said [by others], I think that when we hear it, it becomes speech-ripe and then we remember it. And so when I think about reading books, you know people read them and it's like, "you know, in my version of this book, it's about blah, blah, blah." "I read this book and it's about the struggle of the underclass to find their voice in the world." And I think most of the things, most of the time when we read books, most people have at some level a similar take on the symbols and the theme and so on. But everybody does bring their own unique perspective.

Madelyn also participates in a book group and this mirrors what she finds most interesting about being in that group as well:

And the thing that's been the most fascinating for me—this is going to sound really silly—but the most amazing thing to me is that eight, nine, ten, twelve people can read the same book and can have such different

reactions. I don't know why that amazed me when I first noticed it. You know that about movies or music, but for some reason because I had had literature classes in college where you read a book and you sort of talked about it in terms of theme, there wasn't really, you didn't really focus a lot on whether you liked it or whether you didn't like it, and it was just really astounding that all these people could read the same book and have such different reactions to it.

However, though Madelyn does enjoy this aspect of her book group, she feels less connected to them than to her dream work:

The truth of the matter is, though, that I think I'm on a different wavelength...I like the people in the book group, but I have to say that I don't feel a strong connection to them...I like talking about books. I just think there's something that, I don't want to say something's missing, that's too strong, but there's a dissatisfaction that I have with book group that I don't really know exactly what it is.

Much of this dissatisfaction seems to be linked to the fact that she "would rather be reading nonfiction," while they are "much more in favor of fiction," often particularly of the type she described not liking above. Clearly both Madelyn's dream group and her book group influence and are influenced by what she reads and how she understands her reading, emphasizing the importance of examining how cultural traditions intertwine with, influence, and are influenced by reading habits and practices.

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*Whatever the question, the answer is more books.*

Like the other readers in this study, the link between travel and reading came up frequently during my conversations with Madelyn. However, whereas the other readers primarily focused on preparing reading materials for travel to ensure that they brought enough, Madelyn's focus was quite different. Though she does bring reading materials when she travels, she emphasized the importance of books both as a reason for her physical travels as well as a way of mentally traveling, as is seen in the following passage:

In the last ten or fifteen years, I've become real interested in reading about different places, A. And B, part of travel is exploring bookshops. We do the same thing wherever we go. We look for the used bookstores. Now, if it's a serious foreign country then we don't, cause it's a waste of time if we can't read any of them. But whenever we travel in English-speaking places, we always, always, look for bookshops. That's part of the point. And, I like to read travel books. I like to read other people's experience about going to different places.

One of the results of her shift from reading books to figure herself out has been an increase in reading books about experiences beyond herself, which includes an increase in travel reading:

I think now I read because I'm still curious. And that's why I think I'm in this whole memoir phase. I'm in a memoir and travel adventure phase. It's like I'm not going to travel as much as I thought I would have in my 20s or 30s. I mean I'll travel some. I'm probably not ever going to make

it to Afghanistan. I always wanted to go to Afghanistan. It's probably not going to happen in my lifetime. So the answer will be to read about Afghanistan...There's things I am going to do, but there's things I'm probably not going to do. So I will read about them. And I've become a little more interested in certain aspects of history. I saw *Goodnight and Good Luck* and became obsessed with Edward R. Murrow so I went out and got a biography. And the same with *Capote*. And, I'll watch a movie about something and I'll think let me go see what I can find out about that. I mean, I think I will always be curious. I mean that will never go away. And as long as I'm curious, I think, books will hold an appeal for me. Because I can't be a transgendered person, but I'm curious about what is that like. I'm not going to be someone that raises dogs, but I am kind of curious about what is that like.

We can see reading as travel in a couple of ways here—both as an increase in her knowledge of places she probably will not see in person and metaphorically as travel into the experiences of someone different from herself. Yet a third type of traveling through reading has already been discussed in her description of her reaction to *Bastard Out of Carolina*, that is traveling to a past place and time. In this sense her travels are imaginary—that is, the Afghanistan she travels to through her books is an Afghanistan created, albeit through the help of the author(s), in her mind. In *Imaginary Social Worlds*, John Caughey describes the “imaginary social worlds” people populate and participate in and asserts that “an approach to American society that ignores imaginary social relationships is incomplete” (23). Just as with the mystery fiction, the imaginary

quality of her Afghanistan makes it no less real to her and therefore no less of an important area of study for researchers wishing to understand how people use reading to understand the world.

Books also structure her physical travels as well. Throughout the course of our interviews, she took a couple of trips and visiting used bookstores frequently came up as an important part of the trip, as in the following examples: “We just went to Kansas City and St. Louis and we must have hit ten or fifteen used book stores;” “We went up to Wilmington and Philly [and]...we went to several used bookstores, which was part of the reason for going.” However, it is her trip to Hay-on-Wye that provides the most vivid example and prompted the opening quote for this section:

We finally made it to Hay-on-Wye, which is this little tiny Welsh border town—it’s like 100 yards into Wales—that is known as “the Book Town.” In this six-block, seven-block, nine-block town there are 37 used bookstores. People come from all over the world. There’s a big literary festival every year. My husband read about it in some travel book a bunch of years ago and it became our Mecca. You know, we have to make a journey to Hay-on-Wye before we die. And sure enough, last summer we got there. And we only got to not even half the bookstores, so we have to go back Jennifer. I mean that’s just all there is to it.

Whatever the question, the answer is more books.

What is interesting is that while these trips continue (the one to Wilmington and “Philly” took place only a month prior to this writing), she also frequently describes



herself as needing books less than she did when she was younger. In fact, directly before she told me about this trip, she was explaining this trend to me:

It's very interesting, I'll be 58 this year and I'm finding that I don't *need* to have as many of my books as I used to. That's been something that I've noticed in the last four or five years, it's kind of bizarre. I don't need to have all these hundreds and hundreds of books—I can let them go (her emphasis).

This impulse is reminiscent of her comments about no longer needing books to help her figure out her life and the decrease in her psychology and self-help reading does coincide with this “bizarre” change in her behavior, which she clearly is still trying to understand herself. Also like her psychology reading, remnants of this need are still present in her life—though she has purged some books, she is clearly still surrounded by them in her home. The language of travel also comes through in her descriptions of this phenomenon: “We’re getting rid of a bunch of stuff. And some of it’s going to be books because I just don’t need to have them around as much as I used to. I don’t. They served their purpose, now go on and *visit* someone else” (my emphasis). That she has developed such a collection of books is even more interesting when we consider that she is generally not someone who rereads them:

Once in a while I might reread books, but that’s not my style usually. Once it’s read, it’s read. And I don’t really revisit them...I think part of it is, once I’ve read the story, I’ve read the story. It’s not the same the second time around. Now I know people who really have their favorite authors and they reread the books, you know Jane Austen or stuff like

that, and that's never really happened to me. I don't quite understand that. And I listen to music over and over again. But I don't usually reread books.

As an avid reader and avid rereader, I find this concept of amassing a large number of books that she does not intend to read again difficult to understand, but she seemed to have a personal connection to the books as physical objects that went beyond their content:

Well one of the things that's also happened as I've gotten older, is that I don't need to keep books. I mean, this is a recent phenomenon in the last eight or ten years. I don't need to keep them all the time. I don't need to have them on my shelves. I can turn around, take them over to the used bookstore where I can get credit for them, or I can turn them into ---- for their book sale. I don't need to have them like I used to. I mean I'll buy them, and then I'll give them away. I'll buy them and then, I don't need to keep them like I used to need.

Although Madelyn's need for physical books in her home has changed, as this explanation makes clear, her process of acquiring them has not. While she no longer needs to keep them around, she still takes great delight in finding and buying them. Which brings us back to the bookstore where we started, and particularly to used bookstores:

Used bookstores are just—you walk in, you know, I walk in, and the idea is “oh, I wonder what's here!” (laughs). And I don't feel that way in a regular, in a new bookstore. You know, I don't feel that way. Because

there's in my mind, there's a lot less opportunity for treasure. Used bookstores are treasure hunts for me because you really don't know what you'll find. I mean if you go to Borders you're going to find the same thing usually that you'll find in every other Borders. But every single used bookstore is different. It's the same, but it's different. And I completely love that experience. Whether I buy anything or not, that's irrelevant. It's what will I find.

As we saw at the beginning, for Madelyn it is the pleasure of the hunt that keeps her buying books, and ultimately reading as well:

Myself as an avid reader is always curious. What's between the covers? What is this book going to give me? Where is this book going to take me? There's a big curiosity factor, I think, for me, I mean. Even as a kid, people, my relatives told me, you always asked a lot of questions. A lot more so than all of your other cousins, blah, blah, blah. And I think reading solves questions, you know. What's the story going to be like? How are they going to end this? What all are they going put in the story, if it's fiction. And if it's nonfiction, what does this person have to say about this? I think there's a place in which I'm very curious about people and it's a way of satisfying that curiosity. I think that, I would imagine, my fantasy is, that at the heart of most avid readers is a strong strain of curiosity.

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Though it may seem that Madelyn's reading interests and reasons for reading are quite disparate, at the heart of both her desire for knowledge and her therapeutic uses of reading is this "strong strain of curiosity" that she believes is fundamental to every avid reader. If we wish to understand Madelyn as a reader, we must set aside the distinctions we typically emphasize between fiction and nonfiction and focus instead on the distinctions and similarities she draws between "stories" and informational reading. Through exploring the changes in what she has read over time, we not only gain a clearer picture of the ways reading habits can shift depending on the needs of the reader, as we see in her decrease in therapeutic reading, but also, particularly through her uses of psychological terminology, how past reading continues to influence the ways readers understand themselves and their reading. Her physical and metaphorical travels related to reading also point to the importance of exploring the influences of both real and imaginary traveling on reading habits and practices. As we turn now to Jim, it is the former experience, that is, the act of physically traveling somewhere, that will become most prevalent.

## CHAPTER TWO: JIM

*My notion of hell is not having something to read.*

Of all the statements from every reader I have worked with, both for this project and previous ones, this one resonates most with me.<sup>51</sup> It was a little more than halfway through our first interview and I'd been describing a recent, surprising meltdown I'd had in an airport Borders at the thought of having to board a plane with no book (despite having magazines, sudoku, and my i-pod), to which he responded in sympathetic agreement:

Me: I always have a book

Jim: yup

Me: so it didn't occur to me that I would start feeling almost panicky

Jim: Oh, Absolutely!

Me: if I got to the airport and didn't have one.

Jim: My notion of hell is not having something to read.

Which, it seemed to me, summed up the situation exactly. Then he followed with a story of his own, to which he returned later in the interview as well:

I was in Moscow once about 10 or 12 years ago in the winter and I came down with malaria. I was pretty much confined to my hotel room and I had run out of reading material. And there's a very, very limited selection down in the bookstore of this hotel [because] most of the books are in Russian. I speak three words of Russian. The English selection

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<sup>51</sup> And I do not seem to be alone in this; it was the quote that garnered the strongest response at a conference on reading I presented at in England in 2007.

was very small, and I bought what they had and I ended up reading, it was the worst book I think I have ever read in my life! It was just so...I thought it was a parody, it was so bad. And I kept, you know, under normal circumstances I would have thrown it away after three pages and said this is trash and gone on to something else. But that wasn't an option, I had to read it. (laughs). And I just kept saying "okay at some point the joke is going to become obvious." But it wasn't a joke. It was a serious book and it was just so bad. Oh! (makes several noises that indicate he still can't believe how bad the book was).

It's the only time in my life that I have not had something good to read. The only, well, the only time since say I was older than 7 or 8 years old. Certainly the only time in my adult life. And it was to the point where you know, I'd read the milk cartons. I'd read the cereal box. And then I just had to read that damn book. That was traumatic, and it's to the point now when I travel I think ok, it depends on the purpose of the travel of course, but I'm always trying to calibrate how much time I'll have. Should I bring a stack this big or a stack this big and I always want to estimate generously because I do not ever intend to put myself in that position again!

Throughout my research with Jim, I found myself coming back again and again to this conversation for its significance on many levels. Not only do his comments provide a concrete illustration of his need for reading, but my reactions serve as a microcosm for much of my research with Jim. For me, this story represents both an absolute

understanding of the sentiment behind what he's sharing and an absolute alterity of experience. As he told the story, I found myself thinking many things: Why does he treat having malaria so nonchalantly (whereas I struggle against my grammatically incorrect impulse to capitalize the name of the disease because it feels so weighty to me)?<sup>52</sup> Why does he have malaria in Moscow? I thought that was a hot weather thing? What is it like to be in Moscow? To be in Moscow in the winter (the Texan in me asks)? To be in a country working where you only know three words of the language? Simultaneously this story made me realize both how similar our relationship to reading is and how different our experiences have been in shaping this relationship. What is it about reading that gives it the power to be so vitally important to people? How had he come to be someone who relied upon it the same way I do?

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*How I would characterize my reading today? Well, first of all, I would say that I'm only reading a fraction as much as I care to. The work schedule is hectic and, you know, I'm lucky if I can devote two hours a day.*

It is revealing that reading “only” two hours a day seems inadequate to Jim, a white man in his late 50s, and this clearly distinguishes him as an avid reader. Reading plays an important role in his life from the way he defines himself, to what he does with his personal time, to his chosen profession. Most of his days begin and end with reading—he reads most mornings with breakfast, as I discovered when he pointed out the tray in his breakfast room where he keeps “a couple of things that I'll usually read over breakfast” (see figure 2.1) and “all the way in every day” and back during his commute. As he explained in an e-mail to me:

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<sup>52</sup> When reviewing my transcripts, I noticed that I had routinely capitalized “malaria,” and realized that this impulse was linked to how I view the disease.

I read in both directions. Typically, I'll read the paper, *The Wall St Journal*, on the way in. When I have finished that, which is usually either just before or shortly after arriving at Union Station, I will switch to *The Economist*. And if I don't have a current issue, I'll go to *The New Yorker*. I'll then continue with either one of these on the way home in the evening. The usable portion of the commute is about 45 min to an hour on the MARC and then 20-25 minutes on the Metro. So it totals a bit more than an hour each way, which is roughly half of the entire commute.

After dinner in the evenings, he settles in to read a book downstairs in his chair from “eight to ten, thereabouts” and finishes with “not more than 15 minutes immediately before going to sleep” in bed.



**Figure 2.1**  
**Breakfast Room Reading**



**Figure 2.2**  
**Living Room Reading Chair**



**Figure 2.3**  
**Nightstand Reading**

According to multiple studies, these types of negotiations to fit reading into daily schedules are common for avid readers and challenge the idea that non-readers are



simply too busy to read.<sup>53</sup> This schedule, which suggests that he generally reads between three and four hours a day, seems to contradict his assertion that he is “lucky” to be able to read two hours a day, but the idea that he’s not reading as much as he would like came up repeatedly during our conversations, such as in the following quotes—“in general, I’m not reading anywhere near as much as I would like to” and “the big comment I would make is that it’s only a tiny bit of what I would like to be reading.” Part of this can be attributed to the fact that he is reading significantly less than he used to due to changes in his job. As he explains:

Typically, living abroad, I was able to work a very sane schedule. However many hours it was in the office, once I left the office, I was truly out of the office. I did not take my work home with me. So I had lots of time at home, and I was always living, or typically living, a three or four-minute drive to the office. There was no long commute. I’d spend whatever it was, eight hours in the office, but then when I was off, I was off. And on the weekends, usually I’d have an entire weekend to myself, so I could devote a major amount of time to reading. Since coming back to the US in the early 90s, in 93, 94, I, now my wife would dispute this, but I don’t have a fraction of the time for reading that if I had my druthers I would devote to it.<sup>54</sup>

Schedules make a lot more sense out of this country. Schedules in the United States are just the wackiest in the world—everybody running

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<sup>53</sup> See Zill and Winglee (1990). Catherine Ross’s research also suggests that avid readers “*make time for reading*” (her emphasis, 143) and Nadine Rosenthal defines a “voracious reader” as someone who reads “anytime, anywhere” (77).

<sup>54</sup> Interestingly, it was Jim’s wife who recommended him to me as someone who read all the time after I’d explained my project to her at a holiday party.

around like crazy people all the time. It just never ends, right though the weekends. It never, ever stops. The pace of life in this country is unrelenting. So that's one thing that has affected reading.

As the discussion of his daily reading schedule shows, Jim has made time for some types of reading within this more hectic lifestyle, particularly by using his commuting time. Like the readers in Catherine Ross's larger study, he "can fit reading into the busy flow of [his] life by seizing moments to read," but also like them he "agree[s] that the ideal time for reading is uninterrupted time" (*Reading Matters* 144), which his current schedule only permits a couple of hours of each night.

This alone does not seem to explain fully his counting, however. Equally important is the distinction between the newspaper and magazine reading he does on his commute as opposed to the primarily book reading he does at home or did when he had extended periods of time living abroad, and the comments about his lack of reading refer primarily to book reading. He exhibited this tendency to separate book and other reading again when he used the reading journal I had asked him to keep of what he read between our first and second interviews to further characterize his reading.<sup>55</sup>

Other than that, how would I characterize my reading? It's probably, well I did make a list [that you asked for] when you were here the last time of what I have read since then and it certainly indicates exactly what we've been talking about. One is *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, biography. Two is *The Afghan Campaign* by Steven Pressfield, that's historical fiction. Three is one by a local author, Madison Bell Smart, I think he teaches at Goucher. He recently did a trilogy about the Haitian revolution. This is a

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<sup>55</sup> See Appendix B for each reading list, including the one discussed below.

biography about Toussaint Louverture. And then, the fourth one I finished just a couple of days ago, is *Sharpe's Fury*, that's also, it's by Bernard Cornwell, real popular fiction, but all historical. Set during the days of the peninsular campaign in Spain during the English and the French going at it. So, that's, those four, and then I think I've got a couple others that are in various stages. One is (gets up to look) Kagan's *Dangerous Nation* a different take on US history, and then I'm reading something, it's a translation of a Japanese, ancient, ancient writing. But these four are finished (referring to the list). So, the material that I'm reading is biography and historical fiction.

As is clear, only books have been included in his list, though this was not necessarily my intention when I asked each reader to keep track of what they read. Is it possible I unintentionally indicated that only books should be included? Perhaps. When trying to clarify what I meant by “reading journal,” I did use book reading as an example—“things like the books you read, where you read them, and when you read them”—so it is likely that his list is a response to my instructions, at least in part, and could reflect my predilection towards book reading.<sup>56</sup> However, what is significant here is that he uses this list of the books he read to “characterize his reading.” While one could argue that I influenced what he included on this list through my instructions (though it is equally possible I phrased it this way in reaction to what he had shared about his reading during the interview), it was his decision to use the list as evidence of how he characterizes himself as a reader, not mine. When we further consider that two of his comments on

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<sup>56</sup> It should be noted that the other two readers who kept lists also listed only books. However, as Christine already keeps a list of the books she reads, which she gave me in response to my request, her including only books does not seem a result of my instructions.

reading less than he would like bookend this discussion of the books on his list, it becomes even clearer that these refer primarily to book reading.

Interestingly, Jim came to our third interview aware of the fact that periodical reading had been left out of his reading schema up until this point:

And, you know, one thing that dawned on me—we were in Egypt last month, and it dawned on me as I was reading something...I took a couple of books with me, but I started out the trip working and wasn't able to read too much, but it dawned on me, I wasn't able to read too much in the books, it dawned on me that one category of reading that we've completely neglected is periodicals.

A careful reading of this passage reveals several key things about the distinction he makes between reading books and periodicals. First, that he mentioned four times in this short passage that it “dawned on” him that periodicals were left out emphasizes that he had not been considering his reading of them as “reading” until he thought about why his book reading was so light in Egypt. The second significant thing is that he implicates me in this omission as well—“one category that *we've* completely neglected is periodicals” (my emphasis). However, an analysis of the questions I asked during our first interview reveals that I asked about book reading in particular for only one question: when asking him to expand on each of the reading chapters he identified in his life, I asked him to identify any significant books during each phase. While it might be arguable that this could reflect a subtle bias towards book reading since I did not specifically ask about other types of reading during each phase (particularly in light of the instructions I gave above), all of the other questions were open ended and did not

specify reading of any particular type at all (see Appendix A). On the other hand, many of my questions from the second interview were about books, but as my methodology explains, these were written in response to the information he had shared during the first interview—that is, the questions made frequent mention of the types of books he read because he focused on this as a distinguishing trait of his reading in our first interview. The focus on book reading during the second interview occurred in large part because this is how he primarily defined his reading in his conversations with me until after his revelation in Egypt.

In light of how much he seems to privilege his book reading, the similarity in content between his periodical and book reading is striking:

The things I read regularly are, you know, the first thing in the morning the paper, *The Wall Street Journal*. We have subscriptions to, ah let's see, *The Economist*, *The New Yorker*, a couple of magazines of Maine--*Down East*, *Portland*, ah, the *Biblical Archeology Review*, *National Geographic*, that probably sums it up. And what I do with these is if I have travel coming up, I will very often save them. The current events stuff, *The Economist*, I try to read when it arrives because, well, largely an interest in world affairs, but very often there are things in there that are specifically related to what I'm doing be it Darfur or Iraq or Uganda or wherever. I like to read the stuff, the news, as quickly as I can. It does get stale. But things like *The New Yorker*, the *Archeology Review*, the *Down East*, I'll very often save those and travel with them, maybe bring along one or two books, but a stack of magazines because I can read them

and give them to people I'm going to see or just leave them behind. But if I'm not giving them to people I'm working with, and they always appreciate getting current magazines, I'll just toss them and lighten the load. It's nice, I mean a stack of magazines like that can be ten pounds, and ten pounds on your shoulder is a lot of weight and it's nice to be able to shed that as I go along, but have interesting stuff to read. And what made me think of it this last trip in Cairo was I took two books with me and one I was reading before I left and I didn't even have time to finish it over the course of this, I was there for almost three weeks I think and one of them was untouched.

