

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: *THE BRIDGES OF MADISON COUNTY AND IOWA: PRODUCTION, RECEPTION, AND PLACE*

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The 1992 Warner Books novel *The Bridges of Madison County*, the first by Robert James Waller, a University of Northern Iowa Management professor, was a “surprise” success, marketed as literary fiction through a “word-of-mouth” campaign of “handselling” in independent bookstores, which put it on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Once the love story became a bestseller, the story of its popularity began to appear in mass entertainment media, notably on National Public Radio’s “Morning Edition” and on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*. It sold over ten million copies and became the fastest-selling hardcover novel of its era. *Bridges*’ pretension to literariness touched a nerve with New York cultural gatekeeping literary reviewers, who conflated its perceived sub-literary qualities with its Iowa origins, middlebrow readership, and even cultural disease. Readers, however, identified with and participated in the novel’s realistic frame narrative, which constructed the story and its setting, Winterset, Iowa, as a text and place where true love was made manifest. *Bridges* was parodied for its perceived sexism and pretentious language. A movie adaptation was made by Clint Eastwood and Steven

Spielberg, and *Bridges*-related tourism changed the nature of Winterset's economy and community.

What can we learn about American culture from the unexpected, record-setting sales success of *The Bridges of Madison County*, situated as it was on the boundaries of art and popular culture and of local community and mass media? At each stage of the book's communications circuit—production, sales success, differing receptions by reviewers and readers, and reintegration into the setting of Iowa—the case of *The Bridges of Madison County* illustrates that cultural boundaries are contested and maintained in part by invoking place and region, that the power of mass media depends on the participation of individuals and local community, and that local communities will make their own power in the face of, and out of, the power of mass media.

THE BRIDGES OF MADISON COUNTY AND IOWA:
PRODUCTION, RECEPTION, AND PLACE

by

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DEDICATION

For Charlie and Thelma Wahl

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER ONE Iowa as the Locale of Production for <i>The Bridges of Madison County</i>	19
CHAPTER TWO The Marketing and Promotion of <i>The Bridges of Madison County</i>	73
CHAPTER THREE Reading the Reviews of <i>The Bridges of Madison County</i>	137
CHAPTER FOUR Reader Reception of <i>The Bridges of Madison County</i>	175
CHAPTER FIVE Winterset, Iowa, and <i>The Bridges of Madison County</i>	218
EPILOGUE	264

INTRODUCTION

The 1992 Warner Books novel *The Bridges of Madison County*, the first by a University of Northern Iowa Management professor named Robert James Waller, was a “surprise” success, marketed as literary fiction by Warner Books through a campaign of “handselling” in independent bookstores, which put it on bestseller lists. Once the love story became a bestseller, the story of its popularity and its charismatic first-time author began to appear in mass entertainment media in 1993, notably on National Public Radio’s “Morning Edition” and on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*. Readers kept buying it, until it had sold over ten million copies and, according to its publisher, become the fastest-selling hardcover novel of all time (Maryles, “Behind the Bestsellers” August 7, 1995). At the same time, it received scathing reviews from important literary publications. As the book, its unlikely success, and its sentimental prose style became well-known, it was parodied in Garry Trudeau’s *Doonesbury* and elsewhere. A movie adaptation was made by Clint Eastwood and Steven Spielberg, and its setting, the real-life town of Winterset, Iowa, added *Bridges*-related tourism as a major part of its economy as “pilgrims” began visiting after reading the book and seeing the movie.

What can we learn about American culture from the unexpected, record-setting sales success of *The Bridges of Madison County*, situated as it was on the boundaries of art and popular culture and of local community and mass media? At each stage of the book’s communications circuit—production, sales success, differing receptions by reviewers and readers, and reintegration into the setting of Iowa—the case of *The Bridges of Madison County* illustrates that cultural boundaries are contested and maintained in part by invoking place and region, that the power of mass media depends on the

participation of individuals and local community, and that local communities will make their own power in the face of, and out of, the power of mass media.

Origins of the study

My parents, attending the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls, Iowa, in the early 1960s, knew Robert Waller as a fellow student, by all accounts a Big Man On Campus. I was first-year Master's student in English at UNI when the book came out in 1992. This study was born at that time in Baker Hall at UNI. In the 60s Baker was my father's men's dormitory; it had been converted to English department offices by the time of my student career. In the English office in 1992, we—professors, students, and administrative staff—had frequent discussions about our reactions to the book and the portrayal of Iowa in the national entertainment media gaze. We also gossiped about Waller, with whom Master's students in English were unlikely to have had contact, but about whom we were learning from television and radio. I was one of the few people who saw Waller at the threshold of B. Dalton Booksellers in the Cedar Falls mall in April 1992, waiting in vain for someone to buy his just-published first novel. I was struck with Waller's distinctive appearance: long gray hair, delicate facial features, slender six-foot frame clad entirely in pressed blue denim, and Cuban-heel "Beatle boots." Glancing at his book on my way by, I surmised that it must be a history of covered bridges.

Two years later, when I moved to the East Coast, the book was on the best-seller list and the Clint Eastwood movie adaptation was about to be released. At that time, the book figured in my consciousness as one of the few things people knew about Iowa when they learned I was from there. The fact that Iowa figures so strongly in critical and personal reactions to the book became what interested me most about it. In his 1993 *New*

Yorker review of *Bridges* Anthony Lane wrote that “nobody I know has read [*Bridges*]. Nobody I know even knows anybody who has read the book.” However, he allowed, “that just means I travel in small, crabby circles.” My own circles must be significantly less crabby than Rich’s, as it seems that nearly everybody I know has either read the book or knows someone who has. Many of them liked it, although nearly everyone says that it is the kind of book that just provides entertainment. I have found myself being careful to issue the caveat that this study of *Bridges* is “not literary but cultural,” which reminds me of the cultural issues bound up in the very mention of the book. At the same time, as an Iowan by birth, it has seemed to me that the book was easy to criticize because of its origins and setting in Iowa, and I admit to taking slight offense at that bias.

I have, of course, tried to ensure that the foci in this study, including those of culture and place, are balanced and objective, but the experience of discussing the book has made me realize that its existence means something to me as an Iowan, an American, and a consumer of popular culture (even a “fan” of some types of popular novels and popular music). So I began to ask, what does it mean to other members of such communities, and to individual readers? *Bridges* presents an excellent opportunity to explore such questions, sitting as it does at the intersection between popular culture and literary culture, and between local/regional artistic production and national/global marketing and distribution.

To that end, this work is intended as a factual history of *The Bridges of Madison County* and its associated texts, discourses, and effects in America, and also as an attempt to discern cultural meaning from that history. The study is organized according to Robert Darnton’s formulation of the life of a book in his 1982 *Daedalus* article, “What is the

History of Books,” later republished in Cathy Davidson’s *Reading in America*. It follows the stages of *Bridges*’ “communications circuit,” as Darnton puts it, over the immediate lifespan of *Bridges* texts and discourses, from roughly 1991 to 1996. In the case of *Bridges*, that circuit takes shape in the following stages: strategies of authorship, circumstances of publication and methods of selling, critical reception, and readers’ uses. These stages might also be conceptualized more simply as a triangle, with “cultural force or influence” passing through “the whole complex organism of the book and magazine trade” as it travels in both directions between author and reader, as William Charvat suggests in “Literary Economics and Literary History” (284). Hallmarks of *Bridges*’ uniqueness as a bestseller are its origins in and effects on Iowa; therefore, examination of each stage in its communications circuit includes some discussion of Iowa. This study also adds a stage to the communications circuit of books by examining what happens to the real-life local setting of a book such as *Bridges* as a result of its popularity. Another special contribution of this study in light of the communications circuit of books is a rare chance to examine information provided by readers about their interaction with a bestseller such as *Bridges*, through examination of letters written by readers to Robert Waller.

Primary Sources

Several types of primary sources were gathered for this study. First, I conducted a lengthy interview with Robert Waller in Cedar Falls, Iowa, in 2000. Shortly after *Bridges* became the topic of this study, it happened that Waller was coming back to Cedar Falls to speak at the University of Northern Iowa English Department’s Celebrating Critical Writing Conference and its associated H.W. Renninger lecture. Waller’s friend—and

former folk-duo partner—Scott Cawelti, chair of the UNI English Department and organizer of the conference, helped me set up an interview with Waller during the conference. I interviewed Waller for several hours at the Cedar Falls Holiday Inn before the conference. At some points during our conversation, for example when we were discussing the origins of *Bridges*, I recognized some of what he was saying from media reports I had previously seen. At other times, he spoke more extemporaneously and candidly, such as when we discussed authors who had influenced him or the circumstances of his moving from Iowa to Texas.

I also recorded data at three appearances made by Waller at the conference. The first was the University's annual H. W. Renninger lecture, endowed in memory of the late Dr. H. W. Renninger, head of the UNI English Department from 1939 to 1968. Waller's lecture, titled "*The Bridges of Madison County: The Perquisites and Costs of Fame*," was an anecdotal description of the fame *Bridges* had brought him. Said costs included his busy promotional schedule of interviews and book signings, which he referred to as "meat-packing." Perquisites included the fact that *Bridges* meant so much to so many people, and, he joked, that beautiful women had thrown themselves at him. This lecture yielded information about Waller's view of the writing, publication, promotion, and sales success of *Bridges*.

The second, titled "Getting the Words Rightly Set: Technique, Magic, Execution," was the keynote address at the annual Celebrating Critical Writing Contest and Conference, which gathers area high school students and teachers, and UNI English majors and professors, to discuss writing and literature. Waller's address included an introduction given by Cawelti, during which he summarized how Waller had been

viewed by his contemporaries as a student at UNI. In this talk, Waller encouraged the students in attendance to avoid writing workshops and instead take their inspiration from their Iowa surroundings, as he said he had always done.

The third Waller appearance I recorded during the conference was a reading at Bought Again Books, a used bookstore near the UNI campus in Cedar Falls. Waller did not read from *Bridges*, or from any of his other novels, instead sampling from his early essays, and including an unpublished short story written since his move to Texas, a light tale of a small-town Texas high school football team. I noted how personable Waller was to the fans in attendance, answering questions he had undoubtedly heard many times before, but to which he gave obvious thought and attention.

At the conference, Waller also attended my own talk, titled “Putting *The Bridges of Madison County* in its Place,” during which I had the daunting task of reading, in the hearing of the author himself, the very worst things reviewers had to say about *Bridges*. My interpretation of those criticisms—that they revealed a bias against cultural production from Iowa and the Midwest—must have been satisfactory to Waller, because he invited me to visit him in Texas later that year to examine some of the letters he had received from readers. At Waller’s ranch, I collected evidence from a large cardboard box of letters from readers. I was given twenty-four hours access to the box of several hundred letters and selected ninety or so on which to take notes. The primary data collected from these letters were used as the basis for Chapter Four of this study. Although this amount of data from readers cannot be used as a scientific sample to explain the reactions of the millions of people who read *Bridges*, some surprising and interesting patterns of reader response did emerge.

In preparing this study, I performed as complete a consultation as possible of the reviews of *Bridges* and of Waller's later novels, and a similarly complete consultation of media texts relating to both the novel and movie adaptation of *Bridges*, including print journalism features and national television and radio broadcasts. Those most pertinent to the book's, and sometimes to the movie's, production or reception were chosen for analysis. I hope the presentation of these media texts about *Bridges* over its lifespan as a bestseller will prove useful for readers interested in considering, alongside the analysis performed, how media reflect and frame American attitudes about particular popular culture texts, especially bestselling novels.

Scholarly sources

This study uses sources from various academic and professional disciplines for scholarly context. Some key scholars and works that are included in the study are listed here. There are only four published scholarly articles directly addressing *Bridges*—Bonnie Brennen's 1996 "Bridging the Backlash: A Cultural Materialist Reading of *The Bridges of Madison County*" from *Studies in Popular Culture*, Walter Metz's 1997 "Another Being We Have Created Called 'Us': Point of View, Melancholia, and the Joking Unconscious in *The Bridges of Madison County*" (which focuses primarily on the film adaptation but does discuss the novel) from *Velvet Light Trap*; Lauren Berlant's 1999 "Poor Eliza" from *American Literature*; and Steven Kellman's 1995 "Food Fights in Iowa: the Vegetarian Stranger in Recent Midwest Fiction" from *The Virginia Quarterly Review*.

To contextualize *Bridges* as a book, scholarship from related disciplines of History and Literary History are employed. Historians of the American Midwest are used

to set the stage for Midwestern attitudes related to cultural production. The early twentieth-century American regionalist movement in literature and art is a context for understanding the local/regional circumstances of the production of *Bridges* in Iowa. Therefore, I have taken into consideration the writing of those involved in that movement, most notably the foremost regionalist proponent of the time, artist and critic Grant Wood, who is closely associated with Iowa. More recent evaluations of the regionalists' impact are also included. Kellman's study of *Bridges*, notable mostly for its discussion of vegetarianism as a symbol of political progressiveness and outsider status in Iowa, is referred to in a discussion of the Iowa context for *Bridges*' production.

Book history scholarship is also important in contextualizing *The Bridges of Madison County*. This field includes a variety of types; most pertinent for this study are works that address strategies and trends in book publishing.

To examine how readers and reviewers made use of *Bridges* as an object and text, the work of historians and critics of popular literature and/or readership is also useful. The work of Elizabeth Long, Wendy Griswold, Richard Ohmann, R. Gordon Kelly, and others are used to examine readers' reactions to *Bridges*. Key questions of *Bridges*' readership revolve around the book's perceived status as a romance novel or women's novel. Therefore, scholars who examine readership in terms of gender, such as Janice Radway, are important inclusions. Brennen's and Berlant's assertions about *Bridges*' effects on readers are discussed in conjunction with primary evidence from readers. In addition to these works and since genre and gender are closely associated when considering reader reception, the work of literary historians who address the question of genre is useful in sorting out the meaning of *Bridges* to readers. John Cawelti's

categorization of genres based on the texts of popular novels is especially pertinent in that regard. Cecilia Konchar Farr's 2005 *Reading Oprah: How Oprah's Book Club Changed the Way America Reads*, with a foreword by Elizabeth Long, was also useful in examining many aspects of *Bridges*' production and reception.

Cultural studies and mass communications works that theorize consumers' uses of popular texts, such as John Caughey's *Imaginary Social Worlds*, are also fruitful in surmising why so many readers identified so strongly with *Bridges*. Though less directly applicable to the origins of the book in Iowa, film scholarship—both history and textual analysis—within cultural studies also helps to address questions of consumers' uses of *Bridges*-related products, including the Clint Eastwood adaptation. Metz's film analysis of *Bridges* is discussed along with the text of the movie adaptation of *Bridges*.

Finally, works that might be gathered together under the field of economics plays a part in explaining both Robert Waller as an entrepreneur and the *Bridges*-related entrepreneurship that arose in the wake of the novel's and movie's wide recognition. For example, the work of Roger Riley, Dwayne Baker, and Carlton Van Doren on "movie-induced tourism," used to examine tourist activity in Winterset, Iowa, was originally intended as practical advice for boards of tourism and film offices. Robert Waller's own 1991 economic study of the state of Iowa, commissioned by the state's Office of Economic Development, is a key piece of context for what happened in Iowa because of *Bridges*, and in retrospect, for understanding the origins of *Bridges* itself. That work requires examination of its major influence: the work of management studies guru Peter Drucker, especially his seminal 1982 *Innovation and Entrepreneurship*. Other work that helps provide a context for the origins of *Bridges*, in particular the importance of

Waller's authorship and his situation as an Iowan, includes his 1980s *Des Moines Register* essays and his academic and consulting works in the fields of decision theory and interpretive structural modeling.

Chapters of the study

Taken together, the scholarly work from the various fields mentioned above are used to contextualize this study's examination of what exactly can be said to have happened in the case of *Bridges*, and to posit the cultural meaning of that history. The following is a brief chapter-by-chapter breakdown of the study, illustrating the stages of the history of *The Bridges of Madison County* and the use of relevant primary and secondary sources at each stage.

Chapter One, "Iowa as the Locale of Production for *The Bridges of Madison County*," examines implications of the region of the Midwest, the state of Iowa, and the town of Cedar Falls as the locale of production for *The Bridges of Madison County*. It also examines Robert Waller's status as an Iowan, academic writer, essayist, and musician in order to surmise on his intent in writing *Bridges*. *Bridges'* origin is one of local and regional artistic production and community, and is contextualized in the chapter by historians of literary and artistic regionalism, regionalism's theoretical revision in Cheryl Herr's liberatory "critical regionalism," historians of the Midwest and Iowa literature, data gathered from Robert Waller in interviews and speeches, and Waller's own essays and scholarly work. The history of Waller as an Iowan and as an entrepreneur is especially important in understanding the origins of and intent behind *Bridges*.

Chapter Two, "The Marketing and Promotion of *The Bridges of Madison County*" presents the events leading to and maintaining *The Bridges of Madison County's*

extraordinary sales success, including publication, marketing, and promotion strategies. If the story of *Bridges*' production is that of local entrepreneurship, the story of its sales success is that of a local cultural product's national and global dissemination through the sophisticated machinery of increasingly consolidated global media conglomerates, in this case Warner Books, a division of Time-Warner. Though some industry insiders, according to Simon & Schuster editor-in-chief Michael Korda in *Making the List: A Cultural History of the American Bestseller, 1900-1999*, consider the *Publisher's Weekly* bestseller list a more accurate national indicator of sales than the *New York Times* list, the *Times* holds more cultural prestige (xxvi). Albert Greco notes in his 1995 *The Book Publishing Industry* that the *Times* list is the most important indicator of sales success for the book trade (197). In addition, *Bridges*' success on the *Times* list was an intrusion into the New York-based literary world, as will be shown in Chapter Three. Therefore, the *Times* list seems to better suit the purposes of this study. To illustrate this stage in *Bridges*' history, which also serves as an example of the evolution of the mass marketing of popular "literary fiction" at the time, the chapter is contextualized by sources including book history and mass communication scholarship, transcripts of key broadcasts promoting *Bridges*, reports about *Bridges* and the book trade in *Publishers Weekly*, and data from the *New York Times Book Review*'s hardcover fiction bestseller list from 1992 to 1995.

Chapter Three, "Reading the Reviews of *The Bridges of Madison County*," uses reviews of *Bridges* to situate it within the framework of America's literary gatekeeping institutions and their attitudes about cultural taste and place in America. When *Bridges* was finally reviewed by the *New York Times Book Review* and other literary publications

such as the *New Yorker*—over a year after its publication—those publications mounted all out attacks on the book’s literary merit and decried its popularity as evidence of moral, social, and intellectual decline in America. As negative reviews and critical evaluations mounted, a discourse of place also emerged from their aggregate. This discourse of place was conflated with the critical assertions about the book so that the terms of the literature/popular culture dichotomy were mirrored by a New York/Iowa dichotomy. Therefore, this chapter charts the reaction of literary taste-makers to such a mass marketed “literary” product, using sources including key reviews of *Bridges*, Richard Ohmann’s analysis of New York literary publications and their power, Janice Radway’s and John Cawelti’s studies of literary formulas and literary fiction, Wendy Griswold’s work on the cultural power of literary interpretation, and cultural commentary on popular and literary fiction such as that by journalist Jonathan Yardley.

Chapter Four, “Reader Reception of *The Bridges of Madison County*,” analyzes readers’ experience of *The Bridges of Madison County* as text and commodity. Robert Darnton writes that “Reading remains the most difficult stage to study in the circuit followed by books” (38). An unusual contribution of this study is the opportunity to present some of the letters readers wrote to Waller in order to see what they had to say to him about the book in relation to their own lives. The letters reveal that readers used *Bridges* as a way to reflect upon or discover their own expressive power, often through artistic production. This artistic production was sometimes related to the desire to record their own narratives of their life experiences. Darnton writes that “Books do not merely recount history; they make it” (47), and data from readers of *Bridges* show this to be true on the personal level of the reader. To contextualize this and other patterns, data from the

letters are framed by Bonnie Brennen's and Laura Berlant's reader-oriented analyses of *Bridges* and by John Caughey's, Camile Bacon-Smith's, Janice Radway's, R. Gordon Kelly's, and Elizabeth Long's work on readers' uses of popular texts.

Chapter Five, "*The Bridges of Madison County* and Winterset, Iowa," examines Winterset, Iowa's *Bridges*-related (and bridges-related) tourism industry during the time of the novel's sales success. *Bridges*-related tourism continues in Winterset at the time of this writing, although the controversy it has produced has made residents reconsider the value of their national exposure in relation to their community values. This examination is framed with Waller's study of economic opportunity in Iowa; the work of Peter Drucker on entrepreneurship; Riley, Baker, and Van Doren's scholarship on "movie-induced tourism"; film history and criticism including Walter Metz's analysis of *Bridges* as a movie and novel; and, because the story of *Bridges* tourism shone a spotlight on the town of Winterset, popular media accounts.

An Epilogue discusses events that occurred after 1997, when *Bridges* was no longer a bestseller. Those events illustrate the waning of the attention to and influence of *Bridges*. Unsolved cases of arson targeting the Madison County bridges and *Bridges*-related tourism sites have forced Madison County residents to further evaluate the economic importance of their relationship with the book and movie in relation to their sense of community. Waller's sequel to *Bridges* was published by an independent publisher in Texas and failed to produce the kind of excitement that *Bridges* had. Waller's divorce broke the spell of the "storybook" quality of his long marriage, which had been a part of the promotional context of *Bridges*. Finally, from the vantage point of

the twenty-first century, *Bridges* can be examined in retrospect as a part of the beginning of dramatic changes in the publishing and entertainment media industries.

Value of the study

In examining the meaning of *The Bridges of Madison County*, the novel is considered here in an interdisciplinary context. This study is situated in the interdisciplinary field of American Studies in terms of R. Gordon Kelly's 1974 "Literature and the Historian" in *American Quarterly*, Michael Schudson's 1987 "The New Validation of Popular Culture: Sense and Sentimentality in Academia" in *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, and Robert Berkhofer's 1989 "A New Context for a New American Studies?" in *American Quarterly*. Each of these works calls for a proper historical contextualization of texts and commodities. Kelly notes that literary historians "seek a delicate balance—to avoid identifying the meaning and value of a work too closely with its cultural origins, on the one hand, or too closely with the critic's subjectivity on the other" (142). Therefore, "Literary works as a class of cultural artifacts must be understood in the context of the groups which produced them and responded to them" (149). Schudson writes, "The fact that an anthropologist or literary critic can read an evening meal or a fast food advertisement . . . as a commentary on culture . . . does not mean that participant natives also read the texts that way" (64). Further, ". . . it is as presumptuous to offer critical readings of popular artifacts as it is to interpret high culture artifacts without reference to what the actual audiences may be thinking" (65). Berkhofer outlines the dangers of textual and contextual "fundamentalism," with "the quest for one meaning—usually read as authorial intention in text, document, or even artifact" (589) at one pole and "deconstruction or the linguistic turn" (591), which "denies all documentary

and artifactual fundamentalism” (590), at the other. In negotiating the tension these authors describe, I have tried to consider the *The Bridges of Madison County*’s historical meaning by using documentary evidence to say, as accurately and objectively as possible, what happened at each stage of the book’s communication circuit; and to consider its textual meaning to readers based on that evidence, occasionally adding my own readings of elements of its text.

Even given *Bridges*’ ultimate transience on the American popular culture scene, this study of *Bridges* can contribute to our understanding of American culture and society. A presentation of the historical and textual meanings of a controversial and, in its time, well-recognized popular novel such as *Bridges* reveals divisions in American cultural values including taste, gender, and place. I hope that this study can be used in evaluating other such instances of cultural conflict surrounding popular texts—and such new conflicts arise often.

For example, at the time of this writing, it is especially clear that such conflicts of cultural taste are not merely academic. As the present popular discourse of politics divides the country into “red states” and “blue states,” the diametrically opposed values of each are termed not cultural but “moral.” As such, they are increasingly used as tools for consolidating political power. In turn, that political power affects the liberty of Americans and people around the world. Our current national divisions remind us that cultural values and taste are part and parcel of who we are—or aren’t—as Americans.

Summary of *The Bridges of Madison County*

Finally, it may be useful to provide a summary of the text of the novel itself so that references to it in this study will be understandable.

The novel is the story of the four-day love affair between Robert Kincaid and Francesca Johnson. Robert is a fifty-two year old photographer for *National Geographic* who travels from his home state of Washington to Madison County, Iowa, on assignment in August 1965. He is there to take pictures, or “make” pictures as he calls it (50), of the historic covered bridges (which really exist there). Robert is manly: he drinks Budweiser and smokes Camels; yet sensitive: he likes the words “blue” and “woodsmoke” for how they sound and taste, and is a vegetarian (8). He rails against rationalization in the modern world (155) and thinks of himself as “the last cowboy” (100). Women tell him he exerts tremendous power over them (106). Francesca is a forty-five year old farm wife in Madison County, Iowa, married to a stolid, unromantic man; they have two teenage children. She is of Italian heritage, having met her husband in Italy at the end of World War II. She has a degree in comparative literature and has done some teaching at the local high school. She married her husband because he “offered a reasonable alternative: kindness and the sweet promise of America” (19), but neither he nor the conservative people of Madison County, Iowa, provide her with enough emotional or intellectual stimulation.

Robert and Francesca meet by chance when he stops to ask her directions to the Roseman covered bridge. Her husband and children are away at the Illinois State Fair. She goes with him while he shoots the bridge, then takes him home and makes him a vegetarian supper. They meet again the next day and realize they have fallen in love with one another. They make love. He asks her to come away with him, but she cannot because of her sense of “responsibility” to her husband and family (115). They are both heartbroken when he leaves without her, but the memories and keepsakes that remind

them of their affair, including letters and poems he sends her, and the medallion she gives him, sustain them the rest of their lives.

The story of Robert and Francesca is told through a frame narrative device. In “The Beginning,” a fictional preface to the novel written in the first person and dated “Summer 1991,” a writer, ostensibly Waller, is at his desk “in the autumn of 1989 . . . looking at a blinking cursor” when he is solicited by Francesca’s children, “former Iowans” Michael and Carolyn Johnson, to tell the story of their mother’s affair. Intrigued by their secrecy and earnestness on the phone, he agrees to meet them in Des Moines. There, having flown in especially for the meeting, they show him “documents and magazine clippings and a set of journals written by their mother.” They talk “on and on,” convincing the writer to accept the commission. Despite their fear that “the story might result in tawdry gossip and unkind debasement” of their late parents, they tell the narrator that “in a world where personal commitment in all of its forms seems to be shattering and love has become a matter of convenience,” they feel the tale is “worth the telling” (vii-xii). The narrator researches the events of the affair. The tale then written by the narrator—the novel itself—concludes (but for a “postscript” consisting of an interview with an acquaintance of Robert’s and again introduced by the narrator in first person) with Michael and Carolyn’s discovery, upon their mother’s death, of the documents and objects left specifically to inform them of, and explain the reasons for, her affair with Robert (147-161).

In the course of informing her children of the affair through her journals, she tells them, “I have always used the word ‘powerful’ a lot in thinking about him. . . . I was simply helpless when he made love to me. Not weak. . . . Just, well, overwhelmed by his

sheer emotional and physical power” (153). Later in the journals, she surmises, “Though I suppose it’s not fashionable to say such things in these more enlightened times, I don’t think it’s possible for a woman to possess the peculiar kind of power Robert Kincaid had” (154). At the end of her letter, she even opines that “Robert Kincaid taught me what it was like to be a woman in a way that few women, maybe none, will ever experience” (158).

Let us now turn from this fictional story of the production of *The Bridges of Madison County* to the story of how—and where—it was produced by its author.

CHAPTER ONE

Iowa as the Locale of Production for *The Bridges of Madison County*

Lauren Berlant writes that Waller's intent in *The Bridges of Madison County* is

to take up the decay and failure of possibility that currently casts history as a record of small and big deaths (of persons, souls, and cultures); he wants to help modern persons be something other than tourists visiting the museums and the unlivable landscapes of their own lives. He wants to represent how to reimagine the sublime encounter between the time and space of the nation and the overwhelming difficulties of everyday life for men and women whose modalities of action, abstraction, violence, and desire within normal life progressively empty them out rather than constitute a well-lived life. . . . [H]e also wants to give his readers the aesthetic tools . . . to help them read their lives as evidence for a still shapable future. (660)

Berlant continues to say that in *Bridges*, Waller “repudiates the compulsion to repeat normative forms of personhood across generations and refuses to disavow the aggression at the heart of intimacy’s institutions” (660). Berlant refers here to the semiotic remaking of the world through writing and reading; she does so in tracing the genealogy of the meaning of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a book acknowledged to have had tremendous effects on American society and culture. Berlant shows how books and other entertainment texts including film and drama can convince their audience that the experience of reading them remakes their very person and by extension the world. Perhaps this seems overly dramatic to describe a popular novel such as *Bridges*. We will return to Berlant when discussing readers of *Bridges* in Chapter Four. Let us first turn to

the question of how *Bridges* came to be discussed at all, let alone alongside such classic American popular culture as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

In order to begin to contextualize *The Bridges of Madison County* as an example of American popular culture, this study begins with an examination of the novel's production. What was remarkable in its time about the book's production was the unlikeliness of its point of origin—written in and about Iowa by a middle-aged Iowan economics professor, a first-time author of fiction. For example, *Business Week* summed up the book's sales success with the headline, "How a Little Novel From Nowhere Hit the Big Time" (Tilsner). The most basic question to be asked of this origin is how Robert Waller came to write a novel that was so widely bought and read, selling over 6 million copies in America and 10 million worldwide during its time on the bestseller lists, according to its publisher, Warner Books (Maryles, "Behind the Bestsellers" 7 Aug. 1995). In fact, there is much to explain how this could be so. First, Waller's background as a public figure in Iowa, especially in Cedar Falls, Iowa, at the University of Northern Iowa, can be shown to have contributed to his production of such a popular novel as *Bridges*. Second, Iowa itself has been an important setting for "regionalist" artistic and literary production, both popular and critical. For example, the cultural values expressed in Grant Wood's populist brand of Iowa regionalism in the 1930s, and revived by literary critics in the early 1990s (at the same time that Waller achieved fame with *Bridges*) can be shown to contribute to the meaning of *Bridges* in American culture.

Robert Waller as an Iowan

Robert Waller's background as an Iowan—his rural roots, his local success as an athlete and entertainer as a young man, his later academic and consulting career at the

University of Northern Iowa, his status as an essayist writing about Iowa for an audience of Iowans, and his state-commissioned reporting on Iowa economic development—is important in understanding the origins of *Bridges*. Waller was born in 1939 in the Northeastern Iowa town of Rockford (pop. 800) and grew up an only child on an egg farm. His introspection, creative nature, and love of reading were sometimes at odds with the values of the place, he would later tell me in an interview:.

I think it's safe to say I was a little alienated as a child, growing up in that small town. It didn't mean I didn't have any friends and so forth, I just saw the world differently, I always have. You could get beat up carrying a book of poetry around in that town. And I loved that stuff. There was a time I refused to go to school. I'd play sick. This went on for weeks. I'd send my mother to the library with a list of topics. Miss Hazel Plumly, the librarian, would help her find the books. She'd come home with fifteen, twenty books, and I'd get a pile of peanut butter sandwiches and read books about . . . race car drivers and . . . riverboat captains.

Yet, Waller also found creative inspiration and human interest in the setting of his childhood. Here, he met the small-town Iowa men that would have a profound impact on his written self-expression, as he told me in an interview:

RJW: Somebody in England once asked me, “how would you describe your male characters?” I said, “I think they're smart shitkickers.”

GW: How much of that comes from growing up in Iowa?

RJW: Oh, a lot of it, growing up the way I did especially, in a small town, blue collar town. You know. My friends were the guys at the pool hall, the

tile workers, meatpackers. No nonsense, no bullshit kind of guys. Good sense of humor too, by the way. Wonderful, wild senses of humor. These guys know how to cut loose, have fun, laugh, kid each other. Fought outside once in a while on a Saturday night, over a woman or something, but by and large got along really well. . . . I'm just a smart shitkicker in a lot of ways. I don't mind admitting that.

As an excellent high school basketball player, Waller began to receive the state-wide public attention that would stay with him his entire life. He shot hundreds of jump shots a day on the farm and in his high school gym, and began to break town scoring records. Remembering his basketball prowess in an essay, Waller wrote,

The jump shot floats through the Iowa winter nights. The points mount up game by game—39, 38, 45, 34. I play with two people guarding me in most games, three one time. But the roadwork, the push-ups, and, of course, the jump shot are there with enormous force. The other teams are not prepared for someone training at a near-professional level. (“Jump Shots,” 92)

In 1957, his trademark long-range jumper earned him a full four-year basketball scholarship at the University of Iowa in Iowa City. This was no mean feat, as the Hawkeye team during those years was a national contender—coach Bucky O'Connor's “Fabulous Five,” featuring eventual NBA Hall-of-Famer Don Nelson. However, after a year of sitting on the bench, Waller became frustrated with the rigors of big-time college basketball and transferred to the University of Northern Iowa, then called Iowa State

Teachers' College, in Cedar Falls. There, he says, coach Norm Stewart (later to make his fame at the University of Missouri) taught him to play defense (94).

Upon moving from Iowa City to Cedar Falls, Waller also began pursuing in earnest the interests besides basketball he had cultivated as a child. Remembering the transition, he writes of that time, "I am studying literature, playing the guitar, spending Saturday mornings reading Clarence Darrow's great closing arguments to his juries, and wallowing in all the things that college and life have to offer. I am so deeply in love with a woman [his wife of the next 30 years, Georgia Ann] and with music that basketball becomes something I do because people expect me to do it" ("Jump Shots" 95).

Foregoing his remaining collegiate athletic eligibility, he quit basketball altogether in his senior year.

After quitting basketball, Waller began playing guitar and singing folk music in bars and lounges in and around Cedar Falls, forming a duo with his friend Scott Cawelti, who would later become a professor and chair of the English Department at UNI. In his introductory remarks to "Getting the Words Rightly Set: Technique, Magic, Execution," Waller's keynote address to high school and college students at the Celebrating Critical Writing Conference at UNI in 2000, Cawelti recalled that "Waller was blessed with a terrific natural tenor voice and could play a fair four-string banjo. I had a decent baritone and could manage the guitar, so we formed a folk duo, Bob and Scott. Before long we were singing old Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie songs for eight bucks a night at Joe's 218 Tap on Highway 218." Cawelti also remarked that during these years, Waller was "always one of those people that other people talked about, a personality that took up

more space and time than most of us, partly because of his intelligence, and partly because he worked very hard at everything he did.”

Waller now downplays the impact of the “studying literature” he refers to in “Jump Shots.” He has even done this when speaking publicly at events sponsored by the University of Northern Iowa’s Department of English. For example, in delivering the 2000 H. W. Renninger Lecture at the University of Northern Iowa (endowed by and named for the chair of the department during Waller’s years at UNI), Waller opened his remarks, titled “The Perquisites and Costs of Fame,” by saying,

Yes, I did take Dr. Renninger for a course. That’s the only literature course I’ve ever taken. I don’t know whether Dr. Renninger was responsible for that. I certainly wouldn’t want to sully his memory by brining up any bad things. It was a strange experience for me, and that’s all I’m going to say. Former students have stories, but we’ll keep them to ourselves.

A day later, in his Celebrating Critical Writing keynote address, also sponsored by the UNI English Department, Waller again alluded to his distaste for his sole literature course, noting, “I had, actually, no formal training in literature whatsoever, except for a sophomore-level course in literature which, to be kind, was disasterous.”

Waller was also an adept mathematician. After graduating from UNI, he left the state to study Business Management at Indiana University, where he received his Ph.D. in that field in 1968. During his graduate school years, he continued to pursue his musical

interests by playing guitar and singing in hotel lounges.¹ This resulted in Waller's first national exposure as an entertainer, albeit only for a moment, when in 1967, CBS News "On the Road" reporter Charles Kuralt, staying at the Bloomington Holiday Inn en route to doing a piece on the closing of the Wabash Cannonball rail line, happened to see Waller's lounge performance of the song "Wabash Cannonball," and immediately filmed it as a part of the piece. As chronicled in Waller's 1983 *Des Moines Register* essay "Riding Along in Safety with Kennedy and Kuralt," staffers for presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy saw Waller on the Kuralt show and hired Waller (for \$200) to sing the song at the whistle stops of Kennedy's April 1968 campaign train tour through Indiana, for which the old Wabash Cannonball line was brought out of retirement.

After earning his Ph.D., Waller returned to Northern Iowa to become a professor of Economics, Applied Mathematics, and Management. Waller told me that "one of my major disappointments in this whole tidal wave, this tsunami of *Bridges*, was that my academic career was forgotten, and that's what I've always taken big pride in. I was a serious teacher, serious scholar. I worked hard, you know, but that all got forgotten." As a scholar, Waller wrote papers on "Interpretive Structural Modeling," (ISM) an interest that he was able to combine with local and international management consulting work. Interpretive Structural Modeling uses graphing of information, or "non-numerical mathematics," as Waller put it in one paper ("Comparing and Combining" 109), to assist managers and other decision makers when faced with complex problems. Designed to take advantage of the power of computers, the technique was invented by John N. Warfield, an Electrical Engineering professor, during his employment from 1968-74 as

¹ A photograph of Waller performing in this Indiana period graces the cover of *Memories of Madison County: the True Story of My Romance with Robert Waller*, a spurious tell-all

Senior Research Leader at the Battelle Memorial Institute, a large non-profit technological research and development corporation founded in Columbus, Ohio in 1929, according to Warfield's home page. It is not clear how Waller and Warfield became acquainted, but their association would last into the 1990s and would benefit both men, as will be shown.

Two of Waller's early publications on ISM can be found as chapters in a monograph produced by Battelle in 1975, *Portraits of Complexity: Applications of Systems Methodologies to Societal Problems*. An explanatory note in the monograph explains that "Among Battelle's goals are the education of man and the advancement and utilization of science for the benefit of man," and that "whenever feasible, the results of Battelle supported research are published in the open literature. . . ." Other times, however, Battelle made "courtesy copies" of its monographs available "to selected libraries at major universities," as was the case with *Portraits of Complexity*. The "author notes" for Waller's entries in the monograph state that he was an Associate Professor of Management and Economics at UNI, and also that he was "an Associate of The Academy For Contemporary Problems in Columbus, Ohio and will become a Fellow of the Academy on June 1, 1975." It is unknown whether this Academy is related to Battelle, also located in Columbus. It is likely that this marks the beginning of Waller's consulting career that will be referred to later in this chapter.

Waller's papers in the monograph are reports on field applications of Warfield's ISM techniques. According to Warfield's online résumé, these were the first two examples of ISM applied in the field. The first, which Waller had previously presented at the "Special Invited Session on Applications of Structural Modeling," 1974 Institute of

by an ex-girlfriend of Waller, Jana St. James (with Richard Hack).

Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) “Conference on Decision and Control,” is titled “Applications of Interpretive Structural Modeling in Management of the Learning Disabled.” In the paper, Waller explains that he had served as “structural modeler,” assisting a “content specialist,” an elementary school special education teacher named Joan Hamilton, in applying ISM to her decisions about how best to teach the children in her class (95-96). First, because “emerging evidence indicates the human brain is severely limited in dealing with complex problems involving a significant number of elements and relations among the elements,” he worked with Hamilton to “exchange” her “mental model” of the decisions before her for a graphical representation of the factors involved—on matrices of notecards laid out on a table, one matrix for each of the sixteen children in the class. Using flowcharts and graphic matrices (included in the paper as illustrations), Waller put the content specialist’s input data through a series of graphical steps which allowed her to determine groupings of children in her class based on their similar “strengths and weaknesses” in hearing or sight. Waller reported that the content specialist attested that ISM had helped her group the children more accurately than she would have using “intuition” (96-98).

The brief “Conclusions” section of the paper is a testimonial to ISM: “. . . the author believes Interpretive Structural Modeling is a tool that has much to offer in the teaching of the learning disabled.” However, in the “Possible Problems and Impediments” section, Waller noted the content specialist’s concern at “the amount of time the exchange from mental model to matrix model consumed.” Waller related this concern to “Warfield’s assertion throughout a number of his writings that to be effective

the process must be computer assisted. Both the content specialist and the author strongly support this view” (100).

Waller’s other paper in *Portraits of Complexity* is “An Application of Interpretive Structural Modeling to Priority-Setting in Urban Systems Management.” It proceeds in a similar fashion to the learning disabilities application: Waller works with the Cedar Falls, Iowa Planning and Zoning Commission (PZC), helping the commission of private citizens apply ISM to the problem of prioritizing forty capital improvement projects. The same sentence about the limitations of the human brain appears. Notecards are again a tool, and a graphical representation of the capital improvements priorities is produced. After this ISM exercise with the PZC, Waller repeated the exercise with their governing body, the City Council, this time aided by “an interactive computer system” in which a computer terminal “was taken to the City Council chambers and connected to a computer at the Battelle Memorial Institute via telephone. The Battelle system has a program specifically designed to accompany the ISM methodology” (106). Waller writes that the experiment “met with virtually uniform acceptance and applause” (107).

One of Waller’s other conclusions in the paper is that “because ISM seems rather exotic to those who have not previously participated in an exercise, it is desirable to establish credibility prior to the actual exercise This is easily accomplished by having one or two members participate in a brief trial exercise using a subset of the elements” (108). In the introduction to the paper, Waller describes how he came to be working with the City Council: by cold-calling the mayor. He first describes the roles of the mayor, the City Council, and the PZC as they approached the dilemma of prioritizing capital projects. Then he writes,

As priority-setting commenced, several articles appeared in the local newspaper citing the difficulties encountered by these agencies in carrying out the process. The author contacted the mayor and offered to lend any assistance he could to overcome the difficulties being experienced.

Subsequently, the author met with the mayor and described the nature of ISM and how it might be used to assist the priority-setting process. The mayor was provided with and read a paper by the author on the potential use of ISM in this context [cited by Waller as “The Critical Role of Hierarchical Structures in Decision Making and an Effective Technique for Dealing with Them” from the proceedings of the May 1974 Fifth Annual Midwest Conference of the American Institute for Decision Sciences]. It was then decided to conduct a trial exercise to observe how well the methodology might work. The trial indicated ISM was, indeed, of considerable value vis-à-vis the problem confronted. This led to its use by the PZC and ultimately by the City Council. (105)

Whether monetary gain was involved or not is unknown, but the technical tone and passive voice of Waller’s description of this turn of events cannot mask his sharp eye for entrepreneurial opportunity shown in this action.

Four years later in September 1979, Waller would have another of his ISM papers published in a journal of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, *IEEE Transactions on Systems, Man, and Cybernetics*, of which Warfield was editor at the time, according to his online résumé. The paper, a comparison and combination of the ISM model he used in the learning disabilities field trial and an alternate model he later

realized he could have used, was chosen for republication in the 1979 issue of *General Systems: The Yearbook of the Society for General Systems Research* in 1979. The yearbook format involved an editorial chairman for a number of areas of systems research choosing “one or more ‘best’ articles published in that area during the previous year” (iv). The editorial board of academics and researchers chose papers in “General Systems” areas including not only such categories as “Management and Decision Making,” “Mathematical Systems Theory,” “Methodology,” and, Waller’s entry, “Computational and Informational Aspects,” but also in more wide-ranging disciplines such as “Natural and Biological Sciences, “Social Science and Economics,” “Cognition, Psychology, and Linguistics,” “Philosophy,” and “Cultural, Moral, and Spiritual Systems” (iii).

Waller’s and Warfield’s association would continue after 1979. From that year to 1985 Waller served as the first dean of UNI’s new College of Business. While he was Dean, Waller hired Warfield as a visiting professor “for one year,” and the latter “designed a special room to be used for IM work (“Interactive Management,” a new iteration of ISM), according to Warfield’s online résumé. Waller described this activity to me as “setting up a computer lab.” In 1990, according to the same source, Waller “put in a good word” for Warfield with his publisher, Iowa State University Press, who published Warfield’s book *A Science of Generic Design*. ISU Press also published Warfield’s next book, *A Handbook of Interactive Management*, in 1994.

While pursuing his academic career, Waller added journalism to his repertoire and stayed in the public eye by writing feature essays for the *Des Moines Register*. When asked at a 2000 reading in Cedar Falls how he got his start in writing, Waller replied:

Accidental, like my whole life has been. I was sitting around one time on a Sunday morning, and the *Des Moines Register* people had been out to talk to us. They said they wished more Iowans would write for the *Register*. . . . I was watching Charles Kuralt, and I got to laughing, thinking about the time Kuralt and I did the piece in the Indiana bar. So I sat down and wrote it, sent it to the *Register*. They took it, paid me 25 dollars or something. I thought that was pretty good for a Sunday morning, you know. I was a dean at that time, and so any applause was welcome. Anything, from anybody. I got some nice mail on it, and you know, being a good Skinnerian, I suppose I was motivated by all the rewards and punishments, and I kept on doing the things I was getting paid for and people liked. It's no more rational than that. (Waller, Reading)

Bill Silag, Managing Editor at Iowa State University Press, collected and published Waller's *Register* essays as *Just Beyond the Firelight* (1988) and *One Good Road is Enough* (1990). In the introduction to the latter volume, Silag describes Waller's breakthrough as an essayist in terms of his status as an Iowa personality:

[In 1984] the *Register* published, in eight installments, Waller's magnificent account of an unaccompanied 100-mile journey he made by canoe on Iowa's Shell Rock River. The essay was at once a celebration of Iowa's natural beauty and an indictment of public indifference about its preservation. Waller's river voyage became the talk of Iowa and fueled debates in taverns and cafés across the state. Not everyone in Iowa was

delighted by what Waller had written, but a flood of mail to the Register indicated Waller's message had been heard.

Subsequent essays in the *Register* also drew praise, and increasingly readers' comments focused on Waller himself, rather than on his own subjects: "Some people are given the gift to be able to reach another person's heart," declared one letter. . . . You are loved and appreciated by a great number of people you probably will never meet, but who feel they know you because of a kindred spirit. (xii)

Almost all of the topics of Waller's *Register* essays are autobiographical and personal, from accounts of his days as a sports hero to the tenderness he felt when "excavating" his daughter's room after she moved out of his house. Jerome Klinkowitz—Professor of English at the University of Northern Iowa, Vonnegut scholar, and author of the 1997 entry on Waller in *Contemporary Popular Writers*, which will be discussed later in this chapter—writes of Waller's *Register* essays, "These ruminations targeted a Sunday readership intrigued by the figure of a college professor who could tramp soggy Iowa marshes in search of peregrine falcons and also fly off to Paris, on a moment's notice, for a romantic weekend with his wife." ("Waller, Robert," *Contemporary Popular Writers*).

In his *Register* columns, a Robert Waller persona emerges who is concerned with the environment, aware of his human frailties, and modestly amazed with the circumstances of his rise to local prominence. They offer his status as a native son as a basis for publicly discussing the state of the State. In the process, Waller entered a small circle of local journalists closely associated with Iowa, and used by Iowans as a

barometer of their social, cultural, and natural environment. At the time, this circle included nationally syndicated columnist Donald Kaul (now retired) and longtime *Register* columnist Chuck Offenberger, whose column title dubs him “The Iowa Boy.”

Through writing these essays, Waller developed the distinctive creative writing style emergent in *Bridges*, for example, in “Slow Waltz for Georgia Ann,” a sort of anniversary letter to his wife originally published in the *Register* in 1986. In the essays, Waller portrays himself as the same kind of metaphysical cowboy character as *Bridges*’ male protagonist, Robert Kincaid. Georgia Ann is portrayed in the piece as a proto-Francesca, sexy and talented but unappreciated except by a sensitive man who resurrects her spirit. “It was clear that you would need a life of your own if this marriage were to flourish. That was your hardest struggle,” he writes (11). “You are older now. I can see that if I look hard. But I don’t. I have always seen you in soft focus” (12). He concludes, “The task before me was to teach you about music. And dreams. And how to savor the smell of ancient cities and the sound of cards whispering across green felt. This I have done” (15).

“Slow Waltz for Georgia Ann” also introduces the trope of interior monologues by a man traveling the world but fated to uncontrollable attraction toward a woman, as in *Bridges*. For example, one might compare these two passages. First, from “Slow Waltz for Georgia Ann”: “It seems I have spent a lifetime running toward you. I have tossed in my bed in Arabian desert towns and wanted you. I have stared off midnight balconies in deep Asia, watching dhows older than me tug at their moorings and long for the thrash of coastal waters, missing you and wondering about you” (13). Second, from *The Bridges of Madison County* (and the excerpt on the book’s jacket):

Rationality shrieked at him. “Let it go, Kincaid, get back on the road. Shoot the bridges, go to India. Stop in Bangkok on the way and look up the silk merchant’s daughter who knows every ecstatic secret the old ways can teach. Swim naked with her at dawn in jungle pools and listen to her scream as you turn her inside out at twilight. Let go of this”—the voice was hissing now—“it’s outrunning you.”

But the slow street tango had begun. Somewhere it played; he could hear it, an old accordian. It was far back, or far ahead, he couldn’t be sure. Yet it moved him steadily. And the sound of it blurred his criteria and funneled down his alternatives toward unity. Inexorably, it did that, until there was nowhere left to go, except toward Francesca Johnson. (97)

Other of Waller’s *Register* essays are less personal and more public, commenting on what it means to be an Iowan. For example, in a humorous essay entitled “Drinking Wine the New York Way,” originally published in 1988, Waller reacts to another *Register* piece published a week earlier, a society page interview with Diane Roupe, a former Des Moines resident living in New York. According to Waller, Roupe had asserted that Iowans could further economic development in the state by improving their polite social manners, because companies want to locate in sophisticated surroundings. One of Roupe’s suggestions was that Iowans take note of such matters as holding their wine glasses correctly, with four fingers on one side of the stem and a thumb on the other instead of with two fingers and the thumb at the bottom of the wineglass bowl. Taking offense to this, Waller devotes the column to ridiculing this notion and parodying a

sophisticated tone: “Stunned at the apparent deficiencies in my repertoire of development when amidst polite company, I read the article with near reverence,” he writes (118).

He sarcastically adds more such social guidelines, aiming to deflate the social pretensions of New Yorkers. For example, “. . . if you know the names and locations of all the states and have a fair idea of what transpires in each of them, you’ll immediately be identified as not being a sophisticated New Yorker. This is especially true if you know that Idaho grows potatoes” (120). In addition, he writes, “You will not pass for a New Yorker if you dislike pieces of styrofoam pasted on yellow cardboard displayed in art galleries and selling for \$27,542” (121). Breaking the sarcastic tone at the end of the essay, he addresses Roupe: “I’m sorry to be quite so blunt . . . but I have other work. You see, children are dying in the Sudan from disease and hunger. Then there’s acid rain, water pollution, soil erosion, the mistreatment of animals, child abuse, drug addiction, race relations, toxic waste disposal, the clear-cutting of the Amazon basin, students to be taught, and so forth. Besides, once the Arabs get their act together, New York will cease to exist” (123).

A community-minded bent can be found in Waller’s *Register* essay, “Brokerage.” The 1990 essay recounts a 1988 reading and signing of Waller’s first essay book, held at the Sportsman’s Lounge in St. Ansgar, Iowa (pop. 1,063, located about 70 miles northwest of Cedar Falls and 20 miles north of Waller’s hometown of Rockford). At the Sportsman’s Lounge, Waller practiced direct-to-customer distribution. “I’d stop up at the bar in St. Ansgar,” he said at a reading in 2000, “go in and sell four or five books, drink a couple of beers, laugh with the boys up there and go home.” The bar served as a meeting

place for local wildlife conservationists, and as a public headquarters for Waller's writing career during his days in Iowa. Waller described to the owners of the lounge to me:

These guys Stan Walk and Alan Kruger, these are real politically oriented guys who ran this bar. Really astute people. They were on boards of supervisors. They did a sit-in down at Branstad's office; they were distributing bags that said "sack Branstad" for their take-outs, stuff like that. After they read my long river piece, they just wrote me and said, could we come visit you sometime? They were very forward. So I said sure. So they came down, had a nice talk. So I drove up there, and it sort of became a hangout for me to write.

The essay concludes with a statement of purpose regarding the social and cultural potential of such localized cultural production and events:

The point is there are people out there who write or play music or do theater or create visual beauty or have problems to discuss. And there are people out there who want to read the words or listen to the music or see things of beauty or participate in the solving of nasty dilemmas. The predicament is one of brokerage, of getting all those folks together.

It can be done. Stanley Walk and Alan Kruger did it, and life became a little richer for everyone concerned because of it. The idea of a literate, caring, sensitive, and participative society is attainable, at least in Iowa.

(136)

Apparently, this system was not altogether unsuccessful. Waller claimed in his 2000 Celebrating Critical Writing keynote address, "One of my collections of personal

essays sold 10,000 copies, which is a large number for an essay book, and I sold most of those out of the back of my truck” (Waller, “Getting the Words”).

