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Middlebrow Reading and The Power of Feeling

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***A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club: Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire.* By Janice A. Radway. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. 424 pages \$34.95 cloth. \$16.95 paper.**

The seriousness of sociology articles taps into your emotions if you can get beyond the statistics. The emotions of the novels tap into your seriousness, your awareness that this is reality.

—Megan Olson, sociology major, UC Santa Barbara.

As the author of the renowned *Reading the Romance*, Janice Radway must have had to decide whether to call this book *The Romance of Reading*. She made the right decision, and yet romantic, magical reading is the topic on which this book excels. The volume has great value as a history of the Book-of-the-Month Club and of the formation of middle class culture as "middlebrow" culture. It offers special insight into the techniques by which American publishers managed to commodify books as objects which claim to reach beyond the world of commodities. But it is the best book I know on the mind altering powers of reading for pleasure.

I did not expect this when I sat down to read four hundred pages on the internal workings and social effects of the Book-of-the-Month Club. I knew from the initial reviews that Radway's book describes the creation of middlebrow literature as a new and controversial hybrid of "serious" commercial writing, but I had a hard time imagining the book [End Page 910] offering the drama of a high-stakes cultural conflict. My default association with the term "middlebrow" is the conventional, the normal, the complacent, the conformist. My second association is with the frustration I have felt in my own research when I have examined workplace forms of middlebrow normalcy, looked for something—anything—expansive, unruly, or self-transcending, and I found lots and lots of disgruntled, passive-aggressive commitment to existing structures. I figured that Radway would be making the same kind of effort and braced myself for insightful but necessarily convoluted depictions of the Book-of-the-Month Club as a hotbed of grey flannel rebels, of would-be middle class radicals and "independent thinkers" forever unhappy with the culture of corporate capitalism and yet forever unable to imagine something better. How threatening could the middlebrow

be?

But Part I of *A Feeling For Books* was a revelation. Radway bases this section on sustained ethnographic contact with the club's editors--with their reports, their conversations, their editorial meetings, their ideas in discussions with her. The result is a series of usually secret passions suddenly brought to light. Describing a report from editor Joe Savago, Radway exclaims,

What *is* wrong with being moved? I secretly applauded Joe's refusal of the familiar, ironic pose of caustic disdain for all things sentimental and of the implicit superiority that goes with declaring oneself above such easy pleasure. . . . I loved the sheer energy and campy exuberance of Joe's flamboyant, operatic excess. Joe did not seem to be afraid of feeling, and neither did any of his colleagues. (32)

Savago's exhilaration sustained critique and judgment, while suspending the hierarchy on which most critics think judgment depends. His feelings stayed tied to the feelings and judgements of others, and they brought Savago into a psychological proximity with other lives that allowed him to see unexpected things.

By concentrating on the editors at the club (rather than upper management, support staff, and so on), Radway tells a very unusual story about the literary professional-managerial class (PMC). She unearths an aspect of PMC psychology that is almost always viewed as fake or ineffectual, namely, the passions that can supersede predictable white-collar ambivalence. Radway explores their exhilaration at the unexpected, their emotions that leapt the banks of analytical categories, their head-over-heels careening through a book's new world, their **[End Page 911]** secular raptures, their partly utopian visions. Part I links reading to the emotional charge that not only connects people at an affective level but, while the charge lasts, can erode social distinctions, override institutional logics, allow us to change other people and, even the hardest of things, allow us to change ourselves.

Radway contrasts these passionate yet for-profit editorial reports with non-profit academic writing, which she describes as emotionally desiccated and repressed. But we should not be too distracted by this division, as were a couple of early reviewers.¹

PMC culture exists on both sides of the academic hedges, and Radway is not simply preferring the expressionism of non-academic writing to the restraint or repression that prevails in learned journals. She prefers the particular kinds of feelings that undermine a rigid middle class individualism, an individualism most of us wrongly think middlebrow readers wholeheartedly support:

