

Reading Oprah



So, three women walk into a bookstore. An Oprah's Book Club display dominates the space just to the right of the entrance. The first woman glances at it dismissively and moves past it to the New Fiction section where she spends an hour leafing through hard-covers before heading for the corner where they keep Literature. The second woman, steering toward New Paperbacks, pauses at the Oprah books to read the back covers of a novel or two. She picks one up and carries it with her as she wanders through the bookstore. The third woman looks relieved to find the Oprah books right there as she walks in. She grabs the latest selection and turns straight toward the cash register.¹

As I have talked with many readers about Oprah's Book Club since 1998, I have found these responses typical. The first woman, a careful and confident reader, well educated and well read, regards Oprah books as supermarket fiction. She is *less* likely to pick up a novel if it's an Oprah's Book Club selection, even if it's written by a respected author she might otherwise read—Joyce Carol Oates or Barbara Kingsolver, for example. The second woman, also a good reader, though not so confident a critic, is a little overwhelmed by all the choices in today's mega-bookstores. She willingly takes recommendations from friends, book reviewers in her favorite magazines, or online discussions. She trusts Oprah's choices, generally, though she sometimes finds the novels depressing. The third woman, though intelligent and perceptive, might not be a reader at all if it weren't for Oprah, and she's certainly not a

bookstore regular. She reads what Oprah tells her to and enjoys the stories, often identifying with the gutsy characters who overcome all sorts of obstacles.

I know all three of these women and teach many like them at the College of St. Catherine, a women's college in Minnesota's Twin Cities. In fact, in many ways I am all three women. A PhD in English, I'm expected to be the first woman, holding aloft the standards of literary classics and fighting off the destructive influences of popular culture—influences like Oprah, the Internet, and the mass marketing of confessional pseudonovels. But I am by inclination the second woman. I love to read what everyone else is reading. I can't resist a good contemporary novel, especially a confessional one. In fact, I study and write about autobiographical fiction. And I was born to be the third woman. The daughter, granddaughter, niece, and sister of (now former) Pittsburgh steelworkers, I got the sort of overcrowded public education that leads more often to a trade than a profession. I spent my teenage years with Victoria Holt romances and my grandfather's first-edition Zane Greys until I stumbled accidentally onto a Jane Austen novel in a stack of cut-rate romances at K-mart and became an English major at my state college. Of course, I also studied journalism so I could get a job when I graduated. And I got that job, but ended up in graduate school a few years later anyway, still reading novels. Now I teach and read novels for a living. Because I believe in reading—I believe that it can change people, that it can bring us together and deepen our insights about ourselves and one another—I was drawn from the beginning to Oprah Winfrey's effort to get Americans reading.

By now her influence is common knowledge. Confounding expert opinion about the decline of paper and ink, she tapped into an American passion for reading big novels. Defying the pundits who argued that everything was going digital, she understood that Americans were buying books, not just at amazon.com but at the now omnipresent Borders and Barnes and Noble Superstores. (Remember when bookstores were tiny and lurked in dark corners of the mall?) And surprising the literary critics, she has us talking about books—serious conversations about challenging novels.

Oprah's Book Club, launched in September 1996, operated at first under the radar of critics and professors. It was, after all, daytime TV.

Oprah Winfrey had only recently started to rehabilitate herself in the popular imagination, separating from the likes of Geraldo and Ricki Lake and show topics like daughters dating their mother's boyfriends (or vice versa). Leaving sleaze to Jerry Springer, Winfrey moved on and began using her daytime talk show overtly to educate American women. In a 1997 interview in *Jet* magazine she explained, "When I first got the job, I was just happy to be on TV. But as the years evolved I grew and wanted to say something with the show, not just be a television announcer or a television performer, but I wanted to be able to say things that were meaningful to the American public and culture. . . . I wanted to be able to use the show to enlighten as well as entertain, to have people think differently about themselves and their lives."²

Apparently, like many celebrities, she wanted to do good with the power and wealth she had amassed by doing very well as one of America's top entertainers. Because she had established her popularity as a compassionate and open personality, her viewers were willing to follow her lead from self-revelation to self-improvement. True, her ratings took a hit at first, while Jerry Springer's climbed, but in the end Oprah had read Americans better than the shock jocks. By the time the Book Club began, her ratings were back on top. Self-improvement was all the rage.

And self-improvement, in the American tradition, has always included reading good books. Though reportedly skeptical at first about the idea of an on-air book club, Winfrey's own love of reading led her to give it a try. She told *Publishers Weekly*, "I feel strongly that, no matter who you are, reading opens doors and provides, in your own personal sanctuary, an opportunity to explore and feel things, the way other forms of media cannot. I want books to become part of my audience's lifestyle, for reading to become a natural phenomenon with them, so that it is no longer a big deal."³

So, on September 17, 1996, Oprah invited her viewers to pick up Jacquelyn Mitchard's *Deep End of the Ocean* and read it in preparation for the next month's on-air discussion. Before Oprah selected it, this 400-page hardcover, a compelling though slightly awkward combination of whodunit and family drama, was selling well, though it had never made it to the bestseller lists. There were about 100,000 hardcover copies in print going into that fall, a respectable number for a first novel. Three

months later, *Time* magazine reported that there were 850,000 copies circulating. By October 6, it had topped the *New York Times* weekly bestseller list, and it stayed on that list for an impressive twenty-nine weeks, much longer than most novels—and certainly longer than most first novels by unknown writers.⁴ Twenty-nine weeks enters Stephen King territory.

