

INTRODUCTION

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Oprah's Book Club has officially crossed over; it is now an academic, as well as a cultural, phenomenon. In the last five years, a small but significant number of essays on Oprah's Book Club have appeared in academic journals, including the *African-American Review*, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, *College English*, and *Modern Fiction Studies*. The first book-length study, by Cecilia Konchar Farr, *Reading Oprah: How Oprah's Book Club Changed the Way America Reads*, was published in 2004 (SUNY), followed closely by *Reading with Oprah: The Book Club That Changed America* by Kathleen Rooney (Arkansas 2005). The recent *The Oprah Phenomenon* (Kentucky 2007) has a section dedicated to study of the Book Club. And here you are reading *The Oprah Affect*.

This growing academic attention is heartening. It certainly took literary scholars and critics a while to notice what publishers, writers, librarians, and readers began, as early as 1997, to call the most important influence on literacy in the past fifty years. Unfortunately, when we turn our attention to Oprah, literary scholars tend to identify the Book Club as a media phenomenon rather than a literary one, or as an unprecedented merger of literature and commercialism. It is much more.

Oprah's Book Club is, in fact, the latest in a series of reading events that highlight a long-standing debate about the definition and purpose of literature in American culture. This debate pits readers who want books that engage them emotionally or socially against those who seek books grounded in shared aesthetic or national values. Over the last two hundred years, the tension has grown between the sentimental and the formal, the passionate

and the dispassionate, the commercially successful and the underappreciated. Early on, novels became rich fodder for the debate because they could provide access to both the affective and the aesthetic, an emotional connection and an experience of individual delight. While underappreciated novels are well represented in most formulations of the American literary canon, other novels, often lost to today's readers, represent a shadow tradition, always present in those formulations but not frequently acknowledged except as foils. In this shadow tradition, readers are drawn to literature's affect. They value novels they can take personally, novels that can speak to, challenge or transform their lives, novels that entertain them with lively stories or call them into political or social awareness, even action.

Though these conflicting literary desires certainly cross national boundaries, they are particularly striking in an American context. The surprising success of Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple*, often cited as the first American novel, is illustrative. Here was a seduction novel so real to its readers that they had to invent a gravesite at which to grieve their cherished fictional heroine (Davidson xiii). By the mid-nineteenth century, enthusiasm for this kind of affective novel-reading had become so pervasive in the United States that Abraham Lincoln is said to have teasingly given the novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe credit for starting the Civil War.¹ But *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is only the most famous of a host of politically charged sentimental novels, including slave narratives and captivity tales, which have inspired readers, especially women readers, over the last two centuries.²

In the first half of the twentieth century, for example, the *Woman's Home Companion* became the most successful women's magazine of its day, with a circulation of about one million, because its editor, Gertrude Lane, was a particularly avid patron of popular writers like Dorothy Canfield, Pearl Buck, Edna Ferber, Kathleen Norris, and Willa Cather.³ These women novelists tended to operate outside the cutting-edge modernist milieu that has come to define that age in literary studies. They freely used mainstream institutions, like women's magazines and the Book-of-the-Month Club, to connect with their readers. And it worked; existing fan letters demonstrate the devotion readers had for such novelists.⁴

Feminist consciousness-raising novels of the 1970s represent another manifestation of this affective tradition; writers such as Marge Piercy, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Rita Mae Brown, and Marilyn French encouraged their women readers to rethink their lives and reframe their politics, and their readers took up the challenge in informal "CR" groups. The politics of these novels became more radical than those of the novels of the early twenti-

eth century, but the central faith that fiction could challenge, transform, and change one's life remained.⁵