While [the editors] value learning and seriousness above all else, they did not approve of intellectual achievement if it enforced a distance from the pleasures of the body or hindered affective connection between people. . . . Books at the Book-of-the-Month Club, like books in that secret space of my grade school library, appeared before me as magical objects. In both places, reading seemed to exist as an uncanny pleasure, an act that was weirdly private but deeply social as well. What gave the editors the greatest pleasure, I thought, was a feeling of transport and betweenness, a feeling of being suspended between the self and the world, a state where the one

flowed imperceptibly into the other, a place where clear boundaries were obscured. Good reading . . . stressed immersion and connection, communication and response. (114-17)

Middlebrow reading generates feelings that are reparative rather than paranoid, interactive rather than competitive, open-ended rather than controlling.² And the reader experiences these feelings as freedom.

Society is such a vast reality that most of us see these moments of emotion-driven transport as passing fantasies soon to be overwhelmed by the bureaucratic rationality of our social institutions. Radway does not claim that the readerly feelings of the Book-of-the-Month Club judges transform either the club's structure or the market system in which the club operates. To the contrary, she shows how the club has succeeded by integrating reading into the market and turning serious fiction into a commodity. And yet I did not take her demonstration to show that the commodified book and the market-adapted individual **[End Page 912]** simply cancel out readerly consciousness in a final enfolding of the imagination by institutions, though this enfolding is readily available through an American studies historiography influenced by Foucault and Bourdieu. It is more accurate to view Radway's claims for the "feeling for books" as describing a middlebrow reader's negative relation to her own social existence.

The negative is a stage in a dynamic or dialectical understanding of society that Adorno, Marcuse, and others have identified as the felt rejection of what is. This is quite different from the negativity of the abstract, disinterested citizen associated with the republican notions of the public sphere that continue to influence American studies.³ As a form of negation, Marcuse writes,

the aesthetic dimension can serve as a sort of gauge for a free society. A universe of human relationships no longer mediated by the market. . . [will demand] a sensitivity receptive to forms and modes of reality which thus far have been projected only by the aesthetic imagination.⁴

The crucial point is that the "aesthetic dimension"--where thought and feeling temporarily escape everyday instrumentality--cannot be dismissed for failing in itself to transform the reality which it evades. It offers a "gauge" of freedom rather than actual political or social freedom. A later stage may develop this negativity into an alternative system, but the negative moment opened up through Radway's sense of readerly experience anticipates without attempting this construction. These negative (and simultaneously utopian) feelings make the search for actual freedom possible and perhaps inevitable.

The impassioned middle class reader who stays up late to finish a John Updike novel may still pink-slip employees and reject his daughter's career plans in the morning. But such business-as-usual should not discredit what he felt the night before. Enjoying his book, this passionate reader went beyond the book's literal content--the grey flannel society of Updike's wayward suburbanites--by experiencing representations of ordinary life and existing society minus normal psychological features like detachment, hierarchy, competition, accumulation, repression, mastery, and superiority. Inhabiting an altered emotional sphere, the middlebrow reader knew--

felt--that a different world could come into existence. He knew what that world might look like. And he felt he would prefer it to the one he has.

The reader's states of negativity and of utopian feeling are not **[End Page 913]** "merely" psychological. In Part II, Radway shows that the Book-of-the-Month Club succeeded by materializing an institution to serve and express the emotional states of the developing PMC. Here she offers a history of the club's founding and development in the 1920s. She also engages with current theories about commodity capitalism and the PMC, and provides some interesting refinements--and an important gendering--of existing views. But the biggest achievement of the book's middle section is to show in detail how books that have been brought into capitalist markets as commodities continue to have "non-capitalist" effects.⁵ Radway's argument is especially impressive when she shows how the editors' feeling for books survived the club's modes of commercializing them. Her argument is extraordinary when she shows how commercialization made new feelings possible.