The only literary influence Waller will acknowledge is another essayist, Loren Eiseley (who also happens to have Midwestern origins. “Essayist Loren Eiseley probably influenced me more than any other writer, and Eiseley did not write fiction,” Waller wrote to me in a February 9, 2000 email. Eiseley (1907-1977) was born in Lincoln, Nebraska, and attended the University of Nebraska for his undergraduate degree. He received his Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of Pennsylvania in 1937, and taught Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Kansas and Oberlin College in Ohio before establishing a long and illustrious career as a professor at Penn—specializing in Anthropology and the History and Philosophy of Science—and as a curator of early man at that university’s museum. In addition to journal articles and books for a scientific audience, Eiseley wrote twenty or so non-fiction books about scientific discovery, nature, and “the evolution of man” for a general audience in the 1950s, ’60s, and ’70s. These works include full-length discussions, essay collections, several collections of poetry, and an autobiography, *All the Strange Hours: The Excavation of a Life* (1975) (in which he discusses his Midwestern upbringing in an unstable home, which he says contributed to the wanderlust that would lead to his peripetetic writings about nature). He also hosted a television program, “Animal Secrets,” from 1966-68 (“Eiseley, Loren Corey,” *Contemporary Authors*).

The influence of Eiseley is key in understanding the form, concerns, and content of Waller’s writing, including his conservationist essays, his economic development study, and *Bridges*. Like Eiseley, Waller looked outside the academic community for the

topic of much of his writing, and turned to the essay form, as we see in his *Des Moines Register* pieces, to communicate to a general audience. Like Eiseley, Waller used a mixture of objective tone and poetic language, even in his more specialized work, such as his economic study of Iowa. In sections of *Bridges*, especially those intertexts in the voice of Robert Kincaid, Waller moves from an immediate scope—the observations of one person—to a universal one—the evolution of mankind—as Eiseley often does in his essays. For example, in Kincaid’s “Falling from Dimension Z,” the character imagines the highway he is driving on becoming a path backward in time, and his own consciousness reverting consecutively to that of primitive man, to fish, to plankton, and finally, to “the digit zero” (143). Similarly, in “The Spore Bearers,” a chapter from *The Invisible Pyramid* (1970), Eiseley compares mankind in the space age to the *Pilobus* fungus, which grows on cattle dung and shoots its spores into the air, away from its “spore city,” in order to continue its life cycle. To Eiseley, humans’ desire to shoot themselves away from Earth (before we destroy it) in rockets is a natural impulse similar to that of the *Pilobus* fungus (75-94).

In addition, Waller’s craft and tone were criticized for some of the same transgressions as Eiseley’s. In *The Hudson Review* in 1971, Hayden Carruth called Eiseley’s writing “terrifically overblown, sophomoric, full of purple patches. . . . There is padding and glibness everywhere” (“Eiseley, Loren,” *Contemporary Literary Criticism*). In *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* in 1973, Jascha Kessler wrote of Eiseley’s poems, “I am sorry to say that I am mortified for him: that in his essays Eiseley does better with sentiment [and] nostalgia. . . . But he doesn’t really have any more sense of what a poem is than do most undergraduates. . . . If the book weren’t pretentious, it would be pathetic”

(“Eiseley, Loren,” *Contemporary Literary Criticism*). And no less a poet than W.H. Auden wrote in *The New Yorker*, “I suspect Dr. Eiseley of being a melancholic. He recognizes that man is the only creature who speaks personally, works, and prays, but nowhere does he overtly say that man is the only creature who laughs” (“Eiseley, Loren,” *Contemporary Literary Criticism*).

Kincaid the seeker, a wandering observer and poetic recorder of man and nature, is perhaps cut from the same cloth as Eiseley, whom *Life* magazine’s Melvin Maddocks (1970) included in a group of writers trying to be “latter-day Thoreaus—writers who try to combine the walk along the beach with Big Thoughts About Life” (“Eiseley, Loren Corey,” *Contemporary Authors*). That Waller has Kincaid constantly bemoaning how masculine aggression is ruining the world and longing for the “old ways” before modernity and even civilization, can also be seen as prefigured in Eiseley’s work. Carruth wrote that Eiseley “suggests that only by removing the ‘invisible pyramid,’ the whole crushing edifice of man’s invention, including his will to dominate, and then by returning to the primal natural community as one member coequal among many, may man restore the world and his own life to stability. . . . The ‘old first world,’ the ‘green world,’ these are his terms” (“Eiseley, Loren,” *Contemporary Literary Criticism*). Besides working in the academy and writing essays, Waller spent many of the years working at UNI as a “highly paid” consultant, according to Klinkowitz in *Contemporary Popular Writers*. The most visible of these consulting jobs came just before he quit teaching altogether, when he accepted, on behalf of UNI’s Business College, an “Emerging Business Opportunities” grant from the State of Iowa’s Department of Economic Development. The money, reported by Klinkowitz in *Contemporary Popular Writers* as \$200,000,

would be used to write a study of the state's economic future. Although not slated for publication at the project's inception, the report was published in 1991, again by Iowa State University Press, as *Iowa: Perspectives on Today and Tomorrow*. In the preface to the *Iowa* study, Waller advises the reader to "remember this book is the product of a fifty-one-year-old man who has a secure job, a decent retirement fund, and some money in the bank" (ix). Even though Waller would later tell *Texas Monthly* magazine that he and Georgia Ann were living off their savings during this time—"We canceled all our magazine and newspaper subscriptions. We threw our credit cards in drawers and went to ground" (Swartz 158)—it seems likely that Waller was supported by the commission during the time he wrote both the study and *Bridges*, as will be discussed shortly.

Waller's intent in accepting the commission, he told me, was to try to reshape the reigning political conservatism of the day in Iowa. "As I kept pointing out in the book," he told me, "a true conservative, when you don't know, if you take option X . . . several things can happen. There's a probability tree out there. And if one of them has a fair chance of happening, and it's absolute disaster, the conservative guy says we ought to back off and do this a different way." He elaborated:

There was a lot of dissatisfaction with the kind of planning that was going on in Iowa. [Republican Governor Terry] Branstad never seemed very interested in thinking about the long range. As far as he was concerned, it was cattle and corn. So some people in the legislature . . . put the word out. A guy at the university—he read my entrepreneurship stuff I'd written for the *Register*—wanted to know if I'd be interested in [the commission].

It took a special bill in the legislature to get the money. So what they wanted was an alternate view [of economic possibilities in the State].

Waller's discussion in the *Iowa* study varies in tone from scientific to poetic, and in reasoning from mathematical to anecdotal. He devotes an entire chapter to a discussion of the free market's role in society, including "the relationships among political and economic freedom, social dilemmas, and environmental degradation" (67). However, as Klinkowitz notes, the study also makes "such controversial suggestions as eliminating one-third of Iowa's small towns and recognizing that 'our agricultural land really belongs to everyone, though farm owners may temporarily hold title'" (*Contemporary Popular Writers*). In the study, Waller urges Iowa lawmakers to adopt a "Zen approach to development" (219) in which "sustainability is the overriding criterion for everything we do" (312), including agriculture, the economy, education, the environment, arts and culture. During an interview, Waller told me that he tries to "live as a socialist, operate as a capitalist," that is, to "live in a socialist economy and operate as an entrepreneur." Although it is unclear how one living in the United States could be living in a socialist economy, the *Iowa* book offers a sweeping vision of a radically different Iowa of the future, one that would integrate socialized health care, retirement, land ownership, transportation, etc. into an economy driven by small-business and public entrepreneurship.

The study's emphasis on entrepreneurship and economic and environmental sustainability is especially apparent in Waller's description of an "ideal Iowa" in the year 2020, one in which "enlightenment is dawning" (316) in the form of an alternative culture and economy that is entrepreneurial but espouses conservation and localism over

connection with nationally and globally networked industry. In Waller's vision of 2020 Iowa, "communities operate as much as is feasible in a self-sustaining fashion" (316), for example through the creation of "many small firms [producing such goods as sandal buckles and bicycles] rather than huge industrial complexes. . . ." In addition, "small towns, as well as large ones, have learned to treasure both their professional and amateur arts and crafts" (313-315). Further, in 2020 Iowa, "energy use by Iowans has been cut by 75 percent through efficiency measures. Most of the energy used is produced within Iowa by a combination of wind, solar, biomass, and alcohol generated from agricultural crops" (315). In 2020 Iowa, "we have finally grasped the systemic nature of our world and see education, culture, the arts, economics, and nature as intertwined and inseparable in policymaking. . . . 'Zero Poverty' and 'Zero Hunger' are two of our state goals. The less fortunate among us are appropriately provided for, and those who are able are assisted into self-sufficiency." (315-16)

As education, culture, and the arts become a major part of Waller's Iowa economy in the year 2020, the role of mass culture, entertainment, and sports is diminished:

. . . our large athletic stadiums sit empty now, as people pursue leisure time activities that contribute to self-development and community richness. . . . Monday night football is no longer carried by Iowa television stations because nobody is watching. Nobody is watching much television, period, since people have been taught personal skills and philosophies that have enabled them to substitute the fair and immortal children of the mind for spectator activities. (314)

Perhaps most presciently, as will be shown in Chapter Five’s examination of the entrepreneurial way Winterset, Iowa, adopted *Bridges*-related tourism when the book became well-known, Waller’s 2020 Iowa nurtures a tourist economy that emphasizes Iowa’s rural setting. He imagines that “the preservation of our historic structures and natural places, coupled with the best hiking and bicycling infrastructure in the nation, has made us a favored tourist destination.” He continues, “There is apparently a strong desire by people to see the more-or-less ordinary transactions of life in rural areas. . . . Anyone in Iowa contacted *Country* [Magazine]?” (246).

Waller and I discussed reactions to the book:

GW: How was it received?

RJW: Almost no reaction at all.

GW: Very provocative suggestions.

RJW: Well, there’s something in there for everyone to hate. . . . It just never got much publicity, and only two thousand copies printed. They asked me if they should go to more printings because they’d sold out their two thousand fairly fast. I said, If I were a business person, I wouldn’t go for that, I don’t think. Every so often, I still get requests for it. Some guy was using it as a textbook in something like Economic Development. But it’s a piece of work I’m very proud of. I’m very happy with that.

Waller’s writing and activities before *Bridges*, then, show that he was committed to and affected by the possibilities of community in Iowa—and that he balanced that commitment with an entrepreneurial attitude that led not just to improvements for Iowa communities, but also to personal gain.

The American Midwest and regionalism in Iowa

Robert Waller's life, work, and statewide public persona leading up to *Bridges* bears the mark of the cultural and aesthetic values of Iowa in particular and the Midwest more generally. This can be contextualized by Iowa's situation in the American popular consciousness as Midwestern. There is a notion about the American Midwest as the "heartland," representative of "average" America. There is also a notion of Iowa as, in the words of Paul Engle, the "heart of the heartland" (qtd. in Herr 27). James Shortridge, author of *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (1989), writes that "ever since Iowans were first called Middle Westerners around 1900, writers have agreed that the state epitomized the region's values." More specifically, he ties Iowa's centrality to its twentieth-century artistic and popular cultural production: ". . . if one considers Middle-Western symbols, it is striking how many come from Iowa," including Grant Wood's "American Gothic," Meredith Willson's *Music Man* and *State Fair*, and 'Ding' Darling's political cartoons" (99). Wood's image of a farm couple has become one of the most recognizable in twentieth-century art; Darling's fifty-year career as a *Des Moines Register* political cartoonist allowed him to spearhead natural conservation efforts on Capitol Hill; and (Iowa-born) Willson's Broadway musicals are standards.

However, Shortridge also notes that these achievements live in the public imagination next to other images of Iowans as sheltered and childlike. For example, he continues, "[naïve M*A*S*H television character] Radar O'Reilly, from Ottumwa [Iowa], brings Middle Western wholesomeness down to the present" (100). This wholesomeness is sometimes framed as a blandness. Bernard Engle and Patricia Julius, authors of *A New Voice for a New People: Midwestern Poetry 1800-1910* (1985), elaborate: "Even today Midwesterners as well as their fellow Americans tend to see the

region as lacking in the distinctive. To put it in the affirmative, the Midwest is seen as so centrally American that to understand it all one need do is shear whatever distinguishes the men and women of the East, the South, or the West: what is left is the Midwesterner” (xii). Such notions are often compounded by the conflation of traditional values and restrictive social norms, and by self-deprecation as culturally inferior. Shortridge suggests that the rural image of the Midwest has, to most observers, “suggested wholesomeness and self-sufficiency, but others have seen in it a narrow conservatism” (2). Gary Comstock, a theology professor at Iowa State University, writes: “Like the farmers of my grandpa’s generation who used to introduce themselves as “just farmers,” we are preoccupied with the perception of our own mediocrity” (112-113).

Since the early twentieth century, “regionalist” artists and critics have fought to counteract this perception of the Midwest, especially in Iowa. In *Kinship with the Land: Regionalist Thought in Iowa, 1894-1942* (1996), Bradford E. Burns shows how regionalism has emphasized that the people and work of rural locales inform Americanness in a positive way. For example, Burns refers to regionalist critic Wendell Berry’s definition of the movement as

local life aware of itself. [Regionalism] would tend to substitute for the myths and stereotypes of a region a particular knowledge of the life of the place one lives in and intends to continue to live in. It pertains to living as much as to writing and it pertains to living before it pertains to writing. The motive of such regionalism is the awareness that local life is intricately dependent, for its quality but also for its continuance, upon local knowledge.” (qtd. in Burns 16)

Regionalist movements in art, literature, and criticism have occurred periodically throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in North and South America.² The particular historical regionalist moment most important to the context of contemporary Midwestern literature and popular culture started in the American Midwest, especially Iowa, in the 1920s and '30s. During this time, writers such as Iowans Ruth Suckow and Hamlin Garland wrote domestic novels set on farms and in small towns, often portraying with grim naturalism and realism the mundane, difficult work of maintaining one's livelihood, community, and values in rural America. Literary historian Ronald Weber places this historical moment at the culmination of what Flannery O'Connor called a Midwestern "ascendency" in writing; that is, the time between the end of the Civil War and before the work of Hemingway and Fitzgerald, when American letters were dominated by writers from the Midwest, writing about the Midwest.³ In O'Connor's anecdotal formulation, this period of American letters came between a pre-Civil War New England ascendency and a post-Depression Southern ascendency.

² For further discussion of international literary regionalist movements and works, see *Regionalism Reconsidered: New Approaches to the Field*, Ed. David Jordan, Garland, 1994. For a discussion of the Southern Agrarian school of literary regionalism and its relationship to the Midwestern regionalism discussed here, see James Dennis, *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture*, University of Missouri Press, 1975, reprinted in 1986. This key work on Wood also includes color plates and an appendix reproducing Wood's "Revolt Against the City" in full.

³ Kenneth Winkle and John Lauritz Larson, in chapters in *The American Midwest: Essays in Regional History* (2001), edited by Andrew R.L. Cayton and Susan E. Gray, trace the turning of the nation's attention to the Midwest to the Civil War itself; opposition to the mores of Southerners and the story of Abraham Lincoln's origins in Illinois, Winkle asserts, gave Midwesterners a collective identity for the first time, when before, according to Larson, they had been too diverse in national origin and too busy eking out a hardscrabble existence on stolen Native American land to be anything but individualists. The new Midwestern identity was identified by the rest of the country as symbolizing the American Union Lincoln had saved.

Even during this “ascendancy,” however, Midwestern art and literature was very often intended and received as defensive against the hegemony of the East Coast cultural establishment, especially that of New York, as has been noted by many historians and critics. For example, Frederick Stern writes that the very “concept of regionalism is an oppositional one.” That is, “critics and others who find literary value in the production of writers from other parts of the country [than New York] have felt it necessary to argue for the validity of writing from these areas” (19). This is especially true of the Midwest because, unlike the South, it lacks regional distinctiveness.⁴ I have chosen Grant Wood as the starting point for a regionalist background for Waller’s work because, more than any other regionalist artist or writer, Wood’s work has bridged the gap between “serious” art and popular culture—his *American Gothic*, widely interpreted as a witty comment on the simultaneously humble and prideful Americanness of the Midwest, and Iowa in particular (Dennis 68), has become an icon worthy of reproduction on refrigerator magnets and countless satirical adaptations. Further, as will be shown in Chapter Two was also true of Waller when promoting *Bridges*, Wood and his circle were not above capitalizing on notions of quaint Midwestern primitivism as a promotional scheme even as they criticized such notions in their work. For example, Art Historian M. Sue Kendall describes how Wood and the other members of the “Midwestern triumvirate” in early

⁴ In addition to those quoted above on the lack of Midwestern distinctiveness and the resulting cultural insecurity among Midwesterners, see essays by Andrew R.L. Cayton, R. Douglas Hurt, and Jon Gjerde in Cayton and Gray. Roy W. Meyer’s *The Middle Western Farm Novel in the Twentieth Century* (1965) illustrates how such cultural attitudes were expressed in “farm novels,” the majority of which he shows to be associated with Iowa in their settings and authors’ origins, and some of which were written by regionalist-identified writers such as Ruth Sukow: the attributes of Midwestern farm people evident in such novels include “political, economic, and cultural conservatism,” “strictness and reticence in regard to sex,” anti-intellectualism, and a hostility toward towns and cities expressed as “primitivism” (7-11).

twentieth-century art, John Steuart Curry of Kansas and Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, donned “matching blue jean bib overalls” for 1932 publicity photographs taken at Wood’s newly formed artists’ colony in Stone City, Iowa, knowing that such images would likely find their way into national publications (26).⁵

Wood’s brand of regionalism involved a “Revolt Against the City,” as he put it in the title of his 1935 regionalist manifesto, which was edited and published independently as a pamphlet in Iowa City by Frank Luther Mott,⁶ University of Iowa journalism professor and historian of the press (Dennis 229). Wood had been taken on by the University of Iowa as a professor beginning in 1934. His revolt was aimed at redefining the American character in art and letters as more indigenous (looking less toward trends of European modernism) and more egalitarian (in its frank portrayal of the concerns of the rural American working class). More generally, Wood claimed in “Revolt Against the City” that a reaction against urban art and literature was a matter of America’s final separation from its colonial past (because of the East Coast cities’ cultural ties with European capitals) and symbolic of the lessons about self-reliance taught to Americans

⁵ In the case of Curry at least, such garb was out of character. He had been convinced by Wood to return to his native Midwest from Westport, Connecticut where he had been working, to join the regionalist movement. Kendall writes, “Here was a reformed John Steuart Curry, dressed no longer in the bohemian chic of Arabic shiekdom he had previously sported at the Westport Artists’ Masque Ball, but in the bibbed overalls of an honest-to-god, down-home Kansas farmer” (26). Kendall also quotes Benton from his autobiography on the scheme: “We came in the popular mind to represent a home-grown, grass-roots artistry which damned ‘furrin’ influence and which knew nothing about and cared nothing for the traditions of art as cultivated city snobs, dudes, and *ass*thetes knew them. . . . Grant Wood became the typical Iowa small-towner, John Curry the typical Kansas farmer, and I just an Ozark hillbilly. We accepted our roles” (26; spelling and emphasis original).

⁶ The pamphlet was the first in Mott’s four-part “Whirling Word” series, which concluded with Hamlin Garland’s poetry collection, *Iowa O Iowa* (Dennis 229).

by the Depression. He also used the piece as an opportunity to tout the recent arrival in the Midwest of Thomas Hart Benton and to point out that Paul Engle's recent poetry collection, *American Song*, was focused on America despite Engle's situation at Oxford.

In 1937, Grant Wood would further elaborate on the aims of his movement's "revolt," in a letter replying to the students of a graduate course taught by Norman Foerster at the University of Iowa, who had composed and sent Wood a definition of regionalism: "In this country, regionalism has taken the form of a revolt against the cultural domination of the city (particularly New York) and the tendency of metropolitan cliques to lay more emphasis on artificial precepts than on more vital human experience." Wood continued, "[Regionalism] has reemphasized the fact that America is agrarian as well as industrial. It has been a revolt against cultural nationalism—that is, the tendency of artists to ignore or deny the fact that there are important differences, psychologically and otherwise, between the various regions of America. . . . [I]t is an elaboration of the proposition that art, although potentially universal in significance, is always more or less local in inception" (qtd. in Burns 17)

Wood sought that this local, rural movement would reflect an American, not just Midwestern, expression. For example, in announcing the formation of his regionalist art colony at Stone City, Iowa, 30 miles from Iowa city, he invited artists to "join us in working together toward the development of an indigenous expression. . . . If American art is to be elevated to the stature of a true cultural expression, it cannot remain a mere reflection of foreign painting. A national expression . . . must take group form from the more genuine and less spectacular regions. . . . Stone City has this as its objective" (qtd. in Burns 16).

In addition to the works on Midwestern regionalism cited above, other recent scholarship returns to the idea of regionalism in order to examine the implications of art and popular culture during our present era of increased marketing of culture. One example, Cheryl Herr's 1996 elaboration of "critical regionalism," is especially informative in contextualizing recent literary and popular culture works from the Midwest. Herr asserts the political value of regional, community-oriented culture and economies in her 1996 study *Critical Regionalism and Cultural Studies: From Ireland to the American Midwest*. In this work, Herr traces the history of the concept of "region" as "a semiotic field in which local, traditional identity [can] be recuperated as well as erased by newly imagined ways of living." This is a reaction to "transnational marketing strategies" and "pervasive capital penetration," which target regions as marketing bases (3-4). The "very preoccupation with the traditional and immediate," she writes, "tends to preclude our taking seriously the international corporate logic that helps to produce exploitative symmetries across subnational areas. . . . Even a self-sufficient society now stands entirely open to hegemonic corporate invasions and is absorbed into a global analysis" (4, 6). She goes on to call for a reformation of Cultural Studies' fetishization of the "space between" or "nameless dimension" in order to create "place reaction" as "guerrilla war against the ubiquitous, space-endlessness of the consumer megalopolis" and against "administered culture" (7-8, 13). These concerns are also explored in the text of *Bridges* and are important to its meaning both as text and as product, as we will see in later chapters.

Local cultural production in Cedar Falls, Iowa

As we have seen, Cedar Falls, Iowa (pop. 34,000), where the University of Northern Iowa is located, has been the primary locale within Iowa that can be used to contextualize Robert Waller's work leading up to the publication of *The Bridges of Madison County* in 1992. The traditions of literary, artistic, and popular cultural production in Cedar Falls are exemplary of both the aims and the resulting tensions of regionalism. For example, in Cedar Falls and at the University of Northern Iowa, the cultural insecurity that being an Iowan and a Midwesterner can sometimes engender is further highlighted by the town's situation in the shadow of Ames (pop. 48,000), home of Iowa State University, and Iowa City (pop. 60,000), home to the University of Iowa and the Iowa Writers' Workshop. UNI, founded as Iowa Normal School and later renamed Iowa State Teachers' College, hosts 12,000 students, a very high percentage of whom hail from in-state, and grants relatively few graduate degrees. In contrast, Ames is home to the 24,000-student Iowa State University, founded in 1858 under the Morrill Land Grant College Act. Originally an Agricultural College and Model Farm, ISU still boasts prominent agriculture, science and engineering programs. As a faculty member in English at Iowa State in the early 1990s, Jane Smiley produced the critically successful novels *A Thousand Acres* (1991) and *Moo* (1995), both set in Iowa.

As will be shown in Chapter Two, the indirect Smiley connection, through Iowa State University Press's managing editor Bob Silag, Waller's publisher and Smiley's ex-husband, helped *Bridges* find its way to publication. This is ironic, for *Bridges*' text and context is in many ways an inversion of *A Thousand Acres*, which was published in 1991, a year before *Bridges*. Both authors are associated with Iowa, and both novels feature a

vegetarian stranger who seduces farm wives and who is more politically enlightened than the Midwestern locals. However, in 1965, *Bridges*' Robert is idealized and largely disconnected with the social upheavals in the '60s, whereas in *A Thousand Acres*, set in 1979, handsome outsider Jess is a casualty of the '60s, a Vietnam draft dodger and recovering alcoholic who returns to the farm from exile but is ultimately too disconnected with the values of the place to stay.⁷ *Bridges* alludes to Romantic literature; *A Thousand Acres* is a full on retelling of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. *Bridges* is set on a farm but does not describe the work of farming. *A Thousand Acres* is set on a farm⁸ and delves deeply into the business and operation of farming corn, beans, and hogs. *Bridges*' Robert alludes generally to the destruction of the environment as a product of "male hormones"; the contamination of the environment by farming itself and the effects of that contamination on the characters drive much of the plot in *A Thousand Acres*.

The two authors' background as writers are also opposites. Waller, an untutored creative writer, professed in his Celebrating Critical Writing keynote address his disdain

⁷ See Steven G. Kellman's 1995 "Food Fights in Iowa: the Vegetarian Stranger in Recent Midwest Fiction" from *The Virginia Quarterly Review*: "*A Thousand Acres* and *The Bridges of Madison County* reflect the anxieties of traditional livestock culture suddenly challenged by a newly fashionable ethic of abstention from animal flesh. During Waller's lengthy run atop the fiction best-seller list, the nonfiction list included Dean Ornish's *Eat More, Weigh Less*, which urges reduction if not elimination of meat for a healthier diet. On April 14, 1992 [Two weeks after *Bridges* was published], while a broad coalition of environmental, animal-protection, health, family-farm, antihunger, and development organizations was launching 'Beyond Beef,' a campaign to reduce American beef consumption by at least fifty percent, the best-seller lists included Jay Kordich's *The Juiceman's Power of Juicing*, which proselytizes for a hale and happy life nourished by liquefied fruits and vegetables. . . . Invading a world in which real men don't eat quiche, Jess and Robert [characters in *A Thousand Acres* and *Bridges*, respectively] reject the pork chops that are the prerogative and provender of patriarchy" (447).

⁸ The farm in *A Thousand Acres* near the fictional town of Cabot in fictional Zebulon County, Iowa, is placed by Smiley near the real-life town of Mason City, pop. 30,000, the

for what he calls “workshop writing”; Smiley wrote a creative dissertation of short fiction for her Ph.D. from the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop, where she was a contemporary of Alan Gurganis and Richard Bausch, and slightly preceded by T. Coraghesson Boyle. She joined the English faculty at Iowa State University in Ames in 1981, where she stayed until 1997, teaching world literature, literary modes and genres, and graduate and undergraduate fiction writing. In 1995, Smiley wrote *Moo*, a satire of Ag-school university life thought to be based on her experiences at ISU. *A Thousand Acres* was only briefly a bestseller, but won the Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Critics’ Circle Award.⁹ *Bridges* won the American Booksellers’ Book of the Year award (*A Thousand Acres* was an honor book for that award) and stayed on the bestseller list for years, but was savaged by critics.

A longer literary shadow, however, is cast by Iowa City, home to the University of Iowa, the state’s oldest (est. 1847) and largest (28,000 students) university. “Iowa,” as its name is commonly abbreviated, is host to the prestigious University of Iowa Writers Workshop, established in 1939, making it one of the oldest degree-granting creative writing programs in the country. The workshop was founded by Iowa native Paul Engle, who, as we have seen, was lauded by Grant Wood in Wood’s “Revolt Against the City.” According to Joseph Wilson in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Engle was born in 1908 in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 20 miles from Iowa City, to a German immigrant horse-farming

county seat of Cerro Gordo County in North Central Iowa, just 20 miles from Waller’s hometown of Rockford.

⁹ For a full-length examination of Smiley’s work and the context of its production, see Neil Nakadate’s 1999 *Understanding Jane Smiley*. Smiley and Waller did cross paths in 1993 at the opening of Big Table Books in Ames, Iowa. The first-of-its-kind bookshop was founded by a community-based corporation and features Native American literature and “a ‘big table’ to be used for community meetings” (*USA Today*, March 26, 1993, p. 1D.)

family. He received a B.A. from Coe College in Mount Vernon, Iowa, 20 miles from Cedar Rapids and Iowa City, in 1931, and an M.A. from Iowa in 1932 with a creative thesis of poems that won the Yale Series of Younger Poets prize and was published by Yale University Press as *Worn Earth* (1932). He spent the next several years at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. Continuing to focus on American themes in his poetry while at Oxford, he wrote the optimistic, patriotic collection *American Song* in 1934, which became a best-seller. In 1936, he wrote *Break the Heart's Anger*, a collection which voiced disillusionment with America and Europe and was interpreted as Marxist. In 1937, he returned to the University of Iowa to teach creative writing. In 1939 (the year Robert Waller was born) he founded the Workshop, convincing skeptical administrators of the value of supporting a faculty of established, working creative writers. Continuing to run the Workshop until 1976, Engle saw to much of its funding himself, constantly raising money from private sources. The Workshop has hosted Raymond Carver, Kurt Vonnegut, and W.P. Kinsella, among many other renowned writers, as teachers and students. With his second wife, Chinese novelist Nieh Hauling, Engle added the International Writers' Workshop to the Workshop's programs in 1967 (Wilson). Today, according to Cheryl Herr, much of the "invention of the Midwest" takes place at the Iowa Workshop: it "composes a metatext of 'writing' that has implications for many publications and styles worldwide; it is a sort of clearinghouse for world writerliness in the academic tradition and in this sense a significant factor in the ideological work done by poetry and fiction around the globe" (39).

There have been, however, distinct traditions of literary and cultural production at UNI and in Cedar Falls, albeit traditions most Americans have never heard of. Most

historically prominent in the realm of literature was the regionally established “farmer-poet” James Hearst (1900-1983), a friend of Robert Frost. According to the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Hearst lived his entire life in and around Cedar Falls, operating a livestock farm and publishing nine books of poetry (from *The Sun at Noon* in 1937 to *Landmark and Other Poems* in 1979); a novel, *Bonesetter’s Brawl*, co-written with Carmelita Underwood in 1979; his autobiography, *My Shadow Below Me*, in 1981; and a book of essays, *Time Like a Furrow*, in 1981. Hearst, confined to a wheelchair after breaking his neck diving into a farm pond as a young man, still farmed as he wrote. He began teaching writing and literature to UNI students in 1941, which he continued until his death in 1983. Because of his injury, Hearst taught in his home near campus. The connection between Hearst and UNI was maintained after Hearst’s death through UNI English professor Robert Ward, a student, friend, and contemporary of Hearst and custodian of Hearst’s papers and preserver of his legacy until his own death in 1999.

Upon Hearst’s death, his house was donated to the city to be used as the Hearst Arts Center, which still serves the region as a gallery and meeting place. (For example, in 1994, UNI Professor of English Theodore Hovet gave a lecture there for community members entitled “Wasteland or Garden: Literary Portrayals of the Midwest.” The talk centered around the portrayals of the Midwest in four books: Ole Rolvaag’s 1927 *Giants in the Earth*, Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street*, Kathleen Norris’s *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, and *Bridges*. Discussion of the latter used the character of Robert Kincaid to show “the disproportionate impact of the outsider as depicted in Midwestern literature.” That is, “the outsider simply won’t fit into the story that the community has agreed to tell itself”) (11).

Besides James Hearst, Cedar Falls and UNI have been host to a number of other literary and popular culture figures and institutions. For example, an English department faculty member, Nancy Price, had her 1987 best-selling novel *Sleeping With the Enemy* adapted into a 1991 Fox movie starring Julia Roberts. The thriller featured Cedar Falls as its setting; a woman abused by her husband escapes to there from the East Coast in order to achieve anonymity, but is pursued by the husband. When the movie adaptation played at the mall cineplex in Cedar Falls, the crowd, myself included, was proud of its hometown author and excited to see its town represented on screen, despite the fact that the movie had not been filmed on location in Cedar Falls. When the words “based on a novel by Nancy Price” appeared in the opening credits, a cheer went up. However, open laughter and groaning filled the theater when, in the protagonist’s first glimpse of Cedar Falls from the window of an arriving Greyhound bus, a country sheriff in a traditional uniform resembling those worn in Mayberry on the Andy Griffith show was seen raising the American flag in front of an idyllic, small-town courthouse. Seeing the Cedar Falls/Waterloo metropolitan area of 100,000 residents used as quaint local color was disappointing but amusing.

The English department at UNI has also been host for over twenty-five years to Jerome Klinkowitz, who has written more than thirty-five books, most of them published by university presses, including Iowa State University Press. His work includes several fiction and non-fiction works about baseball (Klinkowitz was also part owner of a short-lived minor-league baseball team in neighboring Waterloo, Iowa), World War II, the American 1960s, and the work of jazz musician Gerry Mulligan. He has written many books of literary criticism, focusing on experimental contemporary literature and

especially the work of Kurt Vonnegut. Klinkowitz was the first literary critic to recognize the work of Vonnegut, about whom he has published six books, starting with *The Vonnegut Statement* in 1973. As a result, Vonnegut has often spoken and attended gatherings in Cedar Falls and the UNI English Department. Richard Ohmann names Klinkowitz as “a critic . . . who promote[s] an avant-garde fiction called post-modernist, post-contemporary, antinovel, whatever.” Attention from Klinkowitz, he writes, can give a book “the right kind of critical attention” to help it achieve a “canonical position” (206). Throughout the 1990s, UNI was also host to a biannual International Conference on the Short Story, events which featured critically acclaimed writers such as Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Joyce Carol Oates, Isabel Allende, Amy Tan, and Wilson Harris.

Still, the shadow of the Iowa Writers Workshop is long, and sometimes in Cedar Falls very dark, as illustrated by Klinkowitz’s comments about Iowa City in his literary memoirs, *Keeping Literary Company: Working with Writers since the Sixties* (1998). For example, in the following passage Klinkowitz describes his reaction to the news that Vonnegut, on a visit to Iowa City before coming to UNI to preside over the English department’s Student as Critic conference for local high-school students and UNI English majors (the same conference presided over by Waller in 1999), had been lionized into drunken submission at a series of parties:

The news from Iowa City confirmed my dislike of the place, which was obviously big-time but bore little relation to the people and styles of Iowa. Wealthy out-of-state students panhandled to be trendy, and the Workshop’s writers, faculty and students alike, spent lots of time talking about the great books they’d write but precious little time doing it. . . .

When a genuine success like Vonnegut visited [Iowa City], it would be an occasion for one great pinball game, with Kurt as the ball. I'd seen it happen with other writers' visits—Robert Coover, Walter Abish, John Irving—where the guests would suffer through endless displays of pinball wizardry by countless partygoers, each one insisting that the writer share a drink while being expected to marvel at the fancy talk.

When Kurt came up to Cedar Falls, I was proud that my own colleagues and students were more interested in his well-being than in showing themselves off. (*Keeping Literary Company* 35)

Cedar Falls has also been home to a small “independent” popular culture scene. Foremost in this scene is the rock band House of Large Sizes, who have galvanized local musicians and fans there since the mid-1980s. HOLS (pronounced “holes”), as they're known to their fans, is fronted by husband-and-wife team Dave Deibler and Barb Shilf, and espouses the “indie,” or independent, ethos, itself very much in line with regionalist aesthetic and social aims. Indie bands record at local studios—or in basements and kitchens, as HOLS did for a time. They often release records themselves or split profits and expenses fifty-fifty with small record labels (in HOLS' case, Toxic Shock records in Tucson, Arizona; What Are Records? in Boulder, Colorado; -ismist Records in Lincoln, Nebraska; Tyros Records in Iowa City; and their own North Cedar Records in Cedar Falls. Like many bands during the early 1990s major-label “feeding frenzy” sparked by the sudden popularity of indie bands Nirvana, Green Day, and Pearl Jam, HOLS had a brief affiliation with a major label; Columbia's subsidiary Red Decibel released the band's album *My Ass-Kicking Life* in 1994. The label failed to promote the album,

however, and HOLS returned to local indie labels for the rest of their career, which ended in 2004.¹⁰ Much of HOLS' public activity has been inspired by a populist localism.

Deibler has said about the band's local-indie arrangement with What Are Records?, WAR? and us are both extremely realistic about our goals. If we get a radio hit then great. But we're just happy catering to our fan base of 10,000 to 20,000. WAR? is better at the grass-root level. Columbia didn't do a good job of putting up posters or calling radio stations. I never met the president of Columbia records, but we spent the night at the president of WAR?'s house. (Jay Miller, ICON, February 3, 2000)

The titles of recent HOLS albums allude to the band's Midwestern home base, for example, "Little HOLS on the Prairie" (a career retrospective of rarities and B-sides) and "Idiots Out Wandering Around" (A live set titled for the punchline to a joke told in Minnesota: "What does "Iowa" stand for?). Song titles and lyrics often refer to local insider knowledge; for example, the title "Albion Cutoff" refers to a highway shortcut through Albion, Iowa, on the way from Cedar Falls to Des Moines and, because Des Moines is located at the intersection of major Interstates 80 and 35, to the rest of America. The lyrics to the song refer obliquely to personal identity and the common

¹⁰ The emergence of American indie and punk music into the mainstream, starting with Nirvana's hit "Smells Like Teen Spirit" from its 1991 Geffen album *Nevermind*, coincides historically with the publication of *Bridges*, perhaps a part of the same entertainment and publishing industry movement toward previously unknown artists and writers that will be discussed in Chapter Two. For a thorough account of the history of DIY indie music production leading up to its mainstream emergence, see Michael Azzerrad's 2001 *Our Band Could Be Your Life: Scenes from the American Indie Underground 1981-1991*. For a first-person account of the effects of this emergence on indie punk community and fandom, see Gina Arnold's 1997 *Kiss This: Punk in the Present Tense*.

confusion of Iowa and Idaho by outsiders, asking, “what’s the difference between I and Idaho?” and answering, “not a thing, unless it’s your home.”

Both the literary scene at UNI and the tradition of independent cultural production in Cedar Falls can be defined by a regionalist Iowan “integrity”—local life aware of itself and its own boundaries—in two senses. First, as Klinkowitz’s discussion of the different attitudes toward successful writers in Iowa City and Cedar Falls suggests, the literary circle in the latter is locally community-oriented in its interactions between professors, students, and members of the community. The local indie scene engenders a geographical and cultural integrity as its members actively maintain boundaries between insiders and outsiders—as represented by its reaction to the corporate music industry, for example. In this way, a coherent set of events, products, and ideas are sustained and disseminated by and for the same group of local people.¹¹

Waller’s artistic endeavors in Iowa before the appearance of *The Bridges of Madison County* did not, to my knowledge, come into direct contact with the literary scene at UNI. He was never featured as a writer at UNI conferences or gatherings until the 2000 visit. Moreover, his more than twenty-five years of activity as a folk singer places him in the tradition of local independent cultural production. It is significant, given folk’s political emphasis on grassroots social change during the civil rights-era “folk revival” and Waller’s self-definition as a liberal, community-minded artist, that he sang on Robert Kennedy’s campaign train in 1968, as discussed above. Later, this self-definition as community-minded would extend to Waller’s status as an Iowa author. The specifics of the creation of *Bridges* begin to emerge out of the contexts of this self-

definition, of independent cultural production in Cedar Falls, and of Waller's activity writing his economic development study of Iowa, with its blending of entrepreneurship and regionalist values.

Authorial intent, commerce, and the writing of *Bridges*

But even if the situation of independent, regionalist-style production in Iowa is useful to consider when analyzing the origins of *Bridges* in Iowa, the work of literary or artistic regionalists cannot be said to be an influence on Waller's writing. In a February 9, 2000 email to me, Waller responded to a question about the influence of other Iowa-identified writers on his literary work. Always careful to frame the writing of *Bridges* as a mysterious channelling of creative inspiration, he replied, ". . . my first reaction is: none."

In the wake of the book's astonishing commercial success, Waller has also become wary of suggestions that *Bridges* was produced with commercial success, or even publication, in mind. As will be shown in Chapter Three, the book's success was often assumed by reviewers to have been the product of knowledge of market research amassed in the course of his career as a professor and consultant. "They thought I was a marketing professor, which I wasn't, and never could have been, to start with," he said in his 2000 Renninger lecture. In conversation with me, Waller expressed incredulity at reviewers who he said had implied that he had used

all my training in business and economics to construct a demographic model of potential readership, and then had gone back and constructed this novel to hit the top of the bell curve, to get the most sales. This is one of the most irrational enterprises to come along. . . . I mean, I might do

¹¹ For a discussion of the meaning of independent rock music to individual and community identity in the 1990s, see Barry Shank's 1994 *Dissonant Identities: The Rock*

something such as that for the business school when I was dean, if I was constructing a computer lab, which I did, building a computer operation up there. I mean, sure, you're going to use a certain amount of rationality and forecasting and all that, but when it comes to the arts, it's just gut level.

It has been reported that the inspiration for *Bridges* occurred during the time Waller spent driving around the state, taking photographs and making notes for his study. *People* magazine reported in 1992 that Waller was struck with the inspiration for the novel "when he began photographing old covered bridges in Madison county . . . for a state-funded project. The next day he began writing feverishly, sleeping three hours a night. 'It was a Zen-like experience for me,' he says. Two weeks later he finished" ("One from the Heartland" 109). Perhaps as a result of the connection between Waller's work for the study and the origins of *Bridges*, the photograph of Cedar Bridge on the cover of *The Bridges of Madison County* is credited to the Iowa Department of Economic Development, the agency that funded his study. Other photographs in the book are credited to Waller himself.

Nowhere does Waller himself explicitly connect the photography junket that he would later claim directly inspired the writing of *Bridges* with his work on the *Iowa* study, but he has often readily offered that the book's protagonist, Robert Kincaid, is based on Waller's own activities, persona, even his clothes, as he drove around the state taking photographs. He told me,

I'd never visited the bridges of Madison County, always intended to. I was rambling around, I used to just get in my truck and drive around a lot,

throw my cameras in. . . . So I just visited the *Bridges*, and walked through and just stood in them. . . . At that time they were forgotten. I'd ask directions . . . pretty much the way they were talking to Kincaid in the book. So it was late when I finished, and I stayed overnight in the motel. I got up the next morning, and I'd had this feeling before, that I wanted to do something creative. It's indefinable sometimes. . . . I got home, I didn't even unpack my gear, just set it on the floor. I went up and turned on this little Zenith 286 or something, had a little tiny screen on it. I had a five-dollar piece of shareware I was using for a word processor. I just sat down and wrote, "there are songs that come free from the blue-eyed grass, from the dust of a thousand country roads." I wrote that line [the first line of the novel] and then started writing about Kincaid and Francesca.

Waller also told me, "My editor once said, 'How many books can you write about yourself?' I said, 'well, it's sort of like a pizza. Let's see, we've got Kincaid, we did Michael Tillman the academic [*Slow Waltz in Cedar Bend*], and we did Texas Jack Carmine, my alter ego [*Border Music*]. . . . Then we've got, I'm not sure whether I'm the hit man or the writer in *Puerta Vallarta Squeeze*. And,' I said, 'I've got a couple more I'd like to do.'"

The actual writing of the book, Waller told me, was a "pipeline to the universe" consisting of

nine days in a hypnotic state, hardly sleeping. All I could think of was this story in my head. I was just so taken with the passion of these people, that all I could do was write. And I wrote with a towel around my neck. There

was one occasion I went to my knees before the computer keyboard and wept uncontrollably. I couldn't write because I was weeping so hard. It just kept coming and coming in waves. And I sat and wrote for nine days.

(Waller, "Getting the Words")

The claim of spontaneous production would later be a successful part of the marketing strategy of *Bridges*.

Along with recounting the writing of *Bridges* as an unplanned act of inspiration almost entirely out of his rational control, Waller has maintained that he had low expectations for the manuscript of *Bridges*. He told me that after finishing the novel, he "ran off eight copies on my dot matrix printer, gave it to my friends. Said, 'I'll probably never do another one, we'll have a party and burn the manuscript or something later on.'" Still, Waller told me that after writing the draft, he was concerned that the book be authentic and realistic (an effect which would have a bearing on the novel's reception by readers, as will be discussed in subsequent chapters). Therefore, he soon went back to Winterset, in the persona of Kincaid, to ask himself, "does this ring true?" He recounted:

I spent one day, after I finished the book, I put my Robert Kincaid clothes on, went out and bought a pack of Camels. I went to the bridges and did everything Kincaid would have done. I even went to the grocery store and bought the kind of food he bought. I went to the Northside Café [featured in the novel] and had a Pepsi. I went and sat in the park. I did everything that I could think of to see how it felt, sort of played Robert Kincaid.

And on another post-writing trip to Winterset, Waller told me, he did some fact-checking, or rather, some checking to make sure no real facts had been inadvertently included in his work of fiction :

I spent a day or two down there. I went to the newspaper office and looked back at the newspapers from that week. At first they weren't going to [help]; they said, "what is this guy doing?" I just said, "I'm interested." They said "OK." So I went down there, and looked at it, to make sure I had the store names correct, the price of goods, I wrote down all the prices. Weather, too was important, to see how close I was. Hot. Then I went to the—what office is it?—to look up birth and death records, because I wanted to make sure I wasn't duplicating anybody. If there had been a Francesca Johnson or a Richard Johnson, you leave yourself open to some weird stuff. And I meant to do no harm to anyone, didn't want to hurt anyone.

It is interesting to note that the nine days of initial writing that produced the draft of *Bridges* did not include the writing of *Bridges*' preface and epilogue, which Waller told me came to him in a similar rush of inspiration, but several days later. In later chapters we will see how important the frame narrative in the preface and epilogue was to readers' experience of *Bridges* as "realistic." That it was added later suggests that Waller did to some degree plan the structure of the novel around his anticipation of readers' reactions to it, despite his claim that its production was completely "gut level" and irrational. Along those same lines, Waller told me that his editors at Warner Books asked him to change only one word in the manuscript before publication; which word that was

he could not recall. It certainly would be very unusual for any writer to produce a completely finished manuscript without revisions of any kind, and the degree to which his spontaneous writing process was emphasized in promoting *Bridges* makes me wonder whether it might be a sales myth.

This is not to imply that Waller was thinking only of selling books in writing *Bridges*, for much of his work to this point—for example, helping a special education teacher better evaluate her students' abilities in his Interpretive Structural Modeling consulting or making Iowans aware of the degradation of their natural environment in his essays and economic study—was clearly intended to benefit Iowans, despite whatever gain he found in it. Were it not for the fact that *Bridges'* national popularity transcended the regionalist intent of Waller's earlier forays into cultural production, perhaps the novel could be neatly fit into the context of local, community-minded production for and about Iowans. However, its sales success complicates such an assertion.

First, there is a question about the decision to publish *Bridges* with Warner Books instead of with his usual regional publisher, Iowa State University Press. This question will be explored in Chapter Two, but for now, the context of Waller's earlier creative activity raises the possibility that he thought of national distribution merely as a means of attaining more widespread "brokerage" for his localist ideas. Second, there is a question about Waller's move from the forms of issue-oriented essays and economic studies to that of the novel (even, by some standards, the "romance novel"). This question will be explored in Chapters Two and Three. For now, however, we may consider that another of Waller's essays, "Romance," first written as a 1983 commencement speech at UNI, where he was at the time dean of the School of Business, and published in the *Des*

Moines Register the same year, explicitly frames the broader subject of romance (perhaps roughly described in the way Waller treated it, as “creative inspiration”) as a social issue.

Waller’s speech is an ode to Iowa and the creative process as romantic. Although Waller does not refer to literary romanticism in his speech, his discussion implies a general understanding of creativity and imagination as similar to Wordsworth’s definition of the creation of poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” As Kurt Weinberg points out in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, such an emphasis on spontaneity in creative writing was a hallmark of literary romanticism; Waller’s account of his spontaneous writing of *Bridges*, and (as will be discussed in later chapters) his allusions to British Romantic poetry in the text of *Bridges*, fall in line with this emphasis. Waller told the graduates that romance “fuels your life and propels your work with a sense of vision, hope, and caring. Because you are working for others, not just for yourself, your work takes on a certain quality that it will not otherwise have” (“Romance” 45-6). Elsewhere in the speech, he urges his audience to appreciate Iowa itself as romantic: “Iowa is a very romantic, mystical place Iowa, like romance, doesn’t come up and pirouette before you, saying, ‘Hey, look, I’m beautiful.’ She just lies there, on hot June days, like a woman in the sun, while romance splashes around where the Winnebago runs to kiss the Shell Rock [The Winnebago and the Shell Rock rivers converge in Waller’s home town of Rockford, Iowa.]” (50-51).

Third, there is a question about the disconnection between *Bridges*’ national sales, and the regionalist context of its production. Evidence of this contradiction can be found in the critical field of regionalism itself. For example, Cheryl Herr holds up Waller’s views on sustainable growth from *Iowa: Perspectives on Today and Tomorrow* as an

example of grassroots, oppositional possibilities inherent in regionalism. Referring to Waller as an “economist and writer,” she notes that he

. . . closely questions the premise, widely held and at the heart of contemporary life, that continued, sustained, and endless economic growth is not only desirable, but necessary. In contrast to the expectations of “high-intensity purchasing” that runs American Industry, Waller asks us to recall a time on the prairies when the winter winds pierced the homemade clothing of farmers struggling to maintain shelter and put food on the table [Waller] decidedly rejects a purely sentimental back-to-naturism, but he asks us to honor the quest for self-sufficiency that brought immigrants to the heartland. (142-3)

Herr illustrates these points about critical regionalism with textual interpretation of popular literature and film, but never mentions *The Bridges of Madison County*—in its time, the greatest example to date of “high intensity purchasing” in popular literature. Instead, she interprets Smiley’s 1997 *A Thousand Acres* as symbolic narratives of the transition from traditional agrarianism to participation in a global economy, and W.P. Kinsella’s 1982 *Shoeless Joe* and its 1989 film adaptation, *Field of Dreams*, both also set in Iowa, as a symbolic narrative of the intrusion of big-business corruption into heartland values. Not only was *Bridges* created by an author who had recently advanced the very ideas Herr finds in these other popular works, but, as we will see in Chapter Five, the tourist economy spawned by *Field of Dreams* in Dyersville, Iowa, in the late 1980s was an explicit model for the *Bridges*-related tourism industry that would spring up in Winterset, Iowa in the 1990s. That the inclusion of *Bridges* in this discussion would

contradict Herr's argument points out that, because it was so commercially successful, it conflicts with the localist values elsewhere espoused by Waller.

However, Waller's intent in writing *Bridges* has been more vulnerable in the context of gender ideology than in that of commerce, as will be discussed in later chapters. Bonnie Brennen has written that Waller's intent in writing *Bridges* was to intervene in reader's attitudes toward men in at the turn of the '90s. Quoting Waller from a 1993 article by Jocelyn McClurg in the *Hartford Courant*, she reports that Waller had planned to write "a total of six or seven novels that [would] explore the plight of the contemporary American male which he views as 'almost a tragedy'" (64). In an interview, I raised this topic with Waller by discussing other books about men published at about the same time as *Bridges*, most notably Robert Bly's 1990 *Iron John*,¹² which, like *Bridges*, makes use of some of the same notions of masculine sensitivity and spirituality. I was surprised at his vehement reaction—his most animated moment in any of our conversations—which started before I could fully pose the question, and involved another explicit comparison of himself to the character of Kincaid.

GW: People have compared you to Robert Bly and the book to *Iron John*; they came out at about . . .

RJW: Ooh! [shudders] It makes me . . .

GW: You don't like that.

RJW: No, I don't like that at all, that's a really dead wrong characterization. Bly's work really turned me off.

GW: Really?

RJW: Really. Smelling each other's armpits and beating drums in the jungle, I mean, it just, that could not be further from Robert Kincaid. I can't tell you how, what a contradiction that is. Kincaid would not have understood anything Robert Bly was talking about. . . . Kincaid, he's like me, a very straightforward guy, this is what I do, this is who I am . . . I don't want to bond. I've got a baseball cap at home that says "real men don't bond" that I wear around. [laughs] Oh, that's really, really, in my estimation, absolutely dead wrong. Bly with this touchy-feely stuff, Kincaid isn't like that. I damn near vomited when I, I read part of *Iron John* and threw it away. Bly and his dulcimer don't do anything for me. [laughs] That's a different world.

GW: Would it be going too far to frame *Bridges* as kind of a counterpoint to *Iron John*, or the flipside . . .

RJW: Yeah, that's fair. That's fair, I would think. . . . I spent a long time in the 80s introspecting about what it meant to be a man. It took me almost six months of almost steady thinking. . . . Well, I'm sorry, it wouldn't be fair for me to do an analysis of *Iron John*, because my reactions aren't very good, but my general impression of it is that people need a flipside.

This last statement, that "people need a flipside," also belies Waller's attempts to make the writing of *Bidges* seem to have happened spontaneously of its own accord; it shows that he had been considering Americans' attitudes toward popular discourses—such as that about masculinity put forth separately in *Bridges* and *Iron John*.

¹² Bly, a Minnesotan, is a 1956 graduate of the Iowa Writer's Workshop. *Iron John* asserts that men's socialization into masculine behaviors has left them in need of

The Bridges of Madison County did not, of course, come “from nowhere,” as *Business Week* would later put it (Tilsner). Rather, it came from Iowa, the heart of the Midwest, in the heart of America, by the hand of a native Iowan. Its author was a cultural entrepreneur, and a politically engaged commentator on Iowan values. Building upon unique influences, his experience as an academic writer, his hobby of songwriting, and his experimentation with the journalistic essay, Robert Waller went ahead and wrote a novel, something he had never done before. In this, he reminds one of Grant Wood, Paul Engle, and other entrepreneurial Iowa regionalists. If the answer to the question of *Bridges’* origin is that it is the work of an Iowan and therefore a Midwestern product—and I think it is—then it is important to note that Waller is cut from the same Iowan cloth as Wood and Engle: Each has shown himself to be confident, independent, outspoken, hard-working, able to discourse on the relationship between the arts and American culture, politically engaged, community minded, well-educated, and moral, but also somewhat defensive, combative, and willing to trade on stereotypes for success. Moreover, many of the Iowans discussed in this chapter took as their project the remaking of their immediate world, not in one fell swoop, but through determination and work, building on their initial modest successes and always trying to reach Iowan and American audiences with their messages about what Americans should value. I would argue that Waller, Wood, and Engle have gone some way toward proving, through undertaking such projects, that these are Midwestern attributes, ways in which the people of the region, and especially the state of Iowa, are indeed distinct.