Indeed, as long as there has been a novel in the United States, critics and authors have railed against what they characterized as the effeminate influence of women's reading and writing communities, a group Nathaniel Hawthorne, in an 1855 letter, famously dubbed "that damned mob of scribbling women." Jane Tompkins's formulation of the debate, in her landmark essay "Sentimental Power," resonates across two centuries; canonical literary study, she writes, has taught "generations of students to equate popularity with debasement, emotionality with ineffectiveness, religiosity with fakery, domesticity with triviality, and all of these, implicitly, with womanly inferiority" (123). Even when men were the readers or the writers (as many have been all along), they suffered from association with this tradition.⁶

Observers of Oprah's Book Club will certainly find this feminized shadow tradition familiar—the enthusiastic embracing of novels, the passionate identification with characters and social causes, and the sense of connection readers feel with their favorite writers.⁷ They will also recognize the critical disdain for all things popular and feminine.⁸ Oprah, in other words, is a landmark literary influence in contemporary society, but she is not an unprecedented one. In the context of American literary history, Oprah's Book Club stands, not as an egregious undermining of who we are and what we represent, but as the latest manifestation of a long tradition that deploys affect, affinity, accessibility, and activism in the symbiotic relationships of readers and texts. Powered by women writers and readers, it attracts crowds, sells well, and makes unabashed appeals to emotion.

This characteristic in particular, the appeal to emotion, has been a flash-point in discussions of the aesthetic value of novels. Immersed in the human condition as a generic imperative, the novel must count strong emotional response as a generic hazard. When readers were reduced to tears reading Stowe or Dickens, that was, for them, a sign of a good novel. For the critics, it was a mark of inferiority—in Dickens's case, a minor misstep for an otherwise competent novelist, in Stowe's, the manifestation of her failure as an artist. It was much smarter to avoid emotional responses altogether, with the stoicism of the naturalists or the modernists. Yet Oprah's insistence on the value of emotion to reading has been characteristic of her Book Club from its first meeting in November 1996, when readers encountered what Oprah called a "mother's worst nightmare," a child abduction, in Jacqueline Mitchard's *Deep End of the Ocean*. While critics have suggested that focusing on emotional (or, in Farr's formulation, empathic) response is to be

immersed in a therapeutic, as opposed to a literary, environment, Oprah's Book Club regularly uses novels as a way to link emotion and intellect. Indeed, the very notion that these are two mutually exclusive modes is part of an Enlightenment inheritance that feminists have long critiqued for its gendered assumptions. Similarly, the critical rejection of emotion as sentimental has been a defining characteristic of the "literary" since that category was applied to novels, but especially since the modernist movement.

If the move toward emotion is specious, Oprah's next characteristic move, to reshape individual emotions into communal experiences, is even more suspect. The experience of Oprah's Book Club—its emphasis on affinity with other readers and with Oprah—has been a stumbling block for critics, who traditionally tend to think of reading as a private expression of personal taste. To consider reading a communal experience inspires suspicion; Orwellian groupthink, inspired by consumer capitalism, may erase individuality, replacing it with a repressive, unitary mode of reading. Sales of books through big box retailers and bookstore chains had already raised this specter when millions of readers began reading the same book because Oprah said to.

But social reading is also a defining characteristic of the shadow tradition of literature, beginning in earnest with the nineteenth-century women's club movement and coming to flower with the recent phenomenal popularity of book clubs across the United States. These communities of readers have been distinguished by women's passion around books, as sociologist Elizabeth Long demonstrated in her recent study, *Book Clubs*. She notes that "by looking at women's reading groups . . . one can see people in the process of creating new connections, new meanings, and new relationships—to the characters in the books or their authors, to themselves, to the other members of the group, to the society and culture in which they live" (22). Oprah's Book Club carefully followed its book club predecessors in format. Not only did it insist on connection through sisterly bonding and shared personal insights for all of its readers, but the smaller meetings of Oprah and the author with four or five chosen readers were regularly filmed in a studio that resembled a living room, with large comfortable chairs and couches and the remains of a shared dinner off to the side.