An older notion of high culture, she writes, espoused an individualism of "special particularities and cherished idiosyncrasies" (179), of the "autonomous, self-regulating, and self-determining individual" (182). The Book-of-the-Month Club retained this notion of individual character but brought it into contact with the abstract, impersonal forces of commodity capitalism, forces that overshadowed and even determined individual character. The result has been a contradictory individual who seeks both to control and have contact with different social groups--who not only feels but feels "for others" (283). Radway calls this condition "personalism" rather than individualism. Personalism, she says, "functioned to counter the singularity of individuals and to meliorate their separation from one another by insisting always on their capacity for identification" (284). The middlebrow reader does not simply dream of affect and adventures while reading the book; he or she imagines concrete individuality through emotionally experienced connections to organizations. Commercialization creates a collision between the high culture idea of individual self-fashioning and capitalism's inexorable collectivization of economic life. The middlebrow reader must continuously cope with this fraught conjunction of individualism and collectivity, in which the collective both torments the self and promises the self release from its competitive smallness. The Book-of-the-Month Club discovered and distributed the books that made this hybridized "personalism" possible. It brought this personalism into its own business organization and into the commodity system overall.

Radway's elaboration in Part I of the middle class's dissonant emotions led me to expect that, in the historically-oriented Part II, she **[End Page 914]** would retrofit our theories of commodity culture to the club's actual practices. I expected that Part II would move from unveiling feelings to assembling the institutional histories in which these feelings occur. Instead, she welds club history to existing theories of commodity culture. If Part I was the scholarly equivalent of the Tunnel of Love, Part II is the steel wheel of social history.

In a fateful move, Radway shifts her attention from the affects of connection to the "fundamental logic of cultural distinction" (173). This logic has received constant

attention from Weber and Veblen at one end of the century to Foucault and Bourdieu at the other; it has had a strong influence on American studies. In most accounts of "distinction," the middle class's main reason for consuming culture is to display its superiority to the masses of ordinary folks through its "accession to middle class comfort and [its] command of middle class refinement" (161). This motive boils down to a commodity-distinction complex, in which culture, like any other object of consumption, promises status distinction to its consumer. The complex, in this view, is manipulated by cultural managers who use the languages of taste and refinement to naturalize the ongoing absorption of cultural artifacts into commodity markets and to naturalize the standard class hierarchies that go with them.

In Part II, Radway claims that the feeling for books doesn't erode boundaries but reinforces them. Middlebrow reading appears here as a "sorting or gatekeeping behavior," as continuous with the bureaucratic distribution of information, as supportive of instrumental rationality, and as reinventing the "disciplinary individual" (197-98). Commercial reading helps turn the old middle class and its belief in individual character into a professional-managerial class which exists to control a hierarchical society through a cultural expertise sanctioned by turning a profit. While the emerging PMC of the 1920s used the rhetoric of disinterestedness, special expertise, and "democracy to argue that they were extending culture to those who might not otherwise have access to it" (253), they actually exercised undemocratic forms of cultural authority. The formal *motives* of club leadership often included openness, public service, and devotion to the readers' pleasure. But the social effect of these views, in most of Part II, did not sharply distinguish club leaders from the elitist cultural guardians they opposed. The leadership sought a wider circle of readers, but they too managed culture in a way that reinforced their own social position (297).

[End Page 915]

I have no doubt that Radway is right to see the PMC's main social function as managing consumption and distinction. (This was true for both the Book-of-the-Month Club leadership and their opponents.) But do their motives and affects and self-doubts matter? Part I said yes, but Part II is much less sure. I wish it were. It is important that Radway explores how the commodified book reinforces status distinctions, but this does not in itself say anything about the affects of connection and reparation that Part I showed these books producing. And yet the plot in Part II interprets the club as a means of PMC social control. The reader's feelings of connection appear as provisional fantasies or nostalgia for a childhood world of "security and stability" (289).