Because of *Bridges’* origin in Iowa, according the historians of Midwestern literature, art, and popular culture quoted in this chapter, it was fated to be considered a

rebuilding emotional attachments to other men.

reflection of the authentic American mores and values of its time if it ever saw the light of day. As we will see in Chapter Two, *Bridges* would see not only the light of day but also, as a bestseller, the bright lights of the American mass-media mainstream.

CHAPTER TWO

The Marketing and Promotion of *The Bridges of Madison County*

From the transcript of “CBS This Morning,” August 5, 1993, Thursday. Paula Zahn and Harry Smith, anchors. Type: “filler.”

ZAHN: We're back. Twenty-five minutes after the hour.

...

HARRY SMITH, co-host:

You know what I'm really pumped up about this morning? . . . It's not the budget.

ZAHN: Sean Connery? Robert Waller?

SMITH: It's not Sean Connery.

McEWEN: It's not Robert Waller?

ZAHN: Foods that heal? Foods that make you live longer?

...

SMITH: The debut of David Letterman on CBS.

The above excerpt is one of scores like it to appear in the national media during the years 1993 and 1994, and is meant to illustrate how “popular” in the media Robert Waller’s *The Bridges of Madison County* had become: as recognizable as Sean Connery and David Letterman on one hand, and as pervasive as “foods that make you live longer” and “the budget” on the other. This chapter is, first and foremost, a distillation of the events leading to, and maintaining, *Bridges*’ extraordinary sales success, including publication, promotion, and “synergy,” or the marketing of clusters of related products, sometimes through companies owned by the same parent corporation. The chronological narrative of this chapter focuses on key events such as the “word-of-mouth” promotion of

the book and the reporting about it on National Public Radio and on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* during 1993 and 1994. Throughout this chapter, the novel's sales success is illustrated by its position on the *New York Times Book Review's* hardcover fiction bestsellers list.

For comparison with *Bridges*, one might note that in her study of bestselling novels recommended by Oprah Winfrey on her television show in the 1990s, as *Bridges* was, Cecilia Konchar Farr has calculated that they averaged seventeen weeks on the list and 1.2 million copies sold. For further comparison, during *Bridges's* tenure as a bestseller Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*, Michael Chrichton's *Disclosure*, John Grisham's *The Rainmaker*, and Danielle Steel's *The Gift* each spent between twenty-two and twenty-six weeks on the list before dropping off. *Bridges's* sales success was exponentially better than any of these examples: between August 16, 1992 and October 8, 1995, *Bridges* spent 164 weeks—over three years—on the *Times* bestsellers list, a record according to the *Times* (“Endnotes”), thirty-seven of those weeks at number one. According to *Publishers Weekly*, *Bridges* was exceptional in a number of ways: By March 1993, it was “the fastest selling novel in publishing history” (Maryles, “The Sky’s the Limit”). By August 1995, shortly before it fell off the list, it had sold over six million copies in America and over ten million worldwide¹³ (Maryles, “Behind the Bestsellers” August 7, 1995). In 1997, *The Washington Post Book World* reported (in a list of sales figures compiled for it by *Publishers Weekly*) that in 1993 alone, *Bridges* had sold 4,362,352 copies, the second greatest single-year sales of any fiction or non-fiction

¹³ This study focuses primarily on *Bridges's* success in America. It has been reported that *Bridges* sold millions of copies in Japan (Bottum; Lyall) and, in both legal and pirated editions, in China (Jinhua).

hardcover bestseller between 1972 and 1996.¹⁴ In 1997, *Publishers Weekly* ranked it first in “the last quartercentury’s largest sales” for novels. *Bridges* was so successful in its hardcover format that Warner Books found it unnecessary to issue a paperback version until June of 1997, when it issued a first printing in paperback of 1.5 million copies (Lodge).

The publication and promotion of *Bridges*

That *Bridges* was published at all is due to the regional success of the two books collecting Waller’s *Des Moines Register* essays, *Just Beyond the Firelight* (1988) and *One Good Road is Enough* (1990). Upon completing the manuscript of *Bridges* in September of 1990, Waller says he sent copies only to “a few friends.” One of those friends was Bill Silag, managing editor of Iowa State University Press, who had published Waller’s essay collections as well as his 1991 study funded by the Iowa Department of Economic Development, *Iowa: Perspectives on Today and Tomorrow*. Silag was the ex-husband of novelist Jane Smiley, who wrote *A Thousand Acres* and *Moo* while teaching writing at Iowa State University in Ames. Waller, who says he has never read Smiley, recounts, “That was how *Bridges* got to New York, was that [Smiley’s] ex-husband was my editor at the Iowa State University Press. And so I just sent *Bridges* to him, because he and I had become close friends, I had given him the two essay books, and was working on a novel. . . . So . . . with my permission, he called Smiley, his ex-wife. She just gave him the name of her agent.”

Smiley’s agent was Aaron Priest, who, Waller told me, promptly told Silag he wasn’t interested in reading, or even receiving, Waller’s novel. However, when Silag

¹⁴ The book with the greatest sales during this time was *In the Kitchen with Rosie*, a cookbook by Oprah Winfrey’s personal chef, Rosie Daley, which in 1994 sold a million

pointed out to Priest that Waller's essay collection *Just Beyond the Firelight* had sold 10,000 copies for ISU press, Priest told Silag to have Waller send a copy of the manuscript. "So," Waller later said, "I did. It was read by a junior member of the firm. She convinced Aaron Priest . . . to read it. That was about Wednesday or so. And I got a phone call on Thursday. It was this wonderful Jewish voice from New York: 'Robert. Where have you been all my life. . . . Gonna be tough to sell. Not really a novel. 42,000 words. Pretty short. Love story. Pretty odd. Not the kind of stuff that sells. I'll call you back.'" When Priest did call back "in a couple of days," according to Waller, he had news. He'd "taken it down the street" to three publishers, two of whom had declined (Waller, "Perquisites and Costs"). At Warner Books, however, the new editor of the hardcover division, Maureen Egen, made it her first acquisition, for a \$32,000 advance ("Waller, Robert James," *1994 Current Biography Yearbook*). Then, in November of 1990, Priest called Waller again. Waller recounts, "He said, 'Steven Spielberg called, wants to buy the book.' And I said, 'Wow, you know, gonna get money, or what happens?'" (Waller, "Perquisites and Costs"). So, seventeen months before the book was to be published, its movie rights were owned by Amblin Entertainment, the production subsidiary of Spielberg's Dreamworks, Inc. Amblin president Kathleen Kennedy, who had made *E.T.*, *Back to the Future*, *Gremlins*, and *Jurassic Park*, told Claudia Glenn Dowling she "liked that it was mature, not about a couple of 20-year-olds" (112). Kennedy, 36 at the time, later said she "didn't know it was an enormous phenomenon about to happen," but that she "found it moving." She continued, "It brought to the surface a lot of feelings and issues. For me it tapped into something deeper than a mid-

more copies than *Bridges* had the year before.

life affair. I believe that a lot of people have the potential to fall in love with any number of people. You don't know what fate has in store" (112-113).

But how was Priest able to convince Warner Books to take a chance on *Bridges*? Waller told me he felt it was because of Priest's experience publishing romance novels. Waller says of Priest, "He's got a whole little quiet stable over to one side, that sort of like, pays his overhead. He has, I mean, Jane Smiley, he's got good authors, Caputo, and so on. But he's got this little romance stable that he takes care of. And he loves them all, they're all women writers, and you know, they're paying for the lights, and so on. He doesn't say much about them." It is true that the Aaron Priest agency represents such writers. In a 2002 email to the Columbia College online newsletter, *Columbia College Today*, Priest (a 1959 graduate) wrote that the authors his agency represents "[run] the gamut from women's historical romance—Johanna Lindsey—to Pulitzer Prize-winning Jane Smiley." However, the importance of such writers as Lindsey to the book publishing industry should not be underestimated. She has sold more than 40 million copies of her books, which frequently appear on bestseller lists. She has published over 30 paperback historical romances for Avon books, writing them at an average pace of two per year, and began publishing them in hardcover for Morrow in 1995 at a similar pace¹⁵ ("Lindsey, Johanna," *Contemporary Authors Online*).

¹⁵ Lindsey's 1980 *Fires of Winter* is discussed by Janice Radway in *Reading the Romance* as a favorite of the Smithsonian group of readers (121-130). Radway also reports that "because historicals typically include more explicit sex than the Harlequins and also tend to portray more independent and defiant heroines, we might expect that this particular subgenre would draw younger readers who are less offended by changing standards of gender behavior" (56). Lindsey, whose books are "noted for their accurate portrayal of historical periods and foreign settings" (*Contemporary Authors Online*) writes the kind of books Radway's Smithsonian readers appreciate for their realism, which allows

Perhaps there was something in *Bridges'* plot or setting that Priest's agents found familiar from their experience with romances such as Lindsey's. However, Priest's agency employs a number of agents, some of whom, like Molly Friedrich—"six-figure Molly," or even "seven-figure Molly," as she is known because of the large advances and rights deals she is able to secure for authors—represent sixty or more authors (Friedrich). If those agents are to be believed, their evaluation of manuscripts involves an individual reaction as a reader. This readerly reaction is fairly immediate, in part due to the volume of material that literary agents must read, especially if, like the Priest agency, they accept unsolicited manuscripts "over the transom" (Friedrich estimates she receives 200-250 submissions per week); she notes another quality of a successful manuscript in addition to authorial voice: "the first page has to be very good" (Friedrich). Besides practical considerations, Friedrich keeps an open mind about unknown authors, even those with unsolicited manuscripts, because "you never know." When selling a book, she says, it is based on her individual reaction as a reader: "I have the authority of my own convictions, but I don't know better than anyone else what's going to do well or what's not going to do well. All I have is my own impulse or experience of reading something" (Friedrich).

Further, an agent's readerly reaction involves uniqueness, not familiarity. Friedrich says she looks for "a spark of any kind of original voice . . . If you take any page of Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*, for example . . . you know that's Tom Wolfe's voice. It's not generic writing. . . . Everyone's looking for the same thing. It is hard to find, but it's not hard to recognize" (Friedrich). The independence and individualism literary agents assert about their manuscript evaluation process falls in line

them to "visit" exotic locales and historical areas (Radway, *Reading the Romance* 110-111).

with their place in the industry. Jonathan Bing reported in *Variety.com* in 2001 that, unlike top editors at publishing houses owned by media conglomerates, “most agents nowadays don’t report to a corporate board. They answer only to their clients.” Other than a few large agencies such as William Morris, which represents people in many areas of the entertainment industries, “literary agents have traditionally been lone-wolf practitioners,” that is, “indies—boutique shops run by mavericks who like to call their own shots” (Bing). The activities of the Aaron Priest Literary Agency and of Maureen Egen at Warner Books during this time highlight the role of the agent—as a reader—in the “communications circuit” of popular books. As Radway notes in *A Feeling For Books*, editors assume—or often hope—“that their own reading of a manuscript could stand in for or represent the likely reading behavior” of their customers. The editors she studied “thought of themselves primarily as readers of books, and they prided themselves on their ability to read with sensitivity, intelligence, and attention” (41).

Egen also cited her immediate readerly reaction to the book as her reason for buying it, but she has implied that her reaction was as much analytical as personal in forecasting the book’s success. For example, in addition to saying that she “liked the idea that it was set in the Midwest and had the kind of Midwestern values people want to believe in” (Tilsner), she has also been quoted as saying she “*believed in*[the book] from day one” (Goldsborough; emphasis added). From the perspective of a publisher, believing in, as opposed to enjoying, a book implies a forecasting of the book’s chances in marketplace. However, the importance of Egen and Warner Books to the success of *Bridges* overlaps into another area of the communications circuit of a book: that of retailing. Before joining Warner as an editorial director in 1990, where her first purchase

was *Bridges* from Priest, Egen had a long career in a variety of editorial positions at Doubleday, including vice-president and editorial director of the company's book and music clubs, such as the Literary Guild ("Egen Named Warner Publisher"; Nathan). As Radway describes in *A Feeling For Books: The Book of the Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire*, Doubleday's book clubs, including the Literary Guild, were regarded by editors at their chief competitor, the Book-of-the-Month Club, as "the inferior world of women's reading, romances, books on forming relationships and rehabilitating marriages, make over manuals, and the most salacious celebrity biographies—the publishing equivalent of Phil Donahue and Oprah Winfrey. The Book-of-the-Month Club . . . was PBS and the Smithsonian" (36). Doubleday has been owned by German publishing conglomerate Bertelsmann since 1986; the Book-of-the-Month Club, bought by Time, Inc. in 1977, became a part of the Time-Warner empire during those companies' merger in 1988. Therefore, when Egen left Doubleday for Warner Books in 1990, she crossed a corporate and cultural divide in the publishing world. She brought with her a familiarity with the kinds of books described by Radway's Book-of-the-Month club informants above, the terms of which would fit well with the the commonly-held opinions of *Bridges*, and even, in the reference to Oprah Winfrey, with the way it would be marketed.

On August 16, 1992—two years after Priest had brought the manuscript to Egen—*The Bridges of Madison County* debuted on the *New York Times* bestsellers list, a surprise hit at number 12. *Bridges* would hover on the list between number 6 and number 12 for the next twenty-three weeks, until February 1993. For a first novel by an unknown

author, this amount of time on the bestseller lists might be a reasonable indicator of healthy popularity.

Book trade and business reporters credit Egen’s innovative marketing strategy for *Bridges*, based on principles brought with her from Doubleday, with much of the book’s sales success. Unlike most bestsellers at the time, *Bridges* became a bestseller despite a “timid first printing of 29,000 copies” (Tilsner), “with almost no traditional advertising,” (Goldsborough), and without at first being stocked in the newly emerging superstores, or even the major chains at the time such as B. Dalton Booksellers, Barnes & Noble, and Waldenbooks. According to the *New York Times*, *Bridges* “got onto lists across the country . . . not because of enthusiastic book reviews, heavy advertising or a major promotion campaign by the publisher” (Fein). *Publishers Weekly*’s Daisy Maryles echoed that sentiment, stating that “The book’s first appearance on *PW*’s list on August 10 [1992] (and the NYT on August 17) was due almost solely to the strength of its sales at the independents” (“Behind the Bestsellers” Jan. 25, 1993). According to Aaron Priest in May 1992, the chains had declined to pre-order the novel or carry it upon its publication (qtd. in Nathan). So Egen used “grassroots, word-of-mouth marketing” (Goldsborough) to spread the word about the book among independent booksellers and their customers.

Before the book’s publication, Egen sent four thousand “reading copies” of *Bridges* to independent booksellers along with a letter “praising the novel’s simplicity and its ‘universal truths’” (Goldsborough) and urging them to “handsell” the book—that is, “clutch the book . . . even clutch the customer, and . . . sincerely confide, ‘You’ve got to read this’” (“The Booksellers’ Art”). According to *Advertising Age*, which in 1992 named Egen one of its “Marketing 100”—the 100 most innovative marketers of the fiscal

year—Egen had “learned first-hand the power of word-of-mouth” at Doubleday. She told *Advertising Age*’s Robert Goldsborough that at Doubleday, she “sat in on focus groups, and most of the people said they bought books because someone they trusted told them to.” In 1998, Egen reflected on the importance of word-of-mouth to the book trade when she was asked by *Publisher’s Weekly* to provide some industry “rules to live by.” One of her rules was that “personal recommendation counts most in a buying decision,” whether that recommendation comes from “Aunt Marie Louise” or “a neighborhood bookseller” (“For Bookseller and Publisher, Rules to Live by in 1998”).

Another of Egen’s “rules to live by” was that “Everyone is part of the team: Authors and agents, wholesalers and jobbers, chains, independents, book clubs, printers, binders and paper suppliers, truckers . . . each needs to be valued and handled with care” (ellipses original). This attitude, and the personal attention Egen showed booksellers in promoting the book, does not seem to have been prevalent on the part of publishers at the time, which is perhaps part of the reason booksellers were so receptive to Egen’s overtures at a time when the relationship between publishers and retailers was tense. In a *Publishers Weekly* summary of book trade trends for 1991, John Mutter, who frequently covered news of *Bridges* in the 1990s, reported in an article summarizing retail trends in 1991, that an important issue facing book retailing that year was “booksellers’ demands for more efficient service and favorable terms from publishers” (“The New Retail Realities” 24). Book retailers, the article pointed out, have less control of their pricing than sellers in other industries because of “antiquated traditions” such as pre-printed prices on the books. As a result, according to “one industry executive with experience

both as a publisher and retailer” quoted in the article, “publishers determine the profitability of bookstores” (27).

In the early 1990s, booksellers were unhappy that publishers, given their power to affect profitability, paid too little attention to how retailers went about selling books. One exception was Bantam Doubleday Dell, which “a year or so ago” (the beginning of 1991, a year after Egen left Doubleday for Warner) “took the step of sending some of its top executives into the field to see how the retail half lives—and sells its books. . . .” This “was regarded as newsworthy,” according to Mutter, but “Surely it should be routine. . . . Surely it behooves publishers to pay closer attention to their most expert customers” (“The New Retail Realities,” 29). The “net impression” in the industry in 1992, according to another *Publishers Weekly* article in the same year-in-review issue, was that “many publishers . . . [did] not think as carefully about how they operate in the marketplace as they might” (Baker).

On August 16, 1992—two years after Priest had brought the manuscript to Egen—*The Bridges of Madison County* debuted on the *New York Times* bestsellers list, a surprise hit at number twelve. *Bridges* would hover on the list between number 6 and number twelve for the next twenty-three weeks, until February 1993. For a first novel by an unknown author, this amount of time on the bestseller lists might be a reasonable indicator of healthy popularity.

Egen’s strategy of sending advance reading copies is an example of publishers paying closer attention to booksellers; by June of 1993, *Publishers Weekly* was reporting that “one marketing ploy that has met with success,” especially in selling romance novels, “is the advance reading copy.” One bookseller was quoted in the article as saying,

“Getting a reading copy is the best thing a publisher can do for me. Then I can put a note on it if it’s wonderful. . . . If I put a note on it, I can sell 100 books or more” (Schulhafer 49). Beth Robbins, manager of Telecote Bookshop in Montecito, California, also told *Publishers Weekly* that *Bridges* had been handsold to her by her Little, Brown sales representative (her distributor for Warner Books), who took it “out of the pile of comps in the back of the store and said, ‘You have to read this’” (Mutter, “Love at First Read” 16). Another way publishers could have been helping booksellers, according to *Publishers Weekly*’s analysis of retailing trends, is by choosing an effective jacket design and physical format for their books. Egen later said that “the special look and feel of *Bridges* is part of its charm” (Angel 19) and that “the art director came up with one of the loveliest designs” (Mutter, “Love at First Read” 18). In July 1992, Warren Cassell, owner of Just Books in Greenwich, Connecticut, told Mutter that he “ignored bound galleys he received of the book. However, when he later received a reading copy of the same title with ‘a real jacket’ on it, *The Bridges of Madison County* ‘stood out.’” His comments reflected a dissatisfaction with publishers’ jacket choices: “I know publishers are aware that jackets sell a book, but I know which jackets sell” (“Love at First Read” 16). Quoted in the same article, Corey Lindberg, a manager at Kingsley’s Book Emporium in Sarasota, Florida, concurred: “. . . he praised the look of the book, noting that the author took the photographs that adorn the jacket and the opening page of each chapter. ‘The jacket’s so appropriate,’” he noted. In *Texas Monthly*, Mimi Swartz wrote of the packaging, “The cover, an understated illustration of a bridge in muted colors with an equally understated type treatment, makes the novel look literary . . .” (158). Cassell also

told Mutter that “liked the book’s length,” and Robbins noted that it could be read in two-and-a-half hours (“Love at First Read” 16).

Other factors in *Bridges*’ heavy sales at these booksellers included the phenomenon of customers buying multiple copies, in-store appearances by Waller, and “co-op money” from Warner. Cassell told Mutter that that a number of customers had returned to the store after reading the book and bought multiple copies—up to 17—to give as gifts. (“Love at First Read” 16). It was reported in the same July 1992 article that Warner had been engaged in the practice of giving “co-op money” to certain independent bookstores as the publisher promoted *Bridges* to them. In his look back at 1991, Mutter reported that “reaching the customer continues to be a problem for the business” because “advertising on TV is beyond most book people’s budgets,” but that “newsletters, which can be financed in large part with co-op money, help” (“The New Retail Realities” 27). Cassell received such support from Warner and in exchange ordered exclusively from the publisher instead of from middleman distributors. In addition, Waller, who told me he signed so many books while promoting *Bridges* in bookstores that he sustained damage to his right hand, made in-store appearances at Cassell’s Just Books and at Village Books and Stationery in Omaha, according to the article. “If the publisher supports what I want to do with the coop, the newsletter and appearances, then I support the publisher,” Cassell said (18).

In July 1992, Mutter reported in *Publishers Weekly* that the independent bookstores Egen had contacted were selling “astounding numbers of copies of [*Bridges*] compared to sales for the average title—and even for their usual bestsellers” (“Love at First Read” 16). According to that article, Kingsley’s Book Emporium in Sarasota,

Florida had sold more than twelve hundred copies in the fifteen months after *Bridges*' publication; Tecolote Bookshop in Montecito, California had sold four hundred "and would have sold more if it hadn't run out for several weeks at the end of June"; Just Books in Greenwich, Connecticut had sold three hundred; Village Book and Stationery in Omaha, Nebraska, had sold 250 ("Love at First Read" 16). In 1995, with the movie adaptation coming out, *Publisher's Weekly* contacted these same independent booksellers to ask whether they were stocking extra copies for the film's release. Some were, but only twenty or thirty copies. This article also updated sales figures of *Bridges* for several of the stores: Tecolote Bookshop reported sales of over six hundred for 1992. Kingsley's Book Emporium, by far the strongest *Bridges* seller in this group, sold 1156 copies in 1993 (bouyed by a Waller signing appearance at which he personalized the books of eight hundred fans), 256 in 1994, and as of June 1995 had sold fifty-two copies for the year (Angel 19). According to Mutter on July 20, 1992, Kingsley's had also sold most of the twelve hundred copies of *Bridges* for the year for a price of \$9.50, the bookstore's cost, and had given a money-back guarantee "as a way of saying thanks to our customers," according to its manager. On July 1, they began selling the book at the suggested retail price of \$14.95 ("Love at First Read" 16).

Factors of price, packaging, length, and coop money—aspects of the book as an industry product—were important in independent booksellers' enthusiasm for selling the book, but it is also clear that booksellers' reading experience of it was important. The bookstore owners cited by *Publishers Weekly* during the initial stages of *Bridges*' sales success spoke of deciding to promote *Bridges* after reading the book and taking opinions from others on it. Mutter reported that the booksellers described themselves as

“obsessed” and “enthralled” with *Bridges* upon reading it. Cassell found the book “wonderful.” He then sought the opinion of his wife, two sons, and daughter, and of his colleagues at Just Books, all of whom “loved it.” Robbins of Telecote Bookshop said she had read the book seven times and claimed, “I don’t care about the sale of the book; I just want people to read it.” (She described buyers of the book as “all kinds of people . . . men and women, old and young . . . very hip and very conservative.”) Judy Gacked, co-owner of Village Book and Stationery, told Mutter that after reading the comp copy, “I immediately wrote to the author and asked him to come. Then I had all the salesclerks read it.” They also found it “wonderful.” She added that it was “fun to have a book you enjoy and want to sell.” Kingsley Book Emporium’s Corey Lindberg told Mutter that he had read, and immediately reread, the book in an afternoon, then “made store owner Paul Ohran read it . . . [they] both decided [they] loved it.” (“Love at First Read” 16, 18). In addition, Chuck Robinson, owner of Village Books in Bellingham, Washington, and president of the American Booksellers Association, told Julie Tilsner of *Advertising Age* that he “liked that kitchen [sex] scene,” but deferred judgement to “a female colleague,” asking her, “Is this all just a male fantasy?” When she “shook her head: no way,” he “pushed the book.”

Priest also attributed the independents’ warm reception of *Bridges* to their reading of the book and contrasted that reception with the practices of the chain bookstores. Paul Nathan reported in *Publishers Weekly* that the agent “was in a mood to sound off against the book chains” when contacted for the article. Priest told him, “You can quote me as saying I doubt [the chains] ever found a single book on the basis of reading it. . . . Three factors determine what they order. The first is whether the new book is a “repeat”—by an author who’s been successful. The second is for you to buy your way in, through co-op

advertising or some other way. The third . . . is how attractive the package is—whether there’s an expensive cover. None of the foregoing has anything to do with what’s inside the book” (“Success Despite the Chains?”). However, as we have seen, Warner Books had engaged the independents in two of the three methods he describes, co-op money and careful packaging—since Waller was a first-time novelist, *Bridges* could not have been a “repeat” in any case.

Priest also took offense to being quoted on the promotion of *Bridges* in an April 1995 profile of Waller by Mimi Swartz in *Texas Monthly*: Swartz had quoted Priest as saying that *Bridges*’ sales success was the result of “one of the best marketing jobs I’ve seen in years” and had added in the next sentence, “Mainly through Warner’s personal nudges to independent booksellers, which in turn inspired enormous word-of-mouth, the book took off” (158). In a letter published in *Texas Monthly* in June 1995, Priest objected that in his conversation with Swartz, he had gone on “to explain that it was the packaging and pricing of the book that made it such a great marketing job. To imply that Warner could lean on independent booksellers to recommend this book with such passion and thereby sell the great quantity that it did is at best nonsense and at worst dishonest” (12). Priest seems to take Swartz’s seemingly innocuous comments about marketing to suggest that there was a higher level of orchestration of the “word-of-mouth” strategy between Warner Books and the independent booksellers than was implied in reports of independent booksellers’ and customers’ enthusiasm for *Bridges*.

The methods used by publishers to sell books in chain stores are discussed in a February 4, 2001 *Washington Post Magazine* article, “The Loneliness of the Midlist Author,” by Paula Span. Citing a 2000 Authors Guild report, Span writes, “Simply to ensure that a new book spends two weeks on a chain’s front tables, and gets included in

some advertising, a publisher has to pay about \$10,000 through subsidies known as ‘coop advertising.’” Span also reports that bookstores were paying \$1,500 per city for author appearances in stores and that other “chain-store devices” such as window displays and cardboard sales racks are also sold to bookstores by publishers (13).

It is evident, however, that chain bookstores did not ignore the signs of *Bridges*’ success in the marketplace for long. In the same May 25, 1992 article containing Priest’s comments about the chain stores—barely a month after *Bridges*’ publication—Nathan reported that chain bookstores had in fact already begun ordering the book (“Success Despite the Chains?”). In addition, Mutter’s July 20, 1992 article about independent booksellers quoted Warner Vice President of Sales Susan Moffat as saying that Warner had “received reorders from Walden” and that it had “recently hit [chain store B. Dalton Bookseller’s] top fifty list” (“Love at First Read”). Fifty titles does make for a long list, though, and *Publishers Weekly* later reported that during 1992, *Bridges* “was selling at chain outlets, but not as quickly as the other bestselling novels. The first time Waller’s novel appeared on the Barnes & Noble and Waldenbooks weekly charts among the top 15 was for the sales week ending January 9 [1993],” seven months after it was first reported that chains were ordering *Bridges*. However, according to Maryles, by February 1993, “it was a very different story. At [Barnes & Noble], the book hit #1 for the week ending February 6, and has been one of the top three fiction bestsellers ever since, most often in the lead spot (Maryles, “Behind the Bestsellers,” June 28, 1993). It has been reported that this was due to a Valentine’s Day promotion at the chain stores (“Waller, Robert James,” *1994 Current Biography Yearbook*). At Waldenbooks, *Bridges* also landed in the #1 position for the week ending February 6; here, too, it has since been one of the three top-

selling hardcover fiction titles.” *Publishers Weekly* also reported that by the week of August 23, 1993, “95% of the independent booksellers we poll, as well as 95% of the regional chains in our survey, listed *Bridges* as their bestselling novel”; *Bridges* was also number two on the national bestsellers lists of Barnes & Noble and Waldenbooks for that week, with 50,000 copies sold (behind Tom Clancy’s *Without Remorse* at 88,000 copies) (Maryles, “Behind the Bestsellers,” August 23, 1993). In short, it is clear that *Bridges* began selling very well everywhere, not just at independent bookstores, less than a year after its publication, and continued to do so for some time.

Some traditional advertising, too, began to crop up within months of the book’s publication, with Warner Books placing a full-page ad in *People* magazine, part of the Time-Warner empire, in July 1992 (Mutter, “Love at First Read” 18). In addition, women’s magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Ladies Home Journal* published excerpts of *Bridges* in February 1993 and May 1993, respectively.¹⁶ *Ladies Home Journal* also published Waller’s essay “Slow Waltz for Georgia Ann” as an excerpt from the Warner Books collection *Old Songs in a New Café*. Perhaps this illustrates that, despite the publicity in the industry surrounding independent bookstores’ “word of mouth” role in breaking *Bridges* to a reading audience, part of Egen’s strategy with the independents was to get the attention of chains as a step toward wider distribution and promotion.

¹⁶ In *Texas Monthly* (April 1995) Mimi Swartz reported on a book party given by Warner Books for Waller and, as Aaron Priest put it in a June 1995 letter to the magazine, “for the employees of Warner Books as a much-deserved thank-you for their publicly unrewarded efforts with Waller’s books. . . . The entire company closed at four and everyone—and I mean everyone, from the mailroom to the president’s office—was present” (12). At that party, Swartz observed Waller “on one side of the bar, regaling a cluster of attractive women. One in particular, a curvy blonde of a certain age in a short black dress, listens raptly. It’s as if fate has brought them together. She’s the *Cosmo* editor who condensed *Bridges* when it ran in the magazine. ‘After I finished,’ she says of that project, ‘I had to close my door and cry’” (160).

Such a strategy would cease to be necessary as chain bookstores came to be dominated by the book “superstore,” which was modeled after the kind of independent bookstore that handsold *Bridges*, as Mutter pointed out in his January 1, 1992 review of trends in the industry. Borders, based in Ann Arbor, Michigan, had just become “a small chain” and Barnes & Noble, Waldenbooks, and Crown had opened “scores of such stores” in 1991 (“The New Retail Realities”). The independent store model for the superstore (exemplified by several of the stores publicized for selling *Bridges*, including Just Books and Kingsley’s Book Emporium) called for “at least 10,000 square feet of retail space and 40,000 titles,” “creative, active customer service,” and “a remaking—or at least rethinking—of the bookstore into a kind of community and cultural center” including frequent author readings and coffeeshops.

Some have argued that, despite the range of titles they sell, these superstores have lessened sales and publication opportunity for authors other than those already established as bestsellers. Span cites the 2000 Authors Guild report to suggest that “the rise of superstore chains and the accompanying demise of independent bookstores over [the 1990s]” have resulted in “shrinking market shares for midlist books,” “midlist” referring to all books and authors who are not at the top of a publishers’ list for promotion and distribution in a given season; often these books are considered “literary fiction.” The report found, Span writes, that as a result of the chains, from 1986 to 1999 the percentage of hardcover bestsellers bought by book shoppers had increased from seven percent of all adult hardcover trade book sales to fifteen percent (12). Others have asserted that bestseller lists such as the *Times*’ shape sales in addition to merely reporting it, and like the superstores, reduce opportunities for midlist authors. For example,

Malcolm Jones, Jr. asserted in *Newsweek* in August 1993 that *Bridges* owed its sales success to the fact that it had been on the *New York Times* bestseller list for a solid year: “*Bridges* is a bestseller because it’s a bestseller.” Jones noted that “when a book lands on the list, its luck improves enormously. Chain bookstores will stock and discount it. So will price clubs and airports and drugstores, places where *only* bestsellers get sold.” Further, since at the time booksellers were less likely than record stores to have bar-coded inventory, “the possibility of human error—and fraud—exists.” Noting that there has long been “perennial industry grumbling” about the *Times* list and “loose talk about the list being manipulated,” Jones quotes bookstore owner Chuck Robinson as saying that “the industry’s growing obsession with bestsellers often leaves book buyers with the illusion that these are the only books that exist.” In his 2005 *The Book Publishing Industry*, Albert Greco, noting the recent proliferation of book authorship by people of color, writes, “The United States has 3.5 million books in print, and 150,000 new titles were released in 2003, hardly indicators that free speech, open discussions, and the marketplace of ideas were in peril” (207).

There is uncertainty whether superstores or bestseller lists push other books out of the market or whether bestseller lists can be manipulated. In *Making the List: A Cultural History of the American Bestseller, 1900-1999*, Michael Korda, editor-in-chief of Simon & Schuster, acknowledges that “from time to time complaints are heard that movie companies and individuals try to influence the list by buying copies in bulk” (xxi-xxii) and even implies that movie producers or executives “have suggested this procedure” to him (xxii). Korda notes that such fraud “has been tried—movie producers have occasionally budgeted large amounts of money and sent their underlings out to buy up

books at key bookstores known to report their sales to the *New York Times*. . . . I have been told of certain novels, made into big movies, that have been stacked up in storage areas in movie studios” (xxii). However, Korda doubts that this is true. When this method has been suggested to him, he says, the matter has been dropped when he has explained the difficulty of the procedure (xxii). In addition, as Span notes using the 2000 Authors Guild report, it has become increasingly difficult to sell enough books just to make the list—even 250,000 copies will no longer suffice to put a book in the top 30 (13). Albert Greco notes in his 2005 *The Book Publishing Industry* that the question of manipulation surfaced in 1995: “Apparently bulk sales in 1995 perpetrated by several authors and publishers pushed their titles onto a few bestseller lists, including *The New York Times* The goals were to stimulate sales and to create reputations for the authors, allowing them to charge higher fees for their consulting work” (198). However, Greco provides no information or sources about which authors and publishers were doing this. He concludes, “All of the reputable publications maintaining bestseller lists take extraordinary measures to insure fair and accurate counting of unit sales. It appears that a few people devised strategies to beat the system in a few, and only a few, instances. Overall, the validity of the major bestseller lists has never been questioned” (199).

On the matter of books’ status as bestsellers driving sales and thus reducing market shares for midlist authors, Stanford University economist Alan T. Sorenson found in a 2004 empirical study that sales of a book do increase when it appears on the list, but that “the magnitude of the effect is modest,” with “the bulk of the effect appearing in the first week” (21). In fact, he found that “weeks in which books of a particular genre first appear on the bestseller list tend to be strong-selling weeks for non-bestsellers of the

same genre. Although too indirect to be conclusive, this result suggests that market expansion effects dominate any business-stealing associated with bestseller lists.”

Therefore, “bestseller lists may in fact increase the number of books published in equilibrium” (21-22). One aspect of Sorenson’s study that implies *Bridges*’ appearance on the list may have affected its sales in particular is that the lists’ impact on sales “is most pronounced among relatively unknown authors (new authors in particular), a pattern that favors information over promotion [by booksellers] as an explanation for the effect” (21). That is, in these limited effects, the list serves the same function as “word-of-mouth” in influencing book buyers: “Bestseller status may serve as a signal of quality: for example, bookstore patrons who are unfamiliar with a particular author may nevertheless buy the current bestseller, thinking that its popularity reflects other buyers’ (favorable) information about the book’s quality” (2). This is not much different from a recommendation from a bookseller, or from Oprah Winfrey.

On the cover of the June 14, 1993 issue of *Publishers Weekly* (which sells its cover as advertising space), Warner books proclaimed, “It’s the All-Time Word of Mouth Bestseller.” By that time the industry’s familiarity with the book was so great that the title of the book was unnecessary; the words appeared accompanied only by a photograph of Roseman Bridge. At the beginning of 1992, Mutter had written that “In the changed economic landscape, booksellers do need a strong urgent voice representing their interests to wholesalers and publishers. The [American Book Association] . . . should consider an extraordinary effort to crystalize the issues and force publishers to focus on them” (“The New Retail Realities” 27). In retrospect, Egen’s strategy of courting the favor of booksellers, especially independents, with *Bridges* did crystalize those issues.

The American Booksellers Association recognized that fact when it awarded *Bridges* its 1993 ABBY award (American Booksellers Book of the Year) in the adult trade category, a prize that is given to “the book retailers most enjoyed selling during the year” (“‘Bridges’ Wins”). Waller, Priest, and Egen had found the right book for the changing state of the book-retailing industry and its relationship with publishing, and marketed it with personal touches that were greatly appreciated by booksellers, who in turn handsold the book to their customers.

Bridges on National Public Radio

Coinciding with the Valentine’s Day 1993 chain bookstore promotion was a series of national broadcast media appearances by Waller and the synergistic promotion of other *Bridges*-related products. *Bridges* had been on the list for more than twenty weeks, the amount of time many bestsellers spend on the list before sales begin to slow. But *Bridges* was just getting started. In January 1993, Waller began promoting the book by appearing on radio and television. Over the next six months, Waller made radio and television appearances on shows including CNN’s *Sonya Live*, NBC’s *The Today Show* (twice), CBS’s *Sunday Morning* with Charles Kuralt and *Eye to Eye with Connie Chung*, ABC’s *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and National Public Radio’s *Fresh Air* and *All Things Considered* (Maryles, “Behind the Bestsellers” June 7, 1993). This study will examine Waller’s appearances on NPR’s *All Things Considered* (January 12, 1993) and ABC’s *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (May 28, 1993). To illustrate how Waller’s image and that of the book changed in the media as the book continued to dominate the bestseller lists, it will also examine discussion of the book on NPR’s *Morning Edition* on August 9, 1993.

One of the first chances to chance to promote the book in person to a national audience came on National Public Radio's *All Things Considered* on January 12, 1993, when Waller was interviewed by Noah Adams. The stated occasion for the NPR interview was the story of Waller's success on the bestsellers list—for twenty-two weeks between numbers six and twelve—despite his status as an unknown African author. In the interview, Adams begins by asking Waller about his intent in writing the book. He encourages Waller to talk about the fact that he reportedly “was going to just put it in the drawer and then have some fun with it.” Adams asks if Waller is “being disingenuous”: “You mean to say you would go all the way through writing a novel and then really be willing to put it in the drawer?” Waller immediately responds, “Of course. It's something you do. I've always admired the . . . French sidewalk painters that paint and let the rain and the feet take the paint away . . . after it's been finished. And . . . I think we're too product-oriented. It was . . . the joy of it was the journey.” To this bit of anti-marketing, Waller adds, “Don't get me wrong, the checks from New York are very nice.”

The interview also makes clear how, even before *Bridges'* sales began to break records, Warner was marketing *Bridges* “synergistically,” that is, as part of a cluster of related media products. Adams asks Waller if he's “been in touch with Hollywood.” Waller responds by revealing (“Oh—I guess I can mention it now”) that Spielberg had bought the rights eighteen months ago. Adams even asks Waller about casting the leads in the movie, which would later become a media story as the movie adaptation was being shot in Winterset, Iowa. Waller comments that he envisions Mary McDonald and Sam Shepard playing the lead roles in the film version of the book; the story, he says, is “about two people with some age on them.”

With the segment half over, Adams segues into a discussion of reader response to the book, including the notion of *Bridges* as a “woman’s book.” During the ensuing conversation, reader response is framed by both Adams and Waller as overwhelmingly positive from men as well as women, and brings up the fact that readers of the book are likely to write or even call him in reaction to it.

Adams: . . . I hear this about the book. People will finish it and—and give it to somebody and say, ‘You have to read it. I cried at the end of it. This is a great story.’ What sort of things are you hearing from readers? Is the reaction different from men than women?

Waller: No. That's what's amazing. At first, this book fell into the category of, you know, the cliché it's a woman's book. It's a woman's book because it's a love story. Men aren't supposed to read love stories. We read techno thrillers. But I would say half of my mail now is from male readers and I get . . . impassioned phone calls from men. A man from—oh, where was it?—Sacramento, called me the other day and he was crying on the phone. He said, ‘A 56-year-old Vietnam veteran is not supposed to cry over words like this, but I am.’ And he—he closed it—I’ve had about 10 people say this same line to me. They say, he closed his phone conversation by saying, ‘Thank you for being.’ And that's a very powerful thing for a writer to hear, for anybody to hear. Somebody thanks you for being around.

Adams: Yeah. Do they tend to call you . . . as soon as they finish the book?

Waller: Yeah. Mm-hmm. Quite often. They call, they're crying . . . when they call me. They just can't seem to help themselves. They track me down in—in Iowa, or they write letters, tear-stained letters, tell me about their affairs, go on and on at length about their own affairs.

Adams: Mm-hmm.

Waller: There's a good deal more of this going on out there, I guess, than I had imagined.

That the book could have such a great effect on readers suggests to Adams that they are being manipulated by it; Waller counters that he is an inexperienced writer, so any such effect is unintentional.

Adams: The—when you were writing it, did you ever have—going up—the purpose is to—to have as much impact as possible as a writer, I suppose. Did you ever think that you were tip-toeing up to the line where you were being in any way manipulative? Did you—did you pull back from some things, perhaps?

Waller: One reviewer did call it a manipulative book. You have to remember, I don't know much about what I am doing when it comes to writing fiction. I'm real visceral. I . . . do have a tendency to overwrite. I'm aware of that, at times to border on mawkishness and maybe fall over the edge on occasion. Most of my critics call me back on that. I was prepared to really get chopped into pieces. . . .

Adams then allows Waller the chance to promote the release of his most recent Warner Books product, the audiotope version of *The Bridges of Madison County* (read by

Waller himself), including the playing of excerpts from the tape and the following story about the material's emotional effect:

Adams: When it came time to do the audio, did you ever doubt that you would do it? Did you think, 'Well, I really should have an actor do it or somebody who does it for a living'?

Waller: . . . I did a commercial for *Bridges* and Warner was very pleased with my reading on the commercial. So when it came time to auction the book off for audio rights, bless their hearts, they stipulated that they wanted me to do it.

(Excerpt read from “*The Bridges of Madison County*”)

Waller: I found it very difficult to do. There were times when I was reading that I . . . had to stop because I was getting emotionally overwhelmed by the images going through my head and I noticed at one point, the producer, a woman from LA, was in the control room crying when I was reading.

Adams: Robert James Waller. His book is *The Bridges of Madison County*. . . . This is NPR, National Public Radio.

In this interview, Waller's responses, and to some degree Adams' questions, construct a Waller persona that plays on his inexperience as a writer, which is tied to his living in Iowa (where readers “track him down”). By the interview's end, we have learned that the author of *Bridges* wrote the book almost accidentally, and that the book delivers profound emotional affect to jaded or weary men and women of a certain age: Vietnam veterans, savvy L.A. producers, and even himself. He is a magical naif and his

book is successful not because it is intended to make readers cry, but because it naturally does so. That such an effect could be the result of manipulation is directly addressed by Adams and absorbed by Waller's naivety and humility. The idea of authorial intent is excised from the idea of the book and cast into the blank space of Iowa.

Sales figures for *Bridges* show that this NPR interview directly preceded the book's rise to the top of the *New York Times* bestsellers list, just when it should have been reaching the end of its natural lifespan as a bestseller. On the January 24, 1993 *Times* list, based on sales figures from the week of this interview, January 10-17, *Bridges* jumped from number seven to number two (leapfrogging over Stephen King's *Dolores Claiborne*, John Grisham's *The Pelican Brief*, and Danielle Steel's *Mixed Blessings*, among others), below only Dean Koontz's *Dragon Tears*, then in its debut week. On the next week's list, that of January 31, 1993, *Bridges* hit number one for the first time. It then powered on through Valentine's Day 1993 at the top spot, until on March 21 John Grisham's *The Client* temporarily bumped it back down to number two.

The next week, March 28, the *Times* published its first short review of *Bridges* — a scathing review which will be examined in Chapter Three. The novel had at that time been on the *Times* bestsellers list for thirty-three weeks. Now it was among a more select group of long-lived bestsellers of the time, such as John Clancy's *Without Remorse* (thirty-two weeks) and Nick Bantock's *Griffin and Sabine* (thirty-five weeks). Despite the negative *Times* review, it went back to number one on the April 18 list, bumping *The Client* back down to number two.

Bridges on The Oprah Winfrey Show

The next major appearance for Waller—and for Madison County, Iowa, itself—was on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, taped on location from the Cedar Bridge in Winterset, Iowa on May 21, 1993. This episode was important in constructing a popular discourse about the book that was based on attitudes toward gender and romance. It also underscored the importance of Iowa as the fictional setting of the novel and the real-life setting of Waller’s authorship. In addition, it explicitly encouraged readers to identify the characters and plot of the book with their own lives and the “real” world, emphasizing over and over again that such a love as found in the text of the book really does exist. Finally, it extended the word-of-mouth method of sales, based on recommendations from someone trustworthy, to a mass scale.

According to its transcript, the episode featured the “confessions” of middle-aged married couples who held “secret desires for someone from their past,” and it “reunite[d] a man and woman he fell in love with 20 years ago, just like in the book.” Waller and his wife Georgia Ann also appeared, and Waller took a turn singing ballads from his then-forthcoming album, *The Ballads of Madison County* (on Atlantic Records, a Time-Warner company), including the “Madison County Waltz,” a Waller-penned song which summarizes the plot of the book. When examining the turning points of *Bridges*’ immense popularity, it is important to note that at the time of the *Oprah* episode, entitled “Bridge of Love” and featuring the graphic index “Men Women Iowa Books,” the book had already been at number one or number two on the *New York Times* bestsellers list for over five months—since Waller’s NPR appearance in January. To begin the episode, Winfrey calls *Bridges* her “favorite book of the year . . . one of the most romantic, stirring tales of true love I’ve ever read” (1).

She also helps to construct the idea of the book as a word-of-mouth phenomenon by modeling the act of recommending it. Winfrey recounts, “The other night I finished a book and I wept. And I passed it on to my best friend Gayle [King]. She read it. She was—she didn’t even weep. She was sobbing at 2:30 in the morning” (1). Later in the episode, King appears with Winfrey on the set, and Winfrey repeats, “As I said in the beginning of this show, I read it and immediately passed it on to my best friend, Gayle.” King remembers, “Oprah kept telling me, ‘You’ve got to read this book. . . . I said, ‘What’s it about?’ . . . She goes, ‘Trust me. You’ve got to read it.’ I said, ‘I don’t want to read a book about a bridge.’ She said, ‘Trust me’” (22). When Winfrey is talking to Waller, she tells him, “I’ve passed that book on to so many people, I need a cut on it, really.” After the laughter dies down, she says, “Only kidding, Robert,” and repeats herself: “But I’ve passed it on to so many people. . . .” (24). Waller himself, it is interesting to note, barely says anything in the episode. Of his twenty-four speaking turns in the show, five of them are “Mm-hmm” or “That’s right.” Winfrey is in very complete discursive control with all the guests in the episode, interrupting them and framing their responses.

One of the most noticeable ways she frames responses is by asking her guests to identify themselves and the events in their lives to the text of the novel with closed questions. For example, in “reuniting former loves, just like in the book,” Winfrey reads part of a guest’s letter addressed to her future husband and asks, “Isn’t this just like Francesca in the book?” to which the guest replies, “Oh, yes.” Never mind that the lovers in the book, Robert and Francesca, were never reunited. Oprah asks another guest whether her “loveless marriage” was “like Francesca in the book.” She also prompts, “So

when you read *The Bridges of Madison County*, I know you weeped, lady.” (sic) The guest replies, “Oh, I cried. Oh, I cried and cried and cried.” Winfrey continues, “Yeah—cause didn’t you see yourself in the pages?” When talking with another guest, Winfrey says that the situation the guest is describing (not being able to pursue a love affair because of his wife and children) is “. . . like Francesca in the book, right?” He replies, “Yes.” She supplies the rest: “And so you decided that you were going to make that decision for your children and for yourself and—because it was the right thing to do?” He replies, “Right. Right” (3). Later, she asks the man’s wife, “So, why did you remarry your ex-husband?” She replies “I . . .,” but Winfrey interrupts: “Trying—trying to do the right thing.” The guest follows Winfrey’s lead, “Well, because I had four children, and he was their father. And. . . .” Again, Winfrey supplies the rest: “Trying to do the responsible thing” (3). Even Waller and his wife Georgia Ann are asked to discuss their own identification with the characters:

Winfrey: Have you—do you have this kind of love in your life, that you felt this—that’s where it came from? Or did it just come out of your head?

Waller: Well, it came out of a lot of places. But I do have that love of my life. She’s here somewhere.

Winfrey: Georgia Anne. Georgia Anne.

Waller: Thirty-one years.

Winfrey: Thirty-one years.

(Applause)

Winfrey: So when I—when I called Robert Waller up on the phone, I said, “Well, who is Robert Kincaid?” You said that all you—all the people who know you know that you are Robert Kincaid.

Waller: Sure. I’m Robert Kincaid.

Winfrey: So—and I—so that means Georgia Anne is Francesca?

Waller: Well, Francesca’s a composite, but . . .

Winfrey: Yeah. When you finished reading the book, Georgia Anne, what did you do? . . . I heard that you went out and got a medallion.

Mrs. Waller: I did, for his birthday. You should have seen that.

Winfrey: And it said? And it said?

Mrs. Waller: It says Francesca. [In the book, the character of Robert Kincaid is given such a medallion by the character of Francesca.] (23-24)

Throughout the episode, Winfrey emphasizes the Iowa setting and makes connections between the text of the novel and actual people, places, and events. For example, she refers to the Cedar Bridge as “the exact setting” of “a beautiful story unfolded right here and now” (8). Later she says, “Now we understand why so much romance is going on around here in Madison County” (14). When talking with Waller, she asks him, “Don’t you feel like [the characters] are real? I know I do.” Waller replies, “Oh, of course.” She continues, “When I came to Madison County today and saw the Cedar Bridge over there, I went, ‘Oh, that’s where she met him and held the camera. . . .’” Waller tells her, “Robert would have been right about here taking the photograph.” She asks, “Is this where he would have been?” He responds, “Yeah, right—kneeling right about here, yeah” (24). Both Winfrey and Waller do discuss that the book is fiction, “all

in [Waller's] imagination" (24). Their discussion also characterizes the novel as "fantasy" (Waller restates the term as "fiction"), but also emphasizes a notion of realism that revolves around reader reaction:

Waller: It was just a story I wanted to tell.

Winfrey: And it is a fantasy, right?

Waller: Oh, sure. It's fiction.

Winfrey: It's fiction. (24)

Identification with the novel in the *Oprah* episode, then, is not a question of confusing fact with fiction, but with imagining the events of the novel as real because of the tangible nature of the setting.

If viewers found themselves wondering after watching the episode why they might have felt like buying the novel for someone close to them, the ending of the episode contains a clue: a repeated characterization of the novel as a "gift":

Winfrey: . . . And I just want to say to you what a friend said to me after she'd read the book. She said, "It was a real gift and thank you."

Waller: Thank you.

Winfrey: And I wanted to thank you for writing the book for all of us. I think it's such a gift.

(Applause)

Waller: Thanks for reading it.

Winfrey: It's a gift to the country, and I wanted to share it with everybody. So that's why we're here.

Waller: Thanks. Thanks, America. . . . (27)

In 2000, Waller told me that during taping of the show, Winfrey “leaned over to me on a commercial break, and said, ‘By the end of this weekend, you won’t be able to buy a copy of *The Bridges of Madison County* in America.’ She knows her marketing clout.” Still, Waller has expressed regret about the effect the appearance would have on his image and that of the book. He told me that the opportunity was “mis-sold” to him

as a celebration of romance. . . . it was tacky, it was a tacky thing. I mean, they could have brought on people to talk about their wonderful, great love affairs, things such as that. It could have been inspirational. It came off as a Jerry Springer deal. . . . They had a young husband and wife there, and by the time it’s over it turns out the husband is really still in love with his high school girlfriend. And they dig up the girlfriend and bring her on, you know. I wanted to crawl right across the grass, you know. Get out of there. It makes my skin crawl, that kind of stuff. It wasn’t a celebration of romance.

The net effect on public perception of the book, he continued, was “a misrepresentation of what *The Bridges of Madison County* was about.”

The episode, however, did suggest ways that viewers might identify with the novel as text and not just as commodity. For example, much of the “Men Women Iowa Books” *Oprah* episode’s use of *Bridges* is explicitly gendered. As a result, *Bridges* is constructed as a “woman’s book.” For example, speaking directly to the audience and viewers about *Bridges*, Winfrey says, “I know that many of you feel trapped in a passionless relationship. A lot of you are married; have been for many years. And even in the marriage you still feel lonely and can’t remember the last time you really felt like a

sensual, desirable woman” (1). Winfrey suggests that women readers can remedy their loneliness by identifying with the setting of the novel.