Long's book and several studies of reading practices before it have dramatically reshaped how literary scholars think about reading. Beginning with Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance*, reception historians have shown how reading is defined by cultural mores. The meaning of texts, in other words, is defined not by the words themselves but by the community of readers who

construct that text—and this is as true of self-consciously literary communities like college classrooms as of book clubs in neighborhoods, at churches, or in gay and lesbian community centers. Reading, these critics argue, has always been social and communal, and the cultural work of fiction, to borrow Jane Tompkins's phrase, has engaged readers in larger social questions. The tenet that novels are an act of communication as well as of artistic creation is central to reception theory. Perhaps even more than poetry or short stories, a novel's structure is embedded in a larger culture. To emphasize the social and communal aspects of novel, then, is not to corrupt it, but to honor its tradition and history.

With their emphasis on what occupies "the general reader," reception studies also lead to questions about access. The legacy of the myth of the Romantic artist, the assumption that true art is by and for the privileged few and not the philistine masses, was reinvigorated by influential factions of modernists and postmodernists in the twentieth century. The critical stance that "if too many people like it, it can't be good" is, in many ways, a response to the rise of consumer culture and anxiety around that culture's effect on literature.⁹ Though Oprah's Book Club tangled with literary value, moving to an all-classics format for several years (2003–2005) before returning to contemporary best sellers, it clearly grows out of a tradition that values art as a meaningful, indeed essential, part of many people's lives. A best-selling novel is, in this formulation, a best-*loved* novel, one that speaks to a wide audience and constructs a communal experience. We propose here that there may, indeed, be an art to accessibility, one that literary critics haven't yet examined fully.

Critics have also found rich fields for exploration in the activism that sometimes results from these powerful social connections around shared texts. The move toward multiculturalism in college curricula in the late twentieth century, for example, sprang from the belief that students could better negotiate cultural barriers if they could vicariously experience gender and racial difference through reading. Bridging these differences has also been an overt agenda of Oprah's Book Club, from its second meeting where the shared text for the predominantly white audience was Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* to a more recent meeting around Sidney Poitier's memoir, *The Measure of a Man*. As many of the chapters in this volume attest, Oprah's intervention into American letters is profoundly evangelical; not only does she insist her that her audience confront personal and social issues (race and gender in particular), but she was also never coy about wanting the Book Club to accomplish nothing less than a transformation of Americans' leisure

habits, from mass media back to print culture. Oprah's right to claim this authority to transform lives, literature, and culture has been a recurring question for cultural critics, but her intention is, again, consistent with the history of the novel.

The chapters in this collection investigate these interlocking issues of affect, affinity, accessibility, and activism with originality and vigor. Juxtaposing book history, reading practices, literary analysis, feminist criticism, communication, and political, religious, and cultural studies, the authors map an exciting range and possibilities for future research on Oprah's Book Club.

Juliette Wells and Virginia Wells's "Oprah in the Public Library" looks at Oprah's effect on library patrons and their book selections. A literary critic and a librarian, the authors use the Fairfax County Public Library in northern Virginia as a case study of the Oprah effect, how the Book Club's choices affected libraries and gave librarians new inroads for expanding readership. They offer conclusions on how librarians (and others) can use these best-loved Oprah novels as lessons for buying, displaying, and recommending books, thus increasing their accessibility.

In "Talking Readers," a chapter from *Reading Oprah*, Cecilia Konchar Farr emphasizes that, in reading for connection, Oprah's Book Club reignited the novel's "talking life" by involving readers in conversations about books. Starting with Oprah's encounter with Jonathan Franzen, Farr offers an alternate view of literary value that cherishes emotional as well as intellectual engagement. Oprah's reading practices are valuable, she argues, *because* they build on readers' current consumption practices.

In "Reading Religiously: The Ritual Practices of Oprah's Book Club," Kathryn Lofton analyzes how Oprah's Book Club uses rituals of affinity to construct a community of readers. The "aha" moment is the key to transformation through the Book Club, she argues; reading communally and religiously helps to solve readers' personal dilemmas. These reading practices create an imperative for activism; after reading with the Book Club or watching Oprah, Lofton concludes, "it seems imperative to *do* something."