The similarities in content between the books he mentioned reading before and the magazines he outlines here is immediately evident. Consider first his list of periodicals. Of these, two (*The Wall Street Journal* and *The Economist*) cover current events, two cover international history and/or anthropological interests (*Biblical Archeology Review* and *National Geographic*), two are about Maine (*Down East* and *Portland*) and *The New Yorker* covers a variety of topics, including world politics and social issues. Now consider the list he provided of books he read between our first and second interview: One, Kagan's *Dangerous Nation*, is US history; two (*Eleanor of Aquitaine* and the biography of Toussaint Louverture) are biographies of non-US historical figures; two are historical fiction (Steven Pressfield's *The Afghan Campaign* and Bernard Cornwell's *Sharpe's Fury*) set in ancient Afghanistan and 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe respectively, and the final is "a translation of a Japanese, ancient, ancient writing." Additionally, four of the six were published less than a year before our meeting, making them fairly current with

the magazines in terms of time as well. The largest similarity is in the interest in history—of the twelve items mentioned, two magazines and four of the books are clearly historical and the remaining two books have a relationship to history as well, though they are fiction. Even the two neglected books he took with him on this trip were both historical—Kagan’s *Dangerous Nation* and *Blue Latitudes*, a biography of Captain Cook. There is a large national and international component as well, reflected both in the works that cover current events and in many of the historical texts. Indeed, really the only things mentioned that do not quite seem to belong are the magazines about Maine, which were not taken with him on this trip, as this further explanation of his revelation shows:

In the course of almost three weeks out there, the first five or six days I was at this conference and was too busy to get more than fifteen or twenty minutes a day, I just wasn’t able to, and then it dawned on me, I thought “well, why is it taking so long to move through these books?” And then I realized “oh well, I also have three *Economists*, and four *New Yorkers*, and, and two or three other things that I’m reading and there’s no evidence that I’ve read them afterwards. They’re gone and I forget that I’ve read them, but that’s what prompted the question about the periodicals

This passage makes it clearer why periodical reading was omitted from his descriptions of his reading during our first and second interviews, despite (or perhaps in part because of) the similarities in content. Though he reads them every day during his commute and though they play an important role when he travels, they are invisible when he thinks

about reading because “there’s no evidence that I’ve read them afterwards. They’re gone and I forget that I’ve read them.” The similarities in content could play into this erasure as well, since he also has books to provide evidence for the types of reading he does and therefore does not need the periodicals as much to fulfill this role. While it is clear that reading does not only mean book reading for Jim, his hierarchy of reading interests places book reading at the top and it is this type of reading that seems most important to him. The idea of an idyllic expanse of time for book reading is one that recurs frequently and seems most clearly represented by his time in the Peace Corps as I will explore later.

It is worth noting here that according to Steven Tepper’s article on the gender gap in fiction reading, Jim’s reading interests are typical of particularly proficient male readers as evidenced in the three large governmental surveys he analyzes:

Women employ their literacy skills to read books of fiction, while men are more likely to read history/current affairs books as well as daily newspapers. In addition, as reading proficiency increases, the reading gap for history/current affairs books and newspapers gets larger (supporting the thesis that men and women at higher levels of reading proficiency choose to read different materials). This finding suggests that reading *fiction* in particular, rather than reading more generally, is a 'feminine' activity in America. (269-70)

It could be argued based upon the list above that even Jim’s fiction interests fit in with this gender division, as what he read was all historical fiction (though he does read some mysteries on occasion as well). However, as we will see in the next section, it is not



gender that hinders Jim from reading more fiction, but rather the combined elements of time and space.

In addition to making creative use of his time to carve out reading spaces, Jim also makes sure he finds ways to read even when his access to books is limited. His reading habits when he spent time “working on boats down in the Gulf of Mexico” show this resourcefulness:

I spent the better part of a year working on boats in the gulf. And when I was doing that, I was reading much more, I guess I probably call it popular fiction, James Mitchner type stuff. It was very available...we'd pull into these ports, and whenever I could get off, I'd go into town and find the nearest used bookstore and buy a bag of books and haul it back to the boat. And then that would get me through the next few weeks until we came back into port.

This was on the Gulf coast of the US, in the mid-70s, and my routine whenever I got into a port was track down a bookstore, a used bookstore, and buy a bag of books. Typically get a shopping bag full of books and take it back to the boat and that would keep me busy until we were in port two or three weeks from then. But there wasn't a whole lot of selection, so a lot of it was just necessity.

The language he uses in these passages conveys the same feeling of need as described by the other readers I interviewed and those interviewed in Catherine Ross's study:<sup>57</sup> “that would get me through the next few weeks,” “there wasn't a whole lot of selection, so a lot of it was just necessity.” Additionally, the focus on books is again present. As we

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<sup>57</sup> See *Reading Matters*, chapter 4.

saw in the opening passage of this chapter, reading is an absolutely necessary part of Jim's life and one that he does not feel that he can do well without.

Jim's creativity in finding sources to read has roots in his childhood. He describes his parents as "voracious readers" and remembers books "all over the house" in most of the places he lived as a child, despite moving frequently because of being in a military family. As he explains, "growing up in a military family in small houses sharing rooms, whenever my brother was back from school, I'd see what he was reading because the boxes of books came back into the room. I'd say 'oh, well that looks interesting.' And I'd pick up on stuff like that." Even in cases where his choices were more restricted, as when his family lived in Japan, he found ways to collect reading materials and made reading an important part of his life:

My father was in the Air Force and was transferred to Japan in 1962. We went over. He had been in Korea and then that was a single status post, so we all joined up in Japan in the fall of 62 and were there for the next 2 ½ years or so. So I was, uh, I was 8. Yeah, I was 8 years old when we got there, and 10, 10 ½ when we left. A lot of my reading in those days was comic books. I had a big ole Japanese chest in my room that had huge drawers and the bottom drawer must have been oh maybe 20 inches high and probably close to 3 feet wide and then 2 feet or so deep. And that was my comic book collection and it was packed.<sup>58</sup> When people traveled in those days, when families were transferred, as they were

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<sup>58</sup> Despite still lingering prejudice against comic books, Stephen Krashen advocates their use to encourage children to become avid readers based on the evidence that "comic book readers do at least as much reading as non-comic readers, and the most recent research shows that they read more overall, read more books, and have more positive attitudes towards reading" (110).

packing out they could never take everything back to the States with them or on to their next assignment. Comic book collections were usually sacrificed (laughs) and as I got there, I started collecting other people's collections and then of course when I left, the same thing happened to mine. I got rid of it. But I accumulated a huge collection of these things and a lot of them were the old, there was a comic book version of the 100 greatest books, or something like that. You know, things like *Robinson Crusoe*. I can't remember the name of it—it wasn't the great comic books or the great books, but it was literature in comic book form. Condensed, of course, but I read a lot of that stuff. And then as far as books went, well mail was not as efficient or as cheap as it is nowadays, so it was difficult getting things shipped to us. So there was the library at school, which was pretty small, and there weren't, I don't even recall there being a bookstore on the base. I mean, I'm sure there was. I know I mentioned that my parents were both voracious readers and they continued reading, but when I think back and I have images of the houses we lived in, I can't picture bookshelves full of books like every house in the US that my parents had and continue to have. Always had. There are always bookshelves of books; books are all over the house. I can't, I don't have that recollection of Japan. So I'm sure I was reading, you know, my father was a big reader of history and in paperback usually. And I do recall reading some of the things that he was reading at that point, but just don't recall a whole lot of variety or a whole lot of availability period.

It is significant not only that he was resourceful in collecting reading materials during this time—through other people’s comic book collections, going to the school library, reading his father’s history books—but also that he remembers his scavenging for reading materials and their limited availability so well given how young he was when this happened. As I will explore, this behavior was mirrored later in his life when he joined the Peace Corps and helped him to create an idyllic reading space for himself in the heart of Africa.

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*A novel should justify itself with every line.*

Clearly what Jim reads is shaped by a combination of the context in which his reading occurs and by his cultural traditions. As we have seen in his discussion of periodical reading, his current reading practices are intricately linked with the circumstances available for reading and while some things remain constant like his interest in history and biography, his practices shift to accommodate his current situation. When he is not traveling he reads the periodicals during his commute and books at home, while when he is traveling, he brings both and ends up reading whatever the time allows—in the case above, primarily magazines because he was “too busy to get more than fifteen or twenty minutes a day.” The following description of his current reading practices emphasizes the importance of time, space, and cultural influences on reading.

I’d say as young as 10 or so, I was interested in history and biography. And nowadays those interests remain. And it’s a bit broader. My work involves travel to areas of conflict and the underdeveloped world in general for the past 30 years, and for the past 10 years or so, it’s been

post-conflict areas. Sometimes they're not actually post. Sometimes it's in the middle of it. And I'll read both as a method of preparing to go out, you know, for Iraq, for example, did a lot of reading on Iraq subsequent to coming back from Iraq and that program ending, I'm reading, there are hundreds of books out now about the fiasco that it has become and I've read a number of those, so I continue to read after leaving a particular county or region as well. You know, a lot of it is I suppose work related, but I'm reading it more for, out of personal interests than any specific work related issue at this point. What else am I reading? I enjoy a lot of, I was about to say a lot of popular fiction, but I'd have to correct that. I think I tend to latch on to an author or two and I find people I like and I'll read them for years like John D. MacDonald. I don't know if you're familiar with him, but he, he wrote a series from the mid-60s to about the early 80s when he died, set in Florida this private detective type. Very entertaining stuff and I read those for years, right up until he died. And then would pick up one or two others. And there are a handful of them today that fall into that category that I read whenever they put something out, I'll grab it and read it. A lot of that is reading on airplanes or on beaches or stuff like that. Well let's see what other types—the popular fiction, the history, the biography. I'm probably not reading as much, well I'm definitely not reading as much poetry as I used to or as much philosophy. That was a 20s and 30s thing when I had a lot more time. I just don't have the time anymore.

As we saw earlier, his interest in history was developed largely through the availability of his father's books on this subject; that is, through the contextual situation of his childhood, characterized in large part by frequent moves as a military child. His work and reading are intricately linked in space, time, and content—the spaces he has available for reading depend on where his work takes him, his time for reading is restricted or increased depending on his work situation, and his reading in preparation for “going out” to a country also spills over into his leisure reading, belying the idea that work and leisure reading are easily separated. He emphasizes the importance of context yet again when he explains that he reads particular popular fiction authors “on airplanes or on beaches.” And then he ends by explaining that he does not have the “time” for some of the things he used to read as a younger man, which we've seen discussed earlier as well. In this section, I will explore several different ways Jim uses reading through looking at the distinctions he makes between different types of reading and how these are linked to his cultural traditions and the spaces and times in which he reads them to reveal how each of these factors plays an intricate role in his reading practices and habits.

Jim's career in international development falls directly within the intersections between his reading interests and his interest in travel:

The work I do, international development, takes me to places that are usually not on anybody's tourist itinerary. They're off the beaten track and they're typically countries that are in real difficult circumstances. I've certainly been drawn to travel, since a very young age. You know, we traveled a lot in the military, and I think I mentioned that I had an uncle

who was also in international development. So I've got the very immediate exposure to this odd collection of countries, and typically when I get involved in one, I will try to pick up writings on history on whatever created the current situation. And sometimes that will branch out to reading, a lot of these countries, there just isn't literature being produced. There's very little writing coming out of them, but in a lot of West African countries, there is some stuff coming out of—much more out of Latin America, of course. But the reading is usually history and then current events, that sort of thing, and then that directly relates to what I do. The more I know about a country I'm working in, the easier it is to get along. The easier it is to work there. Usually. Sometimes it doesn't help at all.

His response when I asked him whether other people read as much in preparation for going to a country as he does makes it clear that he is not atypical in this type of preparation: "I'm conjuring up images of people and names and virtually everyone I can think of, particularly those I know best in the field, are all avid readers." He then offered the following to explain why:

If you're interested in this kind of work, by definition you have to be interested in the world, history, geography, current events, languages, cultures, politics, anthropology. You've got to be interested in all that stuff. If you're not, what on earth do you do it for? People aren't in it for the money. You can certainly be decently paid and live a very comfortable existence, but nobody is becoming a billionaire by doing

international development. Nobody is retiring with a fabulous pension. The financial aspect of it, you can be comfortable, but that's not why people get into it. They're into it because they have an appreciation for those eight or ten or twelve areas that I just ticked off, and I think if you're interested in those, you're a reader. You have to be. You have to read. Certainly you could pick up a bit by osmosis, but only a bit. I mean, learning a language, of course, I find it much easier to be tossed into the culture and learn it through interacting than picking up a book and studying it. Learning the current politics is probably a combination of—you can pick up a lot from people, from the locals who are involved in it, who are living through it, but you've got to read whether it's periodicals or books, you've got to read the stuff. And the history, well you can pick up a little bit by talking to the old folks out there. I've very vivid recollections of talking to the elders in little villages in Gabon who remembered the very first whites who came up the river in the dugouts. They witnessed this stuff, and this was just after the days of the huge European push into Africa, the big explorations. These were people who had recollections of people like Brazza, who they named Brazzaville after, one of the, he was actually French even though the name sounds kind of Italian. But people still had dim recollections of that stuff, but if you want to learn about it, you've got to read. And it's all such wild stuff. Everybody I know in this business appreciates the wild, exotic



aspects of it, and you can only get so much of that, only so much of that rubs off by walking through it. You've got to read.

That he repeats some variation on "you've got to read" five times in this description should be evidence enough of the strong connection he sees between reading and his field and this description provides a good example of how his career and reading traditions intersect. This approach to his job also shows that one way he uses reading is to find out important information. As Ross explains, avid readers "find it easy and natural to turn to texts as a favored source of information" (164), which we see vividly illustrated in this account. While he does value interacting with the people in each country, particularly for developing language skills, he emphasizes again and again that "you've got to read" to really understand the current politics and historical background.

This is not the only use for reading Jim has, however. If we turn now to the distinction he makes among different types of fiction, we can see the other ways he uses reading in his everyday life. In their survey of over 400 male British readers, Lisa Jardine and Annie Walker found that men frequently mentioned reading all of the works from a "trusted" author:

Men also recalled a kind of "mentoring" by authors encountered as a teenager - the same word was used by a surprising number of those we interviewed. Having found an author who "spoke" to them, a man would have trusted them as a literary guide, reading all of their works, and also works quoted from or cited by them. (14)<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> While this idea of "mentoring" may have been mentioned only by the male readers in Jardine and Walker's two studies, according to *Reading Matters*, "choosing books by author is the most reliable method" avid readers use to choose books (203). Interestingly, one of the frequently mentioned authors was Bernard Cornwell. What the male readers described to Jardine and Walker seems to be distinguished

I had noted this trend in Jim’s reading on several occasions (one example of which can be seen in the first long quotation in this section), including during his description of his teenage reading habits. When describing what he enjoyed reading in high school he explained that he would “be introduced to, you know, Faulkner, or Sinclair Lewis, or whoever it may have been in the course” and “then I’d end up reading everything they had done.” However, for Jim this trend continued into his adulthood and characterizes his fiction reading of all types, as can be seen in his response when I asked him about this tendency during our third interview.

Sure. I’ll use a couple of examples that are really different people. John D. MacDonald wrote a lot of popular fiction from the late 50s, he died in the very early 80s I think, early 80s? Early mid-80s. But one of my all-time favorite series was his Travis McGee series. McGee was a private investigator who lived on a houseboat that he won in a poker game in Ft. Lauderdale. And, you know, just great stories of the climate, the water, the weird people who go through Southern Florida and his own little comments on modern day popular culture. And then, the other extreme might be somebody like Joseph Conrad. One is literature, the other is just popular fiction. Conrad—just I’ve always loved his use of language. His own history is fascinating. He was a Pole, he grew up, he didn’t speak English until he was in his 20s and he has produced immortal literature. And he did it basically, I think, on the first cut somehow. So, his history I find absolutely fascinating and he has always written about things that

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by two things: first the idea that the author “spoke” to them in particular and second the frequent quoting from the author.

have intrigued me: his travels up the Congo River, his time in the Malaysian Archipelago, his writings about political events and anarchists in Europe. It's fascinating stuff and he can craft a sentence like very few people ever have. So both, you know, there are things about each style, each type of writing that appeals, and once I find somebody like that I just tend to read whatever they've done, and certainly Conrad passed away long before I discovered him, but I remember the day I heard that John D. McDonald died. That was a sad day. I thought "oh, well, no more Travis McGee. That's it." That was sad.

Like the men Jardine and Walker talked to, Jim has a personal connection to favorite authors and quotes from these "literary guides." The opening quote from this section is his variation on one of Conrad's most famous lines from the preface to *The Nigger of Narcissus* (1897) and is key to understanding how Jim sees the distinction between literature and popular fiction: "A work that aspires, however humbly, to the condition of art should carry its justification in every line." For Jim, Conrad represents "immortal literature": "he was a working sailor who just happened to end up writing immortal literature, but that particular quote has always just stuck in my mind for some reason and it always exemplified, or, to me it exemplifies his writing."<sup>60</sup> The type of writing that Conrad represents for Jim is "extremely exacting," stylistically polished and takes concentration and time to ingest. One of the pleasures of reading this type of literature for him is this focus on language and craft. Though this aesthetic type of reading is often attributed to academics, the research shows that "for a significant portion of avid

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<sup>60</sup> The fact that Jim knows details about Conrad's personal life further signifies how important he is because generally he agrees with writers who "will tell you that they don't matter, it's the book that matters."

readers, part of the pleasure of reading is their delight in language” (*Reading Matters* 156). The problem, as Elizabeth Long has noted, is the tendency by academics “to repress consideration of variety in reading practices due to our assumptions that everyone reads (or ought to) as we do professionally, an approach that privileges the cognitive, ideational, and analytic mode” (“Textual Interpretation,” 194), but this does not mean that avid readers never read for these reasons.

Unlike traditional literary academics, Jim legitimates more than one reading experience by making it very clear that “there are things about each style, each type of writing that appeals” to him. In contrast to literature, he describes popular fiction as “really easy reading. Thoroughly engaging and can be very informative, but really easy reading.” He further clarified this distinction after a funny moment when he accidentally said Faulkner in the place of Mitchner when describing types of popular fiction he had read:

Me: So you consider Faulkner in the popular fiction category?

Jim: No. It’s a completely different level of writing. And it requires a different level of engagement. Faulkner is not beach reading. I’ve, over the course of my life, spent a lot of time on beaches and what I like to read on beaches is beach reading, you know, Mitchner, something like that. Faulkner is more the thing that I would read on my veranda there in Gabon after the workday was ended when I had hours ahead of me. And fewer distractions.

Again the importance of place and time resurfaces—the reason he does not read much literature currently is that he does not have the extended periods of time he feels are

necessary to devote to it. Because he has to schedule his reading in smaller chunks and in more disruptive environments, he chooses to read the popular fiction instead. This is a learned behavior for him, as the following passage about how he discovered one of his favorite popular fiction authors shows:

For my twenty-first birthday my parents gave me a one-way ticket to Honduras. It was one-way because my uncle was there with USAID and he'd said, "oh, I'll send him back." So I went down there and you know, I brought a bunch of books with me and one evening I was sitting around reading, it was *Journal of the Plague Years*, by um, oh who the hell was it? Ah, I can't remember the author, but this is heavy duty stuff. And, my uncle walked through the room and he said "My God" (laughs) something to the effect of "this is supposed to be a vacation! What are you reading something like that for?" And he had just finished a *Flashman* and tossed it to me. And, I mean, *The Journal of the Plague Years* was a slow-going thing, and I was in the mood for something a little faster, and I started reading *The Flashman* and it is just absolutely captivating stuff.

In this passage, traditional hierarchies for fiction are inverted. The inappropriateness of the "slow going" literature is emphasized by his uncle ("My God...What are you reading that for?") and is replaced with something that is "absolutely captivating." But contrary to academic bias, this does not mean that these books are not well written or researched. Indeed, one of the things Jim enjoyed most about the series is the amount of research the

author has done, and it clearly fits into his assertion that popular fiction can be “thoroughly engaging and...very informative.” Consider the following descriptions:

So the stuff’s a riot and it’s carefully footnoted and all these historical references, and the guy, Fraser just has a real gift for both spoof, but also history.

The research he does on these is absolutely, it’s just incredible. He’s got a real firm grip on history, on personalities, on military tactics, strategy and tactics, and on and on and on.

Clearly these books fit in well with his interests in history and he finds them enjoyable both for this aspect and because they are entertaining. He also finds that this type of fiction is good to bring when he travels for work because he generally does not intend to reread it (though this is not true of *The Flashman* series), so he can leave it behind:

Very often I’ll bring along things like a Carl Hiaasen or an Elmore Leonard, or there are a couple other along those lines, a couple other authors I really enjoy. Real easy airplane reading. And again, I like to be able, particularly if it’s a paper book, you know something like Kagan’s book which was a Christmas present, I’m not going to leave that for anybody, that’s mine, that goes right here (points to his bookshelf). But a lot of the mystery writers, the wacky, the Hiaasen types, depends on who I’m seeing, where I’m traveling, but very often I’ll just pass those on to whomever I’m seeing. So, I want to bring something I know I’ll finish. And you know something like a Hiaasen, that’s a three hour read. That’s a portion of a flight. And then I get where I’m going and give it to

somebody. I'm happy because I read it—it was an enjoyable story.

They're happy because they just get a new book and it lightens my load.

And then I can pick up something else.

Note again that though he distinguishes this as “easy airplane reading” he also emphasizes again his pleasure in reading these types of books: “I'm happy because I read it—it was an enjoyable story.” The purpose they serve for him is different than the “literature” but equally as valid and important. Time and place are significant too—he chooses books that he can enjoy on an airplane and finish so that he can leave them behind. We see here too the similar emphasis on planning surrounding travel that the other readers make for their trips. We now turn to his time in the Peace Corps in Africa, which provides a vivid example of many of the themes we have discussed thus far.

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*Because I had so much time that I could devote to reading, I was able to read a much wider variety and went back to some of the types that I had enjoyed in high school and college, primarily literature as opposed to popular fiction.*

The three years that Jim spent in the late-1970s/early-1980s in the Peace Corps came up frequently in our conversations as an idealized period of time in his reading life. Though his reading resources were limited, his time for reading was copious, and this gave him the freedom to engage with reading in a way that is unique in his adult life. I end his chapter with this chapter in his reading life because it encapsulates many of the things most important to understanding Jim as a reader—the distinction he makes between literature and popular fiction and his engagement with each, how time and place influence his reading, his industriousness in finding reading materials, and his love for books as physical objects.