The Book Club Begins

The enormous success of Oprah's Book Club took nearly everyone by surprise. Even Oprah didn't quite seem to get it at first. In the early days of the Book Club, the book discussion got only one short segment at the end of the one-hour program—fifteen or twenty minutes. *She's Come Undone*, the most popular Oprah novel ever, shared half the show with stars of TV's *Third Rock from the Sun*. Later Book Club shows were often advertised as issue-oriented shows, a proven format, where the issue (domestic abuse for *Black and Blue* or illiteracy for *The Reader*, for example) took center stage over the book. It wasn't until mid-1998 that the transcripts regularly began carrying the title "Oprah's Book Club." But in the final two years of the Club's first iteration, the entire Book Club show was usually unabashed book talk.

Generally, Oprah reintroduced the latest novel, played quotes from reader letters, and bantered with the women in the audience who, evidently (amazingly!), had all read the book.⁵ Then she presented the lucky few who made up the smaller discussion group that month, the four or five people who competed for the opportunity to have dinner with Oprah and the author. The best letters—the most touching stories, the most relevant life experiences, the most astute commentary—won these slots. The taped clips show the beautifully dressed women sitting in overstuffed chairs in an elegant room, sipping wine and conversing. This literary salon, which began in Oprah's home and later shifted to a studio/study constructed specifically for the Book Club, was a central element of the Book Club shows from the beginning. As Oprah entertained her guests, presiding over the discussion, the starched linens, fine china and wine, she modeled how to read and talk about books and directly connected reading with *The Good Life* for her audience.

Interspersed throughout many of these dinner shows were issue-centered segments. Usually personal and confessional, these segments, though clearly linked to the novel's themes, were not always directly related to the novel itself or to its characters. Women dished about overcoming divorce, what we do for love, or husbands who lead double lives. And throughout the show, teasers anticipated the announcement of the next book at the end of the hour. When the big announcement came, Oprah unloaded armfuls of free copies of the latest Oprah book to the audience. On the Oprah web page (www.oprah.com), the dates of the Book Club shows were advertised weeks in advance, and an animated online discussion, often including live chats with the author, preceded and followed the shows. Readers who visited the site were invited to consider some in-depth discussion questions, posted as soon as the new book title was divulged, a practice that has since become common in publishing, as Reader's Guides with discussion questions for book groups are increasingly appended to many contemporary novels.

When Oprah announced Mitchard's *Deep End of the Ocean* and introduced the idea of the Book Club in the final five minutes of a show about pregnant women who use drugs and alcohol, she sent out a books-are-our-friends message. "This is one of my all-time favorite moments I'm having on television right now," she began, "you are witnessing it—mainly because I love books."⁶ She spoke enthusiastically about reading, about how "one of the greatest pleasures I have right now in life is to be reading a good book and to know I have a really, really good book after that book to read." And she concluded, "This is the most fun I've had lately." Briefly, after a commercial break, she warned readers that the book is "really intense," and "not like beach reading." The phrase "a mother's worst nightmare" came up more than once.⁷

Still, *Deep End of the Ocean* is what most of us would call "pleasure reading." It's a mystery mixed with an insightful and captivating family story. Its prose is clear, its plot a forward-moving chronology, its characters mainly recognizable and fairly likeable, though delightfully complex (especially the older son). It doesn't wrangle excessively with issues—no Grand Inquisitor or rambling John Galt chapters here—but it *is* serious. What it does very well, in tone and sensibility, is grab its audience and invite conversation about plot events and moral issues—how

families work, in what ways children “belong” to parents. Like many readers, I picked it up in paperback a few months post-Oprah, and couldn’t put it down until I knew that little boy was found and safe. And I wanted to talk, especially to other mothers, about how it felt to read this book pursued by parental fear and doubt.

On the other hand, *Song of Solomon*, Oprah’s second Book Club choice, is capital-L-Literature. An early Morrison novel, it meets any criteria for excellence that professors like me can devise. Full of fantastic images and rich allusions, introducing difficult questions about memory, community, and race, it followed *Deep End of the Ocean* straight to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list. When it was first published in 1977, and even after winning the National Book Critics’ Circle Award in 1978, it never made it to the bestseller lists—not until Oprah chose it almost twenty years later. Placing these first two very different Oprah novels side-by-side gives a sense of the scope of her Book Club project.