Yung-Hsing Wu is also interested in the communal potential of Oprah's Book Club. In "The Romance of Reading Like Oprah," she examines the ethics of reading practices on the Book Club and Oprah's emphasis on "what books can do for us." By examining online discussions of selected books, she concludes that Oprah's Book Club creates a communal experience for reading without standardizing that experience.

R. Mark Hall, too, finds value in the varied and often emotional responses of readers, on television and on the related message boards, to

three Oprah novels, *Where the Heart Is*, *The Reader*, and *The Bluest Eye*. In his chapter, "Oprah's Book Selections: Teliteliterature for *The Oprah Winfrey Show*," Hall analyzes how Oprah's Book Club provides a forum for reading that is grounded not just in optimism, but in ethics.

Michael Perry's "Resisting Paradise: Toni Morrison, Oprah Winfrey, and the Middlebrow Audience" provides a detailed study of the Book Club meeting around Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, a complex and difficult book that challenged Oprah readers. Perry contrasts the reading conventions of book clubs with the reading conventions of the classroom, and analyzes how *Paradise* abandoned the egalitarian nature of book clubs for a more hierarchical lesson led by experts. This betrayal of trust, in Perry's formulation, highlights the contradiction between Winfrey's emphasis on affinity and readerly pleasure and penchant for education.

Returning to the idea of affect and connection, Kimberly Chabot Davis argues in "Oprah's Book Club and the Politics of Cross-Racial Empathy" that emotions are essential, not antithetical, to political action. Rooting her analysis in the Book Club's televised encounters of white women with black fiction, Davis argues that critics would do well to reconsider their disdain for the sentimental and recognize that "such cross-racial empathetic identifications in the private sphere could play a crucial role in galvanizing support for anti-racist public policy in America." Affect, then, for Davis, leads to activism.

Timothy Aubry's "Beware the Furrow of the Middlebrow: Searching for Toni Morrison's *Paradise* on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*" demonstrates that reading in community holds a similar utopic promise to that of Morrison's fictional community. At once difficult and accessible, *Paradise* requires "a kind of hard labor that will not thwart but rather attract readers, and that the labor will continue even when the book ends." Rather than violating the conventions of book clubs, as Perry argues, *Paradise* represents the height of the communal book club experience, providing a bridge between serious literature and middlebrow culture.

Ana Patricia Rodríguez continues this interest in race and Oprah's Book Club in "Did Isabel Allende Write this Book for Me?" Analyzing both Allende's *Daughter of Fortune* and the discussion of the novel on Oprah's Book Club, Rodríguez challenges the mass-media construction of multiculturalism and its easy move toward individualism and the preeminent value of self-made fortunes. Oprah's Book Club, in this case, erased difference by mainstreaming an American success story, but also, even if inadvertently, provided openings for unintended valences of difference.

Kelley Penfield Lewis, in her careful observation of two Book Club programs, *House of Sand and Fog* and *Drowning Ruth*, notes a similar flattening of differences in Oprah's Book Club. She observes the constraints of Oprah's reading practices and contrasts them with those of professional literary critics. Her conclusion considers not only what we might learn from the success of the Book Club but also what the dominance of Oprah's reading practices could mean for our larger literate culture.

Kate Douglas's "Your Book Changed My Life: Everyday Literary Criticism and Oprah's Book Club" argues that the Book Club, by putting the everyday reader front and center, has joined forces with other contemporary cultural practices (customer comments on amazon.com, for example) to challenge the hegemony of professional literary critics to decide what books are best. In contrast to Lewis, Douglas celebrates the "everyday literary criticism" of Oprah's Book Club as empowering to nonprofessional readers.