Listening to Jim's description of his daily schedule in Gabon emphasizes why he feels that his opportunities for reading are now lacking:

There was a phase the first time I went to Africa when I was in the Peace Corps. I was building schools out in remote areas way, way out in the bush in central Africa. And, the typical work routine was up at sunrise, get out to the worksite, which is usually walking distance, get the crew going, put in a good solid four to five hours, and by noon shut it down because of the weather. Because the sun, it was just getting too hot. And after going to the river and getting cleaned up, I would then spend the rest of the day reading and writing. I'd have four to six hours of concentrated reading on a daily basis and I was reading lots of literature then. I amassed what I think was probably the largest library in Gabon in the late-70s/early 80s. And because I had so much time that I could devote to reading, I was able to read a much wider variety and went back to some of the types that I had enjoyed in high school and college, primarily literature as opposed to popular fiction.

Not only did he have more time for reading during this period in this life, but he was not trying to squeeze it in between other events. This daily period of "concentrated reading" enabled him to engage with different types of fiction than he usually does now or did during most other periods of time in his life. We have seen, for example, that he was primarily reading popular fiction during his time in the Gulf of Mexico. While his reading choices were limited by what was available in the used bookstores he found on the Gulf, most used bookstores have at least some literature as well as popular fiction, so



it was not solely accessibility that was influencing his choice of popular fiction over literature in this instance. Rather it was also based upon the time he had for reading:

Working on boats, it was, you know, read ten or fifteen minutes here, and then sleep or be back on duty or whatever, but in the Peace Corp, my schedule when I was out there building schools, my normal day was up at 5:30 or so, have breakfast, whatever that might be, be out on the worksite, which is just a short walk from my hut, and get the work going, do physical labor until about noon, and then when the heat of the day arrived, shut the site down, head to the river, clean up, get back to the house for lunch, and then spend the rest of the day, the rest of the daylight hours, and, and it was usually light until about 7 or so, so I'd have 5 or 6 hours available to read and write and that's pretty much what I did every day. And I think because I did have the more concentrated time, it was easier to deal with a different level of reading, more difficult reading.

An analysis of the reading materials he brought to Gabon and collected while there makes it clear that he was not the only volunteer to consider this an ideal location for reading literature. Jim took his choice of reading materials seriously: "I brought over the dozen books that I was sure I could read and reread for the rest of my life if there was nothing else available." Though his space was limited when he returned, he also returned with these "original dozen." While he does not remember what they all were, the ones he does are clearly members of the literary canon.

I can remember a couple of them. Ah, I think I've still got them. One was a collected works of Shakespeare. Then there were a couple of

collections of E.E. Cummings poetry. And what else, let's see. (pause, thinking). I think I also had a collection of possibly three works in one volume of Conrad. Yeah, yeah, yeah, there was the Shakespeare, Conrad, E.E. Cummings, (pause) and I can't remember what else right now, but those three stand out.

Conrad's inclusion here is no surprise, but that his list is composed of Shakespeare, Cummings, and Conrad shows how strongly this time in his life is linked with reading works of literature. And this seemed to characterize the reading interests of many of the other volunteers as well. As mentioned above, while in Gabon, Jim amassed a fairly substantial library collected from the books of other volunteers:

Most people had friends and family shipping them the odd book. On travels they would tend to pick up the odd book and, and everybody over the years would amass these small libraries that were then passed down to other volunteers. By the time I got to Gabon in early 79, Peace Corps had been in the country for I think fifteen years, since 64 or 65. So there had been six or seven rotations. Typically volunteers are out there for two years. I was there for three, I think. But there were six or seven rotations and the libraries were passed on from volunteer to volunteer and when I was there, I not only brought over my own collection, I brought over the dozen tapes that I was sure I could listen to for the rest of my life, if that was all I had, and I brought over the dozen books that I was sure I could read and reread for the rest of my life if there was nothing else available. Well everybody else had done the same thing, and I was able to travel

around a lot while I was in Gabon, and whenever a volunteer was leaving, more often than not, I'd end up there and claim the library. And I would bring these back to my village. So, by the time I left, now extensive is certainly a relative term, but it was large in the local context. I don't know, I might have had, I would think I could have had 600 books by the time I left. And then I passed those on to volunteers.

Though it seems common practice in the Peace Corps at this time to “amass...small libraries that were then passed down to other volunteers,” Jim shows the same resourcefulness he did as a child and in the Gulf of Mexico of collecting reading materials in limited situations, which resulted in his assembly of “what I think came to be about the biggest library in the Peace Corps.” Given this tendency, he had a fairly good idea about what other volunteers had brought with them, which seemed to mirror his choices in many ways:

Fortunately, a lot of the people I worked with had, you know, we're all out in the middle of nowhere, we came from different backgrounds, but nevertheless there were similarities. Most of us loved to read. Most of us had done a few similar things, you know, we'd all been to college, we had all lived abroad, we all spoke another language, we were all interested in international affairs. We were all interested in construction. We had, there was a large overlap of interests. So, they were also, people were reading a lot of things that I would have chosen otherwise even had I had a much larger selection. As it was, they did a lot of the work for me. They did the triage and I just grabbed the books and then enjoyed them.

Additionally, among the individual authors he mentioned are “Faulkner, Sinclair Lewis, Hemingway.” Given that these books had been passed down from former volunteers, I wondered if any of his collection reflected the American political situation when the Peace Corps first came to Gabon in 1965 until he began collecting books in 1979, but he explained that this did not seem to be the case in his experience:

A lot of the books due to the climate just didn't survive. They molded, animals ate them, insects got into them, and they were constantly being thrown away. But I don't recall thinking, “oh this is from when so and so was a volunteer. I recognize this period.” They were more things like Camus. You know, Camus's, he's eternal. He was popular when he came out, popular when people twenty years older than myself were in college, popular when I was in college, and still popular I would imagine. I mean my younger stepson is reading Camus now. A lot of stuff like that that is really not attached to any particular time frame. Although, you know, the 60s—all the Baba Ram Das, you know, the weirdo stuff that came out of the 60s, I didn't see so much out there even though there were a lot of volunteers who were from that era. It was more literature, I guess.

In Jim's experience, volunteers seemed to bring over more “eternal” literature than whatever was popular at the time, just as he had. While more research would have to be done to establish that this trend goes beyond his experience and if so, why other readers tended to do this as well, it does point to the fact that we must consider the combination

of space and time if we want to understand how and why people choose to engage with literary, or any other, texts.

The other thing that deserves more attention is the fact that Jim did create such a large library during his time in the Peace Corps. As mentioned, this tendency to find reading materials wherever possible is one that Jim has cultivated throughout his life in reaction to having been placed in situations where his reading resources were limited. As we have just seen, being a reader and collecting reading materials was not an abnormal thing among other volunteers in the Peace Corps. Yet, Jim did not just collect a few materials or take on the “small library” from a volunteer leaving his immediate area or “have friends and family ship [him] the odd book” or pick one here or there on travels. Rather, he created “the biggest library in the Peace Corps” amassing as many as “600 books by the time [he] left.” This collecting impulse also was something he had earlier in life as we saw in his comic book collection in Korea:

When people traveled in those days, when families were transferred, as they were packing out they could never take everything back to the States with them or on their next assignment. Comic book collections were usually sacrificed and as I got there, I started collecting other people’s collections and then of course the same thing happened when I left, I got rid of it.

In much the same way he got to a place with limited reading material, collected as much as he could while he was there, and then left it behind when he went. Only this time he did not leave everything behind, despite the similarly limited shipping options.

Me: You said that a lot of people left [their books] and that's how you made your library. So why did you bring yours back?

Jim: Limited shipping. I just couldn't take everything back. We were authorized, I don't recall exactly what our weight allowance was, but it was pretty minimal. And in addition to the small library I had taken over, I also had a bunch of odds and ends that I had accumulated like elephant bones that were big bulky and heavy and that just ate up my allotment.

Me: But you brought yours back, right?

Jim: I did. If I'm not mistaken, I brought back the same books I took over.

Me: And so why did you choose, when you did have limited space, to use some of your space to bring your books back when a lot of people seemed to have left theirs?

Jim: Well those were my books!

This exchange is revealing in many ways. First, note that he misunderstands my question the first time I ask it. I was asking why he brought his books back with him when it seemed that most people left their books behind, that is, why he did not leave his books like most people seemed to. He thought I was asking why he had *only* brought back his books instead of the entire library. Leaving his books behind was never a question for him, as he emphatically explained once I clarified my question: "Well those were my books!" His impulse to surround himself with books illustrates his strong connection to them as physical objects, as explained after the conversation above: "To

this day, I don't know if guilt is exactly the word, but it's a difficult thing to part with one."

This impulse is also reflected in the organization of books in his home. He does most of his daily reading in the chair pictured in figures 2.2 and 2.4 and has arranged it so that his current reading materials, both books and magazines, surround the chair in piles on either side. Since his primary reading space is also a public space, he is aware of the need to keep it manageable, which he defines as "the point where there's just no more room above the books below the next shelf," though he acknowledges that this arrangement "drives my librarian wife up the wall" and a careful look at figure 2.4 makes it clear that there are currently books lying horizontally on top of other books in order for him to keep as many as possible upstairs near him.<sup>61</sup> The books in this room are primarily those he has read recently and histories, particularly of Africa, but it is the more popular fiction that goes when he has to choose what to move: "The Tom Wolfe, things of that sort, might move that out and try to keep more of the history and in particular, the Africana, nearby." This privileging of other types of books over popular fiction is also reflected in his more recent tendency to leave works of popular fiction behind when he travels: "I [part with books] much more readily now. If I'm traveling, if I'm going to Sudan or wherever, I'll take along books that I think I could leave. And they might very well be books I really enjoy."

His interest in Africana is also reflected in the artifacts he exhibits in his entrance hall and in his living room and you can see in figures 2.4 and 2.5 that his shelves contain

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<sup>61</sup> This arrangement is also typical of Rosenthal's voracious reader: "When you visit the homes of voracious readers, you'll most likely find bookshelves crammed with their favorite books, sometimes neatly arranged alphabetically, sometimes just shoved and stacked on the shelves randomly, wherever they could find space to put them" (77).

a mixture of books and these artifacts. When I asked him why he chose to keep the books on Africa nearby, he responded in the following manner: “I think it is probably just because of my familiarity with Africa. I feel at home there (in a few countries, anyway). And having the books nearby just feels comfortable and reminds me of places I enjoy.”



Figure 2.4: Living Room Bookshelves



Figure 2.5: Living Room Bookshelves 2

As Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton have explained in *The Meaning of Things*:

When one values a cherished photo, or souvenir, or plant, these transactions are intentional activities that reflect what one considers significant and which involve real outcomes. The sense of being in touch with a loved one or a place where one has visited, or of being in touch with nature itself, expresses what we consider significant and reveals the



purpose that motivates us to invest attention in certain objects and meanings rather than in others.” (188)

Thus, looking at the way Jim has arranged his most commonly used reading space to surround himself both with writings on Africa and with Africana helps us to see the importance of this in his life and also emphasizes their significance in his reading life. He has continued his connection with Africa through his current work and returns there also through his reading interests. When I asked him if he continued to read about the countries he had worked in after he left, he responded in the following manner:

Usually I'll continue. Most of these places are fascinating, like Zaire, an absolute basket case of a country, but wow what a basket case! I mean, it's enormous, it's mineral rich, it's got an incredible history that has drawn whackos from all over the world to it, as well as producing its own real peculiar collection of whackos. I mean just fascinating stuff. It's just a never ending source of interest. I've read several things. Well, let's see, I finished a biography of Mobutu. I left Zaire, what, 16 years ago, and I read this biography of Mobutu just a couple of years ago. And read another one, something else, about three or four years ago dealing with Belgian colonialism and particularly in Zaire. Belgian colonialism was a particularly nasty form of colonialism, if not the nastiest ever. So I continue to read about those places. They always remain of interest.

That he maintains his ties to Africa, the place of his halcyon days of reading, largely through his collection of Africana in his living (and reading) spaces and through his reading itself, is evidence of how intricately linked his reading is to his other cultural

traditions. Like the other readers in this dissertation, Jim's experiences make it very clear studies of reading as a cultural practice must be contextualized within the day-to-day lives of readers.

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Clearly Jim's reading is influenced by a combination of his cultural traditions and the dual pressures of space and time. We could not understand him as a reader without exploring both his current and past cultural traditions, as shown through his involvement in international development and the Peace Corps, and we would be equally limited if we left out an exploration of how his reading practices are influenced by the times and spaces he has and has had for reading, both in the United States and abroad. Further, the distinctions and hierarchies he draws between popular fiction and literature on the one hand, and periodical and book reading on the other, cannot be understood without contextualizing his reading locations. His strong connection to books as physical objects and his industriousness in finding reading materials regardless of the situation are also key components of his reading habits that would be flattened by survey research or single interviews. As we turn now to Adam, we will see another example of how strongly a cultural tradition can influence reading practices and habits, as well as the role that social location can play in this process.

### CHAPTER THREE: ADAM

*When I read a genre novel, I'm not escaping to another world. I'm reading it and I'm seeing how it ties into our world... And I think genre fiction does that. It opens people's minds to new ideas in ways that, for lack of a better term, mundane fiction does not.*

Of the first meetings I had with each of the people I worked with, I was most anxious about my first meeting with Adam.<sup>62</sup> Our meeting had been arranged through a mutual friend who participates in the science-fiction reading group that is held monthly at his house. She knew of my interest in finding male readers for this project and had suggested that there were several good candidates in her group if I would like to accompany her. While I was excited about the prospect of meeting a group of avid readers and had read and enjoyed the monthly selection (Neil Gaiman's *Anansi Boys*), I was concerned that my position as a straight, female, non-genre reading literary academic looking for someone to work with in this primarily gay, male, science-fiction group would make the meeting awkward. But as I was soon to discover, one way that Adam's love of reading manifests itself is through bridging gaps with other readers.

While I have done research with book groups in the past, this experience differed in many ways that go well beyond demographics. Unlike the straight, female, middle-aged group I had worked with before, this group not only referenced the book heavily throughout the discussion, but also other books and media (TV programs, movies) in the genre, including the author's first book, *American Gods*, and some fiction books more on the border between science fiction and popular fiction, such as the *Harry Potter*

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<sup>62</sup> This name was chosen by the informant and is one he uses often when writing science-fiction reviews. "It's also the name of the main character in one of my favorite books of all time"—*The Power* by Frank Robinson (1968).

books and *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*. So, while I had read the book—not always a necessary component for my past reading group experiences—I still found that I had a difficult time following the conversation at points because I didn’t have the framework for understanding their references.

Hesitant to draw too much attention to myself, I did not express this difficulty and did my best to follow along with the discussion. Had I, however, I would have found a reaction in Adam much different than that which I had experienced in past academic experiences of feeling over my head. While the group spoke fluently within the language of the genre, they, and Adam in particular, would have been more than happy to help situate me, as is revealed from this quote from a later interview:

There have been people who’ve come to the science fiction group, who the first time they come we’ll be talking about books, and I’ll say “oh, have you read such and such?” And I’ll be like “oh no, but wait, yeah, let me go upstairs” and I’ll come down with a copy of the book, “here you should read this.” And I’ll hand them the book and I have no idea whether they’re ever going to show up again. (laughs) I mean, for me, if I really liked a book, I think other people will like it too and I want to share that—the book disappearing is a risk I’m willing to take. One of the advantages of being steadily and reasonably well employed and compensated for my work is that I don’t have to worry if I lose a book because I can just go and replace it. Whereas some people might not have that luxury, you know, they might not be able to read the book if I don’t loan it to them. Huh, small price to pay.

What most exemplifies Adam as a reader is this emphasis on sharing reading. Reading, for Adam, does not stop when he finishes a book. Rather, it is through the experiences of sharing and discussing the book and its meanings in the broader world that reading holds such a meaningful place in Adam's life. He belies the myths of male readers as solitary, competitive, lazy, "affectless" and "utility-minded" and instead, through his actions, asks us to reconsider what it means to read.<sup>63</sup>

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*I would call myself an avid reader. I don't think I'm as voracious a reader as I used to be simply because the world puts far too many demands on my time now. But I'm an avid reader to the point where I don't allow myself to be caught pretty much anywhere without something to read.*

Adam is a 40-year old white man who defines himself as an avid reader because his life is characterized by always having a book at his side. The following brief description of his reading habits reveals how reading plays an integral role in many aspects of his life—from commuting, to work, to going to sleep at night:

I'm in the middle of anywhere from two to four books at any given time. And, I can keep my place in all of them. I usually only carry one of them with me at any given time, but there might be a book by my nightstand, there might be a book up by my computer so if I'm downloading something, I might read a few pages while that's happening. There might be another book near the bag that I carry back and forth on the subway because I might decide that morning to switch out what's in my bag.

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<sup>63</sup> While these stereotypes are well enough known in popular cultural consciousness, I am indebted to Sara Knox for sharing her presentation "Not on the same page": the representation of men's book clubs" from the Beyond the Book: Contemporary Cultures of Reading conference wherein she describes many of these representations at length. These stereotypes are also discussed by Reed in "Henry and I."

As is apparent from this description, Adam's days are bookended by reading. He reads the newspaper on the way into work in the morning and he unwinds at night by reading:

I do find that reading tends to quiet all the turmoil of the day. It really detaches me from the stresses that were going on at work, the stresses of all the projects I'm working on at home, and the financial planning and the paying the bills, all that kind of stuff. I get to detach myself from that when I read, so I think it helps me get ready for sleep. I don't know if I need it, but I have no desire to find out whether or not I'd be okay without it!

Common to the other avid readers included in this study, the level of planning evident in his daily reading is carried to further heights when he prepares for a vacation. Not only is his "idea of the ideal vacation is I go someplace, I lie on a hammock with a big glass of lemonade or a margarita, and a book, or two, or three, and just, I can spend my day just curled up with a book and that's just really relaxing for me," but even when this is not the goal of the trip, much careful planning goes into his preparation to leave. For example, when asked about an upcoming trip he and his partner were taking to Hawaii, he gave the following explanation:

I'm trying to find a balance between things that are light beach reads and more complex things that are books that I've really been looking forward to having the time to digest. For instance there was a book that won the Gaylactic Spectrum Award this year, which its sequel has come out.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> "The Gaylactic Spectrum Awards honor outstanding works of science fiction, fantasy and horror which include significant positive explorations of gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered characters, themes, or issues" ([www.spectrumawards.org](http://www.spectrumawards.org)). The book that won in 2007 is *Vellum* by Hal Duncan. *Ink: The Book of All Hours* is the sequel to which he refers.

Now, in order to read the sequel, I'm going to need to reread the first book and that was a really deep and complex read. So that's two books right there and then, you know, just trying to find that balance. I'll probably get about six books lined up that are coming with me and I may take some electronic materials as well, just so that I don't have to physically carry as much.

Perhaps more revealing is that this type of planning persists even when he is taking a trip to a place with readily available bookstores and on which he intends to buy more books, as is shown through his discussion of a trip to one of his favorite science fiction conferences:

Well I had one book I had just started and I brought that with me on the plane, but I said, "well what happens if I get stuck somewhere or my luggage doesn't arrive?" So, I brought a second book on the plane, even though I knew I wouldn't get to it on the plane if everything worked out fine. And then I had three more books in my suitcase, because you never know when you're going to finish something, or, you know, you could get stuck somewhere, and gosh, you know, just because I'm in a city doesn't mean I won't need books (laughing). And I also, while I was there I bought (pause) 14 books, so...

His laughter and pauses in his description show that he recognizes how his planning and book buying may be viewed by others, but the most important issue for him is not being "stuck somewhere" without a book. This echoes the reactions of the other readers in my

study and also those found in Catherine Ross's study of avid readers. Yet again, as we saw most poignantly with Jim, to be without books evokes a feeling of being trapped.

The roots of this strong connection with reading were clearly visible in his childhood despite his parents being "one of the biggest obstacles to [his] reading." Research on childhood and adult reading suggests that parental involvement or coming from a "readerly" family is important to early reader development and "an overwhelming majority of the committed adult readers in Ross's study came from families that strongly supported reading in childhood" (*Reading Matters* 72). However, Adam's parents not only "weren't particularly encouraging of reading" but tried to convince Adam to participate in other activities: "My parents actually thought I read too much. They would tell me to put down the books and go outside and play baseball and things like that."<sup>65</sup> One of Adam's earliest memories of reading shows the uphill battle his parents were struggling against:

This ties to my first memories, or my early memories of reading. There was a bookmobile in my hometown, so I didn't actually go to the library. The bookmobile would come to us, um, I think at first it was once a week and then it was twice a week, but I remember I just, the day that, you know, some people the ice cream truck comes and they're all excited, I would just, I mean the bookmobile was coming and I would go and I would take out the maximum number of books they'd allow, which I think was eight at the time... it's a very strong memory, and I just, the

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<sup>65</sup> Unfortunately, this type of attitude is still common in the socialization of young boys as readers. Tepper notes that "many American parents view fiction reading as an appropriate activity for girls and as inappropriate for boys" (272), which is supported by the research cited in *Reading Matters* as well (91). Neither Tepper nor Ross look at the role sexuality plays in this issue.



idea of the bookmobile, the first time it ever came, I mean that was Christmas morning!

The excitement conveyed in this response shows how strongly he connected with reading at a very young age, and research also suggests it may have been the access to books the bookmobile provided that helped foster his reading in the absence of parental involvement.<sup>66</sup>

Further, if we look at what type of reading he most enjoyed as a child and why we begin to understand why reading became so important to him. Much of his childhood reading was focused on series books, a much maligned trend common in childhood reading development.<sup>67</sup> Catherine Ross's study suggests that reading these types of books might be particularly important for children without parents encouraging of reading because the familiarity of the repetitive nature of these books mirrors the rereading other children do of books they have had read aloud to them.<sup>68</sup> His reasons for reading the particular series he did reveal the role reading was playing in his life at the time and foreshadow the role it continued to play as he grew older:

I really loved things like *The Hardy Boys* mysteries. I think part of what appealed to me were things where kids were using their intelligence. It wasn't about who was the strongest, who was the fastest, who was the biggest. It was about using your brain to solve problems. Still being kind of adventurous but what saved the day was thinking of something. And

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<sup>66</sup> *Reading Matters*, p. 75.

<sup>67</sup> See *Reading Matters*, p 82-87. Most research seems to focus on how series books provide a useful stepping stone in childhood reading development rather than my focus here on the uses that individual readers put specific series to. For a discussion of the "pernicious effects of series books" (205) as described by librarians and the roots of this attitude, see Ross, "If They Read Nancy Drew' ..."