In the episode, Winfrey does draw on traditional attitudes about men, women and romance to some degree. At one point, for example, a husband is described as a “real-life prince charming” for appearing to his wife on a white horse dressed in a knight’s shining armor—literally (“*Audience oohs*”). In addition, a man whom Oprah calls “one of those *Cosmo*[*politan* magazine] bachelors-of-the-month” is asked to describe how he selected a partner out of the 4,500 letters written to him by women. His explanation: “she didn’t need me. In other words, it wasn’t a damsel in distress needing to be rescued. But here was a woman who was very successful professionally in her own right. . . . So it was like strength meeting strength” (17-18). The woman, it turns out, was an ex-Playboy Bunny. Winfrey does invoke feminism in the episode, though. Just before the final commercial of the episode, Winfrey invokes a popular feminist inversion of the word “history” to describe a guest’s tale of finding her soulmate. The guest concludes with the phrase, “and the rest is history”; Winfrey responds, “Or shall we say ‘herstory’?” (27).

Finally, there is a strong emphasis on Francesca’s decision to stay with her family as the primary carrier of affect for readers of the novel. Both Winfrey and her friend Gayle King refer to “page 117” of the novel, which contains the moment when Francesca tells Robert she cannot leave with him. After she breaks the news, he tells her, “I only have one thing to say, one thing only; I’ll never say it another time, to anyone, and I ask you to remember it: In a universe of ambiguity, this kind of certainty comes only once, and never again, no matter how many lifetimes you live” (117). In the *Oprah* episode, a guest, Van, begins to describe his “true love”:

Van. . . Oprah, in the book it made a statement about, you feel something that—that you know won’t every happen again; and you have a relationship with someone.

Winfrey: I know exactly where that is—page 117.

(Laughter)

Winfrey: Page 117. Is that the thing you’re talking about, on page 117?

Van: Yes.

Winfrey: OK. And go ahead. Go ahead, Van.

Van: And anyway, I—I felt that from the moment . . .

Winfrey: Oh, is this—this, “In a universe of ambiguity, this kind of certainty comes only once and never again, no matter how many lifetimes you live”?

Van: Exactly. That’s it.

Winfrey: Yes, I knew it. Good.

(Applause) (15-16)

Later, when Winfrey and Gayle King are describing Oprah’s recommendation of the book to her friend, King says, “By page 117, tears started to flow. . . . I am sobbing. And when I say sobbing—Oprah and I call it the ugly cry when you’re going, ‘Oh, I want to be like Francesca. I want a Robert Kincaid in my life. I want to ride in a pickup truck’” (23).

In *Reading Oprah: How Oprah’s Book Club Changed the Way America Reads*, Cecilia Konchar Farr details how Winfrey has brought women’s readership into the forefront of America’s ideas about books and reading. Winfrey’s recommendation of

Bridges is not discussed in Farr's study, as she focuses on Winfrey's later official formation of a book club. However, the episode is an early example of Winfrey's interest in recommending books to her viewers and discussing the value of reading on her show. From 1996 to 2002 Winfrey officially recommended a contemporary novel per month through the Oprah Winfrey Book Club. An "Oprah book" would be recommended to viewers on the Oprah Winfrey Show, redesigned with an Oprah Book Club cover, and given prominent display in chain bookstores. Winfrey also gave instructions on her website for setting up book club meetings, through which viewers could discuss the books in small groups. The book club would make Oprah one of the most powerful figures in the book trade.

According to Farr, Oprah began discussing books in part to distance her *Oprah Winfrey Show* from the likes of daytime talk shows hosted by Jerry Springer and Sally Jesse Rafael, which encouraged guests and audiences to confront one another about their (primarily sexual) problems. Since her local Chicago talk show had gone national on ABC in 1986, Winfrey had dominated the format, in the process becoming one of the wealthiest entertainers in the world by 1992. Noting that she now commanded the attention of millions of Americans, especially African-American women, Winfrey decided to move away from a format she considered "cheap and sleazy" and toward one that would feature "social issues, spirituality, self-help, and self improvement." A major part of that format change would be more emphasis on books (Farr 29-30). Oprah's Book Club proved a boon to contemporary novelists and the book trade. Farr reports that each time Winfrey announced her monthly book club selections, "over a million people rushed to their computers and bookstores to buy it. In the first three years of the Book Club,

Oprah Books sold an average of 1.4 million copies each. Every book she invited her book club to read and talk about was an instant bestseller, averaging seventeen weeks on the New York Times bestseller list.” For the duration of this iteration of Oprah’s Book Club, from October 1996 to June 2002, “a week never went by without at least one Oprah Book on the bestseller lists” (2). Sometimes, the distinction of being chosen by Winfrey turned a previously unknown author into a bestselling author overnight. Jonathan Yardley describes such a transformation for author Bret Lott, who in the 1990s published “a handful of novels that the world, in its wisdom, mostly managed to ignore,” as Yardley puts it. However, Lott’s fortunes improved when Winfrey, “reaching down from the Firmament . . . anointed his novel *Jewel* (1991) as a selection for her book club in 1999. . . . Faster than you can say ‘Danielle Steel,’ the book [then out of print] was rushed back into print and became astonishingly successful, selling to date something on the order of a million copies.”

Working from Cathy Davidson’s and Janice Radway’s studies of how novels and novel-reading illustrate the blurring of class distinctions into a “middlebrow” literature, Farr shows how the “Oprah book,” as her selections would come to be called, aimed to reinvigorate the act of reading with the idea of social value for her viewers/readers, regardless of the prevailing attitude among the cultural elite about bestsellers and “mass-market” books as holding less social value than “classics.”

In addition to her effect on the sales success of contemporary novelists, Winfrey’s book club selections had an identifiable aesthetic. Novelist and reviewer Robert Clark writes that “we used to hear with some frequency of a species of fiction called ‘the women’s novel,’ in which heroines triumphed through tears and pluck over various

domestic adversities.” Clark continues to say that “today there is perhaps ‘the Oprah novel,’ whose author may or may not be female but who works to a similar formula hinging on the three r’s of recognition or revelation of a problem or secret (abuse, trauma, addiction, the undiscovered/unrealized self), followed by reconciliation and redemption.” Yet Farr notes that Winfrey has from the beginning of her book club interspersed books considered popular “pleasure reading” with more serious “literary fiction” (10-12).

The best example of the social effects of this blurring of literary taste distinctions, discussed at length by Farr, is Oprah’s “strained relationship” with Michael Franzen when she recommended his “high art” novel and 2001 National Book Award winner, *The Corrections* (4). Franzen, who had written an essay for *Harper’s* magazine in 1996 “dreaming of serious socially compelling novels and a mass audience who wanted to read them” (Farr 75) just as Winfrey was forming her book club, expressed reservations on National Public Radio about Winfrey having selected his book, calling some of her other recommendations “schmaltzy” and “one dimensional,” and suggested that the Oprah Book seal on the cover of his book, because it was “a corporate logo,” would cause him to lose readers. Winfrey rescinded her invitation to Franzen to appear on her show, and, despite Franzen’s backpedaling, *The Corrections* did not appear in stores as an Oprah Book (Farr 75-77).

Farr points out that, even with pre-publication reviews that highly praised the literary quality of *The Corrections*, its publisher, Farrar, Strauss, had planned an initial print run of 90,000 for the book (“a generous estimate for a literary novel and almost twice the total sales of Franzen’s first two novels combined”) (Farr 76) for its September 2001 release, but when Winfrey recommended the book later in the month, the publisher

upped the first run to 600,000 copies. Farr also points out that, as commentators at the time suggested, the Oprah “O” seal is no less of a corporate logo than the publisher’s logo found on the spine of any book. Further, she asks, “who was (and still is) making money from that ‘corporate O’? Not Oprah. It was, from the beginning, the publishers who requested permission to integrate the seal into the cover art of their books and keep it on when the novels were reprinted well after they had had their day on Oprah.” In addition, she notes, “Oprah always does better in the ratings with celebrity and expert shows than she does with the Book Club; she willingly loses ratings points to continue its meetings” (77).

But she sells books. Oprah’s Book Club demonstrates Egen’s proposition that recommendations are what drive book sales; in the case of *The Bridges of Madison County* and the books that would later be Oprah Books, publicity on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* was merely an extension of the “word-of-mouth” factor to a mass-mediated scale. It is possible that a recommended reading from Oprah is nearly as powerful as a recommendation from Maureen Egen’s proverbial “Aunt Louise.” As P. David Marshall shows in *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*, the institution of television constructs its stars’ personalities around familiarity. For Oprah, he writes, this familiarity “is often extended to a level of intimacy” through her subject matter and “relaxed manner” with her studio audience. (137). Oprah is positioned, then, as the ultimate handseller. Her recommendations carry weight in a number of ways, and she is mass-mediated for maximum efficiency, reaching millions of viewers in America and many more worldwide every day.¹⁷ Since *Bridges* was already an amazingly successful

¹⁷ Marshall wrote in 1997 that “Oprah Winfrey . . . is seen every weekday by 15 million American viewers and 113 million worldwide” (132).

bestseller when Oprah recommended it, it is impossible to say what her effect on the book's sales were, but her track records suggests she contributed greatly to its sales success.

Farr equates mass distribution of novels with class and geographical location. "Thanks to Oprah," Farr writes of the Franzen episode, "there was a moment in the fall of 2001 when vast numbers of soccer moms and waitresses in the Midwest were reading the very same thing the New York intellectuals were reading. . . . [Franzen's response] speaks to which group might find that pairing unpalatable" (76). According to Marshall, Winfrey is constructed as "from the people," as opposed to embodying "distance and aura" as would a movie star (143), and simultaneously as representing the Other because of "the marginal figure embodied by [her] blackness and womanhood" (139). As a result, she is not only as familiar and welcome as Aunt Louise, she is also "a representation of populist sentiment in the televisual universe" (139). A recommendation from Oprah, then, is both intimate and political. Further, Marshall asserts that because the *Oprah Winfrey Show* is one of the few daytime television programs designed for attentive viewing (as opposed to soap operas and game shows, which are designed in part for transient viewing and ambient accompaniment to household chores), the intimate, political personality of Oprah "is built on a reconfiguration of the women's television audience. Although not obvious, this reconfiguration of the television audience is very much connected to the organization of the industry around the sustainability of audiences which are retranslated as markets and consumers" (148-149). However, in the case of Oprah's Book Club, Farr notes the fact that Winfrey builds her list of recommendations with "what might be called consumer-driven questions," "Did you like it?" rather than

“Was it good?” Farr prefers to describe the former question as “democratic” rather than “consumer-driven” because they “start from the bottom down, with her readers, rather than with a top-down assertion of aesthetic authority” (96). Using this framework, it would be impossible to say that Egen, Priest, Waller, Winfrey, and independent booksellers “made” *Bridges* a bestseller; they were readers who liked it, not marketers who “pushed” it. When Egen said she “believed in” *Bridges*, did she mean that readers would like it and therefore buy it? Or did she mean they would buy it because they could be convinced to like it, as a parent might say to a child of the broccoli before them, “you’ll eat it and like it”?

“Synergy” and its discontents

After the *Oprah* episode in Madison County consumers would be presented with an all-you-can-eat buffet of *Bridges*-related products, and those who subscribe to the view that bestsellerdom can be made would become more vocal. A month after the *Oprah* episode on *Bridges*, Warner’s promotion of the book was still in high gear, encouraging the “synergy” that was becoming Egen’s trademark, not just with Waller and *Bridges*, but with products such as Madonna’s risqué photography book, *Sex*. Two different audiobook versions of *Bridges*, licensed by Warner Books to Dove Audio, appeared in 1993; in the first, released in February, Waller read the text solo. The second version, released in July, was expanded to feature celebrity voices reading the dialogue. Waller read the central narration “in a seductive rasp,” according to *Publishers Weekly*. Ben Kingsley read the voice of Kincaid, Isabella Rossolini, Francesca; John Ritter, Francesca’s husband Richard Johnson; Carl Reiner, Kincaid’s editor at *National Geographic*; Michael York, Francesca’s estate attorney; and Curtis Mayfield,

“Nighthawk” Cummings (Kincaid’s jazzman friend later in life) (“*Bridges of Madison County* Sound Recording Review,”). Waller also signed a multi-book contract with Warner Books, as first reported by John Mutter in *Publishers Weekly* July 20, 1992 (“Love at First Read”). The book contract yielded three more novels: The first was *Slow Waltz in Cedar Bend* in November 1993, which spent twenty-nine weeks on the *Times* bestseller list, nine at number one.

Waller’s second novel after *Bridges*, *Border Music*, published in February 1995, spent 18 weeks on the list but couldn’t dislodge James Redfield’s *Celestine Prophecy*, another entirely fictional Warner novel based on the premise of found documents, from number one. Waller’s third novel after *Bridges*, *Puerto Vallarta Squeeze*, was published in December 1995 and spent only one week on the list, at number fourteen. All three of these novels featured similar characters and plots—wandering, macho-yet-sensitive heroes win the hearts of underappreciated women. However, of the three follow-ups, only *Slow Waltz* was set in Iowa (the male protagonist, obviously based on Waller himself, is an Economics professor at an unnamed university in fictional Cedar Bend, Iowa, a thinly disguised Cedar Falls). In between *Slow Waltz* and *Border Music*, Warner Books also published two non-fiction books by Waller. *Images: Photographs by the Author of The Bridges of Madison County* (1994), was a tear-out book of postcards. *Old Songs in a New Café*, (April 1994) combined Waller’s Iowa State University Press collections of essays previously published in the *Des Moines Register*, *Just Beyond the Firelight* (1988) and *One Good Road is Enough* (1990) into a single volume. *Old Songs* spent 14 weeks on the *Times* non-fiction bestseller list, peaking at number three. According to Jerome Klinkowitz, the Warner republication of Waller’s essays as *Old Songs* resulted from “an

agreement between Iowa State University Press and Waller's commercial publisher, Warner Books" that "allowed *Old Songs in a New Café* to achieve bestseller status while remaining copies of his first two [Iowa State University Press] essay collections were withdrawn from the market" ("Waller, Robert," *Contemporary Popular Writers*).

Waller's sequel to *Bridges*, published in April 2002 by an independent publisher in Texas, will be discussed in the Epilogue of this study; the 1995 Clint Eastwood movie adaptation and the book tie-ins—*The Bridges of Madison County: The Film* and *The Bridges of Madison County Memory Book*, both released by Warner books to capitalize on the movie—will be discussed in Chapter Five. For the discussion here, it is important to note that the movie tie-in books had first printings much larger than that of *Bridges*: eighty thousand copies of *The Bridges of Madison County: The Film* and seventy thousand copies of *The Bridges of Madison County Memory Book*, according to Ty Ahmad-Taylor in the *New York Times*. A movie soundtrack was also released in 1995, but it did not contain Waller's music. Rather, it featured jazz songs of the type that Francesca and Robert were shown dancing to in the movie in an African American juke joint (a scene added to the book); songs composed by Eastwood, himself a pianist; and songs sung by 1960s crooner Johnny Hartman. According to Ahmad-Taylor, the soundtrack sold more than 250,000 copies in 1995 in the month between its release May 20 and Ahmad-Taylor's article on June 19.

More unusual synergistic tie-in products were licensed by Warner Brothers upon the movie's release in 1995. Ahmad-Taylor reported that Warner Brothers had licensed "tote bags, polo shirts and other apparel, a cookbook and picture frames with the *Bridges* imprint." It also licensed a *Bridges* fragrance line through Tsumura, a leading maker of

licensed bath and body products for children, which produced tie-in products for movies such as *The Lion King* and *Batman Forever*, according to Pam Weisz in *Brandweek*.

Tsumura's first "adult-centered movie licensing effort [called] simply, *Bridges*, so its lifespan can outlast the movie's" and because "the name connotes relationships," included fragrance, bath and body products as well as scented candles. It was launched in department stores with a two million dollar "print and spot TV" campaign "with imagery similar to movie bills for the melodramatic romance [*Bridges*]." Tsumura CEO Howard Hirsch told Weisz that *Bridges* was "a woman's book . . . a woman's movie . . . and a woman's fragrance."

In July 1993, Atlantic Records, a Warner subsidiary, released an album of original and cover songs sung by Waller, *The Ballads of Madison County*. The album was the first of a five-record contract (James, "First They Spin") (one that would be dissolved, however, before any further albums were recorded). On the album Waller, backed by session musicians, performed gentle country-folk originals such as "The Madison County Waltz," as featured on Waller's *Oprah* appearance. (The song is a ballad to Robert and Francesca¹⁸, the only original song on the album directly related to the plot of *Bridges*). Some of the cover versions of others' songs on the album are also *Bridges*-related, for example, Bob Dylan's "Girl from the North Country" ("The only song of Dylan's [Robert Kincaid] had ever really cared for") (Waller, *Bridges* 6), Johnny Mercer's "Tangerine" and "Autumn Leaves," which Robert and Francesca dance to in the movie adaptation, and a musical adaptation of Yeats's poem "The Song of Wandering Ængus," copyrighted in 1990 by Peter Porter. In addition, Waller reprises his performance of A. P.

Carter's "Wabash Cannonball" from his 1968 appearances on the Charles Kuralt show and Bobby Kennedy's whistle-stop tour. The liner notes, written by Waller and dated June 1993 from Cedar Falls, Iowa, point out the *Bridges* connections and describe the songs as "the kind of country music Robert and Francesca might have heard on Robert's truck radio or in the kitchen of an old farm house in Iowa." The packaging of the CD is aimed at the *Bridges* niche-market, with cover art replicating the novel's cover design and a lyric booklet featuring the same Waller photographs of the bridges that appear in the novel. In June of 1996, the *New York Times* reported that according to records compiled by music-tracking company Soundscan, the album had sold only 2,700 copies in three years, an astonishingly low number, compared to the sales of the movie soundtrack.¹⁹ If correct, this perhaps indicates the relative importance of readers' identification with the text of *Bridges*, as opposed their identification with Waller as a celebrity.

The second time *The Bridges of Madison County* was featured on NPR was on "Morning Edition" with Bob Edwards. The August 9, 1993, story focused on the book's sales success through "synergy." This discussion was then extended to include the value, or lack thereof, of *Bridges* as popular culture vs. literature, and the effects of mega-marketed bestsellers on the literary world, with commentary by Jon Katz, a mystery author and media critic for *Rolling Stone*. Waller himself did not appear, and the segment

¹⁸ "We need a lot more dancin' to old radio songs / More brandy and candles as the nights move along / We need a lot more old cowboys, out there on their own / And a woman to remember them, when they're scattered and blown"

¹⁹ The article includes Waller's album in a report of the difficulty of selling "soundtracks" to "New Age" books by authors such as Deepak Chopra (*Seven Spiritual Laws of Success*) and James Redfield (*The Celestine Prophecy*), none of which sold well.

showed more critical distance from the book than did Waller's January interview with Noah Adams on NPR's "All Things Considered."

Some analysis of the reasons for the book's popularity was done on the segment, especially with regard to gender. Here, Katz describes "the heart of [*Bridges*'] appeal" in both literary and popular cultural terms:

Katz: . . . you know, it's a very old story. It's a fairy tale. It's a fable.

There's a woman who's living a dreary life in the Midwest, she's not appreciated by her husband, she lives a boring life, and here comes this incredibly, you know, handsome, erotic, sensitive, empathetic person who she describes as a wild animal sexually, but this incredibly sensitive sort of poet emotionally, and drifts into her life for a week, and then goes away, recognizing, you know, her sensuality and wonderfulness. There's a paragraph I found that I think sort of goes to the heart of its appeal. I'd be happy to read that, if you want.

Edwards: All right. Go ahead.

Katz [reading]: "Robert, I'm not quite finished. If you took me in your arms and carried me to your truck and forced me to go with you, I wouldn't murmur a complaint. You could do the same thing just by talking to me, but I don't think you will. You're too sensitive, too aware of my feelings, for that. And I have feelings of responsibility here. Yes, it's boring in a way—my life, that is. It lacks romance, eroticism, dancing in the kitchen to candlelight, and the wonderful feel of a man who knows how to love a woman. Most of all, it lacks you. But there's this damned

sense of responsibility I have, to Richard [Francesca's husband], to the children. Just my leaving and taking away my physical presence would be hard enough for Richard. That alone might destroy him." The reason I picked that paragraph, I think that goes to the heart of what is sort of driving this *Bridges* phenomenon, which is, like a lot of other mass-marketing phenomena, is gender. I think this writer has created a book that is the ultimate fantasy about what a lot of women would like men to be, and don't see men as being.

Edwards: Good heavens, what is that?

Katz: Well, he is sensitive, he's empathetic, he's very sexy, and he leaves.

Edwards: [laughs]

Katz: So I think it's really the best of all possible worlds.

The discussion of gender here is played for humor, with a punchline about men's relative unimportance to women in the long run. The other rhetorical work done by Katz here is the repetition of "story," "fantasy," "fable," etc. In a sense, this construction counters Winfrey's rhetorical construction of the book as simultaneously fantastic and realistic.

Discussion then turns to the relationship between "mass marketing" and the book's literary merit. Katz allows, "You have to give the writer some credit—I mean, he did think of and he did translate it, and people are certainly reacting to it, not just because it's being marketed, but it's clearly touching some chord." Edwards then raises the question of formulas in popular literature. He says, "It sounds like what you're saying is that the marketing precedes the writing. It sounds like a formula." Katz responds, "It's a complicated problem. When you pay writers millions of dollars for books that are going

to become movies, and you're printing hundreds of thousands of copies, and paying enormous advances, the pressure on the writer is incredible [to] create a whole new world to go to a whole new level. You can't just write a biography of Ted Kennedy and sell enough books to justify it; you have to reinvent the wheel." However, such pressure was not Waller's situation upon writing *Bridges*. In this segment the construction of Waller's sales success resulting from his first NPR appearance—the accidental success of a first-time novelist with few literary aspirations—has been turned inside out. Waller is re-drawn as already working against the weight of public expectation.

Edwards then turns from formula to marketing: "So we're not talking writing—we're talking packaging." In trying to account for the book's popularity, Katz agrees: "We're talking packaging." However, he adds, "in fairness to . . . Robert James Waller, I think there has to be some creative message that people want. It has to tap into some creative message that people want. It has to tap into something. You know, Steven Spielberg in *Jurassic Park* was tapping into people's fascination with dinosaurs." The effects of touching a chord with the public, he is quick to add, are socially revealing. "A lot of people gag," he says, "but more people are buying it. And I know a lot of women who have, you know, pretty critical literary tastes who love this book and are recommending it to their friends. And one of the messages here is it tells us, it's revealing about how unhappy women are with men."

The discussion then turns to the methods being used to sell *Bridges*, specifically synergy. Edwards begins by noting Waller's recently inked five-record deal with Atlantic records and Katz presages the number of related products *Bridges* will spawn. "You have the singing," he begins,

and, of course, we will undoubtedly have a television movie and/or a feature-length film. I mean, these are all synergistic now—you know, the book becomes the movie, and the movie becomes the TV series, and the paperbacks and songs and CDs and—there are many, many levels on which they can cross-market now. We’ve been marketing cereal and cars and refrigerators for a long time, but it’s only recently that they figured how to start marketing, you know, creative works, like books and records—Madonna, Michael Jackson, Jurassic Park. And . . . that’s really changed all of these creative fields because they can now reach millions and millions of people, which would have been inconceivable just a decade ago.

The problem with this marketing-first method, according to Katz, is its effect on lesser-known authors. “When there’s millions of dollars going to *Bridges of Madison County* . . . then there are thousands of smaller, more idiosyncratic writers and singers and artists that aren’t going to get advances and aren’t going to be published. I think those are the real casualties. But I suppose it was inevitable—we live in a capitalist culture, and it’s inevitable that these techniques were going to come to industries like publishing.” Waller, only fifteen months earlier, had himself been considered a writer of the smallest, most idiosyncratic kind, and now, by implication, he shoulders the responsibility for keeping such writers unread.

At this point in the show, a promotional excerpt from Waller’s CD *The Ballads of Madison County*, is played. In fact, excerpts from the CD are also played at the beginning of the segment and immediately after Katz describes the book’s social importance and its

critical success with his discriminating women friends; thus, despite the attempt at increasing critical distance and exposing the workings of the corporate entertainment industry, the segment markets *Bridges* as a “synergistic” set of products. Along the way, Katz and Edwards construct *Bridges* as not just unrealistic, but unreal in many ways. The writing of *Bridges* is said to somehow have been preceded or replaced by its “formula,” “marketing,” and “packaging.” Waller is said to have “translated” the idea for the book—perhaps from the Iowan. The text’s reception by readers—the “message” they want—is compared to the special effects by which dinosaurs can be digitally drawn onto live action in *Jurassic Park* as opposed to the exposition of a real life, as in a biography. Bestselling writers do not think of stories, they “create a whole new world” and “reinvent the wheel.” Further, the completely untrue suggestion is made that before the kind of synergy by which *Bridges* had been marketed—in fact before 1983, “a decade ago” at the time the segment aired—it had been “inconcievable” for popular entertainment to “reach millions of people.” That Michael Jackson is mentioned as a touchstone of this new marketing is especially ironic, since much of his fortune was made by buying the rights to the Beatles’ catalog, who certainly reached many millions of people, and did so in part through the sale of synergistic tie-in products, including movies. What is unspoken in these references is the comparison of books to other popular texts such as music and movies. These comparisons foreshadow the kinds of comparisons some literary reviewers would soon begin making, as will be shown in Chapter Four.

This August 9, 1993 “Morning Edition” discussion of *Bridges* and synergy coincided with the book’s one-year anniversary on the *Times* bestsellers list; for the week of August 8, 1993, *Bridges* had been on the list for fifty-two weeks, exactly half of that

time at number one. On August 23, Tom Clancy's *Without Remorse* went to number one, bumping *Bridges* to number two. On September 12, *Bridges* regained the top spot. In October, Stephen King's *Nightmares and Dreamscapes* and Anne Rice's *Lasher* began a Halloween run up the list toward *Bridges*. By the list week of October 31, King and Rice were at numbers two and three respectively, but even horror writers on Halloween couldn't topple *Bridges* from the top spot.

In *The New York Times* "Book Notes" column, Sarah Lyall reported that upon *Slow Waltz*'s publication, The Book-of-the-Month Club took "the unusual step of offering it as a main selection paired with *Bridges* at a substantial discount." That the amount of sales of the two books was similar is evident in the *New York Times* bestsellers list: *Slow Waltz* debuted at number two on the list, behind only *Bridges*, and *Bridges* and *Slow Waltz* stayed at numbers one and two, respectively, for eleven weeks (the first time in history an author had owned the top two hardcover novel slots on the list, according to *Publishers Weekly* (Maryles, "Behind the Bestsellers," Nov. 8, 1993, 16). When they were dislodged from the top slots on January 23, 1994, by Michael Crichton's *Disclosure* they remained adjacent to one another on the list with *Bridges* one slot ahead of *Slow Waltz* for another eleven weeks, first at numbers two and three for four weeks, then at numbers three and four for four weeks, then at numbers four and five for three weeks. Not until April 10, 1994, over five months after the publication of *Slow Waltz*, did their sales diverge from one another, with *Slow Waltz* slipping out of the top five where *Bridges* remained. Whether because of the Book-of-the-Month Club pairing or not (according to Sarah Lyall in the *New York Times*, booksellers were still reporting brisk

sales of *Bridges* in July 1994) it seems likely from the books' proximity to one another on the list that buyers were purchasing them together

Over the next few months, *Bridges* and *Slow Waltz* hovered in the top five, neither regaining the top spot for the time being, along with Steel's *Accident* and Crichton's *Disclosure*. On March 20, another Warner book, James Redfield's *The Celestine Prophecy*, joined them there. It is easy to see *The Celestine Prophecy* as an attempt by Warner to manufacture sales with methods similar to those used for *Bridges*. Like Waller, Redfield was a first-time author. Like *Bridges*, the novel was told in frame narrative through found documents, in this case, as summarized by the *New York Times Book Review* in its description of the novel accompanying it in the bestseller list: "an ancient manuscript, found in Peru, provid[ing] insights into achieving a fulfilling life." With *Bridges*, *Slow Waltz*, and *The Celestine Prophecy* still in the top five on the fiction list, a new Warner-published Waller book, the essay collection *Old Songs in a New Café*, made the *Times* bestseller list on April 17, 1994, in the nonfiction category. On that date, with *Bridges* holding steady in the top five after a surge to number two, *Slow Waltz* at number five just beginning its descent, and *Old Songs* debuting at number 10, Waller had three top-ten bestsellers. With *The Celestine Prophecy* at number one on the fiction list, Warner Books had four books in the *Times* top ten.

After that feat, Waller's books began a very long, very slow descent off the lists. On April 24, 1994, *Slow Waltz* had slipped out of the top five for the first time, to number eight, and on May 22, 1994, *Bridges* also slipped out of the top five, to number six, for the first time since January 24, 1993, when it was still on its way up the list. The novel had been in the top five for seventeen months. On August 14, 1994, *Bridges*, back in the

top five, had been on the list for 104 consecutive weeks – two solid years. On July 31 of that year, *Old Songs* fell off the non-fiction list, leaving *Bridges* as the sole Waller bestseller on the lists, where it remained, holding steady in the lower half of the list, for the rest of 1994.

But on February 26 of the following year, 1995, Waller's third novel, *Border Music*, debuted at number three. That novel peaked at number two on March 5, unable to knock off its fellow Warner Books property, *The Celestine Prophecy*, which had been at number one since January. *Border Music's* descent would be quicker than *Slow Waltz's*; it fell from the top five (to number six) on May 7, and off the list July 2, spending sixteen weeks as a bestseller compared to *Slow Waltz's* twenty-eight. Since he had become a bestselling novelist three years earlier, Waller had had at least two *New York Times* bestsellers for a total of fifty-six weeks and at least two books in the top ten for a total of forty-seven weeks, including thirty-two weeks in a row from November 7, 1993 to June 12, 1994, with *Slow Waltz* and *Old Songs*.

Bridges would have one more surge on the list due to the June 2, 1995, Clint Eastwood-directed motion picture adaptation of *Bridges*. The movie—like the Oprah episode, filmed on location in Winterset, Iowa—was a moderate success, grossing \$70 million in the U.S. and \$176 million worldwide. Buoyed by the release of the movie, the book began another climb up the list. On June 4, 1995, sales from the previous week had placed the book in the number nine spot. On the June 11 list, reflecting sales from after the movie's release, the book had jumped to number four. On June 18, it reached number two. On June 25, 1995, nearly three years after its debut on the list, *Bridges* was again a number one *New York Times* bestseller, and *Border Music*, in its last week on the list,

was at number fourteen. *Bridges* stayed in the top five, hitting number one once more, until August 20, 1995, when it fell to number eight.

On September 24, 1995, *Bridges* fell off the list for the first time in over two years. But like the villain of a horror movie, it returned for one last gasp, reappearing at number fifteen—the bottom slot on the list—for the next two weeks, October 1 and October 8. Waller's fourth and final novel, *Puerto Vallarta Squeeze*, appeared on the list for only one week, December 3, 1995, at number fourteen. With that book's disappearance from the list, Waller was gone from the *New York Times* bestseller list, for the time being.

Throughout its time on the bestseller lists, as *Bridges*' popularity was reported, it was also commented upon and parodied by cartoonists and writers. The first cartoon parody of *Bridges*, as opposed to mere comment on it, was also a cartoon strip, Garry Trudeau's *Doonesbury*, which featured five days of *Bridges* parody from April 3 to April 7, 1993. Titled "The Washed-out Bridges of Madison County, A Special Literary Adaptation," the strip is set during the disastrous flooding throughout the Midwest, including Iowa, happening at the time. Throughout the week of strips, the character of Boopsie, who "plays" Francesca, and a Robert Kincaid character who looks very much like Waller, appear up to their waists in floodwater as they parody Francesca's rapt adoration of Robert in the book and his impossible perfection. Throughout the week, the humor comes from explicitly laying out, through over-the-top paraphrases of key speeches in the book, Robert's sensitive-yet-studly male perfection, Boopsie/Francesca's attendant self-deprecation, and the matter-of-fact sexual attraction underlying their quasi-spiritual musings. For example, on the first day, when Robert drives into Francesca's farm

to ask directions, Boopsie wonders that “his body seems hard, lean, insistent, even though he appears to be over 50.” He cannot, however, get her attention as she tries in her thoughts to find the most appropriate mystical animal to which to compare him: “Look at him move . . . Like a wolf . . . No, a cheetah . . . No, no a gazelle! No, a dolphin!” On the second day, when Robert tells her he is a *National Geographic* photographer there to shoot the flooded bridges and that, “I use light to reveal not objects but my own kind of truth,” she responds, “Would you like to come in and remove your shirt until it’s time?” He answers, “Could I? The sweat is tacking it down to my tight chest muscles.” On the third day, Robert takes pictures, explaining to Boopsie, paraphrased from Robert’s dialogue with Francesca in the book, that he “tries to dominate the scene, bend it to my desires.” Meanwhile, she is asking herself, “what is it about you, Robert Kincaid? The power, the raw energy, the thighs.” When the light is just right, he clicks his camera frantically, shouting “Got it! It’s mine! I own it!” as she thinks, “Own me! Own me!” The fourth day parodies the kitchen scene in *Bridges*, in which Robert impresses Francesca with talk of his world travels and his critique of an over-rationalized society. In rapid succession, he tells her he is “one of the last cowboys,” that “computers and robots will ruin everything,” and that “Rachel Carson was right. So were John Muir and Aldo Leopold.” (The latter quote is directly from the dialogue of the novel.) She thinks, “His opinions, so deep, so virile.” In the final panel, as they lie down together, he adds, “Did I mention I love fresh vegetables—and W.B. Yeats?” as she thinks, “I am not worthy, I am not worthy . . .” On the fifth day, she tells him all the ways she thinks he is wonderful, but looks downcast as she says, “I only wish I had . . . I had . . .” He prompts her: “Had what?” “A personality!” she blurts, to which he responds, “Hey, hey, that’s not important

to me! No regrets!” On the final day, Robert leaves, inviting Boopsie to come along. Paraphrasing the book, she refuses because she doesn’t want to “kill the wild, magnificent animal that is you.” “If that’s what you want,” he says, “I’ll be sensitive to your needs.” As they part, he says, “I’ll never forget the way you filled out your jeans!” She replies, “And I’ll recall your open shirt, thighs, and forearms! Now, go!” This parody works not only by deflating the language of the original, but by having the characters ignore the drama and disaster of the real world around them—the flood of 1993 was one of the worst on record, destroying many homes and businesses.

Several cartoon strips commented on the quality or content of *Bridges* without parodying it; for example, Wiley’s *Non Sequitor* strip for February 1, 1995, pictured a woman entering an art gallery and asking an attendant at the “Gallery Info” desk, “Excuse me . . . Can you tell me where I’d find the Robert Kincaid exhibit?” Noticing a sign saying “ART” and “SCHMALTZ” with corresponding arrows pointing in opposite directions, the woman interrupts herself: “Oh, wait . . . Never mind.” Other cartoonists used the novel to examine gender roles and the institution of marriage. For example, in Greg Howard’s *Sally Forth* strip from June 23 to June 25, 1998, typical suburban husband and wife Ted and Sally watch a rental video of *The Bridges of Madison County*, and discuss their identification with the characters as a reflection of their understanding of the husband-and-wife roles played out in the story. In the first strip, Ted asks Sally in the video store to “remind [him] what it’s about.” When she replies that it is “about a woman who has to choose between her husband and the man she loves,” Ted asks, “This is the kind of film I want my wife watching?” To her assertion that “it’s a love story,” he replies, “I’m not sure husbands would agree.” In the next day’s strip, as Sally and Ted

watch the movie, Sally thinks silently, “People consider this a ‘woman’s movie.’ I’m surprised Ted’s watching so intently.” Dismissing any possibility that he is engaged with the movie, she decides, “He’s probably trying to figure out what brand of beer they’re drinking.” However, Ted, affected by the movie, is really thinking, “If this happened to me, I’d be heartbroken.” Given the previous day’s emphasis on Ted’s role as husband, we can assume he is identifying with the cuckolded Richard Johnson. On the final day, Ted asks as the movie ends, “That’s it? That’s how it ends?” Sally replies, “She had a wrenching choice to make.” Ted answers, “Nevermind her. What about her husband? He has to live out his life with a woman who has the hots for someone else but who stays with him out of duty.” Sally sums up: “I’m not going to let you watch any more chick flicks if you’re going to sympathize with the husbands.” As opposed to Katz and Edwards’ *Bridges*-induced synergy panic two years earlier, this cartoon shows that *Bridges* had by now been normalized into a category of gender-related texts, for example, the “chick flick,” in which it is assumed that one doesn’t “identify with the husband.” Ted’s concern is dismissed as humorous by Sally, who wears her ever-present knowing smile as she delivers the punch line.

Writers, too, parodied *Bridges* and its popularity. On August 7, 1993, in the *New York Times*, Ralph Schoenstein invents a New York commuter version of *Bridges*, a book by “Sam Piano” entitled *No Tolls For Thee*: “a story of a lonely dermatologist who tossed both a ten and his heart at a Triborough Bridge attendant who’d been waiting for the man of her dreams to lack exact change.” Piano, “a Whitmanesque welder,” sings to himself, “like a bridge over urban waters / To wit, the Williamsburg.” Piano is overheard by Adam White, “an editor at One Day Press in charge of bridge and tunnel prose,” who

asks the welder whether he “would be interested in taking a few minutes to turn that song into a book.” Piano replies, “I don’t know too many words,” but White tells him, “You won’t need many, as long as ‘bridges,’ ‘mists,’ and ‘juices’ are among them.” Piano writes a 617-word manuscript in an hour, illustrated with blueprints of the Holland Tunnel, which sells 900,000 copies in its first day after publication, “half in bookstores and half at rest stops on the New Jersey Turnpike. People who had never read more than a menu embraced the tale . . .” *Publishers Weekly* calls it “the first book since *Goodnight Moon* that you can read while waiting for a light to change,” and *Car and Driver* magazine outbids *Cosmopolitan* for magazine rights to the story. In the *Chicago Sun Times* sports pages on October 31, 1993, just before the November release of Waller’s second novel, *Slow Waltz in Cedar Bend*, David Jacobsen wrote another parody, substituting suburban Chicago for Iowa as Schoenstein had substituted New York. Jacobsen focuses especially on the role of Kincaid, as played by “the last of the free-roaming lawn-care cowboys,” Ed Ameritech, who rides a lawnmower named Albert (as Kincaid had driven a pickup named Harry). Ed, who rolls cigarettes “using a firecracker for a filter” to keep “from smoking ‘em too far down” and “comes from “a blue-collar boyhood spent wearing blue collars, all different shades,” makes “adulterous but thematically understandable love” with suburban housewife MaBell Middlebelt after he’s done mowing her lawn. She tells him, “I think you come from another place in time and space . . . that you are at an evolutionary cul-de-sac, a dead-end, a turnaround on Michigan Avenue at rush hour.”

Two full-length (100-page) parodies of *Bridges* were also published, entertainment writer Billy Frolick’s *The Ditches of Edison County* in 1993 (under the pen

name Ronald Richard Roberts), and Ellen Orleans' *The Butches of Madison County* in 1995. Frolick's version is set in Edison County, Idaho, where free-lance photographer Robert Concave seduces Pancetta Jackson, the lonely wife of a potato farmer. *Ditches* reproduces the structure of *Bridges* faithfully, including found documents, interviews, and "totally unnecessary notes from the author" and for its humor takes Waller's melodromatic prose style and the events of the story to absurd extremes, adding the silliest of non-sequiturs and making the characters into complete morons (despite Pancetta's degree in Comparative Literature from Columbia, with a minor in World Religion). Ronald, there to photograph the county's ditches and try to sell the shots to the all text *Reader's Digest*, is perturbed by the covered bridges that obscure his shots of the muddy holes beneath them. The couple quote Dr. Seuss instead of Yeats, and drink Yoo-hoo instead of brandy. Sample dialogue:

Again, she asked him why he was in her neck of the woods. "It's hard to explain," Concave said. "I look through a camera's viewfinder, and select images to expose onto frames of film. I then have these works developed and printed on light-sensitive paper." "Oh, so you're a photographer . . ." Pancetta offered cautiously. "Yeah, yeah. That's the word," Concave countered. "It was on the tip of my tongue." There was a sexy illiteracy about him, and Pancetta found herself momentarily wishing that *she* was the word photographer. (22-23)

Frolick's parody, with its entirely comic tone, amounts to an out-of-hand dismissal of the melancholic tone of *Bridges*, an exercise in style.

Orleans' version is also parodic, but not to the extent of Frolick's. *The Butches of Madison County* features the four-day relationship of Billie Bold, a fifty-something wandering "butch" lesbian from the East Coast, and Patsy Plain, a straight farmwife—straight, that is, until she meets Billie. *Butches* occasionally parodies Waller's writing. For example, where Kincaid calls his pickup truck "Harry," Billie calls her SUV (the novel is set in the present day) "Janeway," after Captain Janeway from the television show *Star Trek Voyager*, about whom lesbian fan fiction has been written. In addition, in a reference to Kincaid's notion of "making," rather than "taking," pictures, Billie, an aspiring writer, recites some of her poetry to Patsy, and they discuss it:

"Actually, I made the poem—" began Billie.

"Oh yes, 'made' not 'wrote.' I understand!" cried Patsy. "Crafted it with more than a mere writing utensil, but with your whole being—your heart, your soul, until you *made* the words your own. Yes, *yes!*"

"Actually," Billie continued, "I made it with refrigerator magnets. You know, the ones with words on them that you line up into sentences." (39; emphasis Orleans')

Orleans' parody will be further analyzed in Chapter Four to show how some readers used the text in polysemic ways. For the discussion here, it is important to note merely that *Bridges* and its tropes had become recognizable in many segments of the American population. For example, despite its strictly heterosexual story, it was popular enough that Orleans could use it as the basis for lesbian entertainment, and could do so successfully; *The Butches of Madison County* won the 1995 Lambda Literary Award for best Lesbian and Gay Humor in an awards ceremony in Chicago that was itself a parody

of the Academy Awards. Orleans called *Butches* “a parody not only of the original, but of romance novels in general and lesbian romance novels in specific” (“Off Limits”).

These parodies, and countless other references to *Bridges* during the 1990s, ask the reader to recognize inanity as a distinctive feature of Waller’s style and the story of *Bridges*, a hallmark of the undercurrent of critical backlash against the novel that began to emerge simultaneously with awed reporting of its record-breaking sales success. As will be shown in Chapter Three, that negative undercurrent would become the dominant discourse about *Bridges* in literary publications such as the *New York Times Book Review* and *The New Yorker*. As Klinkowitz puts it in his *Contemporary Popular Authors* entry on Waller, “by virtue of its amateurishly overwritten prose and uncritical acceptance of male-dominant attitudes, [*Bridges*] occasioned some of the most viciously effective attacks in critical history.” The conflation of class and place in Schoenstein’s *New York Times* parody, with its translation of Iowan characters into Tri-state “bridge and tunnel people,” like other parody writers’ translation of them into working-class slobs, presages the cultural discourse about Iowa and *Bridges* that emerges in reviews from New York literary gatekeeping publications. But the fact that writers and cartoonists undertook to parody *Bridges* at all also illustrates just how recognizable the book became, and how distinctive its text was. Attributes fit for parody must be highly recognizable. Think, for example, of the annual Hemingway parody contest, in which writers compete to best exaggerate the clipped voice of the original.

Bridges was so recognizable and so successful that it immediately spawned not just parodies of its text, but imitations of the publishing and marketing strategies behind it. Besides the “found journal” frame copied by Warner in *The Celestine Prophecy*, the

“little book” format also became popular for a time because of *Bridges*. In the May 22, 1994, *San Francisco Chronicle*, David Wiegand wrote that *Bridges* changed readers’ expectations of small-format books: before *Bridges*, the format connoted “vacant wisdom from the likes of, say, Rod McKuen.” However, “publishers have deduced that the reading public, thanks largely to *Bridges*, no longer prejudices smaller books as somehow less than ‘real’ books.” He goes on to list sixteen short books, mostly novels, appearing in small format after *Bridges*.

Waller’s novel also made publishers recognize the importance of rewarding uniqueness and freshness when reading manuscripts to consider them for publication. For example, Susan Mantell of *Publishers Weekly* reported that “veteran literary editor” Bob Wyatt, upon being given his own imprint at St. Martins Press in 1993, set about looking for the next *The Bridges of Madison County* in its surprise factor. Mantell reported, “had he been given the chance to publish *The Bridges of Madison County* . . . [Wyatt] admits he might not have done it” because “it didn’t fit any category and it couldn’t be compared to anything.” However, after *Bridges* became successful, Wyatt realized that “that’s what’s so wonderful about it. Whether you like it or not, it’s a whole new voice. I want the next book that can’t be pigeonholed.” Perhaps it was not a coincidence that Wyatt also turned to the Midwest for his first attempt at finding that new voice, publishing Paullina Simons’ *Tully*, set in Kansas where Simons lived for a time. According to Diana Postlethwaite’s review in the *Washington Post*, the novel bears some resemblance to not only *Bridges*, but to Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres* as well: “Take one studly drifter. . . . Mix with one fiesty heroine. . . . Stir in some toe-curling child abuse. . . . And, eh *voilà*— it’s Jane Smiley meets Robert James Waller.”

Whether making fun of *Bridges* as parodists did, or taking it and the story of its sales success seriously, as Oprah Winfrey, NPR, and the book trade did, all of the media discourse on *Bridges* should properly be considered publicity. As Alan T. Sorenson and Scott J. Rasmussen found in an April 2004 empirical study, in the book trade “any publicity is good publicity.” Sorenson and Rasmussen found that, while positive reviews of books have greater impact on book sales than negative reviews, the latter still lead to an increase in sales. This fact is worth remembering as we turn to the literary reviews of *The Bridges of Madison County*.

CHAPTER THREE
Reading the Reviews of *The Bridges of Madison County*

The promotion and marketing of *The Bridges of Madison County* created an image of the book as a popular piece of literary fiction from an unlikely locale, sales of which were powered by word-of-mouth publicity and the “handselling” efforts of independent booksellers. But Warner Books’ strategy for securing the book’s sales did not include seeking the approval of literary reviewers. This strategy is quite different from the understanding of the importance of literary reviewers discussed in Richard Ohmann’s 1983 “The Shaping of a Canon: U.S. Fiction, 1960-1975,” and reflects a significant change in the way books began to be promoted in the 1990s. Ohmann reports on “the process by which novels written by Americans from about 1960 to 1975 [were] sifted and assessed, so that a modest number of them retain the kind of attention and respect that eventually makes them eligible for canonical status” (200), that is, widely respected as serious or “important,” as evidenced, for example, by their eventual inclusion in college literature courses and their appearance as a topic of discussion by critics in academic journals (205-206). Ohmann points out that most books considered canonical were initially best-sellers; drawing the attention of a relatively large number of readers at some point in its history is a prerequisite for canonical status (206). Making the *New York Times* bestseller list is one way that sales are driven, according to Ohmann. “[O]nce a new book did make the *New York Times* best-seller list, many other people bought it (and store managers around the country stocked it) *because* it was a best-seller,” he writes (201; emphasis Ohmann’s), a notion we have encountered before in this study. Another way hardcover novels initially achieved some degree of sales success, according to Ohmann, was due to the influence of reviews in New York-based literary gatekeeping

publications such as the *New York Review of Books*, *The New Yorker*, and especially the *New York Times Book Review*. He states, “A novel had to win at least the divided approval of these arbiters in order to remain in the universe of cultural discourse, once past the notoriety of best-sellerdom” (205). This is true for Ohmann in part because of who the audience for these publications, and therefore the initial buyers of the books in question, was thought to be: “well-to-do, well-educated east-coasters” (202). Citing Julie Hoover and Charles Kadushin,²⁰ Ohmann states that seventy-five percent of “our elite intellectuals” read the *Times*, and it is these “cultural leaders” who “help put a novel on the cultural agenda” (204). These cultural leaders “belong to the same social stratum” as “literary agents” and “editors at the major houses”; therefore, a “small group of relatively homogeneous readers” have “a great deal of influence” at the preliminary stage of gaining widespread cultural acceptance for a novel (202). Whether this is true or not, it reflects a general view that culture is made on the East Coast, and in New York in particular, through accepted gatekeeping channels. *The Bridges of Madison County* was eventually reviewed by such gatekeeping publications, but not often or widely until after the initial weeks and months of its sales success (The *Times Book Review* waited nearly a year after its April 1, 1992 publication, first reviewing it on March 28, 1993.) When it was reviewed by these publications, it was vehemently attacked and ridiculed as worthless and even harmful to individuals and society.

Print reviews of *Bridges* began with a casual dismissal in the *Washington Post* upon *Bridges*' publication in March 1992, continued to include ten or so mixed-to-enthusiastic evaluations in mostly small- to medium-market newspapers in April through September of 1992, and blossomed into scathing attacks from New York reviewers after

²⁰ “Influential Intellectual Journals: A Very Private Club,” *Change* (March 1972): 41.

Bridges' popularity became a story in its own right in 1993. Reviewers sometimes wrote about *Bridges* for the first time in the process of reviewing Waller's subsequent novels, which appeared on the *New York Times* bestsellers list alongside *Bridges* in 1993, 1994, and 1995. This chapter examines how literary reviewers defined *Bridges* as either literary or sub-literary in reaction to its popularity. Reviewers' discussions of *Bridges* also reveal assumptions about the book's audience demographic and its social and cultural effects.

The negative reaction to *Bridges* during 1993, 1994, and 1995 was itself a topic for discussion as reviewers reflected on Waller's *oeuvre* and his unprecedented sales. Perhaps reviewers' self-reflexivity in this discussion resulted from the reports, or the general feeling, that Warner Books and Waller had used *Bridges* as an experiment in circumventing the power of the literary reviewer to make or break public acceptance of a first-time author writing literary fiction. For example, in 1993 as Waller's second novel *Slow Waltz in Cedar Bend* hit the shelves, Malcolm Jones Jr. reported in *Newsweek* that "no one [at Warner Books] is worried about reviews. *Bridges* got lukewarm notices at best and sold on bookseller enthusiasm and word of mouth, leaving Warner president Laurence Kirshbaum [to whom Warner Books hardcover division editor Maureen Egen reported] to crow, 'We are dedicated to publishing review-proof books.'" That is, Warner Books wished to show that the approval or disapproval of book reviewers could be made irrelevant to the sales of not only popular genre fiction such as romance novels, but also to "serious" literature, or "literary fiction," as the publishing industry terms it. Thus, reviewers sought to explain the qualities that made *Bridges* attractive to readers. Most notably, they suggested that the book was attractive to a middle-aged, baby boomer

audience who used the book to reconcile the ideals of their youth with the reality of their adult responsibilities.

Warner was indeed successful in making *Bridges* a “review-proof book”; examination of the book’s position on the *New York Times* bestsellers list shows no effect on the book’s popularity resulting from negative reviews in key print publications such as the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker*. For example, Eils Lotozo was unenthusiastic about *Bridges* in the *New York Times Book Review* on March 28, 1993; Frank Rich savaged the novel in the *New York Times Magazine* on July 25, 1993; and Anthony Lane lambasted it in *The New Yorker* on June 27, 1994; however, *Bridges* had been at number one or two on the *Times* bestsellers list for eight weeks before Lotozo’s review (the first from a New York publication), remained at number one or two for the seventeen weeks between Lotozo’s and Rich’s reviews, and again remained there for another thirty weeks after Rich’s review. At the time of Lane’s *New Yorker* review, *Bridges* had been at number four, five, or six on the list for nine weeks. It dropped to number seven for one week after Lane’s review, but returned to number four, five, or six on the list for eleven more weeks after that. Those readers buying *Bridges* were, for the most part, ignoring the word of these New York reviewers. As has been shown in Chapter Two, the publicity on broadcast media institutions such as National Public Radio and the Oprah Winfrey Show, and the word-of-mouth momentum generated by sales strategies, superseded any effect the reviewers could have on the book’s sales.

Bridges as literary fiction

To understand reviewers’ reactions to the novel, it is important to remember that *Bridges* was not marketed by Warner Books as genre fiction such as romance, but as

“literary fiction.” In terms of physical format, being published as literary fiction meant that *Bridges* was published in hardback, for \$14.95, more expensive than a typical paperback novel but cheaper than most hardcover books. In addition, *Bridges*’ jacket featured a sepia-tinted photograph of Roseman bridge and the words “a novel” rather than a “bodice-ripper” painting. (It was, however, a smaller size than most literary novels.) Along with its appearance, the frequent references to Romantic-era British literature in the text of the novel also give the book a literary veneer. For example, in the book’s preface Waller writes that readers will find *Bridges* satisfying if they approach it “with a willing suspension of disbelief, as Coleridge put it” (xii). For another example, the book’s protagonists, Robert and Francesca, bond over their shared love of Yeats; when Robert quotes Yeats’ “The Song of Wandering Aengus,” Francesca recognizes the passage and reflects on her lack of success in coaxing the local high school students to appreciate the author (59-60). In addition, Robert quotes literary critic Robert Penn Warren (“Robert Penn Warren once used the phrase, ‘a world that seems to be God-abandoned’”) (141) in a letter to Francesca. This presentation asks the reader to take the book “seriously” and it really was unusual for its time, as evidenced by the frequent comment on it in *Publishers Weekly*.