Returning with careful attention to Oprah's encounter with Jonathan Franzen, Kevin Quirk's "Correcting Oprah: Jonathan Franzen and the Uses of Literature in the Therapeutic Age" posits that the eruption of this conflict exposed a broader cultural resistance to the Book Club's "therapeutic multiculturalism." Franzen's anxiety about American culture as therapeutic and multicultural preceded *The Corrections*, but his "solution," to value literature as the only effective therapy, linked him with Oprah in surprising and uncomfortable ways. Franzen's careful reconstructions of *The Corrections* suggest that he has more in common with Oprah's Book Club than he let on in his public comments, and complicates the opposition of "therapeutic" and "literary" on which his Oprah rejection depended.

Simon Stow considers the democratic implications of reading in "The Way We Read Now: Oprah Winfrey, Intellectuals, and Democracy." By contrasting Oprah's reading practices with those modeled by democracy champions like Martha Nussbaum, Richard Rorty, and Gayatri Spivak, Stow suggests that Oprah's Book Club, with its emphasis on discussion rather than debate, and conversation rather than correct interpretation, is a better reading practice to inspire insight and empathy in the practice of liberal democracy. Its accessibility and inspiration to activism make it a crucial literary intervention in American culture.

Kathleen Rooney's "Everything Old Is New Again: Oprah's Book Club Returns with the Classics," an excerpt from *Reading with Oprah*, examines Oprah's move from contemporary fiction to classics and what that move revealed about the divide between highbrow and lowbrow literature. Oprah's

refusal to define a “classic,” Rooney suggests, is a democratic impulse that views culture not as fixed but as fluid and interactive.

Finally, Jaime Harker’s Afterword “Oprah, James Frey, and the Problem of the Literary” considers a more recent crisis of Oprah’s Book Club: James Frey’s falsified memoir. Frey’s deception, Harker argues, was an addiction to the literary modes of masculinity, modes that contradict the basic assumptions of Oprah’s Book Club. Oprah’s selection of the text reflects her own struggles with establishing her authority in the Book Club, and suggests that her activist impulse has been thwarted by repeated attacks. An articulation of her own gendered literary and activist agenda, Harker suggests, could help avoid pretentiously masculine fantasies like *A Million Little Pieces*.

In these chapters, common themes about Oprah’s Book Club emerge—its emphasis on emotion; its insistence on personalizing the novel; its interest in novels as fodder for issues; its general avoidance of the formal qualities of a text; its focus on Oprah as a prism for experience; its opposition to the literary establishment; its primary focus as didactic and therapeutic. But the chapters also share a healthy disagreement about the aims and effects of Oprah’s Book Club.

Timothy Aubry finds the difficulty of *Paradise* an inspiring example of what Oprah’s Book Club can do for readers, while Michael Perry sees it a betrayal of the trust and egalitarianism that had marked the book club thus far. Kelley Lewis finds the disconnect between online chat rooms and the television show of Oprah’s Book Club a disturbing example of how the Book Club’s reading practices forestall other interpretations, while R. Mark Hall reads this same difference as a positive example of how readers can gain a variety of benefits from the Book Club beyond the standard message. Kimberly Davis finds Oprah’s encouragement of cross-racial empathy a compelling model for political activism, while Ana Patricia Rodríguez is concerned about a sanitized multiculturalism replacing the complex and persistent reality of institutional racism. Simon Stow contrasts the monolithic readings of professional literary critics unfavorably with the open-ended conversation of Book Club participants, while Kevin Quirk’s chapter undermines the distinction between “literary” and “therapeutic” on which Stow’s comparison depends. Cecilia Konchar Farr and Simon Stow find Oprah’s Book Club an inspiring model for cultural democracy; Kathryn Lofton reads it as a consciously religious construction of community; Kathleen Rooney sees a mindful embrace of fluid cultural boundaries; Kate Douglas celebrates an affinity for the ordinary readers; Juliette and Virginia Wells

note a dramatic increase in reading. And while Farr, Lofton, Wu, Douglas, and Hall all find the reading practices of Oprah's Book Club empowering for individual readers, Lewis, Perry, and Rodriguez are concerned about how these reading practices may leave readers at the mercy of an ideology of empowerment that actually obscures real oppressions.