<sup>68</sup> Ross, "If They Read Nancy Drew' ...", p 219.

as someone who kind of grew up picked on a lot for being one of the brains in the class and all that, seeing where that could be useful really appealed to me. So I think I would, I would have to say that that kind of story was really my favorite at that point. And it didn't really matter who it was. I mean, I use *The Hardy Boys* as an example, but I adored the *Nancy Drew* stuff, I adored *The Hardy Boys*, it didn't, nothing else mattered. It was the brains figuring something out. You know, a little bit of danger, a little bit of excitement, but all about thinking.

In their article identifying some of the reasons children enjoy mystery series, Barbara Moran and Susan Steinfirst posit that mystery books appeal to adolescent readers because they provide models of “competent, autonomous young men and women, successfully poised on the brink of adulthood” to “young men and women floundering in a sea of self-doubt about own sense of worth and lifetime goals” (117). While the language used in this characterization is perhaps a bit overblown and this article suffers from the academic bias against these types of books as “trash” despite trying to claim an important use for them, Adam does seem to support their reading that these novels can provide comfort for adolescents experiencing self doubt. In his case, these books provided a template for success based upon “using your brains to solve problems,” which he indeed has successfully done as an adult.

Adam also has a strong connection to his books as physical objects and the upper levels of his home overflow with them to prove it. As he told me when I visited his home to explore how he organized his books, having room for them was a primary consideration in a recent home renovation. Not only were the bookcases in his study

designed with this in mind, but they “had to get the contractor to specifically make enough shelves that these were just at mass-market paperback height” to accommodate all of his books, as shown in figure 3.1.



**Figure 3.1: Mass-Market Shelves, Study**



**Figure 3.2: "Chaos Ensuing," Library**

Yet, despite this recent renovation, there is already a need for even more bookshelves.

Me: What happens if a particular place runs out of space?

Adam: Chaos ensues! As you’ll see as we actually go through, trouble happens. We have added bookcases, and we actually desperately need to add some more bookcases now, which is why there are books double-stacked, which is anathema to me. I’m not a big fan of double-stacking books because part of the joy of the books for me is being able to see them, and if you block one row of books with another row of books, you

can't see what's behind there. But right now there are things that are double-stacked, there are things that are just haphazardly placed wherever we can find a surface to put them and that's kind of what happens when we run out of space until we come up with the next solution.

The following series of explanations for how he feels about his books makes it even clearer why they are overtaking his home. A "solution" frequently mentioned, yet infrequently, if ever, accomplished is getting rid of some of his books. While he noted on several occasions throughout our interviews that he intends to "purge" some of his books to make room for the new ones he is constantly buying, his actions, or lack thereof, reveal an internal conflict. For example, consider this passage from our second interview:

There are some books where the book is so tattered from being read it really needs to be replaced, but I don't want to. It's my copy of the book (laughs). So, I don't keep the books for their monetary value. I keep the books because they mean something to me. I've actually been thinking recently, there are some books which I don't feel a connection to anymore in my collection, which I'm actually thinking of purging. Which was a very difficult decision for me and when I mentioned it to my partner, he was shocked.

Yet, when I followed up on this during my visit to his house several months later, he gave the following explanation:

One of the things I had decided is I was going to make sure to do a full inventory of all my books before I did the purging, and so I have

managed to procrastinate on completing the inventory so that I haven't actually purged anything. That is likely to happen at some point, simply because there are some books that I have read, I know I'm not going to reference again, and they really are just taking up space and at this point, they can probably go. But it's hard to actually let go, even of a book like that.

However, though his love for books, and further his particular books, is undeniable, he differs in an important way from the other readers in terms of sharing them. While they are often hesitant or "loathe to lend" (to use Christine's words), he not only freely lends them out to people, but even to people he doesn't know very well. This tendency is evident in the passage cited above when Adam states explains that even when he has "no idea whether they're ever going to show up again" he lends books to newcomers to the book group and "the book disappearing is a risk [he's] willing to take." This is further exemplified in his description of some of the books he owns by one of his favorite authors:

Probably one of my favorite authors is an author by the name of Guy Gavriel Kay. And I have hard-covered copies of his first three books from when they first came out, and it's a trilogy,<sup>69</sup> and the book jackets on those books are ripped to shreds. They're barely hanging on the book at all. And I can't bare to part with those copies of the books, and in fact I'll still read those copies of the books, or if I want to loan the books to somebody, I'm handing out those copies of the books. It doesn't really

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<sup>69</sup> *The Fionavar Tapestry: The Summer Tree* (1984), *The Wandering Fire* (1986), and *The Darkest Road* (1987).

matter to me, the condition of the book, as long as all the pages, all the words are there, that's what's really important. And to me, a tattered book is a loved book.

Lending out his most important books may seem contradictory in someone who finds even books that “really are just taking up space” difficult to let go, but this impulse underlies the most important thing about Adam as a reader. If we look again at the quote from the opening section, we see the answer: “if I really liked a book, I think other people will like it too and I want to share that.” Rather than being contradictory that he shares the copies of the books that he has the strongest personal connections to, then, it is indicative of who he is as a reader. Reading plays such an important role in his life that he is compelled to share it with other people and sharing his personal copies is sharing the very books that had the life-changing effects on him. Consider the following explanation he gave for why he shares books:

The books that I tend to want to share are books that I feel I've gotten some kind of advancement in who I am [from] it. I've gained something from reading them. I've become a better person, I think differently about the world and that's an experience that I want to share. It's kind of like I've had this epiphany and I can only really talk about it if other people have the same epiphany, so I'm really happy to share that book with somebody so that they can have that experience and then we can talk about it—because if they haven't had the experience you might not be able to do that. And even if I don't get to talk about it, I think, I kind of look at the world as I want to do things in this world that make the world

a better place and I think that gets done by people being better people, so if I find something that I think makes people better people, I want to share it.

In their groundbreaking ethnographic research with 82 families about “how and why people in contemporary urbanized American relate to things in their immediate environment” (x), Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton define aesthetic experiences of art as those that “the scheme through which we interpret an object is changed or enlarged...by enlarging or changing the habitual framework of interpretation” (181). They argue that books can provide aesthetic experiences, or “experiences of perception” by “express[ing] feelings and ideas and stimulat[ing] new perceptions through their own qualities” (183). Thus, Adam’s belief that these books have the power to make “the world a better place” by encouraging him to “think differently about the world” fits this schema of aesthetic engagement. And he is not alone among avid readers in thinking of books this way. According to Catherine Ross assigning this role to books is very prevalent among avid readers: “the most commonly occurring claim (in one third of all cases) was that the book had opened up a new perspective, helped its reader see things differently, or offered an enlarged set of possibilities” (“Finding” 792)

Clearly, reading has a transformative power for Adam and sharing this is an important part of his reading experience. Interestingly, this is similar to the way Oprah discusses reading as transformative. According to Rona Kaufman, “in Oprah’s Book Club, a successful text was one that sent a reader back into his or her own life, a text that made a reader rethink his or her life and that led to some type of change on the reader’s part” (228-9). Though there are important distinctions between how Adam reads and

what we see in the aired version of Oprah’s Book Group—Adam’s book group spends more time discussing the book itself than Oprah’s audience does, and importantly, situates the book within the larger science fiction community—the correspondence between his description of what reading can do and that of Oprah and her audience supports Cecilia Farr’s contention that Oprah’s Book Club demonstrates a shift in the way that American society understands reading: “While reading still engages the solitary self in reflection and self-examination, for many readers, inspired by the absorbing worlds of novels, it is also about encountering diversity and making connections, even, put simply, starting conversations” (91). And it is science fiction that Adam believes has the most potential to allow people to start these conversations with each other.

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*Science-fiction is about ideas, and it really is about today’s world, and what we’re doing to it, what we can do to it, what we can make it, what we have made it. And, being able to look at the world through a different lens, I think I said earlier. And that’s just, that, it really fits.*

What makes science fiction transformative for Adam is that he sees it as a “genre of ideas” capable of changing peoples’ lives. Adam understands how science fiction is perceived by most people, but he insists that this only represents a small portion of the genre:

Most people who aren’t genre readers think of genres as escapist literature. And many people when they first get into reading science fiction, they get into it because they’re looking for adventure stories. They’re looking for, they really are looking for escape. But there is a whole realm of speculative fiction out there that goes beyond just the simple escape. It deals with very human issues. It deals with issues of



‘what does it mean to be a person’, ‘what does it mean to be a good person,’ ‘what does it mean to be a bad person,’ what does it mean when we interact with others,’ you know, ‘what does it mean when we lose ourselves?’...So, once you get past just looking at the simple side of science fiction and start delving into it a little more, you really do start to find that most science fiction stories, beyond the most simplistic ones, so, you know, 90% of science fiction stories, really are telling stories about us, about our interactions.

Revealingly, this type of language mirrors his explanation to me of why he was particularly attracted to Shakespeare in high school:

What I really liked about Shakespeare in high school was the human interactions, the dialogue. For me Shakespeare’s characters were so complex and so interesting. And they were faced with such grey area moral issues and decisions that I just, I loved that because it was real human drama. I mean a lot of classic books you read when you’re in high school are, you know, it’s the same old thing, and some of them are kind of interesting, some of them aren’t, and you’re reading them because they’re great literature. But just, Shakespeare, something about the characters just grabbed me and it didn’t really matter whether it was the comedies or the tragedies. I mean all of them, just they’re great characters and the way they interact and the things that they chose to do and why, I really liked.

Just as the Book-of-the-Month Club editors in Janice Radway's study used criteria that did not privilege literary fiction over other types of books, Adam similarly does not privilege literature in his criteria for judging fiction; "good" fiction, whether it be science fiction or Shakespeare, explores "human interactions" and challenges its readers to think beyond their current standpoints.<sup>70</sup> According to Radway, an emphasis on "rich and elaborate realism of character" (282) is one of the primary criteria Book-of-the-Month-Club editors used to choose their monthly selections because it enables their readers to "identify passionately with either fictional or historical characters" and thereby to feel a "sense of absorption or connection" which is "the state to be achieved by middlebrow reading" (284). That Adam uses similar criteria to the Book-of-the-Month Club editors for judging both science fiction, one of the lowest genres on the traditional hierarchy of fiction, and Shakespeare, perhaps the most uncontested author in the canon, is again reminiscent of how Oprah encourages her readers to engage with other canonized authors like Toni Morrison.<sup>71</sup> Though he is aware of this hierarchy of taste, as I will show later Adam's involvement in the science fiction community has enabled him to create an alternate interpretative system that legitimizes this type of reading and praises the novels that enable it.

One of the most important roles science fiction has played is in Adam's development as a gay man. The power that reading has had in Adam's life is perhaps best exemplified in his description of his first encounter with a "happy gay character":

Another very strong memory for me was the first time, as I was coming out, I read one of the earlier works that included a gay character—a

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<sup>70</sup> See *A Feeling for Books*, p. 66-76.

<sup>71</sup> For further discussion of this hierarchy of taste, see Long, *Book Clubs*, p. 118-121.

happy gay character. And, that was a huge moment for me emotionally. You know, here I was struggling with my sexuality, and I'm reading this book and here's someone who's gay, someone who's happy about it, who's coupled, who's living a very positive life. And, that, I mean that stuck with me so much when I ran a science fiction convention a few years ago and I sought out the person who, the author of that book, which was Diane Duane, and invited her as our author/guest of honor to the convention because she had just, I mean, it had been a, in many ways, kind of one of those life-defining moments. You know, the first time I came across the confirmation this character was gay in the book it was just like my whole world had changed. So that's definitely a strong reading memory.

Several of the lesbian and gay young adults interviewed in Beth Kivel and Douglas Kleiber study expressed similar uses for reading: "The books and magazines that Sally and Richard read confirmed that there were others like them who were attracted to individuals of the same gender and others whom despite adversity, had become successful" (222). Kivel and Kleiber found that these texts gave the readers hope that their lives might work out as well, just as it did for Adam. However, while Kivel and Kleiber conclude that their participants use leisure to develop their personal identities, they stressed that they did not use them to develop social identities, something clearly not true for Adam whose social identities as a reader and science fiction fan are clearly mediated through leisure activities.

For example, just as his “whole world had changed” through this reading experience, he has high hopes for the genre being capable of effecting change in others concerning their attitudes towards sexuality:

One of the things I’ve always been a firm believer in is good genre fiction is not about the science or about the magic. It’s about human problems and genre fiction allows you to look at today’s problems through a different lens. And I’ve really found that to be true. Particularly as you start dealing with some of the things that focus on sexuality and gender, which is still a touchy subject for many people.

In *The Meaning of Things* (1981), Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton observe “that books, more than any other kind of objects, are special to people because they serve to embody ideals” (71). Considered in combination with the power that Adam believes science fiction has to transform lives, this idea helps to explain Adam’s strong connection to his science fiction book collection. It also helps to explain why much of his reading in the genre focuses on gay and lesbian issues:

I generally try to read things that I think are going to be more relevant to my particular area of focus, which is the gay and lesbian content, they tend to get read a little faster than books that don’t, even if I’m not in the middle of an awards judging season because they’re simply the books that I’ve had the most focus on and people kind of expect me to be reading them and I get more out of them because they speak more to my life.

His activities within the community also illustrate his belief that science fiction can help people become more accepting of differences in sexuality. For example, he

helps judge a yearly awards program for “speculative fiction works with positive gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender content” because “I really want to see the story of what it means to be gay in different societies, because I don’t think our society does a great job with that.” He also contributes to making sure GLBT<sup>72</sup> voices are heard in the community by being a reviewer of science fiction novels for a local newspaper:

I do analytical critical reviews of mostly science fiction works. And, that actually happened accidentally. I had kind of been doing reviews of books for the science fiction club that I’m involved with for our newsletter and I enjoyed doing those, just kind of letting people know “hey this is a good book. I really enjoyed it, you might too.” And then I ended up getting contacted by a local newspaper to find out if I wanted to write a review for them of a new book that was coming out by a local lesbian author. And I said “what the heck, maybe I can craft something that other, you know, that people who don’t know me will get something out of...” One of the things I do with that is, also ties to the fact that I read a lot, I often try to tie it into its place in the genre. What works is it similar to? What works does it seem to pay homage to? Um, you know, what will people recognize from other things they might have seen? Or what will people who like this book potentially like as well? Ah, so I tend to try to do that, which is another reason why reading a lot is important to me because it helps me establish those relationships.

Historically, the science fiction community was not receptive towards the gay community. It was not until the 1980s that an organization was created dedicated to gay

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<sup>72</sup> I use this designation rather than LGBT because this is the terminology Adam uses.

science fiction fans, the Gaylaxicans, and the late-1990s that gay and lesbian voices finally began to be taken notice of by the science fiction publishing industry. Furthermore, as of the publication of Bacon-Smith's *Science Fiction Culture* in 2000, there was an "absence of prominent male writers who are openly gay and participating in gay science fiction" for fear of losing their status in the community and their income along with this (153). Within this context it is not only important for Adam to encourage the inclusion of GLBT authors and stories in the community, but also to show how these stories belong within the larger science fiction community—hence the emphasis on connecting them to other works.

His negotiations between his identify as a gay man and his roles in the science fiction community are also made clear by analyzing how his books are arranged in his home. The books are arranged by category—while science fiction makes up the majority of his collection, he also pointed out that he has a section for gay novels as well, prompting me to ask what happens to the gay science fiction novels, of which I know he has many, particularly because of the yearly competition he judges. His response shows the negotiations he is making between many of his roles, as a fan, a judge, a reviewer, and a gay man:

That's kind of the overriding thing, the science fiction/fantasy. Partially, because I sometimes use those as reference materials for the award that I administer. Also for reviews I write, I tend to focus on that area as my area of specialty knowledge, so having all the science fiction books together makes sense to me. I've thought at times about trying to pull out the science fiction with gay content but it just doesn't make sense because

it's more that it's science fiction that's important than that it's gay. The fact that it's gay is just another factor in the science fiction.

The cultural intersections represented in this example are illustrative of how he sees himself as a reader—while he strongly believes that representation of the GLBT community is important in science fiction, it is because he believes that science fiction is a genre that is fundamentally about “being able to look at the world through a different lens.” “It's more important that it's science fiction than that it's gay” because it is science-fiction that he believes will “open people's minds to new ideas in ways that, for lack of a better term, mundane fiction does not.”

This is not to say, however, that Adam denies that science fiction can be used for escapist reasons. As we saw in the first quote in this section, he acknowledges that some people “get into it because they're looking for adventure stories” and “they really are just looking for escape,” and he's also had periods like this in his own life.

When I got to college, it really became two very distinct reading things. There were things I was reading for school. Textbooks or reference materials. I also did some, a lot of drama study when I was in college, so a lot of plays, things like that. And then very definitively I read a lot of escapist literature. Really cheesy fantasy—the cheesier the better. I actually had a hard time focusing on anything that was kind of more literary. Um, kind of the, the deeper works. I mean, I've always been a genre reader, but the deeper works of genre stuff, I just, that wasn't for me. I would find the cheesiest, the goofiest, just pure escape. I wanted no intellectual value from it... I was getting the intellectually stimulating

stuff from the academic works and then trying to avoid that completely in my personal reading.

However, even in this capacity science fiction played an important role in helping him negotiate his identity as a gay man as is illustrated in his response to my question of why he thought he was seeking out this type of reading:

There I was at MIT, and you'd think someone at MIT I'd be reading "oh let me find the latest and greatest, you know, Science Fiction with hard science fiction elements to it. And I shied away from that like the plague. I wanted the reading I was doing to have nothing to do with science. I mean, magic was all well and good because it was completely non-technical. In fact, I sought it out. It was kind of the exact opposite of what I was doing, you know, academically. So I think that had a big influence. I also think I was really, escape was a really important thing for me at that point. The two years that I was at MIT were a period of a lot of emotional turmoil for me. I was coming out at that point, you know, away from home for the first time. MIT has a suicide issue. I had a couple of friends who committed suicide over the course of time I was there. So it was really kind of a tumultuous period, and that, the completely fluffy escapist reading was great. I've heard many people describe the stereotypical way some women read romance novels, and for me, it kind of fit in that same stereotype. Not that I wanted to go to these magical worlds or anything, but it at least blocked out the real world while I was reading those things.



Thus, not only is reading transformative for Adam because it can change people's opinions and provide positive role models for children in detective fiction and gay men struggling with their sexuality, but it also played an essential role in helping him cope with difficulties he was facing. While reading for "escape" is much maligned, which he himself seems to acknowledge in his comparison of it to "the stereotypical way some women read romance novels," in this case it undeniably performed an important function for Adam at a difficult time in his life, and makes the reasons for his desire to share these experiences even clearer.

In summarizing her research on how avid readers choose what to read, Catherine Ross concludes that "readers overwhelmingly reported that they choose books according to their mood and what else is going on in their lives" ("Finding" 790). Adam's description of the shift in his reading habits clearly exhibits how his several reasons for reading are intricately linked to his personal life and how each have an important role:

We all need escape sometimes. But where I am in my life, I'm a lot more comfortable in my life now. When I was first really diving into science fiction as true escape and devouring it just for the escape aspects, I was in a place in my life where I didn't know where I was going, I didn't really know who I was going to be, I was dealing with coming out, I was dealing with issues of social deviation and what did that mean and was I a bad person cause I was gay, you know, and sometimes I just needed to shut all those thoughts down and just go away to another planet. Ah, now, yeah occasionally I need that, but what I'm mostly looking for is things that make me think about the world now. I guess I'm just more

rooted in the world, much more grounded. So, my reading tends to tie into the here and now, even though the window dressing in that reading is, you know, fantasy and spaceships.

To complete this picture, we must now turn to an examination of science fiction community itself because it is through his involvement in this community that Adam is able to share his reading experiences with others.

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*There really is an ongoing dialogue between authors and readers and publishers and editors and just everybody has a voice in shaping the genre*

As I've established, like members of the reading groups Elizabeth Long worked with, Adam is acutely aware of the social hierarchy of taste that denigrates science-fiction as escapist. However, rather than give credence to this hierarchy by not reading genre fiction or "buying one of the opaque plastic book covers displayed on the bookstore's counter" (Long, *Book Clubs* 159), he relies upon an alternative cultural authority supported through his involvement in the science-fiction community and his seeking out of a particular type of genre fiction.<sup>73</sup> We see his understanding of this hierarchy exemplified in his description of the type of science fiction he prefers to read:

Since I left school, in many ways I've kind of combined the intellectual pursuit and the genre reading. I focus a lot on works that have a lot of effort put into literary style. They're still genre works, but they tend to be the sorts of genre works that you're not necessarily going to find highlighted at Borders. They're the sorts of things that other writers

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<sup>73</sup> This comment was made by a member of a romance reading group "conscious of the stigma attached to romance reading." It should be noted that she decided not to buy the cover after "several group members were so impassioned about 'owning' their romance reading" (159).

appreciate, but readers often don't. They're not the mass market kind of things.

As before in his comparison of science fiction with Shakespeare this description deliberately evokes literary measures of quality, while simultaneously acknowledging that this is not the type of science fiction often featured at popular bookstores and establishing himself as an authority in this field. In *Science Fiction Culture*, Camille Bacon-Smith argues that there are two predominant types of science fiction publishing—"Lowest Common Denominator (LCD) fiction, which provides the financial fuel but has become increasingly limited by formula, and a more sophisticated but inward turning literary fiction that does not pass beyond the small market for more through-provoking fiction in genre readership" (266). When Adam expresses that he doesn't read the "mass market kind of things" he is distinguishing himself as a reader of the latter type of fiction, often not featured in mainstream bookstores. Indeed, much of what he reads he buys at conventions, as he explains:

One of the things about going to the conventions is I can find books that it's harder to find at a bookstore. Things from small presses—a lot of the genre small presses will really only sell their books either directly special-order or they'll have tables at conventional book dealers and conventional book dealers at conventions will have their stuff.

While this division is not new, according to Bacon-Smith the publishing industry has changed such that science fiction of this type now has a much harder time crossing over to the mainstream market than in the past without "bypassing the genre market place altogether and selling their work as 'magical realism' or other catch-phrases of the

mainstream” (266). Thus, as an insider in the science fiction community, rather than accept the classifications given by the cultural authority represented in large bookstore chains, he questions it:

Adam: But there are often books that are published that meet the criteria of being a genre book that aren't marketed in the science-fiction/fantasy marketing niche. So for instance things like Margaret Atwood's *A Handmaid's Tale* is not marketed as a science-fiction book, but it definitely has speculative fiction elements and it's one of the prime examples that most people would understand.<sup>74</sup>

Me: So that would be a genre book?