Some reviewers outside New York did praise Waller in 1992 and 1993 for the quality of his writing. For example, George Myers, Jr. of *The Columbus Dispatch* called *Bridges* a “beautifully written . . . triumphant first novel,” and Judith Kelman, a suspense novelist, wrote in *The (Cleveland) Plain Dealer* that *Bridges* was “a memorable, magical read . . . presented in a compelling format and written in a lovely, lyrical prose,” adding, “Robert James Waller has all the novelistic gifts: a fresh voice, fully fleshed characters,

fine prose style and an unforgettable story.” *The San Francisco Chronicle*’s Sara Jameson wrote of *Bridges*, “Although the style seems as delicate as dandelion fluff, the prose is strong and tough, written with authority and staying power.” Irene Nolan of *The Louisville Courier-Journal* wrote that, “overly sentimental or not, *The Bridges of Madison County* is a haunting tale. . . . Waller has crafted a deeply moving story that is cleverly told. His spare writing and his lovely use of the language make it even more compelling.” David Dalton of *The Daily Yomiuri* (an English-language newspaper based in the Kansai region of Japan) noted that, while “pockmarked with small failings . . . [Waller’s] narrative flows as naturally as a babbling brook. . . . It is ultimately thought-provoking and poignant . . . a brave and almost successful attempt to trigger feelings in [Waller’s] audience through the paring back of his prose . . . and for that alone it should be commended.”

Some reviewers noticed or even praised *Bridges*’ format and narrative structure, especially its narrative frame. George Myers, in the *Columbus Dispatch*, situates *Bridges* within “a rediscovery of the wildish novella of a half-century ago. . . . Waller coyly presents his fiction as fact, including a forward and afterward contending as much, and reproducing Kincaid’s photographs (actually Waller’s) with each chapter. Nice touches.” In the *Montreal Gazette*, Monique Polak, even while lamenting women’s “escapist” use of romance novels, concedes that “Waller manages to do interesting things with the story’s frame and with the photographic motif, so managing to distinguish *The Bridges of Madison County* from a Harlequin romance. . . . In this way, Waller plays with the boundary between fiction and reality.” *The San Francisco Chronicle*’s Sara Jameson writes that *Bridges*’ format follows “the new style of slim novels that read like extended

short stories, mood pieces that bridge minimal plot with lush atmosphere.” *The Louisville Courier-Journal*’s Irene Nolan notes that “*Bridges* doesn’t take long to read, and that is good because once you start, you’ll find it almost impossible to put down until you get to the last page.”

Some reviewers from outside of New York laid the groundwork for that discussion by discussing *Bridges* as a “love story.” For example, Charles Champlin of *The Los Angeles Times* described the book as “A tastefully erotic and quite moving love story.” Judith Kelman’s *Plain Dealer* review noted that the novel’s “stunning distillate” of “love in its essence . . . tests and stretches the reader’s fundamental concepts of that most basic, most treasured human emotion.” Michael Harris of *The Los Angeles Times* wrote that “Readers—romantic readers, at any rate—are willing to believe in the love story.” Sara Jameson of *The San Francisco Chronicle* predicted that “Readers looking for meaning and weary of rapid relationships will be drawn to this tale of lasting love,” adding that those readers “should resist efforts to pick apart this delightful story.”

Some of those who praised *Bridges* show little or no awareness that the “non-fiction” narrative frame is no more than a device. Jameson, for example, writes, “*The Bridges of Madison County* is a delightful story of true love, but is it a true story? Author Robert James Waller claims he heard it from Francesca Johnson’s children, that he saw her letters. His realistic writing sends a reader looking hopefully for Kincaid’s bridge photos. . . .” Valerie Ryan of the *Seattle Times* writes, “In a writerly device that works, Waller has framed the novel as a true story brought to him by the children of Francesca. I was so convinced of its veracity that I called the library to find the back issue of *National Geographic* with the photograph of the bridge that brought them together.”

New York reviewers and *Bridges*

Such positive reactions to the appearance of literariness in *Bridges*, however, were not shared by other reviewers, especially those from major literary reviewing publications in New York. *The Hartford Courant*'s Colin McEnroe describes those who weighed in negatively on *Bridges* as “a second wave of sneering commentators who won no admirers and lost a few friends by pointing out that, in terms of literary merit, ‘that book’ made *Love Story* look like *Gravity’s Rainbow*. And that, even as high-toned smut, Waller’s preening novel seemed more hopelessly devoted to the masturbatory gratification of the author than the reader.”

New York reviews of *Bridges* really were as critical as McEnroe suggests. The first notice of *Bridges* by a major New York publication was Eils Lotozo’s review in the *New York Times Book Review* on March 28, 1993, a 155-word review tucked away in the “In Short” section on page 25 (the page facing the bestseller lists). Lotozo introduces *Bridges* as a “slim novel from an unknown Iowa writer” that “made its way onto the bestseller list last August [1992] and hasn’t budged since.” Noting that Waller “fails to develop . . . believable characters,” Lotozo sums up the plot as “a lot of quasi-mystical business about the shamanlike photographer who overwhelms the shy, bookish Francesca with his ‘sheer emotional and physical power.’” He concludes that “their love belongs more to the world of fantasy than than reality, and their ability to sustain memories of this passion across decades of absence seems more perverse than admirable.” In the end, Lotozo compares *Bridges* to a romance novel: “essentially a bodice-heaving, swept-away-by love romance, a soft-focus fantasy. . . .” Lotozo’s description of *Bridges* as “essentially . . . bodice-heaving” is telling—the reference to the bodices worn by heroines

on the covers of historical romance novels implies that *Bridges* is masquerading as literary fiction. “Soft-focus” even describes it in terms of television and film.

On July 25, 1993, almost five months after Lotozo’s review, Frank Rich wrote a more thorough evaluation of *Bridges* in *the New York Times Magazine*. In one full page of the magazine, the piece, titled “One-Week Stand,” undertakes to evaluate *Bridges*’ effects on readers. First, Rich notes that some popular novels—*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Gone With the Wind*—“portend tumultuous changes in the country or the world,” and other popular novels—*Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, *Love Story*—“serve up chills and sex” in a way that is merely “benign.” Rich deems *Bridges* too slight to portend social change, yet he cannot define it as benign; its gender bias, he says, is “far from harmless.” “Millions of American women read this slim first novel and weep,” he writes. “Men, however, get the last laugh.” In particular, the ending of the book, in which “the lovers reluctantly part forever so that Francesca can do the right thing and resume her responsibilities as wife and mother . . . is serious business” because it “appeals to men by reviving the most retro of narcissistic male fantasies . . . the roving rake who is God’s gift to love-starved housewives with time on their hands.” This plot situation “elevates [Francesca’s] pointless marital misery to high-toned martyrdom. [Waller] tells the Francescas of America that they have not wasted their lives standing by their men, insensitive dullards though they may be.” In short, the book, according to Rich, “presents itself as God’s gift to women even as it furthers their subjugation.” It may even be “the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* of the gender wars,” an implication that will be discussed further in Chapter Four.

Rich notes and attempts to counter Oprah Winfrey’s recommendation of the book as “a gift to the country.” For example, he notes that there was “dissent” over *Bridges*

within the independent bookstores that helped make the book popular. He recounts that in a Hollywood bookstore, “an employee parodied Waller’s prose in dramatic readings at the back of the store even as readers fought to buy reserved copies up front.” He also quotes Ruth Liebman, “the display manager at Shakespeare & Company on the Upper West Side of Manhattan,” as saying that employee morale in her store rose whenever *Bridges* fell from number one to number two on the store’s own weekly bestsellers list. “[Liebman] dismisses the book as a bodice ripper, ‘mass dressed up as class, like Ralph Lauren,’ with its jacket of subtle artwork and faded colors,” Rich writes. In fact, according to Rich, the book’s plot merely “enshrin[es] Francesca’s sacrifice in pseudo-literary pieties beyond the reach of pulpier romance novels.” Twice, he compares *Bridges* not to written culture at all, but to oral culture. The novel, he writes, “could be a humorless, middle-aged variation on that saloon classic, ‘Did you hear the one about the farmer’s daughter?’” Similarly, protagonist Robert Kincaid is “the old hero of a thousand peurile traveling-salesman jokes resurrected in noble threads for a contemporary audience.” Rich goes farther than Lotozo, who merely implied the book was really a romance novel. The reference to “noble threads” and to “mass dressed up like class” as in Ralph Lauren clothing, compare the book to the people whom Rich’s interview subject imagines might read it, those middle-class readers who aspire to class but can only afford, or only have the taste to choose, the middle-class status symbol of Ralph Lauren. This is equated with the difference between literature and other-than-literature. As a result, elitism stands in for the sexism Rich criticizes.

If early non-New York reviewers praised *Bridges* for its “love story,” here we see New York reviewers conflating “love story” with “romance novel,” which implies that is

driven by that genre's formulas. What is "formula literature," and what might it mean to identify *Bridges* as such, as reviewers did by comparing *Bridges* to a romance novel? Often, comparisons to formula romance novels invoke series such as the Harlequin romances. In *Reading the Romance*, Janice Radway reminds us that many elements of such novels are planned by publishers in direct response to readers' tastes. Thus, Radway's largely reader-generated criteria for identifying a book as a romance point out the very high degree to which romance novels, or in Radway's terms "category" literature or "semiprogrammed issue," are indeed formulaic and designed to "hit the top of the bell curve," as Waller puts it. For example, when describing the narrative logic of the romance novel, Radway and her readers reveal a symmetrical narrative structure in which the heroine moves first toward conflict with the hero and then toward a resolution of that conflict in the "happy ending" of a successful love affair. Similarly, Radway's readers considered the three most important ingredients in a romance to be "a happy ending," "a slowly but consistently developing love between hero and heroine" and "some detail about heroine and hero after they've gotten together" (67). *Bridges'* plot and structure are too divergent from those categories to warrant classification as formula literature in Radway's terms. For example, the narrative resolution of a successful love affair in which the hero and heroine are permanently united does not hold true in *Bridges*.

John Cawelti's *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* yields more points of comparison when holding *Bridges* up for examination against the backdrop of popular literary types; like the reviewers of *Bridges*, Cawelti is concerned with the distinction between "formula" and "literary fiction." Cawelti points out that it is tempting to see the archetypes of literary formulas "as instances of such traditional literary genres as tragedy,

comedy, romance, and satire” (38). However, he notes that such an approach would fail to take into account “certain special characteristics of formulaic literature that tend to differentiate it from what we commonly refer to as ‘serious’ or ‘high’ literature” (38). One of these characteristics, according to Cawelti, is providing “escape,” but by this Cawelti makes it clear that he means readers’ heightened identification with characters and setting that are designed to produce a “moral fantasy.” He elaborates, “We might loosely distinguish between formula stories and their ‘serious’ counterparts on the ground that the latter tend toward some kind of encounter with our sense of the limitations of reality, while formulas embody moral fantasies of a world more exciting, more fulfilling, or more benevolent than the one we inhabit” and in which characters “have an unusually great ability to deal with the problems they face” (38). By Cawelti’s criteria, we can see that *Bridges* exhibits characteristics of both genre fiction and literary fiction, as Robert and Francesca first find a love that is a perfect world and then, in parting, deal with the limitations of “reality,” that is, Francesca’s domestic responsibilities.

The prevalence of moral fantasy in formulaic works leads Cawelti to categorize formulaic structures according to the kinds of moral fantasies they produce. Of the resulting types (“adventure,” “romance,” “mystery,” “melodrama,” and “alien beings or states”), *The Bridges of Madison County* can be placed squarely in the category of “romance.”²¹ Like a romance novel, *Bridges*’ “organizing action is the development of a

²¹ The presence in *Bridges* of a male protagonist who travels the world in search of exotic locales to photograph might lead a reader of *Bridges* to question whether the book could just as easily be categorized an adventure, by Cawelti’s moral fantasy types. However, while the character Robert Kincaid is certainly an adventurer, and male readers report identifying with his wanderlust and introspective “last cowboy” musings (as we will see in Chapter Four), *Bridges* fails Cawelti’s standards of categorization as an adventure novel. Specifically, this is because the plot is not centered on the hero’s overcoming of

love relationship, usually between a man and a woman,” and its moral fantasy is “that of love triumphant and permanent, overcoming all obstacles and difficulties,” even as the protagonists are physically separated at its end. Further, “since romance is a fantasy of the all-sufficiency of love, most romantic formulas center on the overcoming of some combination of social or psychological barriers.” (41-42). While the characters of Francesca and Robert in *Bridges* are not literally united at the end of the story, their affair is conducted despite the social barriers of its conservative 1960s Iowa setting, and the memories of their affair are shown to permanently sustain them throughout their lives. The love experienced by Robert and Francesca (and commented on by the frame narrator) is all-sufficient, redeems the lovers, and has a lasting and permanent impact on not only their lives but, in the frame narrative, on the lives of Francesca’s children. Further, in the book’s preface the narrator says that researching and writing the story has had the same kind of permanent and lasting impact on him, and implies that, if taken correctly, it will have such an effect on the reader.

Finally, Cawelti notes a relationship between the particular moral fantasies of the romance formula and the social meaning of gender roles. “There seems little doubt,” he writes, “that most modern romance formulas are essentially affirmations of the ideals of monogamous marriage and feminine domesticity.” According to Cawelti’s categories of moral fantasy, classification as a romance does not necessarily make a novel a “woman’s book.” However, Cawelti does point out that the likelihood that there will be male protagonists in adventure novels and female protagonists in romance novels suggests “a basic affinity between the different sexes and these two story types.” However, “this is

insurmountable odds and evil villains, as it is, for example, in Ian Fleming’s James Bond novels.

not to say that women do not read adventure stories or that romances cannot be popular with men; there is probably no exclusive sexual property in these archetypes of fantasy” (43). The fact that *Bridges*’ romantic story line, including its main conflict and resolution, is narrated at times from Robert’s perspective and at times from Francesca’s, would in Cawelti’s terms allow either men or women to identify with the book as a romance.

The usual outcome of a formula romance, according to Cawelti, is “a permanently happy marriage,” but he notes that in “more sophisticated types of love story,” such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Tristan and Isolde*, or *Last Tango in Paris*, “the intensity of the lovers’ passion is directly related to the extent to which their love is doomed. It simply cannot continue to exist in the fictional situation either for social or psychological reasons and consequently the passion itself brings about the death of one or both of the lovers” in a way that “suggest[s] that the love relation has been of lasting and permanent impact.” To illustrate one popular work’s position on the continuum of formula and sophistication, Cawelti describes Erich Segal’s 1970 best-seller *Love Story* as only partially fulfilling this “doomed lover” outcome. In *Love Story*, “the passion is perfect in itself and redeems the lovers,” until the female protagonist dies. However, since she dies not because of “the inability of love to triumph over obstacles” but by a “biological accident,” Cawelti reads the novel as “sentimental rather than tragic.” That is, “we feel sad that something so perfect cannot continue, but we do not confront the basic irreconcilability of love with other responsibilities and needs, which is the essential tension of romantic tragedy” (42).²² In *Bridges*, Francesca’s decision to sacrifice her relationship with Robert for the responsibilities and needs of husband and family provides this basic tension. And

although they do not die as a direct result of their love, the protagonists' deaths are included in *Bridges*. The reader is shown through the text of letters read after the protagonists' deaths that each lived their remaining years longing in vain for the other— For example, Robert writes to Francesca that “all the philosophic rationalizations I can conjure up do not keep me from wanting you, every day, every moment” (140), and Francesca writes to her children to explain her instructions that her ashes be scattered at Roseman Bridge, the site of her first meeting with Robert (147). In this way, *Bridges*' plot is constructed in a way that gestures toward the generic conventions of ‘high’ literary romantic tragedy as much as toward those of the formula romance.

More specific than Rich or Lotozo on the subject of *Bridges* as popular as opposed to literary is Anthony Lane's *New Yorker* review of the entire May 15, 1994 *New York Times* hardcover fiction bestsellers list, including *Bridges*, then at number four and on the list for 92 weeks running.²³ Lane's essay, which takes up fifteen full columns of text over eleven pages, is modeled after Gore Vidal's 1973 two-part piece in the *New York Review of Books*, which was entitled “The Ashes of Hollywood.” Vidal's original model for this review is worth some discussion here to contextualize Lane's comments. In Part One of Vidal's piece, he reviewed the “bottom four” of the *New York Times* top

²² Radway's informants also exclude *Love Story* from categorization as a romance because it diminishes the importance of the perspective of women characters (*Reading the Romance* 64).

²³ The top ten fiction bestsellers reviewed by Lane in 1994: #10: *Like Water for Chocolate*, by Laura Esquivel; #9: *Disclosure*, by Michael Crichton; #8: *Lovers*, by Judith Krantz; #7: *The Alienist*, by Caleb Carr; #6: *The Day After Tomorrow*, by Allan Folsom; #5: *Inca Gold*, by Clive Cussler; #4: *Bridges*; #3: “*K*” is for *Killer*, by Sue Grafton; #2: *Remember Me*, by Mary Higgins Clark; #1: *The Celestine Prophecy*, by James Redfield.

ten fiction bestsellers list, and in Part Two he reviewed the “top six.”²⁴ Vidal approached the bestsellers list from his perspective as a former Hollywood screenwriter (alongside such other literary lights as Christopher Isherwood, John O’Hara, and Dorothy Parker); he asserts that popular fiction is best understood alongside movies, some of which every year are adaptations of bestselling novels. Vidal says of the bestsellers he reviews, “most of these books reflect to some degree the films each author saw in his formative years, while at least seven of the novels appear to me to be deliberate attempts not so much to re-create new film product as to suggest old movies that will make the reader . . . recall past success and respond accordingly.” Vidal continues to say that none of the authors on the list, save historical novelist Mary Renault, “is in any way rooted in literature,” and that their books “connect not at all with other books. But with the movies . . . ah, the movies” (ellipses original). Vidal is mostly disheartened by the storytelling and prose skills of the authors on the list, and points out clichéd movie/bestseller conventions, such as the “Mirror Scene” and the “Nubile Scene” in Robert Crichton’s *The Camerons*. (The next week, Crichton wrote a wounded letter to the *Review* disputing Vidal’s opinion.) Vidal, then, frames bestsellers as something other than literature, but he remains determined to evaluate them on their own terms. His motto for the piece, and the first words of the essay, quoted from “The Wise Hack at the Writers’ Table in the MGM commissary”:

“Shit has its own integrity.”

²⁴ The top ten fiction bestsellers reviewed by Vidal in 1973: #10: *Two from Galilee*, by Marjorie Holmes; #9: *The Eiger Sanction*, by Trevanian; #8: *On the Night of the Seventh Moon*, by Victoria Holt; #7: *The Winds of War*, by Herman Wouk; #6: *The Camerons*, by Robert Crichton; #5: *The Persian Boy*, by Mary Renault; #4: *August 1914*, by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn; #3: *Semi-Tough*, by Dan Jenkins; #2: *The Odessa File*, by Frederick Forsyth; #1: *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, by Richard Bach.

The New Yorker and the *New York Review of Books* are both important literary gatekeeping publications, as Ohmann points out, and the intertext between them in Lane's piece reinforces the cultural authority of his views. On its website at the time of this writing, *The New York Review of Books* summarizes the history of its own cultural influence by quoting other publications: According to *Esquire*, the *Review* is "the premier literary-intellectual magazine in the English language." According to *The New Statesman*, the *Review* is "of more cultural import than the opening of Lincoln Center." The *Review* also describes itself on its website as "a literary and critical journal based on the assumption that the discussion of important books was itself an indispensable literary activity." It describes its mission as posing questions in "the debate on American life, culture, and politics," and providing a place where "the most important issues" can be discussed by "writers who are themselves a major force in world literature and thought." This mission is also, according to the *New York Times*, marked by a "stubborn refusal to treat books, or the theatre and movies, for that matter, as categories of entertainment to be indulged in when the working day is done." Rather, the *Review* places "music, theater, dance, and film" alongside books as collectively "the arts." Gore Vidal "hilariously lampoon[ing] best-sellers" in the 1973 "Ashes of Hollywood" piece is cited as a high-water mark, alongside writing by well-known cultural figures such as Vladimir Nabokov, Jean-Paul Sartre, V.S. Naipaul, Joan Didion, and Vaclav Havel. That Vidal's attention to bestsellers is asserted to be a "hilarious lampoon"—which I feel is not quite accurate, as will be shown shortly—and the notion of escape from the working day as a function of popular culture but not, presumably, of "the arts," works to draw attention to boundaries of high and low culture.

In his 1994 essay, Anthony Lane immediately invokes the 1973 Vidal piece with a similar introductory rationale for his choice to review the fiction bestseller list. He characterizes Vidal as having “argued that the art of fiction was thoroughly, and perhaps irreparably, infected by the art of film.” Lane asks, “Two decades after the Vidal survey, has anything changed?” Like Vidal, Lane finds a bestselling author he likes: romance novelist Judith Krantz, whom he admires for being at “the heart of trash appeal.” Like Vidal twenty years earlier, he pans Michael Crichton, whose writing he describes as “human desire expressed in the language of the memo.” After trashing Crichton’s *Disclosure*, Lane concludes, “It should look spiffy on the big screen.” Lane also half-jokes about bestsellers as a “common” cultural, and publishing-industry, barometer: “There are sound reasons for musing on this stuff. It is easy to brush aside best-seller charts as the product of hype and habit, but they are a real presence in the land of letters, generating as much interest as they reflect. And if they do, to an extent, represent the lowest common denominator of the print culture, this only strengthens our need to pay attention, since where else is that culture common at all?” (79).

Lane’s rhetoric is more subtle and playful than Rich’s or Lotozo’s, but just as deep in its superiority toward popular culture. This is evident in what I think is a misreading of Vidal’s intent in his 1973 model for the piece. For example, Lane writes that Vidal argued that the art of film had “infected” that of literature. But Vidal, though writing about “shit,” was careful to meet it on its own terms, recognizing its integrity. Vidal accepted that the texts of movies and books were correlated in authors’ intent; Lane has him denying it. Lane continues to say that “the editors of the *Times Book Review* would like to believe that they bring readers together beneath an umbrella of civilized

discourse; but outside it is raining Danielle Steel, and the rest of the country is drinking it in" (79). "The discourse of "the rest of the country" outside New York is uncivilized, without the sense to "come in out of the rain" of Danielle Steel romance novels. They have not chosen their discursive sustenance, but can be made to swallow it when it falls out of the sky.

Unlike Vidal, Lane does not focus primarily on the connection between books and movies. Rather, Lane professes an interest in exploring "trash" alongside "classics." He describes "trash" as "books you can read without thinking," and "classics" as "books you have to read if you want to think at all." Throughout, Lane comments primarily on the effectiveness of the authors' storytelling and use of language. He is unsatisfied with the language of "serious novelists" who occupy "the twilight zone, the marshes of the middlebrow" between trash and classics. Trash novelists, he asserts, "have a better ear for what we say, or try to say, or don't notice we're saying" than these middlebrow novelists, and have more "fun with the truth." A good pulp novelist, Lane explains,

somehow plugs into the grid of our speech, into the power surge of ordinary fantasies, with a jolt that would knock more delicate writers across the room. That is why we should turn to the *Times* list every Sunday morning. If the language is still alive down at this end of the market—if there is juice running through the art of basic narrative—then we have no cause to be downhearted. Conversely, if the list is crammed with John Grisham, then we can all go out to brunch and rue the decline of the West. (80)

Of course, Lane is poking fun at cultural elitism here, and throughout his review, and his use of the term “middlebrow” in contrast with a segment of society that would rue the decline of the West over Mimosas and eggs benedict shows an awareness of the cultural pretension bound up in matters of taste. This does not, however, prevent those cultural pretensions from being enacted as he presents his ideas. It is worth noting for context Cecilia Konchar Farr’s use the concept of middlebrow culture to describe the Oprah books of the 1990s. For example, she uses Radway to show how the idea of middlebrow literature was “quintessentially American” and “about selling class mobility by selling culture” (Farr 35). Lane wants to engage culture, and his readers, on a level “below” that, that of “trash”; in short, he is taking his readers slumming.

In evaluating the *Times* top ten list by the criteria of lively storytelling and prose, Lane approves of three novels: Judith Krantz’s *Lovers* (#8), Caleb Carr’s, *The Alienist* (#7), and Sue Grafton’s “*K*” is for *Killer* (#3). Lane writes that Krantz “never hesitates to call a fuck a fuck”; that *The Alienist* “breathes a clammy atmosphere of its own making”; and that Grafton is a “skilled worker.” He pans the remaining seven novels on the list: Laura Esquivel’s *Like Water for Chocolate* (#10), Michael Crichton’s *Disclosure* (#9), Allan Folsom’s *The Day After Tomorrow* (#6), Clive Cussler’s *Inca Gold* (#5), *Bridges* (#4), Mary Higgins Clark’s *Remember Me* (#2), and James Redfield’s *The Celestine Prophecy* (#1). Lane takes special notice of *Bridges*, devoting roughly twenty-one inches of print to it. (Krantz’s *Lovers* ranks second highest in attention from Lane, with thirteen column inches of print; Cussler’s *Inca Gold* is the least lengthily discussed, at six inches.)

In his objections to *Bridges*, Lane writes directly about its author, and quotes from *Bridges* often in criticizing it. Of Waller’s preface, which urges readers to “enter the

realm of gentleness required to understand the story,” Lane writes, “Readers are being stripped of their wits before they even have a chance to use them.” The story, Lane writes, “could have been rather touching and graceful,” but is ruined by Waller’s “overwriting” in characterization and diction—“a sure sign of an author who believes himself to be in command of the language but is in fact utterly at its mercy” (89). Of the book’s characters, Lane writes,

Kincaid and Francesca are not so much the victims of fate as the puppets of an unyielding sentimentalist. Not all of us would agree with the French theoreticians who proclaim the disappearance of the author, but sometimes one can’t help wishing that he would disappear a little more. Robert James Waller is the literary equivalent of Leatherface in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*—he won’t leave his characters alone for a second, preferring to harry them through the landscape and whip them in line with his own point of view. (89)

Bridges’ diction, in Lane’s opinion, suffers from “the Waller method—a kind of writing-by-numbers with severe restrictions placed on the available vocabulary. If you added the word ‘Cheerios’ or ‘horny,’ for instance, the whole thing would faint with shock. No phrase has been admitted to the book which you could not imagine being sung by Karen Carpenter.” (89).

Lane also finds hypocrisy in *Bridges*’ characterization, quoting a Kincaid speech which rails against “hierarchies of authority, spans of control, long-range plans, and budgets. Corporate power; in ‘Bud’ we trust.” In response to this passage, Lane asks, “. . . is this the same guy who has been drinking Bud throughout? *The Bridges of Madison*

County sets its face against modern society, but, wittingly or unwittingly, it plucks its images of an unblemished life straight from the world of advertising: ‘tall and thin and hard,’ Kincaid is the first non meat-eating Marlboro man.” He allows that *Bridges* has philosophical and literary influences (“the faintest echo of Emerson and Thoreau”), but asserts that this “only makes it worse: to hear the accents of Transcendentalism corrupted in this fashion, their severe self-scrutiny softened into narcissism, is worse than not hearing them at all.” In all, Lane finds all this “cowardly and delusive, a vacation brochure pretending to be a vision.” (89). He concludes, “The victorious sales of *The Bridges of Madison County* make it a more depressing index to the state of America than Beavis, Butt-head, and Snoop Doggy Dogg put together” (89).

Turning to the question of readership, Lane notes that *Bridges* had at that the time of his writing been on the *Times* bestseller list for ninety-two weeks and had 4,790,000 copies in print. “But who are the satisfied buyers?” he asks. “I don’t know anyone who has read the book; I don’t know anyone who knows anyone who has read the book.” The wide variance in the the quality of the works on the list leads him to wonder about their readership several other times, as well. For example, in praising Caleb Carr’s *The Alienist*, he writes, “there must be people who go out and buy these books *because* they are on the list—who get the Michael Crichton and the new John Grisham as well as the Caleb Carr. If so, don’t they notice the difference? Maybe it doesn’t work like that; maybe *The Alienist* has nourished a clique of discerning admirers all by itself” (86). Of *The Celestine Prophecy*’s self-help bent, Lane wonders, “America is not, by and large, a nation of confused, gullible, and sexist hippies, so who is buying this book?” Together, the twin Warner Books projects on the list, *Bridges* and *The Celestine Prophecy*, reveal,

Lane writes, “something far more sinister” than did the 1973 state of best-selling fiction, reflected in “Vidal’s claim that novels had become little more than surrogate movies.” Best-sellers in 1994, Lane writes, qualify as “surrogate *non-fiction*. They are guides to life, how-to manuals with a little squirt of plot piped around the edge. It is the very worst fate that could have befallen literature; even Tolstoy, the unrepentent didact, would not have wanted it to end like this” (92).

In this discussion of *Bridges*, Lane comments on the high degree of authorial presence in the novel, imagining Waller’s control over readers, but, curiously, his lack of control over language. As Lane makes this point, he refers, like Jon Katz and Jonathan Edwards on NPR nine months earlier, to popular texts from media other than print. For someone who claims to be interested in the “juice” of language at the common level, it is interesting that he compares *Bridges* to rapper Snoop Doggy Dogg (whose moniker has been, at the time of this writing, shortened to Snoop Dogg) and televised cartoon MTV-video watchers Beavis and Butthead. Much of the popular discourse surrounding these music-related 1990s figures centered around whether the antisocial language and behavior they presented was causing viewers and listeners, especially children, to commit violence or internalize oppressive ideologies.²⁵ A similar threat of violence is implicit in Lane’s comparison of Waller’s authorship to “Leatherface,” the psychotic and mentally retarded mass murderer in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, who relentlessly pursues a group of teenagers who wander onto a farm, which is so remote and cut off from communication with civilization that they cannot telephone or run for help. In invoking

²⁵ In her 1994 *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Tricia rose describes how “the perception that rap music causes violence and sexism is fundamentally linked to the larger social discourse on the spatial control of black people”

the “landscape” of the setting of *Bridges* in this comparison, Lane makes an implicit comparison to Iowa as well as Waller. The Iowa setting of the novel is not for Lane made real and rich with love, as Oprah Winfrey constructed it, but is barren and treacherous as the rural farmhouse in the movie. Finally, one might note that Leatherface is so named because he wears a mask (made of the facial skin of one of his victims), hiding his real identity. In this context, it becomes apparent that the other popular culture texts to which Lane compares *Bridges* are fraught with the danger of disease: Karen Carpenter is known not only for her 1970s “soft rock,” but having succumbed to anorexia nervosa; the Marlboro Man (Kincaid gives Francesca cigarettes in the novel; in the movie, Francesca’s husband dies of lung cancer despite her entreaties to him to smoke less) entices consumers to smoke despite the risk of lung cancer. This rhetoric of disease is perhaps related to the “corruption” of Transcendentalism Lane finds in *Bridges*; the novel and its reception by readers—but not New York readers, for Lane knows no one who has read the book—are a cancer on serious writing. If *Bridges* is a “vacation brochure,” as Lane suggests, it advertises Madison County, Iowa as the most culturally dangerous tourist destination imaginable.

But during this wave of negative reviews, a few non-New York reviewers stuck by their early reviews and talked back in print to the book’s New York critics. For example, even as *The Seattle Times*’ Valerie Ryan (also a media consultant and former bookstore owner), like *Bridges*’ most vociferous critics, uses the book to point out the distinction between high and low culture, she decries the “revisionist storm of criticism that blew in as soon as the book became popular”:

(125). See Rose, 125-145, for a discussion of violence as a putative effect of rap music and the racism behind that idea.

It was suddenly beneath the dignity and high moral purpose of any critic to take the book seriously, or heaven forbid, to actually like it.

The race to straighten our collective Sophistication Auras was on. People who had written favorably about the book were looked on with contempt and sympathy for being such dupes. Well, sing no sad songs for me. I loved it then, and said so in print, possibly making my intelligence forever suspect. But I loved it still.

The objection of most detractors of “Bridges” is that it manipulates the emotions far too transparently. But isn’t that one of the reasons we read books or go to movies, plays, concerts and museums: to be manipulated—moved—from our ordinary state to another plane? Make no mistake: I’m not comparing *The Bridges of Madison County* to *War and Peace* or *The Rites of Spring* but it sure works as low art, and it pretends to nothing more.

Cultural power and the literary reviewer

What is the difference between “low art”—or “trash,” as Lane puts it—and “literary fiction”? *Washington Post* book reviewer and intellectual commentator Jonathan Yardley²⁶ defined the publishing term in a 2001 column. Yardley wrote the column in

²⁶ Yardley’s taste for both “serious” and “genre” fiction is typified by his “second reading” series of columns for the *Washington Post*, in which he recommends books that are not newly released. For example, in a November 11, 2003 column, Yardley recommends crime novelist John D. MacDonald’s 1975 *The Dreadful Lemon Sky*. In setting up the context for his review, Yardley describes how, in 1976, he was assigned by the Book-of-the-Month Club Newsletter to write a review of MacDonald’s first “serious” novel, *Condominium*, a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. Yardley remembers his initial reaction to the book: “This man whom I’d snobbishly dismissed as a paperback writer turned out to be a novelist of the highest professionalism and a social critic armed with vigorous opinions stunningly expressed. His plots were humdingers, his characters talked

response to a reader's letter, which asked whether popular writers such as Elmore Leonard, Robert Parker, or John Le Carre could be considered authors of literary fiction alongside "classic" authors such as "Greene, Hemingway, Cather, Dreiser, George Eliot, Conrad, Hardy, Trollope or Dickens." Yardley replies that "on the most immediate and superficial level," the distinction to be made is between "serious literature and entertainment . . . between art and schlock." He goes on to say that popular fiction comprises "most of what makes the bestseller lists," books written "in the hope and expectation of commercial success." By contrast, literary fiction comprises "most of what is reviewed in, say, [*Washington Post*] *Book World* and *the New York Review of Books* . . . i.e., fiction that aspires to meaning and consequence far beyond 'mere' entertainment." This contrasts the intent for popular reception with the authority of the critic. We can tell a work is not merely popular by the fact that it has been reviewed by a reputable publication.

Yardley allows that these lines of distinction are often crossed and that "what seems meaningful and consequential to one reader may seem meaningless and inconsequential to another, and who, pray tell, is to say which of them is right?" But even as he allows for the relativity of taste, Yardley does answer the question: It is the job of reviewers and critics to see what is meaningful and consequential in books. Yardley writes, "As someone who makes a living of sorts passing public judgment on other people's writing I have certain standards by which I judge books, and I express those judgments as emphatically as circumstances warrant." For example, Le Carre is a "popular" writer because his books are "thrillers" and are "wildly popular, not merely as

like real people, and his knowledge of the contemporary world was—no other word will do—breathtaking."

books but as adaptations for movies and television. . . . Yet there is a rather broad critical consensus about Le Carre: He writes ‘literature,’ i.e., works of stylistic elegance, thematic depth and lasting pertinence.” Yardley also classifies Anne Tyler as a novelist who crosses the boundary between popular and literary fiction. According to Yardley, Tyler’s first works were praised by critics and sold modestly, making her a writer of literary fiction early in her career. However, she is now “one of the most popular and beloved writers in the country. Does this mean she is now a ‘popular writer’ who no longer writes ‘literary fiction’? Among the literati, who resent (and envy) popular success, the answer may be ‘yes,’ but a fairer response would be: She still writes serious, ‘literary’ books, but she has had the good fortune to find a substantial readership for them.”

The stakes of such distinctions made by reviewers are discussed by Wendy Griswold in her study of literary interpretation, “The Fabrication of Meaning: Literary Interpretation in the United States, Great Britain, and the West Indies.” Griswold asserts that cultural products such as books embody “cultural power,” in part through the “social context of [their] reception,” including “the meaning construction undertaken by a literary elite of reviewers and critics” (1078). This cultural power is leveraged by, and on behalf of, “an educated middle class that constitutes the market for fiction as well as the audience for book reviews in general.” She continues: “Much of [reviewers’] communication depends on their social presuppositions: they simply take for granted that their readers have certain knowledge and interests.” In doing so, a reviewer “is both answering questions about the book’s meaning for himself or herself and trying to make the book meaningful to the assumed audience of educated middle-class readers” (1082-

83). The cultural power produced as critics decide the value of a literary work for themselves and their readers “refers to the capacity of certain works to linger in the mind and, over and above this individual effect, to enter the canon, which is constructed and upheld by the literary elite.” Especially in America, Griswold notes, “this conception of cultural power does not necessarily depend on whether or not a work is considered to be high or popular culture.” This cultural power is also bound up in the cultures of particular groups and places. In America, this power of place is particularly centered on New York, according to Griswold. For example, she summarizes the assertion made by sociologist Lewis Coser that “The Sunday *New York Times Book Review* is the most prominent reviewing medium and, to some extent, determines what will be reviewed in the press outside New York” (1089).

The role of reviewers to formulate the cultural power of books is especially evident in the case of *Bridges*. Its exceptional popularity before it was widely reviewed created a special urgency for critics to assess its literary value (or lack thereof), lest works such as *Bridges* be assumed to take on canonical status in part by the virtue of popularity alone, as Ohmann asserts. For example, reviewers often condemned *Bridges* through comparisons to “formula” or “genre” fiction, especially romance novels, and other forms of mass-consumed popular texts.

Social melodrama for baby boomers

The cultural power that New York reviewers saw in *Bridges* is a negative cultural power, that of manipulation and obfuscation of real literariness by a mere romance novel (one they imply is as much a movie, a song, an advertisement, a barroom joke, or a travel brochure as it is a novel). In addition to fitting many of Cawelti’s criteria for a romance, as has been shown, *Bridges* also shares an affinity with Cawelti’s definition of a

subcategory of melodrama, “social melodrama,” in several ways that are useful in sorting out *Bridges*’ place on the continuum between formula literature and literary fiction.

Cawelti lists features of the social melodrama that produce “something that passes for a ‘realistic’ social or historical setting” in order to give the reader “the pleasurable feeling that we are learning something important about reality.” Further, Cawelti writes, “By way of insisting on the reality of his stories, the social melodramatist tends to take advantage of anything that can give his tale the appearance of deep social significance and truth” (261). In the case of *Bridges*, it is not the use of such social-melodramatic reference points as “well-known personalities, issues, and events” that creates a realistic historical setting, but the frame narrative in which the author-narrator reconstructs the story as told to him. *Bridges*’ setting does, however, make use of another hallmark of the social melodrama according to Cawelti; it features “an actual place” (262), in this case 1965 Winterset, Iowa and the real bridges that give the novel its title.

Further, Cawelti recounts in the historical development of the melodrama an ongoing concern with how the evolution of gender and sexual roles come into conflict (and are eventually reconciled) with current standards of a just and ordered society (268-280). In particular, *Bridges* shares an affinity with the “contemporary social melodramatists” popular in the 1960s (Irving Wallace, Harold Robbins, Arthur Hailey, and Jacqueline Susann) (39) whose novels, according to Cawelti, were often (like *Bridges*) impugned as “elaborate exercises in soft-core pornography” (282). Cawelti allows that these novels “exemplify a contemporary obsession with sexuality” (282), but asserts that they do so as “part of a larger moral context.” That is, “. . . social melodramatists seek to integrate new ideas of sexual liberation with traditional

conceptions of romantic love and monogamy,” as their characters search for “a full and satisfying sexuality based on a deep and lasting romantic relationship.” In short, “The union of romantic love and sexuality is one source of transcendent moral order in the contemporary social melodrama” (282). At the end of *Bridges*, Francesca has not found this union in a single partner—her husband, we assume, remains a merely adequate life partner—but she carries in her memory her affair with Robert in a way that has made her a fully sexual being for the first time. The reader is also shown Francesca’s choice—whether sexist or not, certainly explicitly moral—to remain in Iowa, faithful to husband and family. “There’s this damn sense of responsibility I have,” Francesca tells Robert in explaining her decision to remain behind when Robert leaves. If she were to leave, she says, her husband “would have to live the rest of his life with the whispers of the people here. ‘That’s Richard Johnson. His hot little Italian wife ran off with some long-haired photographer a few years back.’ . . . Richard would have to suffer that, and the children would hear the snickering of Winterset for as long as they live here. They would suffer, too” (115-16).

In addition to the union of romantic love and sexuality, another “source of transcendent moral order” in a social melodrama, according to Cawelti, is the realization that “true success, as opposed to the pursuit of wealth and power for their own sake, is marked by personal integrity, satisfying human relationships, and the opportunity to be of service to others.” This “concept of true success and integrity” is contrasted with “the unrestrained pursuit of wealth and power in the glamorous and exciting world of modern business, advertising, and the media” (282-283). The character of Robert in *Bridges* enacts this realization. While his profession takes him to exotic places, he decries its

commercial aspect in a speech that also takes aim at advertising, the media, and mass consumption. The problem with “earning a living through an art form,” he says, is that

You’re always dealing with markets, and markets—mass markets—are designed to suit average tastes. . . . The market kills more artistic passion than anything else. It’s a world of safety out there, for most people. They want safety, the magazines and manufacturers give them safety, give them homogeneity, give them the familiar and the comfortable, don’t challenge them. Profit and subscriptions and the rest of that stuff dominate art. We’re all getting lashed to the great wheel of uniformity.

The marketing people are always talking about something called ‘consumers.’ I have this image of a fat little man in baggy Bermuda shorts, a hawaiian shirt, and a straw hat with beer-can openers dangling from it, clutching fistfuls of dollars. (51-52)

Cawelti’s consideration of these “basic continuities of theme and structure” in social melodrama—“the emphasis on romantic love as an ultimate value, the defense of monogamous, family-oriented relationships between men and women, and the attempt to define true and false conceptions of success and status”—lead him to conclusions about the readership for such novels, and about the importance of their social function. He surmises that “social melodrama is primarily a genre of the well-established middle class for whom these particular values are of most importance. If this speculation is correct, then the essential social-psychological dynamic of social melodrama has been one of the means by which the American and English middle classes have so successfully adjusted themselves to the drastic social and cultural changes of the last century and a half” (284).

Reviewers often comment on such possible uses of *Bridges*, and identify “baby boomers”—those born in the post-World War II “baby boom” and whose passing into adulthood was formed by the social upheaval of the 1960s, including the “sexual revolution”—as *Bridges*’ affluent, middle-aged target audience. Here one might again note the book’s setting in the 1960s, the conservative social mores of Francesca’s Iowa surroundings, and Robert’s flouting of those mores with his progressive-thinking, free-spirited lifestyle and appearance. *Washington Post Book World*’s Susan Dooley, the first reviewer from a major publication to weigh in on *Bridges*, also alluded to this demographic appeal in predicting readers’ reactions to the book: “The reader must be convinced of Robert’s uniqueness or he, and his affair with Francesca, will seem, well, boring. Instead of the “last cowboy,” ranging free, Robert will appear to be an ageing hippy, bouncing around the country in a battered truck, earning his living as a free-lance photographer and jotting down portentous poems and phrases” The character of Robert, she continues, is “a symbol rather than a person.” Mimi Swartz, in her 1995 *Texas Monthly* feature on Waller, called Waller “. . . the quintessential baby boomer, embodying all the ambition and all the angst of the age of Oprah” (157). In *The Book Publishing Industry*, Albert Greco writes, “The ‘average’ book purchaser is a graying Baby Boomer. Adults in the 55-64 age cohort [Greco is writing in 2005] [purchase] the most books (20%) [of all books purchased, according to a 2001 study] (216).

For example, in a *Newsweek* review, Malcolm Jones, Jr. was explicit about the role of the baby boomer demographic in *Bridges*’ popularity: “The usual move when reviewing a best-selling writer as embarrassingly amateurish as Robert James Waller—are there any?—is to turn culture critic. What does it *mean* that 5 million copies of [*The*]

Bridges of Madison County are in print. . . . Our theory: these romances in relaxed-fit jeans, with their oddly prudish sex scenes, tell us that baby boomers will read almost anything as long as it's about *them*." Jones also ruminated over how those boomers will use *Bridges*: ". . . the lovers part, and the reader has vicariously enjoyed an affair where no one is punished—and family values win out. You put the book down convinced that your perfect lover is out there somewhere, and in the meantime you get points for sticking with your mundane partner." David Streitfeld implied in the *Washington Post* that *Bridges* functions as a way for baby boomers to reconcile their past idealism with their more settled middle-aged lives. He writes, "This is a novel for all those who hope that someone incredibly wonderful is waiting for them elsewhere, but who meanwhile want to reassure themselves they've made the right choice by staying exactly where they are. It's a contradictory message, but apparently pleasing to many." Similarly, but from a conservative standpoint that was laudatory of *Bridges*, an anonymous review in *The Economist* asked, "Does a best-seller tell something about the way a country wants to see itself? If so, the news from America may be good. [*Bridges*'] sentimental plot . . . speaks volumes about the way America would like to be. . . . The moral: stay with your spouse instead of chasing the grand passion. At present, too few Americans do that. . . . If literature helps to determine the moral climate, *Bridges* may show the way the wind is blowing" ("Forsaking All Others").

One might note the term "spouse" instead of "husband" in this review, but some reviewers did discuss gender as well as age when imagining the book's readership. One reviewer, for example described the book as "yuppie women's porno" (qtd. in Rich). *The Montreal Gazette*'s Monique Polak called the book "a testament to women's appetite for

ideal romantic love. . . . Perhaps because in reality this ideal is difficult—even impossible—to find and maintain, woman readers are likely to seek solace and escape in this novel.” She continues, “. . . *The Bridges of Madison County* seems especially designed to appeal to middle-aged women—the population author Robert James Walker [sic] seems to have targeted as hungriest for romantic escape. Readers trapped in stale marriages can safely commit vicarious adultery. . . .” Similarly, John Jamison of the *San Francisco Chronicle* wrote,

Too much ink is being spattered, primarily by men, over *The Bridges of Madison County*, Robert Waller’s powerful little novel about what is and what might have been. Risking the scorn of naysayers, I am a man who was mesmerized by the book. . . . a man just doesn’t have both oars in the water when he sits down to ridicule Waller’s book. His quarrel with Waller and his characters is born of inner drought.

. . .

Not only do I ache with pain in their separation, I also admire these two stalwarts. They touch the hard face of reality, and respect it. . . . Robert and Francesca recognize and affirm the foundations of being responsible humans.

They hit bedrock, and when they do, they don’t whine. They don’t curse fate, or rail at the injustice foisted upon them by blind societal restrictions. Neither of them speaks the word, “victim.”

Truth is, in the final analysis, Robert and Francesca have substance and a sense of themselves damn near lost in today’s culture of self-pity.

The final word from New York

However, the book's literary legacy, as opposed to its popular legacy, is more memorably defined by the hostile reaction from New York reviewers than by the book's proponents. For example, one of the most sweeping dismissals of *Bridges'* literary authenticity was its inclusion as the punch line of a *New York Times Book Review* special feature on October 6, 1996. The feature commemorated the one hundredth anniversary of the *Times Book Review* by listing the venerable institution's biggest errors of taste to date. It also happened to fall nearly on the one-year anniversary of *Bridges'* final appearance (October 8, 1995) on the *Times Book Review's* bestsellers list. The feature explains:

Look back over 100 years and you're bound to think of things you might have done differently, as this sampling from reviews amply suggests. We've probably slipped up just as badly in more recent years, but history hasn't informed us yet.

May 25, 1907

SISTER CARRIE

By Theodore Dreiser

. . . It is a book one can very well get along without reading.

February 19, 1911

HOWARDS END

By E. M. Forster

. . . He evinces neither power nor inclination to come to grips with any vital human problem.

October 22, 1961

CATCH-22

By Joseph Heller

. . . it gasps for want of craft and sensibility.

April 7, 1963

THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE

By Betty Friedan

. . . It is superficial to blame the “culture” and its handmaidens, the women’s magazines, as she does.

THE BRIDGES OF MADISON COUNTY

By Robert James Waller

Published: April 1, 1992

Reviewed: March 28, 1993 (ellipses original)

While the entries for other books in this list give only the date of the blundering review, the entry for *Bridges* contains the publication date of the novel in addition to the date of Eils Lotozo’s review. The inclusion of both dates allows readers to see that the *Times* did not review *Bridges* until nearly a year after the book was published, by which time the book was entrenched on the *Times* bestsellers list. In addition, in the entry for *Bridges* in this article, there is no quotation from Lotozo’s review, as there are for the other works

over which the *Times* reviewers “blundered” in their evaluation. This exclusion implies that the “blunder” made in reviewing *Bridges* was not a question of the discrepancy between the reviewer’s opinion and the quality of the work. The editors of the *New York Times Book Review* are not retracting their judgement on *Bridges*. But for the other books, what were the reviewers’ errors? Are the editors implying that the things reviewers said about these well-known books turned out to be wrong? Certainly as readers the reviewers are entitled to their opinions. If the reviews are “wrong,” how do we know? Take, for example, Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*. As with all such works on “culture,” there have certainly been many disagreements in classrooms, feminist scholarship, or between individual readers as to whether Friedan’s analysis is “superficial,” as stated in the review, and the editors would most likely allow that one could make that point. The only clue to this judgement in the article is that the works listed are all now very well-recognized; that is, they are popular, and have undoubtedly sold millions of copies. As Ohmann points out, this widespread recognition and readership has helped them become canonical. Perhaps, then, a another implication for the inclusion of *Bridges* in the *New York Times Book Review*’s list of reviewing blunders, without text from its review, is that the gatekeeping publication feels it blundered in succumbing to the pressure of *Bridges*’ duration of popularity in taking notice of it at all. In this reading, what the *Times* “might have done differently” is to have continued denying its existence, lest its pernicious influence spread throughout our culture, wishing, like Anthony Lane in the *New Yorker*, that the unknown Iowa author and his slim novel “would disappear a little more” (Lane 89).

CHAPTER FOUR
Reader Reception of *The Bridges of Madison County*

Regardless of some reviewers' strenuous condemnations of *The Bridges of Madison County*, at least ten million people around the world bought it (Maryles, "Behind the Bestsellers" August 7, 1995) as described in Chapter Two. How they reacted to it when they read it is more difficult to ascertain, as Darnton and others point out. For this study, I was able to gain access to Robert Waller's private collection of hundreds of letters from his readers. The data from these letters allows us to see how some readers of *Bridges* actually used the novel. This chapter examines those uses, as stated by readers, within a framework of key scholarship about *Bridges*' readership and popular fiction in general.

Two scholarly views of *Bridges*' readership

At the time of this writing, the only scholarly works to consider *The Bridges of Madison County*'s readers at length are Bonnie Brennen's 1996 article "Bridging the Backlash: A Cultural Materialist Reading of *The Bridges of Madison County*" in *Studies in Popular Culture*, and Lauren Berlant's 1999 article "Poor Eliza" in *American Literature*. Both Brennen and Berlant address readers' involvement with the text of *Bridges* with a reading of the novel's frame narrative, in which the narrator of the story instructs the reader to suspend disbelief and cynicism in order to fully understand and appreciate the story.

Brennen reads *Bridges* as part of the "feminist backlash" described by Susan Faludi in 1991: as Faludi puts it, the "counterassault on women's rights" in popular culture, politics, and the academy that attempts to "retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women" by "identifying

feminism as women's enemy" (Faludi xviii). In order to make this argument, Brennen uses the theoretical framework of Raymond Williams' concept of "cultural materialism," as formulated in such works as his *Marxism and Literature*, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*, and *Writing in Society*.²⁷ Following feminist scholars such as Leslie Roman, Carol Watts, and Morag Shiach,²⁸ Brennen begins with Williams' concept of "structure of feeling" to examine the interstices between "the articulated and the lived" (62), summarizing Williams thus:

It is the imagination that is thought to transform specific dominant cultural positions and produce an understanding which can be more 'real' than ordinarily observable. . . . In novels, for example, a sense of the community identity in knowable relationships may be more deeply understood than in any other recorded experience. . . . In novels it is possible to speak of a unique life, in a specific place and time that exists as both individual and common experience. It is in this area of lived experience, from its structure of feelings, that cultural practices are created. (62)

²⁷ See John O. Higgins' introduction to the "Cultural Materialism in Action" section of his *Raymond Williams Reader* (Blackwell, 2001, pp. 221-228) for a discussion of the difficulty of defining cultural materialism as a concept and methodological practice, as opposed to "a 'term' . . . whose signified content can be filled in according to the whim of the interpreter" (221).

²⁸ Brennen cites Roman's "'On the Ground' With Antiracist Pedagogy and Raymond Williams's Unfinished Project to Articulate a Socially Transformative Critical Realism" in Dennis L. Dworkin's and Leslie Roman's *Views from the Border Country: Raymond Williams and Cultural Politics*, Routledge 1993; Watts' "Reclaiming the Border Country: Feminism and the Work of Raymond Williams" in *News From Nowhere* 6 (1989), and Shiach's "A Gendered History of Cultural Categories" in Christopher Pendergrast's *Cultural Materialism: On Raymond Williams*, University of Minnesota Press 1995.