It occurred to me that Radway had departed from her ethnographic conclusions in Part I because of the powerful gravity of American studies as a field. In that conceptual field, affects are almost always absorbed into the commodity-distinction system. Nearly all of us working in the field assume that society is big and feelings are small. Or we work with our own version of that corrupt abstraction "homo economicus," in which rational self-interest rules all other feelings. Or we accept the downsized Foucauldian axiom that liberatory desires do not so much express genuine transgressions of a system as they are part of that system's complex but undisturbed operation: we can be disturbed, we can struggle, we can contest, we can imagine

being free, but we do not in fact become more free. Whatever our assumptions, few American studies scholars produce evidence that PMC readers actually experience the affects of status distinction or that these displays lead to conservation and containment in the social world. We usually review the recorded opinions of the senders and ignore the receivers—at least when they are members of the PMC. We fall back on the pervasive cultural studies version of "authorial intention," in which the reader's beliefs are largely irrelevant.

All this confused me because Radway stands for the opposite opinions, as does the field of cultural studies, which—to contradict itself—occasionally claims that readers matter, they resist conventional wisdom, they think as they please, and we should study them. Also, Radway is intensely suspicious of applying academic methodologies to nonacademic readers. I decided that it probably wasn't American studies that was bending the trajectory of Part II; I decided it was the force field of PMC culture itself. Hyper-awareness of the commodity-distinction complex is a major feature of PMC life; after all, it is our **[End Page 916]** greatest creation. We experience our higher feelings, but we see their default objective as better management. Cultural analysts do not generate neutral, scholarly stories of a PMC-managed commodity culture. We generate stories of commodity culture, in which we describe the disciplining of our own emotions as the logic of the commodity.

Well, I thought, if anyone could insist on the continued operation of unruly passions within the commodity-distinction process, it would be Radway. But as I read on, I kept thinking that it was going to be hard for Part III to undo a commodity-distinction complex that had been this thoroughly and brilliantly installed. My worries about Part III increased.

And in fact, in Part III, Radway, a pioneer of reader ethnography, does not offer an ethnography of current and active Book-of-the-Month Club readers.⁶ She does not report on whether the commodity-distinction model fits the actual uses to which readers put the club's selections. I was dying to know: do the readers experience the passions of connection and change like Savago did. Do they use the books to express their "command of cultural and intellectual capital" and as a "measure of specialized knowledge and expertise" (295)? Above all, did they manage to link their feelings for books to their feelings for work, for family, for the rest of their lives? Radway does not try to answer these questions by interviewing the club membership. She addresses her questions to a stand-in for them—her own adolescent self, reconstructed by her adult self in acts of professional analysis.

The reparative emotions do struggle to reappear. Reading Marjorie Morningstar in 1964, she writes, "taught me how to want." She learned that "girls, too, can desire openly, and not just sexually but in a manner more oriented to the external world, where meaningful and significant work are held out as the ultimate goal" (330). This sounds right to me. But as Radway continues, these kinds of feelings are dissolved into the commodity-distinction complex. The bedridden girl Radway who wanted meaningful work, "commitment, and a kind of hearty camaraderie" is seen by the adult Radway to have actually wanted "the new professional's world of knowledge, culture, cosmopolitanism, and intellectual sophistication" (331). The language of this

description is so close to the adult PMC cultural theory of Part II that it felt to me imposed on Radway's younger self.

Something similar happens to her reading of *To Kill a Mockingbird*: "For all its interest in empowering girls and Negroes, Harper Lee's **[End Page 917]** novel finally assents to the rule of a learned and compassionate elite," an elite formed in "the image of a learned white man" (346). I agree with this as a description of the PMC's reflexive institutional politics, but it does not amount to a reading of the emotions the book has inspired in either adolescents or adults. Radway's titles reminded me that I read some of the same books as a bedridden child, and I remember loving *To Kill a Mockingbird* for its image of a child able to move around in an adult world where people who inflicted pain eventually lost. Having a crush on a tomboy with a good father did not threaten Eurocentric paternalism, but it did inspire my developing interest in freedom and justice. At the end of her book, I thought that Radway's readings did not follow through on Part I's interest in how the PMC actually feels when it reads middlebrow work. The second two parts came closer to recording official PMC affects, especially the affects of self-criticism they are supposed to feel in our institutions.