Adam: That would, I would consider that a genre book and most people who are genre readers would consider that a genre book. But for marketing purposes they didn't market it as a genre book. So in many ways, the book store labels are actually more about marketing notions than anything else.

His reasons for being confident in his classificatory system rather than that of the bookstore seem to stem from his involvement within the science fiction community on many levels. As mentioned before, not only does he participate in the monthly book group described above and the local science fiction group it's affiliated with, but he also writes reviews for science fiction books for a local newspaper, judges a yearly nationwide science fiction writing competition, “dabbles” in science fiction writing

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<sup>74</sup> While it is true that *The Handmaid's Tale* is not placed in the science fiction section at most bookstores, it should be noted that it won the inaugural Arthur C. Clarke Award, “the most prestigious award for science fiction in Britain, presented annually for the best science fiction novel of the year” in 1987 <<http://www.clarkeaward.com/>>. This does not change his argument about how it is marketed in bookstores and generally sold, however.

himself, and is an active participant in the science fiction conference scene. The arbiters of taste in his world are not the same as those who choose how things are organized in a bookstore or what is appropriate to teach in a university classroom, but those involved in the science fiction literary community, himself included. His response to my question about influences on his reading illustrates this point clearly:

My influences have very strongly been professionals in the genre...they will point out things that are out there, things that are coming that they think will be of interest to me and people who do this for a living are people I generally tend to have a little more faith in their recommendation at least!

The decorations in his living room also emphasize his involvement in the science fiction community. While he has few books in the more public areas of his home, the artwork consists primarily of numbered prints and original paintings purchased, usually from the artist, at science fiction conventions, like the one pictured in figure 3.3. The



**Figure 3.3: Living Room Art Work**

following considerations he and his partner make when deciding what to display illustrates his various roles in this community:

Was it the cover of the book? Is it an image that is related to a story that we're really fond of? Is it something that had kind of special meaning to us? For instance, I have the artwork from the badge of the convention

that I ran. We have the original artwork from a book that's a favorite book of mine by a favorite author of mine—we have the original artwork for that. So there are things like that, different things that might appeal.

In *The Meaning of Things*, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton discovered that “paintings and prints—even if only pale reflections of the originals—seem to lend themselves readily to the construction of meaning in people's lives by becoming signs of cherished experiences and relationships” (66). What Adam and his partner display is representative of a nexus of relationships and experiences—the badge artwork on display signifies not only Adam's participation in the science fiction community, but his role in shaping others' experiences in the community through running a convention. The original artwork signifies his position as a knowledgeable reader in the science fiction literary community. Though having the paintings recognized is not the primary reason they choose them, the artwork serves the dual function of identifying him and his partner as genre fiction fans to all of their visitors and signifying the level of their knowledge about and involvement with the science fiction community to others involved:

I mean we've had people recognize the book cover artwork, because actually a number of our friends, this is a book that a number of them have read as well, so they've come in and they see the art and they've been like “isn't that the cover of, ah you know, *The Firestone*?” And we're like, “yeah, that's the cover of *The Firestone*.” Ah, so people do recognize some of the, some of the artwork, but not always and that's some, that's not really important to us, so it's really, it's about what we want to see on our walls.

To understand fully the influences of this world on his reading habits and why this seems to transcend the influence of the broader community so strongly for him, we must also explore how this literary community is different from the broader literary community that most of us are more familiar with. To begin with, the science fiction literary community in which Adam participates encourages much more interaction between readers and writers, which Adam emphasized on several occasions:

I think the sci-fi community is different than most other literary communities in that it is a very, very interactive community. It's definitely a dialogue community. Authors speak with readers. Readers speak with authors. Editors are there trying to understand what experiences a reader is getting from a book. It's really, it is a highly interactive community unlike, you know, people who read modern literary fiction. They don't get together. They don't talk about it. The writer writes the book, the reader goes away and reads the book and never the twain shall meet. So I think sci-fi, speculative fiction in general, really fosters that. So I think that's part of why it's a good genre for me to, to be in, to be connected to, since that's one of the things I really want out of reading and out of literature.

[In other types of fiction] an author writes a book, a publisher publishes it, there might be a marketing campaign, there might be a speaking tour, they might go on Oprah, or they might, you know, do a local talk radio show or something. But in the science fiction community, one of the most important ways for word to get out about a book is for the

author to go to science fiction conventions where they physically interact on a one-on-one basis with fans. They might speak on a panel discussion about a topic, but they also will be in parties together, after the panel discussion, people will come up to them. I mean, it's a very interactive community. It's also a community where people go up and down in the community. People who are fans become writers. People who are writers are often also fans. So they may be at a convention and they're a fan of another writer who's there. So they're not at the table, they're actually in the audience. Ah, it's a really fascinating aspect of science fiction that I don't think exists as much in any other genre, although I hear that the Romance genre actually has a lot of that as well, which is kind of interesting. So I just started to become friends through the convention circuit and just enjoyed, because really when you're talking to an author, you're talking to them either about their work or about the art and craft of writing and about stories and as someone who loves to read and loves words and loves language and loves story, it was just a natural fit for me, so I really clicked with that part of the community.

In her book on the science fiction community, Camille Bacon-Smith likens it to a "small town": "Industry professionals—writers, editors, and publishing executives—come back to nurture their roots or to find their place in a newly won social stratum. Fans and amateurs come back to celebrate not just the genre, but the art of appreciation as well" (31). This increased interaction not only has encouraged Adam to write some himself (though he demurs when asked about this and says "I would kind of call myself more of



a dilettante than anything else”), but it enables him to have control over his reading experiences in a way that most of us are incapable of. According to Adam, due to the nature of the science fiction community, if a reader does not like what a writer has written, he or she has several opportunities to express this opinion—either directly to the author, who as an active part of the community is much more accessible than most writers, or through becoming a writer themselves. When I asked how his involvement in the science fiction writing community related to his preferences as a reader, he offered the following:

I think being connected to authors ties into that need to understand, I mean, to use a really cheap cliché, “the human condition,” because that’s what authors are writing about. So, I can read a book, I can then talk to the author about it... I can say to an author “Hey, you know, I was really disappointed in something you did in this story that I was reading and why did you do that? Why did you have this sudden twist of a plot to get the boy to meet the girl instead of running off into the sunset with this boy who he had been best friends with for 20 years? Um, and hold authors accountable for some of the choices they make...I definitely think that ties into the whole change in what I’m looking for [as a reader].

Again, we see here the interplay of the community aspect of the science fiction world, the importance of the content of the books themselves, and Adam’s position as a gay man.

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*I love to try to surround myself with people who read and people who talk about the books that they read because I love to share the ideas. I mean, I rarely read a book and that's the end of the book for me. I'm often thinking about it and being able to talk to someone, and talk through those ideas and bounce them back and forth is really, it's a really important thing for me because that helps to emphasize the fact that it is a genre of ideas and not just escapist.*

By examining the intersections and negotiations Adam makes between his identity as a reader, the science fiction culture he participates in, and his social location as a gay man, we gain a clearer picture of the roles that reading plays in his life and the uses he has made of it. Each of the components is essential to understanding Adam fully as a reader—for example, it is much harder to reject his “escapist” science fiction period as unimportant when it is considered within the broader context of his life at the time and his struggles with coming out, as well as considered against his current reading preferences. It is equally difficult to dismiss his reading style as “middlebrow” without acknowledging the powerful effects of this type of reading and that he applies it to all types of literature. Additionally, when we consider the variety of ways one can become involved in the science fiction community and the roles that Adam plays there, we see the importance of exploring each individual’s relationships to his or her cultural traditions. This last point will be particularly important to keep in mind also as we turn to Christine, who, as an English professor, is also a member of a group that is commonly spoken of in a unified manner as concerns reading.

#### CHAPTER FOUR: CHRISTINE

*And as for me, though that I konne but lyte,  
On bokes for to rede I me delyte,  
And to hem yive I feyth and ful credence,  
And in myn herte have hem in reverence  
So hertely that ther is game noon  
That fro my bokes maketh me to goon.<sup>75</sup>*

Geoffrey Chaucer  
*The Legend of Good Women*

Even after, at my prompting, Christine<sup>76</sup> suggested this passage as an opening quotation, I was hesitant to begin her chapter with someone else's words. After struggling to find an appropriate quotation from our interviews and sending a less-than-desirable suggestion to Christine that neither she nor I were very enchanted with, I had decided to ask her if she had any favorite literary quotations that she might prefer and this was her response. While one side of me saw immediately that this passage with its emphasis on the love of books and reading encapsulated Christine as a reader much better than the passage I had suggested before, I still wondered about the propriety of allowing Chaucer to speak for Christine, as it were, and in doing so I was entirely missing the point. Rather than privileging Christine as a reader and seeing her appropriation of Chaucer's words to represent herself as an example of one of the ways she uses literature, I was committing the same error as my academic predecessors and privileging the text—that is, I was focusing on the fact that these were “Chaucer's words” and not the meaning that they hold for Christine. This mistake was all the more important in light of the fact

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<sup>75</sup> Lines 29-34, text F.

Translation: And as for me, though I know but little./It delights me to read in books./And I give them full faith and credence./And hold them in reverence in my heart/So sincerely that there is no other pleasure/That draws me away from them.

<sup>76</sup> The pseudonym Christine was chosen in honor of Christine de Pisan, a late-14<sup>th</sup>/early-15<sup>th</sup> century Italian writer who challenged the misogyny common in the arts at the time.

that the very reason I chose Christine to work with is our common training in English departments, and I wondered if this were not part of the reason for my error. Had she chosen a quotation from Dorothy Dunnett, one of her favorite writers of historical fiction, would I have had the same reaction? Does the fact that she teaches Chaucer influence how I treated the quotation? I came to realize that our shared background enriched our interviews and our relationship, but also put me in a slightly different, and perhaps more difficult, position as a researcher. In addition to trying to understand how her role as a literary academic influences and is influenced by her role as an avid reader, I was also going to have to consider what happens when a somewhat-removed literary academic tries to explore this question with another literary academic in the first place.

As it turns out, the quotation represents the intersections between Christine's reading and her position as a literary academic better than one from our interviews in part because it is from Chaucer. As a medievalist, Christine frequently teaches students to read Chaucer in the academically approved way in an academic setting, but her appropriation of his quotation to describe herself as a reader represents her reading against this tradition as well. The same can be said for the nature of the reading described in the quotation itself, which emphasizes the pleasurable, enrapturing influences of reading rather than a focus on analytic or aesthetic concerns.<sup>77</sup> As we will see, exploring the constant negotiations Christine makes between her roles as an avid reader and as a literary academic is essential to understanding her participation in each

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<sup>77</sup> As Karin Littau explains in *Theories of Reading*, from antiquity until the late modern period "there was little doubt among critics...that literature was meant not only to please (*delectare*) and instruct (*docere*) its readers, but also to move (*movere*) them, [but] such a trichotomy holds little value in the twenty-first century among those who write, read, and comment on literature" (84).

cultural tradition; they are so intertwined that one cannot be understood without the other.

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*It's usually one literary fiction, one bathtub book, and one nonfiction at a time.*

Christine is a white medieval literature professor in her late 50s who defines herself both professionally and personally as a reader. Due to the high reading demands of her profession, most of Christine's personal reading takes place at night:

I read at night. And what I'll do is I'll tend to read the book I'm having the most trouble with earliest—I'll say "ok, I'm going to read five chapters or 100 pages or whatever." And then I'll just take something a little more easy to, you know, palatable, not necessarily easy reading, but just something that I'm enjoying to bed with me.

Two things are noteworthy in this account of her nightly reading. The first is the volume of what she describes—not only does she read from more than one book each night, but the amount she delineates from the first book ("five chapters or 100 pages") suggests that she often reads several hundred pages a night. The lists of her leisure reading that she has kept since 1981 also emphasize how extensive her reading habits are, particularly during the summer when she is not teaching (see Appendix B).

The second important point is that her account belies the idea that personal reading is all enjoyable. Like many avid readers, pleasure is not the only reason Christine reads, but unlike the other readers in my study and the responses of readers from several other studies summarized by Catherine Ross in *Reading Matters*, Christine

is rare in identifying some of her personal reading as troublesome.<sup>78</sup> When we contextualize Christine as a reader within the academic literary tradition, we begin to see possible reasons for this difference. As many critics have described, for the past eighty years English departments have trained their students to focus on the intellectual components of literature rather than the pleasurable or emotional ones.<sup>79</sup> While Christine often rejects this type of reading and values reading for pleasure, she also monitors her personal reading to make sure that she is reading enough “serious stuff”:

A long time ago, I realized I really had not been reading enough serious stuff. And so I try to be reading one nonfiction book for every two or three fiction I read. Like the Shakespeare book is nonfiction. The next one I’ve got, which is huge, but it’s the next nonfiction I’m going to read, is the new biography of Edith Wharton. So I try to keep one nonfiction going along with my other fiction.<sup>80</sup>

The influence of her academic background is apparent here not only in her impulse to read more serious things, but also in her choice of subject (Shakespeare and Edith Wharton). Often, though not always, what she considers “serious” is nonfiction:

I usually have three or four books going at the same time because I made a decision about ten years or so ago that I wasn’t reading enough nonfiction. So I always try to have a nonfiction book going as well as semi-serious junk reading. So right now I’m reading a murder mystery

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<sup>78</sup> A summary of the variety of reasons avid readers read can be found in *Reading Matters*, sections 4.2 & 4.3. No mention is made of reading of this kind.

<sup>79</sup> See Littau, “The Role of Affect in Literary Criticism” in *Theories of Reading* for a discussion of this as a historical trend and Radway, *A Feeling for Books*, for a more personal discussion of the conflicts between her personal, more passionate reading and the training she received as a literary scholar.

<sup>80</sup> James Shapiro, *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599* (2005) and Hermione Lee, *Edith Wharton* (2007). Her reading lists show that she generally averages one nonfiction work a month (see Appendix B).

set in the first World War, a biography of Tolkien that's based in his war experience, a book on [a medieval topic] because I have to keep up with [this medieval topic] and the books come out much too fast for me to keep up with them.<sup>81</sup>

The connection between her leisure reading and her role as a literary scholar is made explicit in this example because the final book she mentions relates to her academic specialty, but it is rare that she includes this type of reading when describing her personal reading interests, and when she expresses that she would like to read more “serious stuff” she is not referring to her academic work. An examination of her reading lists illustrates this separateness. For example, while both the Tolkien book and the murder mystery are included on her list from February and March 2007 respectively (see Appendix B), the medieval book she mentions here is not included, nor are any of the others she reads as preparation for her work. In another conversation, she explained the difference between leisure and academic reading thusly: “I was doing research though, so I don't count those as leisure reading. It's work reading—that's different because I don't, we all don't read scholarly books from cover to cover generally.”

Like Jim, though she reads daily, she frequently expresses that she reads less than she would like and shows a similar tendency to privilege book reading over magazine reading:

I would say now it's more aspiring to be avid again. Truthfully. I get lazy as I get older. I get tired because all I do is teach and read. I think that's a hazard. So, I'm making a concerted effort actually these days to do

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<sup>81</sup> The particular topic she discussed has been removed from this quotation in the interest of protecting Christine's anonymity.

more reading. To spend at least a couple hours a day doing book reading, not just the magazines and the newspapers, but actually sit down with a book for a couple hours a day and read it.

Like most avid readers, Christine also makes spaces and times to read; in an e-mail several months after our work together had ended she told me that she is “back to reading much more these days; I find that I can read on the treadmill, which was our Christmas gift to each other. So 45 minutes of multi-tasking—mind and body—is pretty perfect.” Unlike Jim, however, her periodical reading also seems to be restricted by the heavy reading demands of her career, which has resulted in her canceling a few of her subscriptions:

I read *The New Yorker* because my husband read it when I met him and I’m usually six to eight weeks behind because I really do read it and right now I have a stack inside because the semester ending messes my life. I’m almost up to May now. So I read that. I catch up in the summer. I read *Opera News* because I’m an opera fanatic and I love opera. I browse *Consumer Reports* because it comes into the house. I just canceled my subscription to *Smithsonian* because time—I just couldn’t, it was just piling up. My mother sends us a subscription to *Southern Living* (laughs). It’s fun. You know it’s like, do people really live like that? It’s amusing, but I do use some of the recipes. And I’m trying to think if, I think those are the main ones. Those are the main magazines. We used to get *Games* magazine, we used to get *Atlantic*, but we’ve just had to cut back for time reasons.



Also, while Jim's periodical reading seems to mirror his book reading to a large extent, Christine's seems to fulfill different, more informational, purposes—she reads *Opera News* to find out information about opera, *Southern Living* for the recipes, and so on. Interestingly, one of the most important informational roles that magazines and newspapers play for Christine is in helping her find books to read:

In terms of book reviews *The New Yorker* would have book suggestions in there. We subscribe to *The Washington Post* and *The Times*, *The New York Times*, of course, not *The Washington Times*. And from the time we moved up here in 1978 until—when did we start getting *The Times*? About six or seven years ago we got it delivered. [But before this] I would subscribe separately to the [*New York Times*] book review, which you can do. And that was mailed in advance, so I'd even know what books I needed to read before anybody else did. So that was a mainstay. And I have clippings. I was just doing a little bit of sorting this week. I clip them and I stuff them in an envelope and then I sort them from time to time when I go to the library or when people want suggestions for gifts and stuff. So that's how I mostly find what I'm going to read. Aside from just shelf-browsing, and it's in the air, or someone says "you ought to read this," or whatever.

In her article "Finding Without Seeking" Catherine Ross explains that successful readers employ a complicated system to determine which books will "provide the reading experience they want," which includes reviewers' comments:

Committed readers typically put out antennae to scan their everyday environments for clues. They tuck away for future use in memory or on lists the names of books and authors mentioned in magazine and newspaper reviews....Recommendations are important, but only from a trusted source with tastes known to be compatible, such as certain reviewers, family members and “friends that know my taste,” selected bookstore staff and librarians, and more recently Internet acquaintances. (789)

In Christine’s experience “not too many people, actually” are able to choose books successfully for her, so her dependence on reviews is even greater.<sup>82</sup>

This is complicated further by the role the rising costs of books plays in what Christine buys and reads, which she brought up during each of our interviews. As books have become more expensive and bookstore browsing becomes more of a gamble, reviews have an increasingly important part in helping Christine make reading decisions:

Yesterday for example, I met a friend at Barnes and Nobel and I saw several things on the tables that I hadn’t read a review of and looked interesting and then I picked them up and see they were trade paperbacks and they were sixteen dollars or fourteen dollars for a book I’d never heard of and I don’t do that. When paperbacks were all cheap and they were under seven dollars, I would buy books on spec all the time. But I’m not going to do that for fourteen dollars anymore. So actually I buy many fewer books sort of on a whim or on an impulse or on a “gee this

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<sup>82</sup> In fact Christine identifies only one person capable of buying books successfully for her: My friend “has very good luck in choosing things I like. She knows, somehow, my weird tastes...so basically, what [my friend] sends me, I like, but that’s it.”

really look interesting, I'll get it" because it's too expensive to do that.

But I used to go to Barnes and Nobel and five, five or six paperbacks I would pick up, but that's when you could do that for twenty-five dollars, and now it's two.

As her nightstand shows (see figure 4.1), the price of books does not prohibit her from buying them at all, but it does restrict her choices and makes her more dependent upon reviews. She also makes frequent use of the library in response to the rising costs of the books. However, her library usage sometimes places limitations on her choices of reading materials:

I read the *New York Times Book Review* and I clip and then I enter on the public library [website to] get me this book. I don't buy nearly as many books as I used to. I used to just buy books all the time, but I think when paperbacks went to \$7.99, I said "you know what, the library's got it. I'll borrow it rather than buy it." So, I guess the *New York Times Book Review*, which is of course is self-selected in what they decide to review, but nevertheless I'll read all of the reviews, and clip them out. And then sometimes I'll just carry an envelope of those clippings to the public library and it's very disappointing that sometimes they don't have them. They're not even in the system.

A comparison of what she is willing to buy and what she gets from the library provides yet another example of how her reading habits and academic cultural tradition intertwine. While she will buy nonfiction and literary fiction on the advice of reviewers, she tends to get most of her "junk" reading from the library:

Me: You talked about how you saw book reading as avid reading, meaning not magazine or newspaper, and that you were making more of an effort to read more books and I wanted to know how that was going.

G: It's going a little better because I am choosing the books in my nightstand rather than going to the library for murder mysteries. So, I'm at the moment reading three books at once, all of which are not junk (laughs), which is a record for me because I—So I'm reading *1599: A Year in the Life of Shakespeare*, which is kind of fun. I'm reading *The Voyage of the Narwhal* because it's beautifully written and she's a beautiful writer. And I'm still reading *The Shadow of the Wind*, which is a really wonderful book, but I started it a long time ago and I just can't sustain it. And I'm not reading any junk at the moment.

Me: What do you consider junk?

G: Oh, genre stuff. And I know murder mysteries are serious and I love the genre and in fact there was a review of a book in the Post today that treats it as a literary mystery. And I guess I call it that in self-defense because most of my colleagues will not even consider reading genre fiction, even serious, even P.D. James, Ruth Rendell, really serious good writers who happen to play with murder mysteries.<sup>83</sup> Real junk is fantasy—Robert Jordan.

Later I will discuss in detail how her academic literary tradition frames her hierarchy of taste even as she goes against it, but what is significant here is the influence these

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<sup>83</sup> The mystery authors she mentions here are commonly considered to write literary mysteries and “blur the boundaries of the crime genre and so-called literary fiction” (Mallory 217).



She explained this seeming disconnect on our tour of her home:

There's only two pieces of real trash [in my nightstand]. One is the Philippa Stockley *The Edge of Pleasure*, which my friend who's a romance writer recommended to me. And again, I read a book just recently that she recommended to me that I was like, "why did I waste my time?" So that'll probably be a bathtub book. It's not the kind of thing I would buy. And then the interminable, multivolume, he never stops writing, Robert Jordan. Those are great bathtub books...and the rest of these are not so much bathtub books because they're too nice.

A bathtub book, she explained, is "something I don't mind dropping in the water."

Thus, while for the most part her purchasing versus borrowing habits reflect her tendency to include less pleasurable reading in her leisure reading time, as this example makes clear, we only get a complete picture of her reading habits by considering the multiple uses she has for reading.