Brennen evaluates readers' identification of their own lived experience with the articulation of experience present in the text of *Bridges*. Most of Brennen's data on the readers who enter into this cultural transaction are taken from newspaper features about Waller and reviews of *Bridges*, for example Eils Lotozo's *New York Times* review (mistakenly attributed by Brennen to a later *New York Times* reviewer of *Bridges*, Frank Rich) in which Lotozo asserts that *Bridges* "belongs more to the world of fantasy than reality" (qtd. in Brennen 66). For Brennen, readers engage in fantasy as they experience *Bridges*. Thus, her question about readers is: "Why do men and women alike identify with the characters and why do so many fans wish to appropriate Francesca and Kincaid's story as their own personal fantasy?" (69). A similar aesthetic criterion used by Brennen to describe how readers perceive the book is that Waller's "active voice as the narrator" and "soothing, nonsensical" language comprise an "audience manipulation" designed to deliver "ideological messages" (72). The intent of this manipulation is confirmed for Brennen by the book's narrative frame, in which a fictional Waller "author" receives the story of the female protagonist, Francesca, from her grown children after her death. This frame includes the frame narrator engaging in research (including Francesca's "found journal" and Kincaid's fictional *National Geographic* spreads), filling in gaps in the "facts" with his own imagination, and encouraging the reader to approach the story with a willing suspension of disbelief in order to be transformed by the novel.

Accounts of the book's early success often included reports of readers mistaking this narrative frame for a factual introduction, and therefore misperceiving the book as a "true story," as will be discussed later in this chapter. For Brennen, this is evidence of Waller's successful ideological manipulation of readers. She writes that "Waller

encourages fans to buy into his fantasy of ever-lasting love, by believing in his magic and adopting the story whole-cloth without any questioning or analysis,” and that the frame narrator “does not accept any critical analysis of his novel. Like his protagonist Robert Kincaid, he insists: ‘Analysis destroys wholes. Some things, magic things, are meant to stay whole. If you look at their pieces, they go away’” (72). This “active authoritative voice” results in a text “so convincingly framed as a non-fiction account that readers are often shocked to discover that although there are covered bridges in Winterset, the ‘ultimate’ love affair is purely fictional” (65).

According to Brennen, analysis is especially necessary for women when considering Francesca’s marital situation and decision to stay with her husband and family, the central climax in *Bridges*. “Since readers suggest that this novel resonates with their individual hopes, dreams, and desires,” she writes, “it seems particularly relevant to ponder the relationship between the blankness and shallowness of the poor wretch Francesca, who is locked into pointless marital misery, and the actual state of feelings in the United States today” (70). This description fits well with Faludi’s idea of the feminist backlash. As Faludi writes, the backlash is “most powerful when it goes private, when it lodges inside a woman’s mind and turns her vision inward, until she imagines the pressure is all in her head, until she begins to enforce the backlash, too—on herself (xxii). In Brennen’s reading of *Bridges*, Waller’s authorial presence encourages the reader to identify with, and internalize, Francesca’s self-enforced “pointless marital misery.”

As further explanation for why readers would internalize Francesca’s decision in *Bridges* as correct, Brennen supposes that “for readers who came of age in a time of

sexual experimentation, the story of Francesca and Kincaid's affair may help to alleviate a sense of guilt over their permissive pasts" (70). This understanding of readers leads Brennen to characterize identification with the novel as "romantic fanaticism" by which "fans envision the book as a catalyst and they ask how they can fulfill their own mid-life fantasies" (64-65). Brennen concludes that

. . . there is no evidence from reader response to the novel and there is nothing in *The Bridges of Madison County* itself that allows readers to decode this text in any oppositional way. While some texts may be seen as "polysemic" (Fiske 1987, 266) or open to a variety of interpretations, this novel, in contrast, is a "readerly text," that is, easy to read, clearly understood, and it encourages passive acceptance by readers (Fiske 1989, 103). Readerly texts are closed texts; alternative or oppositional interpretations are effectively eliminated.

. . . this preferred reading represents the dominant hegemonic position of contemporary society; it is a position that continues to construct the feminine based on patriarchal ideals which encourages [sic] the continued devaluation of women and supports the recent systematic backlash throughout U.S. society. (72)

Lauren Berlant's analysis of *Bridges* also presumes that readers' experience of the text is guided by Waller's frame narrative. Berlant's essay reads not only *Bridges*, but also the 1936 Shirley Temple movie *Dimples*, the Rogers and Hammerstein 1949 musical *The King and I*, and Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved* as inheritors of Harriet Beecher Stowe's use of sentimentality to attempt social critique in her 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's*

Cabin—in particular, the scene in which the slave Eliza, carrying her child, impossibly crosses the Ohio river to freedom by leaping on rafts of ice. Our sentimental identification with Eliza’s resolve and the national moral victory it represents, according to Berlant, is the most frequently and spectacularly appropriated part of the “master text” of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The awe it produces in readers simultaneously enacts “witnessing and identifying with pain” and “consuming and deriving pleasure and self-satisfaction.” For the reader “imagining these impulses will lead, somehow, to changing the world” because it connects readers to others who share the same feeling in an “imaginary world,” a “fantasy scene of national feeling” (645-646). However, Citing James Baldwin’s criticism of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s sentimentality in his “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” Berlant asserts that the sentimental aesthetic destroys its own capacity to criticize by replacing a public portrayal of the suffering with a personal fantasy of universal empathy for the sufferer disseminated on a mass scale. This fantasy separates the suffering from its political causes, reframing it as a personal problem, which reduces the impetus to do anything about it on behalf of others. (635-647). Berlant’s interest in these texts is the degree to which their sentimentality is ambivalent, refusing, at least in part, “to reproduce the sublimation of subaltern struggles into conventions of narrative satisfaction and redemptive fantasy.” That is, they are “postsentimental” texts, “a resistant strain of the sentimental domain” (655). *Bridges*’ postsentimentality, according to Berlant, “concerns the effects the novel has on its readers, who read into it a text of liberation from the silences around the quotidian unpleasantness of heterosexual intimacy, a female complaint.” This reading “repudiates the compulsion to repeat normative forms of

personhood across generations, and refuses to disavow the aggression at the heart of intimacy's institutions" (660). This will be explored shortly.

Berlant points out that *The King and I* and *Dimples* explicitly refer to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the scene of Eliza's crossing through the device of characters enacting plays-within-plays, and that in *Beloved*, Morrison "quotes" the scene by emphasizing a similar river crossing by one of its characters, Sethe (Berlant 685). However, the connection used by Berlant to bring *Bridges* into the circle of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*-related texts is extra-textual, coming from a reference by *New York Times Magazine* reviewer Frank Rich to *Bridges* as "the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of the gender wars." Like Brennen, Berlant takes *Bridges*' frame narrative as primary in understanding reader response to the it. Because of the frame narrative's (albeit fictional) presentation of the texts and documents that went into the writing of the story, Berlant calls *Bridges* "*Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* rolled into one" (660).

Subtitled *Presenting the Original Facts and Documents Upon Which the Story is Founded, Together with Corroborative Statements Verifying the Truth of the Work*, Stowe compiled the five hundred-page *Key*, a collection of court records, slave market bills, and other evidence in 1853 to provide evidence that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was based on real people and events. She did this as a response to Southern critics' charges that the events of her novel were unfounded in the actual practice of slaveholders (Ryan, "Harriet Beecher Stowe"). Stowe asserts in the introduction to the *Key* that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was being "treated as a reality—sifted, tried, and tested, as a reality; and therefore as a reality it may be proper that it should be defended" (1). In the *Key*'s preface, she entreats the reader to examine all of her writings "without bitterness—in that serious and earnest

spirit which is appropriate for the examination of so very serious a subject” (vi) much as Waller would later urge his reader to “approach what follows with a willing suspension of disbelief” in the frame narrative preface to *Bridges* (xii).

Bridges’ frame, Berlant notes, constructs a context of production for the story of Francesca’s and Robert’s affair, calling upon “variously realist genres”—“pseudonovel, -biography, -diary, and so on” to create “a text that can only be described as ersatz” yet in doing so also manages to “pronounce its authority” (660). *Bridges*’ sentimentality stems from the all-encompassing nature of the heartbreaking experience of their brief love. Francesca and Robert read their meeting, according to Berlant, “as an event produced by all the evolutionary and civilizational activity of the world, making all of their knowledge into memories of love and thereby sanctifying their knowledge, censoring any enigma or uncertainty that might threaten its truth.” They also “generate immediate artifacts, traces: a note saved, jewelry exchanged, photographs taken. . . . It is as though they create a commodity cluster about themselves for themselves.” These artifacts transform love “into evidence that can be inherited,” literally (662). In the obsessive consumption of these artifacts, the characters (who live the rest of their lives sustained by memories of love) and the narrator (who tells the reader he himself has been transformed by the story) are able to drown out what Brennen calls Francesca’s “pointless marital misery” as a normal state of being in America.

Berlant asserts that *Bridges* becomes resistant to the passive acceptance of social problems paradoxically caused by the critical sentimental aesthetic when in the novel this set of texts is passed along—by Francesca to her children and by the narrator to the reader in hopes that they “will have the same experience in reading this story.”

Francesca's children and the reader are provided with textual evidence that forces them to "unlearn what they think they know about love's impossibility." Being convinced of the verity of this story of true love (and abandoning a "feeling of superiority" to *Bridges'* "maudlin" sentimentality) teaches the audience "how to reclaim its neglected desire to be in a living story, which is a story worth telling, a genealogy of love that leads to you, specifies your participation in the world, makes you unique as it makes you collective, and extends you into the future as something unimaginable to you now." This does not necessarily mean that the reader must, or will, fall in love; "it means that you at least have to inherit somebody else's story, be changed by what you unlearn from it, and then pass it along as a goad to someone else's unlearning, in the mode of a privatized revolution, a cherry bomb in a can" (662-663). She continues,

It is as though Waller had *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on his lap and answered Stowe's not Marxist enough cry, "But, what can any individual do?" . . . "Of that," Stowe writes [*in Uncle Tom's Cabin*], . . . "There is one thing that any individual can do, —they can see to it that *they feel right*. An atmosphere of sympathetic influence encircles every human being; and the man or woman who *feels* strongly, healthily and justly, on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race." (663; emphasizes original)

Berlant compares this to the narrator's caution in *Bridges* about feeling not right but "cynical," with "carapaces of scabbed-over sensibilities" that can be healed by receiving the story of Robert and Francesca in the proper spirit (xii).

Berlant even implicitly ties this reading motivation to the setting of Iowa. She points out that in Francesca's backstory, her "dreams of a lush life become, wrongly it turns out, condensed in what she calls 'the sweet promise of America.' She marries a soldier after World War II and comes to live in Iowa" (662). Francesca's situation in Iowa before her private social/sexual revolution fits with the view of Iowa as a blank space and the importance of the setting for reader identification. The world, in which the reader once felt as isolated as a farm wife in Iowa—ignominious, invisible, having spent one's life adhering to restrictive social conventions in the middle of nowhere—will be marked with his or her presence for posterity by the passing on of love's artifacts and knowledge. In the text of *Bridges*, the narrator achieves this goal for Robert and Francesca by writing their story. The book itself, though written after their deaths, is an artifact of their love that can be passed on to the reader.

Though her reading of *Bridges*' probable effects on readers implies more readerly activity than Brennen's—at least the passing along of the word that love is out there—Berlant does not valorize the text of *Bridges*. In fact, her conclusion is that *Bridges*' resistance to sentimental national fantasy "is a revolution that preserves the sublimity of the fantasies that already exist, along with what we might cynically call 'business as usual' (664) that is, pointless marital misery. Berlant shows that even as most postsentimental texts "witness critiques of the fraudulent claims to popular consent on which American political culture has based its legitimacy and its claims to have elicited popular consent to its domination of what counts as political," they are at the same time "accompanied by the desire for amelioration at any cost," constantly "substituting for representations of pain and violence representations of its sublime self-overcoming that

end up, often perversely, producing pleasure as a distraction from suffering and also as a figure for the better life that sufferers under the regime of nation, patriarchy, capital, and racism ought to be able to imagine themselves having.” In short, sentimentality “is the only vehicle for social change that neither produces more pain nor requires much courage. This ravenous yearning for social change, this hunger for the end of pain, has installed the pleasures of entertainment, of the star system, of the love of children, and of heterosexual romance where a political language about suffering might have been considered appropriate” (664).

Of the texts Berlant analyzes, only Morrison’s *Beloved* is held up as truly resistant to sentimentality, as the character of Sethe does not transcend history or become consumed by it through her river crossing, she “takes it with her,” always remembering her bondage and humiliation. Sethe shows that “whatever transformation we might imagine being wrought from the world-making effects of identification must start right here, in the place of corporeal self-knowledge that can neither be alienated into the commodity form nor provide instruction and entertainment to audiences committed to experiencing the same changes over and over again. . . . no more time for the big deferrals or fantasies” (666). It is interesting to note, given Berlant’s argument that the star system is a sentimental deferral for the representation of pain, that Oprah Winfrey played Sethe in the 1996 adaptation of *Beloved*. Perhaps, given Cecilia Konchar Farr’s description of talk show hosts’ production of familiarity instead of the distance and aura of Hollywood stars, a casting choice that preserves the successful “postsentimental challenge” Berlant attributes to *Beloved*. As Farr reports, it was during the filming of *Beloved* that Winfrey, who had been considering quitting her talk show because of her

disenchantment with the tawdriness of the format, decided instead to use her popularity to help her viewers improve their lives, by reformatting her show in part around the reading of novels.

Certainly there is much in the text of *Bridges* to support Brennen's and Berlant's criticisms of *Bridges*, including Francesca's frequent descriptions of Kincaid's sexual and spiritual power over her. However, while attributing these effects, Brennen and Berlant primarily analyze the text of *Bridges* rather than readers' responses. Berlant does not address actual readers' responses to the novel at all; Brennen, noting Michael Schudson's assertion that popular culture is too often sentimentally, uncritically validated by critics who maintain belief in consumers' powers of analysis,²⁹ chooses Williams' cultural materialism for a method because "ultimately cultural materialists combine a textual analysis with an understanding of specific conditions of production, author's intent, and critical and consumer response to the cultural practice" (Brennen 63), but her several quotations from readers are taken from reviews and reports on the book's sales success in order to assert that "romantic fanaticism often characterizes consumer response to *The Bridges of Madison County*."

As Chapters Two and Three have shown, the readerly reactions reported by reviewers and journalists had been solicited in order to report on Warner Books' "word-of-mouth" marketing strategy, as in the *Publishers Weekly* reports; and in order to write gatekeeping responses to that strategy, as in literary reviews. Therefore, these reported readerly reactions say as much about the meaning of *Bridges*' sales success as they do about reading *Bridges*. A correlation between the story of *Bridges* as a book—a

²⁹ "The New Validation of Popular Culture: Sense and Sentimentality in Academia." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 4 (1987), 51-68.

product—and readers’ response to it as a text would be well-framed by Wendy Griswold’s discussion of the study of readership in her 1993 “Recent Moves in the Sociology of Literature”: for example in Griswold’s discussion of Elizabeth Long’s extension of the 1970s sociological “production of culture” approach, which “drew attention to the the channels and conduits, the obstacles and filters, the middlemen and gatekeepers and boundary spanners, the wholesalers and retailers and media and critics, that connected creative artists with, or separated them from, their publics” (Griswold 460). Griswold cites Long’s 1985 *The American Dream and the Popular Novel*, in which Long suggests that in the second half of the twentieth century “television supplanted reading as the mass entertainer; reading novels was more and more a pastime of the highly educated, the academics and professionals, who maintained a more jaundiced view of corporate capitalism” (Griswold 460).

In *The American Dream and the Popular Novel*, Long notes that the American ideal of affluence as success underwent transformations from the 1960s liberal critique of that success as “a mystificatory, even dangerous ideology” to the 1980s reassertion of affluence as “the good life” (Long, *The American Dream* 2) and that the themes of popular novels reflected those attitudes (*passim*). According to Long, those themes are “a fruitful source of evidence about [a country’s] cultural ethos,” in part because of their realism, which points to “areas of commonality between the imagined world of the novel, and perceptions of the world held by real people in the audience—perceptions that form an important part of the social world beyond the world of novels,” a dynamic similar to Williams’ articulation of experience. (*The American Dream* 5). Evidence of that connection between imagined and real social worlds in “ephemeral” popular novels is,

for Long, useful in “investigating the complexities of short-term sociocultural change.” In the case of *Bridges*, the production-of-culture intermediaries were brought to the public’s attention along with the novel’s text in the story of the book’s unlikely and great sales success, and in the story of Waller as producer of his own American dream, rising from obscurity (outside Iowa, that is) to wealth and fame. In addition, the text of *Bridges*, set in the early 1960s, comments directly on the mass media supplanting reading, in the form of Kincaid’s criticism of *National Geographic*, consumers, profits, marketing (Waller, *Bridges* 51-52), and corporations (100).

The evidence in letters sent to Waller by readers presents an opportunity to see readerly reactions to *Bridges* apart from the highly intermediated discourse about the novel’s sales success. That is, they present an opportunity to hear about some of the actual “lived experiences” readers connected to the articulation of experience in *Bridges*. This is undertaken not to dismiss Brennen’s and Berlant’s scholarship, but to build upon their assertions about *Bridges*’ effects.

Letters to Robert Waller

Robert Waller doesn’t answer his fan mail. He told me he used to answer some—from children; from people who wanted particularly important advice such as whether to leave their spouse or jump in their truck and travel around like Robert Kincaid; or from elderly people whose letters were so entertaining that Waller entered into correspondence with them for a time. After a while, though, he became overwhelmed with the job, so he hired an assistant to send responses. The impersonality of such a system disappointed him, though, so he stopped answering mail from fans and readers entirely. “If you answer them,” Waller told me, “they just write again.” As a result, many of the letters I had

access to—three to four hundred, by my estimation—were unopened; with Waller’s permission, I opened and read them. Most of the letters made available to me were sent during the years 1993-1998.

Of the total, there were many letters of the kind I assumed to be commonly received by any writer of such a popular book as *Bridges*. For example, there were many simple requests for autographs, sometimes even done up in a photocopied form with Waller’s name penciled in. There were also numerous solicitations from libraries, schools, etc., for charitable donations or funding. A few letters seemed to be personal solicitations for money disguised as fan mail. Because these sets of letters contained no evidence of any specific readerly interaction with *Bridges*, I did not bring them to bear on questions of readership.

However, well over half of the three to four hundred total letters were sent by readers of *Bridges* with something specific to say to its author about the book. Of this set, conservatively estimated as numbering between one hundred fifty and two hundred letters, I selected ninety on which to take notes. These were selected because they were the most fully developed examples of readers’ uses of *Bridges*. All letter text quoted here is taken from this representative group. Some of the earlier, opened, letters I saw were forwarded from either Warner Books or the Aron Priest agency; a few had been annotated for Waller, presumably by an employee of one of these companies (“a nice one,” “have you answered him?” or, once “fan letter of the week!”).

I found the demographics of letter writers and the general categories of letters far less homogeneous than some reviewers and critics suppose *Bridges*’ readership to be; that is, they were not all from middle-aged women. Letter writers’ occupations, when given,

included architect, medical professional, mechanic, retired and active military, librarian, bookstore worker, flight attendant, student, teacher, professor in a variety of disciplines, commercial artist, craftsperson, small business owner, singer, clergy, psychologist, counselor, public relations professional, and newspaper writer/editor. Letter-writers' ages, when identified, varied from eleven to eighty-nine. Many letters were from the baby boomer age group assumed by Brennen and many reviewers to be the book's primary audience, but just as many came from people older or younger than that. Many letters came from high school, junior high, or sometimes even elementary school-aged children. About half the letters from school-aged readers were evidently part of a school assignment. Ethnicity was rarely mentioned, although a very few letter-writers mentioned that, like Francesca, they were of Italian descent.

If the assumption is true that many of *Bridges'* readers were mostly baby boomers interested in reading about themselves, it is possible that these readers used the novel to come to terms with the fact that the social changes that they promised in the turbulent 1960s, or that were promised to *them* by that era—a turn away from an empty corporate capitalism and a full realization of women's rights, for example—not only were not realized a quarter-century later, but were erased from the social and cultural landscape as media conglomerates exerted increased control over the market of cultural products and assertions of women's rights were twisted into a backlash against feminism. This finding is one that fits with Long's interest in using readerly activity to investigate "The complexities of short-term sociocultural change" (*The American Dream* 6).

However, evidence from readers' letters to Robert Waller also suggests that surrounding readers' concern with this sociocultural change is a more generalized

concern, one that is applicable not just to women readers, but to all readers, concerning the personal and social value of reading and writing, or perhaps the social value of reading *as* writing. This concern does begin from the internal working of the text of *Bridges*, but not just from the story of Francesca's choosing "pointless marital misery" as authoritatively framed by the narrator and therefore passively received by the reader. The frame narrative is a story of producing a story after reading it. For the reader of *Bridges*, identification with the frame narrative may transcend the act of reading the story, involving the imagination of writing it, or of actually writing one like it, as will be shown at the end of this chapter.

The gender of letter writers also yielded surprises. Waller told me in an interview that the perception of *Bridges* as a "women's book" is inaccurate and that forty percent of his readers are men. As evidence that the book was widely read by men, he cited informal counts of letters from readers and information from his publisher and agent. He told me the story of a time he was sitting in a "cowboy bar" in West Texas and sensed a group of men, "real West Texas oilfield roughnecks," eyeing him up. The discomfort this caused him was broken when his waitress told him that the men recognized Waller and wanted to talk to him, but were too shy. The waitress brokered a conversation with one of the men, who began crying and told him, "Waller, I just want to thank you for letting people know how men like me feel." Having heard such stories from Waller, I approached with the letters with some interest in verifying that a significant number of men had contacted him about *Bridges*. In fact, based on the letters I saw, I found his estimate of forty percent to be within reason.

First, let us turn to the texts of letters from readers³⁰ within these demographic categories, for evidence of how these different readers used the act of reading the novel. This discussion is preliminary to an examination of how readers used the novel in particularly polysemic and productive ways in light of Brennen's and Berlant's discussion of readership.

Young readers' uses of *Bridges*

Letters to Waller from young people revealed how they had self-consciously used the book to help prepare themselves for the experiences of adulthood, including forming their definitions of "love" and "romance," and contextualizing their first-time experiences with relationships.

One twenty-five-year-old woman (November 1997) reports being given the book by an "old friend" because she was currently recovering from a relationship similar to Francesca's and Robert's. "I know I am young, and that I may have many remarkable loves and experiences ahead of me," she writes, "but this book reminded me of the reason why I loved this person in my life so much." A twenty-one-year-old Greek woman (February 1998) who said she had read the book four times and seen the movie twice, wrote Waller about her impending marriage. This woman found it "strange that two days before I read the book I spend one night awake wondering what I would do if passionate love comes when I am already married." She concludes: "Well, to be honest, I don't have the answer yet, but at least I have a hint"

³⁰ Dates of letters, when available, are given in parentheses. Dates of letters are given in month, year format and hometowns are summarized as regions, states, or countries in order to protect the anonymity of letter-writers. I did not record names or complete addresses of letter writers for the same reason.

People even younger also used the book for similar contextualization of, and preparation for, “love,” and for adulthood in general. One high school junior from the Midwest (January 1996) said that “Francesca will forever live in my dreams and thoughts when I think of love, will it ever come.” A fifteen-year-old boy writing from a high school address in California (December 1997) tells Waller he enjoyed *Bridges* even though he usually reads “bang bang shoot em up type” books. He tells Waller that he disagreed ethically with the protagonists’ affair, but appreciated what he took to be the book’s moral: “Love can make you crazy.” Another boy, a ninth-grader from New England (January 1995) tells Waller that *Bridges* is the first “adult-like” book he has ever read.

Also addressing preparation for adulthood as a primary use of the novel is a letter from a fifteen-year-old girl from New England (February 1998) who was given a copy of *Bridges* by her grandmother. Her letter discusses at length the fact that she was able to identify with the story and characters despite her age. Normally, she says, she “wouldn’t even think of reading a story about any people over the age of twenty-nine.” However, she says that upon reading *Bridges* she discovered that “It felt good to find a book I could really get into despite my age, and it felt even better to find one I could relate to my life.” This girl says she had been seeing a “guy” but that the circumstances of the relationship, which she did not disclose, meant that her relationship could not be public. Despite the age difference between herself and Francesca, the girl compares their respective actions and circumstances: “Francesca had the courage to open herself to him, though, and I doubt I do. Yet there’s still something inside of me that would give anything to be Francesca Johnson.” She concludes by comparing the validity of her own concerns to

those of adults: “I know I’m only fifteen, and most adults think I wouldn’t know a love like that while I was still a teenager, but from the way you presented your story, I felt you would understand that a love like that did exist and how powerful it could be for someone of any age.”

Men’s uses of *Bridges*

Many adult men wrote Waller to say how strongly they identified with *Bridges*. Some of these men wanted to tell him how the book became a component of their relationships with women, including their wives or fiancées. Often these men report having read the book as a sort of favor to the women in their lives, with some initial skepticism about the possibility of identifying with its story. However, they report to Waller that *Bridges* is not the “mushy, mindless, love story” (Pacific Northwest, January 1995) they expected, or to report that they enjoyed it even though they consider themselves “immune to sentiment” (England, August 1995). A few reported that sharing their reactions to the book with their girlfriends became the defining moment in their courtship, and tipped the balance of a relationship toward marriage. Many of these men requested autographed copies from Waller as wedding or anniversary presents, sometimes with specific instructions for Waller’s inscription. One man, a counselor from a Western state (September 1993), found that *Bridges*’ emphasis on “paying attention to the love and caring that is in each of us” was the spark that led to rekindling a relationship with his daughter after his divorce.

When men discuss their specific involvement with the book, they usually mention their identification with the character of Robert Kincaid as the “last cowboy,” and by extension, their identification with Waller. Some go on to reveal how they used the book

to reflect upon their own masculinity. A New England mechanic in his thirties (January 1998) wrote that he felt “very comfortable in its pages” because he has “felt some of that wanderlust *you* must have had in order to bring Kincaid down to Iowa.” A Midwestern man with a Master’s degree in literature (April 1993) wrote in the postscript to his letter that “there is a bit of Robert Kincaid in all men that are in their forties and fifties, and are educated, well travelled, and open minded; I know that there is a bit of Robert Kincaid in my spirit, because sometimes I feel like ‘The Last Cowboy.’” A former military (and current free-lance) photographer (January 1995) wrote of the “many similarities [between] your character Kincaid and my life.” He described his purpose in writing as asking whether “Robert Kincaid is Robert James Waller? Can one develop a fictional character based on himself?” Yet another man included his wife in his return address and signed his letter, “The Second to the Last Cowboy.”

Women’s uses of *Bridges*

Some women flirted with Waller in their letters and/or sent pictures of themselves. One woman living in Greece (February 1998) began her letter by saying that she “put the book down and [felt] like putting on a floral summer dress and go[ing] dancing towards the ocean.” She concluded the letter by telling Waller, “I’m sure the Greek sea sponge fishermen will appreciate you too as I dive into the frigid ocean . . . Nude of course!” In addition, it is important to remember that because of his early appearances on NPR and Oprah, millions of people had seen or heard him speak as *Bridges* was becoming popular, so he was not just an author, but a celebrity, so there were a few obvious come-ons among the letters.

More often, however, women deliberately distanced themselves from such a tone in their letters, as they described how they used the book to reflect upon and validate their independence from men. One Mid-Atlantic woman (October 1995) who wanted to co-write a novel with Waller described herself as “a successful, professional woman in my early thirties,” and continued, “As a single woman I am happily leading an independent life.” A Texas woman (April 1996), who wanted to discuss possible spellings of an Indian or Pakistani word in *Slow Waltz*, prefaced her letter with the fear of being misunderstood as what she imagined a typical *Bridges* reader to be. She wrote: “In quizzing a friend whether I should be brazen enough to write this letter, her comment was ‘if you write an intelligent letter, he probably won’t think you are a sex-starved older female fan.’ So here goes.”

Other women wrote Waller expressly to discuss images of sexuality and gender in *Bridges*. A German woman (November 1995) reported that an event similar to the plot of *Bridges* had occurred in her life “years ago,” but with the gender roles reversed. That is, she had had an affair with a married man who ended the relationship so he could remain with his family. In comparing her own experiences with the basic plot line in *Bridges*, this woman reflected: “thinking about what happened to me, there is always this feeling a man retreating in such a situation is just hiding behind his family, he just wants to have fun and if it is getting to be too serious he just says he has the responsibility for his family.” She continued, “and sometimes we dishonour a great love and say: ‘He just wanted in her panties.’” The point of this speculation is clarified by the letter’s overarching question: “Could you have written the book with the characters swapped?” This implies that the letter-writer is questioning the terms by which Waller has imagined

Robert and Francesca's relationship as exemplary of heterosexual love. One might further speculate that she read her own gender-reversed scenario into *Bridges*' "gender-normal" plot, even though she prefaced her letter with the caveat, "I am not criticizing you and I am not a feminist."

A similar examination of gender roles in *Bridges*—and a similar dissociation with "feminism"—came in a letter from a woman working on a two-year associate degree in a Midwestern town (February 1998). In a course on "images of women in fiction," this reader was assigned several novels to read and analyze, but for the final paper was asked to analyze a book of her own choosing. She reported to Waller (in a letter that did not mention whether its writing was assigned as part of her coursework) that she had chosen *Bridges* for this final assignment because she "had thoroughly enjoyed it before." Indeed, she professed, "I really love the book." She wrote that her assignment had proven difficult and frustrating, as had the analysis done in the class as a whole, "because instead of just reading them for enjoyment," students were "forced" to read novels for eight different categories of "ongoing portrayals of how women are displayed to us." However, despite her frustration with the assignment, the student also expressed concern at what she found in her analyses of women characters in "bestsellers": unrealistic beauty images, "non-existent" or stereotypical female occupations, dependence on men, and a dearth of female mentoring or friendships. The student was "unhappy" to find that Francesca "fit perfectly" many of these criteria. Among the elements of characterization she found in *Bridges* were Francesca's "uncontrollable desires" and her portrayal as an "unhappy housewife" who nevertheless "chooses to stay and sacrifice her true happiness for the sake of her children and her marriage." This characterization, she says, diminishes the

impression of women as independent and self-sufficient, instead portraying them as “just victims of circumstances beyond their control.”

With this exposition as her background, the letter-writer comes to a conclusion about her purpose: “I guess the reason I’m writing to you is because I wondered if you were aware of the way Francesca didn’t stand for a positive female role, or if you just wrote the book as a romance and left it at that?” She also indicates that she is anxious for a reply, to “get the answer from the horse’s mouth.” It is perhaps significant that this reader set up this question as a moral dichotomy between an exploitative portrayal of women on one hand, and merely “a romance” on the other. As she praised *Bridges* early in the letter, she asserted that the book’s “romance theme” especially appealed to her, and said that the book’s “amazing” worldwide success “just goes to prove that there is a tinge of romance in all of us fellow human beings.” The romance here is held up as a vehicle of pleasure, and that pleasure is conflated with the existence of love, and moral good, in the world, capable of uniting people in their humanity where they are otherwise divided by culture and nationality. However, the letter-writer also asserts that the mass distribution and consumption of bestsellers such as *Bridges* is harmful. “If it were just one book that was this way,” she writes, “it wouldn’t be so bad. The problem is that almost all of the bestsellers include at least one negative aspect of women.” But, in the concluding paragraph of her letter, she writes, “I still love the book, and I will read it again and again because it appeals to me.”

This letter captures a moment at which a reader has found new meanings in the text of *Bridges*. Further, once she has adopted a reading of the book that Brennen would surely see as ideologically resistant, the pleasure she derives from the book is not

diminished. In the end, she is able to separate her reading pleasure, and her presumption of that pleasure's power for social good, from her critical objections. If this and other readings put forth in the letters are not fully oppositional, they certainly show readers treating the text as polysemic.

Fantasy, Reality, and the ideological uses of reading

Some readers' letters to Waller can be framed with scholarship that revises the notion of "fantasy." Before we turn to the letters that show how this is so, we might consider some evidence of readerly activity of *Bridges* not taken from the letters, and a critical context for fantasy as a subject of study.

Another example of readerly activity, taken not from letters to Waller, but from Susan Orleans' lesbian parody of *Bridges*, *The Butches of Madison County*, (discussed in Chapter Two) illustrates readers' polysemic reading of *Bridges* as a "writerly text." Orleans uses some elements of *Bridges* in a way that reveals not only ridicule of the original novel, but also shows how Orleans anticipates readers' imagining of the situation in the text of *Bridges* more independently and actively than the way critics anticipated, given Waller's strong authorial presence in the text. For example, the story is not transposed onto a parodic setting, but is set in present-day Madison County, Iowa, where the purpose of Kincaid figure Billie Bold's arrival is her visit to her older lesbian friends, who guided Billie's coming out when she lived with them in a commune in the 1970s. The women have inherited or bought two farms in Madison County, called Bull Dyke Ranch and Diesel Dyke Acres, and run an artists' community, complete with summer interns from "the university" who are there "studying the historical ramifications of mid-seventies lesbian cooperative housing experiments" (55).

Several plot points in the parody are to some degree intended as serious. For example, when Billie notes that the names of the ranches are “pretty blatant for middle America, one of Billie’s older friends replies, “We didn’t start it. . . . We heard snickers, little asides—‘Here come the gals from Bull Dyke Ranch.’ So one day Mamie [another of the older women] made two signs. . . . carved up those letters real nice. We hung ’em up, and wouldn’t you know, the nasty comments disappeared.” To this, one of the interns replies, “Reclaiming language is a classic empowerment tool” (56). The humor intended in the intern’s eagerness to frame the women with analysis as her subject for study, but the dialogue quickly returns to the cultural situation of the women in restrictive Madison County, Iowa. Billie ventures, “So overall you get along . . . sort of like *Northern Exposure* [a 1990s television show in which the eclectic population of a remote Alaskan town includes gay people].” “That would be stretching it,” one of the older women replies. “Stretching it a lot,” adds another (56).

Another serious plot point in *Butches* is the fact that one of the Ranch’s interns knows Francesca figure Patsy Plain’s daughter, Oak, from college and almost accidentally reveals to Patsy that Oak is a lesbian, before being elbowed in the ribs by another of the interns (55). Although Oak’s sexuality is not mentioned again in the book, other characters have conversations about the difficulty and consequences of coming out to parents as gay. Patsy’s actual lesbian experience with Billie and her frequently expressed admiration for the self-sufficiency of the lesbian women she meets, suggest that Oak will not risk her mother’s disapproval when she comes out to her. Or perhaps when the mother and daughter come out to each other, for Orleans chooses to invert the central decision of Patsy’s decision whether to stay in Iowa with her family or leave with

her newfound lover: where Francesca chooses to stay, Patsy leaves. “What would you have done [if you had stayed]?” Billie asks Patsy in the final pages of the novel. “Spent the next 20 years secretly mourning? Pining at your old kitchen table, sipping brandy clandestinely, quietly weeping over a stray letter, poem, or photograph?” Patsy answers, “. . . it does sound pretty idiotic, when you put it that way” Finally, Billie sums up, “. . . our story is more than a mere parody of a heterosexual romance. And a lesbian romance deserves a happy, if not particularly realistic, ending” (93-94). Despite the humor, these points ask the reader to compare real experiences in contemporary America to the “fantasy” experience of reading the (romance) novel. They also move from a parody of the writing in *Bridges* to a criticism of the attitudes about women some have seen in it, particularly the justification of Francesca’s decision to stay with her husband and family so as not to involve them in her flouting of social norms revolving around sexuality.

In *Parody: Ancient, Modern and Post-modern* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), Margaret A. Rose points out that literary parodies are often often simultaneously critical and sympathetic to its object (47). In *Parody* (Routledge, 2000), Simon Dentith notes that “the polemical direction of a parody can draw on the allusive imitation to attack, not the precursor text, but some new situation to which it can be made to allude” (9). Like the letter-writer who has learned to see gender bias in *Bridges* while still being able to enjoy it, this suggests reading activity that at once follows and diverges from authorial intent, at once identifying with a version of its fantasy and maintaining critical distance from it.

The concept of fantasy has been used as a tool of inquiry for studying readership of popular novels, especially those considered women’s novels. Janice Radway’s

ethnographic examination of women romance novel readers, *Reading the Romance*. In *Reading the Romance*, Janice Radway adds specificity to the idea of identification with plot and character as fantasy by expanding the idea of “escape.” She notes that the fantasy world into which her informants escape is not an obliteration of the “real” world:

. . . I was surprised to find that immediately after extolling their benefits as an “escape,” nearly every reader informed me that the novels teach them about faraway places and times and instruct them in the customs of other cultures. As [Radway’s key informant] Dot herself explained in our first formal interview, “These women [the authors] research the tar out of them. They go to great lengths. You don’t feel like you’ve got a history lesson, but somewhere in there you have.

Throughout my stay, readers consistently referred to the “facts” and “truths” contained in the novels. Indeed the tapes and transcripts of the interviews confirm that we spent more time discussing this aspect of romance reading than any other topic except its escape and the nature of the romantic fantasy. (107)

Later, Radway concludes that, despite a potential for readers to learn “conservative ideology about the nature of womanhood” from romance novels, their “insistent emphasis on the romance’s capacity to instruct them about history and geography suggests that they also believe that the universe of the romantic fantasy is somehow congruent, if not continuous with the one they inhabit” (186). Ultimately, Radway sides with the reader’s interpretive power over the fantasy, deciding that

It would be easy enough to dismiss the Smithton readers' conflicting beliefs about the realism of the romantic fantasy by attributing them to a lack of literary sophistication. Such a move, however, would once again deny the worth of the readers' understanding of their own experience and thus ignore a very useful form of evidence in the effort to reconstruct the complexity of their use of romantic fiction. It seems advisable, then, to treat their contradictory beliefs as evidence, at least, of an ambivalent attitude toward the reality of the story. The women may in fact believe the stories are only fantasies on one level at the very same time that they take other aspects of them to be real and therefore apply information learned about the fictional world to the events and occurrences of theirs. (186-187).

John Caughey's *Imaginary Social Worlds*, an ethnographic study of consumers' identification with mediated popular culture figures, questions both the degree to which fantasy, emphasizing social relationships as it does, can be said to have a disconnection from "reality," and the critical tendency to frame such a disconnection perjoratively. Fantasy for Caughey turns not toward its object (in his context, the celebrity), but "to the needs of the self" emphasizing the consumer's control (51). He asserts that "by providing purpose and meaning," the control that such fantasy engenders "has indirect but important effects on actual interactions" (188). Caughey goes further than Radway in presuming that the ultimate power, even benefits, of fantasy rests with the reader and his or her interpretive, creative activity. "While much fantasy conforms to official reality," he asserts,

It can also be a powerful source of innovation. Here, the unconscious self produces imaginative solutions to the frustrations of current reality.

Fantasy solutions are often unrealistic, but sometimes they can be partially realized in actual life. Dissatisfaction with a current job, coupled with persistent fantasies of some alternative life style, sometimes leads an individual to abandon a conventional career. On a larger level, fantasy sometimes provides the basis for social change. Fantasy solutions to negative aspects of current social arrangements provide the creative force behind utopian fiction. They also provide the visionary image in terms of which cultural reform movements—revolutionary movements, utopian movements, cult movements—seek to create a new society. At the heart of all such “revitalization movements” is the visionary “goal culture.” The image of the ideal social system typically comes directly from an individual’s fantasy, a fantasy that not only solves personal problems but solves them in a way that appeals to other individuals suffering similar kinds of identity frustrations. (187)

Radway’s and Caughey’s steps away from a conception of fantasy and imagination as passively induced, and toward a conception of it as actively produced, come to fruition in works such as Camille Bacon-Smith’s *Enterprising Women*. Her study of media fan cultures depends on the basic premise that fantasy is creative, imaginative activity. Indeed, these women’s fan activities are shown to stem from highly original creative production. These authors’ revision of the terms of fantasy are also connected to the problem of authorial narrative techniques and oppositional readings. Assertions such as

Brennen's about *Bridges*—that readers are ideologically manipulated and denied oppositional readings by a powerful narrative frame—are called into question by the stance that identification with text is basically active rather than passive, no matter how strong the authorial presence. Given this stance, Bacon-Smith reaches the conclusion that narrative pleasure can therefore be used by women readers to “reconstruct their own reality” (296).³¹

In *Reading the Romance*, Radway asserts that reading a narrative “repeats and reinforces” the status quo. It is important to note that Radway is dealing with the narrative and linguistic hallmarks of the romance novel very specifically. The linguistic elements of these narratives, she writes, tend toward the stock, the undifferentiated, the familiar, and the proliferation of descriptive detail. For readers, these elements “mask” the “interpretive character of the act of reading,” convincing them that the meaning—and therefore the “truths” and “facts” revealed in the story—are “already fully there *in* the text.” Radway asserts that an overdetermined narrative “enables the reader to maintain her illusory view of herself as the simple recipient of the story because it limits the actual labor she must perform to that of simple memory.” She continues to say that, in this reading situation, interpretation is limited to the reader's unconscious mind, and therefore the reader continues to view reading “as a simple matter of receiving” (197). This unself-consciousness about the activity of interpretation works to uphold patriarchal constructions of gender roles. However, Radway also allows that

this is not the only level at which the reader reacts. The act of romance reading must first involve any reader in a complex process of world

³¹ For further background on the activity of reading as productive in the way Bacon-Smith describes it, see Chapter Four (“Reading as Production”) of John Storey's 1999

construction through which the reader actively attributes sense to the words on a page. In doing so, that reader adopts the text's language as her own and appears to gesture toward a world she in fact creates. Because the process must necessarily draw more or less on the language she uses to refer to the real world, the fictional world created in reading bears an important relationship to the world the reader ordinarily inhabits. The activities of reading and world construction, then, carry meaning for the reader on a purely formal level in the sense that they repeat and reinforce or alter and criticize the nature of the world as the reader knows it. (187)

A Participatory context for reading *Bridges*

Radway's readers' "ambivalent attitude" toward the reality of a story (as opposed to a susceptibility to it) is also pronounced in letters from both women and men readers of *Bridges*. For example, a hypothesis immediately verified by the letters was the supposition that many readers assumed, at least at first, that the book was a work of non-fiction. For example, many letters conclude by asking whether the story of the book is "real" or "true" without noting the fact that the book is a novel. Other letter-writers report that they understood the book is a novel, but supposed that it is based on a true story. For example, one British man tells Waller that his wife, a medical professional, felt the story was "true" but that he doubted its verity, and that their ongoing discussions of the matter prompted him to write.

Other people write to Waller to obtain information about the issues of *National Geographic* in which Kincaid's photographs supposedly appear, or report that they searched for the issues but could not find them. A Southern woman in her thirties

(February 1998) who inquired, “I’ve always wondered—was *Bridges* a true story?” indicated that she is a published author of short stories, poetry, and non-fiction, and an unpublished author of three novels. She also held down a part-time job in a bookstore, where she enjoyed recommending *Bridges* to her customers and discussing it with them. Another reader, a Midwestern woman (August 1994) who described herself as a “middle-aged librarian” who “read[s] critically and [is] quick to find contrivances,” reports that she was “fooled” by the book, searched the *National Geographic* indexes for issues containing Kincaid, and would have gone to Madison County to visit the scene had she not realized in the nick of time that the story was fiction. *National Geographic* itself ran a one-page “Behind the Scenes” feature in July 1995 entitled “The Cover that Never Was,” and the Iowa Tourism Board ran travel ads for the state in *National Geographic Traveler* throughout the 1990s. The “Behind the Scenes” article reads, “The line between fiction and nonfiction blurred for some of our readers when the novel *The Bridges of Madison County* topped the bestseller lists with its hero, Robert Kincaid, portrayed as a *National Geographic* photographer. Convinced that Kincaid was real, members have been writing and calling to ask when his article on covered bridges was published. The answer is: Never. . . . Still unconvinced, one visitor to our library riffled through 1960s *Geographics* hoping to find his story.”

However, this information should be viewed as at least in part promotional; the article goes on to say that *National Geographic* had provided Eastwood with “two camera bags used in the 1960s by a staff photographer, along with [a] make-believe May 1966 cover [Kincaid made the fictional cover with a picture of Cedar Bridge and his story “The Bridges of Madison County”] and *Geographic* photographs that Eastwood—aka

Kincaid—shows as his own work.” The National Geographic Society’s rationale for having assisted Eastwood in this way: “we decided that if art really hoped to imitate life, it ought to contain some semblance of reality.” The article concludes by promoting “an article in the August [1995] issue on shooting for *National Geographic*” that will teach “the truth about what our photographers really do.” In addition, *National Geographic* used the idea that readers thought Kincaid was real in promoting a June 18, 1995, television documentary about what *National Geographic* photographers really do. In previewing the television special in *The New Times*, Richard B. Woodward wrote that *National Geographic* was “crashing through this window of opportunity [provided by the magazine being featured in the book and movie versions of *Bridges*]” in “a shameless attempt to exploit the publicity surrounding a Hollywood star vehicle [the movie had been released two weeks earlier, on June 2, 1995].”

A few letter-writers who reported having recently discovered that the book was entirely fiction expressed no dissatisfaction with their newfound knowledge that the story was not based in fact, but other readers said they felt deceived. The British man quoted earlier professed that he and his wife didn’t “really want to know one way or the other.” The tone of the librarian’s letter, described above, was playful, but occasionally pointed. For example, she teased that it was “not nice” to fool her, but that in a matter of days she had become ready to “forgive” Waller, adding, “not that you or your investment broker care.” One woman from London (August 1994) was initially quite upset when, upon re-reading the book, she noticed the publisher’s disclaimer that the book was “entirely a work of fiction,” and wrote Waller to express her disappointment. Particularly galling to her were the “details of research, dates, sources” in the book’s fictional preface, entitled

“The Beginning.” “Why did you so cruelly deceive?” she wrote. “Was it to sell more copies? You said, ‘here is a story which is true and it can show you what is possible in the course of human relationships[’] except it wasn’t true.” However, this reader continues, “In a sense and I will choose probably to follow this course of thought, it doesn’t matter. The message remains the same, true or otherwise, and I will not reject it.” Several women readers, including a Midwestern woman (December 1994), claimed that, like Francesca, they had had an ill-fated affair with a *National Geographic* photographer. She wrote that she had “made a similar decision to let go of the very thing that made me the most me—and the most happy,” and that “maybe, one day, I will be as brave as [Francesca], and leave my children a note.” She closed her letter with a request: “Although I read the The Beginning of your book, I need re-affirming that this was a true story.” Readers’ obvious desire to believe that the story was true shows that, whether or not because of the power of the sentimental novel to induce readers to feel their lives remade, as Berlant suggests, they felt invested in the novel’s portrayal of “what is possible in the course of human relationships.” Other readers said they had looked forward to going to Iowa before they realized the book was non-fiction, but now that they had, they had changed their minds. Many other letter-writers, however, did say they were interested in visiting Madison County.

As Radway points about about her romance reader informants, it would be hasty to assume that readers’ concerns about the verity of Robert and Francesca’s story reflect a complete misunderstanding of the boundary between fiction and non-fiction books—many novels, after all, are based on true stories—or that, as some critics suggested, it was read by relatively inexperienced book readers. It is true that the length and size of the

book make it quite portable, and readable in a single sitting, increasing even a time-pressed reader's chance of finishing it. But the vast majority of the letters I saw were well-written, many of the writers identified themselves as frequent readers or even "bookworms," and their reading preferences included classic literature (American, British, and European) in addition to best-sellers or genre fiction. For example, one Midwestern man in his forties with a Master's degree in literature (April 1993) wrote that he had read "everything from Shakespeare and Chaucer to Heine, Goethe and Steinbeck," and that his "favorite writers are Hemingway and Thoreau, now also Waller." Similarly, a woman representing a suburban Connecticut book group (October 1995) wrote to settle a discussion question: whether *Bridges* was based on Steinbeck's "Crysanthemums." A rural East Coast woman (January 1996) reported reading *Bridges* immediately after reading Joyce Carol Oates' *Them*. A high school junior girl who reported (January 1996) that she reads "at least a hundred books a month" wrote, "Normally I read V.C. Andrews, Lord Tennyson, Stephen King (who bores me sometimes), and Janette Oke and Mary Higgins Clark." This girl picked *Bridges* out from among her mother's Danielle Steel novels. A male middle-aged free-lance photographer (January 1995) implicitly compared *Bridges* to a classic American novel: "I wish I had written to Harper Lee after reading her classic *To Kill a Mockingbird*, so since I did not do that then, I will write this note to you now. I enjoyed your book immensely!" Perhaps the mix of contemporary genre fiction, literary fiction, and "classic" novels in lists given by *Bridges* readers should not be surprising, given the eclectic bestsellers that would be a part of the "Oprah Book" phenomenon a few years later in the late 1990s.

Letters from *Bridges* readers show not only a conscious awareness of their reading experience, but also efforts to transcend the boundaries of the text in acting on it. The act of writing letters writing letters, writing creatively, or making art is equated with personal satisfaction and sometimes even a way of living. A Manhattan woman in her twenties (November 1997), educated at a small West Coast university, lists her occupation as “anything my romantic heart leads me to.” After thanking Waller for helping her “realize that the spiritual, transcendental kind of love is possible for all human beings,” she remarks on the fulfillment of her own creative promise. “As I sit down to my personal journal and fantasize of writing something meaningful and publishable one day,” she writes, “I am reminded that anything is possible, and dreams are essential to the artist’s way of life.”

Many readers, for example, sent requests that Waller help them tell a story about their own real life. Sometimes the basic tenets of these requests are similar to that of the preface to *Bridges*: a son or daughter wants the story of their mother or father told. These requests by adult children, however, did not tend to be about their parents’ affairs, as in *Bridges*, but about some other remarkable circumstances of their parents’ lives. At times the story was of the reader’s own extramarital affair, or of his or her recovery from the emotional consequences of such an affair, for example as a single parent. These requests were equally likely to come from men as from women. Some of the overall number of requests were relatively informal and candid, but others were more guarded and professional. Money was rarely mentioned, but letter-writers often took the precaution of withholding key details, developments, or outcomes of the story—and attempted to pique Waller’s interest in the story by leaving it a cliffhanger to which he could discover the

ending by contacting the correspondent. Many letter-writers mentioned that they had written outlines, drafts, or notes for the stories they wanted told, which they were keeping in safety-deposit boxes. A few letter-writers also indicated that they had simultaneously sent a similar request to entertainment-media producers such as Ron Howard or Oprah Winfrey.

These readers' motivation for making requests for Waller to tell their story were often stated as a frustrated desire to be able to tell such stories well themselves, whether because of their abilities or because of the stories' presentation of socially disapproved behavior. Expressions of this motivation often revealed a desire to preserve the integrity or verity of the stories. For example, one woman making such a request (February 1998) admired Waller's ability "to project your characters as they were. Leaving their frailties intact. You pronounced no judgement of them." She continued, "Only someone with that ability could tell my story. Even I can't. I'm not a writer to begin with and I do judge myself. That would take away from what needs telling you see." A very few times, the request for Waller to tell a story conflated his writing of the story with the outcome of the real-life story itself. For example, one woman (December 1995) who wanted Waller to tell the story of the affair she was currently having with a married man wrote to him, "It would be your place to supply the ending of this love story, because neither of us knows what it will be."

Some of the letter-writers reported to Waller that *Bridges* had inspired them to want to become, or to actually have become, professional or amateur writers or artists. One woman (January 1995) wrote that she had been depressed at recent turns in her life and had quit painting, but that after receiving *Bridges* from her sister and reading it, had

taken up painting again and begun to shake off her depression. Another woman (August 1996) concluded her letter, “I’ve always thought perhaps there was a book in me—but I’ve never written it. Perhaps someday.” Another woman (December 1997) closed her letter with the desire to become Waller’s pupil: “If you teach at any Writers’ Conferences I would like to sign up for the class.” Often readers reported that, to their surprise, *Bridges* had reminded or taught them that they are “romantic” at heart; sometimes this realization was coupled with beginning their own writing.

Other readers sent Waller their own *Bridges*-inspired literary works. Mostly poems (written by either women or men), the works this group of readers sent were by and large sexually romantic. Many of them were written in the first-person voice of characters from the book, most often Francesca, and addressed to a lover, most often Robert. Fewer, mostly written by men, were metaphysical abstractions in the style of “Falling from Dimension Z,” a prose poem credited to *Bridges* protagonist Robert Kincaid, who sends it to Francesca years after their separation.

One Midwestern woman (May 1998) sent two complete drafts of “stories,” requesting a rewrite from Waller. Although she termed the texts she enclosed “stories,” they were actually research materials for the making of a story, in the way that the narrator researched Kincaid’s life and work. The main text (all written in the same hand) was a series of letters, notes, photocopied maps of the setting, and handmade greeting cards between two lovers. In aggregate, these told the story of an extramarital affair, in the same intertextual way as *Bridges*. In her cover letter, the woman stated that she had sent copies of the draft to Oprah Winfrey with instructions for the material to be passed on to Waller, but since she had not heard back from Winfrey, she had sent Waller his

own packet directly. She expressed confidence that Waller and Winfrey would have already discussed her proposition. Despite such a thorough unfamiliarity with the business of media entertainment, this reader had a quite sophisticated understanding of the pseudo-documentary form of *Bridges*—sophisticated enough to produce a draft of one herself.