By the end I was even more convinced that Radway's conclusions have less to do with her individual methodological choices than with the ongoing condition of the PMC to which she belongs. In her introduction, Radway had defined her own position as "self-divided" and "ambivalent" about middlebrow literature and its readerly feelings (7, 12). But in fact to be a self-divided narrator is simply to be a member of the PMC. Most of us who belong to it see ourselves siding with knowledge not merely to manage but to produce human progress; we hope, in novelist Po Bronson's phrase, to jolt society out of its infinite loop. Even as we routinely dream of worlds better than the one we help to regulate, we associate these dreams with immaturity, ignorance, or illness, with the weakness we always try to hide at work, with a naïveté that we fear will put our jobs at risk. PMC maturity involves the disciplining of emotions, which means seeing emotions as what competition, production, and professionalism must overcome. The cost is that the PMC adult carefully preserves and yet disavows the affects that envision better worlds.

The clingy denial of utopian feeling expresses the PMC's ambivalence. It does not only mean feeling torn about an issue; it means blocking possible change with the torn feeling. Ambivalence is a powerfully determinate state where, write psychoanalysts J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, **[End Page 918]**

the positive and negative components of the emotional attitude are simultaneously in evidence and inseparable, and where they constitute a non-dialectical opposition which the subject, saying "yes" and "no" at the same time, is incapable of transcending. ⁷

By contrast, Joe Savago's reports are exhilarating because they shout "yes" or "no." The pleasure of his emotional clarity lies in his leap beyond the PMC's normally stuck self-division. These are the middlebrow feelings that must be seen and explored, and they are the feelings that can only be explored by surveying the middlebrow's nonprofessional readers. In looking to her own younger self, Radway

has found reader data that can be processed entirely through her own ambivalence. It is therefore not surprising that she has a hard time sustaining her earlier sense of unambivalent, Savago-like feelings, feelings that generate negative or utopian states. Since those feelings always come into contact with huge institutional forces and apparently undivided social determinants like commodification, ambivalence about them predetermines their unreality.

It is understandable that as adult critics we favor the professional over the dreaming self. But we should not ignore a big reason why. It's not simply that commodity capitalism banishes visionary feelings to our inner worlds, but that the managers of that economy banish them with the stories we tell. In particular, we banish them by repeating the story in which these feelings are ill or illusive in the end.

The crucial implication of Radway's remarkable book is that the PMC will stay politically stuck until it can learn to own up to its own feelings for connection, for freedom, for non-exploitative collaboration. It will play roles within capitalism it regrets until it brings utopian affect back from childhood, from the sickbed, from the midnight dreamwork, from the private life we are so unwilling to risk. The PMC above all exists to manage society's large organizations, and has its meaningful public agency there. It writes the stories of these large organizations and it could write the stories differently as well. It sounds a little silly, but the books we love ask us to make organizations the instruments of our utopian feelings. Those are the takeover stories that the books want us to tell.

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Notes

1. See especially Maureen Corrigan, "A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire" *Nation* 265 (3 Nov. 1997): 58; Fred Miller Robinson, "A Feeling for Books," *New York Times* (26 Oct. 1997).

2. I take this contrast between reparative and paranoid from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Introduction to *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham, N.C., 1997). On the relation between affect and cultural interpretation, see Ann Cvetkovich, *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1992).

3. As an example of Radway's use of republican "negativity," see 242-44

4. Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (1969; Harmondsworth, England, 1972), 35. Many thanks to Avery Gordon for this passage as well as good conversations about art and utopia. For a helpful short description of Marcuse's view of negation, see Frederic Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton, N.J., 1971), 108-11.

5. My use of the concept of "non-capitalist" activities and spaces is indebted to J. K. Gibson-Graham, "Post-Fordism as Politics" in *The End of Capitalism (as we knew it): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994).

6. Radway says that data about the early Book-of-the-Month Club membership "has not survived"

(16, 295). For a strong example of a study of reader responses inspired in part by Radway's earlier ethnography of the actively interpretive reader, see Catherine A Lutz and Jane L Collins, *Reading National Geographic* (Chicago, 1993) They describe Radway's example on 218. Thanks to Mitch Duneier for bringing this book to my attention.

I. J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (1967; New York, 1973), 28.

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