To Enlighten and Entertain

I first read *Song of Solomon* in college at the recommendation of my favorite professor (a philosopher, boxing coach, and late-night jazz radio host).⁸ It was hard going then and hasn’t gotten much easier in many rereadings and years of growing appreciation for Toni Morrison’s exceptional gifts. I agree with Winfrey when she introduces Morrison as “the greatest living American author, male or female, white or black, hands down.”⁹ I found echoes of my own encouraging words to students in her introduction to the book (at the end of the first Book Club show, a twenty-minute discussion of *Deep End of the Ocean* tacked onto a program about the Collins quintuplets coming home from the hospital). Gone are Oprah’s effusions about reading. In their place is the frank praise of a more serious reader. She calls Morrison “magical and lyrical” and claims, “She will make you feel and think”—what fun is there in that? Winfrey has difficulty summing up what the book is about in one sentence or phrase. “It’s about motherhood and unrequited love and friendship and family secrets. It’s about ten Oprah shows rolled into one book,” she says. Most tellingly, she repeatedly urges readers to “stay

with" the author and trust her. In an anecdote Winfrey has repeated many times since, she asks Morrison, "Do people tell you they have to keep going over the words sometimes?" Morrison replies, "That, my dear, is called reading."

The first book, then, is as much fun as Oprah promised. It's a pleasure read, though not a simple one ("not like beach reading"). A compelling and well-written conversation-stimulator, it centers on a contemporary white, middle-class mother in crisis. Other Oprah books, indeed some of the most popular Oprah books, share these same qualities—*The Pilot's Wife*, *Here on Earth*, *Black and Blue*, *Midwives*, *Tara Road*, *Vinegar Hill*, *Map of the World*, *While I Was Gone*, and *Open House*.

The second book is clearly a literary novel. It's more challenging, with an intricate, layered plot and more dense, poetic language. It features diverse, even strange characters with multiple motivations in complex relationships. Because it ignores conventional chronology and sometimes leans away from reality into fantasy and dreams, it often requires reading as Morrison describes it—that is, rereading. But, as dedicated readers know, the rewards of such efforts are profound (even fun). All of Morrison's novels are like this, including the four that have been Oprah books. So is Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, one of Oprah's controversial later picks, and the Book Club's second incarnation promises to feature such literary novels exclusively. Like Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, the summer 2003 selection, any of these books might be found in a college literature class. In fact, the Oprah show about *Paradise* became a literature class when Winfrey packed it up and took it on the road to Princeton, where Professor Morrison taught the readers how to read it (in a memorable program I will discuss more fully in chapter two).

Morrison's, Steinbeck's, and Franzen's were not, however, Oprah's only literary novels. Several other Oprah books fit this category comfortably as well—Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (one of my favorites), Jane Hamilton's *The Book of Ruth*, Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*, Anne Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees*, or Maya Angelou's *Heart of a Woman*, one of only two nonfiction works on Oprah's list. And many others have been identified as literary, artistic, or challenging in similar ways—Andre Dubus III's *House of Sand and Fog*, Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*, Joyce Carol Oates's *We Were the Mulvaney's*, Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine*

Balance, Janet Fitch's *White Oleander*, Barbara Kingsolver's *Poisonwood Bible*, Isabelle Allende's *Daughter of Fortune*, Ursula Hegi's *Stones from the River*, and Wally Lamb's *I Know This Much Is True*, for example. In fact, it surprised me, wearing my professor hat, to find how many of Oprah's selected novels were excellent in a traditional literary way—carefully written with attention to language, plot, and character development. Several were literary prizewinners.¹⁰ Two writers for *Life* magazine noted early on that Oprah books "tend to outclass the company" on the bestseller lists.¹¹

The pattern these first two novels set revealed Oprah's commitment "to enlighten and as well as entertain," simultaneously to meet her readers where they were and push them a little further. Both novels challenge; both novels please, but from distinct premises and in disparate ways. This dynamic, I believe, is what took the Book Club beyond a passing media sensation, like the TV book clubs that sprang up in its wake, to a significant cultural phenomenon. Here Oprah's role was not just the therapist/talk show host, the smart entrepreneur, or the wildly successful capitalist. She didn't play the perky cheerleader for popular fiction or the humble devotee for a well-known author. The Book Club placed Oprah in the role of cultural critic and arbiter of taste.

In my first Introduction to Criticism class we focused on these two primary functions of literature—to educate and to entertain. From Plato to Leo Tolstoy, from Longinus to Adrienne Rich, critics have wrangled over this sometimes contradictory pair in their effort to name what reading should do for us. And I have worked the contradiction with my students. Give them too much reading that is good for them and they abandon ship quickly. Tie it to reading that touches or amuses them and they're on board again.

The Oprah Effect

Clearly, Oprah's Book Club was the spoonful of sugar that brought many less confident readers to Toni Morrison. With Morrison's earlier novels, *Song of Solomon* and *The Bluest Eye*, it is easy to trace what critics have called "the Oprah Effect."¹² Both novels were literature-class perennials, long in print and selling steadily, and both took phenomenal

leaps in sales as Oprah books. *Song of Solomon* had been selling at about 50,000 a year, until Oprah chose it "and orders exploded to 500,000 in hard, paper and audio versions," *Publishers Weekly* reported in December 1996.¹³ And that was only the beginning. *Song of Solomon* stayed on the bestseller list until March 1997—sixteen weeks. Then, in May 2000, the more accessible earlier Morrison novel, *The Bluest Eye*, became Oprah's thirty-third pick. Two Book Club versions were made available in hardcover and paper, and the thirty-year-old novel appeared on *both* best-seller lists for more than two months.