Many of these requests, even if tempered by their authors' literary ambitions or their misunderstanding that *Bridges* was fiction, mentioned that they had not previously thought it possible to publicly tell such private stories, or that they had only begun to consider the story worthy of telling after reading *Bridges*. That *Bridges* was the catalyst for these writings, and that they contacted Waller as well as other entertainment producers, suggests an identification not only with the story of Robert and Francesca's affair, but with the frame narrative, as Brennen and Berlant suggest. Perhaps these readers were influenced by the frame narrative to pass along the sentimental story in order to feel their world remade, as in Berlant's interpretation. However, they do not just identify with the story's assertion that true love is out there, and therefore merely pass along the book to their friends and family; this would require no letter. Rather, their writing of the story emulates Francesca's writing of the documents to give her children; and their contacting Waller emulates Francesca's children contacting the "Waller" frame narrator to have their mother's story told. They identify not only with the story but with its telling. They have found in their reading experience that one can and should tell one's own story or help others tell theirs. Readers obviously held the integrity of these stories very dear; we keep papers in safety deposit boxes not only for safekeeping, but for posterity and inheritance. This is also perhaps an imitation of the fact that in the opening

scene of the movie version of *Bridges*, Francesca's journals, which detail her affair with Robert, are removed from her safety deposit box for delivery to her children.

These letters suggest that one of Radway's basic assumptions in *Reading the Romance* about readers' understanding—one which refocuses attention on the reader's creative activity rather than the fixed position of the text as a primary force in the meaning-making process—also underlay many of the most interesting responses to *Bridges*. Radway writes that “Romance writers and readers alike understand the purpose of the text to be the romantic tale itself, just as they conceive the activities of writing and reading as a *storytelling* cycle” (198; emphasis Radway's). This focus on readers' activity as markedly similar to authorship—in fact, related to the very creation of the story being read—bypasses the filter of “fantasy” inserted by Brennen into such schemas of reading experience as Raymond Williams' “relationship between articulated and lived experience.”

If we read the evidence provided by letters from readers of *Bridges* in relation to Brennen's evaluation of the novel as a place where the relationship between articulated and lived experience becomes manifest, a quite different picture of *Bridges*' readership emerges. As we have seen, many of these readers explicitly render their interpretation of *Bridges* through their own original stories, an act that mirrors not just the story of in *Bridges*, but the story of the story in *Bridges*, as presented in Waller's frame narrative. If the story of Robert and Francesca is impossibly unrealistic or even unreal, as critics suggest, the story of researching and writing that story, as the Robert Waller frame narrator does, is realistic, and it caused many readers to “believe in” *The Bridges of*

Madison County even as they understood it was fiction. In his 1998 *Mystery Fiction and Modern Life*, R. Gordon Kelly writes,

In its evaluative dimension, “realistic” is uniquely favorable; there is no term of higher praise, and few that come close to matching it for evaluative power. To be realistic is to grasp accurately and represent faithfully what *is*. . . . To assent to or to acknowledge the aptness of “realistic” in a given instance is for reader(s) and author to share the same world, or so much of the world as is bound up in that to which the term is applied in a given instance. (169)

Reading *The Bridges of Madison County* is something one can do. For readers of genre fiction, the romantic conventions of *The Bridges of Madison County* was perhaps familiar, but the packaging of the book, gesturing toward a more serious literary experience, and the length of the book, allowing readers to easily complete the text, might produce an imagination of being socially productive by reading it, as Berlant suggests, and as Oprah’s Book Club would emphasize in the late 1990s. Because the reading and writing of the private story in the frame narrative—one which is explicitly described as personally and socially productive—is what gives the book its realism, it becomes the world readers share with its author; writing one’s own, or someone else’s story, is something readers of *Bridges* imagine they too can do. *Bridges* had already been presented to the public by introducing Waller and Iowa alongside it on *Oprah* and NPR. The text of the novel is a story of how the narrator wrote true love and the idea of personal regeneration onto the seemingly blank cultural page of early 1960s Iowa, and in being introduced to the book on Oprah and NPR, they were introduced to the person and

place with which it originated. That Waller was from Iowa meant that the story of the book's production was set in a "real" American place, the heartland. That is, in identifying with—and participating in—the text of the book, readers also identified with the circumstances and locale of its production. This identification with the creative act as consciously applied to the self and to the social world is what the New England woman (December 1997) might mean by quoting Jessamyn West's aphorism that "fiction reveals truths that reality obscures" in the closing of her letter to Waller, or what the Texas woman (September 1995) might mean in thanking Waller "for giving my memories dimension and color."

In Chapter Five we will see another thing one can do, and many did, after reading *Bridges*. Once the setting for the story, Winterset, Iowa, appeared on the page, and later on the movie screen, its reality became something that many Americans and people from around the world wanted to literally appear in. When that happened, the people and community of the real town of Winterset, Iowa, were significantly changed.

CHAPTER FIVE
Winterset, Iowa, and *The Bridges of Madison County*

The real Madison County

in July 1990, when Robert Waller was struck with the idea for *The Bridges of Madison County* during a photography junket to Winterset, Iowa, located 35 miles southwest of Des Moines, the town of 4,200 people was quiet. The Northside Café, located on the north side of the town square surrounding the 1876 native limestone County Courthouse, served local farmers and townspeople. Other stores around the square served utilitarian functions: a dry cleaner, a pharmacy, a bar. The town also already had a small tourist industry centered around local history. A few tourists visited the birthplace of Marion Robert Morrison, who would become John Wayne. Located on John Wayne Drive, the small house has been turned into a museum and renovated to its 1907 appearance (the year John Wayne was born) with memorabilia such as the eye patch from the movie *True Grit* lining the walls. Sales of John Wayne-related memorabilia at the museum and through its website, www.johnwaynebirthplace.org, support the non-profit John Wayne Birthplace Society's efforts to maintain the house. Tourists also visited the 1874 one-room North River Stone Schoolhouse, which was in use until 1945; the Winterset Art Center, an 1854 home once used as a stop on the Underground Railroad; the Kaser-Bevinton House and Historical Complex, an 18.5-acre village on the south side of town containing a log school and post office, an 1871 train depot, an 1856 stone barn, a 3-hole stone privy with wallpaper and walnut trim, and a restored 1856 brick Victorian mansion; Clark's Tower, a 25-foot native limestone tower in Winterset City Park, erected in 1927 by the descendents of one of the county's first pioneer families as a memorial; a descendent of the original Delicious Apple tree, "discovered" by

Madison County farmer Jesse Hiatt in 1872; and six wooden covered bridges, scattered around the rustic landscape of groves and farmland in Madison County (Madison County Chamber of Commerce). But like nearly everywhere else in Iowa, agriculture was the major industry.

At one time, there were nineteen covered bridges spanning the county's small waterways. The six that remained at the time of Waller's inspiration—Roseman, Holliwell, Cedar, Cutler-Donahoe, Hogback, and Imes bridges (mostly named for the closest resident at the time they were constructed)—were built in various styles between 1870 and 1884 by Eli Cox or Benton Jones and ranged from 76 to 122 feet long. All were listed on the National Register of Historic Places; none were still used for road travel. Several had been moved from their original locations (in the case of Cutler-Donahoe Bridge, into town to Winterset's City Park). The bridges were originally covered to help protect the flooring timbers, which were more expensive to replace than the lumber of the sides and roof, from the elements. Originally, the bridges were located on "farm to market" roads, used by farmers to travel to and from town. In the early 20th century, farm vehicles outgrew the passageways through the bridges. Many of the original nineteen were replaced with more modern bridges; others were lost to fire or flood. In the 1950s, when seven bridges remained, a community effort to preserve them "in honor of the pioneer spirit" began. Roseman, Holliwell and Hogback bridges were renovated in 1992, the year *Bridges* was published, at costs of \$152,000, \$225,000, and 118,000, respectively. Cedar Bridge was renovated in 1998 at a cost of \$128,000. (Madison County Chamber of Commerce)

The covered bridges are the topic of local lore. Roseman Bridge is also known as the “haunted” bridge. In 1892, the story goes, an escapee from a local jail, trapped in the bridge by posses on both sides, issued a wild yell and rose straight up through the roof of the bridge, never to be found. In addition, the bridges were sometimes known as “kissing bridges,” because of the tendency of local youths to steal a kiss from their sweethearts as horse-drawn carriages passed through their private cover. Young lovers would also carve their initials into the wood of the bridges (Madison County Chamber of Commerce).

McBride Bridge, one of the seven bridges on the National Historic Registry, was burned to the ground by one of those lovers in 1983, a Winterset resident named Steve Mead. Mead, who served prison time for the arson and still lives in Winterset, burned the bridge in order to destroy the initials he and his former lover had carved there. Then twenty-three years old, Mead later recounted the aftermath of the experience: “Kids yell ‘bridge burner’ at me. . . . some of the older people treat me all right, but a lot of them hate my guts” (Santiago, “Depressed Lover”).

Each second full weekend in October since 1971, the covered bridges have been the focus of the main tourist event in Winterset, the Madison County Covered Bridge Festival. The four-day festival’s stated purpose is to “celebrat[e] the historic covered bridges” and the town’s other historical attractions. It features tours of the bridges, “old-time crafts demonstrations” (candle dipping, sheep shearing, basket making, cider pressing, chair caning, corn husk dolls, pottery making, wood carving, spinning and weaving, glass making and blacksmithing), country and barbershop quartet music, a spelling bee, an antique vehicle parade and auto show, and a Civil War reenactment (Madison Count Chamber of Commerce). Such festivals are not uncommon in small

town Iowa—Onawa, population 3,000, has “Lewis and Clark days” each summer, for example—and virtually every county has several towns that hold themed local festival “days,” such as Peru, Iowa’s “Apple Daze,” celebrating the Delicious Apple, nearby to Winterset. Most “days” festivals are named for some local characteristic related to agriculture or history, and feature music and entertainment, food and drink, and a midway carnival. Most also feature “sidewalk sales,” during which local merchants put their wares on tables in front of the store at a discount.

When the book *The Bridges of Madison County* was published in April 1992 and the movie version was filmed in Winterset in late summer 1994, the covered bridges became the center of an expansion of the town’s tourism industry, with gift shops, movie sites, and of course the bridges themselves becoming attractions for tourists from all over America and the world. After Waller’s novel, the bridges became so fantastic in the popular imagination that the first line of Claudia Glenn Dowling’s essay accompanying Warner Books’ 1995 coffee table book of pictures taken by Ken Regan during the filming of *The Bridges of Madison County* in 1994 reads, “There really is a Madison County in Iowa, and it really does have covered bridges. These are facts you can hang onto [sic] in this tangled-up skein of reality and fantasy” (112).

Yes, there really is a Madison County, Iowa, and over the years 1992-1995, it was discussed publicly in the national media. How, reporters wanted to know, was the town reacting to the tourists who were arriving there? Winterset residents answered question after question about their feelings about *Bridges* and those tourists, and about their involvement in the production of the movie. Some, such as Winterset Chamber of Commerce Vice President Sherry Ellis and gift-shop entrepreneur “Uncle” Wyman

Wilson, answered those questions in the course of employment in the town's tourist industry. Answers to these questions emerged in bits, pieces, soundbites, and more lengthy examinations such as a feature article in *Chicago* magazine and Dowling's aforementioned essay. The collected stories reporters told about Winterset residents, the stories they were given the opportunity to tell about themselves, and the story of (and in) the movie version, were added to the story of the book in the popular imagination. The story of Winterset told to the nation during those years is one of community, identity, and American entrepreneurship.

Courting the pilgrims

Upon *Bridges*' publication in April 1992, Winterset immediately incorporated Waller's novel into the October 1992 Covered Bridge Festival. *The Bridges of Madison County* was reviewed in Winterset's newspaper, *The Madisonian*, on the day of its release. The review, written by the paper's publisher and editor, Ted Gorman, called the novel "more than a run-of-the-mill softback romance novel found on the magazine rack at [Winterset's] Montross Pharmacy" (qtd. in Daily 101). A few months later, in July 1992, according to Dowling, the first tourist inspired by the novel arrived in Winterset. Winterset Chamber of Commerce Executive Vice President Sherry Ellis received the visitor, "a young lady from California . . . carrying a small hardback book," who said, "I don't know how you can stand to live in such a romantic place" (112). Impressed, Ellis, who had been at her Chamber of Commerce post only a month, before that working as a sheriff's dispatcher in a nearby town, drove to Des Moines that afternoon and purchased the book. Upon enjoying it ("a box of tissues later," she told Dowling), Ellis invited Waller to sign the book, which had been on the *New York Times* bestseller list since

August of that year, at the festival. At the signing, the five hundred books that had been ordered quickly ran out. In the span of two hours, festival representatives drove to Des Moines and bought every available copy of the book for resale and signing. The next day at the festival, Waller signed an additional one thousand books, presumably rushed there by Warner Books (Dowling, 112).

Six months after that, at the beginning of 1993, *Bridges* was number one on the *New York Times* bestsellers list and the town itself began to draw national attention because of the book. In April 1993, a month before the *Oprah Winfrey Show* came to town, Julie Gammick, a Des Moines writer and television producer, organized a writers' conference in Winterset around the novel. She told the *New York Times*' Francis X. Clines that "a lot of people sit back and admire those who do call on magic. Waller can be ethereal, the same as *Field of Dreams*, where the baby-boomers get in touch with spirituality." In May of 1993, Winterset hosted the on-location filming of the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, at Cedar Bridge. That spring also brought to town the filming of a Charles Kuralt segment, the filming of a VH1 promotional video for Waller's song "the Madison County Waltz" from his forthcoming album, and news crews from NBC, CBS, ABC, and CNN, covering the phenomenon of the word-of-mouth bestseller and its effect on the town.

Then, according to *Chicago* magazine's Bob Daily, after Oprah Winfrey declared *Bridges* her favorite book of the year during her show from Winterset, "the pilgrims began descending in force." Ellis told the reporter that nine tourist buses passed through town in 1992, but "in 1993, after The Book hit the stores, 44 buses made the trip. In 1994, the total was 178" (101-102). During this time, much of the tourism began coming

from Japan, where the book was quite successful and would go on to become the biggest selling foreign book ever, passing *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (“The Sewers of Madison County”). Ellis told Daily that Japanese tourists were “so in love with this book that they [were] making mid-America a destination,” and that one Japanese travel company was booking bus tours that traced the fictional path of Robert Kincaid from Washington State to Winterset (102).

The same year, Ann Hornaday reported in the *New York Times* that this tourism had increased local retail business by 30%. Filming of the movie in August 1994 and its release in 1995 increased tourism exponentially once more. Chamber of Commerce employee Doug Hawley told the *Wall Street Journal*'s Thomas King that his office had had seven thousand visitors in June of 1995, compared with four hundred the same month in 1994. According to *The Economist*, the 1995 Covered Bridge Festival nearly doubled its attendance from the previous year, drawing 120,000 people. Where the entire year of 1994 had brought 178 tour buses, up from only nine in 1992, the mere four weeks before the 1995 festival would bring 157 buses (“The Sewers of Madison County”).

Visiting Madison County to see for themselves the setting of the movie version of *Bridges* was part of a relatively new phenomenon of “movie induced tourism,” as described by Roger Riley, Dwayne Baker, and Carlton Van Doren, who have studied such tourism extensively. They note that the idea that tourists visit movie sites had received “popular support” in magazine and newspaper articles, but also that “a larger body of data to support the idea that motion pictures induce tourists to visit film locations” had yet to appear (920). In examining the phenomenon, Riley, Baker, and Van Doren follow the work of John Urry's 1990 *The Tourist Gaze*, introducing their work by

summarizing Urry's claim that "tourists seek environments and experiences that contrast non-tourism realms" (919). In their conclusion, they write that contemporary visual media create "anticipation and allure" that cause people to visit locations: "In the case of major motion pictures, the constructed gaze is not a sales strategy for tourism promotion but an entertainment ploy where storylines, underlying themes, exciting events, spectacular scenery, and characters create hallmark events. These events create exotic worlds that do not exist in reality but can be recreated through a visit to the location(s) where they were filmed" (932).

Within a major motion picture, according to Riley, Baker and Van Doren, what specifically induces tourists to travel is to gaze upon "icons" of these exotic, unfamiliar worlds, that is, "extraordinary or captivating" properties (924) of a movie including "storyline themes, exciting sequences, and human relationships" (920). A movie's predominant icon can be embodied in its "symbolic content, a single event, a favorite performer, a location's physical features, or a theme." Visiting the associated location provides tourists "tangible evidence of the icon." Since the impetus for movie-induced visits appears through "a non-sales form of communication rather than through "the hard sell of advertising," tourists' experience also features "discovery of the location" (922). The authors describe the iconic, tourism-inducing attraction of the location of *The Bridges of Madison County* ("covered bridges, Winterset, Iowa") as embodying a "love theme" (924). In Riley, Baker, and Van Doren's terms, then, tourists visited Winterset and its covered bridges to discover tangible evidence of "love." This reinforces the notion that the Iowa setting was a significant factor in the book's popularity.

Data gathering at movie locations is difficult, according to Riley, Baker, and Van Doren, because many rural chambers of commerce did not collect data before or immediately after their movie-induced tourism booms; instead, the authors say, such offices often discuss the phenomenon anecdotally. Although the authors discuss Winterset in the article, they do not report tourism data from there, for unknown reasons. However, they suggest that in some for-profit locations and attractions, “proprietors were reluctant to supply visitation data that would then be known to competitors.” Others “refused access to their data because it may have indicated higher profit margins than they had previously disclosed” (925-926).

Riley, Baker, and Van Doren’s 1998 article builds on the 1992 work of Riley and Van Doren, which “likened major motion pictures to [Brent] Ritchie’s [1984] concept of ‘hallmark’ or special events” (Riley, Baker, and Van Doren 922). Ritchie described hallmark events as “major one-time or recurring events of limited duration developed to primarily enhance the awareness, appeal, and profitability of a destination in the short and/or long term. These events rely for their success on uniqueness, status, or timely significance to create interest and attract attention” (qtd. in Riley, Baker, and Van Doren 922). Winterset, Iowa, already had a hallmark event, the yearly Covered Bridge Festival, which was already focused on what would become the movie location and tourism icon.

Winterset civic leaders worked toward ensuring that filming of *Bridges* would happen there, rather than in Canada, or in Pennsylvania or Ohio, which also contain covered bridges. *The Bridges of Madison County* was not even the first movie that had been filmed in Winterset. Part of the 1971 movie *Cold Turkey*, a comedy co-written and directed by Norman Lear and starring Dick Van Dyke, about an entire small town—the

fictional Eagle Rock, Iowa (which is also the name of a real Iowa town)—quitting smoking at once, had been filmed in Winterset. Daily reported that “Winterset [had] been courting Hollywood for years, with a savvy eye on the town’s bottom line.” Daily quotes Winterset civic and business leader John Reed, president of a local building supply company, as saying that renewed efforts to attract productions began as early as 1985: “The eighties were hard on Iowa rural communities” Reed told Daily. “In the course of pursuing economic development . . . it became apparent that [Winterset] should be including movies in that same pursuit.” Because of what Daily calls the town’s “Victorian houses and frozen-in-time courthouse square,” the town managed to lure eight or ten producers to scout the location, and almost landed a made-for-TV movie that ended up being filmed in Nebraska (Daily 116-117).

There was another precedent for filming movies in small-town Iowa. As Hornaday put it in the *New York Times* in August 1994, “Winterset [was] taking many of its cues from Dyersville . . . where *Field of Dreams* was filmed.” Another movie adaptation of a novel (W.P. Kinsella’s 1982 *Shoeless Joe*, also set in Iowa), *Field of Dreams*, directed by Phil Alden Robinson and starring Kevin Costner, James Earl Jones, Burt Lancaster, and Ray Liotta, gave the state a memorable bumper-sticker slogan: “Is this heaven? No, it’s Iowa.” In the movie, a farmer facing foreclosure is supernaturally compelled to build a baseball diamond which, after the ghosts of the Chicago “Black Sox” begin mysteriously appearing out of the surrounding cornfields to play on the diamond, becomes a major tourist attraction and saves the farm. The ballfield movie location, built in the summer of 1988 on land straddling Don and Becky Lansing’s and Al and Rita Ameskamp’s farms outside of Dyersville, Iowa, in turn became a real-life tourist

attraction—free to visitors, but supported by the separate sale of memorabilia by both sets of landowners—when the owners decided not to plow it under for farming after filming was completed. Today, the Ameskamps and Lansings each run their own souvenir, concessions, and rental stands on the site, but they disagree on the tone of the tourist attraction. The Lansings, who own a part of right field, say they want the field to be “simple and serene . . . just like it was depicted in the movie” (Py-Lieberman 92). The Ameskamps, who own most of the field, hired former farmer Keith Rahe to manage their portion of the attraction. To that end, Rahe is general manager for a semi-pro barnstorming team called The Ghost Players, who put on baseball demonstrations at the field once a month in the summer (but are legally bound not to cross the property line between the two owners’ portions of the field, and so must send bystanders to retrieve foul balls down the right-field line) (Py-Lieberman 92).

Riley, Baker, and Van Doren have used the *Field of Dreams* site’s “Visitors Book” to gather data on tourism at the *Field of Dreams* ballfield (925). They write of the location’s visitation numbers, “With zero visitors before the release of the movie to sequential increases of 8,000, 26,000, and 65,000, the field has become a popular location in Iowa” (927). *Smithsonian* magazine reported in 2004 that the location was still attracting 60,000 visitors per year (Py-Lieberman 92).

Wendel Jarvis, manager of the Iowa Film Office, worked together with the Winterset Chamber of Commerce to land the production of *The Bridges of Madison County*. Film commissions work as liasons between states and municipalities and production companies, advising locals on how to make their site attractive, and then helping them sell themselves to the producers. The increased activity of film

commissions is a relatively recent phenomenon, according to *The Economist*: “. . . in 1976, there were fewer than ten government film offices in the world; now there are nearly 300 (including Papua New Guinea and the Artic Circle).” Hollywood listens to these film offices because money can be saved by choosing locations wisely (“Lures and Enticements”). For example, according to the same *Economist* article, the weak Canadian dollar, an 11% tax break, and additional Provincial tax breaks of up to 35% mean that shooting a movie in Canada can nearly halve production costs. To compete, American locations offer similar incentives, for example fee-free filming on any government-owned property in Massachusetts, or non-union labor in Wilmington, North Carolina.

Riley, Baker, and Van Doren describe the initial foray into their study of movies and tourism, a 1992 Riley and Van Doren piece, as “justification for film commissions who actively promote the [tourist] use of locations in their vicinity.” They note that before their 1992 study, “film commissions had justified their existence by documenting money spent by companies while filming on location” (Riley, Baker, and Van Doren 922). That justification alone, however, is not insignificant. In 1998, an article titled “Lures and Enticements” in *The Economist* described how the Illinois Film Office snatched the production of the film adaptation of Jane Smiley’s novel *A Thousand Acres*, written and set in Iowa, away from the Iowa Film Office. Illinois-based seed corn giant DeKalb Genetics had sent the film’s producers twenty-two pages of data on the virtues of Illinois corn for the setting of a farm “with a sea of corn as far as the eye can see” (as described in Smiley’s novel) and had suggested how their hybrids could be used to simulate an entire growing season in six weeks. The film ended up being shot outside Chicago, and contributed to the more than \$100 million spent by the film and television

industry in Illinois in 1997. The same *Economist* article also cites an Arthur Andersen study of a single film that generated \$21 million in local economic impact—the equivalent of 183 full-time jobs—and nearly \$800,000 in state and local taxes, all on a filming budget of only \$14 million (“Lures and Enticements”). (By comparison, the film adaptation of *The Bridges of Madison County* was budgeted at \$9 million “below the line,” or excluding talent fees; Streep’s salary alone has been reported at four million dollars) (Jerome).

Dowling reports that Jarvis and Sherry Ellis flew to Los Angeles from Iowa in January of 1994 to meet with representatives of Steven Spielberg’s Amblin Entertainment, which was scouting locations to film the movie that summer. In addition, Jarvis and Ellis

solicited letters from a variety of local leaders promising cooperation.

They gave Polaroid cameras to all the sheriff’s deputies, with instructions to photograph any potential film location; eventually they sent the producers more than 2,000 pictures. *The Madisonian* ran a contest: “Do You Think Your Farm Should Be THE Farm?” More than 4,000 local citizens signed a petition pledging support. “We just kept sending them stuff,” says Reed, “so they’d know we’d be helpful and cooperative.

Meanwhile, the producers were scouting bridges in 20 states and Canada. Ironically, the bridges of Madison County were part of the problem; they were longer and darker, and therefore harder to shoot in, than covered bridges elsewhere. “It was not an easy sell,” says Jarvis. But eventually—after two years of courting—the producers chose Winterset.

Said the headline on the Madisonian: "IT'S SHOWTIME!" (Daily 117)

Filming in Winterset

In the spring of 1994, work on the movie began that would affect the local economy. The first arrivals from Hollywood to work on *Bridges* in the spring of 1994 were location manager Kenny Haber and production designer Jeannine Oppewall. Their first task was to look for a location for the central set in the movie: Francesca Johnson's farmhouse. They spent three days looking for a deserted farmhouse with a dirt road leading to it. In a helicopter flying "a grid over Madison County," they found "The Place," Oppewall told Dowling. "Kenny and I looked at each other and said 'That's it.' It had the correct relationship to the road, it was large enough to shoot in and clearly not occupied." The owner was located in Detroit, and a deal was made to renovate the house for filming (113).

Riley, Baker, and Van Doren note that "in Madison County, Iowa, there were few commercial accommodations and little infrastructure" (931). So, at first, the movie crew's spending affected West Des Moines as much as, or more than, Winterset, which contained only a few hotel rooms. West Des Moines, a major stopping point for travelers arriving at the intersection of east-west Interstate 80 and north-south Interstate 35, already had hotels and restaurants. Dowling reports that advance crew members were flown in from Hollywood: "a construction coordinator, four motion picture carpenters, four scenic artists with helpers, two art directors who did drawings, [and] a set decorator with four or five people" (114). There were also "10 or 15 extra hands from Des Moines as needed." Beginning with these people, the production began to yield income for the local economy in the form of apartment rentals (Dowling reports that crew members such

as Oppewall and photographer Ken Regan rented apartments, and that Eastwood rented an entire house—according to the *Des Moines Register*, on the Glen Oaks Country Club golf course), hotel rooms (production offices for the film were located at the West Valley Inn in West Des Moines), food and entertainment (a kickoff party was held at Wellman’s pub in Des Moines), transportation between Winterset and Des Moines, etc.

This advance team began work on the Madison County farmhouse, tearing off and rebuilding porches, replacing footings, laying new shingles (on top of the old to preserve the shape of the slightly sagging roof), replacing windows and doors, redoing the floors, repairing the pump to the well, running real telephone and electricity lines underground, and erecting period-proper telephone poles and wires as props. A trailer truck of antique furniture was imported from Warner Brothers (the movie’s distributor) which according to Dowling, “has one of the best prop collections of antique furniture in the country.” Other pieces were bought locally from “junk shops and antique malls,” and the Chamber of Commerce provided a database of local antique automobiles. Agriculture experts from Iowa State University in Ames³² assisted with appropriate garden foliage (Dowling 114). The Des Moines Mattress Company was hired to build a mattress for the love scenes in Francesca’s bedroom. After the initial 72-inch model was found to be too short for Eastwood’s six-foot, four-inch frame, it was rebuilt extra-long (Jerome).

As the production of the film geared up in the summer of 1994, it created excitement in Iowa. NPR’s Morning Edition reported in October 1994 that “thousands of Iowans stood in line this summer, hoping to land a bit part in the film. Several hundred

³² Inaccurately described by Dowling as “the University of Iowa, Ames” (114); the University of Iowa is in Iowa City.

others lined up to audition their old green pickup trucks on the off chance that Warner [Brothers] would choose their truck to be in the film.” In the end, an existing movie property, the same 1960s GMC pickup truck used in the 1993 Eastwood/Kevin Costner film *A Perfect World*, was used, but when Bob Daily visited Winterset for his February 1995 *Chicago Magazine* feature, Winterset *Madisonian* editor and publisher Ted Gorman told him that “the whole town has been in on [filming]. Either someone has a brother that’s a guard, or their husband is an extra” (119). Some locals did win roles as extras.³³ Local police provided security, and the fire department created fake rain. In perhaps the most localized example possible of production-related economic gain, it was reported that a man named Chisum Orr was paid ten dollars an hour to guard weeds near the set because “kids were messing with them” (Daily 119).

Most accounts describe the relationship between the town and the production during filming as amicable. “No traffic. No hassle. The people are very generous and very helpful,” Oppewall told Dowling (114). Daily also reported that “most locals are fond of the movie people,” and he quoted civic leader Reed as saying that Eastwood and company were “very accomodating of our needs, very thoughtful” (119).

However, a few townspeople told reporters that they objected on moral grounds to the filming of a movie about adultery. For example, Daily reports a different version than does Dowling of the discovery of the house that would become Francesca’s in the film: when the unoccupied house that would appear in the movie was found, the location scouts had already been rebuffed by Lola and Aaron Howell, the occupants of the house

³³ Most notably in a highly unflattering scene set in the Northside Café in which narrow-minded townspeople look askance at the free-spirited Robert and torment a local woman

that was their first choice. “I told them no sir, we wouldn’t have no hanky-panky going on in our house . . . there’s never been anything that would desecrate the family farm . . . and there never will be. . . . We have children and grandchildren that sleep up in that room they want to use [as Francesca’s bedroom]. We couldn’t have anything to do with adultery in that room,” Aaron Howell remembered. Lola Howell was also concerned that the movie would damage the reputation of real-life Iowans: “The story is not typical of the Iowa farm wife. We’re not like that. People are not like that around here,” she said. Mrs. Howell was even unimpressed with the sex appeal of the star: “Women are oohing and aahing—‘Oooh, I saw Clint!’ Well, he’s nothing special. He don’t look much different than any other man around Winterset” (118). This comparison suggests not only the Howells’ moral qualms about the story, but a defensive rural reaction against the distance and aura of the big-city star system and entertainment media discussed in Chapter Two. Still, in October 1994, the Howells’ stand against participation in the movie earned them spots on *Entertainment Tonight* and NPR’s *Morning Edition*. In the latter broadcast, they were joined in their views by local man Bud View (“Wishes They’d Film the Movie Somewhere Else,” according to the program transcript), who told a national audience that he had “skimmed [the novel] enough to understand what the story’s about.” His judgment: “I view it as adultery, and I think it’s that which is a distraction to family values. I view the relationship between a man and a woman as something that’s sacred.”

accused of infidelity. The extras give the impression of a motley collection of hicks—

Fixing the book

More troublesome to the movie's producers than the free publicity generated by local cranks was the uncertainty surrounding the movie's direction, scriptwriting, and casting leading up to filming. Eastwood recounts that "nobody seemed to be able to make up their minds on who should be in the picture and what line the script should take" (Dowling 115). In 1994, Spielberg and producer Kathleen Kennedy, unhappy with initial drafts of the adaptation, hired Richard LaGravenese to rewrite the script. In the scriptwriter's words, "Steven said the project was stalled, that the scripts they had were too faithful to the book and the book wasn't a movie" (Dowling 115). LaGravenese, who had written the surreal and critically acclaimed Robin Williams vehicle, *The Fisher King*, described his first rewrite of *Bridges* as "very out there . . . I went into fantasy and comedy. I played with time" (Dowling 115). Eastwood, who at the time had signed on to star as Kincaid (ending widespread speculation that Robert Redford would play the role) but not to direct the film, asked for a rewrite of the "out there" script: "He wanted me to put back some of the specific lines from the book that were memorable, that people would look for," LaGravenese explained (Dowling 115). However, upon completion of LaGravenese's second rewrite, Bruce Beresford was hired to direct. Beresford promptly fired LaGravenese, but was himself fired by Warner Brothers because of his insistence that a non-American actress play Francesca (Weinraub). At this point it was already the summer of 1994; the setting of the book and therefore the schedule of the movie called for it to be shot in August. Eastwood remembers, "I finally told Warner's, 'You're just not going to get this movie done this year if we don't do it now. . . . We're going to have

they are elderly, overweight, skinny, or anachronistically bearded.

to charge out of the box and come rolling down the hill real fast” (Dowling 115). An expert at shooting movies quickly and efficiently, Eastwood bailed out the production by agreeing to direct; in the process, he also became a co-producer, and the movie became a joint production of Spielberg’s Amblin Entertainment and Eastwood’s Malpaso Productions, distributed, like most Eastwood movies, by Warner Brothers. Eastwood immediately rehired LaGravenese and convinced Meryl Streep to play Francesca (Dowling 115).

The choice of Streep to play Francesca was the culmination of a word-of-mouth controversy over the right actress to suit readers’ imaginary picture of the protagonist. Dowling reports that “readers had been casting the roles of Robert Kincaid and Francesca Johnson in their heads all along,” that “actresses had been fighting over the role for almost a year,” and that Isabella Rossellini, Cher, Angelica Houston, Catherine Deneuve, Jacqueline Bisset, Susan Sarandon, and Jessica Lange were possible choices (115). She also implies that Sophia Loren and Claudia Cardinale contacted Kennedy directly to ask for the role (116-117).

Questions of casting and location served as promotion for the movie on television. On *CBS This Morning*, July 23, 1993, anchors Harry Smith and Paula Zahn bantered with meteorologist Mark McEwen about plans for the film, including casting. At the time, Eastwood was not involved, and industry talk was that Sydney Pollack would eventually direct and Robert Redford would play the lead. Zahn says she “hear[s] Glenn Close’s name out there,” along with those of Geena Davis and Jessica Lange to the list of possibilities. McEwen adds Madonna’s name to the list and says that “Cher was one of the people that I heard.” Smith names Angelica Houston, then asks, “You know who

else? You want to hear the latest name that I heard just yesterday? Mary McDonnell.” McEwen playfully ends the discussion by naming Rosanne Barr. After the discussion of casting, Smith sums up: “The hottest, biggest, craziest thing is who’s going to be in this movie, and there is tremendous pressure because so many people have read the book and the expectations are this movie . . .” Zahn interrupts: “. . . better be great!” Finally, Smith adds, “Here’s the other controversy: do you shoot it in Iowa or not? Can you go to that bridge, which I think is in the National Historic Registry? . . . or do you reconstruct the bridge in California or Idaho or someplace?” McEwen: “Do it in Iowa.” Zahn: “I say go there—go to Iowa.” Smith: “Yeah.” McEwen then paraphrases *Field of Dreams*: “Is this heaven? Naw, it’s just Iowa.”

However, as Jim Jerome reported in a *Ladies’ Home Journal* article about Streep’s participation in the project, Eastwood had claimed Streep was “the first actress he considered in what could have turned into the most frenzied casting call since the hunt for Scarlett O’Hara.” Eastwood, “the consummate player, had to fight Warner Brothers” for his choice. “They were testing all these 30-year-olds, and it just shocked me,” Eastwood said. “I told them, ‘The best actresses in the world are somewhere probably between forty and sixty.’ Besides, he said, “My mom had read the book, and she thought Meryl was a great choice.”

The choice of Streep for Francesca lent the story artistic and literary credibility. As Jerome reported, “her name conferred class and substance to Waller’s work.” Jerome points out that Streep, a Yale School of Drama graduate, “became her generation’s most acclaimed female star by breathing life into complex characters drawn from literary classics by William Styron (*Sophie’s Choice* [for which she had won one of her two

career Academy Awards out of nine career nominations]) John Fowles (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*) and Isak Dinesen (*Out of Africa*)—as well as from powerful scripts like *The Deer Hunter* and *Silkwood*.” It was also, according to Jerome, a chance for Streep to revitalize a career that had in recent years become regarded as “Streep-Lite,” consisting of “marginal comedies” such as *She-Devil* and *Death Becomes Her* and “stunt-driven stories” such as *River Wild*. The slump, Jerome opines, had resulted from Streep’s decision to spend more time raising her family of four children in Connecticut, and less time working in Hollywood. He implies that *Bridges* did help break the slump, writing, “Streep now takes her place alongside today’s younger, top-dollar women in film, among them Julia Roberts and Demi Moore. Her resurgence marks a stunning coup for an actress who wants to stay close to home as her kids pass through their teens.”

However, Streep, according to Dowling, did not consider *Bridges* equal to the “classics” she had previously taken on. The actress “carefully” told Dowling that she “was not carried away by the book as a literary experience. I admit I was blind to its power. But there must be some secret hidden within it. It went straight into people’s emotional center.” She found the script version more palatable. It “read like a play . . . perfect, complete . . . playable, with an emotional arc to it” (Dowling 117). It probably also helped that Eastwood offered \$4 million plus a percentage of the film’s profits for six weeks’ work (Jerome). To prepare, Streep channeled the “distinctive mannerisms” of an Italian war bride who had lived in her childhood New Jersey neighborhood. (Dowling 117). And as with her Oscar-winning role as a Polish immigrant in *Sophie’s Choice*, she would do an accent, a part of her repertoire for which she has become known.

Even before Eastwood's upgraded stake in the film and its casting, he and Spielberg were active in guiding LaGravenese toward their vision of what the adaptation should entail. Eastwood told Dowling, "The book is very simple, and I didn't want to veer too much from that. . . . You got the house, a little bit of Winterset, the bridge, some country roads—and that's it. It's like an old-fashioned movie, just telling a story. . . . No special effects, no matte shots or superimpositions—nothing fancy like that. Just concentrating on storytelling and trying to give as much scope to the simplicity of the picture as you can" (Dowling 116). In "concentrating on storytelling," Eastwood, Spielberg, and LaGravenese made several additions to the screenplay version of the story: they added arguments between Robert and Francesca, changed the frame narrative to emphasize Francesca's grown children more, added a new character, Lucy Delaney, to the story, and added a scene in which Robert and Francesca escape the prying eyes of the town by going to an African-American roadhouse to dance and listen to jazz.

Francesca and Robert argue in the movie; in the book they do not. Dowling reports that Eastwood wanted the movie's script to contain "a slightly less idealistic relationship between the two main characters than in the book" (116). Therefore, according to Weinraub, Eastwood "worked with . . . LaGravenese on creating a scene of real friction between the two primary characters, a scene that was not in the book" because, Eastwood said, "a real relationship can never be all that smooth. . . . It has got to have ups and downs, even if it's only four days." Their arguments are started by Robert's implications that Francesca is naïve, sheltered, or stuck in her bland surroundings. When the couple is first getting to know each other, Robert says, "if you're asking a man if he's tired of talking about himself, you really haven't gotten out much, have you?" Indeed she

hasn't, and she takes umbrage to the remark. Later, Robert, sensing Francesca's dissatisfaction with her married life, asks if she wants to leave her husband, to which she also objects. In both these cases, kind words and apologies from Robert defuse the situation. However, at breakfast on the day Robert is to leave, Francesca starts an argument about his "women friends all over the world," asking about her role in the "routine" and "procedures" of keeping in touch after an affair such as theirs. While he is in "some housewife's kitchen in in Romania or somewhere," she will have to "sit here for the rest of [her] life," wondering "whether anything really happened at all." Finally, she asks, "More eggs, or shall we just fuck on the linoleum one more time?" This prompts Robert to admit that the affair has been a newly powerful experience for him as well, and, unlike in the book, she actually packs to leave with him before changing her mind at the last minute.

Another major change involves the addition of a frame narrative about Francesca's adult children. This frame replaces the book's frame narrator; according to Weinraub, this replacement was as a result of Spielberg's urgings to LaGravenese. At the beginning of the movie's narrative frame, it is the present day, and Francesca has died. An estate lawyer presents Carolyn and Michael with their mother's safe deposit box, which contains a love letter from Robert and a key to Francesca's locked cedar chest. The chest contains a letter to Michael and Carolyn, which points them to a series of journals describing the affair. The story of Francesca and Robert's 1965 affair is then told in flashback, with Carolyn and Michael reading the journals aloud to one another. Their reading fades to voice-over narration in Streep's voice as the scene flashes back to 1965. This happens five times in the movie; each time, the siblings comment on their feelings

about the 1965 story so far. In discussing the journals, they reveal to one another that each is trapped in an unhappy marriage. It is implied that their mother's disclosures help them understand true love, and so provide insight into their own marital problems, which they resolve by the end of the film.

For example, Carolyn has told Michael during their reading of the journals that her husband has been unfaithful. She describes to Michael what it is that "gets" her about her situation: "I'm in my forties. I'm in this crummy friggin' marriage for over twenty years because that's what I was taught. You stick things out. Normal people don't get divorced." She has also realized that her sex life is unsatisfactory: "I can't remember the last time my husband made love to me so intensely he transported me to Africa [as Francesca had reported about Robert in her letter] for Chrissakes. Quite frankly, I don't think he ever did." Her summation of the situation jokes about her Iowa upbringing: "All these years, I resented not living the wild life in somewhere like Paris, and all this time, I could have moved back to Iowa." However, her mother's story inspires her to confront the situation. Wearing the dress her mother wore on the night she first made love with Robert (a fact also brought to her attention by her mother's letter), Carolyn calls her husband immediately after finishing the journals. She tells him that they have to talk, and that she is staying in Iowa for a time. Composed, she answers his unheard voice, "No, Steve, I'm not angry. I'm not angry at all." The story and artifacts of true love, in which she is now literally clothed, have transformed her feelings, allowing her to take action to better her life.

Michael also has complaints about his marriage. His irritation with his wife, Betty, is obvious as they are talking with the lawyer at the beginning of the movie. Betty

is played as shrill and insecure, and she is an irritant to Michael; when Carolyn discovers the photos Robert took of Francesca, Betty announces, “she isn’t wearing a bra,” and Michael looks at her angrily. She also asks the lawyer, out of earshot of Michael and Carolyn, whether Francesca had left anything specifically for her in the will. Once when Betty interrupts, Michael halfway raises his hand in a gesture that implies he is fighting the urge to hit her. Later, Michael tells his sister that he’s wanted to cheat on his wife “about a thousand times,” but hasn’t, at least “not since we were married.” Initially, Michael is angered by the tale of his mother’s infidelity. Struggling to accept what he has learned about his mother, he asks his sister rhetorically, “What do I do now? ‘What’s good enough for Mom is good enough for me?’” But by the time they finish reading the journals, he is smiling and sharing with Carolyn Francesca’s brandy, kept as a totem of the brandy she drank with Robert. From his mother’s story, Michael takes the lesson that he should be more loving to Betty and resolves his anger. He returns to his hotel room where his wife has been watching their small children. When he arrives, he asks her, “Do I make you happy, Betty? Because I want to, more than anything,” and kisses her passionately.

LaGravenese also added to the script an entirely new character who appears in both the 1965 story and in the frame narrative: Lucy Redfield, a woman in town who is shunned by locals for having had an affair. First, her name is mentioned in the opening scene by the lawyer as he opens Francesca’s safety-deposit box. The lawyer tells Michael and Carolyn that their mother has requested forgoing burial next to her husband in the family plot. Instead, she has asked to be cremated and scattered at Roseman Bridge. Everyone who hears of this request finds cremation distasteful, especially Michael, who

flatly refuses to comply because no one he knows has ever been cremated; he wonders aloud whether cremation is “even Christian.” (Their distaste for cremation is apparently intended a sign of provincialism: the novel explains that “Cremation was an uncommon practice in Madison County—viewed as slightly radical in some undefined way—and her wish generated considerable discussion at the café, the Texaco station, and the implement dealership” (148).) In the movie, the lawyer notes that the request was “notarized and witnessed by Mrs. Lucy Delaney.” Michael and Carolyn believe they remember who Lucy Delaney is, but are unaware of their mother’s friendship with her, and the matter is dropped. In a later frame episode, Carolyn is reading the journals on her own late at night on the porch. Michael arrives, drunk from visiting a bar in town, and announces that he has found out who Lucy Delaney is. She is known to them as Lucy Redfield, Mrs. Delaney the second, married to Mr. Delaney after the death of his first wife.

In a 1965 scene, Kincaid stops in the Northside Café for a Coke. Lucy enters, and, because it is known that she is an adultress, she is treated cruelly by the townspeople, played by actual Winterset residents. Kincaid, however, offers her a seat next to him at the counter. Having been refused service, she leaves. As Kincaid leaves a few seconds later, he sees her sitting in her car, crying. In a later 1965 scene, Francesca is shown bringing a pie to Lucy, who emerges from her house fearful and scowling, but, satisfied that Francesca means no harm, lets her in.

At this point, a present-day Michael and Carolyn scene begins: as Michael is coming to terms with his mother’s indiscretions, he asks Carolyn whether he can take over the reading-out-loud of the journals. It is Michael’s voice-over, over a long shot of Michael and Carolyn walking in a creek bed, that approvingly reads Francesca’s words

describing her friendship with Lucy. She writes that the two “became inseparable. . . . The town loved talking about the two of us, but we didn’t care and neither did your father.” Francesca’s new understanding of Lucy’s situation seems to have been brought on by her similar actions, but she writes of the time, “The funny thing is, I didn’t tell [Lucy] about Robert until years later,” and that being with Lucy made her feel “safe to think about it, to continue loving him.”

At the end of the movie, through her journals and letter to her children, Francesca has succeeded in securing that her request for cremation be carried out. In the movie’s final scene, they scatter their mother’s ashes at dawn at Roseman Bridge. Also attending is an elderly Lucy Redfield-Delaney. As Michael scatters the ashes in slow motion, Francesca says in voice-over, “I love you both with all my heart. Do what you have to to be happy in this life. There is so much beauty.” The Michael and Carolyn frame gives readers an aspect of the power of storytelling to identify with in the movie. The extraordinary love between Robert and Francesca allows them to understand their own, more mundane, marital problems; it also connects the story to the present day by showing that times have changed. They do not need to hide their problems as Francesca and Lucy did because of the town’s morally restrictive codes. Lucy’s presence at the scattering of Francesca’s ashes implies that the social fabric of the town is being made whole again as well. A new generation has broken with the past, rejecting the cruelty and morally circumscribed gender and sexual roles symbolized in the town’s shunning of Lucy. The moral situation of Lucy’s affair itself is not discussed.

The frame is very loosely based on the final chapter (save for the “Postscript”) of the novel, “A Letter from Francesca.” In this chapter, the writer-narrator describes

Michael and Carolyn finding the letter that points them to Francesca's journals, and the letter is presented as a separate text (the only time in the novel that Waller writes in Francesca's voice). The children have already scattered her ashes at Roseman Bridge, puzzled by the request but without serious objection. The letter itself is much more detailed in the book than in the movie, although some of the things Francesca writes of in the letter are used as scenes in the main 1965 narrative of the movie, for example Francesca's husband's deathbed acknowledgement to his wife that he was not the type to be able to fully satisfy her.

Francesca's story

The film's differences from the book engendered further discussion from reviewers and critics about Waller's and the story's perceived gender ideology. In her *New York Times* review of the movie, Caryn James sees a diminishing of the masculine point of view as compared to the book, writing that "[Eastwood and LaGravenese have] the sense to realize that this is Francesca's story more than Robert's." While Waller is "absolutely, one suspects narcissistically, in love with his own hero," according to James, Eastwood "generously hands the picture to Meryl Streep as Francesca. She, after all, is the character who has to choose between her lover and her family" ("Joy of Renouncing").

Walter Metz's 1997 article in *Velvet Light Trap* goes further, asserting that the film version of *Bridges* "is a progressive reworking of a rather conservative novel in terms of its gender politics" (67) which "transforms the novel's conservative defense of bourgeois morality into a politically contestatory work of art" (79). According to Metz, the additions to the script discussed above and the blocking, camera work, etc., achieve a

“critique of Francesca’s position within patriarchy” (67). For example, Metz notes that in the novel Francesca is said to have withdrawn from the community after her affair (Waller, *Bridges* 133), but in the film Francesca and Lucy Delaney become inseparable and Francesca does not care what people—including her husband—think of the friendship. Thus Francesca’s relationship with Lucy becomes “a transgressive bond” that “provides a base of resistance against the strictures of patriarchal morality that go virtually unchecked in the novel” (67).

In addition, Metz examines the disappearance in the film of the novel’s “most celebrated passage,” (one that appears on the book’s back jacket), Robert’s inner monologue as he resists falling in love with Francesca:

He could have walked out on this earlier, could still walk. Rationality shrieked at him. “Let it go, Kincaid, get back on the road. Shoot the bridges, go to India. Stop in Bangkok on the way and look up the silk merchant’s daughter who knows every ecstatic secret the old ways can teach. Swim naked with her at dawn in jungle pools and listen to her scream as you turn her inside out at twilight. Let go of this”—the voice was hissing now—“it’s outrunning you.” (Waller, *Bridges* 97)

In this fantasy of “returning to more ‘primitive’ sex with an exotic woman of color, Metz asserts, “Waller unwittingly provides us with a perfect definition of orientalism” (77). However, the film version “uses humor to ridicule the race and gender politics of this moment,” in an added episode in which Robert tells Francesca a story about his experiences shooting photographs in Africa. In the story Robert tells, a female gorilla stumbles upon the photographer and takes him for her mate. Metz writes that “the film’s

replacement of a gorilla for a woman of color in Robert's encounter with a female mate in the Third World exposes the hidden racist, orientalist subtext of Waller's passage: that is, that women of color are more in touch with an 'animalistic' passion" (77). This is the only discussion of race in the movie or book version of *Bridges* to have appeared, but there is one other addition to the screenplay involving race: the scene in which Robert and Francesca go to an African-American roadhouse, The Blue Note Lounge. The place is introduced in an exterior shot while Francesca says in a voice-over, "A musician friend of Robert's told him of a place up the interstate—a place, Robert assured me, no one I knew would see us." Cut to the inside, where a jazz band plays and patrons dance and drink. Robert and Francesca are the only white people in the scene other than Clint Eastwood's son Kyle, who plays bass in the band. The assumption that no one Francesca knows would possibly venture into the place underscores the difference between the open-minded Robert and Francesca and the backward provincialism of the townspeople.

Metz also points out that the novel is "told from Robert's point of view," its narrative strategy "akin to that of a pornographic sexual adventure," whereas the film more often uses Francesca's point of view, including scenes in which she surreptitiously watches Robert, allowing her to "successfully appropriate the gaze without recrimination" (68-69). For Metz, the novel "refuses to alter its monolithic representation as Robert as an ideal male," and his authority "dominates not only the narration but the narrative as well." For example, a difference that emerges from the screenplay's replacement of the frame narrator is the omission of Francesca's description of Robert's "power," especially as manifested in his lovemaking. Metz decries this authority as an obsessive concern with "establishing Robert's discursive control." For example, he points

out that “most of the section of the novel detailing the last day of Robert and Francesca’s affair is devoted to Robert’s analysis of the meaning of the events” (71). Even as Robert surmises during this analysis that “male hormones are the ultimate cause of trouble on this planet” (Waller, *Bridges* 101), Metz notices that Francesca’s only contribution to the five-page conversation is “Thank you” (Waller, *Bridges* 99).

According to Metz, the film also empowers Francesca and “feminize[s] Robert according to [its] social description of the domestic space,” as in the positioning of the kitchen chairs in which Robert and Francesca sit (Robert sits where Francesca has sat earlier in the film, next to the stove where she can easily serve food to her family) and in shots of Robert lying “immobile, on his side, with a forlorn look on his face,” before Francesca enters and pats him on the head. (69-71). Such visual and narrative cues demonstrate that “the film is about Francesca’s choices” (70).

Still, Metz allows that to make his points he must use the novel as an “ideological whipping boy” (79). Recounting the media reports of Iowans’ criticisms of the book as a glorification of adultery, he suggests that “we have to keep in mind that from a position more in keeping with traditional mainstream values, the book appears downright scandalous. . . . Despite whatever ideological critiques are appropriately leveled against the novel,” its transgressions “may prove just as affective as its reinforcements of the ideological status quo” (80). Since these values are reported as held by Iowans, this suggests that the book’s reception is especially ideologically important in its home state because of its putatively restrictive, patriarchal social standards, which is in keeping with a reading of the film’s ending that shows the town of Winterset being made whole as it

comes to terms with more modern values about sexuality, ambiguous as those values might be regarding extramarital affairs. This will be returned to at the end of the chapter.