These differences are a strength of the collection, we believe, because they demonstrate the diversity of Oprah's Book Club—its book selections, its television portrayals, its readers, and its aims. The chapters' conclusions depend very much upon which episode(s), and which book(s), they focus on. Indeed, simple summaries about the purpose, nature, and consequences of Oprah's Book Club become increasingly untenable the more one reads both critical essays and the books and episodes that inspire them. Oprah's Book Club is a complex cultural phenomenon that cannot be simply described or dismissed, and it invites future investigation and study.

We would like this collection to challenge literary critics to confront Oprah's Book Club as part of an ongoing and important American literary tradition that has been coded as sentimental. Literary critics have thwarted the development of the culture of the book in America because we have tended to marginalize the books people love. Anxiety about America's ability to foster great art has been a dominant critical mode since Van Wyck Brooks wrote "America's Coming of Age" in 1915. But if we are so afraid of our cultural heritage being defined by the shallow consumerist values of McDonald's or Wal-Mart that we don't claim movements like Oprah's Book Club, we lose the chance to investigate and appreciate the unique American literary culture we have. This mass cultural, consumerist, social engagement with literature is an essential part of the American literary tradition, and *The Oprah Affect* seeks to articulate and even embrace that vibrant, accessible tradition.

Notes

1. For more on Harriet Beecher Stowe, see Joan Hedrick's *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*.

2. For an introduction to eighteenth-century women readers and writers, see Cathy Davidson's *Revolution and the Word*.

3. For more on the *Woman's Home Companion*, see chapter one, "Progressive Middlebrow," in Jaime Harker's *America the Middlebrow: Women's Novels, Progressivism, and Middlebrow Authorship Between the Wars*.

4. For one example of fan letters, see Jennifer Parchesky's "The Business of Living and the Labor of Love: Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Feminism, and Middle-Class Redemption."

5. See Lisa Hogeland's *Feminism and Its Fictions: The Consciousness-Raising Novel and the Women's Libertaion Movement*.

6. And, though women readers and writers were central to this tradition, it freely crossed gender lines, as with the novels of William Dean Howells and John Steinbeck, and, most recently, in the striking success of Dan Brown's novel *The DaVinci Code*, a politically engaged and mildly sensationalized reworking of Christian history that has readers flocking to churches in France and the U.K. to visit the sites where its fictionalized events take place.

7. Some selected studies include Mary Kelley's *Private Woman, Public Stage*; Amy Kaplan's *The Social Construction of American Realism*; Bonnie Kime Scott's *The Gender of Modernism*; Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's three-volume *No Man's Land*; and Molly Hite's *The Other Side of the Story*.

8. This is not to say that women writers are not represented in traditional formulations of literary canon. Women were responsible for the first and most popular American novels and have been at the center of every major American literary movement. Beginning in the nineteenth century with romanticism, writers such as Catherine Maria Sedgwick and Harriet Beecher Stowe defined their age; the contemporary conception of realism is constructed with reference to Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton as well as earlier women regionalists like Rebecca Harding Davis and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman. Women were influential modernists, through the experimental writings of Gertrude Stein and Djuna Barnes, as well as the more realist novels of Willa Cather and Zora Neale Hurston. And they have added nuance and depth to postmodernism, through the novels of Kathy Acker, Louise Erdrich, and Toni Morrison, among many others.

9. Jonathan Franzen's ambivalence about being selected by Oprah's Book Club epitomizes this anxiety—he worried that being seen as too accessible, and too much of a women's novelist, would undermine his claim to be a "literary" writer. The gap between "accessible" and "literary" was, for him, unbridgeable, though in a 1996 essay for *Harper's* magazine he had publicly imagined constructing such a bridge via a successful and socially engaged novel.

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