Bestseller lists, following publishing industry protocols, are generally divided into at least four categories—hardcover fiction, hardcover nonfiction, paperback fiction, and paperback nonfiction. The *New York Times* adds a "Bear in Mind" list of editor picks, an "Advice, How-To and Miscellaneous" section in paper and hardcover, and, since the Harry Potter summer of 2000, separate children's lists as well. In the six years I studied the lists, I saw only two books appear on both the hardcover and paperback bestseller lists at once—J. K. Rowling, with *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, and Toni Morrison, with *The Bluest Eye*.

As soon as Morrison's novel *Paradise* was published in hardcover in 1998, Oprah chose to feature it on the Book Club (she had, she said, read it before it was released and waited excitedly to share it with her audience as soon as it came out). I compared the reception of this Oprah novel with *Ravelstein*, Saul Bellow's novel released about two years after *Paradise*, and with the three novels by John Updike published during the Book Club's first run. Most critics and literature professors, no matter their personal prejudices, would list these three writers among the dons of American literature, certainly among the five or ten best writers working in the United States today. Morrison and Bellow are Nobel Prize winners; all three have won National Book Awards and Pulitzer Prizes. So their new novels were eagerly anticipated, and all five of them were heralded widely in the press.

One week in May 2000, for example, I found *Ravelstein* on the cover of the *New York Times Book Review* coupled with a companion piece in the *New York Times Magazine*. For weeks after this *New York Times* double-shot, the *Book Review* editors encouraged readers to "Bear in Mind" Bellow's significant new novel. Yet even with widespread attention and

praise, Bellow's novel, like most works by respected literary authors, never quite caught fire by publishing standards. *Ravelstein* showed up on the bestseller list for only one week—and at number fifteen. Updike's three novels, *In the Beauty of the Lilies* in 1996, *Bech at Bay* in 1998, and *Gertrude and Claudius* in 2000, never made it past the "Bear in Mind" section. Morrison's novel, on the other hand, spent not only eighteen weeks on the bestseller list, but four weeks at number one. There are myriad reasons for a book's popularity or lack of it, but a significant difference here was clearly Oprah. The popular rise of Franzen's novel in the fall of 2001 tells a similar story, one I will return to later.

In the first four years of the Book Club, Oprah's books consistently averaged about fifteen weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list—paperback or hardcover books, literature or light reading, popular or obscure authors, male or female main characters or writers.¹⁴ In the final two years before its hiatus and format change, when the Book Club met less often and the given wisdom was that it was losing popularity, that average *rose* to nearly seventeen weeks.

Oprah's bestselling choice, Wally Lamb's *She's Come Undone*, appeared on the paperback bestseller list a few weeks after it was selected in January 1997. It stayed there until October, then fell off and reappeared for another year, totaling, finally, fifty-four weeks on the list. By the end of 1997, 1.5 million copies had been sold. Another edition was printed, and over a million copies sold in 1998. When the Book Club featured a second Lamb novel, *I Know This Much Is True*, sales of *She's Come Undone* spiked as well, though the second novel remained on the bestseller list not nearly so long, at nineteen weeks. (Later, it had an eight-week run in paperback.) Even at that, *I Know This Much Is True* was one of the top fifteen bestsellers of 1998 with over three-quarters of a million copies sold, and nearly 900,000 in paperback the next year, according to *Publishers Weekly*.

Again, reviewing the *New York Times* bestseller lists from the time Winfrey began her on-air Book Club in 1996 until she ended regular meetings for a year in May 2002, not a week went by that there wasn't at least one Oprah book listed—not one week for nearly six years. More often, because she announced a new choice about every five weeks for the first four years, there were multiple Oprah books on the list. In May

and June 2000, March and July 1997 and March 1999, there were five. During the week of March 21, 1999, Oprah books took up six of the fifteen slots on the paperback bestseller list. *The Reader*, the latest Oprah pick, stood at number one. *Black and Blue* and *Deep End of the Ocean*, by then in paperback and having their second run as bestsellers, were at number six and twelve. The three previous Oprah picks, *Jewel*, *Where the Heart Is*, and *Midwives*, were still selling at numbers eight, nine, and fifteen, respectively. The return of the Book Club promises more of the same, with John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* exceeding its regular yearly sales of 40,000 to 50,000 copies within hours of Oprah's announcement of it as her first choice by a nonliving writer on June 18, 2003. By the end of that week, Penguin Classics had 790,000 copies in print.¹⁵

Certainly a study of these lists demonstrates that Winfrey earned her reputation for operating the star-maker machinery, discovering unknown authors, and calling attention to neglected ones. With that as the given wisdom, I was surprised to find that several times Winfrey went for the sure thing, no risk involved. She chose Anna Quindlen's *Black and Blue*, for example, when it was already on the bestseller list. Quindlen, a popular former *New York Times* columnist, had seen her third novel debut at number four on the bestseller list of the *Times* in February 1998, soon after it was published. Oprah announced it as her Book Club pick in April, and it rose a little higher in the ranking, up to number two, the highest ever for Quindlen novel. It had a twenty-week run before it dropped off the list in July, returning the next year for a seven-week run in paperback.