Christine also shows a reluctance to buy books based upon space, as she explains: "price point and also space. I mean physical space in the house. I could add more bookshelves, but we had the house completely renovated three years ago, and this is the way it is now." While these varying reasons for decreasing the number of books she buys might suggest that she is no longer attached to them as physical objects, this is far from the truth, as both the prevalence of them in her home and the following quote reveal:

I love sorting books too. Once a year, this is spring cleaning week, one thing I will do this week, and I've been weeding out books lately because

I'm into one of my Thoreau-ian, spring always brings in the Thoreau, simplify, simplify. I'm never going to read this book again, let me put it in a bag and give it to some students or donate it and not have to buy any more bookcases, because we don't have room in the house for more bookcases. But we have IKEA bookcases with the removable shelves, and what I do every year, is I take all the books out and dust because you need to do that and I look at them and I finger them and I remember what I've got. And sit and you know pick out the next thing I'm going to read and stuff. And that, I love it, I love organizing, I mean I really might have been a very good librarian because I like them as physical objects as well.

Even in the midst of describing getting rid of some of her books, her strong attachment to them comes through very clearly. This is reflected in her hesitancy to lend books out as well:

People don't return books and I'm getting to the point now where unless I know I'm going to see the person, I won't lend a book anymore because there are a couple books we really like that I can't find. And one especially that [my husband] is very upset about and I'm just going to have to find him another copy of it...But no, less and less do I lend books. I have a lending library with my mother, who still drives and could just as easily drive down to the little local public library which is opposite her Catholic church in [town she lives in], but no. She's decided in her own inimitable way that I would be her lending library...So my

mother right now will send them back, but I'm getting much more loath to lend.

She also connects this love for books to her career choice:

I love them as physical objects, and as a medievalist I've gotten to handle older [books] and it's just, and when I teach the history of the language, when I teach the survey of medieval literature I always bring in book production. I talk to them about how difficult it was to make a book and how expensive it was and when Chaucer's clerk, he had you know twenty books, I try to explain to them that this man is not eating in order to own books. And they just take it for granted. They don't even buy their schoolbooks half of them, they borrow them, or they just don't have libraries. Very few of them, even the English majors, they sort of look upon reading as an unnatural act. It's very sad.

In contrast, it is unnatural for Christine to be without a book and in the next section we will explore why.

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*I will read mysteries and I'll read fiction for plane rides and stuff. But it has to be something either I've read before or I know I'm going to like, because [during a] plane ride if you're stuck with a book you don't like, you're dead. So you have to be very, very sure.*

Christine expresses the "panic" that many avid readers feel "at the thought of being without something to read" (*Reading Matters* 147) most frequently in terms of travel and she often refers to her books as her "security blanket" in this context as the following examples illustrate:



To this day, when we're going on a trip I pack more books than I need. It's my security blanket.

When we go on vacation I always take too many books and I know it, but it's my security blanket. In case I don't like this book, I need to have another one right away. And I go nuts when I'm in people's houses and there are no books.

To be certain that her "needs" are fulfilled, she puts careful planning into the reading materials that she brings on her trips:

This is very funny, on Monday or Tuesday night I sat in front of my night table, which you'll see that has all the books I'm supposed to be reading over the summer, which is wacky because there are like twenty-five of them in there. And I tried to, I went through them with my husband, and I said we might as well just bring books that we both want to read, which is not always easy, but he basically will read what I tell him to. And so we did that—we took a murder mystery by Donna Leon, who's actually a Maryland ex-patriot who lives in Venice and writes very, very good police procedurals, because we both like her and I had a new one. We took a kind of a crazy Spanish murder mystery/time travel/whatever, I can't remember the title, but I can get it. [My husband] is reading that, he took that. I took a very obscure Trollope novel, *Doctor Wortle's School*. And, I was finishing the new Tolkien, *The Children of Húrin*. And what was the other one I had with me? I know I had another one with me. I cannot bring it to my mind right now. I have an awful short term memory

problem. So I guess we had five books with us. And I finished one on the plane, read another one while we were in California, another one on the plane back. And then I finished the Trollope when we got home.

This planning often starts well in advance of the trip. For example, when we met in late-October she told me that she was “already thinking” about the books she was going to bring on a trip to France the following May and emphasized that she likes to “start planning in advance” when I suggested that she had “plenty of time.” This may in part be due to the fact that the last time she traveled internationally she finished her last book “on the plane on the way home, so that was a little scary,” though she quickly clarified that “I had bought books, so I had some with me.”

This need for books has roots in her childhood, as she explains:

My parents were readers. My mother belonged to a book club. My dad read. So it was just normal behavior. My behavior was certainly *not* normal in the sense that I didn’t feel comfortable if I went some place without a book. And that persisted almost, that persisted a very long time. I just enjoyed it. I liked getting away from, I don’t know, I can’t say I was unhappy, but my parents were a little distant. You know, they were typical older parents and they didn’t play with us. My mother didn’t sit on the floor and play games and stuff, so I read. (my emphasis)

The following description of her reading behavior makes it a bit clearer why she considered it “not normal”: “I always went everywhere with a book. Had to go. Even when we were visiting my grandmother’s house I had a book with me. Always. I was very anti-social. I mean, I used it not to have to interact with people.” Among other

things, this passage stands out in her use of short phrases to emphasize her point, something she does infrequently as the passages quoted thus far should illustrate. When I asked her during the second interview if she could clarify why she thought she did this, she provided the following extensive explanation:

This is one of the most traumatic experiences of my entire life. I was a very outgoing kid, more like I am now then, and the report cards were always given out alphabetically the last day of class by the teacher, boys first then girls. This is the stone ages of American education. (laughing) And I knew who I came after alphabetically, which was Katherine L.; I'll never forget her name either. And they skipped my name and went on to the end. And I hadn't noticed that the two boys' names had been skipped because I was, sitting at my desk. So I began to really feel I had failed or something, which was completely ridiculous on the face of it, and at the end of this, Mrs. C., I'll never forget her name either because I loved her, she was a great teacher, said that Bobby Z., and Mark M., and Christine, were going to go to a new school in the fall and explained why and this was the first I heard of it. (sighs). And that just, you know, it just, I can't describe an analogous thing happening to a little kid. I mean, it wasn't terrible abuse or anything like that, but it was very traumatic for me, very traumatic. And that's, that was it, and I went into this new classroom and I hardly knew anybody, because the only two kids from my old school were these two creepy boys. And I was a lot younger to start with because in those days you could still be in Kindergarten born in

December. So I was already calendar, end of calendar year for my age group. So we did this 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> grade in two years, and I struggled a lot with that, especially with math. I had very good teachers, but by the time I got out of that and went to junior high, I was feeling stupid, I guess, I don't know, and by that time I was almost two years younger than everybody else. So that really screwed me up socially. I'm sure, I don't remember it, but in retrospect I'm sure that's what turned me into a, "I don't want to interact with people, just give me my books and I'm happy" kind of kid. So, I'm pretty sure that that was a definite cause and effect.

The amount of detail she remembers about this event is striking considering that she was only eight when it happened, and this emphasizes how significant a role it played in shaping her life and her reading habits. Indeed, she identifies it as the source of her reliance on books through her twenties and uses the "security blanket" metaphor again to explain this:

I'd say that lingered in various ways and forms with me for a very, very long time, not that you're my psychologist or anything, but I'd say it was probably until my 30s. Not as terrible, but I don't think there were very many places I went without a book until I was in my 30s. Didn't always pull it out, but it was my security blanket.

Relying upon books as "friends and comforters" (152) is common trend Catherine Ross notes in her study of avid readers, particularly among children facing difficult situations. For example, one of the readers she interviewed describes a similarly traumatic

alienation she felt as a child because of her family's frequent military moves and her reliance on books to comfort her.

While Christine does not need this type of comfort with the same regularity that she did as a child, she does seek it out when she faces more difficult times in her life:

I tend to go to a familiar old book when I'm unhappy or, I'm not an unhappy person usually, but if something's stressful and I just really need to know that the book I'm going to read is going to absorb me and I don't want to take the chance of not, then I will go back to an old book. Or I just feel like rereading something. It's time to reread Tolkien or Jane Austen or Dorothy Dunnett. It's a fairly small group that I reread.

Ross has also discussed the importance of mood in determining what avid readers choose to read and discovered that "when readers wanted safety, reassurance and confirmation, they often reread old favorites or read new books by known authors that they can trust" ("Finding" 790). Christine has identified this aspect in her reading as well: "My reading is very moody. You know, it depends on what mood I'm in to a certain extent, like good-day, bad-day, kind of stuff." Thus, it makes sense that she also retreats to familiar books or authors when she travels, particularly in unfamiliar situations, even though she does not need to read for comfort as often as she did as a child. Her descriptions of why she rereads more generally also emphasize how comforting this act can be:

I'll reread a book that has sentimental value because my Aunt Sandra gave it to me the first time to read, which is Gene Stratton-Porter, *A Girl of the Limberlost*. It's a classic, wonderful, beautiful book. I love it.....

So, I can't tell anymore whether I like the book because I like the book, which I do, but also because it's associated with my aunt.

However, right now she is actively trying "not to indulge too much in rereading" because "there's so many books in the world that I'm never going to live to read."

We have already seen that Christine reads for information and edification in addition to reading for comfort, but she emphasizes that she reads for pleasure as well:

I do read for pleasure. But I do get irritated by poor reading and poor writing and poor editing. And that's why I'll put a book down. I get so mad at careless stupid writing and things that should be caught...in popular literature less so, but again, really sloppy dumb writing I can't do.

When I asked what kinds of things she meant by sloppy, she clarified in the following manner, which should feel familiar to anyone who has taught writing or taken a writing course:

Unsophisticated. I don't mean very complex. I certainly don't want people I read for pleasure to all write like Henry James (laughs). That's why I go to Henry James when I want writing like that. But just stuff that's, I want to take a pen and rewrite it because I can make the sentences stronger, more direct.

The quality of the writing matters to Christine because her role as an English professor, that is as one who (in part at least) teaches writing, makes the book distracting if poorly written—for it to be pleasurable and allow her to set aside her teacherly persona the writing needs to be good enough that she does not feel the impulse to fix it. Though she "absolutely adores" Henry James, the type of things she reads for pleasure are generally

historical fiction and mystery novels, and sometimes a mixture of the two in historical mysteries, but she emphasizes that “they have to be well written.” She prefers “traditional British mysteries, but [not] the cute ones” and generally doesn’t “care too much for particularly gory, bloody, terrible things” though she makes an exception for “Minette Walters because she’s so brilliant. Her writing is so brilliant and it’s compelling. Once I start Minette Walters, I can’t put her down.” As I mentioned, she does read some medieval mysteries as well:

But most of them are so awful! You know, you don’t read those if you know about the period. Although Peter Tremayne’s mysteries about an Irish nun in the seventh century are very good because he’s a Celtist. He knows what he’s writing about.

While it made sense to me that she would make an exception for an expert writing fiction about his specialty like Tremayne, I was surprised to hear that she also seeks out medieval historical fiction, particularly when she frequently emphasizes that “most of it is so badly written.” She explained the desire to find good medieval fiction in the following way:

It’s the world I don’t really want to live in, but it’s the world I love. So I can go to the world I love and someone who understands that it’s not the exoticism of time and place. That that’s merely incidental to the human problems written in that period. So Ellis Peters writing as Edith Pargeter wrote some brilliant Medieval novels. Just brilliant. One is a four novel set about the Welsh/English wars in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. One is a three novel set about building a cathedral. And then she’s got a series, I’ve only read

one or two of them, about the English Civil Wars in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. But she writes well, she's intelligent, and she wears it lightly. It's like the Brother Cadfael. I mean, they were formulaic. You knew how each one was going to turn out. And yet, she had a compassion as a writer, I think, that comes through. She's not just taking. What a lot of people do is they have puppets they call Lady This and Sir That and they just kind of manipulate them, they're not real people to them. They don't break the barrier of exoticism. And Dunnett does and Pargeter does.

The distinction between reading to *escape from* something, as Radway claims the Smithton readers do in *Reading the Romance* and as Christine clearly did at some points in her childhood, and reading to *escape to* somewhere is clear in this example. She continues to seek out historical fiction set in the medieval era for the same reason that she became a professor of medieval literature—"it's the world I love." It is important, therefore, that the characters be realistic and have "human problems" because she is vicariously experiencing this world through these books. This type of use of reading is similar to the pleasures that the Book-of-the-Month Club editors were trying to find for their readers: "this pleasure appeared to be more emotional and absorbing; it seemed to have something to do with the affective delights of transport, travel, and vicarious social interaction. Story and the traditional unities of plot and character seemed to figure centrally" (72). As we will see in the next section, Christine continually makes negotiations between her role as an avid reader, which includes this type of pleasurable reading, and her role as an English professor.



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*And I never didn't read for pleasure when I was writing my dissertation either because you had to become sane.*

Though Christine enjoys being an English professor, she makes a clear distinction between her academic and leisure reading and has taken care to make sure that the latter is not subsumed by the former. She also makes frequent distinctions between her reading interests and those of the other faculty members: “There aren’t too many people whose tastes are like mine. I’m not embarrassed about reading murder mysteries and a lot of my friends at school just think that’s a waste of time.” This is perhaps best exemplified in her thoughts about the books chosen by the reading group she belongs to with several other women from her department:

There’s a reading group that I’ve been in a number of years now in the English department at [her university]. We meet once a month or every six weeks and choose different books and read them. And talk about them. You can imagine what this sounds like—a bunch of English professors talking about books. And I mostly don’t like the books chosen, because they’re not the sort things I read. They’re kind of precious contemporary fiction or nonfiction that I don’t like. We were on a phase when we read everything by and about Arab women for a while and I just got really tired of it. And the last thing they chose was an academic, yet another academic satire, and I just, I found it unfinishable, I couldn’t read it, it was so vile. It was Francine Prose’s, god it has blue in the title, I have a real memory problem, but I didn’t like it at all. But, [the reading group] has made me read some things that I would never have

picked up and did enjoy, so it's been really good in terms of expanding me, but they don't like to read what I want to read.

At the same time that she asserts her membership in this group, she also asserts her separateness concerning what types of books she prefers to read. Her comment "you can imagine what this sounds like—a bunch of English professors talking about books" is particularly illustrative of her position as both an insider and outsider in the group—she can participate in this type of talk, while simultaneously poking fun of it. This may in part be because she perceives more of a separation between her leisure and academic reading than she believes her group members do: "Most of them, many of them, I won't say most, are aspiring writers themselves, so perhaps they like more writerly books than I have patience for." Nonetheless, she still expresses frustration with what she perceives as a close-minded approach to what they are willing to read, while being aware that she is maintaining somewhat of a double-standard:

But I don't understand the aversion to genre fiction. That I don't get... I can't even convince them to read someone like Georgette Heyer, who's an excellent writer, who writes excellent books, and she invented the Regency and since then everybody just writes this tripe.<sup>84</sup> You know, if you go back to the source, but, you know. But it's a little bit of intellectual snobbery too. I mean, to me, I'll admit for me it's reverse snobbery to say "well I read murder mysteries, I'm not an intellectual

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<sup>84</sup> Regency romances are a stylistically literary and historically dense subgenre of romance novels set in early 19<sup>th</sup> century England and based upon the work of writers like Jane Austen.

snob!” but of course that’s a form of intellectual snobbism too, so I admit it.<sup>85</sup>

Unlike the women in most of the book groups Elizabeth Long worked with, Christine does not “generally accept without questions the categories of classification and evaluation generated by cultural arbiters such as reviewers or professors” (118) because, as a member of the literary academy, she is one of these arbiters herself. However, as we have seen, she also does not completely disregard the academy’s literary hierarchy either and takes care to defend her reading choices that may be regarded as questionable by others in her profession. This complex negotiation is played out repeatedly in her definitions of herself as a reader, her choices of what to read, her participation in her book group, her role as a professor, and in the way she organizes the books and reading materials in her home.

Of the readers I worked with Christine seems to pay the most attention to how visitors will view her books. She describes the reading materials in her family room (where her reading group meets when it is her turn to host) as “the core leisure reading, non-scholarly, non-genre fiction, the stuff I’m not embarrassed to have people come in the house and look at,” and tellingly most of her mystery fiction is relegated to the basement. One section of these shelves is dedicated to Dorothy Dunnett, a primarily historical fiction author, who has also written some mysteries, and who is one of Christine’s favorite authors. Yet, her justification for reading Dunnett, and indeed the fact that she felt a need to justify her to me, someone with an advanced degree in

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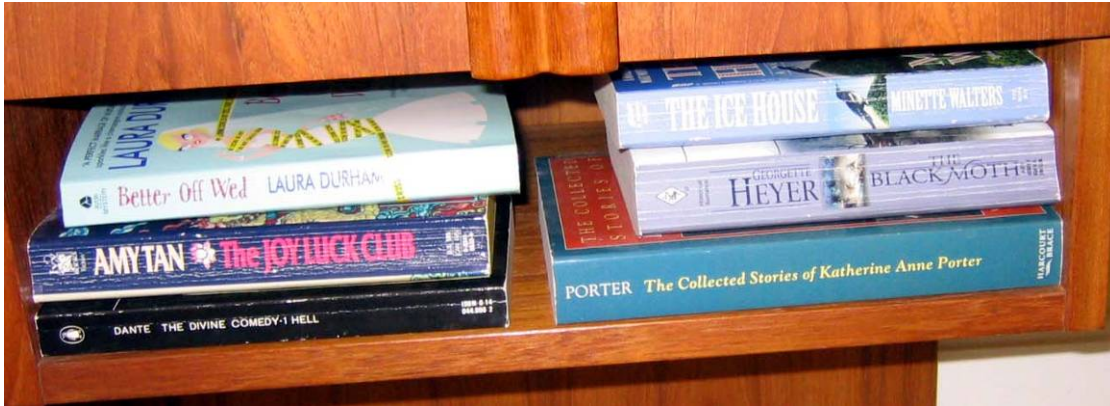
<sup>85</sup> It should be noted here that neither the books that Christine’s group chooses to read nor the books that Christine prefers are typically read by book groups, as shown in Elizabeth Long’s *Book Clubs*: “groups usually do not deal with either end of the literary spectrum; most do not read poetry, plays, or difficult postmodernists novels, and if they do they will mention it proudly. At the other end, groups rarely even consider genre books to be part of the relevant literary universe” (119).

literature married to a fellow medievalist with a PhD in English, illustrates her cognizance of how her cultural tradition as a literary academic competes with her reading interests:

And, I like to read historical fiction, not bodice rippers, but sincere Mary Renault kind of stuff. The people who've really done their work. And that can be very good stuff if it's done well, which it *rarely* is. And I saw a cover that intrigued me, and I opened the book and the prose style was so incredibly sophisticated, I've got to read this. It's Dorothy Dunnett, who was a Scottish author, with two series that were connected, so there were fourteen volumes of them. And she wrote a stand alone novel about the real Macbeth, which is brilliant, and some mysteries of course. (her emphasis).

Not only is she aware of prevailing social attitudes of literary scholars towards this type of fiction, as her clarification that she isn't reading "bodice rippers" and her acknowledgement that these types of books are "rarely" well written shows, but she uses signifiers of worthwhile literature (that is, that which is deemed worthwhile for study by the academy)—a sophisticated prose style, a reference to Shakespeare—to justify her interests. And very tellingly, though she likes mysteries, she almost dismissively notes that Dunnett wrote "some mysteries of course." Including Dunnett in her most public spaces, and importantly in the space where her reading group meets, reveals that this author, at least, wins out over her academic literary tradition, but her explanation to me, someone she perceives as a fellow literary academic, is revealing of the negotiations she makes as a reader.

An analysis of how she has chosen to arrange her guest room nightstand and her description of this further illustrates how she constructs and understands herself as a reader, and also has the added component of revealing how she understands other readers. Figure 4.2 includes a picture of the books in her nightstand and her explanations of these choices:



**Figure 4.2: Guest Room Books**

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|---|---|
| <p><b>1. Laura Durham <i>Better Off Wed</i> (left top)—</b><br/> <b>“I added the silly mystery about a wedding consultant in DC when I bought it at a book signing, read it, thought it wasn’t worth a lot of time, and added it”</b></p> <p><b>2. Amy Tan <i>The Joy Luck Club</i> (left middle)—</b><br/> <b>“everyone’s read Amy Tan”</b></p> <p><b>3. Dante <i>The Divine Comedy- I Hell</i> (left bottom)—</b><br/> <b>“Dante for the intellectuals”</b></p> | <p><b>4. Minette Walters <i>The Ice House</i> (right top)—</b><br/> <b>“Walters is a gripping thriller”</b></p> <p><b>5. Georgette Heyer <i>The Black Moth</i> (right middle)—</b><br/> <b>“the Georgette Heyer is literate light romance”</b></p> <p><b>6. Katherine Porter <i>The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter</i> (right bottom)—</b><br/> <b>“The short stories of Porter are literary”</b></p> |
|---|---|

Both the effort she puts into her choices of these reading materials and her frustrations caused by visiting people who do not provide good things to read make it clear that she considers reading material to be a necessity for her guests (perhaps on the order of a towel or something of that nature). However, though she meticulously makes sure that a wide range of potential readers is covered should they visit her and need something to read (intellectuals, mystery readers, someone wanting a thrill or a bit of romance, a short story reader, and so on), there is also a clear hierarchy in her categorizations of these readers through her choices. For example, that Dante is “for the intellectuals” reveals

not only that she perceives of intellectuals as those who appreciate good literature, and further may want to read it on their vacation, but also is interesting in terms of how she categorizes herself as a reader. Though Dante is someone she appreciates and studies, modern mysteries or historical fiction are much more typical of her leisure reading and what she brings on vacation, and Dante is not the choice she would make were she presented with this shelf while visiting someone, as she explained:

It would depend on the circumstances of the visit. I could see myself picking up any of those. I'm not going to be, probably not *The Inferno*. I put [that] there for my snobbish guests. The stories or *The Ice House*, I think would, the Porter or the Walters, if I hadn't read them. Minette Walters—I think I would grab that.