In an op-ed piece appearing in the *Montreal Gazette* (where Monique Polak's feminist rejoinders to Waller's novel had also appeared), Thomas K. Lindsay, an adjunct scholar at the conservative Heritage Foundation and a Political Philosophy professor at the University of Northern Iowa, defends the movie's moral message against attacks from both liberal and conservative critics who, he writes, "cringe at the natural fact that to be human—male as well as female—means to have needs that can never be satisfied." In doing so, Lindsay refers to a *Chicago Tribune* op-ed piece by Douglas Kmiec which argues that the film's story "defends 'selfishness' as 'entitlement,' presenting 'unwarranted sexual gratification as essential freedom'" (qtd. in Lindsay) and to Frank Rich's description of the novel as "the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of the gender wars." Lindsay's reaction to such criticism is that "*Bridges*'s conservative critics neglect the fact that the film's climax is not the affair. It is Francesca's choice to end it. This is where things get ironic, because Francesca's reason for ending the romance—her commitment to husband and family—is the reason some feminists have been burning *Bridges*." This plot resolution, he asserts, is "pure poison to a generation of feminists raised on Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*." For Lindsay, the movie makes clear the moral function of essential differences between men and women: "Man, by untamed nature, may drop his seed where he will, without thought for the (nine-months-down-the-road) consequences." Women, on the other hand, are taught by pregnancy that "sexual choices carry unavoidable consequences, that pleasures bear duties. This lesson in self-restraint women then teach men." Therefore, Francesca's self-restraint in the choice to remain with her

family is “ennobling” in its “courage,” “dignity,” and the lesson that “the tragedies that follow from eros, love and marriage are inevitable.” In short, he sees *Bridges* as “a defence of human responsibility.” Before beginning this explication, Lindsay makes clear that he is writing only of the film. He refrains from commenting on the book, which he finds “both less subtle and more syrupy than the movie.” One must note, though, that all the plot points he discusses originate with the book.

Eastwood forgiven

The perception of a shift toward the feminine and an increased ideological complexity in the movie version as compared to the book is at first surprising when examined alongside the conservative, masculine image of Clint Eastwood as *auteur* and celebrity. For example, Eastwood’s 1971 directorial debut, *Play Misty for Me*, is a proto-*Fatal Attraction* thriller in which a womanizing DJ is stalked by a murderous female admirer and one-night-stand lover. Before that, Eastwood’s breakthrough roles were the macho “Man with No Name” characters of the Sergio Leone “spaghetti westerns” in 1964-1966, and similar roles in American westerns such as *High Plains Drifter* and *Pale Rider*. In these westerns, a tough outsider rides into a town and cleans up its corruption, but without altruistic motives and sometimes while abusing the townsfolk for being too weak to stand up for themselves.

Eastwood built upon that image in the four Don Siegel-directed “Dirty Harry” movies from 1971-1988, in which his vigilante detective character administers street justice to San Francisco hoodlums, famously intoning through clenched teeth, “feel lucky, punk?” and “Go ahead, make my day” before executing them with his .357 Magnum. The title role in the first Dirty Harry movie (the rights to which had been acquired by Warner

Brothers) was originally offered to several other actors: John Wayne, who refused it because of its violence and frequent swearing; Frank Sinatra, who was eager but injured his hand before filming was to begin; and Paul Newman and Steve McQueen, both of whom found the screenplay to be at odds with their liberal politics. Newman suggested to Warner Brothers that Eastwood would be a better match; Eastwood accepted with the condition that the movie be produced jointly by Warner Brothers and his Malpaso company, the first of many such collaborations (O'Brien 107-108).

Eastwood's reputation as a "macho" star who displayed a lack of sensitivity toward women in his movies, was heightened by accusations from his open-relationship partner Sondra Locke during her highly public palimony suit against him, which lasted from 1988 to 1991 and involved allegations of coercion and even violence (O'Brien 170-171). As described by John C. Tibbets, Eastwood came under fire during the entire 1980s from critics including Paulene Kael for his films' glorification of violence and overwhelmingly masculine points of view. Daniel O'Brien also provides an overview of such criticism, including the "accusations of rampant mysogyny" resulting from *The Beguiled* (104) and descriptions of *Dirty Harry* and its sequels as "irresponsible, ultra-right wing propaganda" (112).

Eastwood's conservative image began to change in 1992 when he produced, directed, and starred in *Unforgiven*, a "revisionist western," from a script originally written in the mid 1970s by David Webb Peoples (O'Brien 177). *Unforgiven* earned critical accolades, box office success, nine Academy Award nominations including victories for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Editing, Best Supporting Actor (Gene Hackman, supporting Eastwood's lead), and the perception, according to Richard

Grenier, that Eastwood intended the movie as “a full-scale, systematic act of contrition, a repudiation and dismantling of the whole legendary, masculine type of which, for this generation, Eastwood himself had become the leading icon.” Again set in a wild west town as an analogy for a faltering, corrupt America, *Unforgiven* builds much of its plot around the question of whether the law can provide appropriate justice for a prostitute who has had her face cut by a cowboy as retribution for her giggling at his diminutive penis. Carl Plantinga writes that “gender relationships are . . . an implicit concern throughout *Unforgiven*” in the way “women’s roles are explored from diverse perspectives” such as “the nineteenth century Redeeming Feminine,” “prostitute and property,” “threats to the male ego,” victims of patriarchal capitalism,” and “utopian subgroup valorized for its communal practices.” Though Plantinga finds that the movie “dismisses the possibility of real change” for women in American society, he explains that the movie exposes its violence as the result of male backlash against perceived “threats to male potency and power” (68).

Eastwood produced/directed/acted in two 1993 films, *In the Line of Fire* and *A Perfect World*, after the regenerative *Unforgiven* and before *The Bridges of Madison County*: Grenier asserts that these films continued the liberalization of Eastwood’s image and message. *In the Line of Fire*, he writes, has a “feminist twist” in which the life of Eastwood’s aging Secret Service agent is saved by a female officer played by Renee Russo. Similarly, Grenier describes Eastwood’s Texas Ranger character in *A Perfect World* as having “a learner’s permit in political correctness.” The character is “a male chauvinist pig” in the beginning of the film, but “the audience is supposed to identify with Eastwood and, as he grows and changes, to grow and change along with him.”

Given the critical discussion of gender already surrounding the novel *The Bridges of Madison County*, Eastwood's control of the movie project—and his steering of it toward a feminine point of view—can be seen as a successful attempt to cement his new, more politically well-rounded worldview. In 1995, with *Bridges* as Eastwood's most recent film, he was awarded an honorary Academy Award, the Irving Thalberg Award for Outstanding Achievement in Film. In 1996, he was honored by the Film Society of Lincoln Center with a gala tribute to his lifetime accomplishments. In response to the honors, the May-June issue of *Film Comment* magazine featured reflective articles about Eastwood's work. *Time* magazine film reviewer Richard Schickel wrote in that issue that “Clint's recent movies are much more acceptable to the mainstream than the rest of his filmography” (14). In the same issue, Kathleen Murphy wrote of Eastwood's onscreen persona, “The intensely focused, yet mercilessly impersonal, attention with which he has always seared his enemies becomes, in *Bridges*, generous, erotic, apprehension of Otherness” (22).

Heartland entrepreneurship

Eastwood, then, certainly benefited from his brief stay in Iowa, and Winterset, Iowa, certainly gained from his visit and the movie he produced. After the movie was filmed and released, the tourist industry that had begun to spring up in Winterset expanded. This expansion included the opening of two gift shops on the town square—Madison County Mercantile on the south side and Hood General Store on the north side—and two more gift shops near Roseman Bridge—the Roseman Woods Country Store and Craft Gallery on the south side of the bridge and the Roseman Covered Bridge Shop to the north. Several town residents also converted portions of their properties into

bed and breakfasts for tourists. These included the Eagle's Nest Luxury Suite on the Square (with a whirlpool tub and a super king-size bed) and A Step Away, which also featured a gallery of "unique leather sculptural jewelry." A local resident started Madison County Farm and County Tours, ferrying tourists to the bridges, movie locations, and farms. Local resident Pat Nelson started "Married in Madison County," a service providing wedding and anniversary ceremonies at the covered bridges, including covered bridge invitations, announcements, and thank-you notes. In addition, Daily reported that in 1995, a local photographer named Ray Susong was operating a business called Kincaid Photography, "[strolling] the square dressed in orange suspenders, just as Kincaid does in the *The Book*" (102).

Another Winterset-area entrepreneur who found opportunity in the wake of *Bridges* tourism is Wyman Wilson, the closest resident to Roseman Bridge. Wilson grew up in Winterset and has occupied the house adjacent to the bridge since 1971. In previous careers, according to his website, Wilson worked with the University of Iowa, Lockheed Electronics, and NASA as an engineer, then in the insurance, real estate and mortgage industries. However, when tourists began arriving at the bridge—practically in his front yard—by the thousands, Wyman constructed a ten-by-eighteen-foot shack and stocked it with gifts (Daily 99). He also began selling gifts on his website, www.rosemanbridge.com, which is linked to the Madison County Chamber of Commerce website. Many of the gifts are of the same make as gifts found in the other Winterset gift shops. They include a wide array of collectibles and keepsakes typically found at souvenir stands: patches, shot glasses, spoons, posters, photographs, postcards, stationary, baseball caps, t-shirts, pins, jewelry, charms, magnets, keychains, jigsaw

puzzles, playing cards, coasters, thimbles, bells, “suncatchers,” can cozies, votive holders, Christmas ornaments, etc. Trading on the rural location, Wilson and other gift purveyors also offer quilt patterns, cross stitch kits, ceramic crocks, and other “country” decorative and craft items.

Of course, Waller’s books are also available for sale in such shops, and browsing the book section of Wilson’s offerings reveals the depth of the tie-in industry attached to *Bridges* in Winterset. There are official Warner Books movie tie-ins, such as official *Bridges* movie production photographer Ken Regan’s coffee-table photo-essay book and *The Bridges of Madison County Memory Book*, a journal with quotes from Yeats and photos taken by Eastwood as he was playing Robert Kincaid. (Regan kept Eastwood’s prop cameras loaded with film.) There are also two separate Madison County recipe books available: *The Recipes of Madison County*, featuring “the actual recipes of the 1960s-style dishes seen in *The Bridges of Madison County* film, prepared by food caterer Jane Hemminger” and the *Madison County Cookbook*, produced as a fundraiser by the members of St. Joseph’s Catholic Church in Winterset (*Roseman Covered Bridge Shop*).

The cookbook produced by St. Joseph’s Church includes “homespun recipes, family traditions, and recollections” written by local residents, including reminiscences of church picnics and of how clothing donations were used during World War II. Indicating that the book was compiled in part as an opportunity presented by *Bridges*, Georgia Ann Waller contributes a recipe for Sour Cream Raisin Pie. The book jacket calls Madison County “more than its bridges, John Wayne’s birthplace, and the site of Robert Waller’s hugely popular novel and the movie starring Clint Eastwood and Meryl Streep.” In addition, it is called “a unique place where the simple values of faith, family, and friends

have not been forgotten,” “the ‘heart’ of the heartland,” and “a small community where good old-fashioned values still prevail.” Local poets, artists, illustrators, and photographers have also compiled images and writing into gift-shop books such as *Bridges In Time*. A portion of the profits from *Bridges In Time* is donated to the Madison County Covered Bridge Preservation Association, according to Wilson’s website. Exploiting a more obscure connection to the place is the book *Bridges: A Memoir of Love*, written by Meryl Streep’s stand-in, Pauline Arthur. In it, Arthur tells “the touching story of her day by day involvement with the film’s production, all the while dealing with her sweetheart’s battle with melanoma cancer,” as described on Wilson’s website.

Finally, Wilson is the exclusive proprietor of two products, “Genuine Pieces of Roseman Covered Bridge” and “Roseman Covered Bridge Sand.” When the bridge was renovated in 1992, Wilson had inherited the leftover pile of wood, and had planned on using it for firewood. When he opened his gift shop, he sawed the weathered lumber into small pieces, attached a “Certificate of Authenticity signed by Uncle Wyman himself,” and began selling them for \$7.50 apiece. The “Roseman Covered Bridge Sand” is just that: approximately two ounces of “actual sand gathered from the banks of the Middle River beneath the Roseman bridge,” in the buyer’s choice of “elegant glass bottle” or plastic container, according to his website. For the 1995 release of the movie, Wilson expanded the shop to twenty-four by thirty-six feet, and according to his website, “two weeks after the release of the *Bridges* movie, Uncle Wyman switched to running the shop full time.” In February of 1995, he told Daily, “Two years ago, I wouldn’t have believed any of this. You build a little 10-by-18-foot shop and the whole world beats a path to your door. This is better than a mousetrap” (99). Wilson told Hornaday that upon starting

his enterprise, “I met with the *Field of Dreams* people in Dyersville, to get an idea of what to expect. . . . I’d like to think I have a better handle on it than they did.”

While entrepreneurs such as Wilson benefitted from their proximity to the setting of the book and movie, actual movie sets also became tourist attractions once Hollywood had left Winterset. For example, the Northside Café, shown exterior and interior in the movie, and the Corner Tap, used for the interior set for the African-American “Blue Note Lounge” in the movie, are listed in official Chamber of Commerce tourist guides. Many reporters noted a dramatic increase of business at the Café, where locals sometimes complained that they had to jockey alongside tourists to get a seat, and at the Tap, where the bartender told Daily he wished “it was back the way it was before all the buses started coming through” (117). Both the Café and the Tap were already in business when the book came out, but sites that were previously shuttered before being used for the movie were also turned into tourist destinations after the departure of the production. For example, the exterior of a closed Conoco gas station was renovated outside by film crews into a 1960s-period Texaco gas station, and then, after the movie, renovated inside by entrepreneurs into a gift shop called “Memory Station.”

The farmhouse used as Francesca’s house in the movie was also turned into a tourist attraction by its owners after the movie. The house actually stands sixteen miles from Winterset in the municipality of Cumming, Iowa, just across the county line in Warren County. Unlike the Texaco station, the house was not used only as a gift shop. Rather, an admission fee was charged for a tour of “the actual movie location where [the] majority of *Bridges of Madison County* was filmed.” A 1996 brochure for the attraction explains that the home was built in 1870 by Nicholas Johnson, “an Argentine sea

captain,” and that the 1,000-acre farm on which it sits was purchased by Joseph Meade in 1910 and is still owned by his family. The main events on the tour of the house are the “once-in-a-lifetime” opportunities to “relive scenes” from the movie. During my own visit to the farmhouse in 2000, guides invited guests to pose for pictures at the kitchen table—and even in the bathtub—where Eastwood and Streep had sat during scenes in the movie. No fee was charged for these pictures, which guides offered to take with tourists’ own cameras. Guides also spent time explaining how movie locations worked; specifically, they pointed out how surprisingly little internal renovation was done to make the set usable; except for the few rooms “still propped” for the movie and thus containing “the aura of Robert and Francesca,” the interior of the house, abandoned for 35 years prior to filming, was very obviously dilapidated.

In his 1991 study for the Iowa Department of Economic Development, published by Iowa State University Press as *Iowa: Perspectives on Today and Tomorrow*, Robert Waller can be said to have presaged the tourist boom in Winterset. In his study, Waller includes a discussion of “entrepreneurship” in a chapter titled “Development.” As the basis of that discussion, he sets out principles for revitalizing Iowa’s economic culture through entrepreneurship. Those principles follow categories originated by Peter Drucker, a “respected old warhorse of management philosophy and practice” who “has been studying entrepreneurs for thirty years, and, in his 1985 book, *Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, has boiled this work down into seven sources of entrepreneurial opportunity,” according to Waller (245-246). To illustrate the point that Iowa should think entrepreneurially about economic development, Waller lists these sources of entrepreneurial activity and how Iowa could capitalize on them.

Several of Waller's suggestions arising from Drucker's categories of entrepreneurial opportunity are relatively unsurprising. For example, the category of "the unexpected" is said by Drucker to be a source of such opportunity, and Waller surmises that it would be unexpected for Iowa entrepreneurs to produce poultry rather than pork or beef in response to Americans' increasingly healthy eating habits. Other unsurprising suggestions include: for the opportunity categorized as a "need for a change in process," teaching new technical skills in rural schools; and for "knowledge-based innovation," university sponsorship of new fields such as laser technology and molecular biology.

However, in the study's discussion of potential Iowa entrepreneurship, Waller also discusses marketing and demographics, including ideas that would shortly play a role in the sales success of *Bridges* and the emergence of *Bridges*-related entrepreneurship in Winterset. For example, Waller writes that Iowans could renew the state's economy by encouraging tourism that trades on Iowa's rural setting. When laying out Drucker's source of entrepreneurial opportunity categorized as "incongruities," Waller points out that "Goat ranches, lettuce fields, catfish farms, and the like [none of which are common in Iowa] usually are not considered as having much to do with tourism. Yet *Country* magazine finds its tours to these places, normally thought of as rather dull vacation stops, booked solid" (246). Waller goes on to imply that Iowa could be made attractive to tourists merely by reframing Iowans' low opinion of themselves and their state; that is, by adopting "a change in perception from the bottle being half-empty to it being half-full" (247). Iowans would not even need to alter their daily routines to become a part of the show, according to Waller: "There is apparently a strong desire by people to see the more-or-less ordinary transactions of life in rural areas," he writes. "In short, *Country*

[magazine] discovered a discrepancy between what really exists and what everybody assumes to be true. Anyone in Iowa contacted *Country* magazine?” (246).

In addition, under “change in industry and market structures plus demographic shifts plus changes in perception,” three Druckerian categories of entrepreneurial opportunity combined “because they so directly relate to the phenomenon of an aging Iowa,” Waller suggests that Iowa has ignored “the economic impact of the older segments of [its] population.” This segment, he writes, has “more disposable income” than “younger folks,” and they travel frequently, “often to exotic destinations.” When they aren’t traveling, “it seems they are moving somewhere else to retire. Retirement,” Waller continues, “is an industry in and of itself. Ask Arkansas. Moreover, it tends to be a stable, quiet, nonpolluting, and low-crime industry.” That Iowa is “not even listed in desirable places to retire, even though Illinois and Wisconsin are,” Waller finds “pitiful” and “a howling testimonial to the uncreative way in which the state has perceived and pursued economic development, lamenting the ‘brain drain’ from Iowa [young people leaving the state to pursue professional careers elsewhere] while ignoring the economic impact of the older segments of our population” (247). In Waller’s attention to the economic power of “older people” a year before the publication of *Bridges*, we can see part of the logic behind the characters’ age in *The Bridges of Madison County*, and perhaps—combined with his ideas about Iowa tourism—even the foresight that publicity for the state provided by a popular text such as *Bridges* could actually have an effect on Iowa’s tourist industry.

Half empty or half full?

Indeed, the story of Madison County's reaction to the book and movie that bear its name is perhaps best understood in the context of Waller's—and Drucker's —thought about Iowa and entrepreneurship. Waller was already thinking about entrepreneurial economic opportunities for Iowa and Iowans when he was struck with the idea for the novel. First, in Madison County and Winterset, Waller rightly saw a setting that could be compelling. To illustrate Waller's probable awareness of this in the writing of *Bridges*, one might note the novel's title, which focuses on the setting, not on the story or the characters. One might also note that the plot is set into motion by Kincaid visiting the bridges as objects of interest worthy of *National Geographic*, which takes as its *raison d'être* the display of exotic and unfamiliar places.

Second, the town of Winterset had already hosted economic entrepreneurship linked to history and tourism, and was therefore primed to exploit the imagination its setting compelled. Take, for example, not only the John Wayne Museum, but also the town's efforts to preserve the covered bridges, starting in the 1950s and renewed in the 1990s so that the Covered Bridge Festival could continue to be a success. Perhaps Waller stumbled upon all this in a flash of inspiration or intuition as he claims, but it is not unreasonable to assume that he would have had contact with various chambers of commerce in the course of writing his study. Either way, one must credit Waller and the town of Winterset for siezing upon the opportunity.

What did the town gain from these developments? In 1995, *The Economist* reported that there was “talk of a local sales tax to raise money for the repairs” to the town's malfunctioning sewer system, which had been discharging untreated sewage into

the Middle River (spanned by one of the covered bridges). However, the idea was “controversial, especially among local retailers,” as sales taxes “tend to fall most heavily on visitors,” and seems never to have been enacted. (“The Sewers of Madison County”) Certainly, *Bridges* did lead to immediate economic benefit and opportunity for the town, through taxes and fees, and for some of its residents, through employment and the tourist trade. In the twenty-first century, the Covered Bridge Festival “marks the county’s proudest weekend and spearheads the area’s annual \$7 million in tourism money,” according to the *Des Moines Register*’s Bill Reiter (“Fire Fails to Fizzle).

However, in securing that gain it traded upon its portrayal as “simple,” a quality that at times equates small-town Iowa culture with cultural and ideological backwardness. This perception is evident even in Metz’s appraisal of the *Bridges* movie adaptation as ideologically forward-thinking. For example, Metz uses a Freudian interpretation of joking to show how the movie more fully develops Francesca’s character against the “bourgeois patriarchy” of her surroundings, with its “suppressions and repressions” of Francesca’s “social position” as a farm wife (78). Metz recounts the scene from the movie in which Robert, just having arrived in Iowa, meets Francesca for the first time on the porch of her farmhouse. Robert tells her he is lost, she asks him whether he’s supposed to be in Iowa, and he replies in the affirmative. “Then you’re not that lost,” she tells him playfully. For Metz, this joke “in effect tells Robert that to her, one place in Iowa is pretty much the same as the next,” expressing “her discontent with her situation” (Metz 78). In the same exchange, Robert asks if she would like to accompany him on his photo shoot to Roseman Bridge, unless she has “other work to do.” She replies, “I was going to split the atom, but that can wait,” which for Metz suggests that “. . . as a farmer

in Iowa, what work of importance could there be to do that could not be done the next day?" (78). This assumption may have been reinforced by the entire set of phenomena surrounding *Bridges*. Because Francesca is a farm wife, she must be a "poor wretch," as Bonnie Brennen put it (70).

Iowans did at times notice such implications during the popularity of *Bridges*. For example, Daily reports that during his visit in 1995 during filming, Winterset residents were "teed off at Connie Chung" for a report on the town the previous night, the tone of which, according to Daily was "how a naïve, middle-of-nowhere Midwestern town is coping with the sudden arrival of civilization." Stefani Fuller, an employee of the chamber of commerce, told Daily that the story "made it sound like there was *nothing* in Winterset until this movie" and that "One 82-year-old lady came in there and was practically shaking. She said, 'I've lived in this town my whole life and they got it *all wrong*'" (116, emphasizes Daily's). Or, as the local newspaperman Ted Gorman put it to Daily, "Sometimes I feel like Winterset's the zoo and we're the animals" (103).

EPILOGUE

Robert Waller after *The Bridges of Madison County*

In 1997, Waller was divorced by his wife of nearly 36 years, Georgia Ann, and remarkably detailed news of the split became public. *People* magazine and *Texas Monthly*, quoting Georgia Ann and the couple's daughter, Rachael (then a 30-year-old film student at Sul Ross State University in Alpine) (Smith), reported that Waller had been having an affair with Linda Bow, the family's ranch hand, separated from her husband but still married. Bow, at the time thirty-four years old to Waller's fifty-eight, had been working in the garden department of the Alpine True Value Hardware before accepting a job on the Wallers' 1,200-acre Firelight Ranch and moving into a trailer on the premises in 1995 (Gliatto, Calkins, and Harmes). Rumors about the affair had begun their way around town in the fall of 1996, but Rachael told reporters that she and her mother had confronted Robert separately about them, and that he had denied the affair (Smith). When Robert and Georgia Ann took a six-week trip to India and Bali in the spring of 1997, they brought Linda along. On the trip, Georgia confronted the couple, and they admitted the affair. Georgia flew home, filed for divorce, and had Robert removed from the main ranch house, which became her property in the final divorce settlement in August 1997 (Gliatto, Calkins, and Harmes). Robert moved with Linda into an adjacent property, the 7,300-acre Del Norte ranch, where he resides at the time of this writing. Rachael also continued living on a 360-acre subsection of the Firelight ranch, which she rechristened Cekiya (a Lakota word meaning "cry for my people") (Gliatto, Calkins, and Harmes) and so Robert and Linda's neighbors were Georgia Ann on one side and Rachael on the other, albeit separated by several miles each, in an arrangement Smith

called “the sort of awkward configuration that only a hack romance novelist could concoct.” Rachael and Robert broke off communication when Rachael took her mother’s side in the divorce. She told reporters her father had accused her of being “in it for the money,” but that “the fact is, I’m a female, and I too feel betrayed” (Smith).

The divorce was immediately compared to the subject matter of Waller’s novels. In *Texas Monthly*, Evan Smith wrote, “Ironists will note that such a plot twist drives not only *Bridges* . . . but also a subsequent Waller book, *Border Music*, in which a faux-cowboy protagonist, Texas Jack Carmine, takes up with a younger woman named . . . Linda Lobo.” *People* also noted “the parallels between Waller’s life and his art,” citing both *Bridges* and *Border Music* (Gliatto, Calkins, and Harmes). Rachael told reporters that Waller had not known Linda during the writing of *Border Music*, which came out in 1995, but she was quoted in *People* as telling a friend, “The irony impales me” (Gliatto, Calkins, and Harmes). Front Street Books owner and later Waller editor Jean Hardy said of similarities between *Border Music* and Waller’s life, “I thought it was astonishing,” but friends of the Wallers told *Texas Monthly* that Linda Lobo in *Border Music* resembles Georgia Ann, not Linda, in appearance and speech (Smith). In any case, *People* noted that the story of Georgia Ann and Robert’s successful marriage had been used to sell *Bridges*: under a picture of the couple from 1995, a caption read, “Waller based his *Bridges* protagonists on himself and Georgia Ann” (Gliatto, Calkins, and Harmes).

While the three novels Waller wrote after *Bridges* were similar to his first in plot and characterization, none were directly related to the story of Robert and Francesca. That changed in April 2002, ten years to the month after the publication of *The Bridges of Madison County* and five years after his previous (fourth) novel, *Puerto Vallarta*

Squeeze, when Waller published a sequel to *Bridges*, titled *A Thousand Country Roads: An Epilogue to The Bridges of Madison County*. The story focuses on a now-elderly Kincaid taking another journey to Iowa in hopes of seeing Francesca again. The lovers do not reunite, but Waller also introduces Kincaid's 36-year-old son from another affair, Carlisle, and sets him on his own journey to find his father. The father-and-son reunion between Robert and Carlisle becomes the central event of the plot. Waller told reporters that, as the title suggests, he did not think of *A Thousand Country Roads* as a "sequel" but as an "epilogue . . . a long conclusion . . . filling in data that was missing in the original text" (L. Weeks C8).

Upon its publication, Waller claimed that the impetus to write the new novel (which, during my visit to his ranch in 2000, he hinted to me that he was working on) came in part from the thousands of letters written to him by readers asking what happened to Robert and Francesca (L. Weeks C1). (Such questions did not appear in the letters from Waller's readers I saw, and one might note that *Bridges* itself follows the story of both characters to their deaths.) Waller warns readers in the introduction to *A Thousand Country Roads*, "If you have not read *Bridges*, the book may not stand by itself for you" (qtd. in L. Weeks C8). The introduction also continues *Bridges*' narrative gambit of using Waller's authorial voice—and, this time, more explicit details from his actual circumstances—to frame the plot as if it were researched non-fiction. He writes, "Living a quiet, contented existence on a remote, high-desert ranch, having returned to my studies of economics and mathematics and jazz guitar, I felt no need to dig out the research notes. . . . Yet . . . for reasons not clear, after reading one more letter requesting information, I decided to tell the rest of the story" (qtd. in L. Weeks C8)

A Thousand Country Roads was not published by Warner Books, or for that matter, by any major book publisher. According to Waller, Warner Books told him that the story did not work as a coda, so they “passed on the book” (L. Weeks, C8). Instead, Waller turned to Mike and Jean Hardy, owners of Front Street Books, a bookstore in Alpine, Texas, near to his ranch. According to John Mutter in *Publishers Weekly*, Waller and the Hardys had become acquainted when Waller made signing appearances at their store upon moving to the area. The Hardys had bought the store in 1994 when it was called Books Plus, moved it into a two-thousand square-foot space in Alpine, and opened a second store in nearby Marathon in 1998. They started Iron Mountain Press as a division of John M. Hardy Publishing, the publishing arm of Front Street Books, in order to publish regional titles. At the time they became the publishers of *A Thousand Country Roads*, they had published four such regional titles: *How Come It’s Called That: Place Names in the Big Bend Country*; *The Last Campfire: The Life Story of Ted Gray, a West Texas Rancher*; *Shades of the West: A Cowboy’s Memoirs*; and *Grasses of the Trans-Pecos and Adjacent Areas* (Mutter, “Texas Bookstore’s Press”).

The Hardys told John Mutter of *Publishers Weekly* that Waller’s sequel, their first title of national interest, “fell into our lap” when Waller called them around Thanksgiving of 2001 to ask if they would like to have a look at the manuscript. The Aaron Priest Agency brokered the deal between the Hardys and Waller, who in a prepared statement did not mention that Warner had taken a pass on the book, but explained his decision to publish with a small, independent publisher by saying, “I got my start selling books out of the back of my pickup truck in small towns in Iowa. I like to do things on a small scale” (Mutter “Texas Bookstore’s Press”). Jean Hardy, formerly a copy editor with

Shearer, worked with Waller on the manuscript for a month, and the initial plan was to print twenty-five thousand copies of the book for a list price of \$19.95, offer a signed limited edition for about forty dollars, and handle distribution themselves. When these plans were announced in January 2002, Jean Hardy implied that the path to best-sellerdom would be similar to that of *Bridges*: “we’re counting on those independent booksellers,” she told Mutter (“Texas Bookstore’s Press”).

According to Edward Nawotka of *Publishers Weekly* in March 2002, part of that plan changed when chain bookstores showed “strong interest” in *A Thousand Country Roads*, so strong that the initial print run of the book was upped from twenty-five thousand copies to more than 250,000. Jean Hardy told Nawotka that “Robert and his agent convinced us to go bigger. It was a little scary at the onset, but we’re confident now. We’ve had heavy interest from the chains and 300,000 preorders.” This updated report also revealed that the Hardys had scrapped plans to distribute the book themselves, bringing on Client Distribution Services as a distributor and “a New Jersey publicity firm” to secure spots for Waller on NBC’s *Today Show*, CBS’s *The Morning Show*, and, in circumventing bookstores altogether, interviews with Waller to be played on Walmart’s in-store television monitors. The book did make the *New York Times* bestsellers list for seven weeks in May and June of 2002, never climbing higher than its debut at number five.

Reviews of *A Thousand Country Roads* were few and to the point. They did, however, allow reviewers a chance to reflect on the sales success of *Bridges*, which yielded some less defensive, even accepting, appraisals of the value of the novel to readers. In the *Times* of London—one of the few major newspapers to consistently praise

Waller's work in the 1990s, as we have seen in Chapter Three—Douglas Kennedy calls the sequel “badly constructed [and] rambling in tone.” However, for Kennedy, the failure of *A Thousand Country Roads* backhandedly points up the success of *Bridges* in reaching readers: the former, he writes, is “lacking any of the naïve emotionalism that at least gave his first novel a certain sugary kick.” Kennedy also leads his review with a story of *Bridges*' worldwide influence: “some years ago while travelling through Morocco, I saw a veiled woman on a bus, weeping her unshrouded eyes out as she turned the pages of a thin little book in her hands. . . . No, it wasn't Mills and Boon Goes Arabic. Rather, it was the French edition of *Sur La Route de Madison* by Robert James Waller.” In the States, *USA Today*'s Deirdre Donahue arrived at a similar acceptance of *Bridges*' value to readers in the process of reviewing *A Thousand Country Roads*, beginning her review by writing, “A decade ago, when this reader first read *The Bridges of Madison County* by Robert James Waller, I would periodically hurl it down, denouncing its stupidity. But a very wise older man told me I was too young to understand *Bridges*' resonance with middle-aged readers.” Barely commenting on the worth of *A Thousand Country Roads* at all, Donahue ends her review by writing, “Maybe it's my own trick knee [In the sequel, Kincaid has a bad ankle] and middle-age blues, but now I understand why all those millions of people loved Waller's *The Bridges of Madison County* and probably will find pleasure in *A Thousand Country Roads*.”

Waller has had no news-making contact with Iowa since his departure for Texas in 1994. In 2000, he did, however, name Indiana University, where he received his Ph.D. in 1968, as the beneficiary of an estate gift “with an estimated value well into the seven-figure range,” according to an Indiana University press release. The gift will establish the

Robert J. Waller Sr. and Robert J. Waller Jr. Chair in Jazz Studies for the University's School of Music, buy naming rights for a courtyard in the School of Business's Corporate and Graduate Center, donate Waller's Del Norte Ranch to the University for preservation and research, and transfer the copyrights to all his literature, art, and music to the University's libraries.

The bridges after *Bridges*

While Waller was writing and publicizing *A Thousand Country Roads* in Texas, the bridges of Madison County were literally burning in Iowa. In 2002, an arsonist began setting fire to the historic covered bridges and even targeted *Bridges*-related tourism sites in the area. On Tuesday, September 3, 2002, according to the *Des Moines Register*, passer-by Jeff Scheffers of Winterset called the county sheriff's office via 911 at 8:28 p.m. to report that Cedar Bridge—the bridge pictured on the cover of Waller's novel; used as a stand-in for Roseman Bridge, the scene for Robert and Francesca's meeting in the movie; and used as the backdrop for Oprah Winfrey's live broadcast in 1993—was on fire. The only one of the six remaining covered bridges of the county still open to vehicle traffic, the seventy-six foot long wooden structure, which had been moved in 1921 from its original 1883 location over Cedar Creek to another spot over the creek in a secluded, wooded park two miles northeast of Winterset and renovated in 1998 at a cost of \$128,073, burned too quickly for firefighters to save it. When they arrived fifteen minutes after Scheffers's 911 call, they found it already "burning from end to end" and its deck falling into Cedar Creek 20 feet below (Santiago, "Bridge Blaze"). The next day, the state fire marshal's office confirmed that the fire was arson, as a steady stream of cars drove by to see the charred ruins. When a Winterset assistant fire chief commented on the

number of cars, a local farmer replied, “There always are at a funeral” (Siebert, “Neighbors Mourn”). A patron at a convenience store said of the arsonist, “they ought to hang ’em right there at the bridge” (Siebert, “Neighbors Mourn”). Residents went to the Madison County Chamber of Commerce office to buy commemorative coins and postcards depicting the bridge, and, along with others from “Iowa, Texas, Washington, D.C., the Netherlands, and beyond,” called to donate money. At the Francesca’s House movie site, a collection jar was set up (Siebert, “Author Offers”). The *Register* reported that a Japanese newspaper also called the chamber of commerce, whose Jen Rinkert told reporters, “they’re very upset over there. They thought it was the Roseman Bridge” (Siebert, “Neighbors Mourn”).

Madison County Supervisor Bob Weeks had announced even as the fire was burning that the bridge would be rebuilt “the best we can, even using the same kind of wood used in the original” (Santiago, “Bridge Blaze”), and that the county had insured the bridge for \$285,000 (Siebert, “Neighbors Mourn”). However, Charles Gerhart, owner of the New Virginia, Iowa, construction company that refurbished the bridge and two others in 1998, guessed that such a project would cost between \$750,000 and \$1 million. Present at the scene consulting with Weeks and talking to reporters, Gerhart talked of having gone “to the Amish” to get authentic, rough-cut lumber for the 1998 renovation. “It just made me sick to see [the remains of the bridge] this morning,” he said. “If I have to, I’ll call Meryl Streep, Clint Eastwood, Waller, Oprah Winfrey. Somehow before I die, we’re going to rebuild this” (Siebert, “Neighbors, Mourn”). On Thursday, Waller called Madison County Sheriff Paul Welch to inform him he was donating \$10,000 to a reward fund for information leading to the arrest of the vandal, and followed his phone call with

a faxed letter that Welch read to reporters in front of the bridge. Waller promised to help with the restoration effort and wrote, “I am sick in my heart and, if arson was the cause, furious. I have lost an old, dear friend with whom I spent many quiet hours.” He called the arson “a loss of one part of our American heritage.” Neither Eastwood, Streep, nor Winfrey had contacted the chamber Thursday, and none could be reached for comment (Siebert, “Author Offers”). The news wasn’t, though, according to Don Menken, executive director of the chamber of commerce. Attendance at the 2001 Covered Bridge festival had been down to 35,000 from a peak of 70,000 in 1996, but “now we will see a huge increase,” he said. “We’ve got a heck of a lot of free advertising from all over the world today” (Kilen). Indeed, the *Register* noted that “because of the popularity of Waller’s 1992 book and the movie version, news of [the] Cedar Bridge fire was broadcast worldwide (Siebert, “Bridge Plans Abound”)

Register articles about the blaze imply that much of the “irreplaceable” nature of the bridges stemmed from their use as a spot as a haven for lovers, many of whom had carved their initials into the wood panels and beams. “. . . the cumulative effect of all those expressions, dated from as early as 1901 to the present, juiced the imagination,” according to the *Register*’s Mike Kilen, who also interviewed “Married in Madison County” entrepreneur Pat Nelson on the marriages of “hundreds of couples from around the world” at the bridges, mainly Roseman and Cedar, since 1992. Since that time, the tradition of carving initials or leaving notes at the bridges had apparently expanded beyond amorous couples. Libbey Switzer, a junior at Winterset High School, told the *Register*’s Mark Siebert that she had brought Japanese foreign exchange students to Cedar Bridge, signing their names there in Japanese and English. A local farmer also told

Siebert that his family had once left a note of tribute to “Billy, the family coon dog” at Cedar Bridge. (Siebert, “Future of Torched Bridge Site”). Contractor Charles Gerhart noted that he had “saved a lot of panels and other wood that had initials carved into them” from the 1998 renovation. “They are under tarps and should be in pretty good shape” (Santiago, “Bridge Blaze”).

In the wake of the Cedar Bridge fire, officials considered new security options for the bridges, among them surveillance cameras, fire-extinguishing systems, and fire-retardant coatings—but admitted there was no affordable and guaranteed way to keep the bridges safe from an arsonist. A volunteer brigade of bridge-watchers was recruited. Wyman Wilson, gift-shop owner and closest resident to the Roseman Bridge, told the *Register*, “they’re doing everything they can. The bridges are being watched, I can verify that.” However, Weeks warned that “coordinating a volunteer effort for five locations would be daunting—especially as emotions fade and the weather turns cold” (Siebert, “Officials Discuss”). On September 11, the Iowa Department of Transportation announced that it would supplement the \$285,000 insurance settlement with up to \$500,000 in federal money under a program established by congress to support transportation projects with historical significance (Petroski, “Federal Funding”). Weeks said he planned to raise the remaining \$200,000 to \$300,000 through private donations. The day before the 2002 Covered Bridge Festival, Sheriff Welch announced that surveillance camera footage from local convenience stores, accelerant tests on scraps of the Cedar Bridge, and numerous tips had resulted in interviews with two people rumored to be involved, but those people were shown to be elsewhere at the time of the fire, and there were no other clues or suspects (Siebert, “Bridge Plans”). At the 2002 Covered

Bridge Festival in October, “rusty nails and faded red boards from the bridge” were sold to raise money for the replacement project (Leys, “Bridging Memories”). There was no reporting on further financial assistance from Waller.

In January of 2003, the Iowa Transportation approved the federal grant to reconstruct the bridge, awarding \$700,000, \$200,000 more than previously expected (Petroski, “Grant to Help”). The insurance settlement came in at \$275,000, and private donations netted about \$30,000 (Siebert, “Bridge Covered”). It was also announced that Calhoun-Burns and Associates, a West Des Moines engineering firm, would design a new Cedar Bridge, replicating as closely as possible the original and considering built-in security improvements. (Petroski, “Grant to Help”). However, by September 2003, the *Register* was reporting that, despite Madison County officials’ desire to start the \$1 million project of rebuilding Cedar Bridge in time for the 2003 Covered Bridge Festival, the first round of bidders had been rejected. An Iowa Department of Transportation engineer said that contractors hadn’t provided evidence of “the old-fashioned craftsmanship in woodworking” needed to tackle the project. Calhoun-Burns and Associates had come up with thirty-four pages of drawings on how to replicate the bridge, but in commissioning the actual work, it was found that “the expertise needed to build a 130-foot timber bridge with complicated lattice trusses has all but disappeared” (Siebert, “Bridge Covered”). At the same time, Weeks announced that greater security and fire security for the remaining bridges could not be paid for. Sheriff Welch again announced that he had no leads, but encouraged anyone with information to come forward.

That week, two more covered bridges were set on fire. One was not a Madison County bridge. Standing in Keokuk county near the town of Delta, approximately 50 miles east of Winterset, it had been the oldest bridge with a Burr arch roof west of the Mississippi river; it was destroyed completely on September 3, 2003, a year to the day after the Cedar Bridge fire (Westendorf). The other was one of the five remaining Madison County bridges, Hogback Bridge. It was caused only about one square foot of minimal damage on Saturday, September 6; passers-by who discovered the fire threw bottled water on it to put it out before the arrival of the fire department. Officials were unable to confirm any connection between the fires through forensic methods (Westendorf). Security at the other Madison County bridges was increased with more rounds by sheriff's officers, and police and residents again began volunteering their time to stand watch over the bridges at night (Buzzaco).

A month to the day after the attempted Hogback Bridge arson, on Sunday, October 6, 2003, an arsonist struck another *Bridges*-related landmark, this time setting fire to the Francesca's House tourist site. Sometime before dawn, someone broke into the house through a window and used a flammable liquid to set the house on fire. As owner Jim Bell drove up to the house at 6:45 a.m. to prepare for another day of tours, he noticed "an orange glow around the roof," then saw the flames and quickly returned home to call for help. A back corner and the attic of the house were burned and the rest of the house suffered smoke and water damage (Morris). At the time of this writing, the attraction has not reopened.

There has been little doubt in anyone's mind that the arsons were directly related to *The Bridges of Madison County*. The *Register's* Bill Reiter asked, "Was it a deranged

adult? Crazy teenager? How about a malicious and spurned resident, a jealous Iowan unable to watch Madison County have its own little piece of glory, or a fanatic religious zealot dedicated to avenging a story of adultery and its local touchstones?" ("Madison County' Arson Cases"). Sociologist Dean Wright, of Drake University in Des Moines, told Reiter, "The timing does tell me that there's something associated with that progression of *The Bridges of Madison County* and the movie and the celebration. It has to be some relationship there because someone identified Francesca's House and the bridges that were in the movie" ("Madison County' Arson Cases"). In October 2003, just before that year's Covered Bridge Festival, the Madison County Board of Supervisors announced a twenty thousand dollar reward for information leading to the conviction of the arsonist. The Iowa Department of Public Safety is offering a separate one thousand dollar reward, and the Iowa Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms is offering five thousand dollars (total reward money of forty-one thousand dollars is being advertised by the chamber of commerce at the time of this writing (Madison County Chamber of Commerce)).

The 2002 and 2003 fires highlighted the importance of the Covered Bridge Festival to the community and state, and caused Madison County residents and Iowans to reconsider the value of their association with the book and movie. "During our bridge festival, we're really packed, but this year [2003] we weren't too busy at all," a Northside Café waitress told the *Register* (Morris). In its annual article previewing the 2003 festival, the *Register* reported that residents and vendors were optimistic and philosophical about the festival. The chamber of commerce's Cindy Knobloch said that "people will be coming this year because they'll be thinking, 'I better get down there

before something tragic happens to Madison County.’ We’ve had tons of phone calls saying that.” Pat Nelson said, “I sense we think, ‘This can’t deter us. Now it’s about more than the bridges. We love our community and like to show it off to others’” (Reiter, “Fire Fails to Fizzle”). During the festival, Winterset resident Diane Lair said that the arsons “will never affect the festival” because the bridges are “the cement that holds the community together.” Chamber of Commerce Program Director Brenda Hollingsworth said that in 2003, “Attendance looks like it is one of the best years we’ve had in a while,” and that “residents remain committed to their festival, as they have been committed to the bridges for decades. It’s not an economic value, it’s an emotional attachment” (Paluch). *Register* Columnist John Carlson used the fires to contemplate a similar reexamination of the importance of *Bridges*-related tourism. He wrote that he considered it “a real shame” that Cedar Bridge was destroyed, but as for Francesca’s House: “too bad, but the hysteria seems a little extreme. . . . The fire has been called a tragedy. A tragedy? No. . . . Television reports called Francesca’s House a ‘historical site.’ No, it’s a movie set. . . . A stop on the Underground Railroad is historical. The Old Capitol in Iowa City is historical. Francesca’s House is a tourist attraction . . . that’s famous for being famous.”

In October 2003, Madison County supervisors awarded a \$576,406 contract to Herberger Construction Company in Indianola, Iowa, to rebuild Cedar Bridge. Construction started in December 2003, and the “Cedar Bridge replica” was dedicated October 9, 2004, during the 2004 Covered Bridge Festival by Governor Tom Vilsack and John Wayne’s daughter Melinda Wayne Munoz. For the first time in three years, the arsonist did not strike in the months leading up to the festival. On October 20, 2004, John Wayne’s birthplace in Winterset was named the 2004 Iowa Tourism Attraction of the

Year by the Iowa Department of Economic Development, in the category for communities with a population less than ten thousand (Madison County Chamber of Commerce).

Clint Eastwood, Oprah Winfrey, and popular literature after *Bridges*

As a director, Eastwood repeated the *Bridges* pattern of turning a place-based bestseller into a movie with a ready-made audience and location. In 1997, Eastwood directed an adaptation of John Berendt's 1994 novel *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* in Savannah, Georgia. Berendt's novel had broken *Bridges*' record of 162 consecutive weeks on the *New York Times* bestsellers list, staying on the list for 216 weeks total (C. Weeks). As *Bridges* had in Madison County, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* spawned a significant tourism industry in Savannah. According to Carl Solana Weeks in the *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, the book brought "hundreds of thousands of tourists. . . . Hotel-motel tax revenues rose about twenty-five percent in the two years following publication of the book, and cottage industries . . . sprang up like morning glories." The Savannah Economic Development Authority and mayor Floyd Adams even declared April 26, 1996 "John Berendt Day." (C. Weeks). In 2003, Eastwood also directed a version of Dennis Lahane's 2001 bestseller *Mystic River*, set in Boston, that was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Picture. Both Eastwood adaptations were Malpas/Warner Brothers productions.

Oprah Winfrey's influence also continued to grow after *Bridges*, especially in her promotion of literary fiction by contemporary authors. On November 17, 1999, on the fiftieth anniversary of the National Book Foundation's first awarding of the National Book Award, the Foundation awarded Winfrey a Fiftieth Anniversary Gold Medal in recognition of her influence in promoting literature. In introducing Winfrey at the awards,

National Book Foundation Executive Director Neil Baldwin explained that the award was given to Winfrey because “[the Foundation’s] mission dovetails so well with hers. . . .

We share her belief that quality, challenging, and, yes, often times difficult literature, can and should be made popular. We share her belief that great literature in our culture, while it has always been the creation of the few, must become the province of the many.”

Perhaps mass-media promotion of books as done by Winfrey has opened doors to writers previously unable to sell enough copies to break the hegemony of the dozen or so bestselling authors dominating the list at the turn of the 1990s. If so, “serious” authors such as Ernest Gaines and Isabel Allende, both Oprah Book Club authors, have benefitted alongside previously unknown bestselling authors such as Wally Lamb and the previously discussed Bret Lott. Winfrey has also encouraged her viewers to start their own face-to-face book clubs, giving instructions on her website for hosting book club meetings. In 2003, Winfrey stopped recommending contemporary novels and began recommending “classics” such as Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*.

Though *Bridges* was an early example of a virtually unknown author’s work entering “the province of the many” with help from Winfrey, neither the reputation nor even the memory of *Bridges* has survived well. The book has by now been eclipsed several times over as a publishing and sales phenomenon. By 1999, *Bridges* was, to publisher Michael Korda, no longer even the most memorable first-novel hardcover success. He wrote, “Lest anybody suppose that this [kind of first-novel success] doesn’t happen anymore, let me mention the magic name Harry Potter” (xiii). Winfrey, too, has left her favorite book of 1993 behind. On her website’s list of her all-time favorite novels, *Bridges* does not merit a place among the twenty titles, which include classics, popular

novels, and even self-help books such as Eric Butterworth's *Discover the Power Within You* and Gary Zukov's *The Seat of the Soul*.

Meanwhile, commentators have continued mourning the decline of serious literature and its readership. In a 2005 review of Bret Lott's *Before We Get Started: A Practical Memoir of the Writer's Life*, Jonathan Yardley bemoaned the "the rise of writing schools," which he says "has added whole new universes of meaning and possibility to hackery." On the art and craft of writing, Yardley advises that "serious writing done in the hopes of making literature is a mysterious process the precise nature of which is hidden within the writer's heart and mind, and this process cannot be transferred—least of all in a classroom or a writers' colony—from one person to another." Similarly, in 2004, Michael Dirda reacted to a report by the National Endowment for the Arts entitled "Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America." Dirda quotes NEA Chairman (and poet and literary critic) Dana Gioia's announcement in the report that "our society is undergoing a 'massive shift toward electronic media for entertainment' and that 'less than half of the adult population now reads literature'" (B1). Further, Dirda quotes the report's statistic that "one in six people reads 12 books or more in a year" (B2) and adds, "what the NEA report fails to say is that most of those people have chosen the very *same* 12 books, starting with *The Da Vinci Code* [the found-document bestseller about sex and spirituality for the twenty-first century], followed by a) the latest movie tie-in, and b) whatever Oprah Winfrey has recommended lately" (B2). In Dirda's opinion, most of the titles on the bestseller list are "innately ephemeral—jumped-up magazine articles, journalistic dispatches in disguise, commercial novels that are essentially screenplays-in-waiting, heavy on plot, shock and spectacle. Such works can hardly be called literary reading. They are entertainments,

little more than 250-page TV shows and documentaries” (B2). Fault for this lies with publishers, who “know that they can promote almost any title to bestsellerdom” with “glittery names and hot-button topics,” and with readers, who are unwilling to “put in the time and effort to read a real book,” who “expect printed matter to be easy,” and who “expect the pages to aspire to the condition of television, and to just wash over us.” In the end, Dirda feels that “book culture” is doomed, as we have become “straitjacketed and brainwashed by the books of the moment, the passing moment” (B2).

Even the *New York Times Book Review*, one of the New York bastions of literary culture and keeper of the the most important bestseller list in the country, has undergone “sweeping changes,” according to *Book Publishing Report* (1). Beginning in Fall 2004 under the editorship of Sam Tanenhaus, the venerable Sunday section relaunched with shortened reviews, more attention to mass-market titles, and publication of grievances by authors who disagree with the reveiws their books have received (1-2). Tanenhaus envisions the *Times Book Review* “offering relief from the news cycle,” and asked, “Why is commercial fiction considered bad? . . . Literary tradition is part of our cultural heritage, but attracting average readers is what we are trying to do. . . . It’s about finding out what readers are responding to and covering that” (2).

So now Oprah Winfrey is recommending Tolstoy—the book of the passing moment—and the *New York Times Book Review* is finding out what average readers are responding to. *The Bridges of Madison County* did not cause this shift, of course, but it was positioned at a moment of change in the way the publishing industry treats literature and the way America sees books. What cultural power it had that was not a reflection of those broader changes is now faded. There is an arsonist still at large among the bridges

of Madison County, and Francesca's house is gone. Meanwhile, in the English Department at the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls, Robert Waller's college friend Scott Cawelti was editing the collected poems of local farmer-poet James Hearst. In 1999, Hearst's student, friend, and custodian of his papers, Robert Ward, who knew he would soon die of cancer, had asked Cawelti to complete his lifelong wish of publishing all of Hearst's more than seven hundred poems in one volume. With the help of the State Historical Society of Iowa, the Hearst Center for the Arts, the University of Northern Iowa foundation, the University of Iowa Press, and the Cedar Falls Art and Culture Association, the volume was published in 2001. Nancy Price, author of the bestselling *Sleeping With the Enemy* and another of Hearst's former students, wrote in the foreword of taking classes and attending gatherings years ago at Hearst's home, now the James and Meryl Hearst Center for the Arts, where he "wheeled himself from group to group, but if he were left for a moment alone, he could seem more lonely than the loneliest person there" xxxi).

On the back jacket of the book is a testimonial—"James Hearst wrote eloquently of the land, its pleasures and sorrows, carefully turning the language as one of his farmer heroes turns the soil. Scott Cawelti and his colleagues have done us all a favor by assembling this fine collection, ensuring the onward resonance of Hearst's words and sensibilities"—written by bestselling author Robert James Waller, who has had more than a taste of the possibility of onward resonance in his time.

In Cawelti's Preface to the volume, Hearst's poem, "Statement," is reproduced; this study ends with that poem, below. Its text is an apt reminder of the cultural power that surrounds the writing and reading of "literature," and that, if we are not already in

with that power by virtue of who or where we are, it can brutalize us. But more than that, Hearst's "Statement" is an assertion that each of us may do what we please with texts and stories. We may choose to send them to, and receive them from, the places of power, places that shoot them as "news" and "reviews" into the world at large with force enough to penetrate into everyone's being at once, or so we imagine. We might even fantasize that our own story will be used in the service of that power one day; that would be one way to change the world. But, we may also, if we choose, simply make or hear a statement. Like the members of the Iowa community who have heard the speaker's voice in the poem and have and returned his intimate gaze, we may give our stories to each other, hand to hand and eye to eye, and share our own world together here and now.

It doesn't matter what the critics say,
I write what interests me in my own way.
I know they have to fill up the reviews
With what is called the literary news.
But you and I have our own thoughts to please
And as my poems go by I hope you seize
On one or two that make you nod your head
As if you liked them. Poet Yeats once said
Of poetry and the critics' wailing wall,
"It's not a matter of literature at all."

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