Did Oprah influence sales of this book? The previous two Quindlen novels did not enjoy the level of success that *Black and Blue* did, but that is not unusual. Novelists usually build their audience with steady effort. However, when Oprah chose *Black and Blue*, it had already spent as much time on the bestseller list as either of Quindlen's previous novels, and her post-Oprah novel, *Blessings*, in 2002, returned her to the hardcover bestseller list for nine weeks, closer to the level *Black and Blue* reached before it was chosen for the Book Club. As an Oprah book, *Black and Blue* sold over 500,000 hardcover copies in 1998 and a million paperbacks in 1999, making it by far Quindlen's most successful novel to date.¹⁶ *One True Thing*, Quindlen's second novel, was made

into film starring Meryl Streep and experienced a spike in sales in 1998, three years after its original release in paperback. Even then it didn't do as well as Quindlen's Oprah book.

The Oprah Writers

The Book Club also picked an easy winner with Barbara Kingsolver's *Poisonwood Bible* in June 2000. It had already been a hardcover *New York Times* bestseller for twenty-nine weeks in 1998–1999 and a paperback bestseller for fifteen weeks just before it took on the Oprah "O." As an Oprah book, it reappeared on the paperback bestseller list for another successful run. Maeve Binchy, whose *Tara Road* was the September 1999 pick, Isabelle Allende, whose *Daughter of Fortune* Oprah picked in November 1999, and Maya Angelou, whose *Heart of a Woman* became an Oprah book in May 1997, were already superstars among bestselling writers and pretty sure hits with Oprah readers. Oprah's one foray into children's books, the "Little Bill" series, led her to Bill Cosby. Sure bets don't come much more sure than Cosby writing about children. Many other Oprah writers, such as Kaye Gibbons, Sue Miller, Alice Hoffman, Elizabeth Berg, and Jane Hamilton were successful novelists with loyal audiences before Oprah chose them. As Hamilton told *People* magazine, though, Oprah did for her what she apparently did for many writers: "Oprah gave me—and my books—a bigger, wilder life than I'd ever imagined."

So, while these writers were good bets for Oprah, Oprah was a jackpot for them. Chris Bohjalian, after seeing his novel *Midwives* hang out at a respectable 100,000 sales mark for a year, couldn't believe it when, as an Oprah book, sales hit 1.4 million, "dramatically, exponentially more than I ever expected to sell in my entire life," Bohjalian said. *Publishers Weekly* Executive Editor Daisy Maryles writes that being an Oprah book can move a novel from "well-published and modestly successful" to "mega blockbuster."¹⁷ *People* magazine called it "Touched by an Oprah."¹⁸ Better even than Powerball or a check from Ed McMahon, it allows Oprah writers to quit their day jobs and be writers full time. According to *People*, Wally Lamb stopped being a high school English teacher after twenty-five years. Jacquelyn Mitchard bought "a retreat in

Cape Cod," and Kaye Gibbons took a year and half off. Several of them hired personal assistants. Melinda Haynes moved from a trailer home in Alabama to "a house with a doorbell" and "more porch space than the trailer itself," with a BMW Z3 convertible parked in front. All of them became celebrities, at least temporarily, the kind of people featured in *People*. Jane Hamilton put it succinctly: "All these new readers gave me freedom. I don't have to worry about having a real job."

In my professional life, I often find myself surrounded by working fiction writers, in meetings, at lunches, over drinks at happy hour. In late August 2000, I attended a dinner at my college president's house to honor Elizabeth Berg, a graduate of our college and a successful fiction writer. Little did we know at the time how successful. Oprah announced, not a week later, that Berg's *Open House* was her next Book Club choice. I spoke with Berg a couple of months later, and she confessed that she already knew that night, but, as is the practice, had been asked not to tell anyone until after Oprah made her announcement.¹⁹ So, as I engaged her in (sometimes suspiciously awkward) conversation about the Book Club, as she (suspiciously persistently) pursued the conversation, she kept her secret. But even as we spoke, huge shipments of books from her publisher were arriving at bookstores all over the country. As usual, bookstore employees were instructed not to open them, not even to peek at the title, until the designated day. It must have been hard for Berg to contain her excitement that night, but, even so, what I heard from her was no different from what I have heard over and over from working writers. They generally respect what Oprah does. And, in an age that has seen unfettered corporate gluttony and twenty-year-old dot-com billionaires, who would begrudge fiction writers more attention, more respect, even more money and fame? Who could blame them for dreaming (with an appropriate touch of self-mockery) of being Oprah writers?