Her response is as revealing of her complex relationship to her academic literary tradition as the arrangement of the books themselves, particularly in her dismissal of *The Inferno* as for “snobbish guests” and her teetering between the “literary” stories by Porter and the “gripping thriller” written by Walters. Furthermore, by including the “silly mystery” she simultaneously acknowledges her culture as a mystery reader, while distancing herself from aspects of that tradition—she is a mystery reader, but not that type of mystery reader. Negotiations of her identity as a reader are further emphasized by her use of derivatives of the term “literary” to describe two more of the books included, making an even count between those books with academic connotations and those books for those with more conventional tastes. Interestingly, even her arrangement of the books emphasizes her hierarchy—the “silly mystery” and “gripping thriller” top each pile, the Amy Tan and “literate” romance hold the middle position, and

the more intellectual choices anchor each side. As this one example shows, an examination of the construction of reading spaces within a reader's home adds much to our understanding of how readers understand themselves and other readers.

However, though she makes these negotiations constantly, she did not share the alienating experience described by Janice Radway and others when they encountered the literary academy.<sup>86</sup> While she describes her path toward graduate school as more a product of her circumstances than any grand plan, at every step things felt natural to her. For example, she decided to major in English because "quite frankly...my French and History teachers were boring old men and my English teacher was a really young guy who was still ABD and made it very interesting." Her decision to become a medievalist was equally a product of her circumstances:

I decided to be a medievalist my senior year of college, because I think I was going towards Shakespeare. It was the day, right, it was Kent State, and it was in Washington, it was very politicized; they had gotten rid of grades at [my university]. We didn't have grades. And you could either take a prescribed curriculum, you know, one from column A, two from column B, like [my current university] has, or you could take whatever you want, do your own thing, quote unquote, then you had to take an eight hour written comprehensive exam. And so, being who I was, which is I hate rules, if there are rules they're made to be broken, so I break them, I did the do-your-own-thing thing. We always knew there was a standard question that was going to be either Chaucer or Milton. I knew my Milton cold in those days, and I hadn't taken a medieval course at all,

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<sup>86</sup> See Radway's Introduction to *A Feeling for Books* and Berggren "Reading Like a Woman."

because it was very rare and he just mostly did Norse myth and I just didn't want to do it, but I'd always been interested in King Arthur and stuff like that, so I studied Chaucer just because I'm obsessive compulsive. I knew I was going to answer the Milton question and I knew I didn't have to look at Chaucer, but I did. Picked up Chaucer and started reading it in Middle English without really struggling, like, "oh, ok." I didn't realize at the time what I was doing, I just found it so easy to read.

This ease of fitting in continued through graduate school, where she found the environment and the tools she was being taught to use stimulating, rather than stifling:

I hit my stride in graduate school. Intellectually and every other way. I was a good student [in college], but I wasn't a perfect student. But once I got to grad school, I was just, it was the kind of work my mind finally found the good fit. That sort of meticulous, detailed, language-based, stuff that I still like to do. So I was very lucky to hit on that really.

Christine's experiences make clear that we must be careful when making generalizations about academic readers. Even those comfortable with the language and skills taught by the literary academy have many reasons for reading and do so differently in different contexts. The question, then, is not whether literary academics read differently for leisure than they do for work, but why this is not acknowledged more, particularly among those trying to understand reading. It is worth reiterating Livingston's point from *The Anthropology of Reading* mentioned in the introduction: "For the critical community, discoveries of reading are, inextricably, discoveries concerning how the



community reads, and theories of reading are, inextricably, theories about those practices of reading” (145). While I believe that there is much to be learned from further in-depth work with readers from all backgrounds, one way literary critics can avoid allowing literary reading experiences to stand for all reading experiences is to look inward and explore their own reading practices.<sup>87</sup>

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Christine’s definitions of herself as a reader, choices of what to read (and what she “should” read), participation in her reading group, and organization of books in her home clearly show how intertwined her position in the literary academy is with her life as a reader. We cannot understand one without exploring the other. An investigation of this sort also reveals how personal these negotiations are and emphasizes the dangers inherent in allowing her experiences to represent those of other English professors. While she is conversant in the literary academy’s rules for reading and is aware of the literary hierarchy these rules support, her relationship to this cultural tradition is influenced by a range of cultural and social phenomena, as Caughey and Sarris emphasize. Just as there is no single “woman reader” or “romance reader” there is also no single “academic reader.” Exploring Christine’s reading life history makes clear why the call for ethnographies of reading situated within individual reader’s particular cultural worlds should be extended to members of the literary academy as well.

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<sup>87</sup> This is not to say that there has been no self-exploration in literary criticism. According to Diane Freedman, autobiographical literary criticism arose “in earnest in the late 1980s” (4), and there has been much debate since then about the relative merits and downfalls of this method (see *Confessions of the Critics*, where this article was published, for an example of these debates). What I am advocating is simply more acknowledgement on the part of literary critics studying reading of their own complex and multiple reading practices.

## CONCLUSION

*What ethnographic work entails is a form of 'methodological situationalism,' underscoring the thoroughly situated, always context-bound ways in which people encounter, use, interpret, enjoy, think and talk about... media in everyday life. The understanding emerging from this kind of inquiry favours interpretive particularization over explanatory generalization, historical and local concreteness rather than formal abstraction, 'thick' description of details rather than extensive but 'thin' survey.*

~Ien Ang<sup>88</sup>

I began this study with the recent international preoccupation with reading, as evidenced in national reading studies, to provide exigency for my own study into the lives of the avid readers you have just met. Of the potential reasons for this proliferation of interest in reading, the most compelling comes from those scholars who seek to understand the changing nature of “reading in the age of electronic textuality,” (133) as Robert Chartier does in “Languages, Books, and Reading from the Printed Word to the Digital Text,” and these studies make even clearer the need for studies of the type I have just conducted. As the argument goes, the electronic era has so quickly ushered in fundamental changes in our understanding of textuality that the very nature of reading as we understand it is called into question: “Regarding the order of discourse, the electronic world thus creates a triple rupture: it provides a new technique for inscribing and disseminating the written word; it inspires a new relationship with texts; and it imposes a new form of organization on texts” (Chartier 142). While Chartier leaves open the possibility of the “introduction of conceptual and technical devices into digital textuality that would be capable of perpetuating the classic criteria for identifying written works” (152), digital media as they exist now encourage a “new way of reading: segmented, fragmented, discontinuous” (151), which he uses to explain the success of

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<sup>88</sup> “Ethnography and Radical Contextualism in Audience Studies,” 70-71.

certain types of material online, such as encyclopedias, and the failure of others, like novels. Though there are differing degrees of concern over the “digital revolution,”<sup>89</sup> it is undeniable that print is still fundamentally different from reading online, as Madelyn’s equivocation over whether or not to include her online reading vividly illustrates. In this era where theorists argue over how reading is being redefined by technology, my life history research with avid readers provides a space for those for whom reading is a fundamental part of their identity to reveal how they define reading and the roles it plays in their lives. For if we wish to understand how cultural definitions of reading are shifting, we would be wise to pay attention to those who read.

Listening to how avid readers describe and conceptualize reading in their daily lives calls many scholarly assumptions about reading into question and brings to light aspects of reading previously underrepresented or simply ignored by scholars. If we return now to the three sets of questions I proposed in my introduction, we can see what each of these illuminates. The first set of questions concerns the particulars of the daily practices of avid readers. Most fundamentally, these questions explore the when, where, and what of these readers’ reading habits, including the impact of time of day, physical spaces, and events in the readers’ personal history on their reading. This set of questions also concerns the material culture of reading—from how readers find their reading materials, to whether they purchase them or borrow them, to what they do with them after they have finished reading them. On a broader level, these questions ask whether useful areas of comparison about these practices emerge, what these practices reveal

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<sup>89</sup> While Chartier sees much of use in digital technology, he is concerned that it not result in “the destruction of works in their printed form” (146) because he views the material form of the text as an important aspect of sense making. On the other hand, writers like Sven Birkerts, who likens the lure of digital media to the devil in the Coda of *The Gutenberg Elegies* (1994), are less cautionary and more directly aggressive about the dangers of digital media.

about reading on a larger level, and whether these insights can reveal anything about non-readers as well. The second set of questions I addressed concerns the explanations provided by the readers themselves of their reading practices, such as how they describe their motivations for reading, how they understand themselves and other readers, and how they use their cultural traditions to frame these understandings. The third addresses the ways reading interacts with, influences, and is influenced by each reader's social location and cultural traditions, which I will discuss in more detail later. As anticipated, the answers to these questions are intricately linked and it is particularly difficult to divorce the explanations provided by the readers themselves of their reading practices in response to the second set of questions from their answers to the first and third sets of questions. Thus, though I have tried to categorize my conclusions under the most appropriate heading, there will be clear overlaps among the categories.

One thing vividly illustrated by focusing on the reading practices of avid readers is how deeply reading permeates and circumscribes their daily lives: reading occurs at breakfast, during a commute, waiting at a doctor's office or for a film or concert to begin, during the workday (both for work and for pleasure), on vacation, and in the evenings at home. These behaviors carry over when these readers travel and live in different environments as well, as is best illustrated by Jim's lifetime reading experiences—from his search for reading materials as a child in Japan and later on the gulf coast, to his idyllic reading of literature in Africa while in the Peace Corps, to the varying ways being on assignment in another country determines what he is able to read. Beyond these observations, what in-depth work with individual readers reveals is that the type of reading occurring in these different times and spaces varies, as does, more

importantly, the reader's conception of this reading, as we see most clearly with Jim's discussion of how much reading he is able to do a day. This points to problems with trying to quantify reading in survey work, which generally does not offer much room for qualification of reading experiences—after all, had Jim been asked by a survey researcher how much he read a day, would he have said two hours, as he did when I asked, or the three to four hours it appears he does upon closer inspection of his daily habits? Clearly, if we wish to understand the roles reading plays in the lives of avid readers, we must consider the effects of space and time on the types of reading they do, something not yet explored in any depth with actual readers.<sup>90</sup>

Listening to how readers categorize varying aspects of their reading has implications on other categories academics use concerning reading as well. One distinction relied upon by researchers that the categories utilized by readers calls into question is the divide between work and leisure reading, which I also relied upon when I began this study. However, as I worked with Jim and Christine, difficulties arose in trying to differentiate between these types of reading. While there were things that each reader clearly specified work or leisure reading, the middle-ground for each was also significant, thereby questioning the efficacy of studies like *To Read or Not to Read* that focus only on voluntary reading.<sup>91</sup> Further complications arise when we consider that the professions chosen by each of these readers are particularly attractive to avid readers

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<sup>90</sup> One interesting study that takes the influences of time and space on *literacy* into account on both community-wide and individual levels is David Barton and Mary Hamilton's *Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in one Community* (1998). By using survey, historical, interview, and observational data, including profiles of four people's "literacy life and history" (75), Barton and Hamilton explore "how a particular group of people [in Lancaster, England in the 1990s] use reading and writing in their day-to-day lives" (3). Though literacy is inherently involved in my study, my focus is different because I work with avid readers for whom reading is often a pleasurable leisure activity.

<sup>91</sup> Kirshenbaum has also noted this "oddly retrograde" (B20) impulse in the study.

because of the reading they require. It seems absurd to suggest that someone like Christine who does not have as much time for leisure reading when she is focused on reading for an article is not an avid reader during that time, but this dichotomy left uncomplicated can lead to just such a conclusion. Another fundamental distinction called into question through my work with Madelyn is that between fiction and nonfiction.<sup>92</sup> Not only do scholars rely upon this distinction as meaningful, but it underlies the structure and function of English departments more generally as well; calling the meaning of this distinction into question calls into question the very way we structure our classes and thinking about reading. As I explained in Madelyn's chapter, once we privilege the function for the reader, we begin to see that we may need different categories for understanding reading. As we saw in Madelyn, Adam, and Christine's chapters, the distinctions we rely upon between literary and genre fiction are also questioned and redefined by these readers. These categories underlie some of our most basic assumptions about reading—that our criteria for differentiating between literary and genre fiction are relevant and appropriate (that is, that the difference between genres is more significant than the difference within them), that there is a significant and meaningful difference in the way people read fiction and nonfiction (and therefore should be in how we teach it), and that work and leisure reading are easily differentiated (and therefore easy to study separately). It is only through working with actual, nonacademic readers that we are forced to call these assumptions into question and to recognize a need for rethinking some of our fundamental assumptions about reading.

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<sup>92</sup> Simonds appears to be the first to note the irrelevance of the fiction/nonfiction distinction for a reader-oriented analysis of reading in *Women and Self-Help Culture* (1992).

These problems with categorization become even more convoluted when considerations of digital reading are added to the mix. By listening to how readers struggle to define their digital reading experiences, as Madelyn does, we contextualize the cultural struggles to define reading as well, as explained above. We must also be careful, as Matthew Kirshenbaum has recently noted, to recognize “the diversity of activity—and the diversity of reading—that takes place on [a computer] screen” (B20). Inherent in this discussion are questions about what types of materials should be considered in studies of reading. While some scholars have argued that limiting our understanding of reading to books leads to a misunderstanding of the upcoming generation of media-savvy readers,<sup>93</sup> most of the existing studies with adult readers focus primarily on book reading.<sup>94</sup> Not only will considerations of digital reading be important if we wish to understand the changing nature of reading, but my research makes it clear that a significant portion of what all generations of Americans read is not contained in books, as is the case with each of the readers included here who reads periodicals on a daily basis. The particulars of the daily reading habits of avid readers reveal distinctions in types of reading based upon what media is read, when it is read, and how it is read that are fundamental if we wish to have a fully formulated definition of reading.

My work also emphasizes the need for attention to the material aspects of reading, as digital media and history of the book scholars have already pointed out in

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<sup>93</sup> Paulette Rothbauer provides a useful summary and bibliography of studies that have considered the diverse forms of reading engaged in by young people in *Reading Matters*, p. 118-123. See Mackey for a more individualized study of the way sixteen teenagers use reading across media.

<sup>94</sup> As mentioned, national studies of reading often include periodicals and have recently begun to include internet reading as well. See *Reading Matters* p. 133-147 for a useful overview and bibliography of these studies. However, there is still the tendency to juxtapose internet reading with other types reading rather than to see it as a legitimate part of daily reading experiences, as seen most clearly and recently in the NEA’s *To Read or Not to Read* report published in November of 2007.

their respective fields. A central tenet in these disciplines is that the material presentation of a text effects how a reader understands and interprets it.<sup>95</sup> As Chartier has explained, the move to digital media disrupts deeply ingrained interpretative systems that we use to distinguish between texts: on a computer screen “all texts, whatever their genre, are produced or received through the same medium and very similar forms, usually decided on by the reader him or herself. Thus a textual continuity is created that no longer differentiates discourse from its material inscription” (“Languages” 142). Or, in layman’s terms, how we receive a magazine, scholarly journal, literary novel, or newspaper are all much more similar on a computer screen than how we would encounter them in a material format and “hence the anxiety or the confusion of readers who must confront or overcome the disappearance of the most strongly internalized criteria that once enabled them to distinguish, to classify, and to structure different types of discourse” (142). Thus, the work of these scholars can provide us with a lens for interpreting the emphasis placed on books by the readers included in this study. Though all of the readers included here use the internet, they primarily use it in an informational or communication capacity, which could explain why only Madelyn thought to mention her reading in this media. Further, though some have considered the benefits of digital reading devices, none of the readers chooses to read novels or literary works on the screen. As Jim put it “as much as I like the notion of being able to carry a library with me, I don’t like the notion of staring at a screen.” The following quotes illustrate the importance of the materiality of the book for both he and Adam:

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<sup>95</sup> See Chartier “Labourers and Voyagers” (1992) in *The Book History Reader* for further exploration of this idea.



A: They're kind of an interesting idea, but I guess I'm old fashioned at heart; I just love the feel of a book in my hands.

J: But, I think one of the things that I enjoy about reading is the, the tactile part of it as well. It's nice to hold a book. It's nice to turn the page. And to be able to turn back and read something again.

Though the textual information is ostensibly the same in each format, the presentation of this information is an important part of the reading experience for each of these readers, hence the strong connection each makes between their reading experiences and their physical books.

Further, not only does the presentation of the books and reading materials influence how a reader will approach and interpret them, but it also stands to reason that the appearance of books and other reading material in a home will influence how the owner of that home is perceived as a reader by others. Thus, as my research illustrates most clearly through Christine, the arrangement of books in a home can reflect the social processes through which readers define themselves as readers, how they wish others to view them as readers, and how they view other readers, as well as the influences of their cultural traditions and social locations in all of these negotiations. Yet, while some limited research has been done into specific book collections, as we see in Adam Reed's discussion of the Henry Williamson book collections of the members of the Henry Williamson Society,<sup>96</sup> we have yet to see an extended analysis of how books, other reading materials, and reading spaces are organized in the home, despite this being the main space in which readers are able to express their reading interests. We also need

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<sup>96</sup> Reed mentions the significance of the members' Henry Williamson books in "Henry and I" (p. 191-2) and provides a more extended analysis throughout "Expanding 'Henry'" (see particularly p. 113-115).

further investigation into how monetary, time, cultural and other considerations influence material aspects of reading; as we have seen in Madelyn and Christine's chapters, physical and monetary considerations play important roles in shaping both their reading and living spaces.

All of these conclusions can also help us not only to understand avid readers, but also to frame questions for understanding those people who do not choose to make reading an important part of their daily lives. For example, once we have a map of the times, places, and spaces in which avid readers read, we can then ask light readers or non-readers what they do in these times, places, and spaces instead. The same is true for the ways avid readers use reading. More fundamentally, by calling into question some of the distinctions we rely upon to define reading, such as leisure and work reading or book and online reading, my work also questions whether our delineations of reader and non-reader are appropriate. In an age where the very nature of reading appears to be undergoing change, it seems clear that we no longer have a stable meaning of reading to rely upon and future scholars of reading will need to be careful to explain what they mean when they use this term.

Concerning the second set of questions, much of what was discovered about the explanations readers provide of their reading practices has been or will be discussed in combination with the first and third sets of questions. However, three important points not covered elsewhere concerning the ways the readers describe their uses for reading deserve mention here. The first concerns genre fiction. As mentioned earlier, the readers included here actively question and redefine genre fiction categories. What is significant under this heading, however, is how they understand the purpose of genre

fiction. Both Madelyn and Adam make the claim that their genre reading, mystery and science fiction respectively, is ultimately about human interactions, which brings up many questions. Do other genre readers feel this way? If so, is it something inherent in genre literature or more related to the way readers read genre literature? What is the significance of the fact that these are both genres traditionally ignored and maligned by the literary academy? Is it significant that both of these readers are careful to distinguish their genre reading from the genre as a whole? As we have seen in his chapter, this claim underlies Adam's participation in the science fiction community, which is largely based upon his belief that science fiction has a transformative potential, the second important use for reading often ignored, or worse maligned, in academic circles, as scholars of Oprah's Book Club have pointed out.<sup>97</sup> The third use for reading that would be interesting for future research is that of metaphorical travels, as described by Madelyn. What unites all of these is that they are ways readers use reading currently absent, or in the case of the transformative power of reading undertheorized, in academic considerations of reading because they do not correspond to the ways that academics understand and use literature.

The third set of questions I proposed explores the ways that reading interacts with, influences, and is influenced by each reader's social location and cultural traditions. Not only did I seek to find out which cultural traditions and social locations were most relevant to each reader's reading practices, but also what we can learn through understanding the particulars of how individual readers negotiate these influences. I formulated this latter consideration in response to current studies of

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<sup>97</sup> See Farr *Reading Oprah* (2005), Kaufman "Oprah's Book Club and the Construction of a Readership" (1994), and Rooney *Reading with Oprah* (2005).

reading which by and large have tended to assume commonalities among groups of readers—whether through their identification as avid readers (as Ross does), a particular aspect of their social location, such as their race or gender (as we see in Bobo and Berggren), or through their belonging to a particular group of readers, such as being a member of a book club (Long) or a reader of a particular genre (Radway). What do life histories of individual readers reveal about the cultural negotiations involved in the act of reading? What is revealed when we take reading beyond the page?

First and foremost, attention to individual differences makes it clear that even people with similar social locations, like Madelyn and Christine, do not necessarily read similar books in the same way. It is useful to consider Madelyn and Christine's shared interest in mystery novels here. Though they are both white, female, middle-class, college-educated, and in their late 50s, Madelyn and Christine view their mystery reading very differently and have different uses for it. As we saw, Madelyn uses a psychological framework to explain that she enjoys mysteries for their "closure" and likens them to nonfiction, while Christine equivocates more about her mystery reading and often describes it in juxtaposition to more "serious" nonfiction and literary fiction reading. What seems more relevant than their social locations to their mystery reading are their professional backgrounds. Both draw connections between their professions and their mystery reading, but while Madelyn sees the tidy endings as an extension of the "problem solving" required by being a chiropractor, Christine notes frequently that she reads mysteries despite her position as a literary academic. Exploring Madelyn and Christine's mystery reading within the matrix of their social and cultural influences

emphasizes how different a study like Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* might have been had the individual lives of romance readers been considered.

These revelations have implications for studies with more formal groups of readers, explored by scholars both historically and in current-day book groups, as well. As Christine Pawley has noted in "Seeking 'Significance:' Actual Readers, Specific Reading Communities," individual studies of "ordinary" historical readers are difficult to conduct:

Uncovering reading choices of those millions of "ordinary" readers who lived out their lives in anonymity presents a different challenge. Such readers rarely left individual records of their lives; while they may have kept diaries, and perhaps wrote letters, because of a class, gender, race, and even regional bias in archival collecting opportunities and policies, these have rarely survived (145).

Understandably, this has led many book historians interested in readers to study reading communities through exploring the "the social and institutional circumstances in which people read" (145), as Pawley herself does. However, this difficulty noted in studying the reading choices of marginalized and non-elite readers underscores the importance of exploring the reading habits of these readers now so as to avoid the perpetuation of the silencing of these voices. Individuating readers within studies of groups could also be a useful direction for those working with current reading groups. Like Long's *Book Clubs*, scholarly work with current book groups tends to focus on book group participants as members of a group, whether the individual group they belong to or as

book group members more generally.<sup>98</sup> As discussed in the introduction, studies that focus on groups of readers assert the importance of overturning the hegemonic tendency to view reading as a solitary activity and instead recognize how it is socially embedded, and studies of this type are essential in helping to break down this image. However, as I have argued, focusing on individual readers does not have to mean returning to the isolated image of the reader and her text; individual readers are just as culturally and socially embedded as groups and an exploration of how the individual cultural influences of each reader interact in a group environment would add richness to our understandings of these groups. A simple example should suffice from my study. Though three of the four readers included here belong to book groups, only Adam feels completely connected to his. Christine and Madelyn both express dissatisfaction with their groups based largely on feeling like their reading preferences differ from what the group prefers. While a study of either of these groups as a whole (or within the context of other groups that are similar) would elide, or perhaps not even uncover, these differences, one that explored the group dynamic by situating each member socially and culturally would be better positioned to account both for the variety of experiences different members have with the group and the books read, and to explore the social and cultural reasons why. Combining these types of studies with those that already exist will create a more socially and culturally complete portrait of this important social phenomenon.