The Oprah Effect, though very helpful for seasoned writers like Berg, was most significant for first-time novelists like Jacquelyn Mitchard, Melinda Haynes, and Wally Lamb. As Daisy Maryles points out in her year-end analysis of book sales for *Publishers Weekly*, "In fiction, veteran bestseller authors dominate [sales] and for debut novels a nod from Oprah is the only way to real success."²⁰ The only way. In 1999, for

example, the only first novels in the top thirty bestsellers were *White Oleander* and *Mother of Pearl*, both Oprah books. In 2001, the last full year of the Book Club's regular meetings before the format shift, Oprah continued her practice of introducing at least two first-time novelists a year, choosing *Icy Sparks* in March and *Cane River* in June, both impressive first novels, and both deserving of attention from readers and critics. They both became bestsellers, of course, but like most first novels they might have gone virtually unnoticed had it not been for Oprah.

Oprah's Choices

In this continued commitment to giving first-time writers a forum, Oprah took real risks she didn't need to take. Here she made it clear that it was *Not About the Money, Stupid*. Oprah has never had any financial stake in the sales of the books she chooses, but her influence is courted by publishers, who constantly send her potential Oprah books. Though the process of choosing Oprah books is a carefully guarded secret, D.T. Max reported in the *New York Times Magazine* in 1999 that suggestions came from a variety of sources—producers and assistants on the show, neighbors and friends, even other writers. "But most of all," Max writes, "Winfrey reads. She told me her ideal weekend is spent reading three books, back to back. Staffers give the books a rating between 1 and 10, then pass it on to Winfrey. Her vote trumps all."²¹

Max lends credibility to Oprah's repeated claim that she chooses every Book Club book herself and also to her explanation for moving away from the once-a-month contemporary novel format—that she couldn't read enough books to find the ones she was passionate about on that schedule. By the time she signed off the monthly book club, publishers had come to depend on her support, seeking "Oprah-type novels," and, when they found one, shipping it "to everybody they knew at Harpo [Oprah's production company]." There were certainly plenty of Oprah-type novels out there, moderately successful contemporary novels by or about diverse women, novels that had Oprah written all over them.

For that matter, there were and are plenty of nonfiction self-help books that Oprah sends her viewers running to the bookstores for—

Simple Abundance, *Talking Dirty with the Queen of Clean* or anything by Dr. Phil. Books like these, what *Publishers Weekly's* Daisy Maryles called "the familiar balance of spiritual solace, health, comics, and computer instruction," dominated the trade paperback market for years, as I mentioned in the Introduction.²² In 1997, the first full year of Oprah's Book Club, things changed. Maryles noted in her year-end report that there was more fiction among the bestsellers than she had seen in decades—five novels in the top twelve, four of which were Oprah books. By 1999, with *The Pilot's Wife* at number one, there were more novels than self-help books in the top twelve—again, the first time ever the editors could remember seeing this. Here is clear evidence that Oprah influenced America's reading habits, nudging readers toward thoughtful fiction.

As with her selection of first novels and her choice of fiction over self-help, another arena where Oprah took notable risks with the Book Club was in opting regularly for novels by African American writers. Until Alice Walker made waves in the late seventies with *The Color Purple* and Terry McMillan hit it big with *Waiting to Exhale* in 1992, works by African American writers were rarely seen as potential blockbusters. With *Exhale*, *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* in 1996, and *A Day Late and a Dollar Short* in 2001, McMillan changed that. Accompanied later by two black male writers, E. Lynn Harris and Eric Jerome Dickey, she joined the band of writers whose novels would inevitably become bestsellers. Stephen King, for example, has had a top twenty bestseller every year but one since 1979, and Danielle Steel has not missed a year since 1982. Like King, she sometimes has more than one among the yearly top sellers. Robert Ludlum, John Grisham, Mary Higgins Clark, Tom Clancy, Anne Rice, Michael Crichton, and Patricia Cornwell all regularly contribute to the yearly fiction top twenty (and dominate mass market sales, those smaller paperbacks you find in the grocery store).

When McMillan, too, became a sure thing, publishers began to look again at African American writers, assessing their crossover appeal to white audiences. And, while there have been notable recent successes, Toni Morrison is the only African American woman to follow McMillan into the annual top twenty since 1997. Morrison, a decidedly erudite writer, seems an anomaly in the company of Steel and Ludlum.

But her presence there makes sense in the context of Oprah's Book Club. Except for McMillan, the only African American woman novelists appearing regularly on the bestseller lists during the Book Club's first six years were, like Morrison, Oprah writers. Evidently, Oprah not only introduced her writers to new audiences, she introduced her largely white audience to new writers.

And with modest success. Among Oprah's first forty-five Book Club picks, eleven were by African-American writers. Of those, four were Toni Morrison novels, one was Maya Angelou's nonfiction memoir, and one was Cosby's "Little Bill" series of children's books, all quite popular. The remaining five novels, *River, Cross My Heart* by Breena Clark, *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day* by Pearl Cleage, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* by Edwidge Danticat, *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest Gaines, and *Cane River* by Lalita Tademy were less well-known. They stand out in the company of other Oprah books, especially in their serious treatment of social issues, including racism and slavery. And they have been less popular by Oprah's Book Club standards. Each spent twelve weeks or fewer on the *New York Times* bestseller list, though Oprah books generally averaged seventeen. Each totaled between half a million and three-quarters of a million in sales, while Oprah books averaged 1.2 million.²³ Still, for a largely white audience in an industry dominated by white writers, this is a significant inroad and one that demonstrates, again, that Oprah had a meaningful agenda for the Book Club. She could have focused on light fiction by well-known writers and created blockbusters every time. She could have stuck with nonfiction self-help and been influential. She could have played to the comfort zone of a white, middle-class audience. But she didn't.

What Women Want

Then there's the question of gender. When presidential candidates Al Gore and George W. Bush visited Oprah's show in September 2000, they cemented the perception that to reach U.S. women, you have to go through Oprah. And this isn't just the much ballyhooed soccer mom constituency. Oprah's audiences cross class and race boundaries, and her

Chicago-based shows always feature a multiracial, though largely single-gender, audience.

The Book Club choices reflect this demographic. Of her first forty-five Book Club books, thirty-five were by women—twenty-four by white North American women, nine by African American women, one by Moroccan Malika Oufkir, and one by Chilean Isabelle Allende. Of the nine novels by men (excluding, for the sake of clarity, Cosby's three Little Bill books), seven feature a woman central character or narrator. Settings range from rural to urban (leaning rural), U.S. (leaning South) to international (including Europe, South America, South Asia, Africa, Caribbean). But some topics recur—love, motherhood, friendship, self-discovery, overcoming adversity, negotiating difference, surviving.²⁴ It's fair to say that Oprah novels are, in general, by, about, and for women. But not women in a narrow sense, as in "not men," as in Freud's (and Mel Gibson's) famous question: "What do women want?" Instead, Oprah books capture the spirit of the old feminist maxim "Women are people too," the maxim that insists that women's lives and desires, like men's, are complex. Oprah books aim big. They aim for an audience that looks like Oprah's audience—women of all colors, classes, ages, and shapes, women who read and those who just picked up a novel for the first time in years, women like the three I described earlier. But, then, the novel has always been something of a women's genre, in ways I will discuss in chapter two.

Aiming for an audience of women has always been a wise move in the world of novels—if you want to sell books. Elaine Showalter, a leading feminist scholar, speculates that women buy at least 75 percent of novels sold.²⁵ But if it's critical success you're looking for, your chances are not so good if you're a woman novelist. An avid reader of book reviews, I have observed that the critics' lists of the top summer reads, the top Christmas books, and the top 100 books of the past century seem predominantly white and predominantly male—and often unpopular. I suspect some of the popular ones may even be what one writer calls "the emperor's new book," books everyone buys but no one reads.²⁶ To be fair, a few Oprah books might also fit that category. How many people, even with all of Oprah's help, actually finished the difficult *Paradise*?

For me, book reviews are a revealing barometer of U.S. culture. Since novels were first published here, women have dominated American fiction. Literary historians have pointed out that the first American novels, most of the historical all-time bestsellers (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Gone with the Wind*, *Peyton Place*), and the biggest moneymakers were nearly all by women. We buy more novels, read more novels, and write more novels.²⁷ But literature is one place where, even in the United States, more isn't better. More is worse. Less is better. While commercial literary success has been largely a feminine sphere, excellence has traditionally been defined as *the lack of commercial success*—and it has been defined as masculine.²⁸

For some reason, there has been a chasm between what we read—for pleasure, for fun, for entertainment—and what we value, critically praise, or teach in literature classes. Feminist literary historians and critics have spent the past thirty years explaining the circumstances that created this contradiction. It is clear that educated European-American men, especially easterners, controlled the publishing industry, held the critical clout, and ruled the halls of academia. Their tastes were obviously not the tastes of the general public, the immigrants, the working class, the uneducated. But their tastes defined excellence and characterized elite, not in some huge conspiratorial way, but because they naturally sought out what was familiar and comfortable, what they had been educated to like. And, as the Marxist critics say, they controlled the means of production.²⁹

Scholars have explored the ways that all of us came around to their point of view, how we learned to see upper-class European-American taste as superior. And they have set to work debunking what we call the "myth of high culture." My friend Phil Snyder, for example, likes to repeat the postmodernist tease that he can teach critical thinking and literary analysis as well with restaurant menus as with Great Literature. In the best of all possible worlds, though, he would use cowboy novels. The point is, literary studies have lately been infiltrated by scholars who question traditional standards of literary merit, leading to the Culture War, a phenomenon I will discuss further in chapter four. These scholars ask why being popular would undermine a book's quality. Why is a middle-class audience roundly disdained? Why are novels by nonmale,

non-European-American writers generally examined for historical or cultural relevance rather than artistic value? Why does knowledge of Shakespeare or Marcel Proust give you more cultural cachet than knowledge of Kate Chopin or Langston Hughes?

When Oprah began her Book Club, these questions were already changing the way critics looked at literature, creating a climate for women writers and readers unlike any we had seen before in American history. Since then, of course, with Oprah's help, the trend has become much more pronounced. Could it be we are finally carving out a distinguished space for women's talents and tastes in the realm of culture?