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<sup>98</sup> Indeed the book club phenomenon is one that has received international attention in recent years. See Jenny Hartley *The Reading Groups Book* (2002) for an exploration of this phenomenon at a national level in England and Frances Devlin-Glass “More than a Reader and less than a Critic: Literary Authority and Women's Book-Discussion Groups” (2001) for a discussion of these groups in Australia.

Another conclusion of my study that has relevance for work with book groups and less formal groups of readers is that certain cultural traditions and social locations reveal themselves to be more significant in influencing a reader's reading habits and patterns than others, and further that changing social situations, times, and spaces influence which are more prominent at a given time. In many past studies the perceived significance of particular aspects of a reader's identity were predetermined by the research questions that assumed significance for these aspects in the first place, as Radway has suggested of her own work in *Reading the Romance*; that is, the reason gender revealed itself to be a significant factor in the lives of the romance readers in her study could in large part be due to the fact that she began with the idea that gender was significant.<sup>99</sup> When we begin with a more open-ended approach to determining what factors are most important, we are more able to "take seriously the reader's identities as classed, raced, or ethnically diverse subjects" (Radway "What's the Matter..." 337), and I would argue as well, as culturally situated subjects. Allowing the most significant factors to arise organically brings to light a large variety of social and cultural influences on reading practices, and points to different areas of research for future studies. For example, my study illustrates a need for work to be done on the role of sexuality among individual readers<sup>100</sup>—do other gay readers privilege sexuality as Adam does? If so, how and why do they do so? Is there a significant contingent of LGBT genre readers? If so, why is genre literature more appealing? If not, why not? As noted earlier, the way a chosen profession and reading intersect is also something that could be researched

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<sup>99</sup> See "What's the Matter with Reception Study?" (2008) for Radway's most recent analysis of this problem in *Reading the Romance*.

<sup>100</sup> As of this writing the only study to work with actual gay and lesbian readers focused on young adults (see Kivel and Kleiber), so there is much room for growth in this area.

further. Are avid readers more likely to be drawn to certain types of professions, as we see in Christine and Jim's chapters? If so, what are these professions? How do their professional and pleasure reading interests intersect, influence one another, and/or collide?

As important as it is to make sure that we are not allowing our research agenda to dictate our findings, it is equally important to listen for silences in our research, and there are two important silences that should be noted here. Of the readers I worked with, it is significant that only Adam mentioned his sexuality in terms of his reading interests. When we consider that Adam is a gay man, this omission on the part of the other participants, all married heterosexuals, becomes clearer. Though careful to note the risk of "submitting to a dangerously comfortable essentialism—as if gayness transcended gender, class, race, nationality, or epoch" (165), Wayne Koestenbaum has theorized a gay reader whose reading is similar to Adam's and those lesbian and gay readers included in Beth Kivel and Douglas Kleiber's study: "the gay reader...reads resistantly for inscriptions of his condition, for texts that will confirm a social and private identity founded on a desire for other men" (165). While more research is needed to determine the extent to which sexuality is an important influence on readers, the fact that it is mentioned as an important factor by Adam, but not by the heterosexual readers included, points to the need to consider the potential role of sexuality and also of other normative and non-normative social positions on readers.

Nowhere has the role of normativity been considered more thoroughly than in considerations of race, which brings us to the second significant absence in my study.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> For an extended discussion of how whiteness has been normalized see George Lipsitz *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* (1998) and Richard Dyer *White* (1997).



None of the readers included here identified race as a significant factor in their reading, and it came up only twice during all of the interviews I conducted—once in reference to Jim’s “talking to the elders in little villages in Gabon who remembered the very first whites who came up the river in the dugouts” and another in reference to a short-lived “guilty white southerner” phase in Madelyn’s reading. In both cases the mention was very brief and, after consideration, I decided not to include them in their chapters because I felt that doing so would privilege what I thought should be important rather than what each reader identified as important. In the case of Jim, despite a life of living and working abroad in places where being white put him in the minority, race was never mentioned again and never in connection with his reading. In Madelyn’s case, other than her initial brief mention, the only time she discussed race again was when I asked her to clarify what she meant in a follow-up interview, at which point she primarily attributed her interest in black literature to her curiosity (as she did with much of her reading). Given that I was the impetus for this second response and that her answers were much more expansive on other topics, I decided that focusing on race in her chapter would privilege my point of view rather than hers. However, the absence of mention of race other than these brief instances, particularly among a group of white readers interviewed by a white researcher, does deserve mention here for its very absence, especially in light of studies like Jacqueline Bobo’s that assert race as an important factor in reception among marginalized (in this case black) women. As Richard Dyer has argued:

the invisibility of whiteness as a racial position in white (which is to say dominant) discourse is of a piece with its ubiquity...precisely because of

this and their placing as norm [white people] seem not to be represented to themselves *as* whites but as people who are variously gendered, classed, sexualized, and abled (3).

Theories such as these may help to explain *why* the readers included in this study do not identify their race as a significant factor in their reading and are able to identify other things, but we also must be careful not to allow these considerations to supersede the explanations of the readers as Radway did with gender *Reading the Romance*. For as we saw, despite numerous theoretical arguments asserting the importance of considerations of gender in reading, none of these readers identified gender as significant either; but perhaps more importantly, typical signifiers of gendered reading were shown to be irrelevant. For example, though Jim's reading interests align with typically male reading interests as described by Tepper, closer consideration of his reading habits make it clear that what he reads is more dictated by space and time than by gender—that is, he reads less fiction because he does not have the time to engage with it, not because he is male and therefore prefers not to read it. These types of details, available only through in-depth work with actual readers, suggest that isolating aspects of a reader's social location for analysis is less illustrative than contextualizing each reader socially and culturally.

In giving voice to readers commonly left out of historical and current pictures of reading, the cultural portraits of the avid readers included herein contribute to our historical understanding of common readers, ask scholars to rethink some of our fundamental categories and assumptions about reading, and suggest many fruitful areas for future research. As we face the tripartite textual revolution described by Chartier—

including fundamental shifts in the reproduction, medium, and uses and perception of the written word—it will become even more important that the ways individual readers are coping with this change be heard.

## APPENDIX A

### Template for Interview Questions for Initial Interview

Note: This provides the template I worked from during my initial interview with each reader and should not be read as an exact transcript. While I did ask these general questions, it should be noted that the shape of the questions was molded to each particular interview situation and several additional questions, mostly of a clarifying nature, were also asked during each of these interviews. The questions asked in the remaining interviews all varied widely depending on the information gained during this initial interview with each reader.

I began each initial interview by explaining a little more about my project. Then I clarified that the purpose of the first interview was to understand each reader's reading history and how he/she became the reader that she/he is today and that the next interview would focus more on how he/she currently seems her/himself as a reader.

1. The first question will provide a map for the remainder of the interview today. I like to begin by asking for you to think for a moment about the path your reading has taken over your lifetime. If you were to divide your life into phases or chapters of reading, what would they be?
2. Then for each phase, I have a few questions:
  - a. How would you describe this phase in your reading?
  - b. What types of books did you read during this phase? Any favorite books or types of books that characterizer this phase? Why?
  - c. Why were you reading? Reasons drawn to particular things
  - d. What factors influenced your reading during this phase?
  - e. What other types of things were you into during this period of your life?
3. What are some of the key influences that you feel have shaped you as a reader?
4. Do you have any important memories that stand out to you when you think about yourself as a reader?
5. Only for Christine: Why did you choose to get a PhD in English and become an English professor?
6. Is there anything else important to forming you as a reader that you haven't mentioned yet? Anything you've not talked about that's standing out to you?

After we finished with the questions, I reiterated that the next interview would be about their current reading interests and asked each of them to prepare a reading journal that included what, when, and where they read in preparation for this meeting.

APPENDIX B  
READER BIBLIOGRAPHIES

To provide a more complete picture of each reader's interests, this Appendix includes all of the books and periodicals mentioned by each reader in their respective chapters, as well as other key works mentioned during our interviews. I have also included all of the reading lists compiled by each reader during our work together and the order of the books reflects the way they were listed by each participant. In the cases where an edition was not specified and more than one edition exists, I have included the author, title, and paperback publication date. Each work is designated as fiction or nonfiction. Genres are also indicated where relevant.

*Adam*

There is no reading list included here because Adam was the only reader not to keep a list of books for this project. His is listed first because of length.

Science Fiction Novels and Key Authors

Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. 1985.  
Barry, Barbara. *The Firestone*. 1992.  
Duane, Diane. The Tale of Five Series. 1979-current.  
Duncan, Hal. *Vellum* (2006) & *Ink: The Book of All Hours* (2007).  
Gaiman, Neil. *American Gods* (2002), *Anansi Boys* (2006) and others.  
Kay, Guy Gavriel. The Fionavar Tapestry: *The Summer Tree* (1984), *The Wandering Fire* (1986), and *The Darkest Road* (1987), and others.  
Robinson, Frank M. *The Power*. 1956.  
Russell, Mary Doria. *The Sparrow* (1996) & *Children of God* (1998).

Other key authors: Ellen Kushner, China Mieville

Other Important Texts/Series

The Hardy Boys Mystery Series (f)  
Rowling, J.K. The Harry Potter Series. (1997-2007) (f)  
Ryman, Geoff. 253. <<http://www.ryman-novel.com/>> (f)  
Shakespeare, William. The Collected Works. (f)

Periodicals

*Express* ("Washington's Free Daily Newspaper" published by *The Washington Post* and distributed at Metro stations)

*The Onion* ("Every once in a while I'll supplement or supplant [*Express*] with the latest issue")

Science Fiction Magazines:

*Analog Science Fiction and Fact*  
*The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*  
*Asimov's Science Fiction*  
*Realms of Fantasy*

## Madelyn

### Important Books

- Allison, Dorothy. *Bastard Out of Carolina*. 1993. (f) (read in book group)  
Styron, William. *Sophie's Choice*. 1979. (f) (read in Chiropractic school)  
Trumbo, Dalton. *Johnny Got His Gun*. 1939. (f) (read in college in the late-1960s)

### Favorite Mystery Writers

- George, Elizabeth. Inspector Lynley Series. 1988-current. (14 books as of 2008)  
Reichs, Cathy. Temperance "Bones" Brennan Series. 1997-current.  
(10 books as of 2008)—Reichs is also a forensic anthropologist.  
Vachss, Andrew. The Burke Series. 1985-2007. (17 books as of 2008 and five stand alone novels). Vachss is also an active advocate of child protection.

### Periodicals

- The Washington City Paper*  
*The Washington Post*  
*This Old House*  
Various cooking, sewing, and travel magazines

### Reading Lists

- April 1, 2006-May 9, 2006  
April 1: George, Elizabeth. *With No One as a Witness*. 2006. (mystery)  
April 4-20: Bruen, Ken. Jack Taylor Novels. *The Guards* (2003), *The Killing of the Tinkers* (2004), and *The Magdalen Martyrs* (2005).<sup>102</sup> (mystery)  
Ongoing: Abu-Jaber, Diana. *The Language of Baklava*. 2006. (nf)  
April 24: Lynch, Jim. *The Highest Tide*. 2006. (mystery)  
No Date: O'Connell, Carol. *Winter House*. 2004. (mystery)

### May 9, 2006-July 11, 2006

This list was conveyed to me verbally during our third interview and reflects the order in which she listed them.

- O'Connell, Carol. *Dead Famous*. 2004. (mystery) (read on vacation)  
Guiley, Rosemary. *Dreamwork for the Soul*. 1998. (nf)  
Abu-Jaber, Diana. *The Language of Baklava*. 2006. (nf)<sup>103</sup>  
Fussell, Paul. *Class: A Guide Through the American Status System*. 1992. (nf)  
Servan-Schreiber, David. *The Instinct to Heal: Curing Depression, Anxiety and Stress Without Drugs and Without Talk Therapy*. 2004. (nf)  
Provine, Robert. *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation*. 2001. (nf)  
Makine, Andrei. *Dreams of my Russian Summers*. 1998. (f)

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<sup>102</sup> I've listed these books together because this is how they were listed on Madelyn's reading list. They are the first, second, and third books in the Jack Taylor mystery series.

<sup>103</sup> This book is listed twice because she listed it twice.

*Jim*

Important Books/Series

- Conrad, Joseph. 1897. "Preface." *The Nigger of Narcissus*. Great Literature Online.  
<<http://conrad.classicauthors.net/Narcissus/Narcissus1.html>> 12 Mar, 2008. (f)
- Defoe, Daniel. *A Journal of the Plague Year*. 1722. (f)<sup>104</sup>
- Faulkner, William. *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and subsequently his other books. (f)
- Fraser, George MacDonald. The Flashman Series. 1969-2005. (12 books) (f)
- MacDonald, John D. The Travis McGee Series. 1964-1985 (21 books). (f)
- Authors to pass on: Carl Hiaasen, Elmore Leonard (f)

Peace Corp Books

- "A collection of possibly three works in one volume of [Joseph] Conrad."  
"A Couple of Collections of E.E. Cummings poetry."  
"A Collected Works of [William] Shakespeare."

Periodicals

- The Wall Street Journal*  
*The Economist*  
*The New Yorker*  
*The New York Review of Books*  
*Biblical Archeology Review*  
*National Geographic*  
Maine Magazines: *Down East, Portland*

Reading Lists

March 10-April 6, 2007

- 10 Mar:<sup>105</sup> Weir, Alison. *Eleanor of Aquitaine: A Life*. Ballantine Books, 2001. (nf)
- No Date: Pressfield, Steven. *The Afghan Campaign: A Novel*. Doubleday, 2006. (f)
- 27 Mar: Bell, Madison Smartt. *Toussaint Louverture: A Biography*. New York: Pantheon, 2007. (nf)
- 4 Apr: Cornwell, Bernard. *Sharpe's Fury: Richard Sharpe & the Battle of Barrosa, March 1811 (Richard Sharpe's Adventure Series #11)*. HarperCollins, 2006. (f) (finished quickly in order to trade with a friend)

April 7-June 22, 2007

- 7 Apr: Parker, Robert. *Hundred Dollar Baby*. Putnam Adult, 2006. (f)
- 15 May: Kagan, Robert. *Dangerous Nation*. New York: Knopf, 2006. (nf)  
(read in Cairo and finished on the plane ride back)
- 14 June: Horwitz, Tony. *Blue Latitudes: Boldly Going Where Captain Cook has Gone Before*. New York: Picador, 2003. (nf)

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<sup>104</sup> This book is primarily important because it encouraged his uncle to introduce Jim to the Flashman series, as discussed in his chapter.

<sup>105</sup> These dates are written as he wrote them on his list and refer to the date that he completed each book.

21 June: Eggers, Dave. *What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng*. New York: McSweeney's, 2006. (f)<sup>106</sup>  
(finished the night before the interview—typically read in his chair downstairs)

June 23, 2007-August 10, 2007

No Date: Webb, James. *Lost Soldiers*. 2002. (f)

11 July: Nicolson, Adam. *Seize the Fire: Heroism, Duty, and Nelson's Battle of Trafalgar*. 2006. (read on the plane to Sudan). (nf)

14 July: Devlin, Larry. *Chief of Station, Congo: Fighting the Cold War in a Hot Zone* (titled *Kinshasa Station Chief* on his list). New York: PublicAffairs, 2007. (nf)

17 July: Waugh, Evelyn. *Scoop*. 2003. (f)

8 Aug: Sides, Hampton. *Blood and Thunder: The Epic Story of Kit Carson and the Conquest of the American West*. Doubleday, 2006. (nf)

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<sup>106</sup> Though this is technically classified as “fictional biography,” it is very heavily based upon the life of Valentino Achak Deng.



## Christine

### Important Books/Series

Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Legend of Good Women*. 1386/1388. (poetry)  
Dunnett, Dorothy. *Lymond Chronicles*. 1961-1975 (6 books). (historical fiction)  
----. *The House of Niccolo*. 1986-2000 (8 books). (historical fiction)  
Jordan, Robert. *Knife of Dreams*. 2005. (fantasy, on nightstand)  
McEwan, Ian. *Atonement*. 2001. (fiction)  
Peters, Ellis (Edith Pargeter)—medieval fiction and mysteries  
Stratton-Porter, Gene. *A Girl of the Limberlost*. 1909. (children's fiction)

### Mystery Fiction

In the case of mystery fiction, Christine emphasized the authors rather than the books, so I've listed them this way.

Current writers: Frances Fryfield (psychological thrillers), P.D. James ("I love"), Ian Rankin, Ruth Rendell, Minette Walters ("her writing is so brilliant and it's compelling"), & Elizabeth George (though she gets "irritated with her")

Classic writers: Margery Allingham, Nicholas Blake, Edmund Crispin, Michael Innes ("just wonderful").

Historical mysteries: Lindsey Davis, Laurie King, Charles Todd (WWI), Peter Tremayne (7<sup>th</sup> century)

### Periodicals

*The Washington Post*

*The New York Times* and *New York Times Book Review*

*The New Yorker*

*Opera News* ("I'm an opera fanatic and I love opera")

*Consumer Reports* (just browses "because it comes to the house")

*Southern Living*

Cancelled due to time constraints: *Smithsonian*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Games*

### Reading Lists

This list is from the journal Christine keeps of every book she reads, which she began in 1981. For space and consistency reasons, I've listed only the books she read during and directly before our work together. Books are listed in the order in which they are listed in her journal. Books that she did not complete are marked with an "X" in her journal, which I've reflected here as well.

February 2007

Garth, John. *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle Earth*. 2005. (nf).

Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. Scholastic, 2003. (f)

Haddam, Jane. *The Headmaster's Wife*. 2005. (mystery)

March 2007

- Franklin, Ariana. *Mistress of the Art of Death*. Putnam Adult, 2007. (historical mystery)  
Kelly, Mary Anne. *Pack up the Moon*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2006. (f) X  
Todd, Charles. *A False Mirror (Inspector Ian Rutledge Mysteries)*. William Morrow, 2007. (mystery)  
Wharton, Edith. *The House of Mirth*. 1905.

April 2007

- Perry, Anne. *At Some Disputed Barricade*. Ballantine Books, 2007. (f)  
Maron, Margaret. *Winter's Child*. Mysterious Press, 2006. (Deborah Knott mystery)

May 2007

- Perry, Anne. *We Shall not Sleep*. Ballantine Books, 2007. (f)  
Burns, Marjorie. *Perilous Realms: Celtic And Norse in Tolkien's Middle-Earth*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005. (nf)  
Dunlap, Suzanne. *Emilie's Voice*. Touchstone, 2005. (historical fiction)  
Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Children of Hurin*. 2007. (f)  
Crombie, Deborah. *Water Like a Stone*. William Morrow, 2007. (mystery)

June 2007

- Leon, Donna. Title not provided. 2007. (mystery)  
Trollope, Anthony. *Doctor Wortle's School*. 1881. (f)<sup>107</sup>  
L'Engle, Madeleine. *A Wrinkle in Time*. 1962. (f)  
Clarke, Suzanna. *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*. Hardcover 2004. (f)  
Roe, Caroline. *A Portion for a Widow*. Berkley, 2001. (historical mystery)  
Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Scholastic, 1997. (f)  
---. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. Scholastic, 1998. (f)  
Lerer, Seth. *Inventing English: A Portable History of the Language*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. (nf)

July 2007

- McEwan, Ian. *On Chesil Beach*. Nan A Talese, 2007. (f)  
Vonnegut, Kurt. *A Man Without A Country*. Seven Stories Press, 2005. (nf)  
Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. Scholastic, 1999. (f)  
---. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Scholastic, 2000. (f)  
---. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. Scholastic, 2003. (f)  
---. *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. Scholastic, 2005. (f)  
---. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. Scholastic, 2007. (f)  
Mugglenet.com "What will Happen in Harry Potter 7?"  
Joss, Morag. *Fearful Symmetry*. Dell, 2005. (Sara Selkirk mystery)  
---. *Funeral Music* (listed as *Funeral Rites*). Dell, 2005. (Sara Selkirk mystery)  
Cleverly, Barbara. *Tug of War: A Joe Sandilands Murder Mystery*. Carroll and Graf,

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<sup>107</sup> Christine allowed me to borrow her reading lists at our June 13 interview and based on our interviews a few books appear to have gotten lost between her handing over the official list and beginning a temporary one. This book appeared on neither list, but she mentioned having just finished it in our interview, so I have placed it between the end of the official list and the beginning of the temporary one.

2007. (mystery)

Zafon, Carlos Ruiz. *The Shadow of the Wind*. 2005. (f)

August 2007

di Robilant, Andrea. *A Venetian Affair: A True Tale of Forbidden Love in the 18th Century*. Vintage, 2005. (nf)

Mullany, Janet. *The Rules of Gentility*. Avon A, 2007. (historical romance)

Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. Scholastic, 2007. (f)

Robinson, Peter. *Piece of My Heart*. William Morrow, 2006. (mystery)

Sansom, C.J. *Dark Fire*. Penguin, 2005. (historical mystery)

September/October 2007

Gee, Sophie. *The Scandal of the Season*. Scribner, 2007. (f) X

Smith, Sarah. *Chasing Shakespeares*. Washington Square Press, 2004. (f) X<sup>108</sup>

Frazer, Margaret. *The Maiden's Tale: (Sister Frevisse Medieval Mysteries)*. Berkley, 1998. (historical mystery)

Fossum, Karin. *The Indian Bride*. Trans. Charlotte Barslund. Harcourt, 2007. (mystery)

Lockwood, Jane. *Forbidden Shores*. NAL Trade, 2007. (historical romance)

Atkinson, Kate. *Case Histories: A Novel*. Bay Back Books, 2005. (mystery)

Barrett, Andrea. *The Voyage of the Narwhal*. 1999. (f)

Shapiro, James. *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599*. New York: HarperCollins, 2005. (nf)

### Future Reading

Lee, Hermione. *Edith Wharton*. New York: Knopf, 2007. (nf)

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<sup>108</sup> It seems noteworthy that she began this month with two books she chose not to finish and is perhaps indicative of the influence of the beginning of the semester on her reading. Note as well that her nonfiction reading begins later in the month.

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