Yes and no. Sure, even car commercials have started to address women consumers, and, before the tobacco lawsuit backlash, cigarette companies were coming on to us. The government now pays for breast cancer research and generally makes sure women are included in drug studies. Chick flicks with Julia Roberts or Nicole Kidman get funding, if not respect, while women indie filmmakers get some respect but little funding. There are more women in the Olympics, in medical school, and in college. Political pollsters in the 2000 presidential election reported endlessly on the women's vote and how Bill Clinton got it, and Gore needed it. But I heard the tone that said Clinton liked us like he liked Big Macs—a tawdry popular taste, but not one to indulge if you want to be taken seriously, Bubba. And suddenly differences disappear, and soccer moms elide to "trailer trash"—and the demographic to aim for is privileged, male (acknowledged), and white (unacknowledged). The media aim relentlessly to attract that crucial audience of eighteen-to-thirty-five-year-old men, the *Jackass* and *Punked* crowd. Now why is that always the crucial demographic when we know that women, in recent years, have bought more stuff, swung more elections, and put *Friends* perpetually at the top of the TV ratings?

Not to go off on a Dennis Miller rant, but look at how the vast majority of the cultural elite responded to Oprah's considerable influence on what Americans read. Again, it has been years since we first became aware of this influence. But, even now, Oprah is rarely mentioned at scholarly conferences or in literary journals. There were more sessions about opera (three) than Oprah (zero) on the program for the 2003 Modern Language Association Conference, the conference of conferences for college

professors in languages and literature. And my experience has been that when the Book Club does come up, the reaction is often patronizing or disdainful. After years of serious study of Oprah's Book Club, I could find only risk-inclined graduate students engaged in similar work.

Even in the popular press, the tone when discussing Oprah is generally less than respectful. While Toni Morrison claims that Oprah has begun a reading revolution, D. T. Max in the *New York Times Magazine* calls her "the most successful pitch person in the history of publishing" and focuses on "the therapeutical approach" she takes to her novels.³⁰ Gavin McNett, in the online magazine *Salon*, accuses her of having a narrow appeal—only to women. He writes, "it doesn't require much greatness of soul or much hard thinking . . . for an audience composed entirely of women to identify with the travails of sympathetic feminine characters."³¹ So there it is. An Appalachian mother circa 1900, a teenaged black girl driven to insanity, a homeless, pregnant white woman, a southern preacher's wife in the Congo, a middle-class British woman going through a divorce, an imprisoned Moroccan princess, or an Atlanta hairdresser dying of AIDS are all the same because they're all women. Have uterus, will travel.

Consider the spirit of the commentary on the release of the *Oprah* magazine in the summer of 2000. The *Times* consulted Samir Husni, a professor of media studies at the University of Mississippi. "Oprah is a drug for millions of women," he is quoted as saying. "They need to be reassured and told that everything is OK." No matter how often she does that, he goes on, "the women will still come running."³² Now, I'm not a fan of women's magazines, but I have looked at this one, and I found it impressive—respectful in tone, addressing many and varied women. Nary an article about catching and or keeping a man. Nothing about plastic surgery, the miracles of Botox, or how to be more sexually attractive. If women's magazines are generally a drug, lulling women into ever-newer variants of traditional roles, Oprah's magazine is a bracing blast of fresh air. Take yourself seriously, it says, and take care of yourself. Trust yourself. Leave bad influences behind. Push beyond your limits and reach into the realm of possibility. Look at the Oprah magazine without a jaundiced view of the concerns of middle-aged or middle-class women, and it seems, yes, almost revolutionary.

Certainly there is room for critique here. Her shows are often sentimental and prone to episodes of hugging or weeping, and her Book Club choices were sometimes similarly emotionally facile, even shallow (I confess I have trouble defending *Back Roads* or *Jewel*). She blurs the lines between art and capitalism, discretion and consumerism. She is building a cult of personality. She focuses on identity and self-help, discouraging broader social critique or efforts at political change. Often she hearkens back to the earlier days of her talk show, appealing to the least common denominator. And, perhaps most unforgivably, she makes money doing this. Lots and lots of money. But, as Mary Elizabeth Williams writes in *Salon*, "Oprah, the microphone-wielding, diet-obsessed chat show personality triumphed where so many others disappointed because she was the one who never underestimated the public or its capacity for discovery."³³ Yes, Mr. Barnum, despite her flaws, she has gotten rich by overestimating the American public more often than underestimating it.

It is this version of a democratic spirit that carried Oprah to the heights of success. There is no question that she reaches people, especially women as diverse as the three readers who walked into my local bookstore as I was writing this. She reaches people and challenges them to read. And, better yet, they take up her challenge. My punch line, then, is this. Three women walk into a bookstore—and all three of them buy an Oprah book (though the first one didn't know she was doing it). And (wait for it . . .) you probably have, too. That's how she started a reading revolution. And that's why it is time to stop laughing and start taking Oprah seriously.